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With the rapid urbanisation and population growth in the cities, the People's Republic of China has recognised the importance of community development based on an ever-increasing demand for social services. In 1994, the Chinese government adopted *community service* as an alternative way of providing the supplemental safety net in urban areas. Along with this top-down approach, resident-initiated activities, participation and grassroots organisations at the community level are growing at an incredible pace. Using a case study, this study explores the context and aspects of community services, participation and community development in a Chinese urban community. Results indicate that China's reformed market economy and welfare system presses ordinary urban people to reconnect to the local community to ensure welfare security and quality of life. Community participation in China has rediscovered the path of community development and re-interpreted the top-down and bottom-up approaches in the context of community services.

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Key words: community development, participation, community practice, China, urban community

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Since the 1990s, with the rapid urbanisation and population growth in the cities, the People's Republic of China has recognised the importance of community development based on an ever-increasing demand for social services. When economic globalisation and its related social changes have taken priority in China, in situations where the government is unable and the economic market unwilling to provide social services, community development and community-based efforts have become a viable means to fill the gap. In 1994, the Chinese government officially adopted *community service* as an alternative way of providing the supplemental safety net in urban areas. The rhetoric of adopting the community service approach suggests that the central Chinese government aims to give communities a stronger role in developing community capacity and monitoring local services in a wide range of areas including employment, housing, healthcare, elderly care, crime prevention and education. As a consequence, in China, resident-initiated activities, participation and grassroots organisations at the community level are growing at an incredible pace. Meanwhile, new concerns, including grassroots organisation, quality of life and community participation, have been included in the broader perspective of community development. However, a

question regarding the connection between community service and community development remains unanswered. In other words, while the ultimate goal of community development is to ensure community self-reliance through effective, broad-range participation of community members, is China's top-down oriented community service assisting community development? This question is critical because the growing interest of community members in community participation and community development has gone far beyond the expectations of both the central government and local authorities in urban China.¹ Answers to this question would help us better understand China's path to urban community development. Based on a case study in Beijing, this article provides a brief review of China's urban community service programmes, and describes community participation in terms of needs assessment and decision-making. It then explores the connections between community service, community participation and community development, and proposes an effective model of community development in urban China.

¹ Related local authorities in urban China mainly include: city government, city department of civil affairs, city department of labour and local police department.

The context of community service

China's rapid development is attributable, to a large extent, to its economic reforms commonly known as the 'open door' policy adopted in 1978 when the nation began its transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market. The State Statistical Bureau of China, which monitors the nation's economic progress, has consistently rated China's economic development as 'great'. The 'great' reform outcome has been based on economic growth and many other indicators, including income distribution, social security, housing, employment and education (State Statistical Bureau of China, 1997). Notably, reforms carried out in social welfare have attracted the most attention, as this fundamentally contradicts the country's long-term trust in socialism. In pre-reform China (before 1978), social welfare services for urban residents were provided mainly through their employment with state-owned enterprises (commonly known as the work unit). Along with promises of lifelong employment, urban people had for the most part enjoyed secure lifetime medical and retirement benefits, housing and education. The traditional social safety net was pre-reform China's main vehicle for providing services, and was compatible with the socialist goal of full employment in urban areas. As the country moved towards a socialist market, the old welfare system was criticised as being inefficient and violating the perceived rules of economic development, mainly because state-owned enterprises had to carry out two conflicted duties: being competitive in the market and providing all welfare benefits. The pre-reform welfare system quickly became a target in economic reform (Jones & Xu, 2002).

Although the Chinese government would prefer to avoid this ideological controversy, concerns about China's welfare policies became a serious obstacle to the nation's further development. In 1987, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) hosted the first conference regarding community and community service, marking the start of modern urban community-based welfare reform in China. In December 1994, the MCA held a national conference for exchanging experiences on community services. Community service was officially defined as:

welfare services for residents that are established with the initiative and financial support of the government to meet the multiple needs of residents in the community, based on the street, township and the Residents' Committee [levels], which organize and provide services through mobilizing various resources of the community. Community services consist of welfare and convenience services, and are the important part of the social security and social services system. (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1995: 12)

By supporting a community-based social service model, the central government aimed to reduce the average

welfare provision from the state sector, to market and privatise some governmental services, to charge a fee for services and to introduce means-tested benefits (Guan, 2000). Issues such as unemployment, retirement and care of the elderly have been delegated to communities via top-down governmental incentives and policies. The top-down approach was clearly demonstrated when the central government and mainstream Chinese economists identified community service as a labour-concentrated industry, a solution for the supply-surplus labour market of China. In 1995, the central government implemented a national programme called the Reemployment Project, which blended unemployment solutions with community service. Through this programme, central government and local authorities encourage urban residents to be self-employed as social service providers by providing fee-charging services to the community with various sorts of governmental support, including a lower tax rate, special bank loans and easy access to government grants.

In adopting this community service policy, provincial and city governments have gradually retreated from their responsibilities of providing social services to residents, and urban communities have gradually taken on greater responsibilities within their jurisdictions. The MCA's 1994 definition of community service does not include the term *community participation*; but it does state that community service is 'based on ... the Residents' Committee, which organises and provides services by mobilising various resources of the community', and thus leaves room for discussion as to whether higher levels of participation from community members is part of the government's agenda. There is no doubt that China's policy makers placed community service into the hands of the Residents' Committee, the mandatory grassroots organisation at the urban community level according to Chinese law.² In doing so, the provision of community services is, to a large extent, dependent on the ability of the community to develop a local service provision network, based primarily on residents' ability to provide self-help and self-reliance services (Leung & Nann, 1995). China's policy makers clearly anticipated that community participation would increase local capacity for providing welfare services. By taking over many of the state's social welfare responsibilities, communities and the new community service programmes require considerable involvement from local residents for financing services, strengthening the effectiveness of service delivery and meeting the increasing urban welfare needs (Xu & Jones, 2004).

However, because of the top-down initiative, the local government's impact and urban administration are a powerful force behind community services. On the

² Organizational Law of Urban Residents' Committee of People's Republic of China (1989), which has not been amended since then.

one hand, the Residents' Committee plays the leading role in expanding community services. This committee is responsible for authorising private vendors to provide community services, deciding on the scope of community services, coordinating community resources and occasionally providing fee-based services themselves. On the other hand, the Residents' Committee is a semi-governmental grassroots organisation in urban China that primarily functions as a governmental agency and carries out the administrative duties involved in providing community services. Many community service programmes are local government initiated or sponsored and the Residents' Committees must comply with their directives. Furthermore, many new emerging community service organisations are still affiliated with city government agencies or are coordinated by government officials.

Therefore, by turning to the local community for welfare and social service provision, the central Chinese government not only revitalised the ideal of community participation based on China's traditional values of community self-help and mutual-help, but also defined the role of community development. The central government aimed at hybridising service-provision responsibilities and found a way to build a new decentralised urban social-services administrative structure.

China's path of community development and participation

Participation in the context of development

While the need for development is in response to widespread poverty among populations (Jones, 1990), community development is recognised as a strategy for dealing with the consequences of poverty, such as accessing healthcare, youth education, crime prevention, and family-crisis counselling programmes (Barton, Watkins & Jarjoura, 1997; Dupper & Poertner, 1997; Mizrahi, 1999; Zippay, 1995). Bregha (1970) noted that community development has two different objectives. He pointed out that 'development as [an] increase in resources and productivity' has been the major focus of community development in the developing world, and that 'development as [an] allocation of assets and power' has been the major preoccupation of community development practice in the more affluent societies of the industrialised West (Bregha, 1970: 33). In Western societies, community development strategies emphasise bottom-up activities and participation at the local level. Those involved in community development help neighbours to rely on each other, to work together on concrete tasks that take advantage of their newly discovered awareness of their collective and individual assets and, in the process, create human, family and social capital which provides a new base for a return to society's mainstream (Kingsley, McNeely & Gibson, 2000; Mizrahi, 1999; Morrison et al.,

1997). In contrast, community development in developing countries typically depends on the entire society's development. Recent literature indicates that because of struggles with global reconstructing (market-dominated globalisation) and its changing ideologies (the collapse of communist groups), community development has since changed focus in developing countries (Banks, 2000). While governments have gradually withdrawn from their practices of intervening in social affairs and have left more space for civil society (Aigner, Flora & Hernandez, 2001), this trend has promoted a search for alternatives to state-controlled social programmes, and to centralised, hierarchical, top-down, institutionalised structures of decision-making.

Participation in service delivery

In examining various community-based programmes in developing countries, scholars have found that government efforts to foster community participation are often linked to the initiation of social service programmes (Abatena, 1997; Donahue, 1989; Jewkes & Murcott, 1996; Pearse & Stiefel, 1982; Smith, 1991). The rise of community participation programmes across developing countries is premised upon the perceived benefits that community participation brings to programmes in terms of added efficiency, sustainability, equity and collective community power (Jones, 2003; Gonzalez, 1998; Midgley, Hall, Hardiman & Narine, 1986). Underpinning the incorporation of community participation in social welfare programmes is the belief that local communities can be organised to address people's service needs and to work effectively with government agencies, voluntary bodies and local authorities in delivering services to resolve local problems (Heenan, 2004). However, recognising the value of community participation in programme implementation, researchers also observe that these community service programmes in developing countries usually have a short lifespan or have required external assistance to survive. Literature further indicates that community participation in service programmes could only be viewed as a 'contribution' if the voluntary donation of people's resources to a common good is intended to be initiated in a top-down fashion and does not imply that control and direction of activities pass to the local people (Blanchet, 2001; Murthy & Klugman, 2004; Paul, 1987; United Nations, 1976; WHO, 1991). Therefore, government-initiated community service programmes involving the local people have not been viewed as a particularly promising path because of the absence of local people's serious commitment to bottom-up decision-making (Foley & Martin, 2000; Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; McConnell, 1993). In view of community development, community-based programmes that promote community participation need to provide the community with at least a degree of control and direction over the

project, so that community members can move from being dependent, passive and powerless players, to independent, active leaders with a sense of control and competence over the problems facing their community (Cohen & Uphoff, 1980; Lord & Farlow, 1990; Mikkelsen, 1995; Zakus, 1998).

Defining participation: top-down and bottom-up

Emerging mainly from a critique of top-down, state-led development strategies, the concept of community participation has a long history in development discourse and practice (Murthy & Klugman, 2004). Although bottom-up activities and participation dominate the meaningful application of community development, there is considerable disagreement among development scholars and practitioners on the definition of 'participation' (e.g. Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante & Steffy, 2000; Midgley et al., 1986; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003). Development economists tend to define participation by community members in terms of the equitable sharing of the benefits of projects (e.g. Breitenbach, 1997; Raco, 2000). Yet some (e.g. Abrahams, 1996; Jennings, 2004) view participation as an instrument to enhance community participation as an end in itself – which is seen as a long-term benefit as it improves the community's performance – whereas others see it as a means to achieve other goals, such as crime prevention (e.g. King, Holmes, Henderson & Latessa, 2001) and health promotion (e.g. Boyce, 2001). Moser (1983) states that when participation is interpreted *as a means* it generally becomes a form of mobilisation to carry out community projects. This mobilisation or participation can be either state-directed, top-down (sometimes enforced) to achieve specific objectives or bottom-up and 'voluntary' community-based to enable the community to obtain a larger immediate share of resources. Where participation is identified *as an end*, the objective is usually not a fixed quantifiable development goal, but a process whose outcome is increasingly 'meaningful' participation in the development process, which in turn, is seen as advancing the development process (Moser, 1983).

To what extent community development and participation can be characterised as a top-down or bottom-up approach in post-reform China remains unclear. China has a long history of community participation. Before the late-1980 economic reforms, the Communist Party typically used community participation to motivate and mobilise the urban masses into political and social actions. By the early 1990s, people's interest in formal political participation in urban China had significantly declined, and their interest in informal channels of participation greatly increased (Tang & Parish, 2000). However, community participation had not received much attention until the central government introduced the community service agenda in 1994. Although

community service in China has been emphasised as a significant mechanism for neighbourhood mutual help (Tian, 1998), this practice of mutual help is nonetheless raised primarily by a top-down political motivation process instead of from residents' collective response to community needs.

The study setting

This exploratory study investigates a contemporary phenomenon – the delivery of community services in a particular neighbourhood in urban China. The study adopted a variety of approaches to stay within the community case-study tradition, including extensive documentation of activities, key informant interviews and participatory observation. The study also included a survey of residents to gather quantitative data. Using data on the Baiyunlu community in Beijing, China, a community selected by taking into account the availability of a research network and the convenience, this case study explores the path and form of community development and participation. Like many typical urban communities across China, the Baiyunlu community in Beijing's Xicheng District was officially established in 2000, as a result of Beijing city government's planning process, and is composed of seven established interconnected neighbourhoods, approximately 6,020 families and about 18,000 permanent residents. Clearly, studying a single community to understand a larger phenomenon has its limitations, notably in the ability to generalise findings. However, the purpose of this case research is to expand our knowledge base, not to enumerate sample frequencies.

By examining the complexity of community participation and its purpose and mechanisms, community participation in this study is defined at three levels, and each one is narrated according to different participation depth, scope and mode. Table 1 presents a range of definitions of community participation. In this study, community participation was first observed in two types of activities: service programmes and social activities. In addition, a survey was designed to quantify the residents' participation activities and their perceptions of participation. Based on a literature review, this survey also incorporated measurements of several variables, such as the quality of community life and community-level support system, in order to explore the relationships between community service, participation and community development.

The survey sampling frame included residents registered in the Hukou system (excluding unregistered migrants in Beijing from other parts of China). In the sampling process, first one family in the community was randomly selected from every ten families and then one adult family member was randomly chosen to answer the questionnaire, rendering a total sample of

Table 1. Definition of community participation: level of participation.

	Highest level	Middle level	Lowest level
Depth	Collective or community decision-making	Advice or consultation	Manipulation or informing
Scope	Service programme management at all levels	Service delivery or management at periphery	Service delivery or supporting role for other family members
Mode	As members of grassroots-based organisations	Members of small collectives or activists	As individuals

Note: This table is developed partially from the inspiration from reading studies by Murthy and Klugman (2004) and Chanan (1997).

592 respondents, of which 58.8 per cent were women and 41.2 per cent men. Because of the high percentage of retired people living in the community, the mean age of the respondents was 54 (49.2 per cent were 35–59 years old, and 40.7 per cent were 60–80 years old). In terms of family structure, most lived in a family with two (44.4 per cent) or three (45.3 per cent) generations, with an average family size of four. A large proportion of the sample had finished either high school education (29.7 per cent) or college (30.9 per cent), with a family income above RMB 1,000³ (equivalent to about US\$120) per month (76.4 per cent).

Measures

Participation Preference (PPS). Resident's preference for community participation was measured by five items. Residents were asked to assess their perceptions of five behaviours, each representing a different level of participation. Using the definition of community participation in Table 1, the Residents' Committee, which is the only legal group (or setting) for residents to exercise self-administration,⁴ was first identified as the major resident representative grassroots organisation in the community. Therefore, considering the dominant role of the Residents' Committee in China's urban community services, serving directly on this committee is the highest level of participation for residents. The middle level of participation is being a volunteer or a community activist and participating in community service; and the lowest level of participation is receiving community services and being supportive to family members who participate in the delivery of these services. Residents were asked to assess their perception from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', which were coded from 1 to 5, respectively; residents' neutral attitude was coded as 3. A participation preference scale (PPS) was then calculated by adding the five items, after adding weights to each item according to the level of participation:

the highest level of participation was given the highest weight of 5; and the lowest level of participation was given the lowest weight of 1. The scale ranges from 15 to 75, while the neutral attitude score is 45 and the highest participation preference is 15.

Quality of community life. For many communities in developing countries, community development is generally evaluated by increased community resources, improved service assessment and enhanced quality of community life. In this study, the quality of community life, as an important indicator of community development, was measured by residents' self-report satisfaction. A six-item scale was developed to examine the survey respondents' attitudes on community organisation, community service, community safety, community environment, community healthcare and community cultural life. A Likert scale was adopted in which 1 represents the highest satisfaction, 5 represents the lowest satisfaction and 3 is neutral.

Support system. Community development primarily focuses on the capacity of the community to solve its own problems. Taking into account that the pre-reform socialist welfare system emphasised a vertical dependency on the government for welfare provision and the state-owned enterprises for welfare delivery, the strength of the community support system can be seen as a valid indicator of community development in urban China. As a result, contemporary urban dwellers have become less dependent on the state for social services than they were under the old pre-reform scenario. One could argue that services provided in the community could increase residents' awareness of community support. We asked the residents to identify the source of support from which they would seek help, including family, community, government or work unit.

Aspects of community participation

The Baiyunlu community services are wide-ranging, including home maintenance services, healthcare, elderly home care, recreational training and work training programmes, information referral centres, convenience stores and recreational programmes. Fifty-five per cent of the residents in the survey reported that they had participated in community services, either offered services

³ The poverty lines in Beijing and other cities in China vary from RMB200 to RMB500 per month.

⁴ Article Two of Organizational Law of Urban Residents' Committee of People's Republic of China (1989) grants the power of community self-administration to the Residents' Committee.

or delivered services. Among these participants, 77.1 per cent reported their participation as voluntary, whereas the rest of the participants charged for their services to recoup their base costs (cost-based) or to make a profit that was base costs plus an additional amount (fee-based). However, based on personal one-on-one interviews and observations, whether community residents participated in various cost- and fee-based services, they view this kind of participation as voluntary. For example, a volunteer community home-repair group has members including plumbers, electric workers and mechanical workers. Volunteers in this repair group provide emergency services for local residents and they usually charge a minimal, below-market fee simply to cover their costs. In this way, volunteers believe that local residents receive timely, needed services when no other commercial services are available. Although some residents, especially the unemployed, provide such community services to make a living and thus do charge fees for this work, many volunteers do not benefit financially from the services they provide and do different work to make a living. Residents referred variously to ‘friendship’, ‘neighbourship’ and a feeling that they were ‘giving something back’ to the community and ‘helping out’. Despite the limitations imposed by the trend of commercialised community services, these statements highlight the important role that community services have played in enhancing community interactions and social cohesion.

Since the central Chinese government highlighted *enhancing the quality of community life* as an important objective of community services, social activities have formally been considered a community service. Residents enjoyed many different types of social activities in the Baiyunlu community, the majority of which focused on areas such as entertainment, exercise, education and social and recreational activities (see Table 2). As such, these activities can benefit almost every family and naturally appeal to residents. Different social activity clubs and groups have gradually been formed since the implementation of the community service policy. These groups are independent of the local government in nature

Table 2. Community organisations and community activities.

Type of activities	Residents groups	Membership size
Entertainment	Peking Opera Team	20–30
	Singing Team	10–15
	Park Opera Team	20–30
Exercising	Morning Exercising Group	10–20
	Yangge Dancing	25–30
Education	Community School	30–50
	The Community Newspaper Team	10–20
Social and Communication	Mahjong Club	40–50

and residents typically organise all types of community activities, though organising efforts were loose. The number of community members involved in these social activities was relatively small, ranging from 10 to 50 people. Although these activities attracted residents from different age groups and genders, and with different background, a significant number of the participants were retired.

Evidence suggests that community services achieve higher participation rates than other programmes and events sponsored by local authorities; for example, only 35.5 per cent of the residents reported that they participated in the last political election. In this respect, the predicated benefits of community services – increased service accessibility, increased community identity and more service programmes to accommodate local residents’ needs – draw more individuals to participate in the community. However, the link between participation in community services and greater engagement in the community decision-making process is less evident. Nonetheless, it can be argued that community services administrated by local grassroots Residents’ Committees are more likely to provide local residents with this sort of opportunity, an issue that is discussed further below.

Despite the fact that many residents in this study expressed their wish to participate in the community, they also stated that they were restricted by time and energy. Overall, residents in the studied community showed a slightly positive attitude towards community participation (PPS mean = 43.84, SD = 12.73, neutral = 45). As shown in Table 3, the respondents’ most negative attitude was towards voluntary involvement in community decision-making – serving on the Residents’ Committee – the only government-sanctioned resident-representative grassroots organisation in urban China. Although residents reported that they would prefer to participate and were willing to support their family members in their participation in community activities and service delivery, this preference was not strong. While recognising that a Chinese cultural norm is not to make negative statements in public (e.g. to the interviewer), the result, the percentage of missing cases corresponding to participation levels, also indicated the growing preference for participation when participation required less personal involvement and commitment. These results suggest that residents are more willing to participate in community services or activities, but are less motivated to serve the community or become involved in the community decision-making process.

Linkage between service, participation and development

While investigating the relationship between community service, resident participation and community development in urban China, two variables, quality of community life and residents’ support system, were examined.

Table 3. Community participation preference (n = 592).

	I would nominate myself as a member of the Residents' Committee	If I were nominated to serve on the Residents' Committee, I would be happy to do it	I would like to serve the community as a volunteer or community activist	I would like to participate in community services and activities	I would support my family's participation in community services and activities
Level of participation	Highest		Middle		Lowest
Valid cases	444	450	466	499	493
Missing cases (%)	148 (25%)	142 (24%)	126 (21.3%)	93 (15.7%)	99 (16.7%)
Mean	3.32	3.02	2.71	2.09	2.05
Mode	4.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00

Note: 1 = Strongly agree, 3 = Neutral, 5 = Strongly disagree.

Table 4. Residents' support system (n = 533, 59 missing cases).

	Community support (neighbours, Residents' Committees, community service providers) (%)	Individual support (family members & friends) (%)	Work unit support (co-workers, work unit leaders) (%)	Government support (%)
Yes	74.7	71.3	38.3	29.6
No	25.3	28.7	61.7	70.4

In general, residents of Beijing's Baiyunlu community showed a slightly satisfactory attitude toward the quality of community life (mean = 2.49, SD = 0.85). A significant correlation was found between residents' service participation and the quality of community life, $r(375) = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$. The higher the perceived quality of community life, the more often residents had participated in community services, and vice versa. In addition, a significant correlation was also found between residents' participation preference and the quality of community life, $r(339) = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$. This result suggests that the increased quality of community life positively corresponds to residents' higher participation preference. Two implications can be made based on the relationships found between increased quality of life, higher participation preference and greater frequency of participating in community services. First, while one of the central government's objectives for community service is to enhance the quality of community life, the significant correlation is predictable. It is also noted that the increased quality of community life might also motivate residents to participate in the future. In addition, the quality of community life might also be a mediator linking residents' past participation behaviour and their participation preference. While residents' past participation behaviour can be viewed mostly as an involvement in community services, their increased participation preference in the community might lead to a bottom-up developmental orientation. The later theory or expectation needs further investigation.

As shown in Table 4, two-thirds of the respondents reported that the community is their source of support;

the community has become the most frequently mentioned source of support from among family, community, government and work unit. The results indicate that the awareness of community as a support system is significantly related to residents' participation behaviour in community services. Respondents who viewed community as their support system participated in community services more often, $t(df = 251.68) = -5.07$, $p = 0.00$. In addition, residents who viewed community as their support system had significantly higher resident participation preference levels, $t(df = 210.43) = -2.56$, $p = 0.01$. The results suggest that dependence on the community for services had led residents to play a more active role in community service provision and delivery. Meanwhile, residents who were aware of the importance of the community in meeting their needs and providing a supplemental safety net were more likely to be involved in the community's decision-making process. However, it is not clear from this cross-sectional study whether increased and diverse service programmes, readily available and accessible in the community, are what have encouraged residents to turn to their community for support.

Model of community development in urban China

Community services in China are concerned with providing services and improving the quality of life in communities, and residents' participation is the vehicle for achieving these objectives. While whether community-based social service model meets local residents' needs is beyond the scope of this article, findings of this study

indicate that community services provided opportunities for social and cultural interactions. Increased social and cultural interactions have led to organised activities for residents based on their interests; however, the pathway through participation in community services and engagement in the community decision-making process is not clear. Community participation in urban China appears to be apolitical at the current stage. In the Baiyunlu community, most participation falls into the traditional practices whereby individuals occasionally attend community meetings, community leaders support residents' groups seeking to organise social activities and residents delivered either low-fee or free services to their neighbours in need. The proactive and political participation at the community level, i.e. community participation in the decision-making process for the betterment of the community and its development, has not yet developed. Learning from the experience of Chinese history, urban residents hesitate to become involved in their community's political life even with the local government's permission or encouragement. Chinese community practices and resident participation traditions indicate that control or administration over residents' motivation were still located at the community level; community service can be seen as a shared responsibility between the government and the community, in that the local resident representative organisation represents the community at large.

The community service model adopted by the Chinese government aims to provide a supplemental safety net in urban areas; but consequently communities have started to play a far more important role in today's urban life. Over the past two decades, as China's old socialist welfare system has gradually diminished, the new welfare system, which has been portrayed as market-durable, represents the ideology of shared responsibilities among societal members. While the central government continuously supplies the overall welfare infrastructure such as subsidised housing and medical benefits, the local communities are responsible for providing a supplemental safety net by providing community services; for example, increasing job opportunities, retraining unemployed people in the community service sector and providing more resources at the local level to create income security. Consequently, while in modern China, people's material life has greatly improved for the most part, certain populations such as the disabled, the elderly and families facing hardships are more vulnerable in a market-oriented society. These groups are less competitive in the market and they have become more vulnerable, particularly when the government is cutting back on welfare services for them. As such, community services have had a significant impact on residents' participation behaviours; urban residents have to reassess their dependency on, identity of and sense of belonging to the community. Obviously, China's economic reforms and decentralisation process

have prompted such a transition. Urban Chinese have seemed to be focused on the increasing opportunities for prosperity in a blossoming market economy. Not surprisingly, with the retreat of the state from providing welfare services, urban people have had to make the transition from being 'people of the work unit', which was appropriate in the pre-reform social economic era, to 'people of the community'. This transformation has been strengthened by people's need to secure their economic wellbeing and the need for a new identity in the society, which has even surpassed residents' general reluctance to participate.

In reality, China's community development reflects political decentralisation trends as far as the fundamental concepts of socialism, such as the public ownership of land and the leadership of Chinese Communist Party, are secured at both the local government and the urban community level. After the open-door policy was initiated in the late 1980s, like many developing countries (Mok, 1988) China has focused on reducing the state's power and responsibilities toward the people; i.e. it is moving toward a 'minimal liberal state', as Sandbrook (1994) asserted. The central government's frequent use of the term 'community' and the concept of 'community development' reflect this transition. The focus is a result in part of the central government's apparent inability to provide the basic human services and meet welfare needs for its citizens. Consequently, the concept of *community* in China has changed in order to fill the services gap created when the central government moved to a market economy, and in so doing decentralised its responsibilities. Community participation is becoming apparent and frequent, not only because residents have to rely on the community for job security and supplemental safety net, but also because their participation in community service has enabled them to see the actual changes in their community as a result of the participation. Residents' participation in the creation and delivery of community services has not only helped to provide communities with convenient, quality services, but it has also created a sense of humanity and belongingness for residents. Indeed, this participation provides a sense of empowerment and connection for participants as they help to fill the service gap left by the central government's diminishing role in the community.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the top-down public policies of community service have created a unique opportunity for community development and community practice in China. The model of community development in urban China, which is drawn from this study (see Figure 1), contradicts Western models.

While the Chinese government has been promoting the concept of 'community' since the 1990s, the community

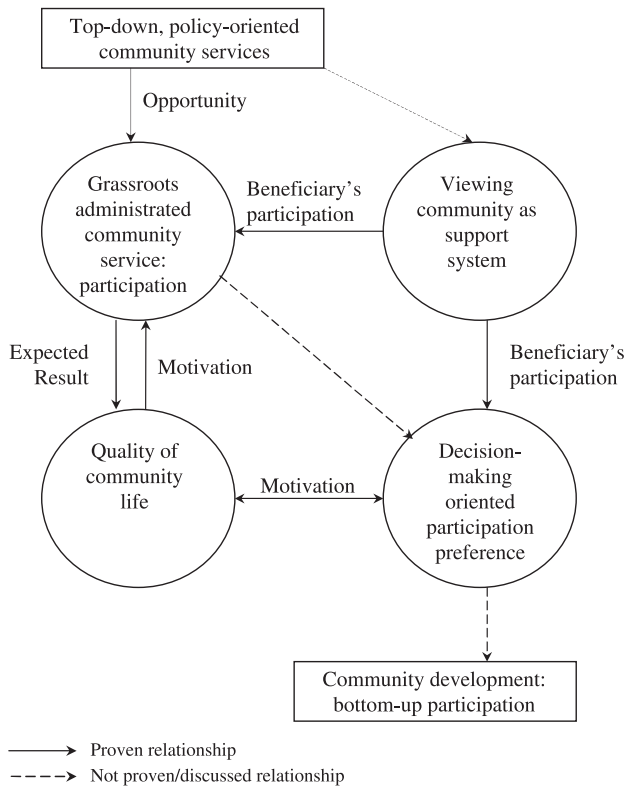


Figure 1. Model of community development in urban China.

practices adopted in urban China have mainly focused on the objective of welfare service delivery, and have been geared to the central government's major goal – to create social stability and promote market economic development. Widely accepted principles of community development in Western societies, which favour bottom-up approaches such as involving residents in setting goals and strategies, identifying community assets and problems and reinforcing community values while building human and social capital (Naparstek, Dooley & Smith, 1997), have not been reflected in the Chinese community development objectives, at least not in the minds of China's policy makers and community administrators. While top-down approaches dominate, Chinese community practices have gradually integrated this traditional approach with bottom-up, resident-driven initiatives to intensify the connection between residents, community organisations and other community entities. In this study, some of the driving forces of resident-oriented practices also come from complex needs for community services, needs for much greater horizontal communication, demands for a certain degree of autonomy and the government's decentralisation.

It has been argued that the top-down and bottom-up community practice approaches are two one-way streets and are not compatible. The top-down approach is believed to be insensitive to local needs and an area

where the potential for creativity and innovation can be compromised. The bottom-up approach, on the other hand, is assumed to be responsive to local needs. However, its influences on changing the existing power structure are also minimal. Such a dichotomy remains central to the field of community practice. But does it have to be this way? More specifically, is there a middle road or an alternative route that would enable the two to be complementary? Political observers suggest that if China is becoming more market-oriented, political reforms leading to a more democratic system will follow. There is less agreement, however, on the appropriate mechanism to facilitate such a change. Hence, community services might serve as a catalyst for this process. Urban residents in China have begun to relate their daily life to the local community. They are likely to discover that their quality of life is closely connected to their community's overall wellbeing. Some people have made an initial step to engage in various community services and social activities. Although most residents' willingness to directly serve the community in decision-making remains low, they have incentives to participate and to mobilise because they now feel more connected. It is still too early to conclude that China's community practice model is a unidirectional move – from top-down to bottom-up – or a two-way street – moving backwards and forwards between these two approaches. However, it is important to note that the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party are unlikely to establish a single model of community practice. The increasing participation of residents in their community, whether in decision-making councils or in providing services, will ultimately change the power distribution at the community level and will surely play a critical role in facilitating community development in urban China for the years to come.

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