COVID-19 and Uncertain Intimacy

State–Society Relations in Urban China and Beyond

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ABSTRACT: The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought new uncertainties to state–society relations in urban China. Arguably, China’s containment of the pandemic can largely be attributed to the state’s effective, but controversial, governance of society. At the grassroots level of Chinese cities, local state *shequ* (‘communities’ centred on the Residents’ Committees) have played a vital role in terms of both surveillance and service provision. However, rather than establishing an intimate relationship with civil society as the state intended, the latter’s handling of the pandemic resulted in contested views on the extent to which the state should intervene in society. This article engages with the ongoing debate on state–society relations, and argues that in urban China we are now seeing the advance of the state.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, intimacy, Residents’ Committees, *shequ*, state–society relations, urban China

On 7 April 2020, China reported zero new deaths from COVID-19 for the first time since the National Health Commission started to publish its figures in January.¹ On the following day, 8 April, the quarantine of the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan, where the coronavirus first emerged, was lifted, 76 days after it began on 23 January. With a vaccine and specific medicines still unavailable, these milestones in what China describes as a ‘people’s war’ against COVID-19 were reached largely through the state’s effective, but controversial, governance of society. At the grassroots level of Chinese cities, *shequ* (‘communities’ centred on the Residents’ Committees) have become part of the frontline in the ‘war’ and played a vital role in the containment of the pandemic in terms of both surveillance and service provision.

Specifically, when nearly the entire country was under lockdown, the *shequ* workers were busy implementing a range of measures taken by the state. Their tasks generally included checking temperature, inspecting residential compounds to ensure self-isolation, visiting household for contact tracing, liaising with hospitals and the police whenever nec-

essary, and delivering the essentials. They are seen to function as both state actors and social workers, blurring the boundaries between the state and society. Many urban residents expressed mixed feelings towards what the *shequ* had to offer. On the one hand, *shequ* are spoken of as a valued source of support during the state of emergency (e.g. providing basic necessities). On the other hand, they are thought to worsen issues surrounding invasion of privacy and the violation of freedom, and occasionally *shequ* workers are seen to abuse their power. Rather than establishing an intimate relationship with civil society as the state intended, it resulted in complicating existing contested views on the extent to which the state should intervene in society. Arguably, the outbreak of COVID-19 has brought new uncertainties to state–society relations in urban China and beyond.

Ongoing Debate on State–Society Relations

The demarcation between the state and society has dominated public imagination and academic dis-

course to such an extent that, as Timothy Mitchell notes, ‘a definition of the state always depends on distinguishing it from society’ (1991: 77). Drawing our attention to its ‘elusiveness’, Mitchell proposes a shift of focus from the boundary between state and society to ‘the detailed political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction . . . is produced’ (1991: 78). Building on a variety of experiences in the Third World, and partially as a response to the trend towards ‘bringing the state back in’ (Evans et al. 1985; Skocpol 1985), a ‘state-in-society’ perspective was introduced in the 1990s (Migdal et al. 1994). Through treating the state as disaggregated ‘parts’ rather than as a monolith, this view emphasises that ‘interactions of state and society are mutually transforming’ (Migdal 1994: 23, 2001). While the notion of ‘civil society’ is seen as a general ethnocentric ideal on the basis of a wide range of case studies (Hann and Dunn 1996), the flurry of state-oriented scholarship (cf. Evans et al. 1985) has been seen as being more or less trapped by the ‘simplistic dichotomy between “state” and “society”’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 3). Begoña Aretxaga points out that ‘the separation between civil society and the state does not exist in reality’ (2003: 398).

On the other hand, scholars like Akhil Gupta (1995) consider the conceptualisation of ‘state/civil society’ as Western and universalising, and inapplicable to ‘developing’ societies such as India. Frank Pieke’s (2004) anthropology of the Chinese state can be seen to further break down state–society dualism. Examining the transformation of a village office into a villagers’ committee in southwest China, he argues that ‘the state is not merely a set of institutions existing in society, the state is society’ simultaneously (2004: 533). More recently, drawing on research conducted in four neighbourhoods in Shanghai, Yihan Xiong (2020) argues against the clean separation between state and society, and stresses a ‘symbiotic’ relationship between them.

The State’s Governance of Society in Urban China

The socialist state of China has endeavoured to achieve a full integration of the state and society since its founding in the late 1940s. Below the municipal and district governments in the city, Street Offices (which oversee Residents’ Committees) and Residents’ Committees were established in the 1950s as part of a nationwide socialist structure to organise those urbanites who fell outside the *danwei* (‘work unit’) system (cf. Bray 2005). They are seen as ‘organizations de-

signed to transgress any clear state–society boundary, to intermediate between the two at an intimate level’ (Read 2012: 8). Interlocutors remembered this kind of intimacy as largely trivial and sometimes annoying, particularly because Residents’ Committees were actively involved in quotidian neighbourhood disputes and even disputes within households. Housed and equipped humbly and comprising mainly elderly, and often retired, women with limited education, Residents Committees were considered insignificant. One of the reasons given by interlocutors for their insignificance was that most urban dwellers belonged to *danwei*, which had more authority and resources, and also combined state and social functions.

The reform and opening-up era, which the country has been in since 1978, has witnessed the decline of *danwei* and massive rural–urban migration as the market economy was ushered in and gradually gained momentum. With more and more people drifting outside the state system, urban governance became an important item on the state’s agenda. Interlocutors from Beijing recalled that the term *shequ* began to be officially used to refer to their neighbourhood(s) in the mid-1990s, when the *shequ* building campaign was vigorously carried out. In the early 21st century the Residents’ Committees were modernised and professionalised with nicer offices and younger and better educated staff members. More divisions were set up to respond to different sections of Street Offices, ranging from the general office to family planning to social order and security.

It is worth noting that, literally meaning ‘community’, *shequ* can refer either to the neighbourhood, or the Residents’ Committee in charge of that neighbourhood. That there is no distinction between the socio-spatial unit and the administrative one is perhaps another example of the state framing of the social. Besides, by concretising and spatialising ‘community’, the state established its presence in everyday space and attempted to guide residents’ imagination of their ‘community’ in a way that was different from that of Benedict Anderson’s (1983). It is clear that the term *shequ* does not convey the meaning of ‘civil society’ that is associated with the English word ‘community’. The boundaries between the state and society vanished where the ideas of state-designed *shequ* (‘community’) and geographical neighbourhood mean the same thing to urban residents.

The twenty-first century has experienced state-directed campaigns aimed at the construction of a harmonious society (*hexie shehui*). This has been followed by the more recent state promotion of the governance of *shequ* (*shequ zhili*) with the CCP’s (Chinese

Communist Party) leadership at the core. Much better funded and empowered to carry out more governmental tasks (though mainly administrative rather than decision-oriented), including health, education, and issues to do with women and children, benefits and housing, the *shequ* has in fact increasingly become an important part of the state system. The discourse of ‘harmony’ invokes political orthodoxy (Confucianism in particular), and is often read as the state’s intention to intensify its involvement in society. Given that the idea of a harmonious relationship between state and society was essential also to ancient statecraft and politics, the Chinese state and society had never existed as separate entities. Nevertheless, rather than a coherent whole, their interpenetration had often resulted in internal disjuncture, tensions, and twists and turns.

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Though still officially defined as ‘voluntary organisations’, *shequ*, in the sense of Residents’ Committees, are largely seen as the local state by urbanites. They differ greatly from the Western conceptualisation of the neighbourhood organisation as ‘a loose form of self-governing voluntary association’ (Read 2012: 3). Describing the former as ‘extensions of the state’ and the latter as a non-state zone, Benjamin L. Read attributes the discrepancies to the different political cultures concerned: the former derived from ‘a more regimented vision of how society is to be ordered’ and the latter from ‘historically liberal settings’ (2012: 3). Seen in this light, it would be difficult to say that *shequ* constitute an essential part of civil society. Rather, what we can conclude from above is the gradual advance of the state. It might be worthwhile to note that, alongside kinship and other forms of connectedness, ‘state networks’ are still found to be ‘powerful’ in rural southwest China (Flower and Leonard 1996).

As discussed in the preceding section, over the decades prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the state in China had made continuous efforts to construct what Fulong Wu describes as ‘a governable society’ (2002: 1080). This phenomenon, viewed from the West, would be understood as intrusive and authoritarian. Yet it would be simplistic to suggest that organisations like the Residents’ Committees would be largely rejected by residents. Rather, Read finds that ‘as of the 2000s . . . [they] enjoyed substantial public support’ (2012: 9). The reach of the state to the very bottom of the social structure, he thinks, ‘depending

on one’s perspective, could appear unsettling, amusing, helpful, wasteful or simply the normal condition of things’ (2012: 8). Xiao Ying (2015) considers the state–society perspective to be insufficient to explain the complexity of China’s social transformation. He proposes an alternative perspective of ‘institutions and life’, in the sense of ‘formal institutions’ and ‘everyday activities’.

COVID-19 is seen to unite urban residents under *shequ*, which have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to contain the spread of the virus through implementing strict measures of lockdown. Keeping the general population under constant surveillance, the *shequ* are often seen as the acceptable face of the state. However, it is difficult to foresee how the strengthened *shequ* will be received in the long run after things get back to normal in the post-pandemic era. During peaceful times, it is usually disadvantaged groups, such as those depending on the basic living allowance, who speak of *shequ* in positive terms. Those who are financially and socially independent tend to ignore the *shequ* and to seek their own social space elsewhere. If a certain intimacy has been achieved between the state and society in times of crisis, the nature and sustainability of the intimacy remains uncertain.

As of the writing of this article, the pandemic is accelerating outside China and has infected more than 10 million people worldwide. Increasingly exposing social problems such as race and inequality, COVID-19 will not be stopped without appropriate and measured state intervention. It is a situation that calls for attuned and nuanced state–society relations at the global level. ‘No one is safe until everyone is safe’ (Ghebreyesus 2018). The virus can only be overcome scientifically and cooperatively, for example through the development of vaccines by the collaborative efforts of scientists across borders.

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Note

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