

GOVERNING COMMUNITIES BY METHOD: THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY WORK METHODS IN SHANGHAI'S NEIGHBOURHOOD GOVERNANCE

ShuQin Yang
Shanghai Technician School, Shanghai 200437, China.

Abstract: Community work occupies an ambiguous position in urban China: it is at once a social work discipline imported from the West, an administrative technology of the party-state, and a vehicle for resident participation. This article examines how community work methods have evolved in Shanghai, the city widely regarded as the pioneer of Chinese community construction, and theorises the hybrid character of the resulting practice. Drawing on an interpretive analysis of peer-reviewed empirical studies, policy documents, and secondary sources published between 1996 and 2024, the article reconstructs three overlapping phases in the development of Shanghai's community work methods: an administrative-service phase in which community construction turned residents' committees into instruments of social management; a professionalisation phase in which the state sponsored the expansion of social work education, occupational certification, and community-based professional practice; and a digitalisation phase in which grid management, one-network governance, and platform-based co-production re-engineered neighbourhood problem-solving. Across all three phases, a participatory thread of elections, consultation forums, and collective contention coexisted with administrative and professional methods. The article argues that Shanghai's trajectory is best understood as governance-led community work: the state orchestrates all three classic method families identified in Western community organisation theory, sponsoring professionalisation and participation while retaining control over agendas and resource flows. This configuration produces consultative empowerment rather than autonomous civil society, and it suggests that community work theory must attend to the state as an active sponsor of method itself.

Keywords: Community development; Community work methods; Neighbourhood governance; Shanghai; State-society relations

1 INTRODUCTION

The residential community, or shequ, has become the basic unit of urban governance in contemporary China. Since the national community construction campaign of the mid-1990s, the Chinese state has sought to reorganise urban social life around territorial neighbourhoods, delegating welfare tasks, social control, and increasingly participatory governance to residents' committees and their ancillary organisations [1-2]. No city pursued this project with greater intensity or visibility than Shanghai, whose "two-level government, three-level management" structure and successive rounds of residents' committee reform have served as national models [3-4]. Community construction in Shanghai has accordingly been described as a state project of social integration that combines service, surveillance, and solidarity within a single territorial frame [5].

Within this institutional landscape, community work has become a core technique of governance. Community work is conventionally understood as a method of social work practice directed at neighbourhoods and groups, comprising approaches as different as locality development, social planning, and social action [6-7]. In Shanghai, however, community work has never been the exclusive property of professional social workers. It is performed by residents' committee cadres, community social workers, volunteers, property developers, grid managers, and increasingly by software platforms, and it is framed as often by administrative regulation as by professional ethics. The result is a practice that is difficult to classify with the categories of Western community work theory. The analytical significance of method is precisely that it reveals the practical grammar of governance: the routines, techniques, and institutional channels through which residents and officials encounter one another on an ordinary day.

This article addresses two questions. First, how have community work methods evolved in Shanghai's community development since the mid-1990s? Second, how should the hybrid character of contemporary Shanghai community work be theorised? I argue that Shanghai's trajectory is best understood as the emergence of governance-led community work: a state-orchestrated hybridisation of the three classic method families, in which professionalisation and resident participation are sponsored from above while administrative priorities continue to structure the field. The argument is developed through an interpretive analysis of published research on Shanghai's neighbourhood governance, complemented by policy documents and secondary sources.

The article contributes to two bodies of scholarship. For community work theory, it shows that the classic three-model framework must be extended to account for states that sponsor all three models simultaneously, treating method choice as an instrument of governance rather than an expression of professional ideology. For the study of Chinese urban governance, it integrates previously separate literatures on community construction, social work professionalisation,

grid management, and participatory consultation into a single account of method evolution, and it explains why "empowered autonomy" and "authoritarian deliberation" are two sides of the same institutional coin [4, 8]. Shanghai is a strategic case not because it is representative but because it is exemplary: the city has consistently been the first mover in community construction, professionalisation, and digital governance, so its trajectory defines the frontier against which other Chinese cities calibrate their own practice.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Community Work Methods: Three Classic Models

Community work is one of the oldest and most contested methods of social work. In the classic formulation, community organisation practice can be distinguished into three models: locality development, which mobilises residents to define and solve their own problems through consensus and participation; social planning, which uses expert analysis and administrative rationality to allocate services and solve social problems; and social action, which organises disadvantaged groups to challenge power holders and demand redistribution [6]. Rothman himself later emphasised that the models are not pure types but interwoven approaches whose balance varies with context, workers, and institutional sponsors [6]. Weil's historical review of community practice models likewise shows that the field has repeatedly oscillated between grassroots organising, service planning, and advocacy, and that the relative dominance of each model tracks the political economy of the welfare state [7].

These models were elaborated primarily in Western welfare states, where community workers could be positioned, at least in principle, as intermediaries between citizens and state agencies. In China, the institutional sponsor of community work is not a welfare state in this sense but a developmental party-state that treats the community as a unit of governance. The transfer of community work knowledge to China therefore requires careful attention to the sponsor and to the purposes for which methods are deployed. This oscillation matters for the analysis that follows because the three models arrive in Shanghai not as a menu of professional options from which workers choose, but as a repertoire that the state can deploy selectively, sequentially, and simultaneously.

2.2 Community Governance in Urban China: The Shequ and Its Politics

Chinese urban governance has undergone a fundamental spatial reorganisation since the decline of the work-unit, or *danwei*, system. Bray shows how the collapse of the *danwei* as the primary mechanism of urban integration prompted the party-state to construct the residential community as the new basic unit of governance, deploying "community" as a spatial, discursive, and organisational technology [2]. The national community construction campaign, launched in the 1990s, established residents' committees as the organisational core of the *shequ*, with their own party branches, service stations, and mass organisations [1, 5].

Scholars have read this campaign in markedly different ways. Some emphasise its administrative logic: fieldwork from Shanghai and other cities documented residents' committees overloaded with government tasks, staffed by elderly and often unpaid volunteers, and functioning as the lowest rung of a hierarchical state apparatus [1]. Others stress its transformative potential. Li argues that community governance provides the micro-basis for an emerging civil society, because routine, face-to-face engagement in neighbourhood affairs cultivates civic skills and associational life [9]. Gui et al., writing from Shanghai fieldwork, criticise the state-society dichotomy altogether, showing that urban grassroots are fragmented across heterogeneous actors, interests, and spaces that cannot be assigned cleanly to either pole [3]. Liu develops the influential notion of empowered autonomy: Shanghai's state-led governance reforms, including elected residents' committees, create institutional space and organisational resources that thicken horizontal networks, norms of reciprocity, and solidarity among residents [4]. On this reading, state sponsorship and civic vitality are not opposed but causally connected. The debate between administrative and empowerment readings of the *shequ* remains unresolved in this literature, and one purpose of the present article is to show that both readings capture part of a single, sponsor-designed mechanism rather than mutually exclusive realities.

The contested character of the *shequ* is most visible in moments of conflict. Shi and Cai analyse a sustained homeowners' collective action in Shanghai and show that its success depended on the fragmentation of state power and on social networks linking residents with officials and media workers [10]. Zhu examines a residents' movement in a Shanghai neighbourhood in which struggles over space and the built environment became struggles over community identity itself [11]. Together these studies indicate that the community is not merely a passive object of governance but a field in which residents, developers, cadres, and professionals compete to define interests and identities.

2.3 Professionalisation and the Deliberative Turn

A second strand of literature concerns the professionalisation of social work in China. Social work education expanded rapidly from the late 1980s, and the state institutionalised the profession through university programmes, occupational standards, and, from the mid-2000s, a national professional examination and certification system [12-13]. The state's investment in professional training and certification responded to a double problem: the oversupply of university-educated social workers who lacked posts, and the administrative overload of residents' committees that lacked technical capacity. Leung argues that this professionalisation is fundamentally contested: the state sponsors professional titles and training while social workers at their work sites confront administrative demands, resource

constraints, and role ambiguity, so that professionalisation is negotiated rather than decreed [14]. This literature is essential for understanding community work in China, because professional community workers are embedded in administrative structures, and their methods are shaped as much by the residents' committee and the street office as by professional ethics.

A third strand analyses the participatory and deliberative dimensions of Chinese governance. He and Warren characterise the proliferation of consultation forums, public hearings, and deliberative polling under party-state auspices as authoritarian deliberation: participatory institutions that generate information, legitimacy, and responsiveness without transferring decision authority to citizens [8]. Shanghai's district governments have experimented with community-based budgeting, residents' assemblies, and issue-based consultation forums since the early 2000s, and these experiments have been analysed as part of this national deliberative turn. This concept is directly applicable to Shanghai's community consultation practices, which have multiplied since the 2000s alongside electoral and budgetary experiments.

2.4 A Framework: Governance-Led Community Work

From these literatures, I derive a framework that treats community work methods as the product of an institutional sponsor. Building on Rothman's models and on the Chinese governance literature, the framework distinguishes three method families: an administrative-service family, corresponding to social planning and service delivery, in which experts and officials define problems and allocate resources; a professional-empowering family, corresponding to locality development and professional social work, in which trained workers facilitate resident self-organisation; and a participatory-deliberative family, corresponding to social action and consultation, in which residents are mobilised to voice preferences and, at the margin, to contest decisions. The central claim is that in Shanghai these families are not alternative professional strategies but simultaneous, state-orchestrated instruments. Which family dominates at any moment reflects the governance needs of the party-state more than the ideology of community workers. Figure 1 presents the framework schematically. The framework generates the empirical expectation that each phase of Shanghai's community development will be marked by a dominant method family, that the families will overlap and hybridise rather than replace one another, and that professionalisation and participation will be sponsored from above even as they enlarge the space for resident initiative. It also implies that the professional community worker in Shanghai should be analysed as a boundary figure who translates between administrative demands and resident initiatives, and that this work of translation is itself a method with its own techniques, tensions, and limits.

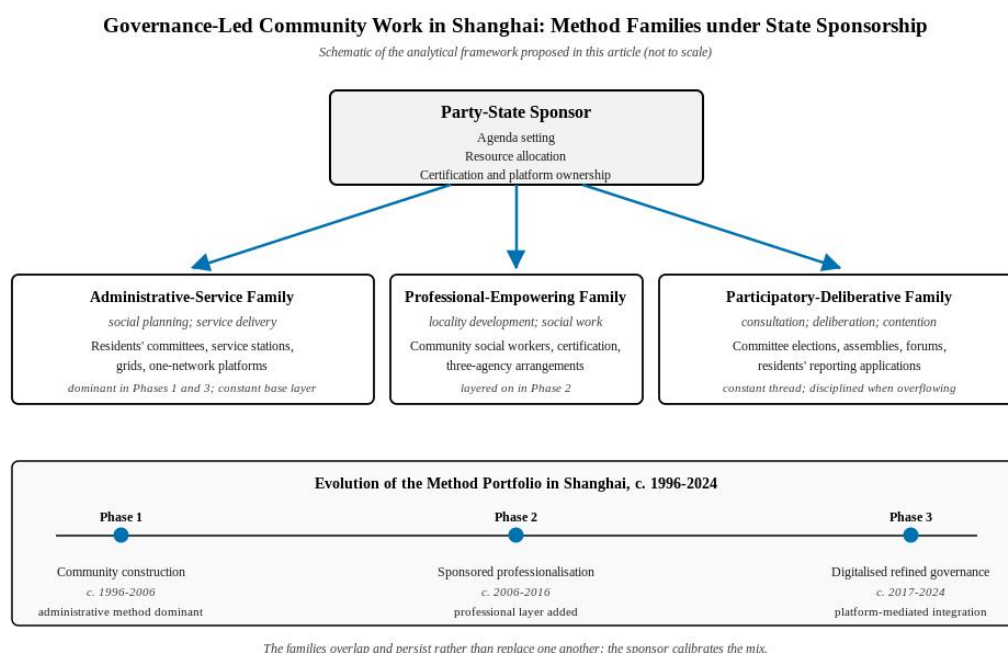


Figure 1 Governance-Led Community Work in Shanghai: Method Families under State Sponsorship

Note. The figure is a schematic of the framework proposed in the text, not a measurement. Phase boundaries are analytical approximations drawn from the literature discussed in the Analysis.

3 METHODOLOGY

This article is an interpretive, document-based analysis. Its primary materials are peer-reviewed empirical studies of Shanghai's community development and of Chinese community governance more broadly, selected for their substantive coverage of Shanghai or of national reforms in which Shanghai was a model, together with official policy documents

and secondary analyses as reported in this literature. The scope is the period from the mid-1990s, when the community construction campaign began, to 2024, when digital governance platforms had become routine.

The analytical procedure followed three steps. First, I reconstructed the institutional history of Shanghai's community development from the secondary literature, identifying the major reform episodes and their policy instruments. Second, I coded the reported practices according to the three method families specified in the framework, attending to who performed the work, what techniques they used, and what institutional resources sustained them. Third, I examined the state-society pattern associated with each phase, asking whether practices were primarily administrative, professional, participatory, or hybrid. Because the underlying studies employ different methods, from neighbourhood ethnography to survey analysis and policy evaluation, I triangulated across independent accounts for each phase, treating convergence between studies as stronger evidence than any single account. Because the analysis relies on published research rather than new primary fieldwork, its claims are interpretative and synthesising rather than statistically generalisable, and it cannot adjudicate between rival interpretations of particular episodes beyond what the published record permits. This design was chosen because the aim is theoretical: to characterise and explain the evolution of methods, for which the accumulated case literature is the appropriate evidence.

4 ANALYSIS

Table 1 summarises the evolution of Shanghai's community work methods across three overlapping phases. The phases are analytical constructs derived from the literature rather than administratively demarcated periods, and the boundaries between them are porous.

Table 1 Evolution of Community Work Methods in Shanghai's Neighbourhood Governance

Phase	Approximate period	Dominant method family	Core instruments	State-society pattern
Community construction	c. 1996-2006	Administrative-service	Residents' committees, service stations, mass mobilisation	State-led delivery with limited resident initiative
State-sponsored professionalisation	c. 2006-2016	Professional-empowering	Social work posts, certification, community organisations	Professional facilitation within administrative frames
Digitalised refined governance	c. 2017-2024	Administrative-technical with participatory interfaces	Grids, one-network platforms, co-production apps	Platform-mediated consultation and control

Note. Phase boundaries are analytical constructs derived from the literature rather than administratively demarcated periods.

Shanghai's community development after the mid-1990s was dominated by what I call the administrative-service method: residents' committees and their affiliated organisations functioned as the delivery arms of social policy, and community work was largely synonymous with the management of government-assigned tasks. The institutional architecture of the "two-level government, three-level management" system assigned the street office and the residents' committee responsibility for an expanding catalogue of services, from household registration and social assistance to sanitation, mediation, and public security [1]. The street office, nominally a dispatch of the district government, became the *de facto* level at which welfare, mediation, and campaign tasks were aggregated and pushed downward, and fieldwork accounts counted scores of government functions converging on each residents' committee. Committee staff, often elderly residents serving without pay, described themselves as "eight grannies with nine teeth between them," overwhelmed by the "thousand threads" of government departments that converge on the neighbourhood [1].

Bray interprets this phase theoretically: the community construction campaign was a governance technology that reterritorialised social life after the *danwei*, and the residents' committee was its organisational expression [2]. Shieh and Friedmann similarly read community construction as the restructuring of urban governance, in which the state devolved administrative functions to territorial communities while simultaneously strengthening its own presence through party branches and cadre systems [5]. In method terms, the dominant family was social planning: problems were defined by higher levels of government, resources were allocated administratively, and residents were the objects rather than the authors of community work.

Yet even in this phase, participatory elements were present. Residents' committees were formally mass self-governing organisations, and their cadres were expected to mobilise residents for campaigns, elections, and consultative meetings. Liu argues that Shanghai's reform wave of the early 2000s, which introduced direct elections of residents' committee chairs and created community service stations to separate service delivery from self-governance, was explicitly designed to make this participatory dimension real [4]. The reforms, on this account, generated a distinctive pattern of empowered autonomy, in which state-led institutional change thickened the horizontal networks and norms of reciprocity that theories of civil society associate with voluntary association. The analytical point for method theory is that the participatory family did not arise from below in opposition to the administrative family; it was designed into the system from above as a complement to service delivery.

4.1 Phase Two: State-Sponsored Professionalisation and the Community Workforce

From the mid-2000s, Shanghai moved to professionalise the community workforce. Social work education had expanded dramatically in Chinese universities since the 1990s, but its graduates long struggled to find professional employment [13]. The state responded by creating occupational categories and a certification system that turned social work into a recognisable, examinable profession, and Shanghai was among the first cities to deploy certified social workers in community settings, residents' committee service stations, and community-based organisations [12, 14]. This phase can be characterised as state-sponsored professionalisation: the party-state, rather than a professional association or a social movement, supplied the titles, the training, the posts, and the pay.

The method consequences were significant. Professional community workers brought with them the repertoire of Western community work: needs assessments, casework, group work, community organising, and project-based interventions. But their employment within the administrative apparatus constrained this repertoire. Shanghai's experiment with community social work posts and service stations effectively created a hybrid occupational category, the community worker, whose role combined the case management of vulnerable residents with the organisational development of volunteers and resident groups [14]. Leung's analysis of Chinese social workers' workplaces shows that professionalisation is contested on the ground: workers must negotiate between professional methods and administrative demands, and the result is a hybrid practice in which professional legitimacy is used to humanise administration as much as to empower residents. The "three-agency linkage" arrangements that became a national template in this period, connecting residents' committees, community social organisations, and professional social workers, institutionalised this hybridity: social workers were inserted into the community as technical specialists whose mandate combined service delivery, organisational development, and the cultivation of resident volunteers.

Two observations follow for the framework. First, the professional-empowering family did not displace the administrative-service family; it was layered on top of it, and the two were fused in the person of the community social worker, who was simultaneously an employee of the governance system and a carrier of professional method. Second, the state's sponsorship of professionalisation was selective: it extended to occupational certification and service posts but not to professional autonomy over agendas, budgets, or the definition of community problems. Professionalisation in Shanghai was therefore an administrative strategy as much as a professional achievement, and its method signature is a community work that is professionally informed but administratively governed.

4.2 Phase Three: Digitalisation, Grid Management, and Co-Production

The most recent phase has been defined by digitalisation. Shanghai has been a national leader in urban data governance, building integrated platforms for public services and urban management, and extending what scholars describe as grid-based and platform-mediated governance down to the neighbourhood [15]. Grid management subdivides the community into cells assigned to grid managers who collect information, report problems, and coordinate responses, converting neighbourhood governance into a continuous monitoring and dispatch operation. The integrated one-network platforms combine data from the grid, complaint hotlines, and residents' reporting applications, so that a problem detected in one neighbourhood can be routed, tracked, and closed within a single administrative workflow [15]. Methodologically, the grid is a dramatic reassertion of the social planning family, now powered by real-time data: problems are detected, classified, and routed through administrative channels with unprecedented speed and granularity. Digitalisation has also created new participatory interfaces. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, neighbourhoods in the Yangtze Delta region, including Shanghai, relied on digital platforms for information, service requests, and volunteer coordination, and studies of these episodes describe a pattern of co-production in which residents and resident committees collaborated through digital technologies under conditions of extreme state mobilisation [16-17]. Liu et al. interpret the pandemic experience as the consolidation of a constructed order of neighbourhood co-governance: the community-building reforms of earlier decades had endowed residents' committees with legitimacy, power, and capacity, enabling them to bridge hierarchical state mobilisation and horizontal resident initiative [16]. In method terms, the pandemic phase fused all three families: administrative command, professional coordination, and resident self-organisation operated simultaneously within the same platforms. The pandemic also revealed the limits of platform-mediated community work, since digital coordination depended on pre-existing social networks and on the discretionary energy of resident volunteers, suggesting that platforms amplify rather than replace neighbourhood social capital [16].

The digital turn thus extends, rather than overturns, the pattern of governance-led community work. Platforms absorb and institutionalise participatory channels, allowing residents to report problems, join volunteer groups, and consult on service priorities, while the agenda, the data, and the decision rules remain in administrative hands. The participatory-deliberative family acquires a technical infrastructure, but its fundamental asymmetry with the administrative family is preserved.

4.3 The Participatory Thread: Consultation, Deliberation, and Contention

Across all three phases, a participatory thread runs through Shanghai's community development. Direct elections of residents' committee chairs, introduced in the reform wave of the early 2000s, are among the most institutionalised forms of resident voice in Chinese urban governance [4]. Consultation meetings, residents' assemblies, and issue-specific forums have multiplied, and Shanghai's consultative practices are emblematic of the broader Chinese

pattern that He and Warren term authoritarian deliberation: participatory institutions that improve information flow, legitimacy, and responsiveness while reserving final decision authority for the party-state [8]. The significance of elections should not be overstated: turnout is often mobilised, candidates are frequently pre-vetted, and the residents' committee remains the lowest rung of the administrative system. Yet even constrained elections habituate residents and cadres to public justification, which is the minimal precondition of deliberative politics [4, 8]. The deliberative gains are real: residents learn to articulate interests, officials learn to anticipate resistance, and the community acquires a public sphere of a kind, but the institutional ceiling is fixed by the sponsor.

Where residents have sought to exceed that ceiling, contention has been the result. Shanghai's homeowners' movement provides the best-documented case: sustained collective resistance by property owners against developers and local governments succeeded where residents could exploit the fragmentation of state power and mobilise social networks linking them to officials and the media [10]. Zhu shows, in another Shanghai neighbourhood, how a movement over physical space became a movement over community identity, generating a sense of place and collective self-understanding that the administrative framework could not provide [11]. These episodes are the social action family in its purest Chinese form, and their existence qualifies any reading of Shanghai community work as merely administrative. But their episodic, defensive character also confirms the framework's expectation: social action appears when sponsored channels fail, not as a standing professional method.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Governance-Led Community Work: The State as Sponsor of Method

The central finding of this analysis is that Shanghai's community work methods have not evolved from less to more professional or from less to more participatory in any linear sense. Instead, the state has layered method family upon method family, retaining the administrative-service family as the foundation, adding a professional-empowering layer through sponsored professionalisation, and integrating a participatory-deliberative layer through elections, consultation, and platforms. This configuration, which I term governance-led community work, differs from the classical Western picture in which community workers choose among models according to professional values, community needs, or political alignments. In Shanghai, the sponsor chooses them all, simultaneously, and calibrates the mix to governance requirements.

The framework therefore extends Rothman's typology in an important way. Rothman's models were always understood as ideal types whose interweaving varies by circumstance, but the implicit variation was professional: which method, at what moment, pursued by whom [6-7]. The Shanghai case reveals a structural variant in which the state sponsors all three families at once and uses their coexistence as a governance resource: social planning delivers services and information; locality development mobilises residents and generates legitimacy; and the capacity for social action is managed by channelling contention into consultation and by policing its overflow. Method, in this configuration, is a portfolio, and the portfolio manager is the party-state.

5.2 Consultative Empowerment and Its Limits

This reading reconciles two influential but apparently contradictory characterisations of Chinese community governance. Liu's empowered autonomy and He and Warren's authoritarian deliberation both describe real features of Shanghai: residents genuinely acquire civic skills, networks, and influence through state-designed institutions, yet the institutions do not transfer decision authority [4, 8]. The framework shows that these are not competing descriptions but complementary dimensions of the same mechanism. Empowerment is sponsored precisely because it is bounded: a community with trained social workers, active volunteers, and practiced deliberators is a more governable community, because it can absorb problems, generate consent, and self-organise within administrative parameters. The limits of the mechanism are visible in the moments when residents define problems the sponsor did not intend, at which point the participatory family is disciplined and the social action family emerges, episodically, outside the sponsored channel. The framework also clarifies why Shanghai's community workers often experience professional frustration: they are trained in empowerment methods and employed in an administrative apparatus whose logic is delivery and control. This friction is not a failure of implementation but the constitutive tension of governance-led community work, in which the same institutions that sponsor professionalisation discipline its effects [14].

5.3 Implications for Community Work Theory and Comparative Governance

Three implications follow. First, community work theory should treat the sponsor as a first-class variable. The Western literature's debates about professional versus activist identities assume a relatively autonomous professional field; in governance-led community work, the professional field is itself an administrative product, and professionalisation is a governance strategy with ambiguous consequences for both service quality and resident power. For practitioners, the framework warns against importing empowerment models without attending to sponsorship: methods that presume professional autonomy will be reshaped by the administrative structures that employ community workers, and their effectiveness should be assessed not against professional ideals alone but against the governance functions the sponsor assigns [14]. Second, the Shanghai case suggests that participation and control are not opposites but complements in developmental states: the design question for community workers is not whether to empower residents but within what

frame empowerment will be allowed to operate. Third, the analytic value of the framework extends beyond Shanghai to other Chinese megacities and to comparative urban governance, where states increasingly sponsor community-based professionalisation and digital participation as instruments of governability.

The argument has limitations that should be stated plainly. It is an interpretive synthesis of published research, not a primary empirical study, and its phase claims rest on the coverage of the underlying case literature rather than on new field data. The analysis privileges Shanghai's policy documents and nationally visible innovations, and it may understate variation within the city, across districts, and across issue areas. The framework is proposed as an analytical lens, not a universal law, and its application to other jurisdictions requires careful attention to their distinct institutional histories.

6 CONCLUSION

This article has examined the evolution of community work methods in Shanghai's community development since the mid-1990s. It reconstructed three overlapping phases, from administrative-service community construction, through state-sponsored professionalisation, to digitalised refined governance, and it identified a participatory thread of elections, consultation, and contention running through all of them. The central argument is that Shanghai's community work is best understood as governance-led: the party-state orchestrates the three classic method families simultaneously, sponsoring professionalisation and participation while retaining administrative control, so that community work functions as a portfolio of governance techniques rather than a professional field with its own ends.

The argument matters for two audiences. For scholars of Chinese urban governance, it integrates the literatures on community construction, social work professionalisation, grid management, and consultative deliberation into a single account, and it shows that empowerment and deliberation, no less than service delivery and control, are instruments of a governance strategy. For community work theory, it demonstrates that the sponsor, and not only the worker, determines method, and that the coexistence of administrative, professional, and participatory families under a single sponsor requires a theoretical vocabulary that the classic three-model framework does not yet provide.

Three avenues for future research follow. First, primary fieldwork in Shanghai's neighbourhoods could test the framework against the lived practice of community social workers, grid managers, and resident activists, tracing how the three method families are combined in everyday work. Second, comparative research across Chinese cities could establish which features of the Shanghai model are generalisable and which are local. Third, as digital platforms increasingly mediate community work, research should ask whether the participatory interfaces of the digital turn can ever redistribute the decision authority that the framework identifies as the sponsor's preserve. The stability of governance-led community work ultimately depends on the state's continuing capacity to absorb the contradictions of sponsored empowerment, and that capacity is not assured in a digital environment in which residents' expectations may outrun administrative responsiveness. Whether governance-led community work remains a stable configuration or evolves, under digital conditions, into something new will determine much of the future of urban social life in China.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- [1] Benewick R, Takahara A. Eight grannies with nine teeth between them: Community construction in China. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 2002, 7(1-2): 1-18. DOI: 10.1007/BF02876927.
- [2] Bray D. Building 'community': New strategies of governance in urban China. *Economy and Society*, 2006, 35(4): 530-549. DOI: 10.1080/03085140600960799.
- [3] Gui Y, Ma W, Mühlhahn K. Grassroots transformation in contemporary China. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2009, 39(3): 400-423. DOI: 10.1080/00472330902944487.
- [4] Liu C. Empowered autonomy: The politics of community governance innovations in Shanghai. *Chinese Public Administration Review*, 2008, 5(1-2): 61-71. DOI: 10.22140/cpar.v5i1.2.81.
- [5] Shieh L, Friedmann J. Restructuring urban governance. *City*, 2008, 12(2): 183-195. DOI: 10.1080/13604810802176433.
- [6] Rothman J. The interweaving of community intervention approaches. *Journal of Community Practice*, 1996, 3(3-4): 69-99. DOI: 10.1300/J125v03n03_03.
- [7] Weil M. Model development in community practice. *Journal of Community Practice*, 1996, 3(3-4): 5-67. DOI: 10.1300/J125v03n03_02.
- [8] He B, Warren M E. Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 2011, 9(2): 269-289. DOI: 10.1017/S1537592711000892.
- [9] Li Y. Community governance: The micro basis of civil society. *Social Sciences in China*, 2008, 29(1): 132-141. DOI: 10.1080/02529200801921044.
- [10] Shi F, Cai Y. Disaggregating the state: Networks and collective resistance in Shanghai. *The China Quarterly*, 2006, 186: 314-332. DOI: 10.1017/S0305741006000178.

- [11] Zhu J. Space, power, and the construction of community identity: A case study of a residents' movement in a Shanghai neighborhood. *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology*, 2007, 40(2): 65-90. DOI: 10.2753/CSA0009-4625400203.
- [12] Law A K, Gu J X. Social work education in Mainland China: Development and issues. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 2008, 2(1): 1-12. DOI: 10.1111/j.1753-1411.2008.00006.x.
- [13] Yan M C, Tsang A K T. A snapshot on the development of social work education in China: A Delphi study. *Social Work Education*, 2005, 24(8): 883-901. DOI: 10.1080/02615470500342314.
- [14] Leung T T F. The work sites as ground of contest: Professionalisation of social work in China. *British Journal of Social Work*, 2012, 42(2): 335-352. DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcr063.
- [15] Deng F. Stakes, stakeholders and urban governance: A theoretical framework for the Chinese city. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2018, 59(3-4): 291-313. DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2019.1570298.
- [16] Liu Z, Lin S, Lu T, et al. Towards a constructed order of co-governance: Understanding the state-society dynamics of neighbourhood collaborative responses to COVID-19 in urban China. *Urban Studies*, 2023, 60(9): 1730-1749. DOI: 10.1177/00420980221081314.
- [17] Zou Y, Zhao W. Neighbourhood governance during the COVID-19 lockdown in Hangzhou: Coproduction based on digital technologies. *Public Management Review*, 2022, 24(12): 1914-1932. DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2021.1945666.