

Democracy and Autonomy in Neighbourhoods: Implications from the Election of a New Owners' Committee in Urban China

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Abstract Homeowner associations play a pivotal role in neighbourhood autonomy across the globe. However, compared to homeowner associations in Western countries, the number of neighbourhood autonomous organizations in mainland China, known as owners' committees, has not experienced exponential growth in the past twenty years. The study examines the election process of owners' committees by analysing a case study of a new owners' committee election in X neighbourhood, G city, and aims to derive implications for the election of owners' committees, considering the distinct challenges they face which include not only the typical collective action dilemma experienced by homeowners in Western countries and regions but also the need to coordinate and strike a balance between state powers and market forces. The findings reveal that the election process of the owners' committee achieved full-coverage institutional norms by adhering to the guidance of party-building, auditing the qualifications of owners, and strengthening public opinion supervision. It also realised all-round owners' mobilisation through stimulating democratic awareness and community consciousness.

Keywords: • urban governance • grassroot autonomy • neighbourhood democracy • owners' committee • elections

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1 Introduction

Early academics have conducted a great deal of research on rural elections. Scholars basically viewed the election of villagers' committees as the starting point for the introduction of bottom-up democracy in mainland China (Li, 2003; O'brien, 1994; O'brien & Li, 2000). These scholars argued that rural elections could raise villagers' awareness of their rights and empower them with greater power, thereby promoting village autonomy and achieving a higher level of democracy (Li, 2003; O'brien & Li, 2017; Shi, 1999). In 1990, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed the *Organic Law of the Urban Residents' Committees of the People's Republic of China*, establishing the legal status of residents' committees as the main body of community governance. However, for a long time, the role played by the residents' committees has mainly been that of a nerve tip of the country in urban grassroots, undertaking a large number of tasks allocated by higher government departments (B. Guan, 2010; L. Zhou & Ouyang, 2023). This has led to the relatively strong administrative character within the community residents' committee since its inception. In addition, although the urban community autonomy, represented by the residents' committee, has a legal basis in China, the large size of the community's jurisdiction and population, as well as the heterogeneity of its residents in terms of their economic conditions, living needs, and housing patterns, can exacerbate the collective action dilemmas and the deprivation of social capital. Therefore, existing residents generally consider that the election of the community residents' committee has little practical significance and show an indifferent attitude towards their interests (B. Guan, 2010; B. Guan & Cai, 2015; Jing & Liu, 2007). With the sinking process of the basic unit of urban governance, a kind of urban grassroots autonomy in the form of neighbourhood autonomy has attracted relatively widespread attention. In mainland China, the gated residential area is the main type of neighbourhoods which broadly have two meanings: first, residential areas are separated by walls or access to control systems, featuring physical security measures such as gates, walls, guards and camera monitors, with access to the neighbourhoods for people and vehicles being through gated and walled passageways; second, the owners of the neighbourhoods are responsible for the shared costs of public goods and public security (D. Wang, 2021). Consequently, neighbourhoods are closer to residents' daily lives, and public affairs are often closely related to their interests, making neighbourhood autonomy more appealing to the public than community-level autonomy, and becoming a substantive form of urban grassroots autonomy in practice (W. Chen & Zhang, 2023; Liu, 2022; Yinhong Wang & Zhu, 2022).

Neighbourhood autonomy refers to the self-organised governance of public affairs in urban commercial housing estates by homeowners, carried out within the framework of democracy and the rule of law (R. Zhou & Chen, 2017). The

owners' committee in mainland China is an autonomy organization that is elected by homeowners to represent and manage their property affairs in accordance with the law (Miao, 2022). A well-run owners' committee not only enhances the effectiveness of neighbourhood autonomy but also reduces the governance pressure imposed by multiple principals, such as community residents' committees, sub-district offices, and police stations, thereby significantly reducing the administrative costs of mainland China's grassroots governments and strengthening the function of community autonomy (Cheng & Guo, 2020; Miao, 2022; Yinhong Wang & Zhu, 2022; L. Zhou & Ouyang, 2023). However, establishing an owners' committee in Chinese urban neighbourhoods is difficult, and achieving a transition between the old and new owners' committees by electing a new committee is even more so (L. Wu, 2021). Currently, only approximately 30% of residential neighbourhoods in mainland China have established owners' committees. The low enthusiasm among homeowners to run for the committee, low participation rates for voting, and opaque election processes frequently occur during the election of new owners' committees, leading to the stagnation of neighbourhood autonomy (M. Chen, 2022; P. Chen, 2023). Thus, successfully electing a new owners' committee can be an even rarer occurrence, and it also points to the presence of a collective action dilemma not only in community autonomy but also in smaller autonomous units such as neighbourhood autonomy.

In the context of urban neighbourhood autonomy in mainland China, the election of a new owners' committee directly affects the interests of the owners and is an important prerequisite for the sustainable development of owners' committees and achieving democratic decision-making, management, and supervision afterwards. Therefore, studying the practical experience of the owners' committee election process can reflect the actual situation of democratic construction in the neighbourhoods and provide useful references for the sustainable development of grassroots democracy and autonomy. As there is limited research on the election process of a new owners' committee in the context of mainland China with the '*people's democracy*' background (Liu, 2022), this paper adopts research methods including participatory observation and in-depth interviews to conduct a thorough analysis of the democratic practice surrounding the election of a new owners' committee in X neighbourhood, G city, aiming to provide valuable insights for the democracy construction embedded in urban neighbourhood autonomy and thus enhance urban community governance.

2 Literature review

2.1 The decentralisation of basic unit of urban governance and neighbourhood autonomy

Community residents' committees and neighbourhood owners' committees are two essential grassroots autonomy organisations in Chinese cities. The former is responsible for managing community public affairs and it has an administrative character in fact, while the latter is a purely civilian autonomous organisation, and it manages public facilities and services in the neighbourhood, representing owners in exercising their rights and safeguarding their interests. In China, the community is defined as the administrative area bounded by the jurisdiction of the community residents' committee based on the social management perspective (Z. Bing et al., 2018). The boundaries of a community and a residential neighbourhood do not necessarily overlap, nor do their names coincide.

For a long time, the community has been the basic unit of urban governance in China (W. Wang, Li, & Cooper, 2017). However, with the acceleration of urbanisation and the intense transformation of urban social management, the grassroots governments are increasingly burdened with management and service responsibilities, and the highly complex demands of governance can no longer be met by top-down administrative inputs and unilateral actions by grassroots governments alone (Liu, 2022). Against this background, the Chinese government has re-emphasised the fundamental role of grassroots autonomy organisations, making the issue of 'autonomy' an important dimension in the examination and discussion of urban grassroots governance. In reality, however, urban community autonomy has failed to function in most areas, and residents' autonomy is in a difficult situation at the community level. Many scholars have explored the causes of this phenomenon, and found that compared with gated communities abroad, Chinese urban communities have larger jurisdictional boundaries and population sizes. Typically, a community will contain multiple gated residential neighbourhoods, generally with a population size of more than 9,000 according to the report of Chinese National Bureau of Statistics. The vast physical space and population size not only affect the close interaction among residents, but also increase the difficulty of collective action (Ostrom, 1998; Hardin, 1968; Zhou & Chen, 2017). Secondly, there is significant heterogeneity among urban community residents in China in terms of economic status, living conditions, and daily demands. These differences make it difficult for residents to reach a consensus on specific public affairs in the community, hindering the operation of community autonomy (B. Guan, 2010; B. Guan & Cai, 2015). Finally, the construction of grassroots political power in Chinese cities has objectively eroded the autonomy of communities and residents' committees have thus become 'an extension of the

municipal government's administrative apparatus', making community autonomy highly formalised (Y. He & Cai, 2005; Read, 2000).

Thus, some scholars have questioned the suitability of the community as the basic unit of autonomy in urban China and have suggested that neighbourhoods should be the ideal type of new autonomy unit and the function of neighbourhood autonomy should be leveraged as a beneficial supplement to community governance (Liang & Jiang, 2017; Liu, 2022). With the unprecedented development of private neighbourhoods, owners' committees (also known as homeowner associations or owners corporation) have emerged as important institutional settings to promote neighbourhood autonomy and community governance after China's commercial housing reform in the 1990s (Lu, Zhang, & Wu, 2022). The prevalence of owners' committees demonstrates a further step towards grassroots autonomy and the decentralisation of state power and government administration in neighbourhood governance (McKenzie, 2005; W. Zhang, Li, & Yang, 2023). Through owners' committees, homeowners are constructing a relatively autonomous space with the support of property rights and common interests (Tomba, 2005). In essence, these committees serve as representative organisation established to safeguard their rights (Merle, 2014).

2.2 The unique dynamics and challenges of owners' committees in urban China

Owners' committees as autonomy organisations in neighbourhoods are not a phenomenon unique to China. Prior to the commercial housing reform in the 1990s, homeowner associations, organisations with similar functions to owners' committees, were widespread in countries and regions such as the United States, Poland, Australia, Russia, India, and East Asia, due to common-interest developments in private neighbourhoods (Carr & Kramer, 2022; R. Cheung, Cunningham, & Meltzer, 2014; Dilfer, 1992; Ekaterina, 2014; Muczyński, 2023; Yip & Ray, 2002). In these countries and regions, the role of the homeowner associations in neighbourhood governance is primarily focused on its internal dilemmas including collective actions, public participation and private governance, and the impact on the external environment such as city cohesion, property values and racial or social segregation (C.-Y. Chen & Chris, 2005; Ron Cheung, Salmon, & Xie, 2022; S. He, 2015; Meltzer & Cheung, 2014). Specific to the internal dilemmas, however, the establishment and operation of homeowner associations may vary in different countries and regions, and the collective action and private governance issues they face may also differ. Taking East Asia as an example, the homeowner associations in Taiwan are established by or with the support of property management companies and developers, and are considered to be a more efficient form of private governance, with greater capacity than either the government (by coercion) or residents (through voluntary association) (C.-Y.

Chen & Chris, 2005). On the contrary, the assessment of homeowner associations in Hong Kong is not very favourable since the anti-democratic organisational arrangement of homeowner associations tends to restrict, rather than promote the involvement of ordinary owners in large scale, high rise, and technically complex environments (Yip & Ray, 2002). In mainland China, the so-called owner's committee and the empowered homeowners have become a rising social power for neighbourhood autonomy (N. C. Bing, 2012; S. He, 2015).

However, compared to homeowner organisations in the United States and other countries or regions under the background of 'liberal democracy', the context of 'people's democracy' in mainland China results in distinct establishments and operations of owners' committees (T. Guan & Liu, 2021). Different from the 'private government' form in Western definitions, Chinese owners' committees actually produce a societal balance by counterbalancing state power and market forces (S. He, 2015; Lu et al., 2022). Initially, local governments provide direct guidance to owners' committees on their registration and daily work. Local authorities like residents' committees hold significant power to interfere with owners' committees, rendering them ineffectual if political interests demand it (Huang, 2006). For instance, according to regulations in Beijing, China, owners' committees must be established under the 'guidance' of subdistrict offices (it is a dispatched agency of the district level government). The subdistrict office will review the application documents submitted by owners to establish the committee and usually appoint the director of the residents' committee in the community to serve as the head of the preparatory group, which gives the government entity significant influence in the establishment and transition of owners' committees. Additionally, the owners' committees are distinct from property management companies and often act as a rival force to them through the power of supervision and dismissal of property management companies granted by the owners' congresses, which is unlike the situation in other countries or regions such as the United States and Taiwan where homeowner associations are either integrated with or closely coordinated with property management companies. This leads to common conflicts and disputes between owners' committees and property management companies in many Chinese cities. In some commercially developed communities, property management companies gain considerable income by infringing upon homeowners' public property. For example, they rent out homeowners' public property, such as parking lots, elevators, and basketball courts, to businesses for parking, advertising, and gatherings without the homeowners' knowledge or compensation. Therefore, they do not want owners' committees to be established or to have a smooth transition of power. Moreover, for homeowners, the opaque election process of owners' committees reduces their trust in committee members. Meanwhile, the 'stranger society' formed in today's urban neighbourhoods makes it difficult for neighbourhoods with several hundred or even thousands of people to achieve the voting ratio of 'double two-thirds'¹

required by law. For owners' committee members, the work of the committee is altruistic and it is difficult to obtain normal compensation based on job performance, which exacerbates homeowners' distrust and non-recognition of their identities. In neighbourhoods where owners' committees have already been established, homeowners' low enthusiasm for running for committee members and the dilemma of committee transition make the committee's work stagnant or even 'bankrupt' (P. Chen, 2023). Therefore, owners' committees in mainland China operate under unfavourable political, market, and social conditions (W. Wang et al., 2017). In the face of various difficulties mentioned above, many owners' committees find it challenging to establish themselves in residential neighbourhoods. This is indicated by the fact that only around 30% of neighbourhoods in China have formed owners' committees (M. Chen, 2022; P. Chen, 2023). Through the election of a new owners' committee, we have a unique opportunity to study how owners' committees achieve a smooth transition of power under unfavourable political, market, and social conditions, which has been lacking in previous research.

In conclusion, as an autonomous organisation at the grassroots level in China, the election of urban neighbourhood owners' committees remains a topic that has not been fully researched. Compared to research that focuses on resident participation in homeowner associations in Western contexts, Chinese neighbourhood owners' committees face not only challenges related to public participation from homeowners but also the coordination and balance of demands from grassroots governments, property management companies, and members of the owners' committee. Therefore, exploring collective actions from homeowners and the election process of new owners' committees in the context of 'people's democracy' in mainland China could potentially enrich academic understanding of democracy and autonomy in neighbourhoods.

3 Study case and research design

3.1 Study case: The owners' committee of X neighbourhood in G city

3.1.1 Overview of X neighbourhood in G city

X neighbourhood is located in C subdistrict, H district, G city, and comprises 12 buildings spread across three phases, with a total construction area of 107974.74 square meters. It is a typical commercial housing estate with the characteristic of multi-owned housing (MOH), and has witnessed a migration of 882 households since 2002. The neighbourhood has a party branch, which consists of 114 registered members of the Communist Party of China. In terms of residents' composition, the neighbourhood has the following characteristics: Firstly, due to the proximity to multiple kindergartens, primary and secondary schools,

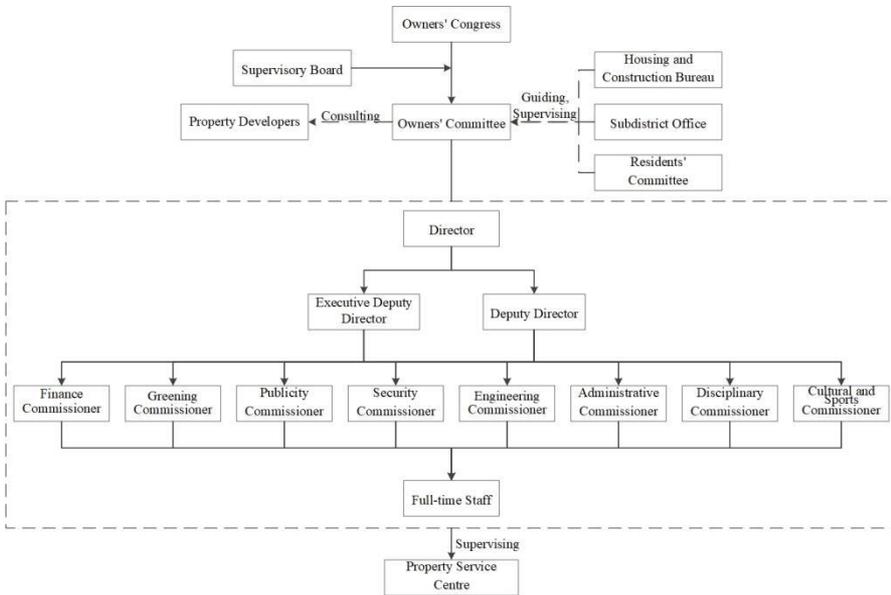
universities, hospitals, and military logistics agencies, the main occupations of neighbourhood residents are teachers, doctors, soldiers, and public officials, and the overall education level of residents is relatively high. Secondly, the residents are mostly from other provinces or other cities in G province, resulting in a strong heterogeneity of the homeowners' structure. Thirdly, the residents have collectively dealt with issues such as soaring property fees, encroachment of shared property rights among homeowners, and the deterioration of the living environment, further stimulating their awareness of rights protection and laying the foundation for the preparation and establishment of the owners' committee. As of June 2023, the owners' committee of X neighbourhood has been established for 6 years and has smoothly transitioned to the second session of the committee. It has made remarkable achievements in the establishment, transition, daily operation, supervision and evaluation, and has also become a model of neighbourhood autonomy for community residents in C subdistrict, attracting other neighbourhood owners' committees in G city to learn from its experience.

3.1.2 Overview of the owners' committee in X neighbourhood

In order to effectively safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of the neighbourhood homeowners, the first owners' committee was elected by the owners' congress under the guidance and supervision of the Subdistrict Office, the Community Residents' Committee, and the Housing and Construction Bureau. It was formally established on April 20, 2017, and its term was set for five years. The committee consists of 13 members, including a director, deputy director, secretary-general, comprehensive commissioner, sanitation commissioner, finance commissioner, publicity commissioner, security commissioner, engineering commissioner, administrative commissioner, disciplinary commissioner, greening commissioner, and cultural and sports commissioner. Additionally, with the authorisation of the owners' congress, the owners' committee hired a full-time staff member to undertake daily work. From April to May 2022, the eighth owners' congress of X neighbourhood was held to vote on various public affairs. As a result, the second session owners' committee was successfully generated through the election at expiration of office terms, with six members being re-elected. As shown in Figure 1, the organisational structure of the second owners' committee dismissed the comprehensive commissioner and secretary-general of the first session, added an executive deputy director, and combined the duties of the sanitation commissioner in the work of the greening commissioner, resulting in a total of 11 formal members and 1 alternate member elected by the owners' congress. At the same time, the owners recommended or jointly proposed the formation of the first supervisory board, which was mainly responsible for supervising and evaluating the various work of the owners' committee.

Since the establishment of the owners' committee, X neighbourhood has been continuously strengthening the supervision and evaluation of the property service centre (i.e. a dispatched agency of the property management company). The owners' committee has also managed to recover public revenues generated from neighbourhood elevator advertisements, public parking lots, and basketball courts from the property service centre. As of 2023, the neighbourhood's public account has a balance of more than 3 million yuan. With the help of these public proceeds, the owners' committee has successfully organised to renew and renovate neighbourhood's monitoring system, security fences, living water pumps, garbage transfer stations, green design, bulletin boards, and children's playgrounds, resulting in enhanced residents' sense of accessibility, security and happiness. In an effort to promote the normalisation and long-term effectiveness of neighbourhood homeowners' autonomy, the community residents' committee, relevant government departments, and representatives of the owners have attached great importance to the election of the new owners' committee.

Figure 1: Organisational structure of the second owners' committee in X neighbourhood



3.2 Research methods and data collection

This study mainly utilised participatory observation and in-depth interviews to elucidate the entire process of the election of the new owners' committee of X

neighbourhood in G city. From February to August 2022, the research group conducted in-depth interviews with multiple principals participating in the election process, including the deputy director of the subdistrict office, the director of the community residents' committee, a member of the supervisory board, representatives from the owners' committee, the manager of the property service centre, and neighbourhood residents. In addition, the research group directly participated in the publicity and mobilisation process for the new election of the owners' committee and collected relevant information and policy documents about the operation of the owners' committee. During the investigation process, the questions in this study adhered to semi-structured principles, mainly including the difficulties, practices, effects, and influences encountered during the preparation, recommendation, voting and reporting stages for electing a new owner's committee. Before starting the formal interview, the purpose of the study and the survey methodology were explained to all the interviewees. Each interview lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. Then, based on qualitative data such as interview texts, publicity materials and policy documents, this study utilised Nvivo 11 software to create an analysis node. To protect the personal information of the respondents, their responses were encoded to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The basic information of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic information of respondents

Respondent Type	Position	Code	Method	Date
Subdistrict office	Deputy director	S1	Telephone interview	2022-02-18
	Full-time cadres	S2	On-site interview	2022-02-19
Community residents' committee	Director	N1	On-site interview	2022-03-20
Board of supervisors	Chief supervisor	B1	On-site interview	2022-04-21
Owners' committee	Director	O1	On-site individual interview and group interview	2022-05-23, 2022-06-24
	Deputy director	O2		2022-05-23, 2022-06-24
	Committee member 1	O3		2022-07-18, 2022-07-24
	Committee member 2	O4		2022-07-22, 2022-07-24
	Committee member 3	O5		2022-08-24
	Committee member 4	O6		2022-08-24
	Full-time staff	O7		2022-08-16, 2022-08-25
Property management company	Manager	P1	Telephone interview	2022-07-28
Neighbourhood residents	Resident 1	R1	On-site interview	2022-03-16
	Resident 2	R2		2022-03-17
	Resident 3	R3		2022-04-17
	Resident 4	R4		2022-04-22
	Resident 5	R5		2022-05-10
	Resident 6	R6		2022-06-28
	Resident 7	R7		2022-06-28

4 Results

4.1 Scheme design: Full-coverage institutional norms

The operation of the owners' committee has a direct impact on the interests of neighbourhood residents and the property service centre (known as property management company), and is closely linked to the management of the community residents' committee. However, the unclear legal status of the committee and the lack of an internal incentive system render it susceptible to residents' distrust, obstruction from the property management company, and inaction or resistance from the community residents' committee, making it difficult to set up and even harder to replace the committee (Guo, Wang, & Tang, 2022). Previous research has highlighted the conflicts that owners' committees face with grassroots government, neighbourhood residents, and property management companies during their establishment and operation. However, these committees can also adopt flexible strategies to balance the opposing forces of these three forces. For example, owner representatives from X neighbourhood gained the trust and support of grassroots government by valuing societal stability and being supportive of Communist Party guidance. They also actively strengthen institutional norms for the election process to minimise adverse situations.

First, adhere to the party-building guidance. On the one hand, in the preparation stage, X neighbourhood first establishes a preparatory group for the election of a new owners' committee, which consists of 5-13 owner representatives (singular), one representative from the construction unit, and one from the subdistrict office or grassroots government department. After its establishment, the subdistrict office and government representatives among the members convened the first meeting to elect the leader of the preparatory group, coordinate and promote the work of the transition, and take the initiative to guide the owners' committee to solve the difficulties encountered in the process of the election. According to the provisions of *The Civil Code of the People's Republic of China*, *The Property Management Regulations*, and *The Property Management Regulations of G City*, the preparatory team formulated the working arrangement, publicity plan and implementation process of the election to standardise and legalise the election of new owners' committee. On the other hand, by establishing a 'neighbourhood party committee-grid party group-building leader' working relationship structure, the neighbourhood party organisation and different action principals are promoted to be embedded and integrated. Through giving play to the vanguard and exemplary role of grassroots party members and their functions of disseminating information, neighbourhood party members are encouraged to participate in the election of new owners' committee, and residents' sense of autonomy is strengthened with party

members' belief in serving the residents and their actions in neighbourhood governance.

The second is to verify the qualifications of residents. As the executive body of the owners' congress, the owners' committee is a statutory organisation that represents and safeguards the legitimate rights and interests of all owners in property management activities, reflects the wishes and requirements of owners to all parties in the society, and supervises the management and operation of the property service centre. According to the law, residents who participate in voting for members of the owners' committee and supervisors of the supervisory board must be owners within the neighbourhood who have ownership of exclusive parts such as residential and commercial housing. Members of the preparatory committee for the election of the X neighbourhood (current member of the 2nd committee) reflected:

In order to ensure that the residents participating in the election and voting are eligible as owners, the preparatory group carefully verified the identity of the owners in X neighbourhood, the total number of owners and the building area of the exclusive part, and issued The Notice on Publicizing Information about the Owners and The List of Owners. At the same time, owners who entrust the community residents' committee or proxy to vote for objective reasons, are required to submit a written application to the neighbourhood committee with voting opinions on the voting matters, and present the owners' identity certificate and real estate ownership certificate. (Interview record: Owners' committee member 1, O3, 2022-07-18)

Through the above measures, the preparatory group has facilitated the voting results of residents participating in the owners' congress to truly reflect public opinion and respond to the wishes of the public, thus effectively ensuring the residents' autonomy.

The third is to strengthen the supervision of public opinion. Amidst negative influences in the neighbourhood—ranging from the detrimental exclusion by property management enterprises to the practice deviation of owners' autonomy and the absence of community awareness—malicious rumours circulating online can significantly impede the election process for a new owners' committee. The director of the first owners' committee and the secretary of the grid party branch commented:

In the beginning, in order to mobilise more owners to participate in e-voting, we did not pay much attention to verifying the identity of the members from the WeChat owner group, and it turned out that the group also included housing agents and even property management company employees. In the process of

preparing for the election, some anonymous members freely published false statements about the corruption of owners' committee members and tried their best to incite owners to attack our motivation for work, thus reducing owners' willingness to vote for the new owners' committee members. (Interview record: Owners' committee director, O1, 2022-05-23)

In this regard, the preparatory group members of X neighbourhood also serve as the administrator of the WeChat owner group. By developing the real-name system for the owner group members, the group members who fail to complete the owner authentication within the specified time will be removed from the group by the administrator. " *After this, the overall online public opinion environment of the neighbourhood residents improved significantly, with homeowners basically focusing on discussing issues objectively, rather than engaging in personal attacks and malicious slander.*" (Interview record: Owners' committee director, O1, 2022-06-24)

4.2 Transition publicity: All-round mobilisation for residents

The owners' committees are a form of neighbourhood autonomy organisation that is primarily responsible for managing common property. As neighbourhood owners collectively own the common property and depend on each other, their participation in decision-making processes, such as voting for electing members for the owners' committee, transforms individual decisions into collective decisions (Hastings, Wong, & Walters, 2006). To address the issue of low participation rates for voting, it is crucial to adopt a collective action perspective. According to the collective action theory, if co-owners perceive that the time and effort they spend in understanding the candidates and participating in voting activity outweigh the positive net benefit they receive from the collective activity or if they consider that their individual participation has negligible influence on the election outcome, they tend to be indifferent to the owners' committee's election process (Olson, 1971). However, on the other hand, some scholars argue that some co-owners can go beyond the calculation logic of individual cost-benefit and actively participate in collective decision-making and action regarding common property (F. Wu, 2012; Yau, 2011, 2013). These scholars thus proposed a communitarian approach including enhancing mutual trust, neighbourhood attachment, social norms, a sense of community and so on (Lu et al., 2022; Muczynski, 2023; F. Wu, 2012; Yau, 2011, 2012; Y. Zhu, 2022).

Mobilising residents' enthusiasm to participate in neighbourhood governance affairs is an inevitable requirement for implementing the principles of whole-process people's democracy to promote neighbourhood autonomy (Kuai, 2023). In fact, with the rapid development of China's urbanisation, the neighbourhood has become a living community where contemporary residents live together. However,

the lack of interaction between residents in daily life and the increasing mobility of people in the neighbourhood have led to a lack of trust and communication among residents (R. Zhu & Wu, 2022).

From the establishment of the first owners' committee to the current election, there are still many neighbourhood owners who believe that it is none of their business and do not know the specific role of the owners' committee, even do not want to participate in the voting required for the election. (Interview record: Owners' committee full-time staff, 07, 2022-08-16)

In the principles of democracy formed by human society based on a long period of democratic practice, participation has always been regarded as the essence of democracy (W. Chen & Zhang, 2023). (Scaff, 1975) believes that to achieve 'participation', on the one hand, it is necessary to advocate the protection of individual rights to ensure that citizens' interests are not ignored by elites, and on the other hand, it is important to emphasise membership to highlight the important role of citizens and others to achieve common goals through collective action. Since *The Property Management Regulations of G City* was officially implemented in January 2021, the election requirements for the members of the owners' committee have been changed from 'double more than half'² to 'double two-thirds'¹. Undoubtedly, it has further raised the threshold for the election of new owners' committee. To this end, the owners' committee of X neighbourhood carries out mobilisation work for residents' participation from multiple aspects to enhance their democratic and community awareness.

The preparatory group mainly adopts two ways to mobilise residents to participate in the election. Firstly, stimulate democratic awareness through policy advocacy. The key to policy advocacy is to make residents understand what the owners' committee is, what it can do, and the importance of residents' participation in the election, so as to enhance residents' democratic awareness and democratic ability, and encourage them to 'form the habit of participating in decision-making, recognising and respecting self-determination' (Fei, 2002). X neighbourhood uses various forms to convey the policy content of the election, including holding owners' congress, commissioners going to homes to publicise the election, setting up stalls in the neighbourhood square to introduce the process of succession and candidates, as well as voting methods, principles and measures, and guides residents to follow the official account called 'The Property Management of G city'³ to complete the owners' identity authentication and binding, etc. In addition, publicity brochures, banners, and WeChat official account are also widely used to make residents understand their position in the neighbourhood and the significance of participating in the election of new owners' committee, with a view to ultimately promote the transformation of policy publicity to neighbourhood residents' autonomous action.

The second is to arouse the community consciousness by means of flexible mobilisation. First of all, by promoting the achievements and work of the inaugural owners' committee nearing its term, the preparatory group aims to strengthen the neighbourhood value recognition among residents and stimulate their psychological perception of community, thus enhancing their willingness to participate in the election. There are mainly two types: (1) The influence of value concepts. The degree to which individual values of residents align with organizational operational concepts is an important basis for determining the success of grassroots mobilisation. X neighbourhood has created a VIS communication system (visual identity system) that highlights the service image of the owners' committee based on the brand building experience of enterprises, and applied it to both online and offline communication matrices, reflecting the work positioning of the owners' committee to create a 'safe, clean, comfortable, and harmonious' neighbourhood. This has certain practical significance for the psychological identification of residents who pursue a better life. Not only that, the members of the first owners' committee also created a promotional column for their positions, campaign intentions, actions and achievements in serving the neighbourhood over the past five years. They highlighted the neighbourhood's stagnation points to identify 'pain points'. showcased their commitment through enthusiastic contributions, and expressed their dedication by demonstrating how serving the neighbourhood benefits neighbourhood households. This was done to exemplify their pioneering spirit and unite the neighbourhood residents around a common public interest. (2) Common memory reinforcement. From the perspective of time, the accumulation of residents' autonomy actions and the transmission of achievements constitute the common memory of the neighbourhood, and these will become the driving force for promoting the continuation of residents' autonomy actions. In the mobilisation and publicity process for X neighbourhood election, the preparatory group took the development process of the owners' committee as the main story line. With the seven owners' congress held as key points, the development and changes of the neighbourhood in the aspects of rights and interests maintenance, security guarantee, environmental governance and harmonious construction are demonstrated in the form of 'picture content plus text annotations', so as to reinforce the neighbourhood residents' sense of belonging and achievement in the autonomy of 'homeland'.

The following is adopting categorical mobilization strategies according to the degree of close connection between different types of residents and the neighbourhood. At present, compared with the young and middle-aged groups who work and interact outside the neighbourhood, the elderly group who mainly meet the needs of daily life and entertainment and leisure within the neighbourhood will be more concerned about the public interests, so that 'elderly

autonomy' has become an important manifestation of the current urban neighbourhood autonomy (Liu, 2022). To this end, X neighbourhood adopts a categorical discourse system for population mobilisation. (1) 'Move them with affection' on vulnerable groups. After the establishment of the owners' committee in X neighbourhood, *"the owners' committee set out to create and build the 'One Old and One Young' care project, which not only went door-to-door to send holiday blessings and holiday gifts to elderly residents and children on Chongyang Festival and Children's Day, but also organised various talent shows to enrich residents' entertainment life."* (Interview record: Owners' committee member 2, O4, 2022-07-22), so as to promote residents' public communication and increase the social capital in the neighbourhood. (2) 'Enlighten them with interest' for young and middle-aged groups. Before the establishment of the committee, public property rights such as public parking lots, basketball courts, and elevator advertisements in the neighbourhood were all encroached upon by the property management company and other organisations. After the owners' committee withdrew these revenues, it organised the owners to negotiate the distribution plan of the public revenues, which alleviated the problem of "parking difficulty" in the neighbourhood, and also provided fitness places and an increasingly comfortable living environment for young and middle-aged groups. *"The owners' committee highlights the transformation of the past environment to the new life through albums, official account tweets and other communication methods, so that the middle group can truly feel the importance of safeguarding their legitimate rights and interests, and then guide them to join the election of new owners' committee."* (Interview record: owners' committee deputy director, O2, 2022-06-24) After all-round resident mobilisation, the residents who participated in the election of new owners' committee accounted for 74.87% of the total qualified number, and the exclusive area of owners who participated in the voting accounted for 80.53%, meeting the 'double two-thirds' requirement of G city, so the vote was carried out successfully.

4.3 Election voting: Whole-chain openness and transparency

In addition to the preparatory stage, the recommendation, voting and filing constitute the whole chain of the election for new owners' committee. Specifically, the voting for election of new owners' committee in X neighbourhood includes: the recommendation of candidates before voting, the exertion of the voting rights from owners in voting, and the personnel reporting after the voting results are generated.

4.3.1 Owners' opinion expression: The mechanism for recommending and publicizing candidates

The nomination of candidates and the determination of official ones is an important task in the election of new owners' committee, and the elected committee members and supervisors of the supervisory board must be recognized by the residents and represent the greatest common divisor of public opinion. Therefore, they must be recommended on the basis of extensive solicitation of public opinion, so as to lay a solid mass foundation for the smooth development of their work. In addition, in order to reduce the constraints of incomplete information and foresight difficulties on residents' voting decisions, the openness and transparency of election voting should also be reflected in the disclosure of information before voting. Consequently, the right to expression and the right to know have a preliminary significance for the operation of the whole-process people's democracy at the grassroots level (Yongxiang Wang & Zhao, 2023).

X neighbourhood collects feedback on public opinions mainly through two ways: recommendation and publicity. For the nominated candidates of the owners' committee, the candidate is jointly recommended by the owners of more than 10 households in each building, and 2 or 3 nominated candidates are determined for each building according to the number and exclusive area of the recommended owners. During the formal candidate determination stage, X neighbourhood adopts the method of combining equal election and competitive election. If the total number of qualified candidates audited by the owners' committee does not exceed 15, the candidates are directly identified as the members of the second owners' committee and are publicized to all owners for more than 7 days, and the official candidates are determined after there is no objection. When voting for the members of the owners' committee, the method of equal election will be adopted. If the total number of qualified nominated candidates audited by the owners' committee is 16 to 28, they can also be directly identified and publicized as the official candidates for the second owners' committee, but the competitive election will be adopted when voting for the owners' committee members.

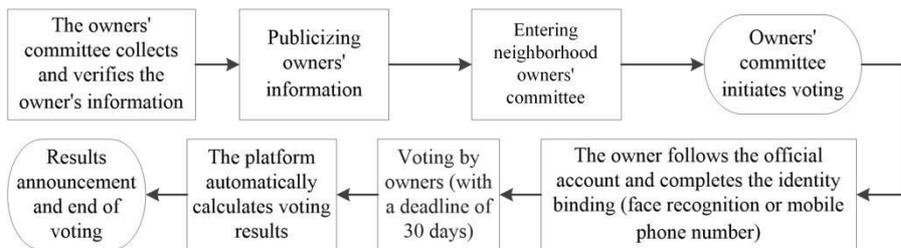
As an organisation that supervises, examines and evaluates the work of the committee, the members of the supervisory board need to be composed of highly respected neighbourhood members with a broader public foundation. In view of this, candidates for supervisors must be jointly recommended by more than 50 owners in the neighbourhood, and the maximum number of candidates is 5, which is determined in order of the number of recommended owners. The owners' committee shall examine the election materials submitted by the candidates, determine 1 to 5 proposed candidates according to the number and exclusive area of recommended owners, and publicize the list, resume, and recommendation of the proposed candidates in the neighbourhood for more than 7 days. After being

publicly announced without objection, they are confirmed as the formal candidates. When voting for supervisors, if there are no more than 3 official candidates, the method of equal election shall be adopted. If there are more than 3 members, the competitive election will be used.

4.3.2 Owners' voting: Electronic voting achieves an efficient and fair election

When the owners' committee of X neighbourhood was established in 2017, the owners' congress used paper voting. However, this involves tedious work such as venue reservation, ballot printing and distribution, owners' voting, ballot recovery and vote counting, resulting in high costs and greater room for falsification of results (Yuan & Chen, 2022). In addition, the 'double two-thirds' setting of the Property Management Regulations of G city and the inability of owners to vote seriously, responsibly and on time due to their own work or social activities in space and time have created a collective action dilemma in the context of information asymmetry. In response to practical challenges such as low participation of owners' voting, high voting costs, and fraudulent voting, in addition to implementing multi-channel, phased, and targeted publicity and mobilisation, digital technology can also promote interaction between organisations and the public, reduce the economic cost of political participation, and build an open, fair, and transparent democratic politic (Pang, 2014).

Figure 2: E-voting process of X neighbourhood



For the first time, the election of new owners' committee of X neighbourhood uses *The Property Management of G City* electronic voting system administered by the Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau. As shown in Figure 2, the owners' committee first collects, verifies and publicizes the owner's information on a neighbourhood-wide basis, and then submits an application for the use of the electronic voting system to the subdistrict office. After the application is approved, the owners' committee can make full use of the information in the database of the Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau to compare with the owner's property registration and its real estate information, thereby achieving the preliminary identification and verification of the neighbourhood owners' identity.

For the owners, they need to follow the official account and bind their identity in the form of face recognition or mobile phone number, so as to realize the double guarantee of the accuracy and authenticity of the owner's identity participating in the voting. After completing the binding, the owner can select the voting interface of 'Election of the Second Owners' Committee of X Neighbourhood' and 'Election of the First Owner's Supervisory Board of X Neighbourhood' in the electronic system to submit voting opinions. After the voting deadline, the system will automatically count the results. It can be seen that with the support of digital technology, X Neighbourhood uses the electronic voting system as a tool for the election, which not only reduces the time and economic costs, but also provides materials and texts for the legitimacy of the voting results that based on the information storage function of the database and the automatic statistical function of the system. Moreover, the electronic voting system can break the time and space constraints, reduce the time and energy invested by owners in voting, and more easily form a long-term mechanism for owners to participate in neighbourhood democratic autonomy activities, thus promoting the efficiency and effect of neighbourhood autonomy.

4.3.3 Results reporting: Double-checking the selection for the right person in charge

The appointment of members of the owners' committee is related to the success or failure of neighbourhood autonomy and the realization of residents' well-being. In order to select committee members who are principled, capable, responsible and credible, the preparatory group and grassroots government departments conduct double-checking regarding ideological awareness and policy conformity.

The first is the ideological awareness. *"The performance of a candidate or committee member is not only measured by whether they are active during the campaign, but also by their specific performance in the daily and important moments. Like a resident in our neighbourhood who participated in the election of committee member, he never participated in the activities held by our owners' committee, and even in so many rounds of pandemic prevention and control actions in G city, he never took the initiative to join the voluntary nucleic acid testing activities carried out by our neighbourhood spontaneously."* (Interview record: Owners' committee full-time staff, O7, 2022-08-25) Whether in the preparation and recommendation stages in the early stage, the mid-term election process, or the publicity period of election results, the preparatory group has opened up channels for residents to provide feedback on candidate opinions, and has gained a comprehensive understanding of each candidate's situation from multiple perspectives.

The second is the policy conformity. The preparatory group, the property service centre, and the subdistrict office will examine whether the candidates meet the election conditions of *The Property Management Regulations of G city*, especially whether the candidates have criminal records, whether they have paid the special residential maintenance funds and property service fees on time, and whether they and their close relatives have worked in the enterprises and their subordinate units that provide property services to the neighbourhood. They all need to be audited step by step and reported to the subdistrict office for filing, so as to ensure that the elected members can withstand the test of legitimacy.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In 1998, China implemented a comprehensive reform of the urban housing system, marking the beginning of the era of commercial housing in mainland China, and leading to the booming development of multi-owned housing (MOH) real estate construction. The transition to private homeownership has significantly transformed the way urban residents perceive and interact with their living spaces. Among various forms of private homeownership, condominium ownership is considered to be the dominant type of MOH development worldwide, which encompasses three key components: individual ownership of housing units, joint ownership of the land and shared areas of the building, and membership in an owners' autonomy organisation such as homeowner associations, owners' committees, and owner corporations (Lehavi, 2015; Muczynski, 2023; Van der Merve, 2015). Due to the existence of common interest in private neighbourhoods, the neighbourhood autonomy organisations are prevalent globally. However, the development of owners' committees in mainland China has not been as prosperous as the real estate industry. This is due to the unfavourable political, market, and social conditions, which make the establishment and transition between the old and new owners' committees difficult (Wang et al., 2017).

In mainland China, people's autonomy is considered to be only feasible at the micro political scale (F. Zhang, 2022). Compared to modern ethnic states, the closed and independent space, small population size, and concentrated residential characteristics of neighbourhoods endow grassroots autonomy with practical significance. The study found that the social capital created by neighbourhood interaction and neighbourhood characteristics is conducive to the role of neighbourhood associations in urban governance (Kim, 2020).

Democracy is not only a core element for the survival and development of grassroots society and modern state forms, but also a long-term value pursued by human society (Forrest, 2018). Many scholars regard the whole-process people's democracy as a subordinate concept of Chinese democracy, pointing out its outstanding features of integrity and the whole process (Xiao, 2022). Whole-process people's democracy reflects the realisation logic from people's

subjectivity, openness and fairness, and the whole-chain participation (Ren & Liu, 2023). To uphold the supremacy of people and implement it in the practice of urban neighbourhood autonomy, that is to say, searching for and discovering the general will and real needs of residents, providing institutional support and guaranteeing the exercise of the residents' right to be the master of their own affairs. Besides, in the early, middle and late stages of the election of the owners' committee, residents can effectively avoid the 'covert deal' and realise the 'fish tank effect' of the democratic decision-making process by pursuing an open and fair election system design. What's more, the whole-process people's democracy in the election of the owners' committee is mainly reflected in the whole chain of actions: 'preparing for the convening of the owners' congress, publicising the legitimacy of neighbourhood autonomy, encouraging owners to participate in the election, cooperating with neighbourhood committees and other institutions, communicating and reporting to the housing construction department and the sub-district office'. Through these actions, the election process of the owners' association achieved a dynamic balance among political, market, and social forces, thereby facilitating the smooth transition of the committee. In particular, the development of election channels, namely the change of participation mode of 'bean election-consent by acclamation-voting by show of hands-anonymous voting-electronic voting', has witnessed the legitimacy change of grassroots democracy.

In the past few decades, the transformation of China's urban grassroots social management system to the community system has made community autonomy become a democratic exploration rooted in urban grassroots, and also an important practice pattern of whole-process people's democracy (W. Chen & Zhang, 2023). In the process of housing system reform and urbanisation in China, with the increasing size of community population and increasingly heavy governance tasks, the previous model of 'the community residents' committee' as a local autonomous unit has been questioned by more and more scholars (Xia & Guan, 2017), and it is proposed that the owners' committee of residential districts be used as the urban grassroots social governance unit to solve the problem of excessive governance scale and the intersection of multiple principals (Liu, 2022; Wang & Zhu, 2022). However, in the existing literature, the democratic and autonomous functions of the owners' committee, especially its democratic construction in the process of neighbourhood autonomy, are still ignored. This paper takes the election of new owners' committee of X neighbourhood in G city as an example, and focuses on how the election of a new owners' committee achieved through the implementation of whole-process people's democracy by analysing the entire process and important actions of the election. The result shows that adhering to full-coverage institutional norms, all-round mobilisation for residents, and whole-chain openness and transparency under the guidance of Communist Party are

essential pathways for achieving moderate neighbourhood democracy and autonomy in China under the context of 'people's democracy'.

The above research results have made some contributions to the study of neighbourhood democracy and autonomy. In the first place, guided by the principles of whole-process people's democracy, this paper analyses and interprets the election process of a neighbourhood owners' committee, which not only helps to deepen understanding of the internal logic of whole-process people's democracy and neighbourhood autonomy, but also refines the structural characteristics and internal requirements of whole-process people's democracy in neighbourhood autonomy. Secondly, by explaining the democratic practice of the election of new owners' committee, this study breaks through the previous research perspective of taking the 'community residents' committee' as the unit of grassroots autonomy (Liu, 2022; Xia & Guan, 2017), and extends the concrete application of the whole-process people's democracy principles in a microfactual case.

Based on the logical implication of the whole-process people's democracy at the grassroots level and the case study of the election of new owners' committee from X neighbourhood in G city, the promotion of urban neighbourhood autonomy under the guidance of whole-process people's democracy can be carried out from the following aspects. (1) Maintaining the residents' subjectivity through party-building leadership. Grassroots party organisations and members have the function of integrating the forces of multiple subjects participating in neighbourhood autonomy. In the process of neighbourhood autonomy, through the mutual integration, organisation and mobilisation of autonomous subjects, it can effectively solve the dilemma of community residents' committees, owners' committees, residents and some other relevant institutions in isolation and ensure the orderly operation of the neighbourhood autonomy, so that residents' participation in neighbourhood autonomy can be guaranteed in different ways. (2) Multiple principals participate in the whole process to achieve collaborative governance. With the reform of the urban housing system and socio-economic transformation, the community calls for the participation of multiple subjects to get out of the dilemma of 'atomization', 'oligarchy' and 'fragmentation' (Chen, 2016), and mobilise enthusiasm and initiative of residents by clarifying the boundaries of rights and responsibilities of multiple principals and all-round publicity and mobilisation, so as to improve the effectiveness of community governance and neighbourhood autonomy. (3) Enabling the whole-chain openness and transparency through digital technologies. In terms of digitally empowering the supervisory process of neighbourhood autonomy, the network platform and digital communication are used to integrate information resources, reinforce the connections among multiple autonomous units, enhance information sharing and interactive communication, and promote the whole-chain tracking of the progress

and results of neighbourhood autonomy affairs, so as to lay a solid foundation for the stable and long-term development of the neighbourhood autonomy in the context of whole-process people's democracy.

The dilemmas of the democracy and autonomy in China's neighbourhood are not limited to the election stage, but also include common problems such as the operation difficulties caused by the lack of incentive mechanism for commissioners and the unequal rights and obligations of itself, and individuality issues such as obstacles to the execution of duties and the acceptance of supervision due to the unclear legal status of owners' committee during the operational stage (A. Liu, 2012). In addition, neighbourhood autonomy requires the committee commissioners to equip with relevant professional knowledge. Due to the non-profit nature of the committee's work, owners are less motivated to run for committee positions. This leads to a significant dysfunction in the owners' committee or shifts it from owner self-governance to elite-driven politics (L. Zhang & Liu, 2021), resulting in the organisational alienation of the committee deviating from neighbourhood autonomy (Savini, 2022). Take Shenzhen as an example, which is a city adjacent to Hong Kong, China. It was the first to learn from the management system of Hong Kong's homeowner association. However, after more than 30 years of development, only about one-third of commercial residential neighbourhood have established owners' committees, which undoubtedly reflects the insufficient breadth of neighbourhood autonomy represented by owners' committee. In the whole process of urban grassroots governance, democracy and autonomy are not separate and opposed (Erlingsson & Odalen, 2017). The democracy and autonomy of the neighbourhood are finally embodied in the realisation of the fundamental interests of the majority of residents, and both require the effective participation of the majority of owners as political subjects. Therefore, guided by the principles of whole-process people's democracy in mainland China, deepening neighbourhood autonomy requires continually enriching its content and exploring effective forms.

A major limitation is that the study focuses on middle-class neighbourhood in mainland China, which raises questions about the generalisability of its conclusions. Over the last two decades, a distinctive "middle class" of homeowners has emerged in mainland China (Wang et al., 2013). To a certain extent, X neighbourhood may simply represent the experience of 'middle-class' neighbourhood democracy and autonomy (Wang, 2022). For future research, there should be more exploration of high-end residential neighbourhoods and cases where owners' committees failed to be elected successfully. If possible, a comparative study of multiple neighbourhood-level cases could further enrich the findings.

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Notes:

¹ 'Double two-thirds' refers to the matters jointly decided by the owners, which should be voted by the owners who account for more than two-thirds of the area of the exclusive part and more than two-thirds of the number of owners.

² 'Double more than half' refers to the matters decided jointly by the owners, which should be voted by the owners who account for more than half of the area of the exclusive part and more than half of the number of owners.

³ An official public account under the supervision of the G city Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau, which mainly provides electronic voting services for owners' congress, publicizes the property management policies and regulations of G city, and provides citizens with services within the scope of the agency's functions.

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