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Institutional change and legitimacy via Urban elections? People's awareness of elections and participation in Urban neighbourhoods (Shequ)

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**Institutional Change and Legitimacy
via Urban Elections?
People's Awareness of Elections and Participation
in Urban Neighbourhoods (*Shequ*)**

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Zusammenfassung/Abstract:

This paper analyses institutional reforms and political participation, most notably indirect and direct elections of residential committees (RC), in China's urban neighbourhoods and communities (*shequ*). It shows that these elections at present are not meaningful to the majority of city dwellers as the RCs have little decision-making power and no revenues generated by a collective economy as in most of China's villages. RCs are primarily important to those weaker strata of society who depend on the state to be provided with social services and financial support – tasks that the RCs are forced to assume on behalf of higher government authorities. Nevertheless, the author finds that as limited the significance of - and knowledge about - RC elections in the daily lives of China's urban dwellers still are, they still have some influence on political awareness and participation. For instance, they make people voice more opinions in their shequ, which may be a good starting point for more direct interference in local political affairs soon to come. The paper emphasizes that RC elections have been introduced in order to enhance regime legitimacy but suggests that they may spur democratization by the rise of accountability as a conditioning factor of this legitimacy and by electoral 'habituation' as a transition to full democratic commitment. Whilst "security first, participation second" seems to be the order of the day and the 'freedom of politics' is still more important than a concern for RC elections and shequ affairs, it remains to be seen if those elections may not soon trigger off a meaningful drive for political participation in China's cities.

Schlagworte/Keywords:

Elections, Legitimacy, Urban Neighbourhoods, Participation

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1 Introduction

This paper is organized around the results of a research project on ‘Participation, elections and social stability in rural and urban areas in China’ which was jointly conducted by Gunter Schubert (University of Tuebingen) and the author. Whereas Schubert focused on rural areas, the author concentrated on urban locations. Three surveys were conducted altogether (based on interviews with ordinary residents and local officials): the first in spring 2003 in two neighbourhoods in Shenyang, followed by two neighbourhoods in Chongqing in summer 2003, and finally two neighbourhoods in Shenzhen in spring 2004 (see Appendix for further information).

One intention of the research project was to examine the political awareness of urban citizens and officials in terms of participation and elections. The pivotal question was how institutional change is reflected in the minds of the people concerned. Not only in the view of the political leadership but also of many social scientists, village and more recently urban elections are crucial for the political reform agenda and for a ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Are we right in the assumption that this ‘local democracy’ prescribed from above will eventually transcend the institutional restrictions set up by the authorities? Will it dynamically reinforce tendencies of social and political pluralization which have evolved during the reform process?

As far as the effects of elections are concerned, new institutionalism has focused on political contest for some time. What this perspective has neglected, however, was the effects of elections on the people concerned.¹ Therefore, from the perspective of new institutionalism, we are concerned with the question of the manner in which the reorganization of urban residential areas could serve to modify the institutional setting and thus contribute to regime legitimacy.

The purpose of this paper is to examine both elections and electoral processes. We will begin with the reorganization of urban residential areas where new communities are created. Similar to rural areas, elections have also been introduced in urban neighbourhoods. In this paper we are concerned with the attitudes of ordinary residents and local officials regarding elections. Our basic argument is that although elections have some mobilizing and participatory effects, they are currently not of primary concern for the citizens themselves, but rather constitute a secondary phenomenon. For the ‘better-off’ strata, individual autonomy is of greater importance; for the socially weak strata, it is the search for social security that is crucial. Finally, we will show that elections nevertheless have a mobilizing effect which strengthens people’s sense of efficacy.

2 The reorganization of urban residential areas and the emerging of the *Shequ*

From the 1950s onward, the organization of the party-state was extended to urban residential areas. ‘Residents Committees’ (RC) were established across the country as leading organizational bodies. Until the late 1990s, the members of those committees consisted primarily of elderly women (housewives and pensioners) with lower educational levels. Their principal function was to ensure social control of and in their neighbourhoods.

Economic reforms, economic and social change, and, strongly interrelated, growing social mobility significantly altered the structure of urban residential areas. Traditional communities as, for instance, the *danweis* eroded. Increasingly, homogeneous residential areas based on an

¹ Cox 1987 and 1990; Knight and Sened 1995: 1.

affiliation to a state-owned economic or administrative unit (like an enterprise) experienced a gradual disintegration. The social structure of those areas was further modified by the decline of previously privileged groups (e.g. urban skilled workers), the rise of new elites (private entrepreneurs, professionals, new middle classes), and a growing floating population. Local authorities were faced with increases in unemployment and urban poverty, as well as the erosion of family structures and public security. The traditional RCs, with their poor reputation, were no longer able to meet the new demands placed by these problems.

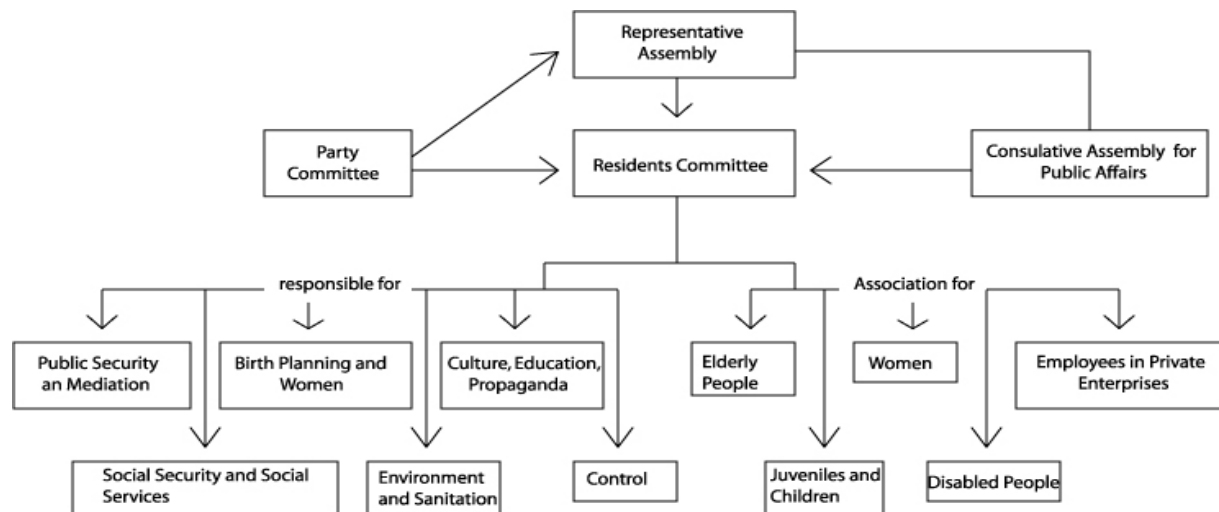
Nowadays, many neighbourhoods consist of subdivisions within which members of still existing or former *danweis* live. The structure of the neighbourhoods has changed through the purchase or sale of real estate, or as some inhabitants moved. Businessmen, craftsmen, and entrepreneurs from rural areas rented or purchased flats. Hence, the neighbourhoods are now composed of rather different social strata and former *danwei* members now live concurrently alongside members of the local political and economic elite, some of whom have purchased new condominiums in these areas.

This was the background for the reorganization of urban residential areas initiated by the central leadership at the end of the 90s. Several neighbourhoods under the jurisdiction of RCs were merged into larger 'communities' (*Shequ*) or neighbourhoods. A *Shequ* is characterized as a geographically separate residential area. With this move, it was intention of the political leadership that neighbourhood residents develop a shared identification based on common interests and needs. It was further hoped that they would voluntarily participate in the implementation of those interests and needs, thus creating a co-operative relationship of solidarity among each other.

The term neighbourhood implies a twofold meaning: (a) a *spatial* one, in the sense of an administrative sub-unit (at the level of self-administration beneath the 'Street Offices'), with a population between 3,000 and 16,000 inhabitants; (b) a *normative* or *functional* one, i.e. a classification in terms of a segment of population characterized by spatial proximity, shared interests and social control.

The size of an RC depends on the number of inhabitants in a neighbourhood. The RCs we investigated were composed of six to nine members. According to legal regulations, members are elected by inhabitants by means of either direct or indirect elections. Diagram 1 illustrates the organizational structure on the example of Shenyang:

Diagram 1: Organizational structure of *Shequ* in Shenyang (2003)



© Heberer.

Below the RC we find people responsible for individual tasks as well as issue-oriented associations. In some neighbourhoods, the number of those associations is considerably large. Yet, as a rule, they were not established by inhabitants but rather initiated in a top-down manner.

In principle, the Organizational Law of Urban Residents Committees from 1989 designated two major tasks to those committees: a) to support the government in preserving social stability and b) to provide the inhabitants with social services and social security benefits. Yet, on the local level, we find differing perceptions of what the pivotal tasks of a *Shequ* are, ranging from the simple tasks of administration and control to social welfare, birth planning, creating new job opportunities, improving hygienic conditions, organizing leisure activities, cultivating social discipline, and expanding the participation and self-administration of the residents.

Currently, the RCs are less concerned with self-administration, but rather with activities which used to be the tasks of the state, such as birth control, paying out pensions, reviewing prerequisites for income support to families with no or low income (*dibao*), mediating conflicts among residents, handling divorce applications, coordinating the care of sick persons, handicapped people, drug addicts and persons with a previous conviction, and providing psychological advice (e.g. after family violence or attempted suicide). The RCs are continually entrusted with new tasks, including keeping personal files or supervision of persons under probation.²

The committees are overloaded with work and poorly backed financially. In 2003/04, the urban districts provided merely a few hundred yuan per month for operating costs (400 yuan per capita for the RC in Shenzhen).³ In contrast, the Street Offices (sub-district level) were housed in modern, multi-story buildings with well-equipped offices; some of them with little factual work to accomplish. Given this situation, it could be argued that the state has transferred cost-intensive and particularly conflictive domains directly to the neighbourhoods.

² Cf Renmin Ribao, September 5 and 15, 2003.

³ Interview, Civil Affairs Bureau Shenzhen 4 March 2004.

3 Elections as political phenomena

Political science comprehends elections as a democratic method of selecting officials on the one hand, and as a technical procedure on the other. Functionally, elections are considered an opportunity of citizens to influence the choice of their political leaders and, furthermore, to shape the political system. Additionally, elections may reinforce both the political legitimacy of a system and the trust held in its efficiency.⁴

Elections are not necessarily a democratic act. Even during the most radical periods of the Mao era, candidates nominated by the Party for various positions were elected in those days by voting, in this case by the public raising of hands. We must, therefore, distinguish between different types of elections, all the more as the significance of elections, their contents and goals, all depend on a given political system. Political science distinguishes between competitive, semi-competitive and non-competitive elections. The various classifications are related to the degree of contest between candidates, and general and secret ballots. Elections characterized by contest, secret ballots, and choices of candidates' selection can be classified as competitive elections; if the freedom of elections is restricted, they are semi-competitive; if there is no liberty at all, we can speak of non-competitive elections.⁵

There has been some progress in enforcing elections in recent years, particularly through the spread of the system of village and town or township elections. Meanwhile, village leadership must be elected by the population via direct, secret ballots. On the levels of towns/townships and urban neighbourhoods, experiments have been made with the direct election of local officials. The success of rural elections reinforced the endeavour of the transfer of rural experiences to urban areas. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, responsible for grassroots elections, argues that elections should strengthen the degree of the population's participation, as well as the legitimacy of the political system. Nonetheless, significant differences between rural and urban areas make a transfer of direct elections to urban neighbourhoods difficult. The following differences between rural and urban areas can be discerned:

- In rural areas, village elections often began as bottom-up processes, i.e. they were initiated by villagers, whereas urban elections had a top-down character, i.e. initiated by higher authorities. In contrast to the work of the urban RCs, the work of the rural Village Administration Committees has a direct effect on the villagers' living standard. Every village, for instance, owns land, which is periodically distributed among the villagers. Villages possess, furthermore, village-owned enterprises and an accumulation fund paid into by the villagers. Therefore, the interest in participating in structuring the village economy or the use of the accumulation fund is much greater. As a contrast, urban neighbourhoods, as a rule, do not possess such a collective economy.
- The RC activities in urban areas do not spawn collective income. The neighbourhoods are more concerned with the organization of daily life and providing services for residents. Yet, it is the state, and not the residents themselves, which organizes and funds the urban entities.
- As far as issues such as income, living space, employment or the the environment are concerned, villagers are able to exert more influence on political decision-making than urban dwellers.

⁴ See, for instance, Banducci and Karp 2003.

⁵ Cf Nohlen 2000: 21ff.

- The village as a natural unit could be classified as a ‘place of neighbourhood’; the urban *Shequ*, in turn, as a ‘place of friendship’.⁶ Urban relations do not rest upon natural neighbourhood relations as in villages, but rather transcend the residential area.

As far as elections are concerned, Chen and Zhong argue that both persons with a stronger democratic orientation and those with a critical attitude towards the political system would participate to a lesser degree in elections than those with a certain proximity to the political system. The latter would elect in accordance with their loyalties. From this perspective, non-voting is a mode of political protest.⁷ Furthermore, they argue, the Party was less interested in democratic competition, but instead in preserving its legitimacy and improving the capacity and efficiency of governance. The authors contradict Shi Tianjian’s findings based on a survey in Beijing, which conclude that people attended elections so as to pursue own interests and not out of identification with the system. People were more interested in penalizing corrupt officials than in enforcing democratic values.⁸

Although both Chen/Zhong and Shi Tianjian examined elections of People’s Congress deputies, our own results, verify, in large part, the results of the former. Our interviews reveal that people who do not significantly identify with the system have only a minor interest in elections. This tendency is strengthened in cases where elections are not yet direct but indirect, horizontally (by the Party committee of the neighbourhood) or vertically controlled (by the Party committee of the street), and the majority of candidates are Party members. On the other hand, *Shequ* officials who back the interests of the residents enjoy a higher standing among their constituency. Such a standing, in turn, has an impact upon the turnout of the elections. Thus, the voting act serves as a mode of legitimizing or confirming the respective officials and thus may legitimize the political system as well. Our interviews reveal that at least a part of the interviewees link the engagement of officials to the electoral process, albeit such a relationship is not easy to determine. The option to select among competing candidates is a basic prerequisite that enables a political choice between different candidates to be made. This, the formalization of electoral procedures, and the voting act itself have an impact on the election delegates. Delegates understand that elections are connected to the responsibility of the elected towards the residents and also between the election process and the obligations of the elected towards the constituency. Accordingly, voting has an effect on the awareness of the constituency.

4 Three types of urban elections

Urban residents are involved in three voting acts: (a) election of the deputies of the district’s People’s Congress; (b) electing the members of the RC, and (c) electing the members of the Home-Owners Self-Organization Committee (HOSOC).

Voting act (a) consists of direct elections, i.e. every 18-year-old resident is obliged to attend the elections. In the case of absence, voters may ask other persons to vote on their behalf. Although our survey did not focus on these elections, our interviews revealed that the majority of interviewees considered them to be important. However, about 10 percent of the interviewees had difficulties in distinguishing which elections (of People’s Congress deputies

⁶ Vobruba 1994: 25.

⁷ Chen and Zhong 2002: 1ff.

⁸ Shi Tianjian 1999.

or of RC members) they had attended. And about 15 percent (21 interviewees) complained that they did not know the candidates and their interest in voting had therefore been modest.

As far as voting act (b) is concerned, two main types of RC elections in urban neighbourhoods can be found: voting on the part of residential delegates is the predominant form (indirect voting), and in a minority of *Shequs* all residents are entitled to vote.⁹ According to the political leadership, in the near future direct voting will be implemented throughout the country (on direct voting see section 5).¹⁰

Elections of the HOSOC (c) can be considered a form of direct elections. The housing reform during the 1990s led to both a conversion of living spaces into condominiums, which were then sold to residents, and to the construction of new commercial housing sold on the market. Companies responsible for administration and maintenance of new commercial housing areas (property management companies, *wuye gongsi*) were established. Yet, frequent tensions have arisen between house owners and these companies in terms of payment of fees, repair and maintenance issues. As organizations representing the interests of the new proprietors did not exist, independent interest organizations of the owners emerged in the 1990s. Their boards (the HOSOCs) are elected by all owners and are accountable to them. Even though the local authorities do occasionally intervene in the daily activities of those committees – for instance if a board proves to be too radical or conflictual – the residents perceive these organizations as being democratically elected and legitimized institutions. They differ from the RC in their character as bottom-up organizations and representation of the constituents' interests. Therefore, property owners demonstrated more interest in electing those organizations than in electing the members of the RCs.¹¹

In the neighbourhoods investigated in Chongqing and Shenyang, HOSOCs had not yet been established. In Shenzhen, in turn, board elections occupied a much more prominent position than that of the RCs.

Interviewees who had experiences with HOSOCs assessed the work of these organizations as follows:

Table 1: Assessment of the Work of Home-Owners Self-Organization Committees (Shenzhen only)

Represents the interests of owners	15
Directly elected	8
We deal with problems once they arise	8
Self-elected (without outside interference)	7
Is a genuinely autonomous organ	6
Too many internal struggles	3
Poorly working	1

Source: Own survey.

Note: Covering persons taking part in a committee's activities.

⁹ So, for instance, in Yingchou County in Guangxi, see Li and Chen 2002: 325–6; in detail: Li Fan 2002: 338–47. On neighbourhood elections cf Wang Bangzuo 2003.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Renmin Ribao 31 March 2003.

¹¹ On the history and current situation of Home-Owners Self-Organization Committees, see Read 2003.

Most owners classified the HOSOCs as ‘autonomous’ i.e. as organs elected by the residents themselves. Elections were considered to be direct and free. In contrast to RC elections, most owners were informed about the elections of their HOSOCs. Mostly people with prestige and a certain influence, such as Party or trade union chairmen of larger enterprises or lawyers, took over the position of chairmen of HOSOCs.

The relationships between RCs and HOSOCs are, to a certain extent, conflict-laden. In Shenzhen’s Huaxiajie neighbourhood, a HOSOC sued the local RC for damages, as the latter had used some vacant space under the first floor of the buildings not only for the establishment its own offices, but also as rental space for commercial businesses. The HOSOC, in turn, argued that those areas belonged to the ownership community and could not be arbitrarily utilized by the RC. The latter lost the lawsuit and had to pay 1.7 million yuan in compensation to the ownership community. But the HOSOC fell short of its original intent, which was to drive the RC out of the *Shequ* area.

Once HOSOCs act too autonomously, higher authorities may intervene. Shenzhen authorities had already taken measures in order to minimize the competition between RCs and HOSOCs and to integrate the latter in a corporatist manner. Though, until 2004, HOSOCs could still act as real autonomous interest bodies, elected directly and in a democratic way, the Shenzhen authorities decided that they had to act under the leadership of the respective RCs in the future in order to minimize cleavages.

5 Elections in the *Shequs* investigated

The first elections of RCs were conducted in Shenyang's Shenhe district in June 1999.¹² Meanwhile, elections can be found in almost all cities. RCs are predominantly elected indirectly by representative assemblies consisting of representatives of households, houses or blocks. The first direct elections to include all residents were conducted in Nanning, the capital of the Guangxi Autonomous Region in 2001.¹³ There is no prevailing model for standard elections. Even in Shenyang, a model city for urban elections, the coexistence of various forms can be observed.

In the *Shequs* that we investigated, only indirect elections existed. The RCs were elected by the *Shequ's* Assembly of Representatives, i.e. by delegates and not by all residents. As a rule, the Assembly of Representatives consisted of the heads of the inhabitant groups or the leaders of houses or blocks, together with the representatives of work units (*danwei*) located in a neighbourhood. The house or block leaders are also responsible for the election of house or block representatives who shall attend the election act.

Representatives Assemblies in Shenyang and Chongqing had between 50 and 125 members, varying in accordance with the size of the neighbourhoods; more than 80 percent were women. According to the Street Office, the representatives were elected by the respective households. Our interviews revealed, however, that the RCs designated specific persons to act as 'voter representatives' through a series of initial consultations. Leaders of the houses went from household to household, polling the opinions of the residents. Such inquiries had a more informal character. People were asked, for instance, about their opinion in relation to particular voter delegates or RC candidates and often responded 'that will be fine' or 'We will leave the decision up to you'.

The Assembly of Representatives (the electors) in Shenyang's Yongfeng neighbourhood, for example, had 132 members (of a total population of 6,000). 18 of them were house or block leaders and 55 were heads of 'Responsibility areas of Party members'; others were representatives of various *Danweis*. 'Responsibility areas of Party members' referred to Party members who were charged with the task of mobilizing votes in distinct sections of a neighbourhood. Furthermore, 'outstanding persons', some of them Party members, some not, were appointed as voting delegates. The appointment was decided by the RC.

RC members are elected for three years. The Assembly of Representatives gathers once a year in order to discuss and formally approve the working report of the RC.

Positions for RC candidates are publicly announced. Applicants may sign up to attend the nomination examination. The examination consists of a written and an oral part and encompasses issues of legal regulations (regarding neighbourhoods), the organization of neighbourhoods and questions of general political and social concern. The Street Office decides on the candidate list and on the positions of the RC's leadership functions. It also ensures that the candidates are qualified and capable of acquiring public trust and reputation.

Party membership is not a prerequisite for becoming an RC chair person; nonetheless, loyalty towards Party and government is expected by the higher authorities. Based solely on their legal status, RC members are not representatives of the government; nevertheless, they are responsible for the propagation and implementation of state policies. This requires persons

¹² On details of electoral processes: Li Fan 2002: 272–3.

¹³ Compare the numerous depictions of election processes in Li Fan 2002: 275ff. and Deng Minjie 2002: 225ff.

who are able to gain the trust of the residents and engage themselves and others in support of residents' interests. Thus, the work of the RCs contributes to reinforcing the legitimacy of the political system.

The nomination list of the candidates is made public. The block leaders contact the households concerned and ask the residents about their opinions on the candidates. Nomination meetings are held in the form of a gathering of the Assembly of Representatives, where the candidates have the opportunity to introduce themselves and to put forth statements. The final nomination list is determined by consultation, not by voting. The list usually contains one person more than the number of candidates which will be elected. In the final act of this election process, the representatives vote separately on the ordinary members and the leading RC body (head, vice-head). Only one candidate is nominated respectively for leading positions.

Thus, RC members are elected by a voting process and must be re-elected after a period of three years. If they do a bad job, they are usually not successful in this endeavour. Therefore, even indirect elections have an impact upon the political behaviour of RC members.

In the 2002 elections, in all of the *Shequs* we investigated in Shenyang and Chongqing, five out of six candidates were elected as RC members. In the Fuhua *Shequ* in Shenzhen, eight out of ten candidates were elected.¹⁴

In recent years, the requirements for candidates have been raised significantly. In Shenyang and Chongqing, a college or university degree was a standard requirement, and the age of candidates was limited to 45 years for leaders and 50 years for ordinary members. Only in Shenzhen was there no restriction in age and an upper middle school educational level appeared to be sufficient.

In Chongqing's Jiangbei district in 2003, 43 percent of the RC members had a college or university degree, the average age was 37 years, but merely 29 percent were Party members.¹⁵ In Shenyang, according to official data, 40.6 percent of the RC cadres had a college or university degree, with an average age of 42; 44.9 percent were laid-off workers (*xia gang*) and 38.1 percent Party members.¹⁶

As the requirements in terms of qualifications are rather high, but the prestige of those positions and their salaries low, it is not an easy task to find a sufficient number of younger qualified candidates. Thus, the districts or Street Offices sometimes assign qualified cadres to the RCs or Party Committees of a *Shequ*.

In the Beidakou *Shequ* (in Shenyang's Heping district), one male interviewee held simultaneous posts as chair person of the RC and of the Party Committee. Prior to those offices he had been a director of a foreign trade company. Although he had formally applied for those positions, he was in fact urged to do so by the Party. No qualified candidate for these offices had been found in this neighbourhood of 6,200 residents, characterized by high unemployment (1,020 persons) and a high ratio of disabled people (152 persons). Conflicts between the RC and the residents were frequent. The chair person of the RC noted that he often had to 'keep his cool', even if he was arbitrarily insulted or criticized. Such insults, he pointed out, were not to be taken personally, and were neither directed at him nor at the RC,

¹⁴ Interviews, Shenzhen, 20 and 21 February 2004.

¹⁵ Interview, 28 July 2003.

¹⁶ Zhao and Cheng 2002: 290.

but actually towards the government. In his view, the residents were only letting off steam. Frankly, he explained, he would never accept such a position again and planned to quit after the end of his term of office. Many tasks of the government, he noted, were simply transferred to the RC without, however, providing the necessary resources for adequately dealing with them.

6 Attitudes towards elections

As mentioned above, in the *Shequs* investigated only indirect elections were conducted and merely a limited number of delegates could vote. As those delegates were not elected by the residents, but rather nominated by the RC, many interviewees declared that they knew little or nothing about those elections. It was only in Shenyang that all interviewees were familiar with elections. This is not surprising, as 31 among 42 interviewees were delegates who had voted. In turn, 27 of 49 persons interviewed in Chongqing (55.1 percent) and 34 of 49 interviewees in Shenzhen (69.4 percent) noted that they did not know anything about RC elections. Even Party members with a higher level of education vehemently denied that such elections existed at all. A lawyer in Shenzhen's Huaxiajie-*Shequ* explained, seeing as she herself had never heard of such elections, it could in fact be assumed that no one knew anything about them.¹⁷

Among the 62 interviewees responding to the question of whether RCs should be elected at all, the answers were as follows:

Table 2: Should Residents' Committees be elected?

	Persons	%
Yes	25	40.3
No	5	8.1
No interest/not important	18	29.0
Elected or not, there is no difference	11	17.8
Everyone should decide on their own	3	4.8
Total	62	100.0

Source: Own survey.

Apparently, people are divided in terms of the significance of elections. Less than half of the interviewees responding to this question spoke unreservedly in favour of RC elections. This does not reflect a general indifference towards voting. A clear majority declared, furthermore, that elections to the People's Congresses of the district were of primary importance.

A 53-year-old woman in Shenzhen's Fuhua neighbourhood, trade union boss of a larger enterprise, noted:

In fact people are too busy to attend voting. This is the experience I got from my company. Less than a quarter will go to the polls if they don't get a half day off or if they couldn't ask a representative to attend voting in the case they couldn't go. Many of our workers and staff simply do not have the time to go to the polls. [question: What about weekends?] To be frank, people are not very interested in voting. If you do not

¹⁷ Interview, Shenzhen, 28 February 2004.

bring them directly to the ballots, they simply refuse to go. The elections are not related to their interests. It is different from other countries where the parliaments are elected by the entire population. Here the electoral act is not really sincere, that's why people are not interested in it. People are not familiar with the candidates and they don't know who to elect. They are not very interested in contacts to the Residents Committee.¹⁸

Many people had the impression that the work of the RC had nothing to do with their everyday lives and personal interests. And what sense do elections make when people do not know about them, particularly if one is not interested in the activities of the RC and does not see any reason to be. As long as actors are not aware of their interests, their readiness to participate appears to be low.

Accordingly, table 2 reveals that less than half of the respondents support elections. Interviewees who responded in favour of elections offered the following arguments: they increase the sense of responsibility of RC members (12); enhance the standing of the RC among residents (7), and raise confidence in relation to the RC (6). Whereas only four interviewees favoured elections in Chongqing, seven in Shenyang and 14 in Shenzhen spoke in support of elections.

A widespread belief among residents (particularly in Shenzhen) was that candidates were actually nominated by the Street Office and that residents merely had the role of giving their blessing to the candidates. As mentioned above, many interviewees did not even know anything about the elections. Not surprisingly, the interest of the residents in attending those elections was low.

A Chinese survey in urban areas revealed the following findings:

Table 3: Why are you not interested in attending RC Elections?

	Persons	%
Elections are a mere formality, only sham	634	59.0
Elections have nothing to do with me	147	13.7
Elections are useless	131	12.2
Elections are a waste of time	112	10.4
Others	51	4.7
Total	1075	100.0

Source: Wang Tiemin 2002: 169.

The majority of the interviewees doubted the seriousness of elections. The answer 'elections are a mere formality, only sham' differs from answers like 'waste of time' or 'useless'. The former has to be comprehended as the result of a reflection process. It is grounded in the observation that elections are not sincere and that therefore it is useless to attend them.

Accordingly, more than a quarter of the respondents (28.2 percent) did not know whether or not 'their' candidates had been elected. Two thirds argued that the candidates were nominated 'from above' and three quarters were unsatisfied with the nomination of candidates.¹⁹

¹⁸ Interview, Shenzhen, 23 February 2004.

¹⁹ Wang Tiemin 2002: 171ff.

Our own results demonstrate that in cases where the RC fails to involve residents, the latter are more likely to be disinterested in both *Shequ* activities and RC elections. This is particularly true for persons with a higher educational level, cadres, private entrepreneurs, residents with jobs outside the neighbourhood and male persons. On the other end of the spectrum, the activist category is primarily occupied by elderly women who are jobless, had to retire early, or dependent on income support. Participation is frequently connected with issues of immediate welfare: many of those who participated more actively had intentions of establishing personal connections to the RC in order to improve their chances to obtain such support. Furthermore, activists were recruited among women who, after their retirement, still looked for a meaningful field of activity, as well as individual and social satisfaction. And precisely those groups have the necessary resource at their disposal: sufficient leisure time for such activities.

Not surprisingly, latent forms of protest against certain voting procedures can be identified. For instance, a female activist in Yongfeng neighbourhood who was not nominated as a candidate due to her age nevertheless gained 30 votes. Moreover, numerous electors stated having voted for only a single person, as they were not familiar with the other candidates. The candidates had neither been introduced to them nor put forth any statements on their working program.

Many voters demanded that in the future, candidates should introduce themselves personally and substantiate their working program. Whereas in former elections candidates were never required to introduce themselves or their working program, this is now not only explicitly demanded by the election stipulations, but also makes up a strong demand of the constituency. These new demands are thus, concurrently, an outcome of institutional change (introduction of semi-competitive elections).²⁰ In most cases, the implementation of elections is taken seriously and monitored by higher authorities. This seriousness, along with the increasing will of the voters to participate in the nomination of candidates and the practice of using secret ballots have, without a doubt, had an impact upon the political awareness of the electors. For instance, many residents were well aware that in Shenyang's Tiexi district an RC was removed by the residents due to its inability to solve the crucial issue of water supply. It could not be precluded that such events could happen in their own neighbourhoods as well.

A particularity of Shenyang was the argumentation that not elections but rather outstanding leaders were decisive for the development of a neighbourhood. Whereas in Shenyang 10 interviewees responded accordingly, no such answer was given in Chongqing or Shenzhen. In the case of Shenyang, the activities of RC leaders were primarily assessed by the residents according to the engagement of those leaders in terms of neighbourhood development and were not related to elections.²¹ A female resident of the Yongfeng neighbourhood expressed this sentiment as follows: 'The success of this *Shequ* is connected to the unconditional engagement of Li Jun [the RC's chairwoman, the author] and not necessarily to elections.'²²

Seen from one viewpoint, this argument contains a traditional factor of political culture, i.e. the notion that non-elected officials who exercise their power according to the 'principle

²⁰ Accordingly: Cai Dingjian 2002a: 51–2.

²¹ A similar assessment: Wei 2003: 18–19: '...in the Chinese social context, non-elected officials tend to enjoy more respect than the elected ones, as long as they govern according to the principle of justice...The people have no reason to trust anyone who is authorized with the tremendous power of government, whether he or she is elected or not.'

²² Interview, Shenyang, 3 March 2003.

of justice' acquire greater respect among the people than elected ones who do not.²³ From a second perspective, this is an expression of a paternalistic experience in the sense that 'everything depends on a good leadership'. And, thirdly, this argument reflects that the RC is identified with the government or 'state'. As individuals are not able to impact upon the 'state', they merely hope that their leaders will be qualified persons who shall act in the interest of the people. This belief makes it so important for people to have a benevolent leader (*daitouren*) at the top.

Such attitudes are also age-dependent. Elderly people in Shenyang argued that the success of a *Shequ* was dependent on such a *daitouren*, not on elections. A *daitouren* was depicted as a personal role model, a leader who sets a good example. Younger interviewees disagreed and preferred instead improvements in the election system.

Yet, even voting on the part of delegates requires the elected to take the interests of their constituents into account. And if the constituents are unsatisfied with the behaviour of RC members, those members may not be re-elected. Given that a job in the RC is strongly connected to elections and – if re-election fails – new jobs are not easy to find, RC members strive to achieve and maintain a positive image among the residents.²⁴

Eventually, elections may serve to reinforce the legitimacy of an RC and its power to bargain with higher authorities (like the Street Offices or district governments), as elected RCs could argue that they were acting on behalf of the residents or in line with suggestions made by their representative delegates.

7 Attitudes towards the Mode of Election

Whereas in 2002 merely 99 out of 1,237 RCs in Shenyang were directly elected, no direct elections were held in Chongqing and Shenzhen. The majority of the interviewees (ordinary residents and RC leaders) argued that the population was too large, the organizational and financial efforts required were too extensive and the residents' interest in elections was too low. The head of a Street Office declared: 'You have to be extraordinary familiar with the situation here, otherwise the elections could get out of control'. On the other hand, the majority of interviewees did not know the meaning of 'direct elections'. After this had been explained to them, many interviewees noted that, undoubtedly, direct elections were the preferable and more democratic mode of voting.

In principle, the current mode of voting is a continuation of previous electoral modes: the RC selects, the Street Office monitors, a group of hand-picked people votes. Such voting procedures result in low interest in voting. Consequently, the attempt of the party-state to involve people in voting processes is destined to fail.

Only a few interviewees questioned the mode of voting itself. Where the interest in voting is low, residents declared to be uninterested in a particular mode. And delegates rarely cast any doubt upon the mode of election.

²³ Wei Pan 2003: 18.

²⁴ Yet, such processes are partially circumvented by Street Offices and district authorities. Interviewees frequently complained that RC members who were not re-elected were transferred into other neighbourhoods by higher authorities.

Here, the general deficiency in information is an issue. The majority of the interviewees was not informed that other voting instances beyond indirect voting existed, such as direct elections in China's cities, nor that the central government was voicing its support for direct elections. After the meaning of and the difference between direct and indirect elections had been explained to them, interviewees responded as follows:

Table 4: Which mode of voting would you prefer?

	Shenyang	%	Chongqing	%	Shenzhen	%
Direct voting	13	30.9	16	45.7	13	31.7
Voting by delegates	7	16.7	3	8.6	11	26.8
Both modes are O.K.	13	30.9	6	17.2	7	17.1
Elections unnecessary	-	-	1	2.8	4	9.8
Sufficient to elect a leader	2	4.8	-	-	-	-
Don't know	7	16.7	9	25.7	6	14.6
Total	42	100.0	35	100.0	41	100.0

Source: Own survey.

Direct elections were the preferred mode. But many interviewees explained they would prefer indirect voting only because the preconditions for direct voting currently remained insufficient.

The supporters of direct elections argued that this mode would better represent the opinions of the voters and therefore was more democratic. More people would understand the work of the RCs and participation would thus increase. Furthermore, in the case of direct voting, the RCs would be also more accountable to the residents or electors. Finally, the RCs would then represent the will of the residents more explicitly.

Two frequently expressed attitudes could be identified among the supporters of direct elections: (1) 'If I were called upon to vote, I would do so', i.e. voting as an obligation, and (2) 'Voting is my right', i.e. voting as a distinct 'legal right'. The first argument was primarily given by people over 50 years old, as well as those with lower educational levels. It represents a more passive attitude that might be summed up by the following line of thought: 'if someone asks me to vote, I am on the one hand obliged, on the other hand I am not doing anything wrong, because I am not doing so of my own accord. I am merely following a command from 'above''. The second argument, in turn, was put forward by younger interviewees and persons with a higher educational level. Such people comprehended voting as a vested right which should be actively exercised.

In Shenzhen, a large portion of the interviewees associated elections with 'democracy'. A sixty-year-old engineer with a university degree argued in terms of direct elections:

This, undoubtedly, is democracy. But we should keep China's history in mind. Though democracy is now a global trend, it does not yet work under the current preconditions in China. To establish democracy all at once will not be possible. Several thousand years of feudal history till the era of Mao Zedong – to make it like in Western democracies all at once – impossible. Look at England or the US, even there the presidents are not elected directly. On the other hand, though we have discipline inspection and supervision of authorities now, to take reprisals and to take revenge [against persons

who uncover misdeeds, the author] are widespread. Though illegal, officials play golf or privately drive state-owned limousines at the expense of the state. Yet, nobody cares about that. What our country is lacking is an effective control of officials.²⁵

What is stated here is that, in principle, the preconditions of an intact democracy or an effective election system will have to be created first, i.e. an effective judiciary system and legal security in order to curb corruption efficiently.

People supporting direct elections were primarily those with a higher educational level and/or a higher cadre's status:

The Resident's Committee must be elected, and not merely because it is decreed by law. By means of elections you become a representative of the masses. You are elected and thus legitimized by the residents. Even voting out should be permitted. For instance, in another neighbourhood a member of the Resident's Committee was frequently absent. He was, therefore, not re-elected and thus lost his job...Undoubtedly, the current elections are not yet democratic. Everything is still under the control of the Street Office.²⁶

The vice-director of the Party School in Shenyang's Dadong district, who concurrently was a member of the Consultative Assembly for Public Affairs (cf diagram 1) in the Yongfeng neighbourhood, argued for direct elections:

In my opinion, the next elections [of the RC, the author] could be direct ones. The preconditions already exist. And we do not need a turnout of one-hundred percent. A turnout of 70 percent would be absolutely o.k. Direct elections are important, as indirect ones exclude the majority of the population. In future, even the government and the People's Congress of the district and the city should be elected directly. One ought to trust the people.²⁷

Supporters of direct elections argued that between 70 and 80 percent of the persons entitled to vote would go to the ballots. This argument contradicted the anxiety of some officials that elections might turn into a disaster due to high rates of voter abstinence.

Supporters of indirect elections indicated the following causes for their decision:

²⁵ Interview, Shenzhen, 24 February 2004.

²⁶ Interview with the former Party Secretary of a RC in Shenyang, 4 March 2003.

²⁷ Interview with the vice-director of a district's Party School, Shenyang, 8 March 2003.

Table 5: Why do you oppose direct elections?

Answer	Persons	%
1. People don't know who to elect/don't know the candidates	19	20.4
2. Difficult to organize	14	15.1
3. Low interest of residents/many won't vote	14	15.1
4. Creates chaos (<i>luan</i>)	12	12.9
5. People don't have time	8	8.6
6. Lack of awareness among the residents	7	7.5
7. Lack of necessary premises	6	6.4
8. Time has not yet come	5	5.4
9. Too many people involved	5	5.4
10. Likelihood that people are elected who were not nominated by the Street Office	3	3.2
Total	93	100.0

Source: Own survey.

The above arguments may be classified in two major categories: (a) subjective items: voters are not yet sufficiently prepared for direct voting; and (b) objective items: conditions are not yet ripe. Here we may be able to relocate traces of an argument propagated for decades by the Party, namely that it was too early to implement democracy. The Party maintained, furthermore, that the population was not yet subjectively prepared and that the objective conditions (e.g. the low degree of development) would hinder the establishment of a democracy. In fact, these arguments reflect distrust towards the population and the anxiety that democratic methods could lead to chaos. E.g., people might elect persons other than those nominated by the Street Office, or a large group of residents might not vote at all (causing the 'leadership' to run into trouble, facing, for instance, the criticism of higher authorities for insufficient preparational work) or that, in a general sense, an situation could occur in which the authorities might loose control over a larger crowd of people in an unmanageable situation.

A more rational argument, offered particularly by officials, was that direct elections were too expensive. Chinese social scientists calculated that the implementation of direct elections, for instance in a single *Shequ* in Peking, would cost about 100,000 yuan.²⁸ These costs cover expenses for election propaganda, organizational costs (room rent), remuneration, food and gifts for polling assistants, etc. In Chongqing alone, a city with 1,951 *Shequs* in 2003, about 195 million yuan would have been necessary for the implementation of direct elections. Neither the respective cities nor the neighbourhoods are able to raise such an enormous sum of money.

Yet, this economical argument is met with a considerable amount of opposition as well. A Chinese survey among various *Shequs* has shown that costs are high when both the awareness of participation is low and neighbourhood networks are weakly developed. The costs are significantly lower where the opposite is true. The Chinese research report provides the following example (*Shequ* A: low awareness of participation/weakly evolved networks; *Shequ* B: high awareness/strong networks):

²⁸ According to Professor Li Lulu, director of the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese People's University, Beijing, 11 March 2004.

Table 6: Organizational costs of elections in two different *Shequs* (in yuan)

Shequ	Total costs	Material	Propaganda	Souvenirs/ gifts	Remuneration of helpers	Catering	Other
A	80,666.7	26,647.4	14,761	18,484.5	11,500	5771	3512.8
B	9400	3000	5500	-	-	200	700

Source: Wu Meng 2004: 12.

The lower the interest is in participation, the higher the material incentives that are necessary for helpers and electors, and vice versa. In fact, it is the belief of officials that people are not interested in voting and that, therefore, the organizational costs would by far outstrip the benefits. Accordingly, a higher percentage of interviewed officials at the levels of districts, Street Offices and RCs supported voting by delegates rather than by ordinary people.

Table 7: Which mode of voting do you prefer? (Officials)

Answers	Persons	%
Election by delegates	22	73.3
Direct elections	5	16.7
No difference between the two	2	6.7
Others	1	3.3
Total	30	100.0

Source: Own survey.

Table 8: Why do you oppose direct elections? (Officials)

Answers	Persons	%
1. Low interest among residents/ many won't vote	6	27.3
2. Lack of material conditions	4	18.2
3. Situation could get out of control	4	18.2
4. Too complicated	3	13.6
5. Too early	2	9.1
6. Don't know	1	4.5
7. Others	2	9.1
Total	22	100.0

Source: Own survey.

Ranking first among officials is the fear of a low voter turnout. They are well aware of the lack of interest in voting among the residents. And they worry that they might be blamed for any type of failure or low turnout at the polls. Moreover, officials themselves are not very interested in direct elections; they are projected to be little more than troublesome and costly, with small potential benefits.

As we have seen, the interviewees assess the issue of voter turnout rather differently. Supporters of general and direct elections predict a high turnout, opponents, in contrast, a low

one. The New Political Economy has pointed out that people do not attend elections if the benefits from participation are lower than the costs.²⁹ In this case, the time required for voting, the electoral act itself, or the encounter with officials may all be counted as costs.

According to our results, the residents currently assess the significance of elections to be relatively low, as the candidates were nominated by the Street Offices and only selected delegates voted for them. In this way, voting provides individuals with little impact on decision-making. Hence, the residents perceive the (low) costs of participation to be still higher than the benefits.

As mentioned above, the fears of local officials include a low voter turnout. Yet, 'low' must be seen in relative terms. Officials classify a turnout of less than 80 to 90 percent as 'low'. This has to be seen vis-à-vis the fact that due to compulsory voting, elections to the People's Congresses in urban districts have a turnout of more than 90 percent. Therefore, higher echelons, officials argue, might expect and demand similar turnouts for RC elections.

On the whole, RC elections are a new phenomenon, a work still in progress. Regularly held elections will foster a learning process, the internalization and training of voting, and participation. On the one hand, this will enhance the citizens' demand for information and participation; on the other hand, candidates are increasingly forced to present themselves in a more substantial way in order to generate trust and secure their election or re-election. The introduction of direct elections would therefore be instrumental in creating trust and legitimacy.

China's political leadership is quite aware of this. And that is why it increasingly supports the establishment of direct elections. The Party's newspaper, *Renmin Ribao*, pointed out that in the case of indirect elections the Street Offices in fact nominate the candidates. This would negatively affect the identification of residents with their *Shequ*. Direct elections, as *Renmin Ribao* says, foster participation and this, in turn, is said to be a prerequisite for self-administration by the residents. Grassroots democracy makes the citizens decide on their own affairs. Direct elections would therefore contribute to the generation of a democratic consciousness, democratic capabilities and democratic habits of citizens.³⁰

Indirect elections do not meet with the approval of the residents. Moreover, they are detrimental to the prestige of elections and of the RCs. As the residents do not have much impact upon the selection of candidates, their interest in voting is low. Furthermore, the residents gained the impression that the authorities are not interested in the real participation of the people. One could therefore argue that indirect elections constitute a sort of institutional distrust, since the authorities are well aware that the voters' turnout would be low and therefore could have repercussions on the legitimacy of the regime.

Currently, the central government is working to popularize direct elections at the local level throughout the country. But there is a strong resistance against these efforts among urban authorities. The latter worry they might lose control over electors and candidates, resulting in a reinforcement of cleavages and conflicts between the population and the local authorities.

²⁹ Kirsch 1997: 225.

³⁰ Pan Yao 2004.

Undoubtedly, direct elections would enhance the RCs' legitimacy, albeit the voter turnout might be low as long as the constituency does not perceive the RCs as organizations representing their own interests, as well as those of their neighbourhood.

Certainly, indirect RC elections have an impact on voting delegates. But as long as they are loyal to the RC and their loyalty is not placed in doubt on the grounds of misconduct or general ineffectiveness of the RC, and as long as the residents do not pressure the voting delegates to champion their interests, the effects of elections may be limited. The Street Offices are still monitoring the RCs, not the residents. Nonetheless, as noted in the foregoing sections of this paper, there are cases in which RCs were successfully removed by the residents after the committees had proven to be unable to solve urgent problems.

8 Electoral effects

According to the 1997 *Carter Center's Field Report*, village electoral processes were significant for three reasons: (a) the election law defines the basic norms of a democratic process: secret, direct and competitive ballots; (b) each election period enhances and expands the technical capabilities for holding elections; (c) the openness of the government in terms of opinion exchanges with experts of the *Carter Center* proves that the former is significantly interested in electoral processes.³¹ Essentially, this also true for urban elections, even if they are still getting off the ground. International comparative research reveals that increased competition in elections goes hand in hand with an increase in the number of politically interested people and thus of voters.³² Hence, the introduction of direct elections in urban areas could function as a catalyst to increase participation.

The enhancement of political participation and politically active citizens are crucial features of political modernization. Even if *Shequ* elections are still a form of mobilized (and not autonomous) voting, it would be wrong to categorically deny the participative character of such elections. The party-state does determine the selection of candidates and – in the case of indirect elections – the composition of the electoral bodies. Nevertheless, behaviour resulting from mobilized patterns of political participation (for instance the right to vote), the right of elections in accordance with the regulations, and the possibility of voting out officials may be internalized and eventually lead to more autonomous patterns of participation. Furthermore, mobilizing forms of elections create opportunities for electors, for instance by placing certain requirements on candidates or requiring an account of their work at the end of a year. Thus, electors can impose restrictions on and monitor the candidates (by means of rendering of account or meeting obligations in regards to the voters in order to be re-elected).³³

The economic theory of democracy assumes that electors behave rationally by voting for those candidates who, they presume will bring them more benefits than others in the future.³⁴ That is why in present-day China, candidates or elected officials have to act in a certain way on behalf of the interests of their constituents so as to be elected or re-elected.

Therefore, the simplistic argument, which states that elections were merely an instrument of legitimizing authoritarian structures or monitoring people, does not hold water. Instead,

³¹ The Carter Center, *The Carter Center Delegation to Observe Village Elections in China*, March 4–16, 1997: 12, op. cit.: Suisheng Zhao 2003: 342.

³² Cf Verba and Nie 1972 and Verba, Nie and Kim 1978.

³³ On the difference between mobilized and autonomous forms of participation, see Huntington and Nelson 1976: 7–10.

³⁴ Downs 1957.

they exhibit a more ambiguous character. In contrast to indirect elections, direct ones concede a certain degree of participation to the population, even if this participation takes a mobilized form.³⁵

Residents have the opportunity to participate in the selection of candidates and to discuss their respective programs. This enhances the articulation of common interests, the nomination of candidates who will act on behalf of the demands and interests of the residents and the election of people capable of bargaining successfully with the Street Office or the district government in order to realize those interests.

The appeal to conduct ‘democratic elections’ may encourage people to make their own demands and work to achieve their shared interests. Moreover, the common accomplishment of even minor demands (e.g. those related to the improvement or maintenance of housing conditions or infrastructure) reinforces the sense of efficacy of the residents. This, in turn, fosters the will to participate and a common sense of community.

The majority of the interviewees who were electoral delegates declared that the content of the following statements had positive effects on elections:

- Elected persons have a stronger sense of accountability, because they were elected and wanted to be re-elected.
- People who do not show any engagement for the demands or interests of the residents will not be re-elected.
- Residents increasingly put forward suggestions and voice their opinion.

Making suggestions and expressing opinions are salient indicators of participation. Our interviews revealed that a certain percentage of the interviewees declared to have raised suggestions or voiced opinions:

Table 9: Did you raise suggestions or express opinions towards the Residents Committee?

	Shenyang	%	Chongqing	%	Shenzhen	%
Yes	15	51.7	7	43.75	6	40.0
No	14	48.3	9	56.25	9	60.0
Total	29	100.0	16	100.0	15	100.0

Source: Own survey.

Note: Refers to interviewees who responded to this question.

Almost half of the respondents conceded that they had occasionally offered suggestions or expressed their opinions during RC meetings. Not surprisingly, the suggestions were predominantly concerned with matters of everyday life in the neighbourhood: complaints about deficiencies in public security or cleanliness, noise produced by street traders or

³⁵ Certain historical similarities may be identified. For instance, in the first provincial elections in China in early 20th century, only specially invited persons were admitted to vote. The majority of the population was excluded. At the 1909–11 elections, only 1.7 million out of the 400 million people were entitled to vote, cf Fincher 1981 and Thompson 1995.

craftsmen, the increasing number of dogs, arbitrarily parked bicycles, cars driving too quickly within the neighbourhood, etc.

Predominantly residents with more prominent positions (veteran Party members, officials of the district authorities, larger entrepreneurs, etc.) made suggestions concerning the development of the *Shequ* as such or even articulated substantial criticism. In Shenzhen, for instance, we interviewed an 86-year-old Party veteran who told us that he had criticized the director of the general office of the district government during a meeting, charging him with having requested the residents to express their opinions, but in the end ignoring their suggestions. The district government and Street Office, he argued, were making decisions without taking the opinions and suggestions of the people living in the neighbourhood into consideration.³⁶

Our survey did not reveal any correlation between elections and an increase in suggestions or opinions. Such a correlation existed rather in the minds of many interviewees. The participation in the electoral body as a supervisory instance of the RC gave those interviewed the idea of being able to offer more suggestions and opinions. They received, therefore, the (fictitious) impression that more and more suggestions had been put forward.

Without a doubt, the introduction of direct elections will reinforce the power of the *Shequ* vis-à-vis the state. And the Party's assertion that elections were democratic could be utilized by the population to enhance its social space. Such an enhancement could, in turn, occur by nominating non-Party candidates or candidates who stand for the common demands and interests of the residents and their neighbourhood. Hence, participation could be comprehended as a learning process and as a crucial element in political socialization. Modes and patterns of participation must be 'learned' as a precondition for participating in matters of one's own neighbourhood. And participation requires mind-expanding information in order to build awareness and civil capacity. Moreover, it requires organizational capacity in order to prevent that participation remains merely a matter of officials. Subjective and organizational capacities (or efficacy) make up two central pillars of participation which will have to be learned in the *Shequ* and in apparently non-political social spheres.³⁷

9 Why elections?

Why then did the Party permit elections?

First, participation does not pose a challenge to the rule of the Party. The political leadership does not comprehend the RCs as a parallel power structure. The Party branches or committees in the *Shequs* are still the dominant and decisive organizations within the neighbourhoods. Secondly, the neighbourhoods are monitored by higher echelons of the government and Party. In the case of 'deviance' the latter may intervene, for example by means of a transfer of new officials into the *Shequs*.

Karklins discerns three patterns explaining why authoritarian regimes conduct elections: (a) in the interest of the legitimization of a regime; (b) in order to socialize the masses politically; (c) in order to mobilize the population.³⁸ A fourth pattern could be identified as 'integration' based on equality and equal rights within a community (a *Shequ*), i.e. the

³⁶ Interview, Chongqing, 30 July 2003.

³⁷ For further information: Kibler 1980.

³⁸ Karklins 1986: 449; Rose and Mossawir 1967.

integrating of Party members and non-Party members, of officials and non-officials, as well as of various social strata.

At the same time, elections are a sign of a political relaxation, and they can provide information on discontent and opposition among residents. In addition, they foster the removal of incompetent and unpopular officials, thus constituting a corrective of power. They are, therefore, a stimulus for officials to behave and act in the interest of the voters. In this way they contribute to regime legitimacy and regime stability. Elections, finally, can serve to make a political system more receptive to new influences.³⁹

The foregoing features of elections are, without question, critical, as they justify the legitimacy of a regime and possess a psychological function: elections contain the symbolic message for the population that there is no alternative to the rule of the Party and that participation will be confined to institutionalized channels only. 'Participation in the great charade of totalitarian and authoritarian elections', writes Karklins, 'is highly valued by the regime, because the act of each citizen in being part and parcel of it is a small, but significant politico-psychological victory.'⁴⁰

In election theory, electoral processes are discerned as opportunities for citizens to have an impact on political leaders. Elections foster support for a political regime. Theories of democracy have proven that a correlation exists between voter turnout and regime legitimacy. Fair and regular elections create a sense of trust and efficacy and therefore of regime legitimacy.⁴¹ That is why the Chinese leadership strives to learn from electoral processes in 'Western' countries: it intends to increase state capacity, legitimacy, and governance.⁴²

Elections do not necessarily represent a challenge to the Party's political monopoly. General, competitive elections could rather reinforce *good governance* in a way that elected candidates are more strongly held to the interests of the electorate in order to guarantee their re-election.

Legitimacy is primarily grounded in a government's or officials' performance in terms of various policy-related arenas as well as the pursuance of national goals and interests (such as nation-building and working to create a "strong" global power). The party-state is currently attempting to increase legitimacy in urban areas by stabilizing the urban grassroots units (neighbourhood communities), as well as providing reinforcement in the areas of social security, welfare and public security. Further measures aim at creating a solid living environment. In March 2005, *People's Daily* noted that a "serving government" (*fuwuxing zhengfu*) was crucial in generating and maintaining people's satisfaction with the government.⁴³ These tasks fall under the jurisdiction of the *Shequ*, i.e. the locations where people experience first-hand the fulfilment of such measures.⁴⁴

Our survey revealed that different social groups develop different notions and criteria in terms of legitimacy. Currently, elections play a minor role. Only states which succeed in protecting their citizens against social insecurities and risks are successful in acquiring

³⁹ Cf Nohlen 2000: 32.

⁴⁰ Karklins *ibid.*: 465; see also Pravda 1978 and Reshetar 1989: 193ff.

⁴¹ Compare, for instance, Banducci and Karp 2003.

⁴² Cf Heberer 2003.

⁴³ See Xu Rongkai 2005. Cf also the contribution of Wen, Feng, Cao and Cao 2005 on the functional change of the state from administrator to service provider.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* The article argues that the government has to pay attention to adaptation and change capacity. The latter constitutes a crucial feature of our concept of stability.

legitimacy. Such insecurities and risks concern both socially weak and socially strong people. State income support supports the socially weak, but simultaneously reassures better-off citizens that they would be able to count on the state's support in the case of need. This produces a feeling of subjective social security. The RCs make great efforts to become carriers of legitimacy. If they succeed, legitimacy will become more visible for citizens and will trickle down from the central to the local and sub-local levels.

10 Conclusion

As Huntington has noted, participation assumes a more spontaneous character in a phase of adaptation or social change, whereas electoral participation becomes more and more salient in order to involve people in controlled processes of participation.⁴⁵ Locally, social control will contribute to impact upon the behaviour of officials and to give the people the impression of efficient participation. This is entirely in the interest of eventually improving both governance and enhancing regime legitimacy.

Therefore, elections are an expression of the intention of the political leadership to enhance patterns of controlled participation. To reach its modernizational goals, the party-state needs participation and initiative stemming from the population. Since the commencement of economic reforms, the party-state has increasingly withdrawn from more and more spheres of societal (social) life. This, for instance, is the case both in the field of economics (decrease of the state- and collective-owned economy compared to the private sector), and in residential areas (dissolution of the *danwei*-type residential areas; conversion of public living space into private property). Increasingly, more and more social spheres (environment, hygiene, administration of residential areas, social welfare) are gradually to be handed over to the neighbourhoods. Yet, as for decades the patriarchal socialist state was responsible for all those issues, the degree of participation among the population is still rather low.

The function of elections is based on generating legitimacy and improving the efficiency of governmental action. Direct elections undoubtedly support these goals. Urban citizens tend to prioritize social security over participation and volunteering. This is the reason why urbanites are currently neither very interested nor well informed about elections. They do not consider ballots very important. Social security and the improvement of one's living standard remain crucial.

Certainly, the enhancement of participation and elections are prominent features of both political modernization and democratization. It may be too early to implement democratization, as the material preconditions in China are still insufficient. Without economic security, elections and participation might not become crucial elements in the minds of Chinese people. As long as people are primarily concerned with solving their urgent social problems and their daily survival, political participation and elections may only play a minor role for individuals. Similarly, Pei Minxin noted that opinion polls would still reveal that the majority of the population prefers economic development to political democracy.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Huntington 1970: 38.

⁴⁶ Compare Pei 1997; similarly: Dowd, Carlson and Shen 2000 and Nathan and Shi 1993.

Appendix

This article is based on extensive field research conducted in 2003 and 2004. Urban research was carried out in cooperation with the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese People's University, and was sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Association). Field research was conducted in six *Shequs* in three cities (Shenyang, Chongqing, and Shenzhen).

Interviews based on qualitative techniques were carried out, for which a series of semi-standardized, open-ended questions were prepared. In total, 140 residents and 38 officials (on the level of urban districts, Street Offices and RCs) were interviewed, and statistical data and written material was obtained from Party and government documents and publications.

84 of the resident interviewees were female (60 percent), 56 male (40 percent). 31.4 percent were over 55 years old, 42.1 percent between 36 and 55 years of age. The share of people under 35 (26.5 percent) was relatively low. Due to their occupational duties, the latter were rarely at home. Our interviews further revealed that younger people were in large part unfamiliar with the situation in their neighbourhoods and, as a rule, did not participate in any activities there as long as they were not unemployed. Therefore, they had only very limited knowledge about *Shequ* activities.

The RCs that aided us in organizing the interviews endeavoured to arrange a representative selection of interview partners. We were thus provided with the opportunity to interview drug addicts, prostitutes, and persons who had previously been charged on criminal convictions.

One crucial problem we faced was that people with daytime working hours were largely unavailable, returning only late at night. Although we even conducted interviews in the evening and on weekends, the number of interviewees that were currently employed was somewhat limited. On the other hand, interviews with this group (entrepreneurs, self-employed, managers, etc.) revealed only slight differences in opinions.

During the daytime, predominantly elderly and jobless people were available. Those interviews enabled us to gain important insights regarding the living conditions of the urban poor, especially as many of the interviewees were members of poor households that received state income support.

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