

The Reconstruction of Neighborhood Committees and Urban Grassroots Governance Systems in Early New China: The Case of Beijing

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Abstract: This study examines Beijing from 1952 to 1958, tracing the institutional formation and functional practices of neighborhood committees to explore their unique role in reconstructing the urban grassroots governance system. In the early years of the People's Republic, neighborhood committees established a dynamic equilibrium mechanism between executing state administrative tasks and responding to residents' needs, evolving into a governance platform that integrated political communication with social services. Through organizing mutual-aid production, conducting cultural education, and improving public welfare, these committees built low-cost social support networks during resource-scarce times. Simultaneously, their administrative transformation revealed persistent tensions between state power penetration and grassroots autonomy. Beijing's experience demonstrates the adaptability and complexity of grassroots governance organizations during institutional infancy, providing historical reference points for understanding the interplay between government leadership and social participation in contemporary Chinese community governance.

Keywords: Residents' Committee; neighborhood-based system; grassroots governance; state-society relations

1. Introduction

Committees in the early days of the People's Republic of China¹ was a key path for the socialist state power to penetrate into urban grassroots society. As a "mass self-governing residents' organization" in legal terms, Residents' Committees

undertook multiple functions in practice, including political mobilization, social services, and resident self-governance, exhibiting a complex governance characteristic intertwined with "administrative" and "autonomous" aspects. In terms of organizational mechanisms, they both undertook administrative tasks assigned by the state and built

¹ Hereinafter referred to as Residents' Committee.

a low-cost mutual aid and service system at the grassroots level, becoming an important link between the state and society. Current academic research on Residents' Committees has accumulated certain results, with many scholars using the relationship between the state and society as a starting point or analyzing the development stages and model transformations of Residents' Committees from the perspective of institutional change (He, H., 2003; Song, Y., 2006; Han, Q., 2007; Mao, D., 2018). Among them, local case studies, represented by Guo Shengli, have conducted in-depth analyses of the Shanghai Residents' Committee. (Guo, S., 2006a; 2006b) However, existing research largely focuses on the administrative tendencies or macro-level institutional changes of Residents' Committees, with relatively little attention paid to micro-level empirical analysis of how they coordinate national will with residents' needs and how they construct public service networks under resource constraints. Particular attention remains insufficient to the unique path and local practices of Beijing, a political center, in the development of Residents' Committees. In light of this, this paper, building upon previous research, uses post-1949 archives held in the Beijing Municipal Archives as core historical materials to clarify how Beijing's Residents' Committees, from 1952 to 1958, achieved functional adjustment within the dual framework of "semi-official" attributes and grassroots self-governance, and how they established a dynamic balance between administrative tasks and residents' welfare through organizational means. Furthermore, it explores the structural position and historical significance of Residents' Committees as urban grassroots governance units within the context of the decentralization of state power and social self-management.

2. The Establishment and Organizational Evolution of Residents' Committees

Before 1954, Beijing's streets were jointly managed by police stations and various temporary organizations such as public security committees

and women's representative associations, but this resulted in problems such as "multiple departments issuing conflicting orders and a lack of unified leadership." This structural chaos directly led to two major governance dilemmas: first, the meeting system was cumbersome and inefficient, with various organizations holding numerous meetings to assign tasks, causing time conflicts and wasting resources; second, grassroots activists were overburdened and there was an urgent need to establish a unified grassroots management organization.

2.1 Institutional Background and Historical Origins

In the initial institutional design of street-level organizations, they can be divided into three basic forms based on their functional attributes: First, political organizations, as an extension of state administrative power at the grassroots level, undertake functions such as in-depth public mobilization and security management, represented by the Public Security Committee; second, mass organizations, focusing on the self-management of residents' public welfare affairs, such as housing repair groups and democratic water stations; and third, hybrid organizations possessing both political and mass attributes, responsible for both policy dissemination and administrative task execution, as well as public education and welfare protection, such as the Women's Representative Conference. Before the establishment of the Residents' Committee, although the above three types of street-level organizations had initially established a framework for grassroots governance, their operational models still had structural defects. Various organizations focused primarily on completing specific tasks, resulting in fragmented functions and a lack of coordination, leading to a fragmented state of grassroots governance. According to statistics from the Ninth District of Beijing in 1951, there were eight organizations in the streets: the Public Security Committee, the Sanitation Committee and Sanitation Team, the Housing Repair Team, the Korean War Support

Association, the Propaganda Team, the Veterans' Support Team, the Women's Representative Association, and the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association. The first six were directly under the leadership of the local police station. At that time, 3,267 people in the entire area were included in these organizations, accounting for only 54.38% of the total population, while 2,758 people were unorganized, accounting for 45.62% of the total population.¹

The overly detailed division of functions and lack of overall coordination resulted in the failure of the street-level organizational system to achieve effective integration, leaving a large number of non-work unit populations—including housewives, the unemployed, and self-employed individuals—outside the organization's coverage. This governance dilemma paved the way for the emergence of Residents' Committees.

October 1952, Beijing, drawing on the experiences of Tianjin and Shanghai, proposed "establishing street residents' representative meetings and standing committees elected by them—street residents' committees—based on the jurisdiction of police stations, to uniformly lead and promote various tasks in the streets." (Beijing Municipal Archives & Party History Research Office of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the CPC. (Eds.), 2007) Two models emerged in this pilot program for the construction of Residents' Committees: In Dongsi and Xidan districts, "small Residents' Committees" were piloted. These consisted of several small Residents' Committees within the jurisdiction of a police station (approximately 100-600 households), organized by street or alley. Each Residents'

Committee consisted of 5-11 members elected by resident representatives. In Dongdan and Xuanwu districts, "large Residents' Committees" were piloted. Each large Residents' Committee had a jurisdiction roughly equivalent to that of a police station, encompassing 2000-3000 households. Approximately 20 members were elected by resident representatives, and four specialized committees were established under each committee: health, education, security, and social welfare. The pilot programs showed that small Residents' Committees were more in line with residents' living habits and more efficient. After the establishment of the Residents' Committee, the number of street-level organizations was significantly reduced. For example, the Guanyinsi Police Station in Dongdan District originally had 17 organizations, but after the establishment of the Residents' Committee, only 4 remained.² Subsequently, street-level work was largely handled by the Residents' Committee, greatly alleviating the burden on activists.

In 1954, based on the experience gained from pilot projects, Beijing further launched a focused pilot program. Key reforms included: abolishing the resident representative assembly level and replacing it with direct elections by resident groups; establishing 300-400 households as the ideal size for a jurisdiction; and incorporating security and mediation committees into the Residents' Committee system. Simultaneously, a classification standard for activists was established: three categories—relying on, educating and utilizing, and purging—to strengthen the organization's purity.³ This pilot program also clarified the relationship between the Residents' Committee and other

¹ Investigation and research materials on the issue of street organization structure in the Ninth District. (1951, September 4). Post-1949 Archives 41-1-17, Beijing Municipal Archives.

² Information on Residents' Committees. (1953, October 3). Post-1949 Archives 2-5-63-14, Beijing Municipal Archives.

³ Summary report on the establishment of key Residents' Committees in Beijing. (1954, October 12). Post-1949 Archives 2-6-72, Beijing Municipal Archives. Relying on those with good class background, clear history, upright conduct, active work, and close ties with the masses; Those to be educated and used: those with a basically clear history, or those with minor problems, active work, and some minor shortcomings in conduct; or those with good class background and a basically clear history but weak work ability; and those with bad class background but whose post-liberation behavior proves they have indeed been reformed; Those to be purged: those with serious political problems, unclear history, or severely bad conduct.

organizations: in factory and mine collective dormitories, the family committee concurrently performed the functions of the Residents' Committee, and the security committee was jointly led by the Residents' Committee and the local police station.

However, the pilot program also exposed some problems: some cadres exhibited bureaucratic tendencies, demanding both full-time leave and plans to establish a joint office, striving for independence¹; the election process was not standardized, with instances of manipulation; and the vetting of activists was lax, leading to unqualified individuals infiltrating the ranks.² These problems reflect the enormous challenges the state faced in balancing organizational control and grassroots self-governance in the early stages of grassroots democratic practice in the People's Republic of China.

Faced with the previous governance challenges of fragmented street-level organizational functions, incomplete coverage, and a large number of unemployed individuals remaining outside their designated work units, the pilot program significantly improved the fragmented state of grassroots work through reorganization and the establishment of a unified structure. The small-scale Residents' Committee model, developed during the program and better suited to residents' lifestyles, better streamlined working relationships and reduced the burden on grassroots staff. Simultaneously, this initiative incorporated non-work unit groups such as housewives into the organizational system, expanding governance coverage and establishing classification standards for activists, providing valuable experience for achieving orderly management at the urban grassroots level.

2.2 Organizational Structure and Nature Positioning

On December 31, 1954, the National People's Congress simultaneously passed the "Regulations on the Organization of Urban Subdistrict Offices" and the "Regulations on the Organization of Urban Residents' Committees," unifying and standardizing the nature, tasks, and organizational form of Residents' Committees at the national legislative level, and formally establishing the subdistrict office-Residents' Committee system. The "Regulations on the Organization of Urban Residents' Committees" (hereinafter referred to as the "Regulations") defined Residents' Committees as "mass self-governing organizations," with each Residents' Committee consisting of 7 to 17 members, elected by each residents' group; and members mutually elect one chairperson and one to three vice-chairpersons; one member must be in charge of women's affairs. This organizational structure aimed to handle grassroots public affairs more efficiently and safeguard the interests of residents. Due to the groundwork laid by pilot projects and the opportune timing, Beijing had already begun comprehensive construction work before the promulgation of the Regulations. On October 8, 1954, the Beijing Municipal Government decided to establish street offices and Residents' Committees in all districts of the city, with the first batch planned to be completed by 1955. Since the Regulations had not yet been promulgated by the state, the Beijing Municipal People's Committee carried out the work based on methods summarized from the pilot projects. Regarding the division of jurisdiction, the suggestion of 300-400 households per district, proposed in the key pilot projects, was not adopted. Instead, the scope was broadened to 100-600 households per district to address the more complex construction conditions in the suburbs. Resident groups consisted of 40 to 65 households. (Zeng, P.,

¹ Investigation by the Secretariat of the Beijing Municipal People's Government on the current situation of street Residents' Committees under key pilot construction in urban areas of Beijing. (1953, November). Post-1949 Archives 2-6-72, Collection of Beijing Municipal Archives.

² Summary report on the key establishment of Residents' Committees in Beijing. (1954, October 12). Post-1944 Archives 2-6-72, Beijing Municipal Archives.

1954) After the establishment of the Residents' Committees, it was clarified that, except for the Public Security Committee and the Mediation Committee, no working committees would generally be established. The Mediation Committee, under the leadership of the Residents' Committee, would work under the joint guidance of the District People's Court and the Street Office.

Beijing's current Residents' Committee construction work continues the comparative exploration approach adopted during the pilot phase. Unlike other districts that continued with the universal suffrage model explored in the pilot phase, Qianmen District selected six police stations, including Boxing Hutong, in November and broke down the process into nine steps through a nomination-based election¹. This meticulous nine-step election procedure aimed to improve efficiency, but contrary to expectations, it not only failed to save overall work time but also led some residents to suspect that the nomination election was merely a formality². This exploration of both "top-down" and "combined top-down" election models reflect the difficulty the state faces in balancing increased control with ensuring legitimacy. Apart from the election method, other aspects of this work were largely the same; the first three batches of Residents' Committees all followed a three-step approach:

preparation, publicity and deliberation, and election and establishment. In this process, when the Residents' Committee fully leveraged its social role—such as residents of Fayuansi Back Street spontaneously building seepage wells to solve public health problems (Jin, Y., 1954)—it demonstrated the vitality of grassroots self-governance; however, excessive administrative intervention could lead to a sense of alienation among the residents. This tension is driving the evolution of governance from simple administrative management to multi-party co-governance, although this process is full of twists and turns.

The reform of the funding system for Beijing Residents' Committees in the early days of the People's Republic of China also reveals the complex interaction between state power and grassroots governance: from the pilot period in 1952 when only office expenses were borne by the state, to the "Trial Scheme for Beijing Street Residents' Committees" in 1953 which included living allowances in the financial guarantee, and finally to the "Regulations" in 1954 which formed a complete funding system, this system design, through the nationalization of funding, clarified the "semi-official, semi-social" organizational attributes of Residents' Committees in terms of implementation, making its staff "non-governmental employees"; in the specific practice in

¹ Report on the establishment of Residents' Committees in Qianmen District. (1954, November 20). Post-1949 Archives 39-1-176, Beijing Municipal Archives. (1) A meeting of activists was held to explain the purpose of the meeting and announce the list of preparatory committee members; (2) The first preparatory committee meeting was held to elect the director, clarify the tasks, and propose the method for electing candidates; (3) Publicity was carried out to the masses, and the working group and the preparatory committee exchanged opinions and deliberated on candidates; (4) The preparatory committee convened meetings of activists in different areas to discuss candidates; (5) The second preparatory committee meeting was held to report on the deliberation process and discuss and determine the preliminary list of candidates; (6) A representative meeting was held (the activists who participated in the study of the list attended the meeting) to discuss and revise the list; (7) The third preparatory committee meeting was held to determine the official list of candidates; (8) A mass meeting was held to conduct the election; (9) The director and deputy director of the residents' committee were elected, the division of labor among the committee members was carried out, and a celebration meeting was held to announce the formal establishment of the residents' committee.

² Report on the establishment of Residents' Committees in Qianmen District. (1954, November 20). Post-1944 Archives 39-1-176, Beijing Municipal Archives.

Beijing, the funding standards for Residents' Committees went through the process of being determined by population in 1954 (Mao, D. (Ed.), 2019), the refinement of standards after the currency reform in 1955¹, and further refined management between 1956 and 1957, tightening the amount while expanding the scope of subsidies to all members who actually participated in the work of Residents' Committees². While the expanding scope of subsidies and simplified approval procedures reflected a balance between institutional norms and actual needs, they also exposed a deep-seated contradiction between social needs and state management. On the one hand, the state incorporated Residents' Committees into the administrative system through financial control, but this strengthened control while weakening their essential nature of grassroots self-governance. On the other hand, the lack of oversight led to irregularities in the use of Residents' Committee funds, ineffective approval procedures, and³ frequent instances of "funds coming from and going from the pocket." This funding system was not merely a fiscal arrangement but also a crucial mechanism for the penetration of state power into the grassroots. While ensuring the state's control over grassroots society, it also laid the groundwork for the later "bureaucratization" of Residents' Committees. Through this micro-perspective of funding, we can clearly glimpse the structural tensions and institutional reform dilemmas faced by the construction of state power at the grassroots level in the early days of the People's Republic of China.

3. The Multidimensional Practical Functions of Residents' Committees

Although the state stipulated from its inception that Residents' Committees were self-governing resident organizations, their development paths varied across regions due to local circumstances. For example, the Shanghai Residents' Committee initially operated as a purely self-governing organization, entirely self-funded with members working voluntarily. In contrast, the (Guo, S., 2006) Beijing Residents' Committee's operating expenses were allocated by the state from the pilot stage, making it a representative body specifically cultivated by the Party and government to address street-level issues. This administrative constraint on its social function made the Beijing Residents' Committee a "leg" of grassroots governance. For a considerable period, any work assigned to the street-level authorities had to go through the Residents' Committee. On the one hand, the Residents' Committee, leveraging its proximity to the masses and the grassroots network built by activists, effectively alleviated the predicament of insufficient national governance capacity under resource scarcity. On the other hand, the excessive burden of administrative tasks gradually transformed it into a "jack-of-all-trades" administrative tool, exposing the problem of the bureaucratization of grassroots self-governing organizations.

3.1 Political Mobilization and Social Order

In the early days of the People's Republic of China, the practices of Beijing Residents' Committees in political mobilization, cultural education, and public administration constituted an important

¹ Provisional regulations of Beijing Municipality on living allowances for members of Residents' Committees. (1955, June 20). File No. 2-7-37, Collection of Beijing Municipal Archives.

² Notice of the Beijing Municipal Finance Bureau and Civil Affairs Bureau on adjusting the standards for expenditures of Residents' Committees. (1956, March 10). File No. 134-1-254, Beijing Municipal Archives; Draft measures for the use of funds of Beijing Municipal Residents' Committees. (1957, April 12). File No. 2-9-25, Beijing Municipal Archives.

³ Request for instructions on revising the provisional regulations on living allowances for Residents' Committees. (1957, April 12). File No. 2-9-25, Beijing Municipal Archives. This regulation stipulated that subsidies were not discussed by the Residents' Committee during the subsidy process, nor were detailed accounts disclosed to the Residents' Committee afterward.

dimension of the penetration of state power into grassroots society. At the political level, Residents' Committees served as an institutional channel for various political movements to penetrate into grassroots society. During the suppression of counter-revolutionaries, in order to further eliminate counter-revolutionaries, Luo Ruiqing, then Minister of Public Security, emphasized that "it is necessary to universally establish security committees in order to consolidate and promote the enthusiasm of the masses in suppressing counter-revolutionaries, so as to facilitate regular suppression of counter-revolutionaries." (Luo, R., 1951) As the security committees were incorporated into the unified management of Residents' Committees, the four defenses (anti-espionage, anti-spying, anti-theft, and anti-natural disaster) were also handed over to the Residents' Committees for overall coordination. In September 1954, Li Shuying, a housewife from Zixin Road in Xuanwu District, was elected as a street security committee member. In February 1955, while visiting neighbors, she discovered a wanted counter-revolutionary criminal who had fled from Shandong and, with the cooperation of her family and the local police station, arrested him. (Zheng, Y., 1955) Members of the Residents' Committee have played an important role in assisting the police station in managing household registration, investigating suspicious persons, organizing residents' joint defense, building a grassroots security network, and maintaining stability in the jurisdiction.

On February 16, 1955, a signature campaign against the use of atomic weapons was launched among residents of Dongdan, Dongsi, and Chongwen districts. ¹ Since the campaign primarily involved collecting signatures, to further mobilize Beijing residents, a large number of street activists, with the assistance of the Residents' Committee, went into the streets and alleys to publicize the significance of opposing the use of atomic weapons. Thanks to the

vigorous publicity efforts of the Residents' Committee, the vast majority of residents in Qianmen district signed the petition, expressing the public's love of peace.²

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, population growth and consumption upgrading led to a surge in food demand. However, domestic production capacity was insufficient to meet market demand. Therefore, the state decided to implement a planned supply policy while carrying out the socialist transformation of capitalist industry and commerce to ensure basic food security for the people. In June 1955, the People's Daily published an editorial entitled "Urban Grain Unified Sales Work Must Also Be Seriously Rectified," which marked the beginning of urban residents formulating grain consumption plans and strictly implementing the unified sales policy. Beijing began to formulate grain consumption plans on a household-by-household basis that month. Street offices were responsible for overall publicity, verification, and statistics, while Residents' Committees were responsible for going deep into the streets and alleys, working with residents door-to-door. "In the work of approving residents' grain consumption plans, the various Residents' Committees played a significant role in introducing the situation, assisting the working group in reviewing the plans, explaining and mobilizing residents, and helping them with accounting in a targeted manner." (Li, Y., 1955) In the early stages of rectifying the unified grain sales work, some residents were afraid that their plans would not match the actual situation or that it would be difficult to apply for supplementary grain supplies, leading to their families' inability to make ends meet. They had a "preparedness" mentality, while others believed that whether or not to save was a personal choice. However, after being educated by the Residents' Committee, some residents' perceptions began to change: "I used to think that

¹ People in twenty provinces and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region across the country have signed petitions against the use of atomic weapons: The signature campaign of the people in the capital is expanding vigorously. (1955, February 16). *People's Daily*, p. 1.

² Report of the People's Committee of Qianmen District, Beijing, at the Conference of Representatives of Street Workers in Qianmen District. (1957, May). File No. 39-1-226, Beijing Municipal Archives.

food was not expensive, and that a pound of wheat flour only cost a little over 10 cents... Now, thinking about it carefully, I realize that wasting food is wrong.”¹ In 1957, Qianmen District achieved great success by “fully utilizing the role of the Residents’ Committee, saving more than 77,000 pounds of food among its 117,000 residents.”²

In addition, the Beijing Residents’ Committees undertook numerous tasks requiring grassroots assistance. For example, in 1955, they assisted with the promotion and exchange of the new currency³; in 1956, they helped the government identify residents’ social status⁴ and facilitated a 99.46% voter turnout in that year’s elections⁵; when mobilizing residents to participate in agricultural production in Gansu, some Residents’ Committees actively organized residents to listen to mobilization speeches (Forest, 1956), while others helped responding residents pack their belongings. (Jia, Z., 1956) Besides these, in other administrative tasks assigned by other units, organizing residents to engage in sideline production, selling government bonds, conscription, and organizing visits to military and martyr families during holidays, the Residents’ Committees demonstrated a crucial role as the final link in the implementation of national policies.

3.2 Public Services and Social Welfare

In grassroots social services and governance, Residents’ Committees have played an irreplaceable role, constructing a unique grassroots ecosystem through low-cost mutual aid models and community-based public affairs management. In terms of livelihood services, Residents’ Committees effectively compensate for the lack of kinship

support in urban life by organizing resident mutual aid, developing sideline production, and establishing preschool classes. From providing daily care for military families to helping struggling families achieve self-sufficiency through sideline production, from mobilizing residents to jointly build preschool classes to organizing neighborhood mutual aid to cope with unexpected difficulties, these measures have not only effectively solved residents’ living difficulties but also cultivated collectivism in mutual aid practices, forming a “mutual assistance and support” atmosphere at the grassroots level in the city.

In the field of culture and education, facing an illiteracy rate as high as 80%, Xidan District explored a new model for literacy work in 1954. “A school affairs committee was established under the leadership of the joint meeting of residents’ committee chairpersons, composed of three street cadres and four representatives of students and teachers from the schools. The committee specifically led the work of the citizens’ amateur schools and was responsible to the residents’ committee.”⁶ In addition to the fixed literacy schools, the Residents’ Committee also took the lead in establishing study groups, literacy classes, and youth literacy teams, encouraging mutual assistance among neighbors and families. For some disadvantaged housewives, home-based teaching was adopted to help them consolidate their learning as much as possible. The Residents’ Committee’s literacy methods were characterized by diversity and daily integration. Teachers were often selected from among the residents, with voluntary teaching as the main form, and mentoring was encouraged. The Beijing Residents’ Committee also invented

¹ Residents of this city generally formulate grain consumption plans; plans will be formulated in July based on the actual number of formal households. (1955, July 12). *Beijing Daily*, p. 1.

² Report of the People’s Committee of Qianmen District, Beijing, at the Conference of Representatives of Street Workers in Qianmen District. (1957, May). File No. 39-1-226, Beijing Municipal Archives.

³ The issuance of new Renminbi in the capital, Shanghai, Shenyang, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Xi’an and other cities proceeded smoothly. (1955, March 2). *People’s Daily*, p. 1.

⁴ Beijing Municipal Archives & Party History Research Office of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the CPC. (Eds.). (2007). *Selected important documents of Beijing (1956)* (p. 452). China Archives Press.

⁵ Report of the People’s Committee of Qianmen District, Beijing, at the Conference of Representatives of Street Workers in Qianmen District. (1957, May). File No. 39-1-226, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁶ Report on the gradual transfer of the leadership of the municipal working people’s spare-time schools to the Residents’ Committees. (1954, November). File No. 152-1-253, Beijing Municipal Archives.

street literacy signs and other forms that were more closely integrated into daily life¹. By 1956, there were more than 110,000 illiterate and semi-literate students enrolled in schools in Beijing, accounting for more than half of the total number of illiterate and semi-literate students. In the three districts of Xisi, Chongwen and Qianmen, 80% of the illiterate and semi-literate students had participated in learning, and the vast majority of the students were housewives. (Ji, X., 1956)

Due to a severe shortage of educational resources, the Beijing Municipal Government decided to promote a two-part school system in 1953. However, problems soon followed. The sudden increase in extracurricular activity time made it difficult for many schools and parents to adapt, leading some children to develop bad habits. To address this issue, most Residents' Committees in Beijing established extracurricular learning groups. These groups, mostly located near schools, fostered students' all-round development through a variety of activities. The Grain Store Residents' Committee in Qianmen District organized all 224 children in its jurisdiction who were enrolled in the two-part system into 31 groups based on their schools.² In addition, Residents' Committees assisted residents in establishing their own children's playgrounds³, utilizing existing street resources to create educational spaces outside of schools.

At the level of public affairs governance, Residents' Committees gradually normalized key initiatives such as the Patriotic Health Campaign, house repairs, and carbon monoxide poisoning prevention, transforming them into the collective responsibility of residents. Besides organizing seasonal cleanups, Residents' Committees⁴ successfully integrated the national health

campaign into residents' daily lives by establishing a courtyard hygiene supervisor system and conducting safety awareness campaigns. According to a surprise inspection conducted on December 26, 1958, in Beijing of 1899 addresses and 5659 households, "78.7% had clean front yards, 67.2% had clean courtyards, 80.4% had conducted thorough cleanings indoors, 99.5% were fly-free, and 100% were mosquito-free."⁵

In responding to natural disasters and other emergencies, the Residents' Committee also demonstrated strong organizational and mobilization capabilities. Beijing's rainy season typically lasts from June to August, with concentrated rainfall. To prevent houses from collapsing and injuring people, the Residents' Committee conducts rigorous inspections and reviews every year from March to May. Under the leadership of the street offices and the Residents' Committee, house repair work is guided by the principles of "self-inspection, self-repair, self-rescue, and mutual assistance," supplemented by various forms of publicity such as meetings, slideshows, and bulletin boards, mobilizing the masses to make house repair a routine practice. (Zhang, L., 1956) When the rainy season arrives, the Residents' Committee also independently organizes residents for disaster relief and rescue, and organizes mutual aid and donations after disasters. In August 1955, Beijing experienced continuous heavy rains. The street offices and the Residents' Committee worked day and night in the rain to rescue and organize residents for mutual assistance in disaster relief⁶, effectively reducing the government's initial relief pressure during the disaster.

¹ Housewife helps the illiterate learn to read. (1956, February 22). *Beijing Daily*, p. 2.

² Caring for the extracurricular life of children and cooperating with schools to organize diverse extracurricular activities. (1957, May). File No. 39-1-226, Beijing Municipal Archives.

³ The paradise my mother built. (1958, June 24). *Beijing Daily*, p. 2.

⁴ How we basically achieved regularization of sanitation work by combining central tasks. (1957, May). File No. 39-1-226, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁵ The winter campaign to eliminate the Four Pests and promote hygiene. (1958, January 6). File No. 39-1-688, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁶ More than 800 houses collapsed due to continuous heavy rain in the city: People's committees and the masses in various districts actively carried out rescue operations. (1955, August 20). *Beijing Daily*, p. 2.

For a long period after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Beijing residents still relied on coal stoves as their primary means of heating. However, due to a relative lack of knowledge, carbon monoxide poisoning incidents occurred every winter. In November 1957 alone, there were 58 cases of carbon monoxide poisoning, resulting in 116 poisonings and 15 deaths.¹ The prevention of carbon monoxide poisoning was generally the joint responsibility of the Residents' Committee and the Health Committee. In addition to concentrated publicity efforts such as small seminars, meetings, and small-scale photo exhibitions, the Residents' Committee also focused on conducting more thorough daily inspections and education. During the Spring Festival of 1956, seven or eight Residents' Committees in areas such as Toutiao Hutong inspected each household for damaged electrical wires, whether ventilation ducts were installed, and whether flammable materials were properly stored. (Zhou, Y., 1956) Because the publicity and education work on preventing carbon monoxide poisoning is a long-term process, concentrated publicity alone had limited effectiveness. With the cooperation and assistance of the Residents' Committee, Beijing has gradually established a publicity approach that combines top-down and bottom-up approaches, and has made this work routine and widespread, realizing the transformation of public health from "top-down mobilization" to "bottom-up participation".

The core value of this grassroots governance model lies in the Residents' Committee's construction of a collaborative public life mechanism between the state and society. It further highlights its integrative function in reconstructing grassroots social order: by transforming political tasks into daily life practices, integrating cultural education into community spaces, and shaping public health into a collective responsibility, the Residents' Committee successfully embeds the will of the state into the capillaries of grassroots society. This not only achieves the goals of political power construction

but also, to a certain extent, responds to the needs of the people. This "embedded governance" model laid the institutional foundation for the subsequent evolution of China's grassroots governance system. It not only improved residents' living conditions materially but also reshaped the public consciousness of community residents spiritually. This governance model, with residents as the main body, mutual assistance as the means, and public affairs as the link, still has important implications for contemporary community governance innovation.

4. Governance Challenges and Dilemmas of Residents' Committees

In the early days of the People's Republic of China, at the organizational and operational level of Residents' Committees, some grassroots staff faced systemic dilemmas. The core contradiction lay in the tension between the state's need to extract social resources at low cost and the demands for protection of the rights and interests of grassroots workers. Regarding external coordination, fragmented management led to the generalization of functions, and the overlap of responsibilities with organizations such as mediation committees and women's federations exposed the ambiguity of the institutional design. Faced with these dilemmas, the state attempted to restructure the grassroots governance system through institutional adjustments. This process not only demonstrated the deepening of state power construction but also reflected the diverse practical forms of grassroots self-governance under different historical conditions.

4.1 Governance Challenges Within Organizations

In the early days of the People's Republic of China, residents' committee members and activists faced extremely heavy workloads, yet their welfare benefits were meager. While some residents' committee members facing financial difficulties could apply for subsidies, before July 1957, ordinary

¹ Beware of "gas": Fifteen people die from gas poisoning. (1957, December 7). *Beijing Daily*, p. 2.

activists lacked any institutional support. Furthermore, some offices viewed activists as merely “utilizers,” lacking genuine humanistic care. For example, Liu Shuzhen, from Bandaren Hutong, had a history of heart disease and had fallen ill several times due to overwork, yet her family’s situation continued to deteriorate. Her children’s education and family sideline production were forced to halt due to her excessive workload, and even clothing for her children became a problem.

¹Liu Shuzhen’s experience was not an isolated case; the imbalance between work and life led many activists to demand re-election. Some activists had been working since the early days of the Chinese Communist Party’s entry into the city and had undergone education through several political movements. Most of them objectively met the requirements for Party membership and subjectively desired to join, but the street-level ²government did not recruit Party members. Neither in terms of personal development nor promotion channels were sufficient upward mobility provided for activists. Such workload and training methods created significant obstacles to mobilizing the masses to actively participate in street-level work.

In some tasks, due to the municipal and district governments’ lack of complete understanding of the situation at the grassroots level, some standards and regulations are overly stringent, increasing the workload of grassroots workers. For example, the 1956 general election in Beijing overemphasized voter participation, with some districts requiring 100%, leading to “group leader meetings being held at 11 or 12 o’clock at night... and the voting results, some reaching 100%, some exceeding 100%.” ³Some cadres gradually lost themselves, using various meetings to satisfy their bureaucratic tendencies. Some have criticized this phenomenon, pointing out that these “meeting addicts” do not care about work

efficiency, but only whether the meetings themselves can satisfy their unhealthy psychology. (Guo, M., 1956) However, to avoid displeasing higher-level departments, most street activists still choose to attend even repetitive and unnecessary meetings.

Furthermore, although Residents’ Committees were essentially mass organizations, they struggled to maintain their “mass” stance amidst the pressures of various political movements. After the Great Leap Forward swept into the cities, Beijing’s efforts to improve productivity reached a fever pitch. Influenced by “leftist” ideology, some Residents’ Committees became overly critical in carrying out their central tasks, exhibiting excessive strictness in their inspections during the “Eliminate the Four Pests, Promote Hygiene” campaign. “The lampshade is a bit dusty, and the glass isn’t shiny enough; this can’t be considered clean.” ⁴ Even worse, during the sparrow eradication campaign, some residents suffered damage to their property or health. Instead of ordering rectification, the organization reported it to higher authorities as part of the campaign’s success: “The sparrow eradication campaign in our district has been fiercely underway. This morning, the entire district fought the battle in the rain, with high morale... Yesterday, a total of 14 safety incidents occurred in the district... This morning, incidents continued. Yang Junlin, the vice president of the Construction Bank, fell from a ladder when it broke due to its rotten stool, breaking two ribs. He has been rushed to the hospital for emergency treatment.” ⁵ During this period, the social nature of organizations like the Residents’ Committee had essentially succumbed to their political attributes, deviating from the normal path of development and creating a situation where self-governance was ineffective and politics trumped everything.

¹ Draft opinions of the People’s Committee of the Fourth District on the current chaotic situation of street work and future improvements. (1956, April 19). File No. 196-2-441, Beijing Municipal Archives.

² Opinions on street work. (1957, July 15). File No. 2-9-41, Beijing Municipal Archives.

³ Opinions on street work. (1957, July 15). File No. 2-9-41, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁴ Report on the major health inspection on January 30. (1958, January 30). File No. 39-1-688, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁵ Health work bulletin No. 2, Qianmen District Sweep-Off Sparrow Assault Command. (1958, April 19). File No. 39-1-688, Beijing Municipal Archives.

4.2 The Dilemma of Coordinating External Relations

In the early days of the People's Republic of China, the street-level organizations were numerous and varied, with each organization overseen by different departments. "Those directly responsible for assigning tasks included the Propaganda Department of the CPC District Committee, the local police station, the District Women's Federation, the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association, cooperatives, the Xinhua Bookstore, and the District Government (including the Civil Affairs Department, Education Department, Health Department, Construction Department, Labor Department, and Secretariat), among more than ten other units¹." Furthermore, most of these organizations were detached from the masses, meaning that virtually all work directly involving the people was delegated to street-level activists. After the pilot program for Residents' Committees concluded in 1954, the Beijing Municipal Government summarized its experience and proposed that street-level work must be under unified leadership at the district level, with a regular joint meeting system established, and tasks assigned to the sub-district offices after consultation and agreement.² Although the initial intention of establishing sub-district offices was to alleviate the problem of fragmented management, the lack of clear definition and effective publicity regarding the Residents' Committees' role as "mass self-governing organizations" led to them effectively becoming "all-purpose tools" arbitrarily dispatched by various administrative departments. The neighborhood offices and other government departments (such as the Housing Management Bureau, the People's Bank of China, and the Power Bureau) systematically transferred a large number

of administrative and operational tasks within their own jurisdiction to the Residents' Committee. These tasks—from assisting with affixing official seals and conducting various statistical surveys to being responsible for savings and promoting safe electricity use—clearly exceeded the statutory functions of the Residents' Committee as a self-governing organization, placing an unbearable burden on it.³

Although various districts had offered solutions to eradicate the problem of multiple leadership structures over the years, the issue remained unresolved until 1958.⁴ At the Beijing municipal level, the organizational structure of street-level work remained unclear. Districts repeatedly requested the city to establish a unified management body, but the leadership and guidance relationships within street-level work remained ambiguous. Both the Civil Affairs Bureau and the District Administration Department held leadership authority, and street offices harbored doubts about how to train cadres and guide Residents' Committees.

Furthermore, the adjustments made by the Residents' Committee in integrating grassroots social organizations, its relationship with the Mediation Committee, Women's Representatives, and Work Unit Family Committees also point to institutional challenges in the construction of the grassroots governance system. The scope of work for the Mediation Committee was repeatedly adjusted among the police station, the street office, and the Residents' Committee, evolving from initial division of responsibilities to later overlapping powers and duties. This led some grassroots staff to mechanically assign tasks based on merit, resulting in organizational buck-passing and public dissatisfaction. The Women's Representatives, due

¹ Preliminary summary (abstract) on the adjustment of the street organization of Xueyuan Hutong Police Station. (1954, June 1). File No. 2-6-79, Beijing Municipal Archives.

² Opinions on the relationships and work of the Nanbanjie Hutong Subdistrict Office and Residents' Committee after their establishment. (1954, August 5). File No. 2-6-79, Beijing Municipal Archives.

³ Draft opinions of the People's Committee of the Fourth District on the current chaotic situation of street work and future improvements. (1956, April 19). File No. 196-2-441, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁴ The Municipal People's Bank formulates new measures. (1958, June 24). *Beijing Daily*, p. 2.

⁵ Report on further improving the relationship between Subdistrict Offices and Police Stations. (1957, November 4). Post-1949 Archives 2-9-41, Beijing Municipal Archives.

to the high degree of overlap between their target groups and those of the Residents' Committee, experienced status disputes. In some areas, the Residents' Committee suppressed the work of the Women's Representatives, while activists tended to choose the Residents' Committee as an "upgrade" option,¹ reflecting hierarchical concepts and resource competition among organizations. Most notably, the governance blind spots created by work unit family dormitories, where the sense of superiority among government employees' families and the Residents' Committee's avoidance contributed to anarchy in these areas², making it difficult to implement basic tasks such as sanitation management and policy dissemination. Even after the family committees were explicitly incorporated into the street and neighborhood system in 1957, problems of insufficient guidance and poor communication persisted. These inter-organizational tensions not only affect the effectiveness of grassroots governance, but also reveal how the new China balanced the complex relationships between professional division of labor and unified leadership, work unit system and community system, and administrative orders and mass autonomy when building its urban management system, reflecting the structural contradictions in the process of building grassroots political power.

4.3 National Response and Institutional Consolidation

In response to the problems of fragmented management, over-utilization of functions, and excessive personnel burden exposed in the actual operation of Residents' Committees, the Beijing Municipal Government conducted two systematic reorganizations and reforms in 1956 and 1957,

aiming to strengthen organizational effectiveness through institutional restructuring. The 1956 adjustments unfolded on three levels: In terms of management system, it clearly stipulated unified management of street-level work by the municipal and district levels, strictly prohibiting departments from arbitrarily assigning administrative tasks to Residents' Committees, stipulating that meetings requiring the convening of Residents' Committee members must be approved by the street offices, and limited to no more than six times per month, with each meeting lasting no more than two hours³, attempting to eradicate the deep-seated problem of "multiple departments issuing orders" at its source; in terms of organizational structure, it optimized the size of Residents' Committees according to Beijing's geographical characteristics, generally adjusting their jurisdiction to a more reasonable 300-400 households⁴; and in terms of personnel, it significantly expanded the number of activists and relaxed the selection criteria for general members to bolster strength, but the political vetting standards for the core leadership (chairperson and deputy chairpersons) remained strict⁵, reflecting the state's balancing strategy between expanding participation and strengthening control. Through these measures, the organizational structure and operational mechanism of the Residents' Committee have been further standardized, improving its efficiency as a state agent.

However, the increased political influence in the 1957 Residents' Committee election criteria foreshadowed new challenges to its grassroots self-governance. While the "bottom-up" democratic nomination process was still employed in personnel selection, a personnel screening mechanism centered on political loyalty was established by strengthening the review criteria for "class stance"

¹ Report to the Beijing Municipal Committee on some problems in the division of labor and cooperation between Residents' Committees and Women's Representative Conferences in the pilot work of establishing Residents' Committees. (1956). Post-1949 Archives 84-1-78-40, Beijing Municipal Archives.

² Managing family dormitories. (1957, April 4). *Beijing Daily*, p. 1.

³ The Municipal People's Committee held an administrative meeting and decided on measures to overcome the chaotic situation in street work. (1956, April 29). *Beijing Daily*, p. 1.

⁴ Opinions on reorganizing Residents' Committees and improving street organizations. (1956). Post-1946 Archives, Beijing Municipal Archives.

⁵ Opinions on reorganizing Residents' Committees and improving street organizations. (1956). Post-1946 Archives, Beijing Municipal Archives.

and “political attitude¹.” In terms of organizational structure, the re-election clarified the independent status of the Women’s Congress and added a full-time health director, achieving a balance between professional division of labor and administrative control. Regarding coverage, by incorporating the non-agricultural population in suburban areas into the Residents’ Committee or resident groups according to different sizes, organized full coverage of all residents in the city was ultimately achieved. Thus, while the Residents’ Committee retained the shell of a grassroots self-governance organization in form, it had essentially evolved into an institutionalized agent for the penetration of state power into grassroots society. This re-election marked a crucial institutionalization of Beijing’s grassroots governance system. The comprehensive standardization of its organizational form, personnel composition, and spatial layout signified the successful construction of a vertically integrated and horizontally comprehensive urban grassroots control system.

5. Conclusion

The creation and practice of Residents’ Committees in Beijing during the early days of the People’s Republic of China was not only a crucial link in the reconstruction of the urban grassroots governance system, but also a highly original institutional attempt by the Communist Party of China in exploring the construction of socialist regime. It transcended the scope of traditional administrative organizations, constructing a governance space outside the work unit system that covered all urban residents and combined political integration with social service functions. With its unique “semi-official, semi-social” attributes, the Residents’ Committees became an important hub for the interaction between the state will and grassroots society, undertaking both the function of extending

political power and activating the vitality of mass self-governance within a limited scope.

This historical process reveals the complex tension in the “state-society” relationship in grassroots governance: administrative control and autonomy are not simply opposites, but rather a governance logic of interdependence and dynamic adjustment under specific historical conditions. Residents’ Committees, through organizational means, incorporate dispersed individuals into the national governance network, achieve social mobilization through service provision, and transform political tasks into daily life practices through embedded governance, thereby constructing a low-cost, high-efficiency grassroots order in a resource-scarce context. However, the gradually strengthening administrative tendency in its development, and the resulting problems such as functional overreach, excessive personnel burden, and shrinking autonomous space, also expose the inherent contradiction between the decentralization of state power and the autonomy of the masses.

Looking back at the early history of Residents’ Committees, their initial purpose was to achieve a positive interaction between government leadership and social collaboration. Today, in the context of advancing the modernization of grassroots governance systems and capabilities, this history still holds profound implications: how to better clarify the boundaries between “administration” and “autonomy” in institutional design, how to stimulate the intrinsic motivation of residents to participate through mechanism innovation, and how to seek a dynamic balance between state guidance and social awareness remain core issues that urgently need to be explored in current community governance. Only by drawing wisdom from history and daring to innovate while inheriting traditions can we build a truly resilient, vibrant, and identity-based new pattern of social governance

¹ Plan of Beijing Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs on re-election of Residents’ Committees and adjustment of street organizations. (1957, December 11). Post-1949 Archives 2-9-41, Beijing Municipal Archives.

based on co-construction, co-governance, and shared benefits.

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