

Chapter One

Introduction

Administration at the Grass Roots in East and Southeast Asia

From the main avenue, the route to Chongxing community still runs through the alleys known as *butong*—not the elegant kind often found in the old Manchu quarters, but the ramshackle warrens of southern Beijing, some barely wide enough for two pedestrians to pass. In the furious run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games, the city built a brick wall and a cosmetic ribbon of lawn and shrubs to hide this maze. Behind that facade, capillary-like lanes wend past doors that lead to small courtyards, around which cluster cramped homes, many of them single rooms. On the way, you pass the old office, where the women of the residents' committee once spent winters gathered around a coal-burning stove—now rented out to boisterous migrant workers. Characters chalked in cursive on a nearby blackboard exhort residents to mind the Eight Honors and the Eight Shames, one of the ideological refrains of the Hu Jintao era.¹ As placards, bulletin boards, and posters of all kinds have done for decades around China's cities, whether trumpeting such national campaigns or conveying more prosaic imperatives, they also signal the presence and authority of the neighborhood organization.

Set in its own courtyard where several alleys join, the new office of this body announces itself with bold sign plates emblazoned with the names of the district, street office, and community, paired with a red-lettered counterpart denoting the Communist Party committee. Inside lie several freshly painted meeting rooms and offices, among them the desk of the party secretary Liao

Jian, a middle-aged woman who moved into the nearby *butong* in 1986, initially working as a manager in a state-owned store. She leads no fewer than sixteen other staff members, who busy themselves with a slew of responsibilities: from issuing health insurance cards to mediating quarrels, organizing charity drives, and counseling residents on birth control (a rack in the front reception room holds boxes of condoms, free to anyone willing to take them). Signs on the walls display organization charts and tabulate basic facts: 9,100 persons live in the neighborhood; there are five hundred courtyards, each with a designated liaison, and 76 residents' representatives. This is, in short, a kind of nerve center amid the dusty old homes. Through this nexus, dozens of state programs and tasks take root in the jumbled terrain of this corner of urban society.²

A thousand miles to the south, in the city of Taipei, the neighborhood of Wenchang similarly flanks a bustling arterial road. There, too, finding the office means plunging into the lanes off this main thoroughfare, through gently curving alleys wide enough for a car but intersecting at odd angles. Next to a steel security door with eight mail slots, a bright blue sign marks the neighborhood office, although the entrance is otherwise no different from those of the other apartment buildings nearby, most two to four stories high, with tile walls and narrow balconies. Pressing a button brings a routine greeting through the intercom from Bai Zhengmin, Wenchang's elected warden. Visitors exchange shoes for plastic slippers before stepping into the living room of the three-bedroom home that Bai and his wife share. Although it holds trappings of family life such as sofas, the Buddhist shrine, and the dinner table, this room is also a nerve center of its own.

Bolted to a wall are the components of a broadcasting system that Bai uses regularly for immediate communication with the neighborhood's 5,700 residents, his voice echoing through the alleys from a microphone on his desk. In a study off the living room, a set of monitors displays real-time pictures from twenty-nine video cameras scattered throughout Wenchang; police officers sometimes stop by to consult the stored images. Here, too, the neighborhood's full-time civil servant signs in for his daily visit and works on many kinds of government business requiring local outreach: support for the poor and disabled, the military draft, health insurance cards, and more. On the walls hang a detailed satellite photograph of Wenchang and a map showing its precise boundaries, contact information for Bai's twenty designated block captains, and a whiteboard calendar of meetings at the district office and the

nearby activity center. Half private domicile, half public space, this focal point receives a steady trickle of inquiries and requests in the form of phone calls and personal visits from constituents, government staff, and all manner of others.³

Each of these two offices, described above as they existed in 2010, forms one cellular component of immense systems of urban governance. These systems, in the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, respectively, are profoundly different from each other in some ways. Yet in other ways they are closely related. They also contrast with how neighborhoods are run in many other parts of the world. In a country like the United States, for example, the term "neighborhood organization" generally suggests a form of self-contained, small-scale activity: Saturday potlucks in the local park, efforts to protect and celebrate historical homes, the circulation of directories with children's names and ages. It indicates a loose form of self-governing voluntary association that may be entirely apolitical or may participate in urban politics episodically. With few exceptions, people in such historically liberal settings also take for granted that neighborhood groups are far removed from governance writ large. Military conscription, verification of welfare eligibility, household registration, and other parts of the machinery of the modern state would seem inappropriate for this kind of entity. As Whyte and Parish pointed out in a comparative comment in their landmark study of China's cities, "Americans tend to feel that it is illegitimate for city administrations to try to reach down into neighborhoods and formally organize them as part of the urban administrative system" (1984, 24).

In China and Taiwan, and in several other countries in East and Southeast Asia, neighborhood groups also imply social gatherings, recreational activities, community centers, and the like. But in these societies, such organizations—at least, in their official and universally mandated form—have substantially different structures and political roles.⁴ They grow out of a more regimented vision of how society is to be ordered, which in most cases descends from origins far in the past. They constitute a dense network of standardized cells, with state-defined boundaries, covering all or virtually all of the urban geography. They are intended to help govern society, not merely to provide a focal point for conviviality.

The neighborhood institutions discussed in this book are examples of systems that I call administrative grassroots engagement (AGE), in which states create, sponsor, and manage networks of organizations at the most local of

levels that facilitate governance and policing by building personal relationships with members of society. Their leaders serve as the state's designated liaisons in the neighborhood and as such work closely with officials and civil servants. The administrative programs to which they lend assistance run the gamut from welfare to conscription, from census taking to public health. To one degree or another, they help police to monitor their neighborhoods, and in some cases they help gather information on constituents for purposes of political surveillance. At the same time, these parastatal entities also provide a range of services to their constituents, listen to and act on their suggestions and complaints, and organize social and volunteer activities for them to take part in if they choose. To be sure, they are not the only roots of the state, which intersects with those it governs in countless ways, of which urban neighborhoods are but one. Yet the root metaphor captures something fundamental about the shape and ambitions of this institutional template. It points as well to a widespread social basis for an active, proximate, and responsive state, a basis that coexists with many forms of disagreement, contention, and resistance. The purpose of this book is to explore the vision of the state-society relationship embodied in these institutions as it plays out in practice.

James Scott memorably characterized modern states as yearning to take the impenetrable complexity of natural and social ecologies and render it "legible"—measurable, taxable, and regularized (1998, 2, 183–184). Indeed, anyone visiting the institutions examined in these pages will marvel at the many examples they provide of "seeing like a state," from the records they keep on women's use of birth control in Beijing to the micro-level neighborhood maps and video surveillance found in Taipei. It is tempting to apply a Foucauldian framework to such practices, as some have fruitfully done.⁵ But it is not clear that such perspectives explain how these bodies can be deadening and alienating to certain constituents, yet vital and appealing to others. More generally, as this book shows, to focus merely on the baleful gaze of the state would lead to a partial and biased understanding of these systems. Doing so would leave us ill prepared to understand their extensive associative functions, how they serve as an important (sometimes the most central and vibrant) nexus of neighborhood life.

Varieties of AGE institutions have appeared in many parts of the world. State socialist systems such as that of the former Soviet Union featured official neighborhood-based organizations with wide-ranging responsibilities (Friedgut 1979; Roeder 1989). Cuba has them to this day in the form of Committees

for the Defense of the Revolution (Fagen 1969; Kruger 2007), and Nicaraguan revolutionaries once sustained a similar network of Sandinista Defense Committees (LaRamée and Polakoff 1997). They also crop up in systems that are neither Leninist nor Asian. For instance, in the early 1970s, Peruvian authorities worried about political unrest among urban squatters created thousands of block-level neighborhood committees in the shantytowns of Lima and other cities.⁶

Although they are by no means unique to the countries of East and Southeast Asia, some of the most elaborate and persistent examples of this type of organization are found there (Table 1.1). As discussed in Chapter 2, most descend in one way or another from imperial or colonial periods. Early or premodern states in East Asia developed institutions of local control to collect revenue and to deracinate deviants and threats, and Japanese colonizers spread and refined these systems. Today, security and fiscal goals remain two of the powerful imperatives that drive public authorities to reach down into the warp and woof of local life. Yet today's states look to the grassroots level for a great variety of purposes. As it turns out, local organizations provide a highly convenient platform for projects of just about every stripe.

To the extent that they have attracted theoretical attention at all, they have generally been conceptualized along totalitarian lines. Yet—strikingly—such organizations exist in free societies and authoritarian politics alike. In Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia, they have endured long after the passing of the autocratic regimes that first spawned them. In China and Singapore, as well as in the region's democracies, they have also persisted through a process

TABLE 1.1
Cases of administrative grassroots engagement in cities of East and Southeast Asia

<i>Country</i>	<i>Neighborhood level</i>	<i>Subneighborhood level</i>
China	<i>Jumin weiyuanhui, shequ jumin weiyuanhui</i>	<i>Jumin xiaozu</i>
Indonesia	<i>Rukun warga (RW)</i>	<i>Rukun tetangga (RT)</i>
Japan	<i>Chōkai, chōnaikai, jichikai</i>	<i>Kumi</i>
Singapore	Residents' committees, neighborhood committees	
South Korea	<i>Tong, tongjang</i>	<i>Banchanghoe, banjang</i>
Taiwan	<i>Li, li bangongchu, lizhang</i>	<i>Lin, linzhang</i>
Vietnam	<i>Cộng dân cư</i>	<i>Tổ dân phố</i>

NOTE: Countries are listed in alphabetical order. Only currently existing institutions are included; historical predecessors are not.

of economic growth that has transformed the nature and meaning of residential neighborhoods for many urbanites. Why this is so forms a high-level puzzle that this book aims to solve.

Each of the AGE institutions has its own unique characteristics; they cannot be simplistically equated with one another. Important aspects of their organizational structures vary across cases. Residential areas in Taiwan are led by a single individual, a neighborhood warden (NW; *lizhang*) like Bai, who obtains the position by winning elections held every four years. This person works out of a government-supplied office, which may be set up in his or her home or elsewhere in the area. The network of wardens and their chosen block captains (*linzhang*) was once intended to mobilize and incorporate the local citizenry under the externally imposed rule of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT). Yet in the past two decades it has transformed into a remarkably democratic institution, as Chapter 3 shows in detail. Indeed, in terms of the rigor of their elections, the neighborhood wardens may be the most democratically chosen leaders of their type in the world. Each comes to his or her position through formal processes of campaigning and balloting, in races that are often sharply competitive. Yet they are paid stipends by the state and work closely with a civil servant (*liganshi*) sent from the district administrative center.

In China, the comparable institution has, since 1954, been called a residents' committee (RC; *jumin weiyuanhui*), a team of neighborhood auxiliaries under the leadership of a director (*zhuren*). In recent years, this institution has been encased in an increasingly elaborate organizational architecture and packaged as a "community" (*shequ*). The RC elections take place every three years, although, as we will see, these carefully choreographed affairs offer little latitude for residents to contravene the arrangements of the street offices, the ward-level agencies that oversee the committees. The communities contain within them cells of the Chinese Communist Party, and their directors often double as party secretaries, although the posts may also be held by different people, as in Chongxing's case. Like their counterparts in Taiwan, the staff of the community receive monthly stipends for their service.

Just as the details of their composition vary, ultra-local administrative bodies across the region also range from those tightly linked to—indeed, almost part of—local government to those with a considerable degree of formal autonomy. For example, Japan's *chōnaikai* do not fall under the command of local government, researchers have argued; they cooperate extensively with

city authorities, but on a voluntary and negotiated basis (see Chapter 8). Taiwan's wardens are legally obliged to obey higher levels of government, but as Chapter 4 shows, in practice they have considerable independent standing and clout. In China, neighborhood leaders are selected and installed by the party and the government, which can remove them from their positions whenever they please; the leaders are not in a position easily to refuse their requests. There and in other authoritarian settings, these local institutions perform a political surveillance function that is not found today in the democratic cases, by reporting to higher levels on people and activities that are deemed threatening by the ruling regime. Moreover, the systems of China, Vietnam, and Singapore strongly condition the local political environment, for instance by discouraging, precluding, or constraining organizations that might challenge the state's grassroots bodies. In Asia's democracies, in contrast, state-backed grassroots groups are subject to a higher degree of restraint by voters, the media, and other means of oversight. In these more open contexts, alternative forms of organization proliferate, thus constituting at least potential competitors for resources and popular participation.

Without losing sight of these important differences among countries and between regime types, this book makes the case that all these state-supported structures may nonetheless be analyzed within a shared conceptual category. At the highest level of abstraction, it asks why it is that these kinds of institutions have shown such staying power—not merely persisting under autocracies but also surviving and flourishing after democratic transitions in Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Taiwan. It thus purposefully compares one of the most authoritarian cases, the Chinese RCs, with the most internally democratic case, Taiwan's *li-lin* system, a comparison explained later in this chapter.

Researchers have published a scattering of English-language case studies on such organizations, some of them deftly executed, painting their subjects in vivid colors. Yet, as argued later in this chapter, the social sciences remain without a convincing understanding of them. This can in part be attributed to the tendency for Asia to remain marginal in theory building. More fundamentally, scholars steeped in the liberal tradition tend to fixate on wholly independent citizen initiatives, whether in the form of social movements or less contentious types of association. They often regard state-backed institutions, conversely, not only as deleterious but also as uninteresting, inherently stale.

At the same time, generations of observers have repeatedly been drawn to the subject of China's RCs, attracted by what they find repellent in them. Many

such accounts come from Westerners, but by no means all; for example, Jung Chang's best-selling memoir, *Wild Swans*, gave special attention to the prying neighborhood committees of both Manchukuo and the postrevolutionary order (1991).⁷ The organizations elicit such curiosity, I believe, because of the way they transgress what outsiders take to be boundaries between public and private, and between state and community.⁸ Typically, the author expresses an appalled shock at the committee's surveillance of and intrusion into residents' lives.⁹

Among Beijingers, and in Taipei as well, the lowly neighborhood leaders are more likely to form the subject of humor. For years, whenever women of the residents' committees were mentioned, it was almost obligatory for people to poke fun at them as the "small-footed tracking squads" (*xiaojiao zhenji dui*), a trope spread even in comedy routines on state television.¹⁰ In Taipei, the former vice president Lien Chan held, for four years during his term as chairman of the KMT and before his second presidential election defeat, a block captain position under the warden of Ren'ai li.¹¹ This drew wisecracks from some quarters: "Serving as neighborhood warden rather than president—that would be about right for him," one academic joked.

Responses of both discomfort and mockery help to frame the issues posed by administrative grassroots engagement and the questions that this book seeks to answer. These institutions constitute ornate extensions of officialdom fused into the structure and governance of the smallest of urban territorial units, which, depending on one's perspective, could appear unsettling, amusing, helpful, wasteful, or simply the normal condition of things. As Friedgut wrote about ultra-local institutions in the Soviet Union: "The point of the Soviet community organizational effort . . . is to make the regime your neighbor by having your neighbor represent the regime" (1979, 239). Put differently, in the approving term used both in China and in Taiwan, they act as a bridge (*qiaoliang*) connecting the people and the authorities.¹² The question is, What are the subjective attitudes and responses of people who actually live in such close proximity to these manifestations of state power? How do they perceive and understand this statist apparatus? How do they interact with it on an everyday or an occasional basis? Building on the answers to this fundamental set of questions, we go on to inquire further about the possibilities and problems of organizations designed to transgress any clear state-society boundary, to intermediate between the two at an intimate level. How should we understand the kinds of relationships that connect ordinary people with

these ultra-local government intermediaries, and what effects do hierarchical authority patterns have on community networks? Finally, is it possible for what began as heavily top-down organizations to provide a basis for truly democratic participation and a channel for bottom-up political influence?

Those who are disconcerted by the kind of state structuring and oversight embodied in the RC and the *li-lin* will be surprised to learn that, as of the 2000s, at least, the systems both enjoyed substantial public support. Contrary to what one might expect, patterns in authoritarian Beijing and democratic Taipei display certain broad similarities. In both cities, one portion of the population took a dim view of them, seeing them as intrusive, grasping, or simply irrelevant and useless. Survey data and interviews show, however, that such perceptions are not the majority. More often than not, residents saw reasons to value their neighborhood organizations, as detailed in Chapters 5–7. Thus, both cities showed a divide in popular attitudes—and interviewees in the two capitals gave many of the same reasons for taking one position or the other.

Explaining these patterns—approval and disapproval alike—as this book aims to do, requires arguments at several levels. First, we observe in both Beijing and Taipei the enduring popular resonance of a collaborative (rather than arm’s-length) vision of state-society relations. Many see as appropriate the presence of a permanent locus of authority in the neighborhood, a liaison to police and other authorities, and a source of help for themselves or for disadvantaged residents. At the same time, this orientation is by no means uniform or uncontested. It contends with other ideas: for instance, those insisting on a right to privacy and personal autonomy in the domestic sphere.

But such ideational constructs take us only so far. It is not merely abstract notions but rather the tangible milieu of the local social environment that forms the context in which residents interact with their RC or warden. This environment, and particularly the extent of leaders’ ties to their communities, varies from place to place in both Beijing and Taipei, for instance between long-standing neighborhoods of older homes and newer high-rise apartments. Some RC staff and most *lizhang* draw on years or decades of familiarity with their neighborhoods, but they also build at least nodding acquaintance with broad circles of residents through the many functions they perform and services they provide. These range from giving free blood-pressure checks to responding to countless queries and complaints, and mediating local disputes, all of which can develop or reinforce connections with constituents. In many cases these are relatively thin relationships rather than thick, intimate ones—

but as Granovetter noted in his classic article, “weak ties” can have special strength and efficacy (1973). Examining the alley-level social terrain shows us that putting community ties toward state-mandated purposes, intermingling horizontal bonds with vertical lines of authority, is neither wholly contradictory nor entirely unproblematic, as discussed below.

Finally, for a portion of the urban population, state-fostered neighborhood structures provide a welcome and convenient venue for active participation—whether in purely social functions like festivals and exercise classes or in many forms of voluntary service. In both Beijing and Taipei, much of this participation fills government-defined roles that are intended to channel people’s energies into pursuits that serve the state rather than make demands of it. Persistent scholarly debates have revolved around the nature of and motivations for such supportive activity. Programs like volunteer neighborhood patrols duplicate the kinds of missions that civil society organizations might pursue, and I argue that participants’ motivations are much the same as those that underlie nonstate volunteering, although service in official auxiliaries also has its own distinct appeals.

All in all, the resemblance between patterns found in Beijing and in Taipei, and in the general reasons people feel as they do, is striking. Just as instructive, though, are the contrasts between the two capitals. Although residents of Taipei overwhelmingly feel that the *li-lin* system should continue to exist, compared to their Beijing counterparts they are less inclined to see it as an essential institution, something they would miss if it were gone. Even so, the social footprint of the neighborhood apparatus is in some ways larger there; a broader swath of Taipei residents join in activities sponsored by these organizations. Most significant, Taiwan’s case illustrates the possibilities for vibrant democracy inherent in these entities. Through them, citizens cast votes in meaningful and competitive elections, choosing local leaders with strong standing from which to negotiate with the urban state. Taipei shows that AGE systems, born as tools of authoritarian control and cooptation, may evolve into highly democratic loci of bottom-up participation—even though bitterly fought elections at the neighborhood level and links to national political parties complicate community life in their own ways.

This study argues against foregrounding three factors that loom large in other aspects of politics for the purpose of understanding these neighborhood institutions. The RCs and the *li* operate as extensions of powerful states; in China’s case, the state routinely employs repressive force against what it sees

as threats. Yet even in Beijing, let alone in Taipei, most urbanites do not experience these organizations acting toward them in a coercive capacity. As well, partisan political allegiances—among Chinese Communist Party members in Beijing, and adherents of the two major parties in Taipei—have a place in this story, but residents are not strongly divided along these lines in terms of their basic attitudes toward these bodies. Finally, these intermediaries participate in an intricate fabric of ongoing negotiation, with their constituents and with higher officials, over various kinds of resources, opportunities, certifications, and more. In certain cases, specified in the chapters that follow, these exchanges can be thought of as following a patron-client pattern. Most, however, do not rise to the level of what should properly be called clientelism, a potentially vast category that requires sensible boundaries if it is to have meaning. All three of these factors have their place, but none deserves a unique spotlight.

So many states in East and Southeast Asia continue to retain and support grassroots institutions like these partly because they provide such a convenient platform for administrative interventions, but also because they root themselves so deeply in parts of urban society. Whether or not these institutions democratize, and even when they remain part of the surveillance apparatus of a repressive state like China, they nonetheless can win the acceptance or even support of a large portion of society. They do so in large part on the basis of interpersonal social networks, which take many forms and correspond only weakly and partially to a clientelism model.

The questions addressed in this book have special resonance in the world of East Asian studies and the China field. For example, these research communities have long grappled with issues surrounding the state-society relationship, including whether publics in the region are particularly receptive to a close partnership between the two of the kind that these grassroots organizations represent. Prominent scholars have provided arguments in the affirmative. The late Benjamin I. Schwartz, in an essay titled “The Primacy of the Political Order in East Asian Societies,” argued that “the conception of the supreme jurisdiction of the political order in all domains of social and political life” has been “a more or less enduring dominant cultural orientation” in China through the ages and in countries influenced by Chinese civilization, such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. He clarified that this refers not to totalitarian control but to an assumption that the political order, or state, has special “centrality and weight,” that it appropriately claims jurisdiction

over and intermingles with the religious, economic, intellectual, and social spheres rather than remaining clearly delineated from them (Schwartz 1996, 114–115).¹³ In a similar vein, the anthropologist Robert P. Weller wrote that, customarily in China and Taiwan, “state and society are not thought about as separate entities in tension with each other,” although he noted that this is evolving as ideas from other parts of the world are borrowed and adapted (1999, 139).

Such perspectives, of course, are by no means unique to East Asia. Stepan, for instance, surveyed a closely related political vision he identified as organic statism, a set of normative principles that call for the elements of society to join together harmoniously in concert with public authority, and under its guidance (1978, 26–45). He showed that this strain of political philosophy extends back to thinkers such as Aristotle and Aquinas and influences doctrines as diverse as those of the Catholic Church, Lenin, and many other figures and forces in the modern world. One aim of this book is to assess the extent to which these kinds of ideational or cultural orientations influence popular attitudes as well as underpin institutional arrangements created by elites; it also weighs them against competing ideas and other factors. More broadly, as the above illustrates, the phenomena examined in this study take regionally specific forms and speak to themes in Asian studies but also inform our understanding of general concepts in the world of politics. Before continuing, then, it is necessary to consider a few other conceptual building blocks, as well as their tensions and limitations.

Organizations at the Local and Neighborhood Level

Urban neighborhoods generally seem to occupy a category lying between units of government and citizen associations—perhaps falling into the gap between them and constituting neither. In most cities of the world, neighborhoods are not a fundamental unit of governance. Often it is at much larger units that the real action begins. Each of London’s thirty-two boroughs is the size of a city all by itself, with an average population around 230,000. Chicago’s fifty wards hold more than fifty-five thousand people each and generally contain multiple neighborhoods within them. In global perspective, to situate layers of administration or representation below these is clearly the exception rather than the rule.