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Community development in Chinese commodity housing estates through civic action

In contrast to the 'community lost' argument describing the changing local social order in urban China, an increasing amount of local civic action is occurring in newly built Chinese commodity housing estates through the application of local social networks and capital, enabling the development of local community life. On the basis of the key themes underlying local civic action, in this study we develop a theoretical framework linking the application and development of local social networks and capital through multiple civic action steps by applying a dichotomised definition of social networks and considering the involvement of multiple stakeholders within China's institutions. In a case study of a newly built Chinese commodity housing estate, we used interviews and questionnaires to identify social changes in the neighbourhood inspired by civic action that promotes place attachment, mutual trust and civic responsibility. The development of local community life is created in a heterogeneous neighbourhood, and the influence of civic action on the local social order is reflected within the Chinese context.

Keywords: Chinese commodity housing estates, community, civic action, social networks, social capital

Introduction

Concerns relating to the resilience and sustainability of urban communities and neighbourhoods have a long history in urban studies (Putnam, 1993; Dempsey et al., 2011). These concerns are related to whether, and if so how, there should be a constant transition in the social order at the spatial level in an urban neighbourhood, given that the 'community lost' argument declares that local community life has been replaced by anonymity, individualism and competition as a consequence of rampant urbanisation and globalisation (Wellman and Leighton, 1979; Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Zwiers et al., 2016). Since the 1980s, scholars worldwide have bemoaned the fact that community life is either deteriorating or completely disappearing in urban neighbourhoods as a result of the increasing fragmentation of urban societies (Clark et al., 2017; Sakızlıoğlu and Lees, 2019). Putnam's study has suggested that this is the result of a decline in local social capital, which refers to 'the features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual

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benefit' (1993, 1). This argument has been widely applied by urbanism scholars in both developed and developing countries, especially those that are experiencing ongoing urbanism (Dempsey et al., 2011; Wu and Logan, 2016).

The narrative of poor neighbourhood connections in contemporary urban China has been studied from the 'community lost' perspective within the context of the ongoing urbanism that has transformed urban residential spaces into individual enclaves (Wu, 2015), commonly known as Chinese commodity housing estates (CCHEs). CCHEs are collections of private properties including individual residences and collective facilities and services that are continually being built to house the ever-growing urban population, and there has been a boom in demand over the past decade that has seen house prices almost tripling in most cities. These residential compounds are commonly gated, high-rise, quality-facilitated developments that include both collective and private properties, and have become increasingly heterogeneous following the ongoing restructuring of Chinese urban society, as individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds have sought to purchase property (Li et al., 2012). This arrangement is in stark contrast to the traditional courtyards and socialist workers' villages that were built before the reform era, which mostly featured a homogeneous socioeconomic context and cordial reciprocity (Huang, 2006; Cheng et al., 2021).

Given their ubiquitous nature, CCHEs have frequently been studied by scholars seeking to investigate neighbourhood changes that have occurred in the context of the 'community lost' argument (Fu and Lin, 2014; He, 2015; Wang, 2016). Numerous empirical studies have highlighted the deterioration of local neighbourhood connections, social cohesion and social capital, finding that individuals and households have become increasingly isolated and anonymous (He and Wu, 2007; Zhu et al., 2012), and have bemoaned the difficulties involved in forming or building local community life in these CCHEs (Wu et al., 2019). Empirically, property management bodies or homeowners' associations, which are forms of self-governance that are commonly found in CCHEs, are unable to spontaneously promote the integration of local residents, and the reclassification of China's local state administration has been unable to promote resident connections within a highly heterogeneous context (Chen et al., 2021). Most contemporary Chinese urban studies have adopted the 'community lost' perspective in analysing the social changes occurring in CCHEs (Li et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2012; Zhu, 2020).

A counter-narrative is, however, slowly emerging suggesting that an urban community can be created within these CCHEs, wherein local social networks and social capital are developed through homeowners' collective actions (Soja, 1980; Wang and Gooderham, 2014; Zhu, 2020). In these newly built neighbourhoods, homeowners from various socioeconomic backgrounds have displayed their capacity and aspirations through collective actions (Fan and Yan, 2019; Smith, 2019; Zhu, 2020). Theoretically, if the civic action occurring in CCHEs can be perceived as the collective pursuit

of common goods (Putnam, 1993), local community life could potentially be enhanced through extended social networks and increased social capital (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Webster, 2003; Smith, 2019). However, there are challenges to the potential enhancement of community life as reflected by the growing number of civic actions in CCHEs because these collective engagements only reflect the homeowners' desire to protect their collective or individual property rights, whereas civic virtue is related to local democracy (Li and Li, 2013; He, 2015). Given China's unique sociopolitical context and the inevitable institutional barriers (Wu et al., 2019), these collective homeowners' actions cannot be viewed as being solely based on their personal conscientiousness or aspirations in relation to property rights, but rather must be viewed in terms of the creation and development of social networks (Shih, 2019).

This study thus addresses the research question of whether local social networks and social capital are enhanced through homeowners' civic actions in CCHEs in an effort to promote local community life. We begin by developing a theoretical framework to probe the continual application and progressive development of local social networks and social capital through civic action. We then apply this framework to a case study involving a local civic action, which we examine using mixed methods to determine how extended social networks, enhanced social capital, stronger place attachment and greater mutual trust resulted from this local civic action. The case study findings illustrate why and how community life can be created through civic action in CCHEs. This study provides a new vision, an innovative research paradigm and a theoretical framework for civic action and community development within the Chinese context.

Theoretical debates: community formation through local civic action

Understanding local civic action

Originally, civic action had a democratic purpose associated with civic virtue, and was understood to be a reflection of grassroots collective efforts aimed at achieving social and political transformations. However, in the contemporary global context, this conceptualisation has been challenged by empirical studies suggesting that civic action is not necessarily aimed at benefiting anyone beyond the local social network (Son and Lin, 2008). Adler and Goggin (2005, 238) defined civic action as 'an individual's duty to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship with the obligation to actively participate in volunteer service activities that strengthen the local community'. By synthesising various definitions, Son and Lin (2008, 331) described civic action as:

> taking many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with

others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.

From an empirical perspective, contemporary civic action can take various forms, but mainly occurs in two spheres: civic participation in voluntary associations within the social sphere, or voting and petitioning within the political sphere (McBride et al., 2006). In terms of functionality, civic action can be seen as citizens' collective actions aimed at resolving problems that emerge as a result of government shortcomings. Specifically, civic action is excluded from 'other types of public behaviours such as work, leisure, and activities of daily living' (McBride et al., 2006, 153). These definitions of civic action are further illustrated by Putnam's work on the social changes in economies that have experienced transitions. Here, civic action is generally understood to be part of a discussion about or reaction to 'civic disengagement':

> Civic disengagement appears to be an equal opportunity affliction. The sharp, steady declines in club meetings […] and electoral turnout have hit virtually all sectors of American society over the last several decades, and in roughly equal measure. (Putnam, 2001, 185)

All these conceptualisations clearly relate civic action to the perceived social networks that exist in social entities, and highlight the importance of social networks in facilitating any civic action. Thus, within the geographical context of an urban neighbourhood, civic action 'is experiencing a sense of connection, interrelatedness, and naturally commitment towards the greater community' (Diller, 2001, 22). Here, civic action involves coordinated action by participants whose civic virtue leads them to seek improvements in their common life or to pursue common goods, as Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014, 810) noted:

> (1) Participants coordinate interaction around a mission of improving common life, however they define 'improving' and 'common'. (2) Participants coordinate their ongoing interaction together, expecting, if not always, to attain some flexibility in coordinating interaction rather than imagining their action as mainly being predetermined by pre-existing rules and roles. (3) Participants implicitly act as members of a larger, imagined society – however they are imagining it – to whom their problem-solving can appeal.

Notably, regarding the above quotation, there are three key themes in relation to civic action. First, the collective concern, to a certain degree, invokes ideas of local civic virtue and norms, and also implies the application of local social networks as social capital when participants coordinate their interactions with the aim of achieving consensus. Second, civic action should be seen as a process of ongoing interactions illustrated by the multiple steps that are usually involved in civic action, which is mainly conducted through state-sanctioned institutions. Third, who the civic action is against

(i.e. the local civic actors' opponent) and to whom the civic action can be appealed (i.e. the official arbitrator) imply coordination and cooperation among multiple stakeholders to achieve the desired outcome. These themes underpin research into the potential changes in local social networks and social capital as a result of civic action.

Theoretical framework of changes in social networks and social capital as a result of civic action

On the basis of the theories outlined above, throughout the multiple steps of civic action, there should be the consistent application and development of social networks and social capital (Son and Lin 2008). At the commencement of a civic action, the application of social networks, representing the existing social capital, is fundamental in developing a civic action into a collective concern. This builds the capacity of local collectives and encourages others to join in the civic action (Sakızlıoğlu and Lees, 2019; Meléndez and Martinez-Cosio, 2021). From this perspective, the civic actors' social networks not only function as the capital supporting their civic action, but also become more concentrated and widespread. Then, within the state-sanctioned institution surrounding a civic action, the continual application of social networks can be anticipated, resulting in enhanced participants' interactions aimed at achieving their collective ambitions by confronting and negotiating with other stakeholders. Thus, local social networks are continually extending and enhancing their social capital. Local social networks and social capital also benefit from interactions, such as negotiations and trade-offs, among multiple stakeholders, including their opponents and arbitrators. Once trade-offs have been negotiated to facilitate coordination or arbitration related to the collective concern, civic actors are more likely to believe that their participation will be valued and supported. This enhancement of local social networks and social capital can continue to the end of a civic action, and thus a diverse set of people tend to produce a norm of generalised reciprocity. Synthesising these arguments, the application and development of local social networks and social capital can be represented by a series of progressive changes within multiple steps, as shown in Figure 1.

Regarding these progressive changes, presumably the civic actors' social networks, regardless of whether they are loosely knit or otherwise, provide the initial impetus for the civic action, given that they represent local social capital. Once these networks have achieved their collective aim, the local social networks and social capital benefit through investments in increased internal interactions. These investments continue to enhance local social networks and social capital, which are fundamental elements of an urban community along with place attachment, mutual trust and civic responsibility among participants (Soja, 1980; Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Dempsey et al., 2011; Longhofer et al., 2018). In addition, in relation to the application and develop-
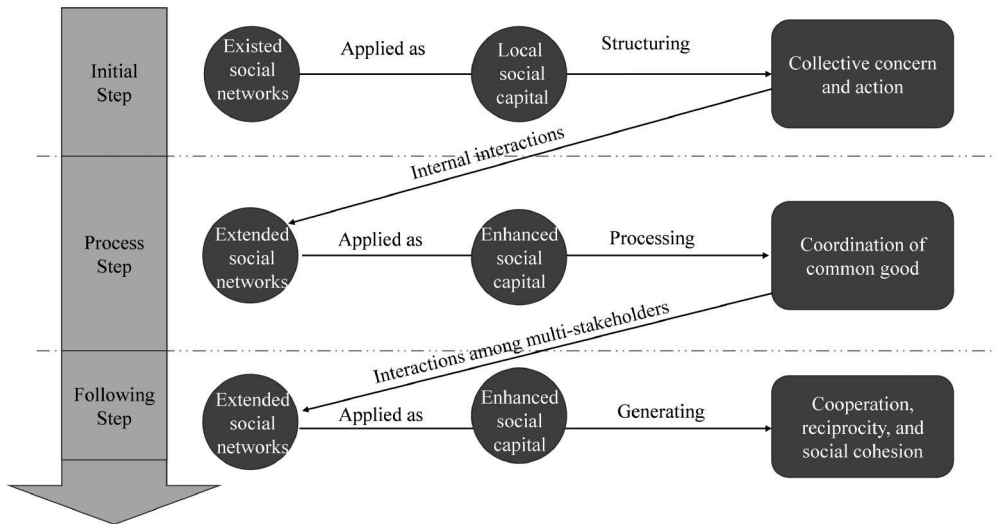
Figure 1   Progressive changes in local social networks through civic action [AQ1]

ment of local social networks, it is important to recognise the unique role played by those who initiate or organise civic action (Fu, 2019; Fan and Yan, 2019; Meléndez and Martinez-Cosio, 2021). These individuals play a fundamental role in facilitating internal and external interactions, and are continually extending their social networks and increasing their social capital as civic actors (Portes, 1998). Regarding these findings from previous empirical studies, it is essential to apply Son and Lin's (2008) dichotomisation of local social networks in relation to civic action into organisational social networks developed by the residents and individual social networks developed by individuals as initiators or organisers. From the commencement of civic action, local organisational social networks are capable of continually facilitating and developing the necessary organisational social capital to support collective action, while individual social networks are also vital, and often intertwined with organisational social networks (Manturuk et al., 2010). This intertwining has a mutually reinforcing effect on civic action by increasing local participation and empowering the local neighbourhood, and promotes continual investment in local social networks and social capital, with the positive consequences of promoting stronger place attachment, mutual trust, and civic virtues, and building a stronger sense of community (Webster, 2003; Lo Alex et al., 2015; Corcoran et al., 2017). Despite this, in the course of external interactions with the state institution, other stakeholders, as opponents and arbitrators, can also influence the development of local social networks and social capital (Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2014). Opponents of the civic action might seek to have a disruptive influence on the application of local social networks (Fu, 2019).
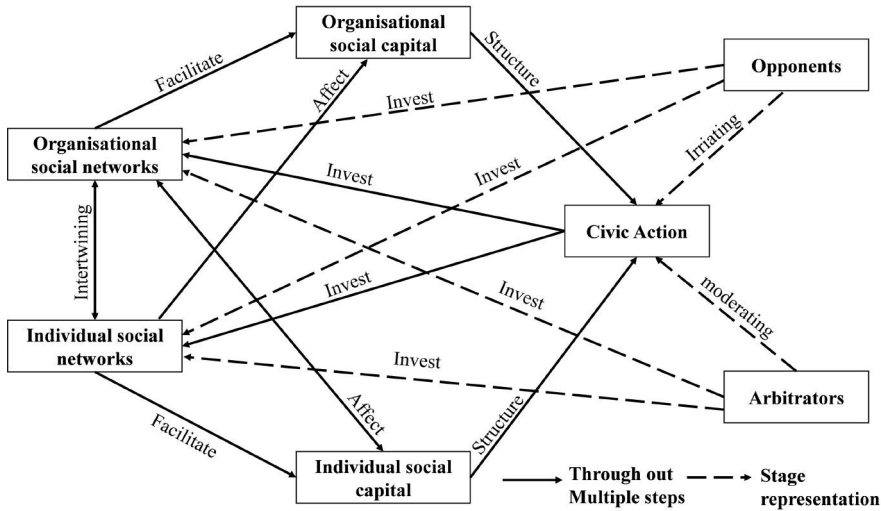
Figure 2   Theoretical framework [AQ2]

Alternatively, following mediation by the state institution, an arbitrator's involvement could also influence the development of local social networks and social capital, for example, by yielding to local collectivism when negotiating and coordinating disputes and delivering the final arbitration decision, or providing compensation to local civic actors (Wang, 2016). Notably, these presumed investments by opponents and arbitrators are included in specific stages of the civic action (Teets, 2015).

Summarising the theories of progressive changes and multiple stakeholders' functions in relation to these progressive changes, Figure 2 presents a theoretical framework of why, and how, local social networks can be applied and developed within the multiple steps of a civic action. Presumably, this theoretical framework demonstrates the positive changes that can occur in the local social order as a result of civic action, corresponding to the research question regarding community development in CCHEs.

Research paradigm and methods

Research paradigm

The aim of this study suggests the need for a case study to test whether our theoretical framework accurately represents community development as a result of civic action in CCHEs. Previous studies on civic actions and social networks within local communities have noted that these are 'not an objective thing out there but a function of

personal interactions and perceptions' (Merriam, 1988, 17). A case study enables these realities to be more clearly observed and evaluated, facilitating further exploration through 'detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of informa-tion' (Creswell, 1998, 73). Civic actions that occur in CCHEs, mostly in the form of petitions to China's state institution, provide clear evidence of the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including civic actors, their opponents, and arbitrators, enabling detailed observation and evaluation consistent with the above-mentioned theoretical framework.

Case study

The case study involved the Greenland Estate in the eco-tourism district within Huai'an City, Jiangsu Province, China (see Figure 3). Construction of this estate commenced in March 2014, consistent with the establishment of the district government of the day, and all units had been sold by September 2015. It is a gated residential compound featuring fourteen high-rise residential buildings (including fifty-two individual units in each building) and various other buildings surrounding the high-rises. There were 420 registered households living in this CCHE when the civic action commenced, 74 per cent of which consisted of three family generations, that is, grandparents, parents and children, while the remaining 26 per cent mostly consisted of young couples (under 35 years old) with or without children.

The civic action began in April 2016. The collective concern was directed towards the local state authority, which gave notice of its intention to occupy an indoor space

Figure 3   Location and layout of Greenland Estate and public space

of approximately 4,000 square feet located in one of the surrounding buildings that faced directly onto the main street (see Figure 2). Legally, this space was listed as having been donated to the residents by the developer. However, there was no specific record of ownership, that is, whether it was publicly owned (i.e. state-owned) or collectively owned (i.e. owned by the residents). Since 2014, the space had been used on an informal basis by some of the early residents for various social activities. In 2015, some of the residents set up a voluntary organisation to handle the management and maintenance of the space, which they perceived to be a permanent location for social contact and activities. In addition, some informative lectures were organised for the local teenagers with the support of various non-government organisations (NGOs).

In December 2015, soon after the installation of the new district government, a local street office and its associated residents' committee were authorised to administer the Greenland Estate and four adjoining CCHEs. This authorisation, including the establishment of a local street office and residents' committee, reflected the hierarchical nature of urban administration in China (Lin, 2018; Chen et al., 2021). Although residents' committees are constitutionally recognised as civic organisations, they are mostly established and run as representative agencies of state authorities at the grassroots level, undertaking delivery of social welfare and public goods, disseminating the party-state's policies, handling neighbourhood crises and maintaining local social stability in CCHEs (Lin, 2018). In March 2016, the newly installed residents' committee posted a notice announcing their intention to occupy this indoor space, which was to become their permanent office. The residents were ordered to cease using the space with immediate effect to enable refurbishment works to be undertaken. Those residents who frequently used the space raised a protest against the decision, preventing the state's workers from carrying out their refurbishment tasks, and there were violent clashes with the higher-level state authorities from the street office. However, these protests did not resolve the issue, and thus in April 2016, the residents sent a petition to the district government containing 215 signatures of local householders.

The petition was arbitrated by the District Bureau of the People's Letter and Visit (District Bureau), which is officially authorised to handle local civic petitions within China's state institution. Various negotiations and public hearings were held among multiple stakeholders, including the local residents, the civil service representatives on the local residents' committee, and the arbitrators. In June 2016, an agreement was finally reached among the multiple stakeholders. On the basis of this agreement, the indoor space was redefined as a local community centre that would accommodate both the residents' social activities and the residents' committee's administrative requirements. To recognise this spatial combination, the space was renamed the Greenland Living Centre. As shown in Figure 4, following redecoration, most of the large rooms were reserved for local neighbourhood activities, while the local residents'
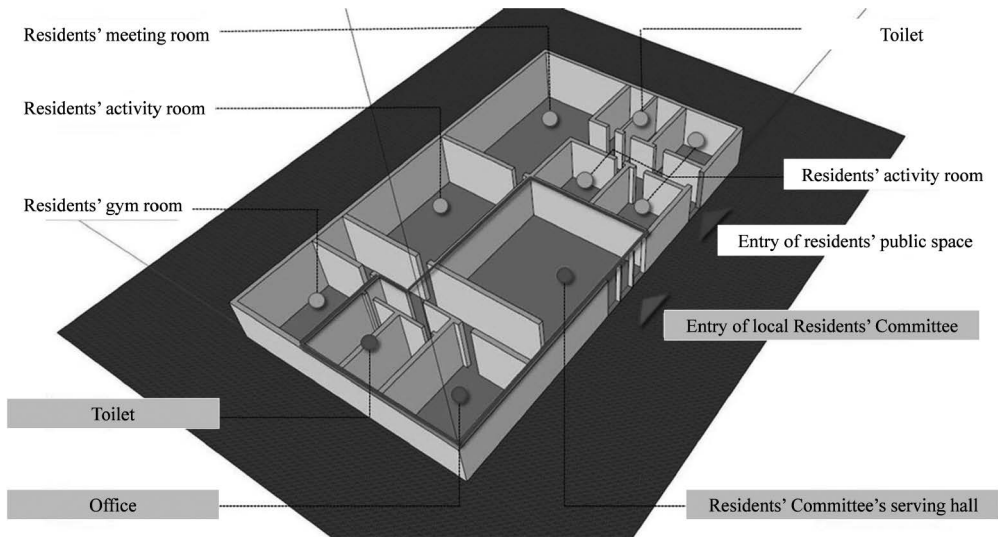
Figure 4   Layout of the new public space

committee only occupied about 30 per cent of the space. The new public space was reopened in November 2016 following its redecoration, which was mainly based on the local residents' collective input and undertaken by the residents' committee. Table 1 provides a summary of the steps involved in this civic action and the key associated issues.

Table 1   Timeline of the residents' civic action

Steps	Periods	Key issues occurred with timing
Initial	March 2016–April 2016	1) The announcement intended to occupy the indoor space, March 2016; 2) Local residents' protests and clashes with the state authorities, March 2016.
Process	April 2016–June 2016	1) Residents' submission of the petition, April 2016; 2) Meetings and public hearings held between multiple stakeholders, in May 2016; 3) The production of final arbitration, June 2016.
Following	July 2016–November 2016	1) Decoration of the new public space, July and August 2016; 2) Re-opening of the new space, November 2016.

Research methods

The research paradigm that we used involved direct access to key actors from multiple stakeholders who played important roles in the various steps involved in this civic action, and to local residents who aspired to achieving community development through civic action. First, we undertook a detailed review of the case files and identified the key actors, and then conducted semi-structured interviews with seven key actors to gather information on their perceptions regarding the application and development of local social networks and social capital through civic action. Among these key actors, three local residents, denoted as R1, R2 and R3, were interviewed because of their vital roles in initiating the use of the indoor space, raising the civic action and organising the petition. They also subsequently became the managers of the new public space following the arbitration process. As opponents of the civic action, two civil servants from the local residents' committee, denoted as C1 and C2, were interviewed because of their consistent involvement. They not only made the initial decision that irritated the residents, but also sparked the civic action and represented the local state authority's interests during the petition process, and then cooperated with the local residents in creating the new public space. Two civil servants from the District Bureau, denoted as A1 and A2, who were the key arbitrators, were also interviewed given their crucial roles in enabling a compromise to be negotiated and coordination to be achieved, and implementing the outcome of the arbitration.

Following interviews, structured questionnaires, sent to all local households, were used to collect data on the local residents' changed aspirations in relation to place attachment, mutual trust and civic responsibility following the civic action. These changed aspirations, as dependent variables, were all measured using a five-point Likert-type scale. The questionnaires covered residents' demographic characteristics, such as gender and age, which were empirically related to local civic participation within the Chinese context (Fu and Lin, 2014; Wang, 2016; Zhu, 2020). The questionnaires also collected information on the application of local organisational social networks and individual social networks in relation to civic action, including individual participation (using a three-point Likert-type scale where 3=participated since the initial step, 2=participated in the petition process, and 1=did not participate), satisfaction with the arbitration decision, connectedness to neighbours, acquaintance with the local initiators, and opinion on the new space (all measured using a five-point Likert-type scale). A regression model was applied, using SPSS 19.1, to the responses to the questionnaire in an effort to identify the correlations among the dependent and independent variables, as well as triangulating the findings from the interviews. This mixed methods approach enabled a greater theoretical and empirical understanding of the positive changes in local social networks and social capital through civic action aimed at forming a local community in the CCHEs.

Case study: the progressive development of local social networks and social capital

Initial step: residents' collective resistance to the local state authority

By 2015, the space was known as a common place that was shared by a certain proportion of Greenland Estate residents and those of the adjacent CCHEs. Given this usage, an informal management committee was established that created a schedule of social activities. As R3 stated, 'We want to make this a place that meets every neighbour's requirements and welcomes everyone'. The constant use of the space reflected these individuals' capability in terms of place-making, which has traditionally been seen as a civic virtue in Chinese society (Friedmann, 2010). Consequently, when the newly installed residents' committee announced that they intended to occupy this indoor space, the frequent users organised themselves in collective opposition to the plan, decrying it as a form of robbery. More specifically, they were angry about the local state authority's statement that the space would still be considered public, in the sense that it would be used to accommodate the state's offices, when this was going to exclude the residents from a space in which they were able to satisfy their need for social interaction:

> We were never told anything before that announcement; the local state suddenly stole it from us… Why was our use not considered public use? We already shared this space with a lot of people from other estates… this place had been used by the masses, that is, us, so it was a public space. (R1) [AQ3]

However, following clashes over the use of the space, the residents' complaints were dismissed, and the protesters were warned that their actions could potentially be construed as illegal actions causing social instability. At that point, the initiators faced concerns from their fellow residents as to what the consequences of the state's warning might be for the neighbourhood. As R3 commented, 'Some of the residents had concerns about the possible trouble that might result from our protests… fewer residents joined in our protests and actions'. Mindful that the protests had achieved nothing, these three initiators proposed submitting a formal petition as part of the 'final struggle'. Unfortunately, there was little enthusiasm among the residents:

> At that moment, our protests seemed meaningless. The loss of the space seemed to be inevitable… But we were not resigned to that. So, we decided to send a petition to the district government. (R1)

The preparation of the petition proved difficult for several reasons. First, it was difficult to achieve consensus among the initiators and their fellow residents. Some of the initiators wanted the local neighbourhood to have full ownership of the space, while others suggested sharing it with the local state authority to avoid further disputes.

By this time, the initiators did not enjoy universal community support, and lacked a strong network of social connections and the associated mutual trust, and were even undecided regarding the best course of collective action. Second, they had difficulty in gathering sufficient support from the local neighbourhood. Although they paid visits to various households within the CCHE based on their personal connections, they were only able to obtain 215 signatures on the petition, which represented just over half of all households. The petition initiators linked this outcome to their limited connections with households comprising political elites and young families who either feared the consequences of a civic action against the state authorities or lacked awareness of the issue. As R2 mentioned, 'Some neighbours refused to sign the petition because being a CPC [AQ4] member or a civil servant, they did not want to irritate the state authority… Some young families denied awareness of the space'.

Addressing the residents' opposition and protests, the local civil servants insisted that their occupation of the space would enable them to establish an administrative function and deliver real public goods to the local neighbourhood. Indeed, commencing in 2012, the CPC's policy of promoting local urban governance was listed as the top-priority task for local residents' committees, providing direct insight into and involvement in the local neighbourhoods' social life. Meanwhile, at a time when the new district government was being established, the residents' views on how the space should be used were being challenged by the higher state authorities as a waste of a valuable public resource, largely because of the lack of formal involvement by the state authority:

> Their activities were a kind of waste of this space, without any state organisation or guidance… We selected this space because it was close to the local residents, which is essential for proper social control, as some higher-level authorities recognised'. (C1)

Despite their high level of antipathy towards the residents' opposition, the local civil servants noticed that there was a lack of cooperation among the protesters, who were few in number, disorganised, and operating based on emotions:

> Those protests could not threaten us because there was no consensus among them, and they did not even know what they really wanted. In addition, they seemed to have no trust among themselves. (C2)

In reviewing the initial step in this civic action, the ownership of the indoor space remained the central issue. At this stage, the limited application of local social networks to organising the civic action and the petition were clearly evident, reflecting the low level of local social networks and social capital within this newly built CCHE. Nevertheless, the initiators were able to garner sufficient support to structure the civic action based on their interactions with their local acquaintances.

The process: increasing civic participation

By sending the petition to the District Bureau, the initiators presented the residents' consensus view that they would be willing to share the indoor space with the local residents' committee. Making this collective concession might be understood as the residents bowing to the state authority's administration: 'It was inevitable that we would make this concession in an effort to win the battle against the powerful state' (R3). Nevertheless, the concession reflected the gradual emergence of a new level of cooperation between the initiators and their fellow residents through the development of small, mostly localised social networks. The concession was certainly welcomed by the arbitrators who served in the District Bureau: 'The arbitrators were willing to listen to our views…and praised our willingness to share the space with the state' (R1). A local meeting was organised by the petition initiators to enable them to report back to the local neighbourhood on their achievements thus far and to motivate more residents to get involved, thereby enabling them to present a more collective appearance. As the petition initiators anticipated, this meeting successfully motivated the residents to increase their level of participation. Later, a final public meeting was held in the district government hall, with representatives of 247 local households in attendance. At this public meeting, the attendees collectively challenged the draft proposal from the District Bureau that sought to divide the public space equally between the local neighbourhood and the local residents' committee, and ended up acquiring 70 per cent of the space. By this time, there was a higher level of cooperative action and expanded local social networks. Moreover, with regard to the final outcome delivered by the arbitration process, this extensive civic participation involving the significant application of local social capital significantly influenced the arbitration decision.

Confronted by the increased level of civic participation, the local civic servants on the residents' committee participated in the petition process, including negotiations and trade-offs, but were eventually marginalised, and their requests were rejected by the arbitrators. This marginalisation was clearly related to the local state authority's decision-making that had resulted in chaos and clashes between the state authorities and the local neighbourhood, with damaging consequences in terms of social stability and the district government's reputation. As C1 noted, 'We had no chance to speak out about or claim anything, because we irritated both the local neighbourhood and the higher levels…our job in relation to the petition was just attending, listening and waiting for the arbitration decision'. Even when the draft proposal was opposed by the local residents, these local civil servants did not offer much resistance. The arbitrators from the District Bureau, as the representatives of the district government, applied a more pragmatic approach toward this petition, particularly when faced with growing civic participation in the final public meeting. As one of the arbitrators noted:

We did not expect so much participation on that time, as we had already had discussions about the partition with the initiators... However, many local residents seriously challenged us… Honestly, these participants placed pressure on us in an open forum. I was afraid to irritate them again, and so we had to satisfy their wishes'. (A2)

During the arbitration stage of this civic action, the key actors' statements and perceptions emphasised the importance of the rising level of civic participation in shaping the final decision. The increased involvement of the residents reflected the growing application and development of local social networks – there was a growing recognition of the value of collective action in protecting their common good. Moreover, this could be directly related to the ability of the initiators of the petition to continually connect with local residents throughout the process.

Following the process: greater place attachment, mutual trust and civic responsibility

After the arbitration decision had been handed down and accepted, the petition initiators immediately organised a local meeting to discuss what would happen next. The main item on the agenda was the decoration of the new public space. This meeting was very well attended, not only by those who had attended the final public meeting, but also by some new faces. With a democratic format, including free discussion and voting, there was a general consensus that creating a sense of place or community was in everybody's best interests. As R2 stated, 'Most were concerned about how best to develop it for the benefit of the entire neighbourhood, including elders, teenagers and children'. In addition, the initiators proposed a formal approach to the management of the new public space that was voted on and agreed to by the majority of the attendees. It was clear that the collective plan and collective norm reflected the residents' new level of cooperation, mutual trust and place attachment.

In November 2016, the new public space was reopened to the public, and although it was now smaller, usage increased significantly. This reflected the increased social networking among residents, who continually brought their acquaintances to the new public space to participate in collective activities. Consistent with these visibly enhanced local social networks, social capital also seemed to have increased. Nevertheless, not everybody benefitted from the extended social networks and increased social capital. Some households with young families remained absent from these increased social activities and interactions. As R2 stated, 'Some younger residents were largely disconnected from us: maybe our social activities were not attractive to them…or perhaps they just wanted to remain anonymous'.

As the executors of the arbitration decision, the local civil servants from the residents' committee followed the local residents' collective wishes regarding the redecoration of the new public space. This was largely an attempt to try to 'rebuild

the broken relationship with the local neighbourhood' (C2). By cooperating with the local neighbourhood, the local civil servants were able to observe and experience the continual development of the local social networks and social capital, and concluded that a united and cohesive neighbourhood was emerging in this CCHE, as evidenced by growing participation in activities in this new space. Moreover, from their perspective, the initiators and the public space were seen as important assets in terms of promoting mutual trust and helping to develop a high level of cooperation between the local state authority and the local neighbourhood:

> The role played by the initiators cannot be ignored, as they funded the space, raised the civic action and petition, and then united residents in developing this space…They have become real assets in uniting this neighbourhood, and very important for our work. (C1)

These positive social changes that occurred in the neighbourhood were also highlighted by the arbitrators. They saw these changes as instrumental in building the local community, with growing connectedness among local residents. However, the arbitrators expressed concerns about the enhanced role of the initiators as the leaders of the neighbourhood, and worried about these initiators' capacity for leading collective civic actions against state authorities:

> The initiators used the space to gather local residents, and it was undoubtedly that the residents became increasingly united following the initiators' charismatic leadership… If they had another dispute with the local states, I think these initiators could readily and easily organise a protest. (A2)

During the following step of this civic action, all of the key actors suggested that positive social changes had occurred in the local neighbourhood, with outcomes such as greater mutual trust, sense of civic responsibility and place attachment. These positive changes were the direct consequence of the extended local social networks and increased social capital, and were set to continue as a result of the residents' growing participation in local community life. However, it would be irrational to conclude that an urban community had been created through this civic action, given that some families continued to be absent from this enhanced local civic life. Nevertheless, with the initiators enjoying more personal empowerment in the local neighbourhood, how their extended social networks could potentially develop a greater sense of local community in this CCHE remained unclear in these interviews.

Findings: the emergence of local community life

Interviews with key actors confirmed the progressive changes in the local social order throughout the civic action, supporting the presumed mechanism presented in Figure

2. From the key actors' perspectives, it was deemed that this civic action could create local community life in this CCHE, as the majority of people developed greater place attachment, mutual trust and civic responsibility as a result of the civic action. Moreover, as strongly emphasised by these interviewees, the initiators' social networks and social capital were deemed to have played fundamental roles in facilitating the civic action, thereby producing progressive social changes and the continual development of the local community in the CCHE. These interviewees' perceptions were further triangulated with the local residents' responses to the questionnaires (N=128, over 30 per cent of all households) by applying a regression model.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics regarding the residents' responses to the questionnaires. The means of the three dependent variables, promoting place attachment, promoting mutual trust and inspiring civic responsibility as reported by the interviewees, were 3.682, 3.843, and 4.115, respectively, suggesting that the local residents generally perceived a greater sense of local community following the civic action. Regarding the respondents' demographic characteristics, the questionnaires collected responses from various groups, especially young families, to guarantee the reflection of the heterogeneity in this CCHE. Regarding the other independent variables, the mean participation in civic action score was 1.471, indicating that most of the respondents participated in the civic action from the petition step, and most expressed general satisfaction with the final arbitration decision. However, the mean value of connectedness to neighbours was lower than that of acquaintance with initiators, consistent with the key actors' perceptions of the gradual application of organisational social networks but strong application of the initiators' individual social networks in the initial stage of the civic action. The mean value of favouring former space was 3.211, indicating that most of the respondents rarely participated in the social activities that occurred prior to the civic action. Similarly, the mean value of contraction to state authority suggested that most majorities had no sense of the central issue prior to the petition. Overall, these descriptive statistics verified the interviewees' perceptions regarding the application of local social networks in relation to the civic action and the positive social changes that resulted.

The correlations identified as a result of three multivariate regression analyses are presented in Table 3. The first regression examined factors associated with the respondents' demographic characteristics and reflections on promoting place attachment through civic action (adjusted R^2=0.672, F=26.113, p<0.01). All independent variables were positively associated with the dependent variable. Specifically, the effectiveness of individual participation (β=0.277, p<0.001) in promoting place attachment was significant, consistent with the theoretical framework and the interviewees' perceptions. Moreover, it is worth noting that the correlation of acquaintance with initiators (β=0.233, p<0.01) was greater than that of connectedness to neighbours (β=0.105, p<0.01), that is, initiators' individual social networks are more likely to be effective in promoting local residents' place attachment, consistent with the interviewees' perceptions.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics (N=128)

Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Dependent variable				
Promoting place attachment	3.682	0.772	1	5
Promoting mutual trust	3.843	0.791	1	5
Inspiring civic responsibility	4.115	0.667	1	5
Independent variable				
Age	49.972	6.899	22	77
Gender	1.044	0.071	1	2
Participation	1.471	0.339	1	3
Satisfaction to final arbitration	4.337	0.492	1	5
Connectedness to neighbours	3.441	0.737	1	5
Acquaintance with initiators	4.042	0.719	1	5
Favouring the former space	3.211	0.753	1	5
Contraction to state authority	3.944	0.339	1	5

The second regression examined the civic action's effectiveness in promoting mutual trust (see Table 3), and confirmed that most of the independent variables were significantly positively associated (adjusted R^2=0.631, F=30.105, p<0.01). Moreover, the correlation of acquaintance with initiators (β=0.115, p<0.001) was marginally greater than that of connectedness to neighbours (β=0.101, p<0.001), consistent with the interviewees' perceptions regarding the growing application of local organisational social networks to promoting the local residents' mutual relationships. It also reflected the intertwining of dichotomised social networks that were applied in the course of the civic action.

The third regression examined the civic action's effectiveness in promoting the local residents' civic responsibility (see Table 3). Most of the independent variables were significantly positively associated with the dependent variable (adjusted R^2=0.744, F=28.752, p<0.01), and thus this regression provided a greater explanation of the statistical association than the previous two regressions. The civic action was more effective in raising the local residents' awareness of the need to defend the common good, consistent with the interviewees' perceptions regarding the increased civic participation during and following the civic action. Moreover, the results confirmed that the dichotomised local social networks were equally effective in developing local civic life, as reflected by the correlations of connectedness to neighbours (β=0.127, p<0.01) and acquaintance with initiators (β=0.177, p<0.001). This similar effectiveness might be supplementary to the interviewees' perceptions that the application of organisational social networks and social capital in the civic action had a profound effect in terms of inspiring civic awareness.

Table 3   Regression results (N=128)

	Promoting place attachment	Promoting mutual trust	Inspiring civic responsibility
Age	0.335*	0.277*	0.441*
	(0.167)	(0.101)	(0.163)
Gender	0.011	0.017	0.031
	(0.005)	(0.022)	(0.011)
Participation	0.277***	0.331***	0.391***
	(0.012)	(0.083)	(0.066)
Satisfaction with final arbitration	0.133**	0.071**	0.092***
	(0.103)	(0.123)	(0.075)
Connectedness to neighbours	0.105**	0.101**	0.127**
	(0.132)	(0.127)	(0.087)
Acquaintance with initiators	0.233**	0.115***	0.177***
	(0.072)	(0.166)	(0.096)
Favouring the former space	0.094	0.082	0.103
	(0.067)	(0.043)	(0.031)
Contraction to state authority	0.073*	0.045*	0.081**
	(0.051)	(0.013)	(0.037)
Constant	-0.397	-0.653	-0.212
Adjusted R^2	0.672	0.631	0.744
F	26.113**	30.105**	28.752***

Notes: Standard errors are shown in parentheses.
*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this case study demonstrate how positive changes can occur within local community in terms of developing social networks and social capital through civic action in a newly built CCHE. The civic action acted as a catalyst in producing greater place attachment, mutual trust and civic responsibility, and even enhanced expectations regarding local community life, even when initially there were only loose social networks and limited civic participation.

Using interviews and questionnaires, we obtained several findings. First, within the Chinese urban context and state institution, a civic action against state authorities can raise individuals' awareness of the local common good and sense of community, even in a newly built residential compound where local social networks are loosely knit. This finding challenges those of most previous studies on changes in China's urban neighbourhoods, which mostly bemoaned the 'community lost' as a result of an increasingly heterogeneous social structure at the local level. Second, the civic

action led to the development of local social networks through interactions involving multiple steps. Both organisational and individual social networks were applied in the form of local social capital to facilitate internal interactions, and China's state institution enabled external interactions among multiple stakeholders. This finding provides a new perspective for the study of Chinese urban neighbourhoods, especially given increasing reports of civic action occurring in CCHEs, with a view to further examining local residents' capacity to develop local social networks, organise local civic life and develop local community life. Third, those who initiated the civic action had a fundamental role to play in uniting the residents, interacting with multiple stakeholders and continually developing the local community, not least because of the leadership characteristics they displayed throughout the civic action. This might be a reflection of current Chinese civil society, as more and more individuals have become aware of the possibility of leading collective action in defending the common good and restructuring local social orders within a changing urban society. However, it could be irrational to conclude that these individuals' empowerment is capable of being used as political capital to influence or change China's political institutions, because the results of the case study indicated that the initiators and residents developed a cooperative relationship with the local state authorities as a result of the civic action. Finally, the local community life reflected in the case study might not be ideal, given the absence of some families both during and after the civic action and the varied responses to the questionnaire regarding place attachment, mutual trust and civic responsibility. Regarding China's current urban transition, the effectiveness of the civic action in changing the local social order might be not only immediate, but also capable of having a fundamental long-term effect on developing the local social order in newly built CCHEs. Overall, the empirical findings confirm the academic assumptions associated with the theoretical framework presented above, namely, that a mutually influential mechanism exists between the application and development of local social networks and social capital, and civic actions.

Our empirical and theoretical findings illustrate how issues pertaining to the importance of local civic actions can clash with the changing local social order in heterogeneous urban China, and that local social networks and social capital can be developed to enhance local community life in CCHEs. In contrast to our findings, a series of empirical studies has found that the property-led attributes of increasing numbers of civic actions in CCHEs might not be effective in producing social or civic development or achieving structural changes in relation to the current urban transition (He, 2015; Shih, 2019). However, as demonstrated by this case study, the meaningful contributions of civic action are the application and development of local social networks to achieve further social changes in China's heterogeneous urban society.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by analysing how a contemporary urban community can be developed within China's changing urban context. Urban

homeowners' civic actions, which are growing rapidly in urban China, offer interesting opportunities to explore whether the 'community lost' narrative is being addressed, and provide opportunities for further studies of China's urban communities. A social transition toward the notion of 'communities saved' as a part of China's contemporary urban neighbourhood changes is to be encouraged, and the development of civil society within China's institutions at the local scale is also to be encouraged.

Acknowledgments

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