The Involvement of Planners in Community Planning: A Promising Model for Chinese Local Governance?

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ABSTRACT: Participatory governance has become a mode of governance around the world since the 1990s, including in non-democratic contexts. Since November 2002, the notion of participatory governance has indeed been appropriated by the Chinese authorities after the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since 2010, numerous experiments in participatory governance have been implemented in China, from participatory budgeting to participatory planning. This essay studies the specific development of participatory governance in China through the role of urban planners. It will first discuss the context of the development of public participation at local levels, while analysing the emergence of participatory planning and its implications. Furthermore, it will analyse the role of planners in participatory planning. Then, it will focus on the transformation of local governance, especially in the case of community governance. In the final sections, the article will discuss planner-mediated participation and reflect on more academic thoughts on the model. It will conclude with a discussion on Chinese participative experiments.

KEYWORDS: Participation, community governance, planners, urban planning.

Introduction

In October 2017, the 19th National Congress of the CCP emphasised the importance of strengthening social governance in China by promoting two main factors: public participation (*gongzhong canyu* 公眾參與) and the role of social organisations (*shehui zuzhi* 社會組織). However, under the Chinese historical trajectory of a centralised administration and *danwei* (單位) system under the planned economy and the authoritarian regime, society was "framed" under state-sponsored organisations (see the "corporatist" model of Unger and Chan 1996; see also Audin and Doyon 2019). From the end of the 1990s, the urban "community" (*shequ* 社區), the residential unit in cities, started to develop as a field of governance. Residents' committees were created and given increased autonomy and responsibilities in these communities, assisting local governments as the basic units for managing political and social functions in cities (Bray 2006; Heberer and Gobel 2011; Hoffman 2014). To facilitate these communities' dynamic interactions with various levels of government, increased attention has been paid to the public participation of their citizens and social organisations.

After two decades of accelerated urbanisation, China's urban area now covers 40,941 square kilometres, with a population of more than 450 million.[1] Against this background, growing demand for the development of urban public services has emerged, and citizens and social organisations alike have become more concerned about the quality of those services.

Thus, exploring new modes of urban development and stimulating residential communities to create new dynamics have become important issues in Chinese urban governance. In recent years there has been a diversity of experimentation, including hearings and other forms of public participation from the central to local levels, public participation in environmental evaluations, and decision-making committees (Zhang 2016); for example, urban renewal projects in Guangzhou must now be discussed at public hearings before implementation, and environmental evaluations are published by Guangdong's provincial government[2] to involve local citizens.

Although public participation is encouraged, its impact has been limited in China. Public participation is usually guided by public authorities, and governmental policies are generally formed based on a selective absorption of public opinion. Although public participation in urban planning was first enshrined in China in the urban and rural planning laws in 2008, the implementation of those laws remains problematic. As the community is now considered the basic unit for managing cities' political and social functions, examining the evolution of community governance in China (Read 2000) and improving public participation and coordinating urban development are of crucial concern for both the government and local society as they create new urban governance dynamics in a society faced with new urban spaces, landscapes, economies, and lifestyles. As such, important experiments have been carried out at the community level and will be the focus of this essay. Unlike the existing scholarship on urban communities in Chinese cities and on grassroots political participation, our approach focuses on a new type of actor, urban planners. It discusses the political implications of such professionals in community affairs as well as

1. "城市更新: 讓城市更優雅的成長" (Chengshi gengxin: rang chengshi geng youya de chengzhang, Urban renewal: Making cities grow elegantly), *The Qijiang of Chongqing Construction Network*, 15 November 2017, http://cxjw.cqqj.gov.cn/zxdt/news/2017-11/1882_101190.shtml (accessed on 19 July 2018).
2. 廣東省生態環境廳公衆網 (Guangdong sheng shengtai huanjingting gongzhong wang, Department of Ecology and Environment of Guangdong Province), http://gdee.gd.gov.cn/ (accessed on 12 August 2019).

the academic discussions that followed. This essay shows that residents' active participation is greatly promoted through the advice of "planners." To assist the community planning process, these planners provide residents with professional knowledge, organise workshops as alternative channels for participation, and promote capacity building. Moreover, they attempt to stream these demands directly into the institutional environment and facilitate negotiation between residents and local government. The planners emerge as new mediators, replacing such institutions as the subdistrict office system and the neighbourhood committee as a new mechanism for generating active citizenship in Chinese society and fostering citizen participation in local governance.

On 16 August 2017, an article published in *People's Daily* and entitled "It is necessary to pinch hard persimmons in project experiments"[3] offered a positive critique on the "co-created community" (*gongtong dizao* 共同締造) governance practiced in the Mudan community (*Mudan shequ* 牡丹社區) in the city of Shenyang.

Mudan community, mainly developed during the 1970s, is typical of older Chinese residential areas, with its ageing population[4] and lack of public facilities. Based on 721 suggestions from local residents, a group of five planners helped residents draft 40 community governance proposals, including adding public seating, creating a recycling station, and enhancing green environmental protection.[5] The practice promotes participatory urban planning at the community level, in contrast to China's usual top-down system of urban planning. The planners work as new mediators and as substitutes of the subdistrict office and other actors such as social organisations and businesses. Unlike these institutional organisations, the interactions between planners and residents are more equal than top-down. The planners are presented as a knowledge group that is not institutionalised. They mobilise the participation of residents via social relations instead of political or administrative instruments, introducing a new trend in state-society relations. The involvement of planners in participatory community governance is seen by an increasing number of researchers and policy-makers in China as a promising local governance model for an increasingly urbanised China. This paper examines "co-created communities" as a new mode of governance, in order to understand how public participation can be evaluated in concrete terms and whether the process leads to the formation of new local governance elites. It studies the involvement of planners in community governance as well as the power configuration of different actors, and the implications for local governance in China.

The involvement of planners in "co-created communities"

In recent years, many urban communities (*chengshi shequ* 城市社區) have explored the model of "workshop for a co-created community" (*gongtong dizao gongzuofang* 共同締造工作坊). This framework, characterised by participatory planning, allows planners to engage residents by providing clear community planning content and methods. It was originally tested in Xiamen and Shenyang from 2013 to 2016,[6] after which the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhufang yu chengxiang jianshe bu* 中華人民共和國住房與城鄉建設部) extended the model to 15 cities, such as Zhuhai,[7] Chengdu,[8] Changsha, and Shanghai, by the end of 2017. While these cities have developed a variety of participation practices, all those practices emphasise the role played by planners.

There are three types of planners in China. The first belong to the institutional system and are public servants (*gongwuyuan* 公務員) employed directly by government agencies such as the Planning Bureau (*guihuaju* 規劃局). The second type includes planners who work for a community project and are drawn either from the government or from planning research institutions (*guihuayuan* 規劃院 / *guihuasuo* 規劃所); the planners in this type are usually "registered professional planners" (*zhuce chengshi guihuashi* 註冊城市規劃師), and are the main focus of this article. The third type is comprised of volunteer planners (*guihuashi zhiyuanzhe* 規劃師志願者) engaged in planning but without belonging to an official institution.

Experiments in community urban planning are mainly divided into three stages.[9] To illustrate the process, we refer to the practices in Mudan Community.[10] First, planners and scholars perform fieldwork in the community, collecting detailed information and reporting to local authorities, particularly to the municipal government, thus linking the government and the community. For example, several times since February 2017, planners from the Research Institute for Urbanisation and the Rural-Urban Planning and Design Research Institute of Sun Yat-sen University have gone to Mudan Community to collect relevant information about its environment, background, history, and residents to develop a basic understanding of the community's existing problems, which fall into four main categories: Mudanjiang street renewal; corridor facilities; housing reconstruction; and public facilities.[11] Second, the planners accessed the communities through surveys and individual exchanges to better engage with citizens and help them define their urban planning demands, without referencing explicit political guidelines. The role of planners in this stage was to support residents technically by drawing out their ideas. For instance, the planners organised participatory discussions with residents; built models of buildings to help residents locate problems easily and exactly; made videos and PowerPoint presentations to help residents communicate; guided residents to think about problems and solutions; and provided training on how to understand community planning.[12] Third, residents made the final decisions on community projects – e.g., through exhibitions or voting for proposals

3. He Yong 何勇, "搞試點要會捏硬柿子" (Gao shidian yao huinie ying shizi, When carrying out on experiment, one should choose the harder case), *People's Daily*, 16 August 2017, http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0816/c1003-29472744.html (accessed on 20 July 2018).
4. Around 32% of its 10,269 residents are elderly.
5. "牡丹社區的幸福密碼" (Mudan shequ de xingfu mima, The happiness code of Mudan community), *Sohu*, 30 June 2017, http://www.sohu.com/a/153227664_586137 (accessed on 20 July 2018).
6. "美麗廈門共同締造: 廈門市探索社區管理新模式" (Meili Xiamen gongtong dizao: Xiamen shi tansuo shequ guanli xin moshi, Beautiful Xiamen creates together: Xiamen explores a new model of community management), *China Daily*, 26 December 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/dfpd/fj/2013-12/26/content_17199378.htm (accessed on 24 July 2018).
7. "珠海市參與式社區規劃試點路徑與體會" (Zhuhaishi canyushi shequ guihua shidian lujing yu tihui, The pilot path and experience of participatory community planning in Zhuhai), *Sohu*, 9 January 2018, http://www.sohu.com/a/215533253_611316 (accessed on 26 July 2018).
8. Qingyang District of Chengdu, "談社區營造" (Tan shequ yingzao, Talking about the construction of community), 15 March 2018, http://jcpt.chengdu.gov.cn/qingyangqu/taishenglujiedao/detail.html?url=/qingyangqu/xiaoguanmiaoshequ/300109/9777331_detail.html (accessed on 28 July 2018).
9. "珠海市參與式社區規劃試點路徑與體會" (Zhuhaishi canyushi shequ guihua shidian lujing yu tihui, The pilot path and experience of participatory community planning in Zhuhai), *Sohu*, 9 January 2018, http://www.sohu.com/a/215533253_611316 (accessed on 26 July 2018).
10. "社區治理, 人民日報為何點贊這個社區?" (Shequ zhili, *Renmin ribao* weihe dianzan zhe ge shequ?, Why does *People's Daily* comment on this community's governance?), *Sohu*, 7 September 2017, http://www.sohu.com/a/190489084_656518 (accessed on 28 July 2018).
11. "共同締造工作坊活動回顧" (Gongtong dizao gongzuofang huigu, Review of co-create workshop), Geography Department of Sun Yat-sen University, 7 September 2017, http://www.pinlue.com/article/2017/09/0723/204481228925.html (accessed on 15 July 2018).
12. "社區治理, 人民日報為何點贊這個社區?" (Shequ zhili, *Renmin ribao* weihe dianzan zhe shequ, Why does *People's Daily* comment on this community's governance?), *Sohu*, 7 September 2017, http://www.sohu.com/a/190489084_656518 (accessed on 28 July 2018).

organised by the planners – to increase the acceptability of participatory planning outcomes to the community. These decisions were subsequently supported by the government and implemented.

Planners played an important role in this experiment. The community has become a place where planners, governments, and residents work and manage together. In the planning process, interactions between the subdistrict office[13] (*jiedao banshichu* 街道辦事處), neighbourhood committee[14] (*juweihui* 居委會), planners,[15] and residents reinvent their roles in local public affairs. Thus, this article aims to understand the role of planners in the neighbourhood-level urban planning process.

Currently, however, neighbourhood committees or subdistrict offices still act as mediators. Urban planning in China has long been dominated by public authorities, and there is a lack of communication about urban planning between the Planning Bureau and residents. Although some scholars argue that governmental control over citizens has weakened and that the neighbourhood committee is transforming from a control instrument to a service organisation, most researchers argue that the relationships between governments and citizens have become more dynamic, with governmental control being strengthened by the functions of neighbourhood committees. Therefore, the nature of community-level participatory urban planning may be uncertain, as the planning is initiated by the planners (who could be institutional), and its objectives are to let residents make decisions (which could be non-institutional). The role of planners is more complex. Before answering the first research question (whether "co-created community" can be considered a new model of local governance), we will briefly review the historical development of local governance in China.

Local governance in Chinese communities: From management to participation

Since the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the subdistrict office and neighbourhood committee have become the basic organs of cities, charged with public management at the community level. They help to organise elections and provide basic public management functions, such as birth and marriage registration, as well as basic public services. With the development of Chinese urbanisation, the neighbourhood committee gradually evolved from an institutionalised organisation into a semi-institutionalised one, moving from implementing political control to providing public services. We argue that local governance in Chinese communities has gone from focusing on management to encouraging citizen participation through the following stages.

First, the basic service and management functions of the subdistrict office and neighbourhood committee underwent a series of reforms in the late twentieth century. In 1995, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*Minzhengbu* 民政部) published guidelines for neighbourhood committee building and urged communities to provide various public services such as education (Jin 1996) and medical care (Song and Liuyun 2000). Doing so informed a smooth transition from the *danwei* system to a community-based service system after the enactment of the 1978 Reform and Open-Door Policy. The subdistrict office and neighbourhood committee took on the main community development responsibilities (Bray 2005), providing public services and facilities such as elementary education and clinics. Additionally, they facilitated negotiations for any urban planning in the community, although they were rarely directly involved in the urban planning process itself.

Second, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the formation of urban management was characterised by "two-level government, three-level management, four-level networks" (*liangji zhengfu, sanji guanli, siji wangluo* 兩級政府, 三級管理, 四級網絡), with policy concerns mainly centring on the relationships between different governmental levels and the interactions among public authorities, economic actors, and citizens. As He Yuhong (2002: 26-7) noted, neighbourhood committees relied on the support and direction of both government and residents to manage public affairs, marking a transformation from an administrative management system by subdistrict offices to a semi-administrative system in which the neighbourhood committee is the main operator in urban management, in cooperation with the government (Audin 2008). The opinions of residents were little recognised by the authorities, leading to well-documented conflicts over contentious actions in urban China (Wang 2012; Tan, Hao, and Huang 2016; Zhao 2017).

Third, recent development has focused on participatory planning at the neighbourhood committee level. Since 2010, the central state has emphasised this governance system and paid attention to the role of citizens at the local level. Participatory planning has become a new model for urban development and management, one based on negotiation at the neighbourhood committee level and resident participation. However, Li Fangchen (2012) found residents' participation in public affairs was very limited; most participants were bureaucrats or entrepreneurs, with residents participating in public affairs only when their own interests were affected.

Various models of participatory community governance have been discussed by scholars and policy-makers. Five such models are discussed in this article. The first is the Shanghai model (*Shanghai moshi* 上海模式), characterised by governance under the united leadership of various Party/government administrators, such as the subdistrict Party committee (*jiedao dangweihui* 街道黨委會), the subdistrict office, and the urban management committee (*chengshi guanli weiyuanhui* 城市管理委員會). In this model, the subdistrict office is granted more autonomy in dealing with management affairs. Second is the Shenyang model (*Shengyang moshi* 沈陽模式), which features community autonomy (*shequ zizhi* 社區自治). This model views the community as a place where residents share the same interests and a mutual identity; accordingly, its governance is under the leadership of community autonomous organisations (*shequ zizhi zuzhi* 社區自治組織) such as a community member committee (*shequ chengyuan weiyuanhui* 社區成員委員會), a consultative committee (*zixun weiyuanhui* 咨詢委員會), and other associations. The third model is the Jianghan model (*Jianghan moshi* 江漢模式), combining elements of government and community-based governance and providing a smooth framework for their cooperation. In the fourth model, called the Baibuting model (*Baibuting moshi* 百步亭模式), businesses play an active role in local governance under the joint leadership of the community residents' committee, estate management office (*wuye* 物業), and homeowners' committee (*yezhu weiyuanhui* 業主委員會). Finally, the Tongling model (*Tongling moshi* 銅陵模式) replaces the administrative functions of the subdistrict office with a three-level (city, district, and community) management structure. Notwithstanding the above models, community governance models vary at the local level from one place to another; under different models, the participatory urban planning process presents diverse characteristics as well.

13. The subdistrict office manages the lowest political division in urban China.
14. According to Chinese law, the neighbourhood committee of an urban community is a self-governing organisation for local residents.
15. The planners in this practice come mainly from the Geographical Science Department of Sun Yat-sen University. They can be considered part of the second type of planners presented earlier in the article.

Transformation of relations in community governance

It is clear from the above discussion that institutions such as the subdistrict office play a leading role in participatory governance and that the involvement of planners in community governance is a response to the changing relationship between the actors involved. First, although the local (particularly municipal) government still plays a leading role in planning, its ability to communicate with residents and other actors is even more essential. Planning projects that relate directly to residents require the participation of those residents; relying on government technical teams to make effective and efficient planning decisions is insufficient. However, not all residents have knowledge in planning. Therefore, the development of participatory urban planning relies on planners who possess professional knowledge and can communicate their expertise to both government and residents. Since 2013, the village of Ceng Cuo An in Xiamen has been transformed from an urban village to a touristic and cultural village through the effort of planners, scholars, and local residents.[16]

Second, China's rapid urbanisation has led to a variety of actors with different social backgrounds living in the same area, but pursuing different interests. However, neighbourhood committees were historically institutional and regulatory in nature, making it difficult for them to play a mediating role in the community; in this context, a new mediator was urgently needed to connect governments and residents. To that end, subdistrict offices and neighbourhood committees have increasingly worked to link residents to administrators, whose role it is to mediate between upper and lower levels to solve the former's problems and stimulate the latter's participation (Gui 2007). They receive directions from the upper level, translate them into everyday words, and integrate them into practical actions through a strategy of compromise.

Third, planners have been given an increasingly important role in community governance. In several experiments, power was delegated to the Institute of Urban Planning, which has an independent status and whose members are planning experts, to create a technical and participatory planning process.[17] In a 2017 participatory urban planning experiment in Zhuhai, planners from central planning institutes and scholars from Guangzhou and Taiwan organised community planning in the city centre, helping local residents develop planning projects based on local demand. The planners also cooperated with social sciences scholars to achieve social objectives, including re-establishing their credibility among local citizens. Neither the local government nor the neighbourhood committee implemented the experiments in Zhuhai directly; residents were the main decision-makers, with the support of the planners and scholars. Thus, the leading role of planners became more important.

Planners work as new mediators, replacing the subdistrict office and other actors such as self-organisations and businesses. Unlike the common top-down interactions between institutional organisations and residents, interactions between planners and residents are more equal. Although planners are involved with different groups, they do so as a non-institutional knowledge group. They mobilise residents via social relations instead of political or administrative instruments, resulting in new trends in administration-citizen relations. The specific objective of this model is to meet residents' demands and preferences through their direct participation in urban community planning. The new mediators act as a lubricant, reducing the friction between top-down and bottom-up planning. Within this context, we argue that this can be understood as a new model for community governance in China.

Table 1: Participatory actors, behaviours, and role transition

Participatory actors	Behavioural change	Role transition
Residents	Planning report listening – **voting**	Subordinator – **Dominant player**
Planners	Designing– **Investigating and planning**	Implementer – **Coordinator**
Social organisations[18]	Implementing– **Investigation cooperation**	Subordinator – **Cooperator**
The municipal government	Plan formulating – **Implementing**	Leader – **Service provider**

The sustainability of planner-mediated local participation

Although we argue that the involvement of planners represents a new mode of community governance in China, the sustainability of planner-mediated public participation remains in question. Two concerns are generally raised.

The first concern is about the nature of public participation. Arnstein (1969) proposed the theory of "ladder of citizen participation," in which she divided citizen participation into eight levels. "Placation," "information," and "consultation" are grouped as tokenism, indicating that they have limited influence on public decisions. In contrast, "partnership" and "citizen control" are understood as having real power to influence government. Guided by this theory, we reviewed the main types of public participation in co-created communities and found that although planner-mediator participation informed several governmental policies, most participation activities were taking place at a lower level. For instance, most of the activities reported in Zhuhai were training, organising photographic competition, design competition, and solution discussion;[19] the master plan of the community was still mainly decided by the municipal government.

The second concern is about the planners' capacity. To achieve effective participation, the planners' role would ideally be above that of ordinary citizens, to keep the interests of different actors balanced. Planners should not only be responsible to governments, developers, and the consignors or future users of a given space, but should also consider the needs and claims of the current residents. Thus, planners are not limited to being technical representatives of the government or developer, but also act as mediators, facilitating public discussion (Forester 1989). Before the real planning begins, planners need to address political considerations, mediating among different actors and keeping various parties balanced. Being a mediator requires negotiation capacity, which could represent a challenge for Chinese urban planners, who are used to working for institutions and who have little experience in political analysis and debate.

16. "美麗廈門, 共同締造" (Meili Xiamen, gongtong dizao, Beautiful Xiamen, create together), *Sohu*, 10 December 2016, http://www.sohu.com/a/121171252_189668 (accessed on 15 July 2018).
17. "珠海市參與式社區規劃試點路徑與體會" (Zhuhaishi canyushi shequ guihua shidian lujing yu tihui, The pilot path and experience of participatory community planning in Zhuhai), *Sohu*, 9 January 2018, http://www.sohu.com/a/215533253_611316 (accessed on 29 July 2018).
18. Social organisations are the neighbourhood committee, consultative committee, etc.
19. "珠海市參與式社區規劃試點路徑與體會" (Zhuhaishi canyushi shequ guihua shidian lujing yu tihui, The pilot path and experience of participatory community planning in Zhuhai), *Sohu*, 9 January 2018, http://www.sohu.com/a/215533253_611316 (accessed on 31 July 2018).

Academic viewpoints on local urban governance and participatory planning

Despite these concerns, it is undeniable that planners respond to the three requirements mentioned in the participatory model – i.e., they own specialised knowledge facilitating efficient participation; their mediator role keeps them in communication with residents and governments; and they can understand the diverse interests of different actors during the participatory planning process (Table 2). Thus, as a professional group, planners can be an important actor in local governance.

Table 2: Planners' role in community planning

	Interaction between Residents and Planners	Planners	Interaction between Residents and Government	The role of Planners and Network building
Prior stage	Self organisation ←		Authorised projects ←	The popularisation of planning knowledge
Research stage	Investigation feedback ↔			Training publicise planning knowledge
Adminis-tration	Communication opinion collection ↔		Communication opinion collection ↔	The promotion of the idea and plan of planners
Implemen-tation	←	Supervision	→	
Evaluation	Residents evaluation ←		Evaluation feedback →	Form planning ideas and plans

The professional ethics and legal norms developed by professional groups promote the development of a public and social spirit in action, value, and trust (Feng 2002). However, many researchers (e.g., Yang 2009; Kang 2012) have little understanding of the role of professional groups and a limited definition of social organisations at the neighbourhood level, believing social organisations to be only those built by residents to pursue their own interests; thus, such researchers have largely ignored professional groups' influence over community governance. However, Xia Jianzhong defined social organisations more broadly, including all organisations – both NGOs and professional groups – formed on a neighbourhood scale (Xia and Zhang 2012; Gao 2014). Nevertheless, most research focuses on the development and history of social organisations at the national level, rather than at the neighbourhood level.

Zhang Zhengzhou and Tian Wei (2017) analysed the reform of neighbourhoods through "networking governance," which integrates the social work of the administration and neighbourhood committee, emphasising the role of social workers in local governance in urban China. For Song Daolei (2017: 172-9), local governance in China has evolved from mobilising natural resources to mobilising human resources, and then to mobilising specialisation. As such, more and more problems cannot be solved by governments, neighbourhood committees, or residents alone, but require the participation of one or more specialised actors. Planners, as presented in this article, perform the role of professional groups in local governance, critically influencing community planning and providing essential mediating services.

Second, planning invites us to analyse new forms of elitism in the transformation of local governance by paying attention to planners' role in the neighbourhood. Studying participatory planning in China sheds light on the role of urban planners in the evolution of local governance. As planners are both technically and socially qualified, this implies that new institutional channels for planners will be integrated into community governance. At the same time, Yao Hua and Wang Yanan (2010) confirmed that greater citizen participation in neighbourhoods is possible only if Chinese residents play a more important part in local public affairs. From this perspective, planners constitute new actors in neighbourhood governance, as they help residents present their own opinions, while playing a social role and developing social trust though participatory planning (Xu and Wang 2008). They may be the new elites in local governance in China, in the context of promoting citizens' participatory planning.

Conclusion

Within the context of evolving local governance from management to participation in China, the involvement of planners in community planning has developed rapidly in recent years, as exemplified by the increasing number of experimental community projects, mostly concentrated in more-developed provinces and in close cooperation with universities. Colleges such as the Institute of Geography and Planning have established their own planning research centres, and have played an active role in sending planners to participate in urban community planning projects. As shown in the case studies, planners work with the government or subdistrict offices and avail residents of their professional knowledge in an advisory process with the potential to transform local governance. Planners work as new mediators, taking the place of subdistrict offices and other former administration institutions. On the one hand, they transfer government information and decisions to residents in a timely manner and not in an administrative tone; on the other, they listen to residents, provide professional advice, and ask for government feedback, easing conflicts between governments and residents and solving them in a more efficient way. As a result, the involvement of planners leads to a new model of local governance, where new technical elites occupy the dual positions of providing professional advice and linking the government and residents in bottom-up and top-down two-way flows.

However, public participation in planning reveals a new, specialised, and technical approach to participation (Warren 2009). The facilitators-planners of this planning are also depoliticised, promoting participation by identifying technical problems and mobilising their professional knowledge. Residents' demands for public infrastructure are better represented in concrete urban projects with the integration of planners into the community. Through this new form of participation, urban planners have expanded their role between public authorities and community residents. This depoliticised experiment has become an important tool of governance in the context of the transformation of urbanisation, and the emergence of new local elites is a trend in public action in China.

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