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Grid Governance in China under the COVID-19 Outbreak: Changing Neighborhood Governance

Tianke Zhu ^{1,†}, Xigang Zhu ^{1,*} and Jian Jin ^{2,*,†}

¹ School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, China; tiankezhu@nju.edu.cn

² Law School of Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, China

* Correspondence: zhuxigang522@hotmail.com (X.Z.); jinjian@nju.edu.cn (J.J.); Tel.: +86-139-1396-4450 (J.J.)

† These authors contributed equally to this work and share the first author position.

Abstract: Housing commodification seems to suggest that a process of a state is embracing private governance. However, private governance in Chinese neighborhoods is a two-way trajectory. This paper examined two types of housing neighborhoods, namely, a work-unit housing neighborhood and gated commodity housing to understand the changes in neighborhood governance. It is interesting to observe that during the Covid-19 epidemic period, the state government enhanced its presence and public trust in neighborhood governance by changing the former ways of self-governance. As a strategy for the state to return to local governance, the grid governance is the reconfiguration of administrative resources at a neighborhood level and professionalizes neighborhood organizations to ensure the capacities of the state to solve social crises and neighborhood governance. The potential side effects of changing neighborhood governance are that while the implementation of grid governance has improved internal connections among residents, the empowered neighborhood governments acting as the “state agent on the ground” leads to an estrangement between residents and private governance. The underdevelopment of neighborhood autonomy is not only due to the restriction of state government, but more importantly, the reciprocal relationship of state-led neighborhood governance in the context of housing privatization development in China.

Keywords: grid governance; COVID-19; neighborhood governance; private governance; China



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as a global disaster in which society or its larger secondary systems, such as neighborhoods, suffer social damage and material loss [1–3]. Since a form of social life, the neighborhood, acts as the primary ‘responding organizations’, representing the ‘very effort’ involvement of neighborhood organizations; since a disaster tests the governance capabilities, ‘occasion’ demonstrates the ongoing nature of such a crisis [4]. The very concept of disaster has been reformulated into a more generic category: ‘collective stress situation’ [5]. Collective stress situation emerged under the influences of disaster as one where ‘many members of a social system fail to receive [the] expected conditions of life from the system’ [6]. The literature of disaster as a social crisis emphasizes the significance of neighborhood governance, where the government response to the neighborhood significantly impacts the community building post-disaster.

As early as 2003, when China faced the SARS crisis, the self-governing approach reduced the impacts of disasters on neighborhoods, with an emerging trend of private governance in neighborhood governance [7]. The emergence of private governance in China seems to suggest a process of state retreat in neighborhood governance [8–14]. Residents treat their gated communities as private utopias, preventing interference by governmental sectors [15]. However, private governance does not possess social capitals at a neighborhood level [16]. This is not only because the emerging forms of neighborhood

in China have vulnerable characteristics [17], but also, they remain representative of the state's intention to retreat from land provision while retaining neighborhood control [18].

Trust relationships between a neighborhood and its new leaders, as a form of social capital, can contribute to the success of neighborhood regeneration partnerships [19]. In transferring that delegation of authority to the executive, trust is the single most important commodity that will determine the fate of a society [20]. Increasing research indicates that the role of neighborhood organizations failed to deliver greater self-governance [12,21] or civic engagement in China [22], because housing commodification has left a vacuum requiring state intervention [9]. Successful neighborhood governance is a crucial determinant of whether the government can effectively transfer power to lower levels of society [23].

The 2003 SARS crisis in China provided a unique experience for the state government to review the private governance in responding to the social crisis. The failure of transferring responsibility to commercial property management occurred since housing privatization has pulled back the state to return to neighborhood governance. In recent years, as an important part of national governance innovation, a grid governance scheme (Known as “wang ge hua zhili” in Chinese) has been widely adopted in the neighborhood governance in China [24]. The ongoing grid governance scheme is different from the self-governance and private governance, where the central government handed over the dominance of neighborhood governance to the autonomous and neighborhood organizations [25,26]. The scheme is also different in that the residential community is the base unit of urban governance [27]. The state government attempted to reformulate the structure of neighborhood governance that could foster social bonding [28]. By enhancing the presence of state in the neighborhood governance, the state attempted to regain the neighborhood control by setting up a local identity [29].

Starting in December 2019, an unknown Coronavirus caused a pneumonia outbreak across the entire world [30–32]. During the COVID-19 outbreak in China, the grid governance strategy was enhanced to contain the virus spread at the neighborhood level in many Chinese cities. Some observers might argue that strengthening the right to govern at the neighborhood level stems from the power that socialist countries can still use in times of social crisis. However, the state sees paralyzed society as an opportunity to strengthen the presence of state government in reforming the private governance in China. The strategy creates a new form of neighborhood governance by adjusting authority of neighborhood organization, increasing the size of neighborhood committees and its professionalism, and adjusting coordination between neighborhood organizations and public sectors. However, the approaches of grid governance do not show a return of state to the control of a totalitarian society, but rather reflect the emergence of a new neighborhood relationship, combining authoritarian coercion elements with a series of neoliberal strategies in the form of emphasizing local autonomy and individual discipline.

This study chose two different forms of neighborhood in Nanjing, an ex-public housing neighborhood and a gated community. The ex-public housing neighborhood was invested in and constructed by several state work-units in the mid-1990s, while it is managed by the subdistrict office or called “street office” (Known as “Jie Dao Ban” in Chinese). The gated community is newly invested in and managed by a private property management company. The two types of neighborhood represent the formal residential forms in urban China since housing privatization. The selection of cases provides a more nuanced understanding of the implication of neighborhood governance in China.

This study attempted to analyze how China state government can use grid governance strategy to extend the governance capacity into neighborhood governance and to rebuild social trust by observing the outbreak as a crisis of private governance. In the cases, how much do they really tell us about the capacity of state government to reformulate neighborhood governance? Although the case of COVID-19 is extreme, it showed the mechanism potential of neighborhood organizations in China and revealed some shifts in the forms of power in neighborhood governance that have been more largely overlooked.

In particular, this article reveals the impacts of a grid governance scheme on the private governance in China in post-pandemic times.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we review the features of grid governance as a form of neighborhood governance in China. In Section 3 we then introduce the survey and methodology. In Section 4 we examine the relationship between the approaches of grid governance and the participation of neighborhood organizations during the outbreaks. In Section 5 we discuss the connotation for neighborhood governance with respect to post-pandemic and implications of ongoing grid governance in the post-epidemic era. Finally, in Section 6 we reflect on the effects of the grid governance strategy on neighborhood governance in China.

2. Changing Neighborhood Governance in Urban China

In this section, the features of neighborhood governance before economic reform and the initiative of “strengthening the capacity of neighborhood governance”, rising “private governance” under the retreat of the state, and the state-led grid governance as a neighborhood governance scheme are reviewed to identify research gaps.

2.1. The Decline of Work-Units and Neighborhood Committees Since the 1990s

Under state socialism, the work-units (danwei in Chinese) were the main organizers of community life. Work units were once considered to be a rational, future-oriented, and technical structure, and it is a fairly effective organization of important modernization tasks [33]. Communities attached to work units formed an organized dependence on the state and replicate the traditional features stable communities, known as “Communist Neo-Traditionalism” [34]. In the past, work units have played a key role in housing supply and in organizing social life [35]. However, market-oriented reform has created great impacts on neighborhood governance [36]. With the diversification of the economy, Chinese cities have witnessed an influx of laid-off workers and rural migrants who are no longer dependent on work units or state-owned enterprises. These are private sector works outside traditional social control mechanisms, and the state is therefore attempting to reconnect these outsiders with the state. At the same time, the declining governance capacity of the traditional community is mainly due to the fact that management organizers are more or less self-organizing and housewives based on retirement services [11].

The initiative of “strengthening neighborhood governance capacity” arguably returned of state control. Wong and Poon [37] argued that the community system has changed from “serving the neighborhood and regaining control of urban society”. The policy aims to rebuild an intimate space where social monitoring can be effectively achieved [9]. For instance, Nanjing’s urban governance has adopted a new model of two levels of government (municipality and district government) and three levels of administration (the establishment of additional street offices). Later, the system was extended to the fourth tier neighborhood committee as an agent of local government [8]. The development of neighborhood committees represents an extension of state governance into the neighborhood [11].

2.2. Emerging Awareness of Private Governance Since the 2000s

The commodification of housing reform seems to be a major process that affects the transition of neighborhood governance in China [9]. The retreat of the state from housing supply and the emergence of entrepreneurial governance in China are argued as neoliberal urbanism [38,39], echoing the process of “neoliberalism” [40]. The demise of work units as organizational forms of urban governance is a major change [8,27,35,41]. The rise of private governance rapidly changed the formation of neighborhood organizations. The emerging gated neighborhoods transformed the past neighborhood governance into private governance [18]. As a legacy of housing commodification, the relations between residents in the gated neighborhoods and neighborhood organizations are declining, which is manifested in less frequent community activities. The spatial forms of private gover-

nance have not emerged outside of gated neighborhoods [42]. Under the leadership of the sub-district (street office), the residents' committee as an autonomous organization has tended to become a bureaucracy, leading weak professionalism in providing community services [9]. However, the state government believes that the lack of substantive neighborhood organizations participating in neighborhood governance is not conducive to provide a cornerstone for the democratization process, but also increasingly leading the estrangement among residents into public affairs. Therefore, the state proposes to adjust the role of the neighborhood governments, initiating the "community building" to establish a "resilient community" and a "comprehensive governance platform" by introducing the participation of social organizations. The proposition signaled that the sub-district no longer played the role of administrator, adopting the identities that included the role of service provider and coordinator. On the one hand, by strengthening the role of private governance at the neighborhood level, the administrative role of the grassroots government is shifted to the development of social organizations and intermediary institutions at the neighborhood level; on the other hand, the new scheme relies more on the reformation of autonomous organizations because the coalitions and partnerships demonstrate significant means by which local government improves governing capacity to act [43].

However, the "community building" initiative also represents the state's attempts to regain control at the neighborhood level by enhancing a local sense of identity [29]. What are the impacts on the emerging private governance? First, unlike the rapid economic growth in China, the transformation of the urban governing system from a work-unit system to a market-oriented system was criticized for being slow. The private governance is difficult to form a stable and mature model. The development of private governance is often needed to conduct transactions and cooperate with the governmental sectors; in such a process, the autonomous organizations are likely to develop an alliance partnership with the government, even acting as a vassal to maintain broader social order. In this context, the initiative is not only expected to prevent large scale social unrest and help build social stability [24], but also indicates the state's positive intention to build social trust in gated neighborhoods. However, when 'strong government meets weak society', achieving the simultaneous development of the state government and the private governance has also become a challenge for the administrative transformation. The administrations in China always show an authoritative form, while the autonomous organizations show limited roles in challenging the policy implication. Furthermore, the emerging bureaucracy of neighborhood government constitutes the driving force of neighborhood governance innovation in China. The interactive relationship between bottom up democracy and top-down governance formed by autonomous organizations and administrative departments constitutes the pattern of the ongoing grid governance scheme in China. The initiative demonstrates that governmental departments are attempting to promote the standardization of administrative procedures. However, the implementation depends largely on the support of local residents. At the same time, the scale of grid members not only limits the extent to which diverse market sectors participate, but also shows conflicts with the private governance in Chinese neighborhoods.

2.3. The Return of the State with the Strategy of Grid Governance

The term 'grid' is an administrative designation comprising different sizes of neighborhoods in urban China. It commonly represents approximately 10,000 square meters of a neighborhood. As part of the process of reforming China's socialist system, the grid governance scheme was widely implemented at varying extents, including disaster prevention and control, grassroots governance, party building, social security, and social cohesion. In 2013, the state government initiated the reform proposition of 'national governance system and governance capacity modernization'. For the first time, the task of innovating neighborhood governance in China was determined by central policy makers (See the decisions on several issues by CCP) [44]. The reform institutionalized the strategy as an administrative system for coordinating different departments. In 2015, the state govern-

ment attempted to enhance the governance capacity in the neighborhood governance [45]. The strategy attempted to mobilize social organizations in the neighborhood governance. Because the increasingly local response challenged the legitimacy of top-down control in neighborhood governance [46,47], the attempts were not only to improve the governance capacity but more importantly, to supervise the development of private governance [48,49].

The main features of the grid governance scheme demonstrate the state government attempting to transfer local administrative resources to the neighborhood level. By setting up a local “agency of the state”, the ‘grid governance office’ represents the interests of the state in neighborhood governance. The grid governance member (wang ge yuan in Chinese) is recruited through formal exams as a state-employee for delivering political directives at a neighborhood level. Meanwhile, the scheme forms a horizontal coordination mechanism of top-down governance structure. By dividing neighborhoods into ‘grids’ to replace the existing administrative divisions, the strategy attempts to refine neighborhood governance within a new geographic area. For example, the street offices no longer consider neighborhoods as the scope of work. By keeping the original boundary of neighborhoods unchanged, the administrative boundary of sub-district is divided across several grids.

The introduction of the grid governance strategy reduces the local institutional resistance to the reform of neighborhood governance. Therefore, the grid governance offices are able to reconnect the resources of public and private sectors with neighborhood organizations at a microscopic spatial scale. Furthermore, the strategy is the product of the interaction between information technology innovation and administrative system reform. China is in an era of vigorously developing informatization, and cyberspace has become a place where the conflicts between public and private interests are amplified by social effects. Therefore, governmental sectors attempt to legitimize their roles of neighborhood governance, thereby shortening the time to respond to the escalation of social conflicts.

From the above review, it can be seen that the introduction of grid governance stems from the state’s distrust of residential autonomy in China. Common interests and recognition may challenge the capacity of urban governance and require more grass-roots democracy. The questions are, even in the face of a strong sense of private governance in the gated neighborhood, how can the state manage to continue to exercise its control? How does this process work in ex-public housing neighborhood with a weak sense of autonomy? Especially during the outbreak, when the role of commercial community services is restricted, we need to understand that private governance and state-led approaches are complementary roles in promoting state hegemony in China.

3. The Context of the Case and Research Methodology

Compared with Wenzhou, a small city in China, Nanjing as one of China’s mega-cities, has seen fewer COVID-19 infected cases. We speculate that this seems to be related to the underdevelopment of self-governance in Nanjing [9], because the private governance in Wenzhou has emerged in diverse forms [18].

Before the economic reform, Nanjing was a compact city in China with an early development of housing provision. After the 1990s, Nanjing carried out a large-scale industrial restructuring, forming a state-owned enterprise as the dominant market economy system. On average, one in twenty-five citizens serves state-owned enterprises in Nanjing. Better-off residents with the social background of state-owned enterprises and work-unit accumulated initial wealth through the housing subsidies in the housing reform. Similar to other Chinese metropolitans, Nanjing witnessed massive urbanization and suburbanization—a large number of rural migrants outside the system of state-owned enterprises moved into the urban area in search of better housing conditions and social welfare, and the better-off residents moved out of former work unit housing into the private development neighborhoods in the suburban areas. The residents of ex-public neighborhoods became diversified, comprised of migrant workers and laid-off workers. There has been an emerging literature on impacts of housing commodification on neighborhood governance [9,21,50–52] and gated neighborhoods in Chinese suburbs [53–55]. However, it

is not entirely clear why housing privatization has not seen greater private governance in both suburban and urban neighborhoods.

The Zhongshan (a pseudonym) as an ex-public housing neighborhood is close to the past central areas, located in an alleyway in a bustling urban area. In the 1990s, urban development offices developed a large estate to accommodate local veterans and state-owned factory workers. A college also bought eight residential buildings for their employees. This is a typical neighborhood with a diverse social background of residents. The total area is 5 hectares. The total building floor space is 58,000 square meters. In 1995, the college bought another four buildings because of the bankruptcy of the state-owned factory. More young university teachers settled down here through the housing subsidies. About five years after the neighborhood was stable, China implemented housing commodification, which had a significant impact on this public housing neighborhood. The better-off residents moved out to the other commercial neighborhoods, leaving their properties for the rental market. The residents became diversified, comprised of migrant workers and laid-off workers.

The Baijia neighborhood (a pseudonym) is the earliest suburban neighborhood invested in and constructed since the introduction of housing privatization and housing market in Nanjing. The place is far from the central areas, but connection is easy. The place is relatively quiet and surrounded by a lake. In the early 21st century, state-owned employees and university teachers who sold their urban dormitories came here for the private spaces in the suburbs. The relocated households also arrived here, once living in poverty. The government expropriated their dilapidated bungalows in the central area to build shopping malls and relocated two condominiums for them in the neighborhood. The total area of the neighborhood is 2 hectares. The total building floor space is 68,000 square meters. Initially, the property developer company provided property management services in the neighborhood. Since the establishment of a residents' committee, a private property management company was appointed to provide services.

This study is based on the experiences of living during the COVID-19 outbreaks in Nanjing and ethnographic observation from regular visit thereafter. During the self-quarantined policy, an initial investigation of the grid governance scheme was done, through reviewing local policy of neighborhood governance in response to the "community building" [10,23,25]. Meanwhile, investigation focused on the daily epidemic control reports, which were uploaded by property companies or neighborhood committees to the WeChat groups of homeowners. By analyzing different approaches for containing Covid-19 in two different types of neighborhoods, the changes of leading organizations in neighborhood governance were explored. In the following sections, the Zhongshan neighborhood and Baijia neighborhood are respectively abbreviated as ZN and BN. A semi-structured interview of street officers, neighborhood committees, and grid members was conducted with the street offices (which is also known as the "sub-district" government). Overall, 21 unstructured and semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2019 to 2021. Where possible, we have conversations with the residents, staff of property management companies, and staff of social organizations. It is important to emphasize that semi-structured interviews were conducted through a more formal process with neighborhood government and community officials. Due to our familiarity with the neighborhoods, triangulation of conversations has become possible because of the interest in ongoing research on state control at the micro level, and this survey tends to use cross-sectional methods. We believe that this "longitudinal" approach helps to uncover long-term trends.

4. The Imperative for an Enhanced State Presence in Neighborhood Governance during the Outbreak

In this section, we will explain why the rising private governance in China is a two-way trajectory. The failure of commercial property management in many work-unit housing areas creates an imperative for the state to return [9]. The increasing size of residents' committee and its professional confine the capacity of the private governance in

the gated neighborhood. The limited autonomy under the epidemic in the both work unit and gated neighborhood has given the state a chance to return in a more territorialized form. In the period of socialism, the street offices and neighborhood organizations played complementary roles in the provision of social welfare, while community management was underdeveloped. Since the rising privatization, community management as a paid service creates opportunities for the development of property services through the market. Community space was privatized as a residential territorialization, and property management companies were brought in to take over neighborhood governance. Although the work unit housing has also been privatized, the road to the private governance has not been smooth. Property management companies are difficult to find in the work unit housing neighborhood because residents cannot afford or are unwilling to pay for the maintenance. After privatization, “professional property companies have their own standard of service charge, residents often cannot accept the maintenance costs that do not have a direct relationship with their own flats” (a street office in ZN, April 2020). Because of the difficulty of collecting property management fees, property management company leave the neighborhood in a status of limbo (A member of residents’ committee in ZN, April 2020). Meanwhile, although the properties within the work-unit housing area belong to individuals, municipal departments and street offices are still responsible for the management of the community space, such as a gated system been put on hold because it is difficult to identify the boundary of the neighborhood (a resident in ZN, April 2020).

The failure of commercial property management in the work-unit housing area presents a significant opportunity for the state to return to its role in neighborhood governance. In the past, the residents’ committees were encouraged by the residents’ committee for transferring more autonomous capacities to the residents, while “the maintenance of work-unit housing neighborhood has to depend on the funding from the street office” (a resident in ZN, May 2020). Therefore, “the residents’ committee is a non-existent organization, and its main members are retirees—in addition to the daily work of filling in forms with the street office, it is difficult to realize the proposal of building community” (a resident in ZN, May 2020). After housing privatization, the residents’ committees are no longer supported by work units, and the role of residents’ committee is dwarfed. One member of the residents’ committee described themselves as a “beggar” for asking donations (April 2020). The dilemma of the residents’ committee in the danwei housing neighborhood indicates that they have to realize professionalization and private governance through state funding.

However, this was not the case in the gated neighborhood. The residential autonomy is becoming active in neighborhood governance because of the strong awareness of property rights [51,56]. The residents set up homeowners’ associations to represent their interests [22], and the diverse roles of homeowners’ associations strengthen the private governance in gated communities. In gated communities, the state’s plan to strengthen the role of residents’ committees through the grid governance scheme has been resisted by homeowners because moving into gated communities provides privacy [57,58]. Homeowners believe that privacy gives them the freedom to be away from the social surveillance of residents’ committees [9]. The property management company appointed by the homeowner’s association is playing the role of the butler in the gated community in the normal period, while this was not the case during the outbreaks because of the rising presence of the grid governance scheme. A resident describes the role of the property management company during the outbreak, “they are no longer like a gentle butler who only focuses on providing community services, they are more like the agent of the neighborhood governments, surveilling my daily life” (June 2020).

The following parts examine how the neighborhood sectors act as an agent of the state to adjust the interactive relationship between different administrative sectors and how they build a complex system to reconnect residents through the grid governance scheme and what important changes have taken place in the involved roles of state government.

4.1. *The Return of the State as a Territorialized Form of Governance*

Since the first COVID-19 case in Nanjing on 22 January 2020, the municipal governments were required by the state to roll out a series of red title circulars covering the seventeen approaches in the aspects of reducing residential mobility and strengthening neighborhood governance. On 30 January, in response to the bottom-line approach by the central government, the Nanjing municipal government convened emergency meetings to deliberate on coping central policies and control approaches through objective investigation and across-the-board examination of the rapidly worsening pandemic locally. The emergency meetings emphasized the role of neighborhood organization as an executive in stabilizing social order.

Implementing the strict epidemic control approaches for all neighborhoods across the city involved the adjustment of the governance boundaries and mass mobilization. The neighborhoods in Nanjing were divided into 12,615 grids including gated and non-gated communities. By recruiting from danwei, grassroots departments and neighborhood organizations, 31,252 grid members were involved to guarantee the possibility of implementing the so-called ‘strictest lockdown policy’. Overall, neighborhood governments played the leading roles in epidemic control, and the grid members and private sectors played their roles as a complement, forming a comprehensive and interlocked governance nexus.

The original rational of consolidating grid governance in the outbreak was to re-create a territorial form of social relation, which might be described as state-to-citizen, similar to the relationship between leaders and subordinates in the socialism, where neighborhood officials were familiar with their residents. However, it is not easy to institutionalize the grid governance scheme in the existing neighborhood jurisdiction, as is the case in the work unit housing neighborhood, where there are serious resource constraints. In order to improve the efficiency of neighborhood governance, street offices have to consolidate smaller residential clusters into larger residential compounds for integrating resources.

However, the reform of state-led neighborhood governance has come at the expense of a decline in local territorial autonomy, not least because of the large residential territory of the merged neighborhoods, whose officials are appointed from other places. Moreover, the grid office is an unelected body that carries out tasks assigned by the state government. The combined roles of neighborhood organizations become complex, with which the local residents are unfamiliar. Unfamiliarity has led to the decline of reciprocal social capital [9]. During the outbreak, a series of movements of private governance came to an abrupt end. In contrast with previous example in SARS outbreaks in China, many neighborhoods were governed spontaneously by homeowners [7]. When asked about the possibility of rebooting the activities of residential autonomy, one resident in work unit housing neighborhood replied: “In the absence of property management company, it is sufficient for neighborhood governments to be able to assume the role of caring for residents’ safety, and I do not expect autonomy” (September 2020). Until early 2021, although the outbreak has been effectively contained in Nanjing, there is still no sign that the neighborhood governments attempt to withdraw from the work unit housing neighborhood. Because the problem involves the forms of social stability that state governments are trying to establish, neither street officials nor residents are willing to take risks. In the newer gated community, although the homeowners have a strong awareness of territory, due to the fear of viruses generated by the distrust of public space, they began to consider the intervention of neighborhood governments in managing gated community is an option. “Even property management company was not functioning properly during the outbreak, and their employees were being asked to be quarantined at home—I do not want to see the gated community become an enclave during the outbreak” (A resident in BN, December 2020).

4.2. *Increasing the Size of Neighborhood Organizations and Their Authority*

The major way of promoting a grid governance scheme is the bureaucratization of neighborhood organizations. As early as 1954, neighborhood organization was a “self-organized mass organization”. It was subsequently defined by law in 1989 as a “resident

self-managed, self-educated, and self-served local mass self-organized organization" [33]. However, in reality, neighborhood organizations are always guided by the government, which is distinct with the "grassroots organizations" in the West.

When the pandemic broke out in Nanjing, the governing capacities of grassroots organizations raised concerns by the municipal government because their complex roles. On 23 January 2020, the municipal government urged the establishment of a grid committee in an attempt to increase the size of cadres of neighborhood governments (May 2020, the street officers in ZN). By setting up three-tier of committee structures at a neighborhood level, the municipality attempted to help street offices form a collaborative working platform. The municipality, district, sub-district, and neighborhood level formed a cooperative mechanism by shifting administrative resources into lower-level government. For example, municipal officials were distributed to a lower level of administration and to the epidemic situation at the neighborhood level. Through emergency institutional reform, administrative resources were shifted down in order to secure policy implementation. Municipal resources, such as the administrative power on allocation of public funds, were transferred to the district level; district resources, such as public officials, operated at a street level, and public officials from sub-districts were responsible for maintaining social safety at the grid level.

The neighborhood organizations play an important role in surveying backgrounds of residents during the outbreaks. For example, with the primary role of the virus spread containment at the neighborhood level, neighborhood and grid committees carried out 'carpet-style' investigations to track infected cases. Specifically, neighborhood committees sorted out all communities within their administrative boundary, implementing a series of governing approaches to respond to emerging infected cases. "Before a street official knocked on my door and proceeded with a body temperature check, I even did not know which street governed our neighborhood" (May 2020, resident in BN). These included checking residents' travel histories, transferring infected residents to designated hospitals, and monitoring quarantined households (May 2020, the street offices in BN and ZN). In the past, old neighborhoods and work unit neighborhoods in Nanjing suffered from the absence of professional social management. Unlike gated communities in Nanjing, communities are connected with the urban streets. "They (street officers and grid members) netted off the residential building from the urban streets and only allowed the homeowners to enter our residential area, although I had to have my temperature checked for entering and leaving the residential area, but I felt that the neighborhood has been finally governed (May 2020, a resident in ZN). The surveillance is carried out by the grid members, which mainly supervise the residents to cooperate with lockdown measures. The sub-district is mainly responsible for initiating local plans in a timely manner. The main grid was formed to build a cooperative relationship between different administrative departments, functioning not only as a network connecting residents with the grassroots government, but also a platform for providing co-governing approaches based on the local situation (June 2020, a street officer in ZN).

4.3. Filling the Vacuum of Community Service in Neighborhood Governance

In the past, residents' committees were primarily responsible for community service in work unit housing neighborhood. As the budget is allocated by street offices and community management is barely maintained, the budget for commercial services has been considered inadequate. Before the outbreak, the annual budget of community service in the residents' committee of Zhongshan neighborhood was only 50,000 RMB. "The budget has been exhausted simply by inviting doctors to arrange home visits and covering the costs of ambulance calls for vulnerable residents in the community", a director of residents' committee complained (October 2019). Meanwhile, the work of neighborhood organizations is laborious. Since the reform of housing privatization, the work unit has decoupled with the housing neighborhood, leaving a vacuum of community services. Furthermore, the low income of community work discourages young people from taking

up social service. “Compare to working in the private sector, working in the residents’ committee is not well paid, the job is not full-time employment—therefore our social workers do not have additional welfare”. (A director of residents’ committee in ZN, October 2019). “I have to be a food deliverer in the community to increase my extra income” (A social worker of residents’ committee in ZN, October 2019).

While the underfunding of community service has been revised in the outbreak, the residents’ committee has become a purely administrative agency. Nanjing municipality recruits grid members for a full-time job, increasing the size of the residents’ committees and the budget. For example, “the annual budget is raised to 100,000 Yuan, and we can apply a special fund from the district government for supporting daily supplies to the community during the outbreak” (a staff of residents’ committee, May 2020). “Since the officials of district government also undertake grid government, the specific funds are not transferred from street offices” (A grid member in ZN, May 2020). “Grid member are full-time jobs with career establishment and welfare, which is similar to the employment of work unit” (The director of residents’ committee in ZN, May 2020). Staff replenishment has reduced the proportion of former members of residents’ committee in the neighborhood organizations and has also helped to maintain the residents’ committee as an agent of the government. “Five of us provided community services to more than 1000 residents in the community, and now the residents’ committee has been expanded to 15 people, which means the content of community services has increased” [ibid].

In addition, property management companies in the gated neighborhood are required to provide office space for residents’ committees. The reports of community services must be provided to grid offices for reviewing to ensure that all services provided during the outbreaks comply with the local approaches of virus containment (A staff of property management company in BN, May 2020). This provision reduces irregularities by commercial services, but also increases the administrative role of the residents’ committee. Grid members need to deal with requests from higher government departments, and their funding resource reflects the nature of grid offices as administrative organizations at a neighborhood level. Other government departments can also require grid offices to act as “agents on the ground” for specific tasks, but they have to assign specific budgets to cover these costs. For example, when the Department of Health needs disinfected the neighborhood spaces, they ask residents’ committees and grid members for help to carry it out and allocated them funding as compensation. “I don’t deliver food anymore because the salaries are paid by the street office and there are more community services to finish” (a social worker of residents’ committee in ZN, May 2020). Although asked what community service had been increased, the social worker replied that the services were carried out in accordance with the grid members.

4.4. Reconnecting the Work Unit System to the Neighborhood Organizations

The housing commodification has brought greater residential mobility to urban China. Better-off residents in the former work unit housing neighborhood moved out to other gated communities. The influx of rural migrants has increased the diversity of neighborhoods. The relocation of residents raises the issue of mismatch between the place of residence and the place of actual residence. The creation of a rental market for work unit housing, although with limited development, has attracted private tenants. Since the 2000s, the better-off property owners have managed their properties, leaving the residents’ committee a limited aspect for establishing connection with new tenants, such as verifying the identity immigrant tenants. In the past, the state had tried to incorporate voluntarism into its formal structure of governance, but it has been difficult to mobilize migrant residents in work unit neighborhoods because of the sense of alienation among residents [9].

At present, reconnecting the work unit system and neighborhood organization is another attempt, which demonstrates as a way of sharing the responsibility of “building community” between the residents of work unit housing, the migrant residents, and the staff of neighborhood organizations. The state attempted to mobilize the retired employees

and homeowners of work unit housing neighborhoods by rebuilding their territorial awareness. A shared responsibility between the neighborhood organizations, work units, and migrant residents demonstrated the mixes of institutions and the interaction of different co-ordinations, attempting to replace the traditional approach of socialist hierarchical governance through the state [59]. Work-unit as the top-down social system was used to provide welfare and housing for urban workers employed by state-owned enterprises [41,50]. As a former vertical social-mobilizing system, though work-units are gradually dissolving since market reform in China, they still assume a significant role in strengthening the neighborhood governance (May 2020, a street officer in ZN).

In the Zhongshan neighborhood, the workplace appointed a former leader of enterprise to liaise with the retired employees and homeowners. “The street office hopes that I can invite all the former employees to a WeChat (a commonly used instant message app) group of homeowners, and I also am willing to share the information and provision of street office in the message group. Although I have retired, my reputation is still with me” (A resident in ZN, October 2019). The creation of the WeChat group did not strengthen the communication of homeowners in the work unit neighborhood, while, since the outbreak, the group began to become active. “The group started to share local infected cases, and we didn’t know how to avoid getting infected until the group owner invited the director of street office into the WeChat group” (A resident in ZN, May 2020). “The director of street office encourages us to play the role of party members, cooperating with the approaches of neighborhood organizations in containing the epidemic and reporting the recent travel history of our family members in the WeChat group daily” (A resident in ZN, May 2020). “No one wants to be infected with COVID-19, since the workplace and the street office required us to be guaranteed at home, but if something bad happens—I feel that my child’s carrier will be implicated” [ibid].

Establishing reconnection through grid governance schemes is also reflected in the attempts by neighborhood organizations to mobilize work unit welfare systems to provide community services to migrant tenants and vulnerable residents through “community-building” initiatives. As the legacy of the planned economy, work unit still controlled more social resources than private sectors when social crisis emerged. Residents of work-units, as state employees, relied on the logistics department of their workplaces for the procurement of medical supplies. For the vulnerable groups and migrant residents outside the system, the market supply under the impact of epidemic has stagnated, and their limited social capitals cannot maintain life safety. In the Zhongshan neighborhood, the street office appointed a retired work employee to keep in touch with tenants and vulnerable residents as a logistics officer. “As a landlord, I hope my tenants are safe during the outbreak, which was also important for the house value, so I sent them masks and disinfectants that my work-unit provided for me” (A landlord in ZN, May 2020).

Reconnecting work unit systems to the neighborhood organizations through grid governance schemes demonstrates the state’s nostalgia for the work unit systems in socialism to maintain social order and social control. Since the privatization, work-unit and state-owned enterprises are still highly structured with governmental obedience. In the Zhongshan neighborhood, the long-term absence of a professional property company has led homeowners to no longer expect residential autonomy and spontaneously establish connection with the neighborhood organizations when their safety is at stake. Compared with private housing, work unit housing neighborhoods have a social basis for mobilization. This is mainly because work-unit housing provision represents an extension of social welfare in the past and as “retired employees of state-owned enterprises, obeying the requirements and commands of the government is the basic political consciousness” (A resident in ZN, May 2020). Furthermore, work-unit neighborhoods are publicized by the municipal government as role models for demonstrating the effectiveness of the approaches at the neighborhood level. Although China’s central government has repeatedly emphasized that restructuring connections between neighborhood organizations and

work-units is not to strengthen party building, by promoting governance success to the society, the state attempted to regain the dominant role in neighborhood governance.

4.5. *Enhancing Social Trust in the Gated Neighborhood by Integrating Social Organizations*

Since the housing reform in China, gated communities became the prevalent residential form in China [60,61]. The living conditions of gated residents have been fundamentally improved because property management companies provided professional services [62]. As a result, the interactions between residents and residents' committee have declined [63,64], which has become a significant issue during the outbreak. It is manifested in conflict between the property management company and residential collective demand. At normal times, householders believed that the roles of the property management company were decided by residents' committees or themselves. However, implementing the policy of street office as a mandatory order, the role of the property company becomes the "state agency" in neighborhood governance. "If we don't respond to the requirements of the street office, such as providing residents' contact numbers to them, we might get into trouble because the street office may not support our company to manage the community continually when the property contract is expired. (A manager of property management company in BN, May 2020). The strengthening of the administrative power of neighborhood organizations limits the operation of private governance in the gated community and also transfers the demands of community service in the gated neighborhood to the government. "The property management company was able to provide us with sewer dredging services during the outbreak because they thought it might undermine the policy of quarantine and we had to turn to the neighborhood government!" (A resident in BN, May 2020). "We could do a lot and we were doing it, but when we make mistakes, the street office would hold us accountable, so we had to encourage the residents transfer their claims to the neighborhood government" (A manager of property management company in BN, May 2020). The accountability system for officials forces street offices, as administrative agencies, to adopt practices that restrict private governance. Public spaces within gated neighborhoods do not fall within the jurisdiction of urban governance. Body temperature checking and monitoring travel time of residents became the only community services provided by the property company companies during the outbreak. Thus, the conflicts between property companies and gated residents rapidly increased during the outbreak, including the right of using community spaces, protecting privacy, and receiving maintenance services as usual (A staff of property management company in BN, May 2020).

The implementation of grid governance renewed the governance environment of 'strong government, weak society' [65]. As a result, the property companies found themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, they need to comply with the neighborhood organizations for policy implementation, on the other hand, they are criticized by residents because their roles were transferred as the community supervisors. The introduction of grid governance schemes reflects a concern of governments that the actual lives of gated residents are tending to deviate from the past administrative scope of the party-state.

The increasing service demands on the neighborhood organizations stimulated the development of professional social organization during the outbreaks. The municipality realized that incorporating social organizations into neighborhood governance is an efficient way to sustain governing efficiency in the gated neighborhood (June 2020, A street officer in BN). "Compared with street offices, we are more flexible and professional in providing life assistance to vulnerable residents, such as psychological counselling and accommodations for quarantined households" (May 2020, a volunteer in social organization). The social organizations are managed by the street offices, "their services are more welfare-making than private institutions" (May 2020, a director of street office). The involvement of social organizations has reduced the public expenditure of neighborhood organizations. By involving diverse entities in the grid governance scheme, governmental sectors concentrated on maintaining social stability, while social organizations created a spontaneous relationship to meet each one's diverse demands (May 2020, a street officer in BN). When

asked about the difference between community services provided by social organizations and the services provided by property management companies, the director of street office replied, “Property management companies provide paid services for housing maintenance and spatial management, while the development of social organizations contributes to the two-way development community building and social management” (May 2020).

During the outbreak, the implementation of grid governance schemes no longer distinguishes the boundaries between commercial services and social management in order to innovate a framework of neighborhood governance for the sharing of social management between the state and society. This manifest itself in the purchase of community services by neighborhood organizations from social organizations. Compared with property management companies, neighborhood organizations as administrative agencies provide fragmented community services, which is not conducive to shaping the public trust of middle-class communities in the state government to strengthen neighborhood governance. In order to enhance the professionalism of neighborhood governance, neighborhood governments tried to provide commercial elderly care services and welfare services to vulnerable residents through an integration of social organizations. For example, in 2019, the street office of BN set up a neighborhood elderly care service center. By purchasing local information on the elderly, social organizations are encouraged to set up institutions for the elderly within the neighborhoods (the staff of the elderly care center, October 2019). During the outbreak, street offices encouraged the elderly care institutions to initiate an elderly support program and provide counselling services to protect the mental health of the elderly. As a result of quarantine policy, neighborhood organizations have joined pharmacies and supermarkets in their neighborhoods to organize public service projects to provide food and medical supplies for older homeowners and vulnerable residents to support their normal life. “The purchase of food and medicine comes partly from community sales by art stores and galleries in the WeChat group of homeowners in the community, and partly from specific funds provided by higher government departments” (A staff of social organization in BN, May 2020). “In the past, the contents in the homeowners of WeChat group are housing maintenance demands and complaints to the property management company. During the outbreak, the WeChat group became harmonious, and I could not only buy artworks and paintings, but I could also donate the poor and stray cats and dogs in my community—I feel like I’m involved in neighborhood governance” (A resident in BN, May 2020).

The rising involvement of social organizations reinforced the image of the state as a public trust in the middle class in gated neighborhoods. On the one hand, emerging social organizations dynamically demonstrated their role as commercial service providers in the gated neighborhood. On the other hand, they also play the roles in building affluent residents in gated neighborhoods and neighborhood organizations. Institutional change for grid governance is not simply readjusting the administrative roles of neighborhood organization nor regaining the dominant role of neighborhood governance from the private sector. The implementation of grid governance in gated neighborhood is an institutional reform that helped the growth of social organizations. The integrative connections between government and market sectors demonstrate an administrative mechanism featuring the sharing of social resources.

In terms of local practices in Nanjing, it is clear that shifting administrative resources to social organizations is the fundamental strategy for establishing a complex governing model with the features of commercial profits and welfare attributes. In addition, the roles of social organization exist to provide social management and are represented by neighborhood governances for policy implementation. Different from past social participations in the neighborhood governance for the purpose of enhancing residential autonomy, China’s political system emphasized the priority of national interests, resulting in social participations that are supported by neighborhood governments, including administrative and legal support.

5. Connotations for Neighborhood Governance at Post-Pandemic: Estrangement and Empowerment

5.1. *The Estrangement and Empowerment of Neighborhood Governance*

As a legacy of authoritarianism, ordinary residents in China are not involved in decision-making of neighborhood governance. In the work unit neighborhoods, despite the strong social cohesion of retired residents and neighborhood organizations, migrant residents and tenants are not involved in social management. Better-income residents moved into other commercial housing areas since the development of housing commodification, leaving a vacuum of community services between the workplaces and their neighborhoods. Housing rentals to migrant workers have led a retreat of workplaces in housing supply and property management.

There was a sense of estrangement among residents in the work unit neighborhoods. Despite living in close proximity, there is an absence of interaction between work-unit residents and migrants, which means the migrants now have to rely on their own property maintenance. At the same time, the state has enhanced neighborhood governance by increasing the size of residents committee and professionalism. Neighborhood government has attempted to incorporate voluntarism into its approaches of grid governance, but mobilizing residents into the formal structure of governance remains difficult.

In the suburban neighborhoods, the development of housing commodification in China has enhanced the sense of property rights among households. Households believed gated living allows them to stay away from neighborhood government and rely on the appointed private property management companies to provide community services. However, this is no longer the case after the outbreak. In the gated neighborhoods in China, such as Baijia neighborhood, there is a sense of empowerment among local neighborhood organizations. Neighborhood governments attempted to increase the trust of residents by helping the development of social organization and acting as their new “agents on the ground”, while the appointed property management company is excluded and be pushed to outside of the process, only being responsible for the housing maintenance and maintaining the gated neighborhood.

5.2. *Implications for the Return of the State in Neighborhood Governance*

China’s community workers and staffs were hailed as heroes in harm’s way for promoting pandemic control, saving and protecting residents’ lives around the clock despite the risk of infection and exhaustion from overwork. Their heavy workload is related to the severity of the pandemic as well as a deficient mechanism of residential mobilization and residential autonomy. It should be emphasized that neighborhood organizations should not only play the role of service providers but also need to undertake the work of initiating a plan for supporting pandemic control at the neighborhood level. Meanwhile, a short developing period of private governance is a common problem faced by modern governing system in China, especially as the growth of residential autonomy is challenged by residential mobilization in times of crisis. In the context of the pandemic and the relevant emerging social panic, collective community activities were forbidden, resulted in the depletion of neighborhood connections. In addition, due to the limitation of administrative rights, autonomous organizations cannot directly allocate social resources. Since the majority of Chinese cities were under lockdown, urban functions previously undertaken by the market sectors were shifted to governmental sectors. The emergence of social conflicts at the neighborhood level was difficult to be dealt with by public sectors alone.

In addition, the relationship between neighborhood organizations and community services in the China’s emerging neighborhoods is vacuous because of existing urbanization strategies in China. Real estate developers are usually responsible for providing community services for their households. Residents of gated communities have become accustomed to handing over their community management to the property or real estate company. Past research has indicated that the enclosed residential spaces of the gated communities in China are providing both a catalyst for the autonomous mobilization of collective resources

and new social units for the state to govern an increasingly complex society [51]. Therefore, how to maintain neighborhood relations in the gated community through effective collective action is the core issue of grid governance schemes in China. The housing reform demonstrated that China is embracing a neoliberalism strategy of development, and a new nexus of governance has formed in the neoliberalization process [39,66]. The challenges of the ongoing strategy of neighborhood governance in China is the intention of the state to bring private governance or residential autonomy under its control [9,52,67]. At the same time, social control at the grassroots level in the political realm could coexist comfortably with the advancement of neoliberalism in the economic realm [68]. Therefore, the state attempts to conduct the approaches of neighborhood governance in the gated communities where privatization has already emerged is a challenge issue. Although the epidemic prevention measures carried out at the neighborhood level reflect the high governance capabilities of the authoritarian regime, the retreat of residential autonomy also weakens the role of social organizations at neighborhood levels. The grid governance scheme needs to involve future practices of shifting public services and facilities from the government sector to the private organizations.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we elaborated on and analyzed the mechanism and operational deficiencies of China's grid governance scheme in the containment of Covid-19 pandemic. The grid governance scheme demonstrates the determination of state government in maintaining the stability of neighborhood governance and enhancing its role at a neighborhood level. Through the analysis of the mechanism of the grid governance scheme in China and its relevant effects, this study analyzed how China's state government can use the grid governance strategy to extend the governance capacity into neighborhood governance and to rebuild social trust by observing the outbreak as a crisis of private governance. The mechanism of grid governance relies on strong administrative orders, social participations, and integration of social resources. That is, the connection between multiple subjects constitutes the sharing of social capitals between the government and market. This logic is similar to that of currency as a general equivalent, which is more efficient than bartering. Therefore, the implementation of grid governance showed a characteristic of collective action; that is, in a neighborhood where there is a large amount of social capitals, it is easier for residents to voluntarily cooperate with government policies. The accumulation of social capital overcomes the plight of collective action and regains the state's control of neighborhood governance. At the same time, the community's social capital has nurtured residents' public trust of the governmental sector, promoting public participation and the capacity of private governance. This is of great significance for strengthening the equal consultation relationship and coordination mechanism between the government and the market.

Under changes in neighborhood governance in China from private governance to the state-led approaches in the outbreaks, both residents and neighborhood organizations held uncertainty for the growing roles of integrative governing form at post-epidemic, demonstrating estrangement among residents and empowerment of neighborhood organizations. This shows that the collaborative relationship between private community service providers and local authorities encountered several problems and challenges.

First, the trust between autonomous organizations and grassroots governments has not been formed yet. This is not only due to the short development period of private governance, but also because its capacity is not widely trusted by the government. Fukuyama [69] argued that the trust foundations refer to the governing capacity. The capacity simply has to do with the government having an adequate number of people with the right training and skills to carry out the tasks they are assigned and the government executives making higher-level decisions about issues such as quarantine [20]. However, this is the capability currently lacking in China's residential autonomy. In the context of the pandemic, autonomous organizations in China, such as residents' committees, demonstrated reluctance to help vulnerable groups establish social capitals at neighborhood levels because their

forms are market-oriented [9]. Meanwhile, residential autonomy decreased during the crisis because residents in China expected a strong, effective, modern state that can concentrate and deploy power when necessary to protect the community, keep public order, and provide essential public services. Unlike other sudden disasters, in the absence of professional medical protection, members of autonomous organizations may be infected with the virus at any time. Therefore, local governments in China have adopted a conservative and cautious attitude towards encouraging private governance into the grid governance scheme because of unclear division of responsibilities. The cautious attitude reflects a mistrust of the forms of autonomous organization in Chinese society in part due to long-term authoritarian accountability in China. The party state has developed a powerful executive branch with institutions of constraint. Thus, local government officials are often summarily dismissed by higher level departments in times of pandemic crisis.

Second, the current integrative form is facing two dilemmas: an administrative dilemma and an autonomous dilemma. The ‘administrative dilemma’ is mainly because of the sub-district attempts to help the central government reshape the dominance of neighborhood governance, showing misplaced function positioning; the ‘autonomous dilemma’ refers to the neighborhood committee as an entity of residential autonomy, encouraging social participations in neighborhood governance. The state’s attempt to strengthen the influence of grassroots governments in neighborhood governance is a declaration of war on the past form of residential autonomy. Due to the long-term institutional environment of ‘strong government, weak autonomy’, the innovation of grassroots governance in China has fallen into the swamp of ‘transforming without change’. The path dependency seems to indicate that due to the impact of self-reinforcing mechanisms during the process of institutional change, innovations may be ‘locked’ in a state of inefficiency. As a result, the governance innovation verified that China’s neoliberalism will be a loose hug rather than an intimate embrace [70,71]. Meanwhile, the connection between social organizations and neighbourhood governments offers different understandings of collaboration, compromise, and cooperation. The interaction between residential autonomy and grassroots governments is not equal at the administrative level, resulting in a complex grid governance scheme. When facing the pandemic crisis, the original system becomes more vulnerable. The greater administrative power possessed by the grassroots governments has resulted in residential autonomy not being exercised for its own affairs.

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