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Governing the Neighborhoods with Confucian Ideas

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Abstract

Attributes of communities have long been considered a major influence on people's self-organized governing behavior (Ostrom 2005). Does Confucianism, a widely shared set of traditional ideas, inform Chinese homeowners in governing their neighborhoods? Based on in-depth interviews with 27 homeowner associations (HOA) organizers from 16 neighborhoods in Beijing, we found evidence suggesting that their governing behaviors were informed by traditional Confucian conceptual distinctions and normative expectations: Stringent expectations were found on HOA organizers to serve with purely "public" motives and renounce "private" ones; neighborhood management, meanwhile, were not merely considered as a means for improving living conditions, but a patriotic act of serving the country. Arguably, these meanings corresponded to the Confucian ideal of *junzi* and its guide to moral cultivation. They helped sustain homeowners' participation and promote a social norm that scrutinized their behaviors. The findings suggest further research on neighborhood governance, and contribute to the reforming governance in contemporary China.

Home ownership in China surged in the last few decades since the cessation of government housing provision based on welfare principles in 1998 and the subsequent marketization process (Huque, 2005; Ye & Wu, 2008; Dong, Christensen & Painter, 2010). These reforms have given rise to a variety of governance issues in private urban neighborhoods, and correspondingly a number of local governing structures such as community-run non-profit entities, social organizations and homeowner associations (Wang, 2008; see also Read, 2007; Liu, 2008). Notable among these structures is the possibility of establishing homeowner associations (HOAs) (Yip, 2014). Homeowners' right to establish HOAs is now safeguarded by the Property Rights Law enacted in 2007 (in particular Article 75 and 76). The law allows property owners of residential complexes to establish an HOA committee, elect its members, convene regular meetings, hire and control their property management firm, and manage affairs of their neighborhood.ⁱ

This change in neighborhood governance presents excellent self-governing opportunities and correspondingly major challenges to the Chinese people (Chen, 2009).ⁱⁱ Ever since the founding of communist China, ordinary Chinese have been *de facto* "subjects" of the party-state, enjoying limited political and economic rights (Wang, Li & Cooper, 2015). Despite the long history of self-governance among extended family members in many traditional villages of dynastic China (Fei, 2008/1947), it is only until recently that economic liberalization and administrative reforms have gradually transformed the post-revolutionary state-society relationship to a more equal one. This legally guaranteed right to form HOAs, and thus the right to assemble and collectively decide on private neighborhood matters, represents one major advancement in opportunities to political participation for the ordinary people.

Just as in many developing countries experiencing rapid modernization, nevertheless, China has observed a major tension between preserving traditional governing cultures and

practices versus reforming them towards some modern, rational-legal arrangements (see Commons, 2009/1925). For one thing, many Chinese homeowners, as first-time property buyers in the private market, may not be disposed to comprehend and accept the often-ambiguous boundaries between individual and shared property rights. Further, collective efforts and broad-based agreements are hard to formulate for managing their shared properties, given the general lack of efficacy and experience in civic deliberation, or sometimes simply the large number of homeowners they needed to organize. How did Chinese homeowners approach and seek to overcome various governing difficulties when realizing their new rights? Were their behaviors any different from those of other countries?

Experiences of Neighborhood Governance

The emergence of self-governing institutions in urban neighborhoods has attracted much scholarly attention in the last decade (for example, Webster, 2003; Baer & Feiock, 2005; Musso, Weare, Oztas & Loges, 2006; Farrelly & Sullivan, 2010). The phenomenon has been considered a “constitutional revolution” (Nelson, 2005), or the rise of “local federalism” (Fung & Wright, 2001; Box & Musso, 2004).ⁱⁱⁱ Against worries about societal fragmentation with the development of gated communities, these scholars argue that participation in neighborhood governance fundamentally revitalizes people’s democratic experience, as it usually involves careful deliberation and collective decisions among the people.

In China, however, the change in neighborhood governance follows a different trajectory. Unlike their Western counterpart, Chinese homeowners do not have much modern-democratic governing experience, and Western concepts such as modern citizenship and democratic principles are relatively new to them. Ever since the establishment of modern China, urban neighborhood affairs have been the responsibility of residential committees (RCs), instituted by the Chinese Communist Party and managed directly by Street

Offices, the lowest, subdistrict-level government of China. Although they are supposed to be the venue in which “residents engage in ‘self-administration, self-education, and self-service’”, RCs now consist of not volunteers but “three to seven paid staff”, with their main function being “fusing ... government administration with local social networks”; they are to “facilitate ... government programs”, through mainly “cultivating positive relations with those who are receptive to their work”, and “us[ing] persuasion and social pressure to defuse any group demands by residents before these are taken out of the neighborhood and into the streets or onto the doorsteps of government agencies” (Read 2003, 37-38). A predecessor of HOA may be found in 1994 when the Ministry of Construction announced that residents should form their own elected committees to select their property management company to manage their neighborhood. Yet residents were constrained heavily by local housing and other administrative agencies (e.g., the Ministry of Civil Affairs) with their oversight and subsequent stipulations such as that these committees should be established by a “preparatory group” (introduced in 2000) consisting of the developer, the management company, local government and the police (Read 2003, 43-44). In other words, for a lot of the Chinese people, this possibility of establishing and operating HOAs represents less of a revival of democratic experience than a first taste of self-organization for governing their neighborhoods in contemporary China.

Apart from homeowners’ inexperience, their neighborhood governing efforts might also be hindered by their lack of understanding in the rights and the corresponding limits as a property owners (see Chen, 2009; Fu & Lin, 2014). Major disputes often arose on the management of their jointly-owned properties. Individual homeowners might show little regard for others’ rights to the communal properties, for example, knocking down a load-bearing wall to enlarge private space, taking over portions of the common garden space for personal use. They would also disagree with one another on how the HOA should be

established, and how it should be operated if established. The norms and practices of deliberation and citizen participation have remained weakly developed. It is not uncommon that individual homeowners would grow suspicious of other active homeowners. They would disagree on the usage of the communal fund, the choice of the best property management firm, or the meeting, election and decision procedures. Many also showed little respect to the authority of the HOA, refusing to pay the required management fees, or simply ignoring its decisions.

Challenges to their effort do not just come from the internal. Legally speaking, the establishment of an HOA requires an agreement of more than 1/2 of all the unit owners who collectively own more than 1/2 of the total area of the neighborhood. The sheer number of households needed to be mobilized *before* the establishing of HOAs is already a daunting challenge, especially for larger condominium projects. Moreover, developers might delay their establishment and thus the transfer of rights to hire and control property management firms when maintaining such control was profitable—Developers often generated additional revenue and pocketed themselves by leasing homeowners’ parking spaces to local businesses and individual outsiders, their garden spaces for parties and weddings, or even the buildings’ walls for advertising signs. When homeowners finally realized and complained about these practices, they were at best ignored, or at worst physically attacked by the security personnel of management firms hired by the developers. Local government authorities were not very helpful in a lot of these situations. In fact, homeowners often accused the street offices of colluding with local developers and property management firms. Local governments, meanwhile, might consider homeowners’ organizing and complaining efforts as “homeowner rebellion”, disturbing the supposedly harmonious relationship between the state, market, and the people. Overall, the political environment has not been very conducive to the self-governing efforts of the homeowners.

In spite of all these, some homeowners did manage to mobilize other neighborhood members and overcome various difficulties (albeit with mixed degree of success) in their self-governing effort. For example, there were cases of civic actions such as litigations in local courts, appealing (上訪) to higher authorities, sit-ins in government offices, picketing, freeway blocking, and some even participating and campaigning in local government elections (see also Wang 2008, 22-23). Most importantly, some neighborhoods did succeed in forming their HOA, as shown by its relatively reasonable establishment rate (Wang, Yin & Zhou, 2011), and sustain its operation. How shall one make sense of their persistent endeavors to neighborhood governance and explain their success given the unfavorable historical and political contexts? It is with these questions we review the various approaches to studying neighborhood governance in the literature.

Approaches in Neighborhood Governance Studies

In general, a neighborhood consists of privately-owned residential units and shared neighborhood properties, such as gardens. The good governance of its communal features are fundamental to the well-being of its residents as well as its property owners. Depending on the situation, relevant actors usually involve individual residents, unit owners, developers, property management units, and sometimes government officials and offices of local districts.

The problems and difficulties in homeowners' neighborhood governance effort can be conceptualized as an ongoing series of collective action problems among the property owners (Olson, 1965; Chen & Webster, 2005). According to Olson's theory of collective action (1965), members of a group, who are assumed to be rational self-interest maximizers, will not engage in organizing for collective actions unless their respective gain is larger than their private cost of organizing. A well-managed neighborhood (such as good neighborhood facilities and environment) is hard to attain as it is easy for individual residents to free-ride on

others for its production. A recent study of urban communities in Guangzhou, for example, highlighted the “hidden costs of civic engagement” as one major factors impeding homeowners’ voluntary participation in neighborhood affairs (Fu & Lin, 2014). It is especially so when its consumption is not readily excludable as unit owners are often entitled to roughly equal rights based on their share of ownership in the neighborhood. In a functioning property market, dissatisfied property owners may always try to sell their properties and move elsewhere, and a market-based order is said to emerge from the exchange of neighborhood properties (Webster, 2003; Baer & Feiock, 2005). Neighborhood governance thus may be seen as a *nexus of contracts* (see Webster, 2003), formed among the constitutive property owners based on their interests, private and public information about the property, as well as the transaction costs associated with the exchange.

From this perspective, the neighborhood may also be governed indirectly through some proxies; property owners may set up and utilize institutional structures such as neighborhood councils (organized voluntarily by the residents) or homeowner associations (organized by real estate developers based on written restrictions in title deeds), and through which property management companies may be hired to manage neighborhood affairs on behalf the homeowners. Although mixed empirical evidence were found regarding their respective impacts, the successful establishment and operation of these governing structures usually increases the property value in the neighborhood (see Scheller, 2015; Craw, 2017), and their success depends largely on the properties owners deriving agreements for efficient monitoring and accountability systems; Problems may arise if the owners fail to agree on the corresponding management rules and measures, for example, the selection criteria of representatives, the amount of management fees, or the power to be assigned to the governing committee. As Craw (2017, 709) argues, neighborhoods governed by voluntary efforts may suit better the residents’ interests, but without the help for some formal governance

mechanisms (e.g., local codes and regulations), the high cost of organizing informally may undermine these efforts.

Since the last decade, more and more scholars have modified the rational actor assumption and proposed that the influence of social relationships should be considered in neighborhood governance (Box & Musso, 2004; Nelson, 2005; Musso, Weare, Oztas & Loges, 2006). This perspective sees neighborhood governance as constituted by a *nexus of social ties*, in which individuals may develop various kinds of informal relationships with one another (e.g., kinship, friendship, ethnicity, acquaintance) (Chaskin, 1997). Patterns in their organizing behaviors are then explained by some structural properties and configurations of these social networks (Weare, Lichterman & Esparza, 2014; Musso & Weare, 2006; Wang, 2015)^{iv}, as well as the social capital (e.g., mutual trust) accumulated in the neighborhood among the homeowners (Fu & Lin, 2014). The perspective focuses on how neighborhood governance is understood through the nexus of embedded social relationships, which mediate people's interaction in the process (Granovetter, 1985). The successful governing of the neighborhood depends on whether structural characteristics of the embedded social networks are conducive to some collective efforts required in neighborhood governance.

Individuals, under this perspective, may also create and sustain informal institutions for various neighborhood governing purposes (Ostrom, 2005; also Elster, 2015). These institutions are enforced socially, sustained through such mechanisms as ostracism, shaming, reciprocity and reputation (Nee, 2005). They help govern who may manage the neighborhood, and how. For example, in some developing countries with weaker legal systems, informal institutions help residents demarcate each others' property, indicating their *de facto* ownership (de Soto, 2000). Features such as face-to-face communication, smaller groups, and those with members of similar interests and resources are all conducive to the development of these institutions,

which help induce cooperation and resolve collective action problems among the neighborhood members (Ostrom, 1998).

Nexus of Shared Meanings

The above perspectives, however, do not provide a full explanation regarding why property owners' have those preferences and why certain types of institutional arrangements and practices are pursued and more welcomed than others. To answer these questions, we propose an alternative perspective which takes into account the meaning context of homeowners' embedded community (Ostrom, 2005), and sees neighborhood governance as constituted of a *nexus of shared meanings*.

Social actions inherently carry meanings (Weber, 1978). A view commonly shared by interpretive theorists (Bevir, 2012) is that individuals do not live in a vacuum but in a "web of significance" which they have spun (Geertz, 1973). These meanings influence actions, and are also sustained by them. Understanding human behaviors thus requires understanding of the meanings behind people's action. Generally speaking, meanings are constructed as people assign their subjective conceptions to things such as objects, events, and experiences. Meanings may be recognized and remembered; they may also be shared and transferred as they are expressed, communicated, negotiated and/or contested. Meanings are often manifested in people's narratives, or stories, as distinctions, categories and logics (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). As people develop more complicated relationships with and among these concepts, the web of meanings can become very entangled and complicated, to the extent that people may simply take them for granted as social facts (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1991)

Studies have adopted this interpretive approach to understand neighborhood-related phenomena (Glover, 2004; Campbell, Henly, Elliott & Irwin, 2009). Applying it specifically to neighborhood governance, the perspective suggests that the multiplex conceptions and associations homeowners had regarding their neighborhood and its governance *constitute*

their diverse attitudes and behaviors. On the one hand, these meanings may be exchanged and become shared as neighborhood members communicate with one another. On the other hand, despite the apparent autonomy, their assignment of meanings is often conditioned culturally and historically. Communities experienced common historical events or sharing similar cultural traditions tend to assign comparable meanings to make sense of and discuss various governance matters (Bevir, 2013). These shared meanings serve as the basis for formulating consensus on neighborhood governing matters. For researchers who are interested in explaining neighborhood governance, it is essential to go beyond considerations of individual interests and incentives, or the embedded social network and associated capital and norm, to their embedded meaning contexts underlying their interests and social relationships, as well as the institutional structures and practices pursued and adopted in the governing process.

The Relevance of Confucian Ideas

To understand better Chinese homeowners' endeavor to neighborhood governance and overcoming various collective action challenges in the process, we looked into the self-narratives of these homeowners—how they described themselves and their involvement in neighborhood governance. As an exploratory study, we drew our data from residential neighborhoods in Beijing. Beijing has been the capital of China both before and after the revolution for more than half a millennium. Arguably the influence it received from a major traditional culture, Confucianism, should be one of the most salient; Beijing should be a good litmus test for exploring the utility of our proposed perspective that focuses on shared meanings in neighborhood governance.

Confucianism has been a strong source of cultural influence in China. The classical texts of Confucianism have been held in high regard by generations of scholars. The *Analects*, and *Daxue*, (大學), together with *The Mencius* and *Zhongyong* (中庸) were

mandated since the Song dynasty to be the four required texts for the national public service examinations until the end of imperial China. There were hiatuses in the promotion of Confucianism in the 20th Century. It was bitterly criticized at the time around the May Fourth Movement in 1919, and during the Cultural Revolution (Solé-Farràs, 2013; Wu, 2014). Yet its influence continues. Zuo and Benford (1995) in their study of the student democratic movement in 1989, for example, found that one strategy students used in the mobilization process was aligning the movement frames with some later variations of Confucianism (“*tianxia xingwang / pifu youze*”, 天下興亡 / 匹夫有責, every individual [even those coming from humble backgrounds] is responsible for the rise and fall of *tianxia* (天下, the world)). This showed that, at least among the movement participants, Confucian ideas such as a sense of responsibility and self-sacrifice still resonated strongly in post-imperial China. More recently, Confucianism is experiencing a revival, in part due to the sponsorship by the Communist government, which sees Confucianism as a critical moral resource to promote social responsibility and stability. The revival has been attributed to the fact that people are turning to traditional ideas in order to find meanings and peace in response to the anxiety and atomism brought by fast economic modernization in the past three decades (Bell, 2014; Wu, 2014).

As a school of thought, meanwhile, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of cultivating personal *de* (德, virtue). Despite its many variations and later development, Confucianism regards individuals with noble *de* (德, virtue) as *junzi* (君子, nobleman). One major, if not the most important, virtue of *junzi* is *ren* (仁, compassion), generally understood as compassion. In the *Analects*, Confucius made the point that “The determined scholar/intellectual and man of *ren* / does not seek to live at the expense of [compromising]

ren / [He] sacrifices his life to achieve *ren*. (志士仁人 / 無求生以害仁 / 有殺身以成仁)” (Analects, 9).^v *Ren* occupies a major position in Confucianism.

Another major virtue of *junzi* (君子, nobleman) is *yi* (義, justice/righteousness), which is in contrast with *li* (利, interest) (Yu, 2010a/1987, 205-206). As quoted in the *Analects*, “The Master said, ‘The gentleman [*junzi* 君子, nobleman] understands what is moral [*yi* 義, justice/righteousness] / The small man understands what is profitable [*li* 利, interest].’ (君子喻於義 / 小人喻於利)” (Analects, 4.16, translated by D. C. Lau 1983).^{vi} The distinction between *yi* (義, justice/righteousness) and *li* (利, interest) runs parallel with the distinction between *gong* (公, public/common) and *si* (私, private) (Yu, 2010a/1987, 205-206).

According to *Li Ji* (禮記, The Book of Rites), “...When the Grand course [*dao* 道, the Way] was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky (*tianxia wei gong* 天下為公). ... (Li Yun 1)”.^{vii} Affairs of *gong* (公, public/common) are considered the task of *junzi*. In other words, *junzi* is expected to contribute to what is public and righteous, and not what is private and interest-related.

Note here that the social unit of “family” plays a significant role in the cultivation of personal *de* (德, virtue), and one’s path to become a *junzi* (君子, nobleman). And *Daxue* (大學, The Great Learning), another Confucian classic, proposes that “The Way” of “The Great Learning” is to manifest luminous virtue and stop only at the “ultimate goodness”. It discusses in detail the path that *junzi* should follow in his pursuit of the Way (see Johnston & Wang, 2012):

The ancients, in wishing to manifest luminous virtue in the world [*tianxia*, 天下], first brought good order to their states. In wishing to bring good order to their states, they first regulated their households. In wishing to regulate their

households, they first cultivated themselves. In wishing to cultivate themselves, they first rectified their minds. In wishing to rectify their minds, they first made their intentions *cheng* (誠, true, genuine, sincere). In wishing to make their intentions *cheng*, they first extended their knowledge to the limit. Extending knowledge to the limit lies in investigating things.

This idea bridges two main goals of Confucianism: *neisheng* (內聖, “inner saint”) with *waiwang* (外王, “outer merit/benevolence”), or noble virtues in the private realm with good deeds in the public realm (Yu, 2010b, 22). The passage advises one to start with perfecting his character and knowledge in the private realm, continue with cultivating his inner virtue, managing well his family and country, and eventually contributing himself to the world. Overall, the text describes what *junzi*’s ultimate life goal should be, and details practical guidelines on how this ideal can be achieved (Yu, 2010b).

Research Context and Methods

Would traces of major Confucian ideas such as the above be found to inform contemporary Chinese homeowners’ neighborhood governance behaviors? The study collected its empirical evidence in 2013 by conducting semi-structured interviews with past and current organizers of homeowner associations in Beijing. Structured questions were asked to understand why they joined in organizing the homeowners in their neighborhoods in the first place and to elicit their thoughts and experience in the process; Open-ended questions were also raised during the interviews to stimulate deeper dialogues (see Appendix). Our collaborators in Beijing, a nonprofit organization which specialized in homeowners’ advocacy, helped arrange the first set of interviews with past or current HOA organizers from six different neighborhoods. We then adopted a snowball sampling approach by asking these interviewees to introduce us to HOA organizers from other neighborhoods.

Each interview last for 2-3 hours. The interviews took two forms: one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. We had seven focus groups, each of which had a number of homeowners. The group discussions created rapport and synergy among the interviewees, which gave us some in-depth knowledge about their thoughts and experiences. We stopped at the point of data saturation when we felt that we repeatedly came across similar information. In the end, our sample included 27 homeowners from 16 different neighborhoods. While the literature tends to conduct field observations to examine the dynamics of homeowners interacting with one another in the organizing process (e.g., O'Brien & Li, 2006; Zhu, 2011), our focus on their self-narratives allows the interviewees to take a step back from the often contentious negotiating process, and reflect deeply upon the motivations of their behaviors, the rationales behind their concerns and arguments, and more generally their roles in the process. It fits our purpose of uncovering the meanings they ascribed to themselves and their involvement, the knowledge of which, as argued above, provides a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical contexts underlying the neighborhood governing process. We analyzed the data with the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). Facilitated by the software NVivo 10, the data analysis started with open coding, which gave us some initial categories. We next formulated some working hypotheses that linked some of these categories. The working hypotheses were then tested further. Those withstood the tests were kept and became the major arguments of this paper, as presented below.

Findings and Analyses

Progression from Individual through Neighborhood to Country

Our interviewees often considered their involvement in neighborhood affairs as part of their contribution to the country. They felt that their work in the neighborhood would promote the country's development. The association seemed so natural that it was often

mentioned without much supportive reasoning. We contended that this association might find its root in one strain of Confucianism: virtuous individuals, or *junzi*, should cultivate themselves, regulate their households, and then contribute to the good order of their states. Such an ethical idea imbued a special responsibility to the homeowners, motivating them to look beyond immediate personal interests.

For example, one organizer (B), who graduated from a top Chinese university and worked as a journalist and a teacher before, described how he first realized the broader implications of his effort in organizing homeowners. He saw that his behavior could have important consequences for both “China” and “Chinese society”:

When I first wanted to do it [organizing homeowners], I thought that I could not let the neighborhood continue to be chaotic/disordered (混亂). I did not have the vocabularies of rights-protection, or democracy. However, very soon in half a month, I realized what this means to China, what is politics, what is society, and what Chinese society needs.

Another interviewee, homeowner D, was an expert in protecting homeowners’ rights and organizing homeowners to establish HOAs. He was often invited to train homeowners in other neighborhoods:

I was invited [to train homeowners] when they wanted to establish their new HOAs. You should learn how to be responsible, and figure out how to unite your neighbors. We have to do something for ourselves, and for our country. We cannot escape [this].

To him training homeowners in other neighborhoods was not just about helping them protect their property rights. It was part of a larger effort to actualize the inescapable obligation to themselves and the country.

Another homeowner E saw organizing homeowners as a contribution to a more civil and democratic society:

I think this [organizing homeowners] is a foundation of the Chinese society. Why cannot we make democracy work in Chinese society? It is because this foundation is not good. It is difficult to organize ordinary people, and they don't even know how to have meetings [to discuss public affairs] as well as how to protect their interests.

The frequent appearance of this “individual-country” association invites further interpretation. The leap from personal behavior to its implications for China may sound abrupt logically, if not pretentious, to some readers, but it makes sense if we see it from the Confucian perspective. As discussed above, Confucianism expects virtuous individuals, or *junzi*, to not only perfect their private behaviors but also contribute to the good order of the state. The “individual-country” link mirrors the sequence from “regulating households” to “bringing order to states” in Confucianism. As homeowners saw their work in the neighborhood as part of their inescapable responsibility to the society, they devoted more time and energy to homeowner organizing.

Some homeowners elaborated this linkage in more detail. A female HOA organizer (A3) explained how “natural” it was to progress from taking care of one's household affairs to community affairs when commenting on women's participation in neighborhood affairs:

We women actually didn't really care / wasn't really able to care much about big issues. And it [participation in neighborhood affairs] is just a natural thing for us, because after we have taken care of our house and family, it is natural that we are going to take care of the community environment surrounding us. We move from things inside our family to things outside our family, such as the stairs [in

apartment buildings], and then to our neighborhood and even to areas across the road...

In another case, such an “individual-country” relation even served to legitimize their behavior. The neighborhood of homeowner C1 faced some unfavorable conditions mentioned above in setting up the HOA, and the homeowners encountered some government officials who thought that their effort was “revolting against the government”. She defended their behaviors as part of the effort in “perfecting” national development.

Actually, from a macro perspective, our establishment of homeowners association is for perfecting *guojia* (國家, country-family, or national) construction. But during the process, government officials thought that we were revolting against the government, picking on their problems. They have the wrong idea.

In fact, she even went on to develop a more comprehensive conception of citizenship and evaluate the government officials against it accordingly:

I think they [homeowners] have a strong [sense of] social responsibility. That is, as a *ren* (人, person/human-being), we should not only be a *shunmin* (順民, agreeable/obedience-person [of a country]), and *liangmin* (良民, good-person [of a country]); we should also be a *gongmin* (公民, public-person [of a country]^{viii}).

“Public-person” (*gongmin*), carries a lot of weight—public affairs, country’s affairs. Civil servants have to know what their role is: you are to serve everyone (為大家服務). Because what they [the civil servants] get is taxpayers’ money.

[They] should learn from us. Our homeowners have not even given us any money!

From our perspective, this Confucian idea of social responsibility not only constituted their neighborhood involvement but also helped them counter government officials’ frame of “homeowner rebellion”. It conferred legitimacy to their behavior, allowing them to stand against political obstruction and continue with their action.

Sharp distinction between public and private

Our interviews also found that homeowners associated special meanings with the concepts of *gong* (公, public) and *si* (私, private). They classified and evaluated their behaviors as well as other homeowners' against a norm that distinguished strictly between the two concepts; effort that might be suspected as serving private gains was detested and severely criticized. To many interviewees, organizing for the neighborhood represented a service to the "public". The term "public" often had a positive connotation. Homeowner B, for example, described himself as "public-spirited" and had a "public personality" when explaining why he started organizing homeowners for his neighborhood:

I am the kind of person who is public-spirited and have a public personality. I care a lot about public affairs. When the property management firm sued 16 or 17 homeowners in my neighborhood because they did not pay property management fee, I was worried that our neighborhood would become tumultuous, and also the [quality of] property management was too poor, so I started to organize homeowners.

On the other hand, those who did not contribute were seen as focusing only on "small" (private) "personal interests", which carried clearly a negative connotation. Homeowner K commented that:

Not many people think about this matter of self-governing. So their general behavior is "don't care, don't participate". Even for those whose personal interests have been infringed upon, they just "open one eye and close one eye. ... [It is] the bad-root-nature (劣根性) of Chinese people who focus on small personal interests (小利).

It was widely reported that in order to garner trust and support from other homeowners, one's motive had to be related mostly, if not completely, to "public". For instance, when

homeowner C1 was trying to garner others' support in the neighborhood, she described the establishment of HOA as a *gongyi* (公益, public-beneficial) event that required strong dedication:

The other day we were saying why [we failed] to establish our homeowners' association. And I said establishing homeowners' association is a *gongyi* (公益, public-beneficial) event. One has to dedicate oneself, dedicate his efforts and financial resources.

Homeowner K also reported with pride that no one in his team carried with them a “private-heart” (私心, private-heart):

We all work in accordance with the regulations. We hold ourselves to a high standard. And in our team no one brings in his *sixin* (私心, private-heart), so we are very united.

Organizing effort might be criticized for serving “private” interests. As reported, homeowner M complained about her experience of dealing with local governments. The officials were suspicious of their motives and criticized them as having in it “private-interest”:

We had a big headache when dealing with the Street Office. There are all kinds of problems at the lower level of the government.... These people are very bureaucratic. When you initiate to establish a homeowners association, they will first assume that you are serving *sili* (私利, private-interest).

Many homeowners did admit to us that their participation served both personal and public interests. Yet the normative expectation of benefiting the public was so strong that they felt obliged to justify themselves why that their motives were not purely public. One homeowner (M) explained her “half-public-beneficial” motive at length:

It (my motive) might be said as *half-public-beneficial* (半公益). It cannot be counted as purely public-beneficial because I receive benefits from it (HOA organizing). Other people receive benefits from it too. But I have to contribute a lot, including surviving a lot of gossips. For example, when our previous property management company left (was fired), there were lots of gossips, saying we had collected a lot of money from the rents of the basement. ...

Overall, normative disapprovals of the pursuits of “private”-ness were expressed in a variety of forms, such as *zisi* (自私, self-private, or selfish), *sili* (私利, private-interest), *sixin* (私心, private-heart, or [with] motives of private interest). Such an expectation was widely shared among the interviewed homeowners.

Discussion

Our empirical investigation found some common distinctions and associations shared among the homeowners in their neighborhood governing efforts through HOAs. HOA organizers were normatively expected to serve with purely “public” motives and renounce “private” ones, whereas neighborhood management was not merely seen as a means for improving living conditions, but a patriotic act of serving the country. These shared meanings corresponded to the ideal of *junzi* in Confucianism as well as its guide to moral cultivation: virtuous individuals are expected to pursue public-righteousness instead of private-interest, and they are to pursue the “ultimate goodness” by progressing from one’s personal self to one’s family and country, and eventually to the world.

The findings suggest important implications for future research. Existing literature has largely conceived neighborhood governance as nexus of contracts or social ties. Both perspectives nevertheless beg further questions: What shapes homeowners’ interests, as well as their creation of social network and the accumulation of social capital? What determine the

acceptability of certain institutional arrangements and practices in neighborhood governance? Our analysis provides initial answers to these questions. It shows that neighborhood governance does not take place in a meaning vacuum—the role of the participants, their acts, and the created governance structures, as well as the neighborhood itself may all be imbued with rich meanings that are sustained and negotiated in the process. These related meanings constitute people’s interests, expectations, and their involvement in neighborhood governance. These findings contribute to Ostrom’s (2005) Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework by elaborating how “attributes of community” (the meaning context of Confucian ideas) may influence individuals’ collective governing effort (for their neighborhoods). Our study also answers the recent call for a decentered theory of governance (Bevir, 2013), which views governing institutions as practices embedded in the cultural and historical contexts of the involved actors (see also Bevir & Rhodes, 2010).

For sure, there may be other potentially influential ideas in our empirical setting (see Cai & Sheng, 2013). Even though Beijing has been the political, economic and cultural capital of China before and after the revolution for more than half a millennium, whereas Confucianism had been the core ruling ideology for roughly the same period, one should still remain open to the potential influence of other ideas. For example, the Communist ideological emphasis on public service might have reinforced our interviewees’ beliefs. Our interview records also indicated, perhaps due to the economic liberalization in the past three decades, some influence of the market logic: A few homeowners demanded better treatment from the developers with the reason that they were the latter’s “customers”. Professional identities, contemporary pop cultures, as well as other philosophical-cultural-political ideas such as Daoism and Buddhism may also influence the homeowners. What is important is that some intersubjectively shared meanings are embedded in the homeowners’ narratives and constitutive of their involvement in neighborhood affairs. Further research is warranted to

investigate the roles of various culturally and historically embedded ideas in shaping people's behaviors and their accepted practices in contemporary neighborhood governance.

Our findings also complement recent discussion on the impacts of participation on citizenship development in China (Wang, Li & Cooper, 2015; Wang & Dai, 2012) or specifically the argument that HOAs provides a good arena for citizenship development (see Read, 2003). Thus far, the literature has been arguing from a capacity building perspective that citizen participation is a good training ground for citizenship and democracy (De Tocqueville, 1840), and that a key to citizenship cultivation is education (Cooper, 1991; 2011; see also Stivers, 2001). One important remaining question is that whether the participants *also* see that what they are doing embodies the values of democracy and modern right-based citizenship. This concern is similar to the debate about whether the “rightful resistance” activities in China (O'Brien & Li, 2006) represent “growing rights consciousness or a rules consciousness that has existed for centuries” (O'Brien, 2013, 1059; see also Perry, 2008; Zhu, 2011). From our perspective, efforts in neighborhood governing, to some, may simply be about serving the instrumental purposes of improving their own living conditions and/or the market price of their apartments (which may not be very different from some corporate board members deliberating for company profits). But interestingly, our results showed that at least in Beijing, or perhaps other areas receiving strong influence from Confucianism, some people did share similar understanding about neighborhood governance and consider their corresponding efforts as carrying significant implications for the country. While more empirical research is needed to confirm these initial findings, relevant legislators and government agencies should probably take these potential associations into consideration.

Finally, our analysis may contribute to the recent proposal of developing *endogenous* citizenship ethics for contemporary China (Heberer, 2009). It demonstrates how core Confucian ideas remain deeply ingrained in people's conceptions, influencing their attitudes

and behaviors in situations they consider “public”. It also echoes recent empirical research on what constitutes “public” and what values are desired in public affairs (see Jørgensen & Rutgers, 2015). Policy makers and public managers should consider if the assumptions underlying their policies and expectations are consistent (enough) with the meanings nexus shared by relevant policy actors and members of the wider society.

Conclusion

Until recently, economic development had been dominating the developmental agenda in China since Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening Up Policy. The rapid process of development has caused devastating disruption to China’s indigenous cultures and the fabric of many existing communities. The possibility of establishing HOAs and allowing local people to govern their neighborhoods presents an encouraging opportunity to rectify such a trend. However, self-organizing for governance is difficult, and it is even more so in China as ordinary Chinese people generally lack such experience and have limited political and economic rights. Whether they can overcome the challenges and materialize this opportunity remain an open question. Our findings demonstrate how traditional Confucian ideas might have driven and guided homeowners’ self-organizing effort for governing their neighborhoods. Seeing neighborhood governance as constituted of nexus of shared meanings, our analysis shows alternative ways for conceiving urban policies that are more conducive to the revival of indigenous governing understanding and practices in China. While further ethnographic research is warranted, our analysis provides important lessons for the nation’s reforming governance.

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Appendix

Table. Interview Protocol

Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduction of the research team and individual interviewers ▪ Explain purposes of the study ▪ State the proposed duration of discussion ▪ Explain confidentiality of the collected information ▪ Obtain consent
Neighborhood characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Neighborhood size ▪ Common age group ▪ Housing price
Organizational characteristics of HOAs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Founding date ▪ Under what circumstances ▪ Size of participants
Experience of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ When did you begin to participate in organizing HOAs? What motivated you to do that? ▪ Can you share with us your story of participation in HOAs? Do you have a goal in your participation in HOA? ▪ What do you think of your participation in HOAs? What have you obtained in this process? Are there any changes to your mindset and skills? Can you talk more about these changes? ▪ How often do board members have a meeting? What do you usually discuss? ▪ Can you list the organizations that you deal with frequently on neighborhood affairs?

ⁱ Available online at http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2007-03/19/content_554452.htm. Last assessed 22 November 2015.

ⁱⁱ Many interpretations of “governance” were found in the literature (for example, Le Galès, 1998; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Rhodes, 2014). We follow Bevir and conceive governance broadly as “all processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, market, or network; whether over a family, tribe, corporation, or territory; and whether by laws, norms, power, or language. [It] is a broader term than government because it focuses not only on the state and its institutions but also on the creation of rule and order in social practices” (2013, 1). See also Ostrom (1990).

ⁱⁱⁱ For a more skeptical view on the democratic promise of these “private governments” (see McKenzie 1996; 2011).

^{iv} For example, an investigation in the neighborhood councils in Los Angeles found that communities with lower social status had more diverse boards if *both* the mechanisms of “elite bias” and “homophily” were present, as compared to the presence of the mechanism of “homophily” alone, whereas membership diversity in neighborhood community had a weak relationship with the community’s political tolerance and its access to information (Weare, Musso & Jun, 2009).

^v Lau (1983) translates the paragraph as “The Master said, ‘For Gentlemen of purpose and men of benevolence while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished.’”

^{vi} A comprehensive online source of Chinese literature, ctext.org, translates the paragraph as “The Master said, ‘The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain.’” Available online at <http://ctext.org/analects/li-ren>. Last accessed 15 February 2015.

^{vii} Available online at <http://ctext.org/liji/li-yun>. Last accessed 15 February 2015.

^{viii} The term is commonly translated as “citizen”. However, in the Chinese context, the association between “citizen” and its associated rights is usually not emphasized, as suggested from her elaboration.