The Co-Governance of Community in China's Megacities

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About the Author

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Summary

In 1925, the publication of *The City*, edited by Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie, marked the arrival of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology. "Community" has long been a central theme of this school. How should we comprehend and interpret "community"? Revisiting this classic text reveals that the concept of community can be understood across three fundamental dimensions: as an "entitative," "processual," and "everyday life" concept. This paper analyzes the co-governance modes of urban communities in megacities across three dimensions, drawing on field research in four Chinese megacities and their recent property management reform practices. The paper emphasizes understanding the fundamental connotation of Chinese urban communities within the context of integrated vertical and horizontal authority structures. Based on this, it introduces the "troika" governance framework that megacities are actively constructing under Party-building guidance, and further examines its governance mechanisms and practical logic from a meta-governance perspective. Finally, the paper argues that bringing "the school" back in—developing coherent theoretical schools of urban studies rooted in specific spatial and historical contexts—can revitalize urban scholarship, particularly as the frontier of urban research shifts from the Global North to megacities in the Global South.

Abbreviations

CPC	Communist Party of China	
CPO	community Party organization	*shequ dang zuzhi* 社区党组织
GPO	grassroots Party organization	*jiceng dang zuzhi* 基层党组织
HA	homeowners' association	*yezhu weiyuanhui* 业主委员会
HC	homeowners' congress	*yezhu dahui* 业主大会
OD-CPC	Organization Department of the CPC	*dangwei zuzhibu* 党委组织部
PMC	property management committee	*wuye guanli weiyuanhui* 物业管理委员会
PME	property management enterprise	*wuye guanli qiye* 物业管理企业
RC	residents' committee	*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委员会
SO	subdistrict office	*jiedao banshi chu* 街道办事处
SPWC	subdistrict party working committee	*jiedao dang gong wei* 街道党工委

Frequently Used Chinese Terms

"dual authority"	*tiaokuai jiehe* 条块结合
civil affairs department	*minzheng bumen* 民政部门
community (level)	*shequ* 社区
grassroots Party organization	*jiceng dang zuzhi* 基层党组织
homeowners' association	*yezhu weiyuanhui* 业主委员会
Housing and Construction Department	*zhujian bumen* 住建部门
lateral territorial	*kuaishu* 块属
neighborhood level	*xiaoqu* 小区
residents' committee	*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委员会
society work department	*shehui gongzuo bu* 社会工作部
subdistrict level	*jiedao* 街道
vertical line	*tiaoxian* 条线
vertical line system	*tiaoxian xitong* 条线系统

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Humanity's entry into the twentieth century marked the arrival, or at least the beginning, of the urban moment (Katznelson 1992, 97). If the twentieth century was the century of urban expansion, then the twenty-first century will be the century of the megacity (Jayan 2009, 4). The rise of megacities is a prominent phenomenon of the early twenty-first century that is increasingly drawing the attention of urban scholarship. The megacity is generally defined as an urban agglomeration with at least 10 million inhabitants (UN 2008, 10). According to the United Nations *World Urbanization Prospects*, 33 megacities existed by 2025, of which 19 were located in Asia (UN 2025, ix). Due to their large populations, megacities raise questions about their "governability and governance" (Kübler and Lefèvre 2018, 378). The "governance scale" of megacities, along with their "governance loads" and "governance contents" (Zhou 2022, 6–8), exhibit distinctive characteristics. The megacity features governance structures across multiple levels, from federal/central, state/province, and down to the local level; effective governance requires enhancing dialogue and cooperation across these levels (Slack 2021, 9–11).

With the launch of reform and opening-up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), and particularly at the dawn of the twenty-first century, China's urbanization process accelerated, with rapid growth in both the number and size of great cities. In 2014, the State Council issued the "Notice on Adjusting the classification standards for urban sizes,"[1] defining a city with more than 10 million permanent urban residents as a "megacity." By the end of 2023, China's urbanization rate reached 66.16 percent based on permanent residents, with a total of 11

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1   State Council,《国务院关于调整城市规模划分标准的通知》, November 20, 2014, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-11/20/content_9225.htm?trs=1.

megacities.[2] Following its landmark meeting in 2015, the Central Urban Work Conference (*Zhongyang chengshi gongzuo huiyi* 中央城市工作会议) reconvened in Beijing in July 2025 and outlined urban development and governance strategies for modernization. Against the backdrop of "strengthening and innovating social governance" (Wei 2021, 2–5), first-tier megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen have actively explored new pathways for modernized governance and undertaken reform and innovation initiatives with Chinese characteristics. As social governance continues its downward trajectory, the governance elements, characteristics, and scale effects of megacities are typically reflected at the grassroots level. This makes the community the fundamental unit for megacity governance.

To understand community from a governance perspective, we must first define two basic concepts: "governance" and "community." Generally speaking, "governance" refers to how power and authority are organized within a sphere of human activity (Baehler 2023, 5). The concept of governance describes and reflects the transformation of the nature and role of the state—shifting from bureaucracy to market and network (Bevir 2007, xxxv) and embodies a new model of interaction between government and society (Kooiman 1993, 1). From a conceptual perspective, governance can broadly refer to any mode of coordination among interdependent activities, primarily encompassing market exchange, organizational hierarchy, and self-organization; in a narrow sense, governance mainly refers to self-organization (Jessop 1998, 29). Conceptually, the term "governance" encompasses at least three primary meanings: "international governance," "good governance," and "governance without government" (Fukuyama 2016, 90). Thus, governance reflects the ongoing interaction between state and non-state actors concerning public affairs coordination, spanning from local to global levels.

The notion of "community" generally includes three basic dimensions. As an academic concept, it originates from *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, the 1887 classic by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who invests it with a strong philosophical flavor. Tönnies (2001, 95–96) views *Gemeinschaft* as an ideal-type, representing a genuine and enduring form of communal life based on people's natural will. In 1926, the Chicago School sociologist Louis Wirth translated the book's title as *Community and Society*, establishing a

2   Xinhua News Agency,《国家统计局报告：全国超大城市规模增至11个》[National Bureau of Statistics report: number of megacities in China rises to 11], September 24, 2024, http://www.ce.cn /macro/more/202409/24/t20240924_39148947.shtml. Due to differences in statistical methodologies, this list differs significantly from the United Nations (2025) report on global megacities, which only counts Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shenzhen as megacities.

correspondence between *Gemeinschaft* and community for the first time (Wirth 1926, 416). This represented a critical shift in the academic history of community, transforming the foundational concept of European continental social theory into an empirical sociological concept of the American Chicago School.

Second, as a policy concept, community is widely used in government social policy and public service, reflecting and embodying the dynamic relationship between the state and the community. Third, as an everyday life concept, community is a familiar and frequently used term in people's lives, referring to such domains as residence, study, work, and leisure. From this perspective, the notion of community has expanded and evolved from an "academic concept" to a "policy concept" and ultimately to an "everyday life concept." During the governance process of urban communities, these three dimensions interact and shape one another, intertwining to form a conceptual context for understanding community governance in megacities.

As a basic term, the concept of "community" (*shequ* 社区) in China has undergone a historical evolution. During the 1930s and 1940s, community studies emerged as a crucial theoretical concept and methodological unit in research on rural life and culture in China (Fried 1954, 17–20). By the early 1950s, however, due to nationwide disciplinary adjustments in colleges and universities, some disciplines, such as sociology, were discontinued, and the concept of community also vanished. Throughout the planned-economy era, the concept of "community" was seldom used in policy documents, whereas the concept of "work-unit" (*danwei* 单位) (Walder 1986, 28–30; Bray 2005, 1–7) was more prevalent. Following reform and opening-up, and thanks to the development of the socialist market economy and innovations in social construction and governance, the term "community" gradually entered into the formulation of various policy documents. Community, as a now-prominent policy concept, is closely linked to the functional domains of the Party (the Communist Party of China, hereafter, the Party or CPC) and the government.

With this background in mind, this paper explores three questions: (1) What is the main implication of urban community in the new context of China's megacities? (2) What is the governance framework of urban communities in China's major megacities? (3) What insights does the urban school approach offer for urban studies in China?

Urban Community Under Dual Authority

Zhou (2022, 129) uses the term "dual authority" (*tiaokuai jiehe* 条块结合) to refer to the integration of two systems of authority, vertical line (*tiaoxian* 条线) and lateral territorial (*kuaishu* 块属).[3]

Vertical Line Systems

The Party-government's vertical line systems (*tiaoxian xitong* 条线系统) assign the implementation and execution of administrative tasks to various departments. Here, the focus is on four departments most relevant to this paper's theme.

CIVIL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

The civil affairs department (*minzheng bumen* 民政部门) is a key functional domain closely tied to urban communities and involves basic livelihood security, social services, and grassroots social governance. The Ministry of Civil Affairs was the first to adopt the concept of "community" in policy formulation. In the mid-1980s, the concept of "community service" emerged, emphasizing the development of the tertiary (service) sector and the socialization of social welfare. This can be called "community social services." With the construction of service-oriented government, community services have gradually evolved into "community public services," encompassing a wide range of basic public service programs. By the early 1990s, the concept of "community construction" appeared, emphasizing comprehensive, integrated grassroots state-building as a response to the dissolution of the traditional work-unit system. As the process of national community construction experiments advanced, a series of typical models and experiences emerged. In 2000, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued "Opinions on promoting urban community construction nationwide," which marked a crucial turning point by defining the scope of an urban community as the "jurisdiction of residents' committees."[4] As China's urban migrant population surged and social interest structure diversified at the dawn of the twenty-first century, strengthening social construction[5] and innovating social management gradually became strategic tasks, and

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3   Zhou (2022, 95–97) also uses "dual authority" to refer to the two systems of Party and government.

4   《民政部关于在全国推进城市社区建设的意见》[Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on promoting urban community construction nationwide], November 3, 2000, https://mzj.sh.gov.cn/MZ_zhuzhan266_0-2-8-15-55-234/20200519/MZ_zhuzhan266_7855.html.

5   *Shehui jianshi* 社会建设 is a policy term referring to social development, the provision of social services, and building social infrastructure.

subsequently the concepts of "community management" and "grid-based management" appeared in the policymaking domain. "Community governance" has become a more widely used policy term since 2012, following the Party's 18th National Congress. In 2017, the "Opinions on strengthening and improving urban and rural community governance" noted that "communities are the basic unit of social governance."[6] Article 3 of the newly revised Organizational Law of the Urban Residents' Committees of the People's Republic of China, which took effect on January 1, 2026, states: "The area where the residents' committee is established is referred to as the community."[7] Thus, the residents' committee (*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委员会) constitutes the fundamental governance organization of the urban community in China.

HOUSING AND CONSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT

Within the Housing and Construction Department (*zhujian bumen* 住建部门) lie real estate development and property management divisions, key functional domains that are closely connected with urban communities. As urban housing system reforms advanced, the "residential neighborhood" emerged as a new type of community. In 1994, the Ministry of Construction issued "Administrative measures for newly built urban residential neighborhoods,"[8] which proposed the gradual implementation of a socialized and professionalized management model for such neighborhoods. Here, "socialized" primarily referred to the establishment of the homeowners' associations (*yezhu weiyuanhui* 业主委员会), while "professionalized" mainly denoted the introduction of property management enterprises (*wuye guanli qiye* 物业管理企业). In 1998, the deepening of housing commodification reforms significantly accelerated the shift of housing from "welfare" to "commodity." Since then, newly built residential neighborhoods have proliferated across major cities, establishing a new model of urban residence life. With the enactment of Property Management Regulations (2003) and the Property Rights Law (2007), property management in residential neighborhoods has become an increasingly vital component of urban community governance. The frequency of conflicts and disputes between property owners and property

6   《中共中央 国务院关于加强和完善城乡社区治理的意见》[The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on strengthening and improving opinions on urban and rural community governance], June 12, 2017, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2017-06/12/content_5201910.htm.

7   《中华人民共和国城市居民委员会组织法》, October 28, 2025, http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c2/c30834/202510/t20251028_449063.html.

8   《城市新建住宅小区管理办法》, issued March 11, 1994, http://www.gongzhuling.gov.cn/gzlszjj/zjjzcfg/201711/t20171124_7744918.html.

management enterprises (PMEs), coupled with the rise of homeowners' rights activism, has made the governance of property management issues a key challenge for grassroots governments. In May 2020, the state issued the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo minfadian*中华人民共和国民法典, in effect as of 2021), which included dedicated chapters on "property rights" and "property service contracts" as the two pillars of property management. In December 2020, the Ministry of Housing and Construction and nine other ministries co-issued the "Notice on strengthening and improving residential property management," which proposed "integrating property management into the grassroots social governance system."[9] The homeowners' association (HA) and the PME have consequently become new governance subjects[10] within these private residential neighborhoods.

ORGANIZATION DEPARTMENT OF THE CPC

Within the Organization Department of the CPC (OD-CPC, or *dangwei zuzhibu* 党委组织部) lies a key functional domain tightly connected to urban communities and focused on advancing grassroots Party-building. Urban community construction had always been under the leadership of community Party organizations (CPOs, or *shequ dang zuzhi* 社区党组织), but beginning in 2000, it entered a new phase of comprehensive advancement. In 2004, the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee issued the "Opinions on Further strengthening and improving party building in subdistricts and communities," which proposed that CPOs lead community residents' self-governance organizations and community mass organizations, [11] and emphasized that serving the people was a key task for Party organizations at the subdistrict and community levels.[12] The document set forth that urban community Party-building had become an important task, closely integrated with urban community management, in the process of building a "harmonious socialist society." In 2014, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee (hereafter General Office,

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9   《关于加强和改进住宅物业管理工作的通知》, December 25, 2020, https://www.ecpmi.org.cn/NewsInfo.aspx?NewsID=11477.

10   In organizational theory, a governance subject (*zhili zhuti* 治理主体) is an agent that can act, make decisions, and exercise agency, and that also is subjective, with its own interest and perspectives.

11   Community mass organizations (*shequ qunzhong zuzhi* 社区群众组织) are organized resident groups that are not government bodies but are Party-led; they include groups like women's federations, youth leagues, and volunteer organizations.

12   《中共中央组织部关于进一步加强和改进街道社区党的建设工作的意见》, October 4, 2004, https://news.12371.cn/2015/03/12/ARTI1426130898617248.shtml.

or *Zhonggong Zhongyang Bangong Ting* 中共中央办公厅) issued "Opinions on strengthening the construction of grassroots service-oriented Party organizations," which further proposed "strengthening the service functions of grassroots Party organizations, including serving reform, development, people's livelihoods, mass, and Party members."[13] Serving the "people's livelihoods" primarily entails providing services to address practical challenges to people's well-being and fostering innovation in grassroots social governance. In 2019, the General Office further issued "Opinions on strengthening and improving Party-building at the grassroots level in urban areas," which proposed "enhancing the Party organization's leadership in grassroots governance; [and] establishing comprehensive, efficient, and integrated Party-mass service centers."[14] Amid this push to strengthen Party-led grassroots governance, many large cities are actively exploring innovations in social governance systems. The OD-CPC usually serves as the coordinating body, working across multiple government departments to integrate grassroots Party-building with community governance. It focuses on strengthening grassroots Party organizations and mobilizing Party members to play leadership roles in community affairs, including encouraging Party members to run for positions in homeowners' associations.

SOCIETY DEPARTMENT OF THE CPC

A newly established department within Party committees, the society work department (*shehui gongzuo bu* 社会工作部) is a key functional domain that is closely engaged with urban communities, guiding Party-led grassroots governance while consolidating and strengthening government authority at the primary level (*jiceng zhengquan jianshe* 基层政权建设). Before the establishment of this department, there had been some exploration and innovation in systems for social construction and social management at the local level. After the CPC's 17th National Congress in 2007, multiple provinces and major cities established social work departments at the Party committee and local government levels to strengthen social construction and innovate social management. In 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee proposed the major task of innovating the social governance system for the first time, signifying a leap from "social management" to "social governance" (He 2016, 100–104). In 2017, Chengdu, a megacity in China's west, established the Chengdu Municipal Party Committee's Urban and Rural Community Development and Governance

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13   《关于加强基层服务型党组织建设的意见》, May 28, 2014, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-05/28/content_2689492.htm.

14   《关于加强和改进城市基层党的建设工作的意见》, May 8, 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-05/08/content_5389836.htm.

Committee,[15] a new department for social governance innovation. This propelled and facilitated Chengdu's emergence as a key hub for community development and governance nationwide. Following the 2022 CPC National Congress, Party-state institutions underwent a new round of reforms. In 2023, the Society Work Department of the CPC Central Committee was established, and subsequently, at the provincial, municipal, and county levels, society work departments were established nationwide. The new reforms have transferred certain functions previously handled by the civil affairs departments, related to grassroots communities and social work, to the newly established society work departments. This represents a new system model for social work and social governance and will further strengthen and promote the vital role of professional social workers and community workers in grassroots governance of urban communities.

Lateral Territorial Systems

Tiaoxian systems mainly focus on business guidance and management, while *kuaishu* systems emphasize territorial administration. This creates an urban community management system summarized by the expression "combining vertical and lateral, with the lateral as the main" (*tiaokuai jiehe, yi kuai wei zhu* 条块结合，以块为主). From the perspective of the grassroots *kuai* system, grassroots governance is primarily divided into three levels, as below.

SUBDISTRICT LEVEL

The subdistrict level (*jiedao* 街道) mainly refers to the jurisdiction of the subdistrict office (SO, or *jiedao banshi chu* 街道办事处). The SO has administrative management functions and functions as an administrative outpost of the district government. First-tier megacities have implemented a new round of reforms to the subdistrict management system, empowering subdistricts through both institutional and technological dimensions. Institutionally, these megacities closely monitor local legislation and policy revisions in response to the new challenges and tasks of grassroots governance. For example, in the governance of property management issues, the Shanghai Municipal Residential Property Management Regulations have been amended four times since 2018; significant revisions were made to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone's Regulations on Property Management in 2019; the Beijing Municipal Regulations on Property Management were issued in 2020; and the Guangzhou Municipal Regulations on Property Management were disseminated in 2020.

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15   *Chengdu shiwei chengxiang shequ fazhang zhili weiyuanhui* 成都市委城乡社区发展治理委员会.

Technologically, these megacities fully leverage advanced technological systems to enhance the effectiveness and standards of digital and intelligent governance. Beijing has a unified government services hotline (*jiesujiban*接诉即办); Shanghai has an integrated network platform for problem detection *(yiwangtongguan* 一网统管); and both Shenzhen and Guangzhou have something similar to Beijing, with complaints being submitted via a hotline or online platform (*minyisuban* 民意速办). Internal institutional structures within subdistricts have undergone reorganization and consolidation, establishing comprehensive internal agencies to more effectively deliver public services and conduct public management. The names of internal agencies within the SO may vary slightly across megacities. Generally speaking, the main internal agencies at the subdistrict level corresponding to the functional divisions of the four *tiaoxian* systems include the offices of community construction, urban management, public services, public safety construction, and Party building.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

The community level (*shequ* 社区) primarily refers to the jurisdiction of the residents' committee (RC), a kind of administrative planning unit. A SO typically administers multiple urban communities. Urban communities typically establish RCs that govern several residential neighborhoods. Connections and coordination among residential neighborhoods are mainly carried out at the community level. Sometimes, a single urban community corresponds to a single residential neighborhood. In such cases, the community governance structure becomes more centralized. Regarding the characteristics of urban communities, different megacities often exhibit distinctive local cultural features of traditional communities, such as Beijing's *hutong* 胡同 and Shanghai's *linong* 里弄. With the accelerated pace of urbanization and the substantial increase in migrant populations, the adjustment and optimization of the size of urban communities has become an increasingly crucial aspect of megacity governance. To better meet the demands for refinement in urban governance, reduce the burden of community public services and management, and promote grassroots self-governance, first-tier megacities have led the way by adjusting the size of urban communities. This process involves dividing and optimizing large communities (over 3,000 households) and super-large communities (over 5,000 households). According to the newly revised and promulgated Organizational Law of the Residents' Committee of the People's Republic of China, urban communities are generally set at 1,000 to 3,000 households. These megacities are also actively developing so-called 15-minute community service zones, where a wide range of basic government public services and convenient services are provided within a 15-minute walk or bicycle ride from a household.

NEIGHBORHOOD LEVEL

This neighborhood level (*xiaoqu* 小区)—primarily defined by building boundary red lines (*jianzhuwu quhua hongxian* 建筑物区划红线) or property management areas (*wuyeguan-liquyu* 物业管理区域)—represents what Tomba (2014, 37) calls a "private property neighborhood" or "gated micro-district." This type of residential neighborhood, which resembles a condominium neighborhood, emerged alongside the development of real estate and property management. With the enactment of the 2007 Property Rights Law, ownership of a building's units gained legal protection, meaning that a unit owner has ownership over an exclusive unit of a building, and also has the right to co-own and jointly manage common space apart from the unit itself. This novel property-ownership structure not only signifies a new residential lifestyle but also raises new governance issues. Based on their age, residential neighborhoods are primarily classified as either newly built or older neighborhoods. As urbanization in China progresses, the governance of older residential neighborhoods has become an increasingly important task in urban renewal. A residential neighborhood usually can establish a HA,[16] and hire a PME to provide professional property management and service. Generally speaking, an urban community encompasses several private residential neighborhoods. However, some super-large residential neighborhoods emerged during the early phases of real estate development, leading to the establishment of multiple RCs within a single residential neighborhood. The governance of such mega-scale residential neighborhoods poses a significant challenge, much like that of governing a megacity. As the priorities of property management in urban community governance continue to grow, the residential neighborhood is increasingly becoming a fundamental unit of grassroots governance in megacities.

A Troika under the Guidance of Party-Building

Under the guidance of the grassroots Party organizations (*jiceng dang zuzhi* 基层党组织), the RC, HA, and PME are commonly regarded as the "troika" of urban residential neighborhood governance, dedicated to establishing and developing a grassroots governance model characterized by multi-stakeholder collaboration and consultative co-governance. This approach is vividly demonstrated in the grassroots governance practices of megacities. Drawing on

16   Some residential neighborhoods do not establish HAs, while others cannot: sometimes they are averse to establishing an HA; extremely large neighborhoods may find it difficult to achieve the required votes to establish an HA; and in some cases, PMEs obstruct the establishment of HAs.

fieldwork in first-tier megacities, this paper provides an introduction and analysis of these practices.

Governance Framework

The governance framework primarily concerns the major governance subjects and their respective rights and responsibilities within residential neighborhoods. With urban change and development in China, three governance subjects—the RC, the PME, the HA—have successively emerged and gradually evolved into the troika of residential neighborhood governance. The following governance subjects are typically involved in urban neighborhood governance.

The *residents' committee* is a grassroots mass self-governance organization elected by the residents of an urban community. The first RC was established in Hangzhou in October 1949 (Huang 2019). Later, with the enactment of the Urban Residents' Committee Organization Regulations (*chengshi jumin weiyuanhui zuzhi tiaoli* 城市居民委员会组织条例, 1954), it became a nationwide institutional body. The RC serves as both the "nerve tips" (Read 2000, 808) of state power at the grassroots level and the head of the residents (here, *jumin qunzhong* 居民群众), possessing dual administrative and self-governance functions. These dual attributes mean that while assisting the government with relevant administrative tasks, the RC also actively organizes residents to engage in self-governance activities; the integration of administrative tasks and self-governance activities further enables RCs to effectively deliver community public services and manage the community. In response to an ever-changing social environment, the RC's internal organizational structure has undergone continuous transformation and reorganization. The escalation of property management conflicts and disputes in residential neighborhoods has led to the establishment of environmental and property management committees within RCs, and the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the strengthening of public health committees within RCs. As the importance of community work increases, megacities have widely established teams of young, educated, and professional full-time community workers. From a generational perspective, the leadership teams of the CPO and the RC (known together as *shequ liangweibanzi* 社区两委班子) are predominantly composed of individuals born in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of the dual roles of CPO secretary and RC director have been filled by relatively young people born in the 1980s, while those born in the 1990s have become the mainstay of full-time community social workers. This has not only significantly strengthened and elevated the RC's

governance capabilities and standards, but also deeply influenced and reshaped the RC's governance ideas and mindset.

The *property management enterprise* represents a new type of service pattern that emerged alongside the development of the real estate market and the construction of residential neighborhoods. Shenzhen is the birthplace of China's property management industry, initially drawing on Hong Kong's experience. China's first PME was established there in 1981.[17] Guided by market-oriented and professional development principles, property management has gradually become a vital industry in China's economic and social development. The property management and services provided by the PME mainly involve the maintenance, upkeep, and management of common areas and shared facilities, as well as ensuring environmental sanitation and order within residential neighborhoods. These services exhibit both attributes of commercial offerings that are purchasable and characteristics of quasi-public services. In terms of organization and delivery, property management services exhibit the characteristics of "collective consumption" (Castells 1976, 75). This means that property services can only be purchased as a package and cannot be selected individually. Because it is a collective purchase, even those who do not pay property management fees can still obtain the services, leading to free-rider problems (Olson 1965, 76). In the latest round of property management reforms, first-tier megacities have further expanded the coverage of property management services, particularly in older residential neighborhoods, and they are actively promoting for the property management fee billing method to be transitioned from a lump-sum system (*baoganzhi* 包干制) to a commission-based system (*choujinzhi* 酬金制). Since Shenzhen granted homeowners' congresses (*yezhu dahui* 业主大会) legal status as market entities and allowed them to open bank accounts for collectively owned funds in this round of reform, the commission-based property management fee system has been widely adopted.

The *homeowners' association* is an organization for self-governance elected by the homeowners in a residential neighborhood. It represents and safeguards the legitimate rights and interests of the residential neighborhood. The first HA was established in Shenzhen in 1991 (Xiao 2023), with slight variations in name across major cities. Following the promulgation of the State Council's Regulations on Property Management (2003), the HA became a standardized institutional framework nationwide. With the rise of the HAs and their rights

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17   《深圳"国土房产十大事件"开评》, n.d., Shenzhen News Network, https://www.sznews.com/top/adv/guotu10-2.html.

activism, the socio-political implications of housing commodification reforms have become increasingly apparent (Read 2003, 33–34; Wang et al. 2011, 577–79; Yip 2019, 1636–637). HA elections are subject to statutory voting thresholds, making the process more challenging in residential neighborhoods with larger populations both in terms of achieving a quorum and in holding the elections themselves. When establishing the HA proves difficult, or elections at expiration of office terms fail, the property management committee (*wuye guanli weiyuanhui* 物业管理委员会) may be formed as a temporary transitional body to assume and perform the HA's duties. The PMC serves as a substitute and incubation mechanism in the HA's absence, particularly in older residential neighborhoods. By establishing new PMCs, some older residential neighborhoods can manage their property management affairs and issues more effectively. Megacities such as Beijing and Guangzhou pioneered the PMC model through local legislation during the latest round of property management reforms, establishing it as an innovative institutional system that has been widely studied and adopted by other major Chinese cities. Compared to the HA, the PMC differs in its personnel composition and formation methods, representing an emerging form of homeowners' self-governance organization. Establishing an HA typically takes longer, whereas a PMC can be formed more quickly. The PMC is typically established under the leadership of the SO and the RC. Its members include representatives from multiple sources, not just property owners. Different great cities have distinctive characteristics in their membership composition, as shown in the comparison of PMCs in Beijing and Guangzhou in table 1.

TABLE 1.   Differences in the composition of property management committees, Beijing versus Guangzhou

Committee member source	Beijing	Guangzhou
Residents' committee	Only one, usually the RC director	Usually one
Homeowners' representatives	Constitute more than half of total PMC members	Usually no less than five
Property users	Includes representatives	N/A
Property management enterprise	N/A	Only one, the PME manager
Subdistrict office	N/A	Only one, usually from urban management office
District Housing Administration Department	N/A	Only one, usually from urban management office

Grassroots Party organizations usually include at least three levels: subdistrict, community, and neighborhood. Their functions focus on Party-building, governance, and services, and they form a regionalized framework and system for large-scale Party-building. They play a central leadership role in grassroots governance by overseeing the overall situation and coordinating diverse governance subjects. Under the Party's guidance on grassroots governance, first-tier megacities typically formulate and issue policies to encourage the establishment of Party branches within HAs, PMCs, and PMEs. Party-building guidance primarily takes the form of political, organizational, and institutional guidance. For instance, it guides subdistrict-community-neighborhood institutions to prioritize people's interests, mobilizing and leveraging the proactivity and creativity of Party members; according to statutory procedures, it encourages cross-appointments between the CPO and the RC; it recommends excellent homeowners and residents with Party membership as candidates for the HA election and the PMC's selection, and it encourages cross-appointments between the HA and PMC and their affiliated Party branches. It also provides important policy guidance on formulating and revising two documents required under China's property management legal framework: the Rules of Procedure for the Homeowners' Congress (*yezhu dahui yishi guize* 业主大会议事规则) and the Management Covenant (*guanli guiyue* 管理规约). Through these approaches, Party-led governance aims to translate the Party's political, organizational, and institutional strengths into effective governance at the grassroots level.

Governance Mechanism

In discussing the governance mechanism, I adopt a meta-governance analytical framework and primarily focus on the operational modes, principles, and objectives of these governance subjects. There are three fundamental governance mechanisms In the context of modern governance: organizational hierarchy, the anarchy of exchange, and self-organizing "heterarchy" (Jessop 1998, 29); these are also called three ideal types—"hierarchy," "market," and "network," and they emerge as "hybrid forms of governance" in social life (Meuleman 2008, 13–14). No single governance mechanism operates in isolation; rather, they are interdependent, mutually influential, and interactively connected. In practice, these three mechanisms may either complement or undermine one another (Meuleman 2008, 51–52). The dynamic tension among these three governance mechanisms influences and determines governance effectiveness. When complementarity is low and mutual conflict is high, governance failure may occur, necessitating coordination through meta-governance. "Meta-governance" refers to "the governance of governance," involving the reinterpretation and synergistic integration of hierarchy, market, and self-organizing governance

mechanisms to achieve optimal governance outcomes (Jessop 2003, 101–116). Here, I will use residential neighborhood governance as an example.

The residents' committee serves as "the agent of state power" (Tang 2019, 57) at the grassroots level, primarily functioning as a hierarchical governance mechanism that guides and supervises the homeowners' association and the property management enterprise. For example, the RC, through its guidance and oversight, establishes and elects a new HA; discusses major matters and submits them to the HC for a vote; and hires and fires the PME and oversees the fulfillment of the PME's service delivery and contract. In practical community work, the RC often relies on approaches such as providing services (*zuo fuwu* 做服务), emphasizing personal relationships (*jiang renqing* 讲人情), and "making appearances" (*shua mianer/shualianmian* 刷面儿/刷脸面)[18] to complete the task. At the same time, due to relatively limited human resources, the RC cannot carry out certain community tasks without the active support and cooperation of the PME. Some property management disputes within residential neighborhoods are first addressed through mediation and resolution by the HA, which serves as a buffer layer (*huanchongceng* 缓冲层) that reduces burdens (*jianqing fudan* 减轻负担)[19] for the RCs' community work. This demonstrates that the effective operation of the hierarchical governance mechanism also requires support from the market and self-organizing governance mechanisms.

The PME, as a market entity pursuing corporate profits, represents a kind of market governance mechanism. As a labor-intensive enterprise, labor cost is a critical component of its business operations. The PME primarily provides professional management services to residential neighborhoods under the property management contract. The selection and appointment of a PME are major property-rights matters for the residential neighborhoods. The process requires approval through a vote by the HC, authorizing the HA to sign a property management contract on behalf of the residential neighborhood. The PME's primary source of revenue is property management fees. The prices and collection rates of these fees directly affect the survival and operational status of such PMEs. Despite rising labor and energy costs, property management fees in many residential neighborhoods have remained unchanged for years, making it difficult to implement reasonable price adjustments. A PME manager in Shenzhen provided some data as an example:

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18   Interview, Beijing, November 10, 2021.

19   Interview, Shanghai, December 13, 2024.

In 2001, a cleaner earned ¥400 per month, while a security guard made ¥600 per month. Today, the cost for a cleaner is ¥4,500 per month; for a security guard, it ranges from ¥5,500 to ¥6,000 per month. That's a tenfold increase. Yet incomes remain largely unchanged."[20]

This often leads to some PMEs operating under heavy financial burdens. Faced with this situation, PMEs typically reduce expenses and draw on public revenue from common property in residential neighborhoods to cover the shortfall in property management fees. The difficulty of adjusting property management fees stems from the requirement that any such adjustment within a residential neighborhood be approved by a statutory majority of HC voters. Achieving this high voting threshold is quite challenging. Moreover, homeowners are particularly sensitive to price adjustments in property management fees, and PMEs are also exceptionally cautious about raising these fees. This demonstrates that the effective functioning of market-driven price mechanisms requires support from a rational and mature homeowners' self-governance system.

The HA, as a social organization, aims to safeguard the lawful rights and interests of the residential neighborhood while preserving and appreciating property values. It represents a self-organizing governance mechanism in which homeowners' active participation, support, and trust are crucial. Since HA members volunteer and many hold full-time jobs in addition to their HA roles, this significantly affects the continuity and stability of the HA's operations. If the HA membership includes more retirees or freelancers, this situation may be somewhat alleviated. The HA may also hire a salaried executive secretary to manage daily operations, administration, and implementation, which must be approved by an HC vote. First-tier megacities have conducted extensive practical explorations in executive secretary systems. These executive secretaries, who sometimes hold qualifications as accountants, not only handle daily administrative tasks but also provide professional support in financial affairs. During my fieldwork in Shenzhen, I met a female secretary, certified as an accountant, who earned ¥6,000 per month. Unlike full-time secretaries, HA members may receive only a very small monthly allowance (usually a few hundred RMB) for transportation and communication expenses, which must be approved by an HC vote. The work of HA members is not easy, especially for leaders, who typically must devote significant time and energy. These leaders' motivations may be mixed or multiple, and they may reprioritize or adjust their objectives during practical work (Cai and Sheng 2013, 514). HAs, as self-governance organizations,

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20   Interview, Shenzhen, December 8, 2024.

must maintain impartiality and actively work for the residential neighborhood's welfare to earn homeowners' trust and support. Any pursuit of personal gain would severely damage the trust between the HAs and the homeowners and seriously undermine the effective operation of homeowners' self-governance. The most immediate consequence of such a loss of trust is the failure to elect an HA at the expiration of its office term due to insufficient votes. If an HA fails to establish or undergoes an unsuccessful election at the expiration of its office term, the PMC can serve as a supplementary mechanism for managing property affairs. A PMC deputy director pointed out its main role:

> The PMC can help oversee the PME, communicate with the PME about the areas needing improvement or the issues requiring resolution in residential neighborhoods; it can be effective."[21]

Beijing and Guangzhou have taken the lead in exploring this new approach. As for the HA, the effective operation of the homeowners' self-governance mechanism—particularly in establishing and electing the HA, voting on major property rights matters at the HC, improving property service quality, and enhancing the residential environment—also relies on the active support of the PME and the RC. This demonstrates that the effective functioning of the self-organization mechanism also requires support from market and hierarchical mechanisms.

The CPO represents a primary mechanism of meta-governance, playing a central leadership role and coordinating multi-subject relationships within an urban community. It unites and guides the RC, the PME, and the HA to work together, support one another, and advance together. Within the three-pronged governance framework, direct interest conflicts often arise between the HA and the PME, and disputes may also emerge between the HA and the RC over authority in neighborhood governance. When significant conflicts arise among these three parties, the CPO serves as the meta-governance coordinator. It facilitates resolution through internal organizational networks within the Party branches, or by convening multi-stakeholder communication and consultation meetings. A secretary of the CPO vividly articulated the pivotal role of Party-led meta-governance:

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21   Interview, Guangzhou, December 31, 2024.

> Party-building guidance must be problem-oriented, addressing specific
> issues one by one. It involves how to coordinate your resources to resolve
> these problems. This is the essence of genuine Party-building guidance.[22]

When conflicts become overly complex or acute, and the CPO's authority proves insufficient for effective coordination, the meta-governance level shifts upward to the subdistrict level for multi-stakeholder coordination. The subdistrict Party working committee (SPWC, or *jiedao dang gong wei* 街道党工委) and the SO possess greater administrative authority and stronger capacity to organize and facilitate coordination among multi-stakeholders in urban communities. However, even meta-governance at the subdistrict level is not always effective and may sometimes face partial failures. This necessitates a longer period to repair and recover the social relationships and social capital that were severely damaged during acute property management conflicts within the residential neighborhood.

Governance Logic

The operation of the troika under the guidance of Party-building embodies and reflects a logic of multi-stakeholder consultation and co-governance, striving to build a grassroots social governance community characterized by co-building, co-governing, and co-sharing. Regarding the three levels of governance in urban communities, the residential neighborhood level primarily focuses on self-governance, the urban community level emphasizes co-governance, and the subdistrict level concentrates on meta-governance. In the actual governance practical process, these three levels frequently interact and interconnect.

At the residential neighborhood level, daily governance activities primarily concern property management. The HA and the PME, or the PMC and the PME, serve as the main governance subjects. In some residential neighborhoods, each of these three organizations has established its own Party branch, which also actively leverages the guiding role of Party-building. In the interactional collaboration between a homeowners' organization and a PME, the RC's participation and support are usually indispensable. At the urban community level, the CPO and the RC are the primary governance subjects; their daily operations revolve around Party-building, public services, and public management, with property management affairs constituting a crucial component of their work. The secretary of the CPO and the director of the RC are often the same person, holding a dual appointment (known as *yijiantiao* 一肩挑, or "one shoulder carrying two loads"), and other personnel can overlap between the CPO

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and the RC. At the subdistrict level, the main governance subjects are the SPWC and the SO; their primary function is to undertake and execute regionalized Party-building and administrative tasks delegated by district-level functional departments. In strengthening and innovating grassroots social governance, subdistricts typically prioritize property management as a key challenge. As shown above, the three governance levels—neighborhood, community, and subdistrict—are actually closely interconnected in property management affairs.

How should we recognize and understand "property management issues"? Property management primarily involves the oversight and maintenance of residential buildings and their ancillary facilities and equipment. However, it inevitably extends to the management and service of the people. In the context of property management systems, some residential neighborhoods are developed by real estate companies, which then establish their own PME responsible for management, creating a father-son system (*fuzibing tizhi* 父子兵体制) in which the developer acts as the "father" and the PME as the "son." This often leads the PME to form a dominant position in the management of residential neighborhoods. The residential neighborhood constitutes a community of shared interests, centered on exclusive property rights and bound by common property rights. This kind of property structure enables homeowners to unite and organize to protect and defend their rights and interests. When the PME infringes on the legitimate rights and interests of the residential neighborhood, homeowners can assert and protect their lawful interests through the HA, for instance, in the ownership of common property and distribution of public revenues; transparency in property management financial accounts; quality and pricing of property services; and the use and management of special repair funds. These often become focal points of conflict in residential neighborhoods. Due to persistent conflicts of interest between HAs and PMEs, disputes over property management have become increasingly frequent and widespread. This has transformed property management—originally a contractual transaction in the market economy—into a complex social problem. Consequently, resolving these conflicts requires a social governance approach.

So, how should we understand and interpret social governance? Through the lens of property management, we can observe that governance of communities in megacities reflects and embodies mutual dependence and integration among self-governance, co-governance, and hierarchical governance. At the neighborhood level, everyday governance primarily relies on the HA's self-governance, with the HA hiring the PME to provide professional services and management. Both the HA and the PME are subject to the RC's guidance and oversight. This implies that the *continuous presence* of the RC functions as a hierarchical

governance mechanism, with one RC typically serving multiple residential neighborhoods. Thus, under the guidance of the CPO, a tripartite co-governance structure has emerged among the RC, the PME, and the HA. In this governance framework, the dynamic interactions among these three bodies are constantly evolving, with the greatest variability residing in the HA. Homeowners' self-governance can falter if the HA fails to establish itself; if it experiences collective resignations or dismissals, or is automatically terminated; or if it engages in passive inaction. Such outcomes necessitate corresponding remedial mechanisms. At this juncture, the SO, as the higher meta-governance body, intervenes promptly. By legally initiating the supplementary mechanism, the continued function of the community co-governance framework is ensured. Based on this, the SO further mobilizes and facilitates the election and re-establishment of a new HA, thereby restoring the tripartite governance framework.

Conclusion:
A call for a new school of Chinese urban studies

The growth of great cities is the outstanding feature of modern society (Park and Burgess 2019, 47). Over the century spanning 1925 to 2025, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago emerged as America's three largest metropolitan areas, giving birth to three distinct schools of urban studies. A century has passed since Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie published *The City*: *Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in Urban Environment* in 1925. Many regard this work as heralding the arrival of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology and defining a research agenda for urban studies that remains influential to this day (Dear 2002, 5). Inspired by the Chicago School, the Los Angeles and New York schools subsequently emerged (Dear 2001, 5–8; Halle 2003, 15–22), sparking a series of academic debates among urban researchers that propelled the field's development. These schools of thought represent one of the most fundamental academic legacies in contemporary urban studies. "Community" has consistently occupied a pivotal position throughout the research of these three urban schools.

As we stand at the threshold of a new century, revisiting the Chicago School's manifesto, *The City,* continues to inspire and guide our thinking about cities, our understanding of communities, and our interpretation of the school itself. The guiding principles and ideas presented in *The City* remain relevant to comprehending the vast and contradictory social conditions in contemporary cities, and are connected to the contemporary resurgence of interest in

neighborhood effects (Sampson, 2019: viii). Research from the Chicago Neighborhood Human Development Project demonstrates that the neighborhood exerts enduring influence on urban social life (Sampson 2012, 426). As a core theme of the Chicago School, what exactly constitutes a community?

> [The community is] a collection of people occupying a more or less clearly defined area. A community is not only a collection of people, but it is a collection of institutions. Not people, but institutions, are final and decisive in distinguishing the community from other social constellations. (Park and Burgess 2019, 114–15)

From this perspective, understanding Chinese urban communities necessitates recognizing their institutions, like the GPO, the RCs, the PMEs, the HAs, and the PMCs. Simultaneously, for the Chicago School, "community" is also a "processual" concept (Abbott 1999, 6). As E.W. Burgess pointed out, urban development emerges from the interplay of social disorganization and reorganization—two processes that mutually reinforce each other within the dynamic equilibrium of social order, ultimately towards a progressive goal (Park and Burgess 2019, 54). This implies that the organizational structures of communities in urban environments can be examined through the lens of the interplay between the social processes of disorganization and reorganization. In this sense, the organizational governance framework of the troika under Party-building guidance, as analyzed above, is itself situated within a dynamic, tension-filled process of change. Among this troika, the disorganization and reorganization of the homeowners' association have become key variables, and the property management committee constitutes an important supplementary mechanism. Both the institutional organizations and the dynamic governance framework of the urban community equally and deeply influence residents' everyday life experiences and, in turn, are shaped and constructed by them.

When "community" meets "governance," what changes and reactions unfold? As two widely used yet highly contested concepts in the social sciences, "community" and "governance" have found a remarkable convergence and application in urban environment, giving rise to a core theme in urban studies. Across diverse cultural contexts, different nations develop community governance models shaped by their unique historical and cultural characteristics.

From an analytical perspective, "community" as a theoretical concept denotes a series of social relationships and interactive processes that increasingly require a return to its essence as a "processual" concept.

From a policy practice perspective, "community" primarily manifests as an "entitative" concept, encompassing a set of institutions and functioning as a fundamental unit of modern social governance.

From an everyday life perspective, "community" denotes a shared existence, experiences, emotions, and attitudes, remaining a fundamental condition and urgent need for modern individuals.

These three basic dimensions are intricately interwoven in the governance and operation of urban communities. A century ago, Robert Park argued, "The thing of which we still know least is the business of carrying on an associated existence" (Park and Burgess 2019, 110). A hundred years later, the urban environment has undergone a great transformation. Whether due to the global rise of megacities or the revolutionary changes brought about by modern information technology and artificial intelligence, the "city" is increasingly emerging as a new social laboratory, presenting numerous new research questions for urban studies. The methodological proposition of the "city as a social laboratory" (Park 1929, 1–19) continues to demonstrate that "human nature and social processes may be conveniently and profitably studied" in an urban environment (Park and Burgess 2019, 46).

The Chicago School of Sociology is inextricably linked to the origins and development of modern Chinese sociology. In 1932, Robert Park, a leading figure of this school, was invited by Yenching University to lecture in China, where he introduced the concept of "community" to Chinese academia. At that time, Yenching University faculty and students, represented by key figures such as Wu Wenzao 吴文藻 and Fei Xiaotong 费孝通, held a collective discussion and decided to translate this concept as *shequ* 社区. They endowed the term with specific connotations from a combined functionalist and ecological perspective, making it a crucial methodological unit in the indigenization movement in Chinese sociology. This initiative also launched a series of studies on various rural communities in China during the 1930s and 1940s, yielding a body of representative and influential research that later crystallized into the "Yenching School" (Sinha and Lakhanpal 2022, 388). As the urbanization process continues to advance, China is increasingly entering an era of urban age. In some sense, only contemporary Chinese urban community research holds equal value to the Chicago School's urban studies of yesteryear (Wu 2024, 20). The historical trajectory and massive

transformations of China's urbanization have stimulated and inspired a substantial body of urban research literature. This calls for the development of urban theories and methodologies with Chinese characteristics. Such approaches may be grounded in the Chinese context for extensive, in-depth theoretical and empirical urban research, while simultaneously engaging in constructive dialogue with the global forefront of urban studies, and ultimately resulting in the emergence of a school of Chinese urban studies born from the rise of the megacity. As the cities in the Global South represent "a sufficiently different urban situation" (Garrido et al. 2020, 2), this may also indicate the potential contribution that Chinese urban studies, as a member of the Global South, can make to global urban studies.

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