

## Chapter 5

### Qinghe Experiment: Re-understanding and Fostering the Society

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#### Abstract

In the first thirty years of socialistic practice in China, the country included all aspects of the society into the system framework of national administration through entity-based system building, thus forming an “overall society”. Over the 30 years after China’s opening up and reform, the economic system reform has made the market force released stepwise, the entity-based society broken up, and China’s society divided and reorganized. But compared with the market’s development, expansion and organizational degree, the society development has been severely delayed. The society has insufficient autonomy and self-organization capacity. Using the improvement experience from the pilot communities in Qinghe Experiment as a case, this project found some social autonomous forces emerging in the community life—different degrees of community participation enthusiasm sprung up from different social classes, and different modes of community participation were created. However, under the restriction of existing systems and structure, these positive social forces have not been fully released, thus failed to play an expected and due role in improving the grass-root communities’ governance and promoting the development of social autonomy.

**Key words:** country, market and society, grass-root community governance, development of social autonomy.

#### I. The New Qinghe Experiment

The historical Qinghe Experiment started in 1928. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the foreign enemies’ invasion and civil war led to increasingly serious depression of rural economy and mass impoverishment in China. A group of far-sighted persons gave advice and suggestions one after another to solve rural economic and social problems in China. The old-generation sociologists Yang Kaidao, Liang Shuming et al. launched the dynamic “rural construction movement” in Shandong, Hebei and other places. Almost in the same period, Professors Yang Kaidao and Xu Shilian from the Department of Sociology, Yenching University selected Qinghe in the then Peking as a site of experiment, aiming to examine whether it was possible to promote rural construction through farmers and the

then residents organizations. The results of social research and practice in Qinghe Experiment Zone improved the living quality of local people, the objective of improving the rural life on all sides through academic research and scientific spirit was achieved, and the practice survey and rural working ability of the then students at the Department of Sociology was developed. Regrettably, the Japanese troops invaded Peking in 1937, and the old Qinghe Experiment had to discontinue thereafter.

In 2014, Qinghe Experiment was re-launched at the Department of Sociology, Tsinghua University. In more than 70 years after the old Qinghe Experiment was discontinued, tremendous changes have taken place in Qinghe. There has been no farmland in today's Qinghe (though there are some people with rural household registration). It has become part of Beijing's urban area, where high buildings and crowded population can be seen. In terms of administrative system, Qinghe is affiliated with "Qinghe Sub-district Office" of Haidian District (though individual villages and villagers committees coexist). The area under its jurisdiction is 9.37 square kilometers. Now there are 160,000 permanent residents, including 74,000 residents with household registration of Beijing, and 84,000 non-local residents. A total of 28 community residents' committees are under the jurisdiction of Qinghe. For 37 years since China's reform and opening up, significant changes have taken place in the communities across the country, and the community types have been extraordinarily diversified. And almost all of these changes can be tracked in Qinghe. Therefore, Qinghe's change is also an epitome of decades of changes in Chinese society. All problems in China's reform and social change can be tracked in Qinghe.

## **II. Exploration and Discovery of Qinghe Experiment: Different "social" demands and how they are expressed**

The previous study of Qinghe Experiment revealed that, first, in the context of economic and social system transformation and housing system reform in China, urban residents of different classes have become passionate in community participation stepwise. It can be said that in the communities inhabited by different types and different classes of residents, numerous positively participating social forces have sprung up one after another. For example, a large number of owners committees, community foundations as well as various social organizations initiated by the communities themselves have grown rapidly. We found many "societies" in a lot of case studies. Secondly, to a variable extent, the development of these positively participating social factors is restricted by the expansion of governmental power. On account of this, the author advises that, the development and fostering of society needs release the power from the government to a certain degree. Especially,

changes in the perception of grass-root governments are reflecting the development of grass-root society.

(I) A migrant middle-class community: establishment and operation of the owners' committee

The Oak Tree Bay Community is now inhabited by 2997 households, more than 5000 people in total. Most residents are university professors, managers of IT companies, company bosses, and governmental officials. A larger portion of them are especially middle-senior company managers of companies and young people. Therefore, it is a typical emerging migrant middle-class community. Residents here have a stronger consuming capacity. Some of them are keen on community construction. For long, they have been communicating and contacting through the owners forum and a QQ group of a hundred people. In 2012, owners in the QQ group first made a proposal of establishing the owners' committee. They selected three young representatives to come up to the community residents' committee and the property management company. In September 2012, the owners' committee was established formally in the Oak Tree Bay Community, consisting of 6 members, 5 of whom are members of the owners' committee, 1 is a full-time staff employed, who is also a resident in the Oak Tree Bay Community.

After the owners' committee was established, several members did a lot of practical work for the community residents positively and voluntarily. For example, they organized owners to buy furniture at lower group purchase prices, coordinated with the property management company to clean up the exterior windows of the residential buildings in the community, organized wide-range door-to-door survey of community needs, rationally communicated with the property management company on behalf of the owners when a proposal on increase of property management fees was made by the property management company, supported various cultural and entertainment activities organized by the residents in the community as well as community self-organization construction with public earnings, and the like. The author found in the investigation that the office of owners committee received phone calls from residents every day. Some reported problems existing in the community. Some made suggestions to the property management company. Currently, the owners' committee is preparing the Oak Tree Community's own newspaper under the leadership of Li Hong, director of the committee, who is professionally engaged in graphic design.

From the case we found that the establishment of owners committee is indeed one of the approaches for grass-root social participation. Through a self-governance organization like owners committee, the owners can reflect their

demands, supervise the property management company, safeguard their rights and interests, and effectively participate in the community construction and development. It can be said that in the wake of establishment of numerous owners' committees across the country and their activities of rights protection and self-governance, the owners' group has been increasingly a prominent social force, and become an important component of the urban grass-root social structure in China.

(II) A downfallen "post-unit" community: the rise and embarrassment of discussion and consultative committee

The South Community of Woolen Mill is an old community of traditional company dormitory style. The property owners are three enterprises, i.e. two woolen mills and one wool making factory. In the community, there are 3275 households, 35 buildings in total, including 2 high-rise buildings, and 3 humble buildings constructed in the 1980s by the enterprise. There are 10,000-plus residents, including more than 4000 non-local inhabitants. 95% residents here are former employees of a factory and their family members. This community is characterized by silver aging and lower average income of the residents.

From 2000, with the assistance from the residents' committee, some residents initiated to establish the "community discussion and consultative committee", which now has 11 members, including 3 responsible persons of entities in the jurisdiction of the three factories, 4 resident representatives, 1 representative of the property management company, 1 person from the residents' committee, 1 representative of merchants as floating population, and 1 representative of entities in the jurisdiction. Most of them are enterprise employees living in the community. And most of these discussion and consultative members are veteran cadres and retired old leaders of the property owners such as the then woolen mills. They have certain influence, charisma, and strong representativeness in the community.

When the discussion and consultative committee was established in 2000, there were only five members. In 2006, one representative of merchants was added as a member in order to strengthen the management of merchants. This merchant has been running a hairdressing saloon by renting a house in this community for more than 20 years. She is responsible for coordinating the merchants' needs. In 2009, the community introduced a property management company. The new management model made the community work more difficulty. Therefore, the property management company's manager was added to the discussion and consultative members, bringing the number of members to the present 11. Members were reelected as some were old or moved from the community. They are reelected simultaneously with the residents'

committee members, with their term of office changed every three years. Generally, the discussion and consultative members first seek advice from the residents. Then candidates who have strong ability of expression and who are representative are recommended from the factories. After the list of candidates is determined through all-sided investigation and survey by the members, the new members are elected by 98 representatives of community residents upon expiry of a term.

The discussion and consultative committee holds a regular meeting at the end of a month. The members make suggestions on the community's development planning and problems, and services required by the residents, etc., and reach a consensus through discussion. Then the director of residents' committee is responsible for implementation and deployment. Issues are discussed once raised by many residents, such as renovation of old community, significant activities in the community, sanitary environment, helping the aged and poverty-stricken people, numerous street vendors. All members express their opinions, and finally determine the practical solution. In the event of any provisionally affair, the director will call the discussion and consultative members together.

### (III) A vegetable market formed spontaneously in the old community

As the enterprise moved out in 2006, and a large group of employees became jobless, the South Community of Woolen Mill became a burden left by an unprofitable enterprise. This community is characterized by poor living conditions for residents, old houses, waste and sever aging. A prominent problem lies in a vegetable market on a small road near a wall in the west part of the community, which is "known far and wide". At 6:00-7:00 every morning, the road sides are occupied by dozens of floating vegetable vendors. Residents coming here to buy vegetables are from the South Community of Woolen Mill, or even from the communities near Qinghe. Even residents from top-grade commercial housing communities like Oak Tree Bay come here to buy vegetables. In the investigation, the author learnt that, the vegetable market has its particular historical origin. In the era of planned economy, the grocery, grain shop, and vegetable station provided for the three factories were located at the position of the present vegetable market in the South Community of Woolen Mill. All residents from around Qinghe area had to line up to buy what they needed with grain and cooking oil coupons. As the market economy was introduced, though the grocery, grain shop, and vegetable station lost the then significance (the grocery has indeed been changed to Dia Supermarket), the surrounding old people have been used to buy vegetables here.

In addition, the strong supply-demand relationship has enabled the vegetable

market existing for more than two decades despite being constantly suppressed and banned. There are many old people in the community. Nearly 600 residents are 80 years old and over. 1180 are 60 years old and over. Unable to move freely, these old people prefer buying vegetables near their home. Furthermore, with a lower living standard, most residents live on their small sum of pension. With no need to pay rental, floating vegetable vendors sell vegetables at prices lower than supermarkets; on the other hand, these vendors sell their own vegetables that are fresh and of full range. Previously, vegetable wagons were introduced from Dahongmen of Fengtai District, with an attempt to make a link between the farmers and the supermarket. But their vegetables were not fresh, but expensive, and were sold once or twice per week in this community. The residents felt very inconvenient.

The reason why the author defines the vegetable market in the South Community of Woolen Mill as a society is that the vegetable market here is not a normative market, and in a certain sense, it can be defined as a society. Originally, a place where there is exchange of currency is regarded as a market. A market is supposed to have norms of business transaction, and can only operate upon examined and approved by the administration for industry and commerce. But the vegetable market in the South Community of Woolen Mill was formed as the residents had strong demands. Demands would bring into existence of supply, and the two parties were matched. The vegetable market was not examined and approved. In fact, the people spontaneously made up the deficiency of the market and society to some extent. So the vegetable market is a society.

### **III. Analysis and Discussion: the innovation of community governance under polyphonic social demands**

In the empirical survey of several micro-communities, the author found various positive and enthusiastic social participation forces. At the same time, another further finding of the author is that, these positive social factors were not fostered very well in the process of development. Of them, the owners' committee, discussion and consultative committee and vegetable market are good examples.

Currently, grass-root governments are generally reluctant to and worried about the establishment of owners committee in a community. Based on similar worry, grass-root governments are unwilling to advocate the establishment of owners committee in all communities. They even extend the period of examination and approval as long as possible in the process of examination and approval of an owners committee, and impose rigid restrictions and multifarious procedures on the establishment of such committee. This is

actually a restriction on the development of society. In the author's opinion, these practices are not desirable. In the short term, the development of owners committee may really bring troubles for the grass-root governments' community governance. And various problems have really been found in the current operation of owners committees. But more reasons causing the problems are the lack of system. Long containment will only make the forces representing the society weaker and weaker.

Thus it is observed that the weakness of society is largely caused by the infinite expansion of power of governments. The result of such infinite expansion of governmental power is that the society cannot be fostered. Owners' committees could have been fostered. But all neighborhoods and governments are opposed. This is in fact a very contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, there are many problems as the society is not fostered. On the other hand, there are so many system factors impeding the development of society. We should better foster our society, give more correct and positive guide to owners committees, and conduct effective communication and fostering. In this process, the grass-root governments and social organizations need go through a process of joint learning and growth.

The discussion and consultation provided by the discussion and consultative committee of the South Community of Woolen Mill is effective as the members have the same background, and most of them are retired leaders or old prestigious residents in the community, with good representativeness and mass base, together with the resource support from the property owner, the old woolen mill. But in the wake of development of the society, increase of the floating population and migrant population in the community, especially numerous non-local young people purchasing houses here, the South Community of Woolen Mill has gradually shifted from a traditional society of acquaintance to a society of strangers. Over the past 10-odd years, some old discussion and consultative members withdrew from the organization as they got too older. Some moved out from the community. But it is harder and harder to absorb new members. Most importantly, after the family members committees were transformed into residents committees, grass-root governments failed to give a guarantee of resources to spontaneous civil organizations such as the discussion and consultative committee through the approach of system. Discussion without decision brings a great challenge for the sustainability of the work of the discussion and consultative committee.

And the attitude toward the vegetable market also reflects the absence and ineffectiveness of grass-root governments in the society fostering. For a long time, it has been a routine and troublesome task for the grass-root governments to clear up the vegetable market. When it comes to the attitude

toward the vegetable market, the grass-root governments said definitely it must be banned. But every time the effect was not as good as expected. The vegetable vendors were forced to move to the road outside the community, where they were chased by the city inspectors. Then they hid into the community, where they were again driven by the residents' committee members. In such repeated chasing and hiding, the vendors have survived toughly in the clipper seam between the residents' committee and city inspectors. Even the vegetable market meets the demands of residents in the old community, the grass-root governments have suppressed and contained it again and again, giving no correct counseling and rectification. Then, as for the question whether the fostering of the society by the grass-root governments is effective, the author will make a contrastive analysis with the case of Qingyuan sub-district, Beijing, so as to show that these positive social forces are to be driven by grass-root governments in the development of China at the current stage.

Seemingly, the grass-root governments have indeed transferred and decentralized some of their own power, changing from the former administrator to a participant, with their "apparent power" shrinking; on the other hand, the grass-root governments also serve as a referee of community service affairs to judge the already existing results rather than doing everything by themselves. In this respect, the power of grass-root governments has not been impaired. Rather, their existence has become more reasonable due to their role as a referee. Their "hidden power" has been expanded. The former single power of grass-root governments has been turned into a cross influence of two operating models, one apparent power, other hidden power. Exactly through the transformation of one apparent power and one hidden power, the residents have been provided with a space for participating in the community services, without playing a negative role due to going over the boundary of grass-root governments. In this way, the hidden worry of most grass-root governments is eliminated. In fact, such model that mobilizes the residents' full participation has not fundamentally shaken the foundation of the former bureaucratic system. Rather, it is just because of the continuous existence of the bureaucratic force which is expressed by either apparent power or hidden power that eventually makes possible the community services with the participation of multiple players.

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