

Spontaneous or Constructed?

Neighborhood Governance Reforms in Los Angeles and Shanghai

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This paper applies a comparative approach to examining two cases of grass-roots governance reforms initiated by two metropolitan governments: the neighborhood councils in Los Angeles and resident committees in Shanghai. We highlight the need to understand the interrelationships among the content of reforms and the political and administrative structures where these reforms are initiated and implemented. Our analysis suggests that the neighborhood council system in Los Angeles could be best described as “high spontaneous and low constructed,” while the resident committees in Shanghai as “high constructed and low spontaneous.” The efficacy of a government-initiated civic engagement program would depend on a balanced combination of state involvement and community self-organization.

Growing urbanization has intensified the challenges of urban management in both developed and developing countries. Significant attention has been given to building participatory governance at the grass-root level of urban management (Box 1998; Fung and Wright 2003). Many city governments around the world have initiated urban governance reform programs. Yet people are usually questioning if the government can initiate genuine empowerment because state orchestration always will be instrumental to state interests. So it will be of theoretical and practical significance to explore whether it is possible for state-sponsorship to encourage democratic participation in urban governance. There is also no reason to believe that efforts of experimenting with participatory governance have the same consequences in all nations. Attention should be given to understand how the formal political and legal contexts, in particular, political institutions, administrative structures and government policies where these participatory innovations and reforms are embedded, shaped their trajectories. To broaden and deepen our understanding of participatory governance theory and practice, there is a need for more comparative analyses of cases of community governance reforms across countries (Bogason and Musso 2006).

To contribute to the understanding of community governance reforms, we selected two cases in two different countries--Los Angeles in the US and Shanghai in China--for a comparative analysis. Beginning from June 1999, Los Angeles has created a citywide neighborhood council system. The neighborhood Councils are designed to build partnerships with local government to address local needs and requests, to promote public participation in city governance and decision making, and to serve in an advisory role on issues of concern to the neighborhood (Los Angeles City Charter 1999, Article I). The past thirty years have seen tremendous changes occurring in China--economically, socially and politically. Yet China is

facing the overall challenge of modernizing its political and administrative structures that matches its modern society and reformed economy. The city of Shanghai, as the largest metropolitan area in China, began in the late 1990s to restructure its resident committees to meet the growing demand of community services.

The cases of Los Angeles and Shanghai were chosen for four reasons. First, both are major metropolitan areas in their countries. With a population of 3.7 million, the City of Los Angeles spans an area of 469 square miles, sprawling from suburban San Fernando Valley in the northeast, to the wealthiest coastal communities that stretch from Venice to Palos Verdes, to the working-class industrial port community of San Pedro near the Los Angeles County border. Shanghai is the largest city in China and one of the largest urban areas in the world, with over 20 million people in its extended metropolitan area. Located on China's central eastern coast at the mouth of the Yangtze River, the city is administered as a municipality with province-level status. Second, the two cities are diversified. Such diversity has imposed a great challenge on the two cities' urban administration. In the past decades, Los Angeles has experienced tremendous racial and cultural diversification as a result of the region's status as an immigration hub, as well as middle-class flight that has left the region's poorer and more racially diverse communities concentrated in the urban core. Although residents in Shanghai are not racially as heterogeneous as in Los Angeles, as many as four million people in the city are migrant workers from China's impoverished regions, in addition to around 16 million local residents. Third, both are typical of neighborhood governance reforms in their countries. Los Angeles' citizen self-governance movement has reflected a nationwide trend over the past three or four decades in the United States (Berry, Portney & Thomson 1993). Restructuring resident committees in Shanghai also has been a typical model of government involvement in community development in China (Li

2006). Fourth, although the two community governance reforms are all government-sponsored, they differ in terms of implementation, function and consequences. Los Angeles's neighborhood council system exhibits an overall feature of empowering local residents to participate in the process of policy-making, while resident committee reform in Shanghai has been observed as an effort of local government to strengthen grass-root administrative function (Xu 2008). A comparative analysis will shed light on how institutional structures facilitate or constrain the initiation, implementation and consequences of community governance reforms across countries.

In the following sections, we first describe urban political and administrative structures in two cities by highlighting their common feature of hybrid governance and differences in degrees of "spontaneous versus constructed orders." The structural difference guides us to illustrate how the formation of neighborhood councils system in Los Angeles can be understood as "high spontaneous and low constructed" and that of residents committee in Shanghai as "low spontaneous and high constructed." We move on to investigate whether neighborhood councils and resident committees meet the criteria of representative legitimacy. Then we assess the functioning of two neighborhood reform movements. The paper finally concludes with some implications for comparative studies on community governance reform.

Hybrid Urban Governance Structures in Los Angeles and Shanghai

We define urban governance as institutions and processes where collective decisions are made--policy formulation and public goods and services are delivered--policy implementation in the urban setting. We highlight the structural aspect of urban governance because it refers to features of a system that are stable over time and that form the framework within which policy activities

and processes occur and through which the purpose of the policies are achieved. In the literature and practice of citizen participation, governance structures are considered as important because they generate the patterns of actions and determine which activities and results are possible (Box and Musso 2004).

Both urban governance structures in Los Angeles and Shanghai resemble some features in Kettl's (2004) description of "hybrid governance" - a combination of vertical, hierarchical authority and accountability, and horizontal alliances and partnerships. On the one hand, in a traditional hierarchical, authority-based administrative structure, top officials operate through a chain of command from state, local to grass-root levels, giving orders, and expecting them to be followed by those at lower levels. On the other hand, the governments at all levels have increasingly relied on a horizontal network of partners in policy implementation, whether those partners are civic organizations, nonprofits and even citizens. The vertical and horizontal aspects of governance fit nicely with Hayek's differentiation of constructed versus spontaneous orders in social institutions (1978). A vertical type of governance is a constructed order which is deliberately designed to achieve specific, defined policy purposes while a horizontal type of governance emphasizes a spontaneous order which is self-organizing and voluntary.

Yet the two cities' governance structures differ in the degrees of vertical versus horizontal lines. Los Angeles has a much shorter vertical and broader horizontal lines than Shanghai. The difference illustrates the fundamental differences between liberal and socialist societies because liberal societies depend primarily on spontaneous order, whereas the structures of socialist societies take constructed and designated order as their model. Liberal societies are fundamentally decentralized. By contrast, socialist societies are centralized and monolithic. Their governments attempt to control all aspects of life. Despite the reform of a centrally planned

economy in China, there is a centralized rule of one political party that controls all political and administrative activities. Anything which the party does is to be approved and anything which threatens its central role is condemned and suppressed. Socialist societies have clearly tried to organize themselves according to the principles of constructed order (Hayek 1978).

Fragmentation in Los Angeles versus Hierarchy in Shanghai

Created by progressive reforms in its 1925 charter, Los Angeles's governance structure includes a relatively weak mayor and a city council composed of 15 members, each of whom represents a constituent district of 250,000 residents. With their own districts, each city council member has considerable policy control. City administration is highly fragmented among 32 departments and administrative oversight is shared between the city council and more than 240 city commissioners, "part-time citizen officials" appointed by the mayor to oversee particular departments.

If urban governance structures in Los Angeles could be characterized as being fragmented, Shanghai's urban governance would be considered as a heavily top-down, authoritarian, and hierarchical structure. Under the jurisdiction of Shanghai Municipal government, there are 18 geographic districts, each with a district government. The average district has a population of about one million. Each district is divided into multiple sub-districts and each sub-district in turn is further divided into numerous resident committees.

Shanghai's administrative structure is also noted as "two-tier government, third-level administration and fourth-level network." "Two-tier government" refers to municipal and district governments that have independent administrative, financial and law enforcement powers.

“Third-level administration” points to sub-district offices. Resident committees form the “fourth-level” network in a hierarchy where the higher level oversees the operation of the lower level. A resident committee consists of a network of neighborhood cells. Residents living in the same building or block constitute a neighborhood cell. The cell leader is appointed by the resident committee and acts as a liaison between the residents and the resident committee. Because of the hierarchical nature of governing arrangement, the structure is characterized by higher levels of stability and rigidity than in comparable cities in the West (Whyte and Parish 1984). Moreover, a ‘dual bureaucracy’ system adds another layer of complexity into the structure, with the Communist party organizations playing an important role in the direct management of the state bureaucracy. In a two-fold organization, both the party and government keep corresponding structures.

The structural difference also reflects on a difference with respect to meaning of ‘community’ in American and Chinese contexts, which in turn has significant impacts on their experiments with neighborhood governance reforms. Americans think of community as multiple identities--communities where they live, work and play. They could be members of religious, ethnic, advocacy, political parties, labor unions, charitable and even sports ‘communities’ (Savas 2007). Yet the meaning of community in China is strictly in geographic and administrative terms. The Ministry of Civil Affairs in China, a central government agency, officially defined a community in urban area as either a sub-district or a resident committee. Neighborhood or community in Chinese context is considered as an administrative unit nested in a hierarchical urban governance system.

Formation of Los Angeles' Neighborhood Council System and Shanghai's Reforming Residents Committees: Spontaneous versus Constructed

We position Los Angeles' neighborhood council system and Shanghai's resident committees differently in a two-level framework of spontaneous order and constructed order where each order ranges from low to high. Both systems are a combination of spontaneous and constructed orders. The neighborhood council system in Los Angeles is "high spontaneous and low constructed" and resident committees in Shanghai "high constructed and low spontaneous." When creating Los Angeles's neighborhood council system, local residents act spontaneously, but within a constructed framework provided in the Charter, the ordinance and the neighborhood council plan. Neighborhood council systems in other US cities are even more spontaneous than Los Angeles and no government requirements imposed on them (Berry, Portney and Thomson 1993). In reforming Shanghai's resident committees, local communities follow a framework designed by the local government and lack spontaneity.

A Combination of Top-down and Bottom-up and Approaches in Los Angeles

The neighborhood council system is a result of a push-pull process between community activists and city officials. The metropolitan governance structure in Los Angeles was designed to serve the homogeneous population and business interests of the early twentieth century. It cannot meet the challenges posed by post-modern Los Angeles (Box and Musso 2004). City Hall is perceived by many residents as distant from local communities and inefficient in the delivery of services. Less than 30% rated it as 'very good' or 'excellent.' More immediate threats came from the secession movements in three city areas—the San Fernando Valley, Hollywood and the L.A.

Harbor area (San Pedro and Wilmington) whose residents' demand for increased local control over land use decision-making, more equal revenue allocation, and more responsive service delivery moved them to seek separation from the City of Los Angeles.

The neighborhood council system was established in 1999 when Los Angeles voters adopted a new Charter for the City. It was envisioned to unite the city by promoting local participation in municipal governance and by making government more responsive to local needs. The city-wide system involves relatively autonomous but potentially interdependent councils in which neighborhoods have identified their own boundaries, established their own missions and bylaws, adopted their own systems for financial accountability, and elected their own officers.

A Top-down Approach in Shanghai

If the neighborhood council movement in Los Angeles could be understood as an attempt to address the growing tension between increased urban diversity and the homogenizing legacy of Progressive-era institutions (Cooper and Musso 1999), reforming resident committees in Shanghai would be best described as an example of adapting urban administrative structure to the challenges emanating from significant social and economic transformations that occurred in China. It exemplifies the prominent role of the "administrative state" in the policy process (Painter 2005; Cooper and Lui 1990). An administrative state tends to dominate the public policy process from initiation through adoption to implementation.

In the pre-reform era, although a mandated basic part of the urban political and administrative hierarchy, resident committees played a relatively marginal role in urban

administration due to the “omnipotent” nature of *danwei* (work unit)-based society (Xu 2008). Under the socialist planned economy, most urban adults were assigned a job in a *danwei* (either a state-owned enterprise (SOE) or other public organizations) that secured their income, housing, healthcare, pension as well as other welfare benefits. *Danweis* were also places where urban residents were subject to political and ideological controls. The resident committee was supplementary to the *danwei*-based institution by being involved in political mobilization, social control, and community service provision. The residents committee was typically used by the party and the government to mobilize residents for major social and political events, like the National Holiday celebration. It monitored family-planning compliance, maintained household registry rolls and implemented other government-sponsored programs. It was also responsible for taking care of the disabled, orphans and childless old people who did not belong to any *danwei*.

However, since the introduction of the market economy, Chinese society has undergone a remarkable social and economic transformation that led to the disintegration of *danwei*. The “Iron Rice Bowl” (referring to life-long employment) was broken, and many urban residents no longer enjoyed life-long employment because of a large-scale restructuring and privatizing SOEs. A large number of employees were laid-off and became social welfare recipients. The privatization of housing that used to be distributed by *danweis* further weakened residents’ affiliation with their state employers. As a result of relaxed restrictions on population mobility, millions of migrant workers from rural areas flooded into major urban cities in pursuit of job opportunities. Under the new social and economic conditions, resident committees were suddenly required to assume more responsibilities in urban administration. With their declining traditional functions of political mobilization and social control, resident committees began to play a more important role in the provision of social services in their communities.

Against this background, the Ministry of Civil Affairs began a nationwide “Urban Community Building” program in the late 1980s. The program was aimed at meeting the growing demands of community-oriented social services left unfulfilled by the disintegrated *danwei* system. The goals of community services were stipulated by the ministry as “to launch and organize cooperative social service activities among members of the community under the leadership of the government, so as to solve social problems in the community” (Li 1997).

The program trickled hierarchically down to municipal, district, sub-district and neighborhood levels. The Shanghai Municipal Government began to restructure its resident committees in the early 1990s. Efforts were made to have residents in the neighborhood elect representatives to form a new resident committee. The elected resident committee as a major decision-making body in the community holds regular meetings. The function of community service delivery was reorganized into a community service center staffed by professional social workers (Xu, Gao & Yan 2005). The elected resident committees are to select competent staff into the community service center, to oversee and to evaluate their performance. The elected resident committee will have a final say on major issues concerning their community.

Heterogeneous Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles

The formation of neighborhood councils in Los Angeles is “high spontaneous” in the sense that it is “self-determining and self-governing.” The process is also “low constructed” because the charter left many details about the design to the discretion of neighborhood council organizers and provided little guidance. Although initiated by the city charter reform, the actual organization of neighborhood councils has occurred in a grass-root fashion with minimum

technical assistance or resource support from the city government. The charter provision requires that they represent all stakeholders within a neighborhood and defines stakeholders as those who live, work, or own property in the neighborhood. Stakeholders define boundaries, determine stakeholder population, and address issues of concern to the community. The council must establish operational procedures and secure community support to qualify for certification. Board of Neighborhood Commissioners (BONC) certifies (and decertifies) councils. They are the policy board for the neighborhood council system. Within one year, a governing board must be elected and seated. Once a certified neighborhood council has elected a governing board, it can apply for \$50,000 in annual funding that can be used for either operations or neighborhood projects. Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE), a city agency assists councils in organizing, running meetings, and navigating city bureaucracy. DONE also regulates councils and ensures that they follow all rules governing public bodies. Councils can also be decertified by the BONC for reasons indicated in the Charter and ordinance.

The neighborhood council elections have been relatively successful despite some problems concerning election disputes. Civic engagement in Los Angeles is historically weak. Given its nature as an advisory body, election turnout is low but respectable. As of April 2008, there were 88 certified neighborhood councils and all of which had elected boards. Three councils have been decertified. The whole system covers 3,485,085 residents in the city. Their governing board structure varies from council to council - there is no standard form. Councils are free to decide new operational structures-- including committee and subcommittee assignments. Some of them are divided into subcommittees with geographic representations. Some include stakeholders representing homeowners, renters, business, faith-based organizations and other nonprofits. The size of neighborhood councils also varies dramatically with an average

population of 38,298. The top five neighborhood councils cover population that ranges from 103,364 to 73,966 and the bottom five from 14,931 to 7,323 (Department of Neighborhood Empowerment 2007). Consequently, neighborhood council capacity varies considerably across the city.

A Paradox of “High Voting Rate and Low Participation” and Homogeneous Resident Committees in Shanghai

In contrast, resident committees in Shanghai are “high constructed and low spontaneous.” In 2000, some 50 resident committees experimented with direct elections. About 20 percent of resident committees in the city were directly elected three years later. In 2006, the Shanghai Municipal Government decided that 40 percent of its resident committees should be directly elected. The city’s Bureau of Civil Affairs planned the whole process and the Sub-district Party Committees and its Neighborhood Branches assumed the responsibility of implementing the election. By the end of 2006, 18,712 members in 3,371 committees were elected and 53 percent of them were direct elections.

A typical election went through four stages: community outreach – voter registration – solicitation of candidates – election. In almost all the communities, mobilizing residents to participate in the elections turned out to be very difficult. The whole process can be characterized as “participation by invitation.” Election staff employed a face-to-face invitation strategy. They visited families one after another to register the voters and get the nomination of candidates. Yet residents demonstrated a negative attitude toward serving on the resident committee and were unwilling to be the community decision-makers. One survey demonstrates that only 17 percent of residents are willing to participate in community affairs (Wang and Feng 2004). It was

existing resident committee staff and neighborhood cell leaders who selected the candidates. At the Election Day, staff knocked on the doors one by one to invite residents to cast their ballots. Most of votes are so-called proxy votes. That is, instead of showing up at the election, residents usually authorize either a family member or their neighborhood cell leaders to cast their ballots.

Several case studies at different neighborhoods illustrate a paradox of “high voting rate and yet low participation rate” in elections (Wu, Zhai and Wang 2008). For example, at one neighborhood, there are 2,765 registered voters in total. As many as 2,401 ballots were tallied and produced a very high voting rate of 86.8 percent. Yet it was discovered that only 304 residents actually came to cast ballots, suggesting that each of them casted 7.9 ballots on average. Assuming that one voter represented one family with an average size of 4 people, the total ballots should be 1,216. What happened to other 1,185 ballots? These were proxy ballots casted by neighborhood cell leaders on behalf of other residents. In fact, each neighborhood cell leader casted 20 proxy ballots in addition to their own family ballots. If we only counted 1,216 as direct ballots, the overall voting rate would be down to 44 percent. The high voting rate was mainly due to the presence of a large number of proxy votes.

On the surface, the low level of volunteerism reflects that modern urban residents in China are tired of any government-sponsored political event, even if they are intended for good cause. But the root cause should be traced back to the legacy stemmed from the old, rigid socialist planning system. Four decades of state control imposed on every aspect of ordinary people’s life basically eradicated any voluntary association, an important feature of civil society. When the state begins to withdraw from some domains of social life, no alternative social organizations are ready to fill the vacuum. Resident committee elections have to rely on the existing network of neighborhood cell leaders as the major outreach, mobilization and

organizational mechanism. Local residents are less inclined to participate in community collective decision-making via self-governing and self-organized grass-root organizations. They lack the tradition of bottom-up advocacy.

In a hierarchical administrative structure, the boundaries and size of resident committees were predetermined by higher-level administration. A typical resident committee in Shanghai covers an area of 100,000 square meters with a population of 2,000 households. The elected resident committees all adopted a unified governing structure that includes one director and other four to eight members. Under the elected resident committee, there are five subcommittees—planning, social security, public safety, property management and audit. The organizational structure of subcommittees corresponds exactly to that of functional departments in higher level governments. For example, Social Security Subcommittee follows a hierarchical chain of Municipal Labor and Social Security Bureau – District Labor and Social Security Division – Sub-district Social Security Section.

Representative Participation

In western societies, residents with higher education and family income levels are more likely to participate in the community affairs, while lower levels of participation were observed among lower-income minorities in neighborhood councils in the US (Berry, Portney and Thomson 1993). Despite their nature of spontaneous versus constructed, both neighborhood councils in Los Angeles and resident committees in Shanghai exhibit such a community elite bias.

Participation in Neighborhood Councils

The elected neighborhood councils do not adequately incorporate the cultural diversity of Los Angeles. The average size of a neighborhood council board is about 21 board members. Elected board members in neighborhood councils are generally better educated, wealthier, white, and older than the average persons in their communities. A total of 67 percent of neighborhood council board members have a college degree, compared to 34 percent of all residents in Los Angeles. Board members also are more likely to have household incomes that exceed \$100,000, to be white and to be older than 45 (Musso et al. 2006). The profile of elected board members is criticized as having representative biases and endangering the political legitimacy of the councils (Musso et al. 2007). These representative biases raise questions regarding boards' ability to speak and act on behalf of diverse constituencies and suggest that council decision-making may not represent adequately the views of community stakeholders.

Participation in Resident Committees

The central and local governments, led by Chinese Communist Party Committees worry that resident participation in community programs with political purposes could empower local communities and challenge their authority (Shi 1997). In urban China, community participation is confined to community collective decision-making and community service provision. Serving on the elected resident committee is the primary mechanism to participate in the community collective decision-making. Residents can also participate in the service programs sponsored by the resident committee.

A complete demographic profile of elected resident committee members in Shanghai is not available. Different studies suggest that compared with the once appointed resident

committees that were dominated by “auntie and grannies,” there are more male, educated and younger elected committee members. In a survey of 10 randomly selected resident committees in Shanghai, elected committee members are predominantly female. A majority of them are in the two age ranges of 41- 50 years and 51-60 years. 53 percent of them have high school diplomas and 7 percent hold undergraduate degrees (Lu and Li 2008). Another study shows that 70 percent of them are party members (Chen forthcoming). The increased male participation in grass-root governance, a higher level of education for elected members as well as a strong presence of party members are considered desirable in the eyes of higher level government because they help improve the social status of community workers.

Although the participants in collective community decision-making through the elected resident committees are more like community elites, residents who are older with lower levels of education and low income are found to show greater involvement in community-sponsored programs. Those residents are facing more difficulties and need more services than the average residents. They are usually beneficiaries of community service programs (Thomas 1986) and their participation can be interpreted as their dependence on the community for job, elder care, health care, as well as other welfare programs (Xu 2007). Whether and how the elected resident committees are willing to champion the interests of the vulnerable population in their communities remains a question.

What are Neighborhood Councils and Resident Committees doing?

In order to examine how neighborhood councils and resident committees function in their urban governance structures, we analyzed the activities they are pursuing and the time they spend on

different types of activities. The results suggest that the neighborhood councils in Los Angeles primarily are “working horizontally,” by functioning as a channel for residents to participate in the process of policy formulation (Musso et al. 2006). The resident committees in Shanghai are “working vertically” and remain a vehicle of policy implementation for the government’s social control as well as for urban administration (Benewick, Tong and Howell 2004).

Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles: Working Horizontally in Policy Formulation

An analysis of the content of neighborhood council board meeting agendas divided their activities into non-issue versus issues (Musso et al. 2006). The boards devoted two-thirds of their energies to non-issue activities and issue-oriented items account for one-third of all agenda items. Among the non-issue items, given neighborhood councils’ nature of self-maintenance, it comes as no surprise that 52 percent of them were devoted to managing internal operations, which include attention to procedures and bylaws changes, managing committees, and appointing officers. The second most common area of non-issue activity is government relations (26 percent), followed by community relations and events (17 percent). Relationships with city council office staffs and city department administrators develop a council’s capacity to oversee service delivery while community relations and involvement in events develop networks within the community.

Land use and planning (including transportation) together constitute the single most important issue area to councils at 49 percent of all issue-related activities. Project-specific activities such as requests for zoning changes, account for nearly half of land use agenda items. Assistance (including funding) to local programs comprised 13 percent of issue-oriented items,

followed by beautification at 11 percent of items, the fourth largest category. Some 12 percent of council agenda items addressed public safety concerns. Agenda items on the environment were 7 percent of all issue items, while the economy accounted for 5 percent of issue items.

Resident Committees in Shanghai: Working Vertically in Policy Implementation

The major aim of reforming resident committees is to transfer the social welfare responsibilities and service provision from the local government to the local community. To this end, the government subsidy accounts for as high as around 70 percent of resident committee's total budget. Because of this financial dependence, resident committees are asked to undertake many administrative functions at the grass-root level, including community health, public safety, family planning, conflict resolution, population census, social security, and etc. Some resident committees are even responsible for implementing as many as 148 programs on behalf of municipal, district and sub-district governments (Yang 2007).

One study reveals that resident committee staff members in Shanghai devote more than 60 percent of their working time to administrative functions handed down from higher level governments, such as political mobilization, assisting the delivery of public services, conflict resolution and public safety. Less than 40 percent of their time is used to engage residents in community affairs (Lu and Li 2008). Even though the resident committee is legally a self-governed, autonomous grass-roots organization, most residents perceive it as a government office (Yang 2007).

To many observers, resident committees represent an extension of administrative functions into the grass-root level (Zhu 1999). Yet some argue that even such a state-led

community governance reform could potentially empower the community with autonomy (Liu 2008). One deliberative institution established by the resident committees in Shanghai is the “3-meeting” mechanism--coordination, public hearing and evaluation. Resident can bring their disputes to the coordination meeting for mediation. They also can voice their concerns on policies and projects that impact their neighborhood at the public hearings, often with participation by officials from district and sub-district governments. The evaluation meeting provides them with opportunities to assess the performance of resident committees and the quality of service delivered by sub-district offices (Liu 2008).

Conclusion

We start with the idea that city governments around the world vary in the way they are organized and in their approaches to community governance reforms. Our comparative study suggests that the neighborhood councils system in Los Angeles could be best described as “high spontaneous and low constructed” while the resident committees in Shanghai as “high constructed and low spontaneous.” We attribute the different patterns to the political and administrative structures where these reforms are embedded.

The neighborhood councils system in Los Angeles is designed to include neighborhood residents in advising about policy formulation and service delivery. However, the institutional support for council involvement with the city government has evolved in an ad hoc and halting manner. There is a lack of structured arenas for councils’ interaction with the city council, the mayor’s office, boards and commissions, and city departments. Because of their self-organizing nature, neighborhood councils are burdened by an extraordinary share of efforts at self-

maintenance and external relations activities. The city should play a more “constructing” role in providing greater assistance to councils while developing more structured arenas for engagement around policy formulation and service delivery. The Charter, ordinance and plan actually provided for a Congress of Neighborhood Councils that would serve this purpose, but it has never been implemented as intended. It has been only an information sharing and training event run by DONE.

In the case of resident committees in Shanghai, their dual role--serving as an agent of government in policy implementation and also as self-organized community organizations, makes it difficult to engage local residents in community collective decision-making. The process of reinforcing grass-root government functions and the process of developing civic capacity (Li 2008) are logically contradictory. Resident committees simply cannot ignore the government’s agenda and represent all residents’ interests. A less hierarchical, flatter administrative relationship between local governments and resident committees is therefore needed to create more incentives for community participation, in other words, making it “more spontaneous and less constructed.”

The concepts of spontaneous and constructed orders are useful because they concretize the structural relations that lie behind the efficacy of government-initiated neighborhood governance reforms. They capture the variations in government involvement in promoting citizen participation in urban governance. The effectiveness of a government-initiated civic engagement program, we argue, would depend on a balanced combination of “constructed order”--state involvement and “spontaneous order”--community self-organization. How this balanced combination is achieved, of course, depends on both the historically determined character of the state apparatus and the nature of social structure in which it is embedded, as a

comparison of neighborhood council system in Los Angeles with resident committees in Shanghai illustrates.

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