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People's will or the central government's plan? The shape of contemporary Chinese local governance

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of 18th and 19th CPC Central Committees' reforms on "social governance," this paper will explore subsequent developments in local governance in China. This is an appropriate focus because earlier research has largely tended to overlook the different ways that local governments behave in balancing the requirements of upper-level, national government with the needs and will of society. By using interviews and participant observation to examine the case of Xicheng District Beijing, this paper finds that, when local government faces pressure from central government, it tends to downplay consideration of the people's voice and instead it uses monetary compensation to appease people's anger at not being listened to. However, when local government is afforded more freedom, it is more likely to try and address people's needs and demands and reconcile these with central government's plan, so as to balance the needs of the two. The analysis of the post-2012 reforms identifies three Project Types to illustrate different approaches to local governance. Owing to government's dominant role, Types One and Two are more akin to what empowerment theory dubs "collaborative betterment." In contrast, Type Three projects give local communities far greater say in determining policy priorities and implementation methods. For this reason, they broadly resonate with the notion of "collaborative empowerment," although ultimately government remains a veto-player. A further key finding is that local governance is not only shaped by the central government's plan, nor the demands of society, but to a significant degree, by the mediating role of local government officials.

1. Introduction

In the wake of 18th and 19th CPC Central Committees' reforms on "social governance," this paper explores subsequent developments in local governance in China. This is an appropriate focus because earlier research has largely tended to overlook the different ways that local governments behave in balancing the requirements of upper-level, national government with the needs and will of society. Drawing on interviews, official documents, and participant observation, it examines the case of Xicheng District, Beijing. As will be seen, the analysis of the post-2012 reforms identifies three Project Types to

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illustrate different approaches to local governance. Owing to government's dominant role, Types One and Two are more akin to what empowerment theory dubs "collaborative betterment." In contrast, Type Three projects give local communities far greater say in determining policy priorities and implementation methods. For this reason, they broadly resonate with the notion of "collaborative empowerment," although ultimately government remains a veto-player.

Before considering the case study research it is important to briefly trace the recent history of thinking on notions of society and governance. During the 30 years after 1949, China was a "wholist state," with economy, society, and politics highly intertwined and controlled by the state. In urban China, the State exerts its power over individuals through Daiwei (also known as Work-Units), which, as the major form of social management system, usually shouldered economic, social as well as political responsibilities. They provided their employees not only with salaries and subsidies but also with social welfare, and community activities[1]. After the reform and a series of "Opening-Up" policies in 1979, Chinese civil society gradually developed, with more private firms being set up and social organizations formed. In consequence, many ambitious citizens started to look for jobs outside the Danwei system. Later, in the 1990 s, due to the increasing welfare burden, many state-owned companies lost their competitive edge in the market, and had to lay off workers in order to survive. With a significant number of people losing their jobs, the state felt the pressure for maintaining social and economic stability. In response, it started to use urban communities as a supplement to the Danwei system. Thenceforth, urban communities were to take the leading role in providing social services. However, in spite of its importance, "society" had long been considered as the subordinate to the economy and politics in China and it was not seriously considered as an independent domain until 2006. At this juncture, the concept of "harmonious society" was officially put forward at the Six Plenary Session on the 16th CPC Central Committee. In consequence, now recognized as the basic unit of society, communities are getting more attention and resources from the state. Gradually they became the most important unit of social management. Although the "organic," "grassroots" role of the community is emphasized in official policy, its affairs are still arranged by government in a "top down" fashion, with communities lacking autonomy of their own.

In recent years, as the result of China's rapid economic development, people's living standards have improved, and their demands on authorities have diversified. For example, they not only need the government to provide for public services but to do it in an impartial and negotiable manner. In the face of this process of change, the preexisting, top-down system of governance failed to adapt to the new social reality. Therefore, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's "Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms"[2] adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, put forward the new idea of replacing social management with "social governance," that is greater involvement of civil society. This is a significant reform because it emphasizes that the government should play a guiding role in governance, encouraging and supporting all sectors of society to

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[1]The Danwei also exercised significant control on people's lives. For example, if people want to travel around or to get married, they had to get permission from their Danwei.
[2]An official document released by the central government on November 15 2013. It concludes achievement summary of former reform and guiding principle of future reform.

participate in governance; rather than undertaking the whole task itself. The report of the Nineteenth Congress also explicitly requested that further reform and innovation should be applied to the social governance model; notably, creating a shared, co-built, co-governed structure of social governance.

Responding to central government's reforms, local governments have implemented a raft of different projects as the main way to fulfill people's needs. The "Project system" as scholars call it, has emerged as a commonly used method for governing in contemporary China[3]. However, analysis reveals that the reality of the Project System is very different from the vision set out in policy. Not least, current practice is shaped by the fact that, whilst trying to encourage more people to participate in community development projects and join the co-governing process, local government has its own interests and challenges that are not always considered by the Nineteenth Congress reforms. For example, its work is evaluated by the upper-level government in a timely fashion, so it has the motivation to finish the job as soon as possible. Including more people in the governing process takes more time and energy, which is in contradiction with the local government's interest. Furthermore, it shoulders the crucial responsibility of maintaining the stability of local society. But letting more people in the decision-making process may cause chaos. Faced with these challenges, most of the time, experience shows it is hard for local government to build a social governance model that could both pass the evaluation of central government and meet the requirements of the local residents. In the face of these challenges, this article explores how local government reconciles competing pressures from central government and local communities in order to successfully implement China's "Project System" governance.

The remainder of this paper is structured thus: following a review of the relevant literature, and an outline of the methodology, attention centers on the empirical case studies to illustrate: 1. under what circumstances different modes of local governance emerge and; 2. their effectiveness. The concluding discussion seeks to conceptualize the new modes of governance in today's China and reflects on the lessons learned about local government's implementation of projects under the new social governance model and the extent they can give autonomy to local people.

2. Literature review

Existing work on local governance in China falls into two broad categories. One is from within the government itself and the other is from the angle of society. In the first category, scholars mainly explore the relationship between different levels and sectors of government and the influence of the emergence of new forms of governance. For example, Zhou[4] put forward the concepts of "administrative subcontract" and "political tournament."[5] The first one is an ideal type which refers to a subcontracting relationship inside the government system, representing a hybrid governance structure between bureaucracy in Weberian[6] sense (a hierarchical system of administrative personnel) and pure subcontract which occurs among independent entities without bureaucratic

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[3]Qu, "Project System", 113.
[4]Zhou, *Local Government in Transition*, 3.
[5]Zhou, "Governing China's Local Officials", 36.
[6]Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 5.

hierarchical relations. This system is outcome-oriented rather than procedure-oriented, and therefore it gives the agent more discretion to do things in his/her own way while letting the principal keeps its authority. He also advanced the notion of "political tournament," which is an implicit competition among local governments for gains in political and economic performance. It describes how the vertical bureaucratic relationship between central and local government and the horizontal competing relation between different local governments impact upon governing results. He regards both as incentive systems for Chinese local officials, and critical sources of China's development.

Allied to this, Cao[7] takes issue with Western scholars' representation of China's political power as a centralized imposed system. He argues that the actual situation is one in which "central government rules officials and local government rules people." By adjusting centralization and decentralization of power across different tiers of government, central government distributes and controls the risks and burdens of ruling. Zhou[8] points out that the hieratical nature in Empirical China parallels with today China's multi-level government and legacy of the formal and informal system in old China still has influence on today's China, which are not autonomous but co-existing and codependent to each other. From an international perspective, the flexibility of this hybrid system has made China's bureaucratic system unique and "effective."

According to the foregoing view, government is understood almost as the sole actor for "governance" (here, the connotation of the term is more closely related to "ruling"). After the rise of "new" governance studies in the West during the 1990s, many Chinese scholars embraced some of the emerging ideas and began to see local governance in a different light. They agree that the essence of governance is to build order in society[9] and to focus on governing mechanisms. Crucially, these are not necessarily reliant on the resources, authority[10] and sanctions of government[11]. Instead, they are shaped by a multiplicity of actors across the state, civil sphere, and business. More importantly, they believe that local residents should be the subject rather than object in local governance, because fulfilling their needs is the priority in a socialist state[12]. However, scholars have also highlighted how, in spite of people's urgent need for effective public services, their participation rate in local governance is very low. Some believe that this is because people still carry the habits formed in the Danwei era planned economy, and as a result notions of autonomous society are not well formed[13]. In this sense, local governance in China is not just about providing public services but also building a society that can make up for some of the shortcomings of the state and the market[14]. Wu & Yang[15]. believe the way to resolve such challenges is to have more programs variously led by the government, market forces and/or social organizations, targeted at building trust among people and increasing social capital within communities. Others think that a lack of public awareness

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[7]Cao, "Divided Governing System", 244.
[8]Zhou, "State Governance Logic", 5.
[9]Yu, *Governance and Good Governance*, 3.
[10]Rhodes, *Understanding Governance*, 2.
[11]Stoker, *Public-Private Partnership*, 6.
[12]Pan, "Community Administration", 33.
[13]Yang, "Community as Governing Unit", 137.
[14]Xia, "Characteristics of Governance Theory", 125.
[15]Wu & Yang, "Community Governance", 25.

of the aims of the governance reforms is the fundamental problem for local governance in China. According to this view, helping people learn to communicate and negotiate, and step out from their private zone into the public arena is critical for good governance[16][17] There are also scholars who believe that more autonomy and resources should be given to the people so that they can govern by themselves[18]. Although these scholars all stress the importance of the role of society, they still admit that the role of the local government is more than necessary in the governing process. It still has to provide resources and more importantly, to keep the direction of the local development in line with the spirit of central government priorities.

In fact, the difficulty of governance for local government is not just about fulfilling the requirements of the upper-level government, nor is it solely about stimulating people to participate in the governing process while maintaining stability. Rather, it is about balancing the two and actually carrying out the programs with limited time, energy, and resources. To explore this further we now examine the case of Beijing Xicheng District and learn about how local governance is possible by analyzing different governmental projects.

3. Methodology

China's vast size presents different provincial governments with diverse governing environments that are shaped by contrasting levels of economic development level, as well as local social or cultural factors. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on the case of Beijing province. As the capital of China, Beijing not only shoulders the responsibility of being the leading example for China in terms of building new governance models, but it is also under tremendous pressure to maintain socio-economic stability. Xicheng District is located in the center of Beijing and considered a very important district of the capital. As a result, the local government faces strong pressure to build governance and yet to maintain stability, which gives this case very high demonstration value.

As noted, this study examines moves toward implementing a new, post 19th CPC Central Committee mode of governance from the perspective of the local government. From May 2017, Xicheng District started a project called the "People's Livelihood and People's Will Project" (hereafter referred to as "People's Will Project"). This follows the Nineteenth People's Congress's call to "meet people's need and elevate people's living standards" by listening closely to the people's will[19]. As a member of the CASS[20] research group, the author went to six street agencies (government dispatched offices), in Xicheng District for interviews and to undertake participant observation. Twenty-one interviews were conducted, each took about 3 h. Six focus groups were also conducted with, including local CCP party leaders, government officials, community directors, social workers, volunteers, and residents. In addition, textual analysis was undertaken for the author also examined some political documents as references, such as the notice of the

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[16]Li, Xiao & Huang, "'Publicity' Dilemma", 125.
[17]Xiao, "Negotiating to 'Public",104.
[18]Wu & Zhang, "Community empowerment", 125.
[19]Report of the Nineteenth National Congress, October, 18th, 2017.
[20]Explained in the title page.

"People's Will Project," work plan of the district government, Workflow of different street office, etc.

4. Research context

The Peoples' Will project did not emerge suddenly, but developed over a number of years. During Hu Jintao's period, some local-level experiments of "consultative democracy" and "deliberative democracy" has already taken place, and local governments started all kinds of programs to practice. However, the progress was rather slow and effects not very obvious. Early in 2012, when the 18th Congress meeting was held, the Xicheng District Government was trying to take the lead in local governance innovation. It started a "fully responsive" project. It proposed that the government use advanced technological means to interact with enterprises and social organizations through information sharing, in order to identify and solve residents' problems in a timely manner (giving residents more ways to reflect problems). Compared with the previous top-down governing model, this project was an important attempt to take consideration of people's will into account in the governing process. Albeit that people's opinions were collected after the implementation of these projects, and the local government tried to solve related problems afterward. These actions were innovative at the time and local government won a national prize for "Progress in Urban Management." However, in terms of governing, the actions taken by local government were relatively passive. Furthermore, as noted, they were reactive rather than proactive – and only responded to existing problems rather than taking the initiative to prevent problems from happening. In 2013, Xicheng District government started another project called "Visit-Listen-Solve," which is the short term for "visit communities, listen to public opinion, and solving people's problems." This initiative was more proactive and put more emphasis on local government's interaction with local residents. It won two government innovation awards.

There is innate policy continuity of Xi Jinping's administration with that of the Hu Jintao's administration. People's will are better expressed and heard. From 2014 onwards, Xicheng District government more widely and routinely started the practice of including more of people's will in local governing processes. But it was not until 2017, that this officially became known as the "People's Will Project." The cases in this paper were selected from 2014 to 2018. This was a key period when Xicheng District government tried to incorporate people's will in the entire process of project execution. This innovative step was considered a pioneering action for local government. There were many programs falling under this overarching project heading. As we shall see, these included: reinforcing buildings to ensure they are earthquake-resistant, transforming, and upgrading people's convenience stores, constructing community-based welfare centers for the elderly, resolving issues relating to the "mobile population,"[21] repairing, and maintaining roads and alleyways, managing car-parking, installing elevators on the outside of older-style apartment buildings, and arranging groups for social cultural and educational activities. According to the official document of the Xicheng District government "Opinions on carrying out the 'people's will' project," all these projects should take people's will into account.

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[21]Also known as migrant worker, but this term was later considered discriminatory and replaced by mobile population.

These diverse programs required different management methods; a "bespoke" approach that is very time and energy consuming for local government. Besides, while some programs have been relatively successful, others encountered many obstacles. Therefore, the Xicheng District government was keen to identify more efficient ways to conduct these programs. It categorized the programs into three types, namely: programs involving the will of the people in a supplementary role (Type 1), programs involving the will of the people in an advisory role (Type 2), and programs initiated by the will of the people (Type 3) in order to better steer project delivery. Although three types of program are classified, the Xicheng District government itself admits that these are not discrete and some programs are hard to classify. Therefore, the numbers of each category are not clear and stable. However, the trend shows that, the cases in the first category is decreasing, while the second and third are increasing. In order to provide a full insight into the new governance arrangements, the remainder of this article focuses on one case from each category. A cross section was taken to clearly reflect project type.

5. The case studies

5.1. *Type 1 Projects involving the will of the people in a supplementary role*

The first type of project mainly concerns welfare projects that the government wants to carry out, and which require people's understanding and support. It is clearly written in the official handbook "these are rigid tasks that has to be carried out." The usual procedure is to publicize the project, and then to solicit opinions and suggestions from the residents on the established work plan through the form of hearings and public meetings. Based on this process, subsequent improvements can then be made to the project, and it can then be opened to residents for inspection. Examples of this kind of project include shanty-town renovation and road construction.

Case 1 Most of the early projects (circa 2014) based on the will of the people belonged to this first category. They were usually managed in a top-down way. For example, the government-led project to reinforce buildings in older communities to make them earthquake-resistant. After the 2008 earthquake in Wenchuan, ensuring that buildings were earthquake-resistant and shock-proof was a nationwide priority. In the subsequent years, various locales began housing reinforcement projects. Many old communities in Beijing needed comprehensive renovation, and the buildings in most of which were purchased Danwei housing rather than commercial housing. It means these houses used to belong to the Danwei, and were sold later to the residents at a very low price. They are not fully on the market and the state still exerts some power over them. The municipal government believed that the best way to realize project goals was for it to take the lead, and for the residents to cooperate with this.

At the beginning of this project, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development required local authorities to conduct a general survey of buildings and to reinforce those that did not meet the standards for earthquake-resistant housing. After the project was finalized, the government initially determined three reinforcement methods: external reinforcement, internal reinforcement, and double-panel wall reinforcement. Each of the three methods have their advantages and disadvantages. External reinforcement does not take up much of the interior space

of the home, and has less impact on the residents, but it has a greater impact on the façade of the building, so that the effect of consolidation may be less effective. Internal reinforcement does not change the façade of the building, but it does decrease living space. If the original wall is not strong enough to resist earthquakes, the internal reinforcement method is better. But in the residents view it was seen as less welcome because of the consequent loss of living space in their houses. The double-panel wall reinforcement method reinforces the building from both the inside and the outside. This approach has the best consolidating effect, but is problematic for it also takes up living space.

From the perspective of the local government, the most effective way to implement the program is to hire professionals and let them design the reinforcement plan and then ask the residents to cooperate. This was the government's plan. However, when the program was conducted, many problems emerged. While most residents considered the reinforcement program a beneficial policy, some had concerns. For example, some residents disliked having to leave their home during the construction work; not least because finding alternative accommodation was costly. Furthermore, others wanted to choose the reinforcement plan themselves. They stressed that the internal and double-panel reinforcement method would shrink their living space and consequently affect the rental charges they could command and the value of their property.

Apart from dissatisfaction with the project itself, a small number of residents used their refusal to cooperate with the project as a leverage to force the government to resolve other problems, such as drainage issues. In other cases, they opposed the plan because of other conflicts with neighbors. In such instances they wanted the government to take their side. Although the foregoing should not be the government's responsibilities, some residents were still accustomed to relying on the government like in the Danwei era. Therefore, during the project's operational stages, government personnel received many letters of complaint on a range of matters, not all directly related to the task at hand.

As noted, reinforcing buildings so that they are earthquake-resistant is not just a citywide requirement, but is a nationwide one. Therefore, the top-down pressure on Xicheng District from Central Government was great. As a result, in spite of some people's resistance, the local government adopted a tough attitude and pushed through the project. However, it did take some residents' opinion into consideration, and even offered displaced families financial compensation to help with alternative accommodation costs during the construction period. It also asked some party members of the residents to take the lead in the program and show others that cooperation is the right move. In the end, the work was finished, but the implementation process was difficult and caused a lot of dissatisfaction among the residents.

According to the office of Xicheng District's Major Construction Projects' Headquarters, many Type One projects tough completely implemented, yet did not ease people's concerns and stirred some public disquiet. Even though the government has invested a lot of money, it is difficult to get the residents to agree to such projects, and the results have still not been ideal. Therefore, some projects that are not of the highest priority to the national government are developed in the form of projects involving the will of the people in an advisory role (Type two).

5.2. Type 2 Projects involving the will of the people in an advisory role

The second type of project mainly refers to those that the residents want to do and the government is able to facilitate, but the local authority's mode of working determines that these projects need a certain percentage of residents to agree before implementation. The usual procedure is for the government to announce the project, and then local people apply to participate in it. In the following discussion, this kind of project is represented by a scheme to install elevators on the outside of old buildings.

Case 2 In recent years, the problem of an aging population in China has become more and more prominent. The buildings in many old residential areas do not have elevators, and it is difficult for elderly people to use the stairs. Therefore, the call to install elevators gradually became louder. Since the aging problem is a major policy priority for central government, local government is incentivized to act. However, people living on different floors have very different requests. This made it very hard for local government to enforce the program. Therefore, the Xicheng District government piloted the program in several communities where elevators are needed.

The buildings in residential area X[22] were built in the 1950 s and 1960 s, without elevators. The majority of residents in this community are elderly, so there is a greater demand for installing elevators. Since 2012, community residents have repeatedly reported the need to install elevators. At the same time, the government has gradually been paying greater attention to those issues relating to the aging population. The project was announced by the Xicheng District Government, who determined the conditions and procedures for applying. Subsequently, street-level and community administrators collected the residents' ideas on the proposed program of elevator installation. Before the project began, the Xicheng District Housing Management Bureau held some Q&A sessions based on the initial survey of local peoples' concerns. Initially, the government was unable to fully answer people's questions and dispel their misgivings (such as the cost of running the project, how to maintain the elevators, whether or not there will be extra noise). However, as a result of the Q&A sessions, the Xicheng District Government gained greater understanding of the will of the people.

After this, in order to dispel the residents' doubts, the street-level officers and the Neighborhood Committee conducted three visits to the 62 danyuan[23] of the eleven buildings in the community and collected residents' opinions. During the first visit, they held a meeting attended by the volunteers who oversaw communication among residents in each of the eleven buildings and arranged the installation of elevators. The data collected showed that the overall support rate in favor of installing elevators was 87%. The biggest difference in approval rates was between ground-floor residents and those residents on higher floors. This is because many elderly residents in high-rise buildings have difficulty using the stairs, their demand for elevators to be installed is very strong. However, many ground-floor residents fear that installing elevators will increase noise and block out light, which may also lower the value of their apartment or reduce the rental price the apartment can command. The second visit was conducted by the Xicheng District Housing Authority. It interviewed 935 households using a questionnaire survey, and at the same time answered any concerns that the residents had about the costs of

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[22]The name of the area is coded to protect residents' privacy.
[23]Living unit. There are usually three-five danyuan in each building.

installing the elevators. This assured the residents that this was a pilot project and they did not have to worry about the installation fee. They were also told that the elevator maintenance fees would be based on square meters of Residents' property size, except the first floor. After the reassurances given by officials during this visit, the supporting rate for the program rose to 92%.

During the third visit, the staff conducted a questionnaire survey on whether or not it is appropriate to charge one Yuan per square meter for the elevator's electricity supply and its maintenance fee, after this residents' approval rate dropped to only 51.2%. The People's Republic of China's Property Rights Law stipulates that generally only if a two-thirds majority of residents are in favor of a project, can it be carried out. However, in the case of installing elevators on the outside of older residential buildings, as noted, the opinions of ground floor residents were different to those of residents on the upper floors. The proportion of ground-floor residents compared with the entire population of residents is relatively small, so the government has stipulated that the approval rate for elevator installation projects must be 100%.

Because the residents had quite a few concerns and the will of the people was constantly changing, finally, only the residents of numbers 5, 7, and 9 danyuan reached a consensus. A large part of the reason that these particular residents reached an agreement is that the ground floor of each of these three danyuan was a shop, rather than a residence. In addition, the volunteers who oversee communication among the residents were very proactive in their work, and continually worked to change the minds of the residents and build consensus. Within these three danyuan, each floor has four households, so a danyuan with five floors has 20 households, and the three danyuan together have a total of 60 households. Residents signed two agreements, one indicating that they were willing to install the elevator, and the other indicating that they were willing to pay its operational costs. After both agreements were signed, the project was successfully launched, and the District Government took the lead in contacting a company to implement the project.

Compared with project Type One (above), this Type Two project took peoples' will into consideration at a relatively early stage, and during the process, the government constantly communicated with the people, adjusting the plan based on residents' opinions. Volunteers played a key role in this project, intermediate between residents themselves and between residents and local government. These volunteers mainly came from top floors of the residential building and have a high incentive to install. Type two project gave them more room to act and they emerge on case by case bases. People were generally happy with the program, but from a local government perspective, it was resource- intensive and would be expensive to roll out to other areas.

5.3. Type 3 Projects initiated by the will of the people

The third type of project has the highest participation rate among the Peoples' Will Projects. This type of project mainly refers to the projects that residents want to see implemented, but are not in the local government's existing program of work. In the case of these projects, the government first listens to the peoples' needs and wants – and then let residents discuss a practical scheme for implementation. The government then provides assistance to realize these projects.

Case 3 With the improvement of people's living standards, the number of private cars in urban communities is increasing, resulting in increasingly limited availability of parking spaces. Older style urban planning cannot meet the new demands of urban residents, and parking problems are a serious issue for local communities.

The hutong in our third case study is an alley of one-story buildings with more prosperous streets on both sides. In consequence, many vehicles pass through it, and many people park their cars in it. However, because of a lack of management, car parking is very disorderly. Residents have installed a lot of ground locks[24] to safeguard a parking space. Not only does this not solve the parking problem, it also causes conflict among residents. Originally, this issue did not attract the government's attention. However, when the hutong environment started to deteriorate, the Xicheng District government felt obliged to intervene. In order to avoid resident coercion as in Type One projects, the street-level government together with community Neighborhood Committees organized several hutong "salons" and let residents themselves discuss their biggest concerns. Foremost, was the parking problem in the hutong. By letting people initiate their own needs, local government significantly enhanced people's enthusiasm about the program.

After this, the community held a second salon to let both car-owners and non-car owners voice their opinions, discuss the reasons for parking problems and let both sides understand the other's position. This process lasted for about a month. According to the official staff, it was to allow the residents a "venting period." After that, people's emotions gradually subsided, and the discussion entered its second stage. At this point, residents became more rational and gradually began to understand that they themselves, not government, had a responsibility to rectify the parking problem. In short, there was a shift from "emotional venting" to rational thinking about how to solve the problem.

The third salon brought the discussion into the solution stage. This involved residents electing representatives that were articulate and were likely to actively participate in the discussion of the parking solutions and protocols. Staff of the Neighborhood Committee reported that the atmosphere during this phase of the discussions was both amiable and rational. As residents' discussions advanced, the role of street-level governments and communities leaders gradually changed from being a controller, to an organizer and then to a supervisor. However, they were there the whole time, showing that the state and the party is still and always in control of the situation.

It was entirely up to the residents themselves to decide on parking charges and how to balance the relationship between the various groups in the negotiations. Because the government was not directly participating in a top-down manner, residents were highly motivated and demonstrated a sense of responsibility for both organizing and supervising operations.

After the draft of the residents' protocol on addressing the parking problem came out, the neighborhood committee mobilized residents to vote on it in accordance with the relevant provisions of The Law of the Urban Residential Committees in the People's Republic of China. In order to increase the legitimacy of the decision-making process, the neighborhood committee gave notice of the upcoming vote to all residents aged above 18 years in the community. One person was chosen from each household as representative and seven residents were chosen from the community as the hutong management

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[24]Physical devices to control access to a parking space.

committee. They were placed in charge of the implementation of the program. The traffic management bureau and the region's danweis were also very cooperative and sent representatives to the meeting. In the end, avoiding parking at peak times and having different parking areas for different types of vehicles has, to a large extent, greatly alleviated the parking problems. At the same time, the ground locks privately installed by the residents were forcibly removed. These measures have helped greatly to improve the community environment, and during the consultation process residents have also gained a deeper mutual understanding of local problem-solving and co-working.

6. Discussion and analysis

As the foregoing discussion attests, when lower tiers of government launch a project, they often face pressure to align their actions with – and realize the policy goals of – higher levels of central government. This is especially true of Beijing's Xicheng District government because it is situated in the capital, and therefore located near the central government, making oversight easier, but also requiring a demonstration effect. When they formulate projects that are beneficial to the people, the starting point for the Central Government or the Beijing Municipal Government is usually to consider development at the national level and at the city-wide level. In "Seeing like a state," Scott's[25] holds that, when implementing a project, the state usually adopts a scientific, modern, and economic approach in the process of governance. Not least, it considers development from an overall or holistic perspective. However, such perspectives often conflict with the specific needs of a specific locales, leading to the failure of many local development projects. Scott's explanation resonates with the findings of the present study for it underlines the tension between people's will from the perspective of the state and the will of the residents of a given locality. In practice, the current discussion has shown how Xicheng District government is aware of this problem and, in response, it trying to bridge the gap in different projects by treating them with different approaches – such as the Type 1–3 interventions discussed above.

On the face of it, what differentiates the governance style adopted by the authorities, in this case, Xicheng District Government, is the degree of the local public involved in the project. From Type One to Type Three projects, the degree of the peoples' engagement in the project increases. In the first type of project, the intervention is in line with the government's preexisting policy program. In this mode of governance, the will of the people is basically only involved at the level of offering advice and supervision. In the Type Two projects, social policy interventions are also largely part of the government's preexisting program. In contrast, in Type Three projects, whilst they might potentially be part of the government's plan, it is the residents that take the initiative and propose the project, and the government then decides whether or not to carry out the project.

Viewed from a deeper angle, the classification proposed in this study (Type 1–3 projects) is not only determined by people's participation degree but also on the urgency and "rigidity" of the program in the eyes of the government. From the first to the third type of project, the rigidity (or prescriptive nature) of each program decreased. The first type of project is assigned from the top-down, and the requirements of the project are

pre-specified, so that local government has to follow the instructions of central or municipal government. In the second type of project, the proposed intervention is also on the upper government's agenda, but the time frame and degree of freedom is relatively flexible. In the third type of project, these are not originally the concern of the central government, but local government is still under pressure to ensure good governance and actively solve people's problems.

During the implementation process, local government faces most pressure from superior tiers of government in Type One projects. Therefore, in such instances, effectively the will of the people has been silenced. As stated in the discussion of Case One, the government asked experts to evaluate and find suitable reinforcement schemes; but when it came to different groups and individual residents, their demands were different to the views of the experts and officials. For example, some groups and individuals felt that the reinforcement method negatively impacted on their living space, especially those residents with smaller apartments. During the implementation process, different residents may have compared viewpoints. Moreover, they may have held inconsistent opinions about the merits, fairness, and disadvantages of a given reinforcement method. However, due to the rigidity of the Type One mode of governance and project implementation, residents' views and wishes were side-lined. Overall, although the reinforcement of old buildings is beneficial to residents, the benefits to different groups and individuals may vary greatly. In order to maintain social stability and ease people's dissatisfaction, the present study shows how local government used monetary compensation as a solution to over-ride community concerns and resistance to its programs. Whilst this expedient approach might be helpful in pushing the project forward, arguably, it is neither helpful in making local people really satisfied nor consistent with the spirit of the 18th and 19th CPC Central Committee reforms, which is to enhance the participation of civil society. Compared with the first type of project, the second and third type of project fosters wider and deeper levels of citizen engagement and are more desirable in the eyes of the government.

As can be seen from the case study provided in this article, the Xicheng District Government's planned installation of elevators in some old communities was one way of addressing the problem of the aging population. Many residents in the community also expressed an urgent desire for the installation of elevators. The District Government still faced top-down pressure, to both alleviate social conflicts and respond to the central government's requirement for participatory governance. Here the Type Two project solicited the will of the people both after the project's launch and before its implementation.

From the perspective of the participation mechanism of the will of the people, residents' participation in the second type of project is freer than in the first type. Although collecting the will of the people is still dominated by a top-down approach, yet the level of community participation has apparently increased. Notably, this was accompanied by a broadening of engagement mechanisms, such as focus groups, surveys, and public meetings. Peoples' will, in this case, is very diverse, and the communication between residents was not achieved by the residents themselves, but rather through the mediation of the Xicheng District Government, the street-level offices and the Neighborhood Committee.

During the government's visits, residents' concerns could be addressed. If they were not satisfied, they could choose to not participate in the project, which gave them a greater degree of freedom than the first type of project. However, the space to express the will of the people in such projects is still limited. Compared with the first category, the will of the people is no longer completely fragmented, yet disagreements and dissert remained. The government ultimately carried out the project, but this was not after the residents reached a rational and unanimous decision. Rather, it was by the government using subsidies to solve the problem of disagreement among residents. It can be seen that in this way, the grassroots government has completed the tasks asked of it by the higher-level government, and at the same time, it has, to a certain extent, also met the needs of the residents, reducing the contradiction between the government and society. However, it is important to note that this was a pilot project and it could take special measures, specifically, it could obtain greater resources. Excessive cost and resource factors mean that it is unlikely to be rolled out and implemented in other communities.

The third type of project are those where the residents themselves set up specific projects, rather than the government. Compared with the previous two types of project, with Type Three projects the District Government is not directly faced with the specific projects assigned by the higher levels of government. Instead, it is faced with the task of completing the residents' welfare projects. In accordance with the concept of multi-governance, and at the same time responding to the wishes of local communities, in this type of project, the District Government allows the residents themselves to decide what projects will be developed by setting up negotiation platforms. Ironically, although residents have many demands, they finally settled on the parking management project, and this was not an arbitrary choice.

There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the parking problem has indeed affected the lives of residents, resulting in a deterioration of the community's surrounding environment, so the residents had a strong desire to rectify the problem. Secondly, the parking problem violates the overall plan of the city, affecting the image of the capital city, and rectifying the problem is in line with central government policy. Therefore, the staff of the street-level government and the Neighborhood Committee intentionally directed the will of the people toward this matter.

The Neighborhood Committee provided residents with a platform to discuss actual problems and allow different groups to express their opinions. In this way, the residents' discussion gradually developed from venting their emotions to a more rational, solution-orientated discussion. This allowed various solutions to the problem to be identified. Although different groups and individuals have contrasting opinions, people were finally able to understand each other's viewpoints and, through discussing these problems, find solutions. The problems of individual parking spaces and the effective use of public space were both rectified by this means. In the end, residents came to a unified agreement. Compared with the case study about installing elevators, the strategy for solving parking problems did not cause obvious unfair effects on certain groups or certain individuals. Instead, by means of establishing a set of regulations and its consequent constraints, the interests of different groups and individuals were balanced. In the end, the community's parking problems were resolved by the project.

In social theory terms, the three Project Types can be conceptualized with reference to empowerment theory[26]. Broadly, Type One and Two Projects can be seen as examples of "collaborative betterment" – whereby government pays a dominant role in project choice and implementation, with communities then asked acquiesce after most of the major decisions have been taken. In contrast, Type Three Projects might broadly be characterized by what Himmelman terms "collaborative empowerment." As the name suggests, to a degree, in this mode of governance citizens are empowered to set the agenda and play a more thoroughgoing role in determining the means by which projects are implemented. That said, it remains the case that government is a veto-player and retains ultimate authority.

7. Conclusion

From the perspective of grassroots participation in government, this paper has explored three approaches to local governance in today's China. When discussing the difficulties of local governance, previous academic research as previously illustrated has largely focused on exogenous interests' vertical or horizontal relationship within the government, or on how autonomy can form within local society. Crucially, these works tend to undermine the importance of local government during this process. The present study discusses how the local government faces the challenge of simultaneously balancing the requirements of central government and meeting the demands of local communities.

While central government and CCP is the representative of the people, their view is more focused on the national level and this may contradict with the people's will in local societies. By comparing and contrasting three case studies in Beijing Xicheng District, this paper provides a different perspective to understanding local governance. Our findings can be summarized thus:

First, although the central Chinese state wants to build a new governance model in which there will be many different elements contributing to the contemporary process of governing, central government will always retain supreme authority. As can be seen from the three case studies discussed earlier, no matter which type of project it is, the local government and the party (the government officials are always party members) is always present. In the first type, it dominants the project; in the second type, it leads the project; and in the third, it manipulates the project. In all three scenarios people have the freedom to choose their own projects, as long as it aligns with the agenda of the central government. Otherwise, it is hard for local government to give it serious attention. What the local government actually does is translate people's needs into the upper-government's plan, and then it gets resources to solve the community's problems.

Second, with the advancement of the role local government in the wake of 18th and 19th CPC Central Committees, not only does peoples' will play a more and more important role in local governance, it also influences the implementation of the programs in an earlier stage. For example, people get more room to express their concerns and dissatisfactions *before* the project. Moreover, they have rights to veto the project if it greatly compromises their interests. In Type Three projects, people even have freedom to choose their own ways to solve the problems. For local government, giving people this degree of

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[26]Himmelman, *Transformational collaboration*, 20.

freedom not only alleviates some of its burdens but it is also good for reducing people's complains and maintaining social stability.

Last but not least, it should be noted that the degree of freedom that the local government gives to people under Type Three projects is not unbounded, but falls within certain boundaries. The past experience tells local government that too much community involvement of the local government would cause unlimited responsibilities falling on the shoulders of the local authority. Therefore, a key consideration when deciding which of the three different projects types to implement is where to draw the line between the state's responsibilities and those of local communities. Indeed, as the foregoing case studies reveal, we can see that the dynamic of Chinese society lies neither exclusively in the central government's plan nor in society, but in the hands of local government officials.

This paper shows that central government reform, when implemented through the multi-level governance system, involves considerable demands on local government to find innovative and effective ways to address government demands. The paper reveals that tension between the rhetoric of participation and the pressure for successful project delivery by local government that often brings a fallback. Upon top-down tools, in this case, monetary compensation. However, if a senior government denies the project or the project is contradictory to the central government's plan, it will not happen at all.

Overall, local governance is an ongoing task that is faced and explored by both the state and scholars alike. Due to the fact that across China different local governments in each province face different institutional environments, cultural histories, and social relations, they may have to come up with different strategies. However, this article reveals one possible way of bridging the gap between people's needs and the central government's priorities. It also offers a new perspective for understanding grassroots governance in China.

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