

## Book Review

Thomas Heberer and Christian Gobel, *The Politics of Community Building in Urban China*, New York and London: Routledge, 2011, 191 pp. + xiii

This is an insightful book written by Heberer and Gobel that illustrates China's urban communities, *shequ* 社区, as a channel for bridging the gap between government and the community. Re-development, or in the words of the authors, reconstruction, is an effort by the central government to gradually transfer provision of social services and public security from the state to the community. Indeed, this is not an attempt to democratize the villages and challenge the control and powers of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but as the authors have interestingly pointed out, it is a way of re-organizing China's urban neighbourhoods. Reconstruction, carried out in this manner, gives it legitimacy to resolve issues confronting China's urban communities such as socioeconomic problems, inequality in wealth distribution, social tensions and maintaining stability amidst rapid urban changes.

The authors have pointed out that the erosion of the *danwei* 单位 which used to be the "source of employment and material support" for the urban Chinese has destabilized their social lives. Hence, the emergence of the *shequ* is significant for its compensatory role in providing a new platform for social security and community values. Nevertheless, from a political angle, the emergence and development of *shequ* represents an intriguing study of central-subnational government relationship. In this particular instance, the reconstruction of the *shequ* exemplifies the powers of the state and the CCP. It manifests itself in the state's strategic planning and social objectives of the urban communities as well as improvement of the administrative apparatus through indirect empowerment of the community by means of fostering local self-governance. As Heberer and Gobel succinctly put it, "that such empowerment would generate support for the regime" indicates the actual situation of an urban community in China presently. Basically, the *shequ* is a means by central government to regulate community participation and provide a form of guided urban self-governance.

This book continues to explore and test the hypothesis that the *shequ* is indeed the central government's attempt at controlling an urban community and guiding its development according to its principles and beliefs. Has it succeeded? Has it met its objectives? These are some of the intriguing questions and matters of governance, attitudes, social security, infrastructural

power that the authors try to answer and reconcile through their study and interviews with the residents and local decision-makers in the cities of Shenyang, Chongqing and Shenzhen. This book is the outcome of their extensive research and has for the first time enlightened readers with the re-organization of China's urban neighbourhoods; the adaptive capacity of the Chinese community and the role of the Party-state in balancing state and people power in an urban community.

The affinity between state and community is analyzed in the first part of the book and described through various issues including institutions of social control, infrastructural power, self-administration and *shequ* governance, while detailed facts on social security and community attitudes and participation are succinctly captured in the latter half.

The events after the 1970s when China liberalized and economic development grew have resulted in social fragmentation which compromised urban stability. Thus the re-organization of the urban neighbourhood that followed in the 1990s was to propagate community-building and create some form of social equilibrium. However, this process led to an increase in state and Party control. Clearly, an intention for more community autonomy was bridled when *shequ* re-construction required significant resources and finance. This was necessary to successfully carry out the re-organization and provision of social services. Indeed, state and Party intervention increased considerably and yielded discrepancies between what was perceived as mobilized and genuine participation in the *shequ* units. Thus whether it was more or less autonomy in the urban units apparently depended upon the financial condition of the *shequ*. Those communities that possess assets, incomes and employment and less state aid for successful completion of tasks and services were likely to be in control as opposed to those that did not. Even then, there is a tendency for the leadership in these units to be guided by the rules of the state and Party.

Although the study has shown that the increased role of the state can lead to more amenities and services to the community, however, it does not automatically translate into a *shequ* that is more harmonious and warm. It merely shows that there is a form of stability through state guidance. It appears to be in conflict with the notion that an established urban community should have some form of autonomy, self-administration and more citizen participation. These are indicators of a shift from government and Party control to self-governance. But these seem to be lacking in the established urban communities and the authors conclude that *shequ* re-construction merely increases state infrastructural power rather than nourishes self-administration and autonomy. It is obvious that most urban communities tend towards dependence upon the state and Party in mobilizing participation and provision of social services and infrastructure. As rightly pointed out by Heberer and Gobel, the establishment and re-organization of the *shequ* demonstrates

strong paternalistic and hierarchical features influenced by the bureaucratic and authoritarian nature of the Party-state. However, in fairness, the *shequ* does fulfil the tasks of social control but provides a limited measure of self-autonomy and self-help.

There is indication that *shequ* serves as an extension of infrastructural power and cannot adequately provide for autonomous community participation. In sum, the re-development and re-organization of the *shequ* will still be important and necessary as they represent a form of potential entity in the future as they are the base for community identity, legitimacy and stability. The future holds potential for such urban communities in China as they are the “masses” or “the people”. Consequently, the process of mobilizing them for practically any agenda, particularly political participation, nation-building and development of China, will be much easier and more methodical.

*Dr Phang Siew Nooi*  
*Professor*  
*College of Law, Government and*  
*International Studies (COLGIS)*  
*Universiti Utara Malaysia*

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Dr Phang Siew Nooi 彭秀女 is a Professor at the College of Law, Government and International Studies (COLGIS), Universiti Utara Malaysia (Northern University of Malaysia). With a PhD from the University of Birmingham, England, she is a specialist in the areas of local government management and decentralization with focus on federal-state relations. Professor Phang has conducted extensive research and consultancy projects in these areas and is associated as a country expert collaborating with local and international agencies. As author of numerous papers on local government reforms and urban governance published in reviewed journals, she also sits on the board of several local and international academic journals, and is a resource person in the Asia-Pacific Regional training programmes on development issues pertaining to sub-national and local governments. <Email: [siewnooi@uum.edu.my](mailto:siewnooi@uum.edu.my)>