

BUILDING MORAL COMMUNITIES



Local urban government in China should “implement the spirit of the CCP’s 2017 Nineteenth National Congress,” “creating strong links between the Party, grassroots civil servants and citizens by encouraging them to join in common activities ... stimulating ethical and caring attitudes toward others across all sections of society, [promoting] residents’ participation in community governance and development [*shequ zhili yu fazhan*], [and] mobilizing the resources of all parties to maximize the use of manpower and material resources [*renli wuli*].”¹

All of the items on this list issued by Shenzhen’s Municipal Party Propaganda Committee come under the heading “community-building” (*shequ jianshe*). Community-building implies that “a conscious effort has to be made to cultivate community (*shequ*) consciousness so that individuals can return to a state of social solidarity despite the individualizing pressures created by marketization” (Xu 2008: 639).

Urbanized villages are primary targets of this policy, which appeals to citizens’ desire to improve their own “quality” (*suzhi*) and to their moral values of caring for others. *Suzhi* refers to a mix of cultural and educational, economic, and moral qualities and can be applied to both individuals and whole populations; high *suzhi* broadly indicates that one is well-educated, law-abiding, and in stable employment. By governing themselves and caring for each other, “citizens of ‘quality’ relieve China’s governmental authorities of a considerable burden” (Bray 2006: 545).² The widespread focus on *suzhi* in China and its close relationship to the promotion of community self-governance has led to debate among anthropologists about the extent to which it can be interpreted as part of a trend toward neoliberalization. Some

consider it part of a new government technique for shaping self-governing individuals in the context of relaxing state control. Others stress its affinity with ethical Confucian traditions of the moral self that extend much further back in Chinese history, to well before the global diffusion of neoliberalism (Kipnis 2007: 2008).

This chapter examines public goods and services—mainly senior care, cultural entertainment, and pedagogic activities—the provision of which relies on party members and ordinary citizens’ ethical commitment to work and volunteering and builds on, while further contributing to their shaping, the gender and generational dimensions of class relations between natives and newcomers in urban villages. The chapter also considers the underlying, more abstract notion of *gongyi*, the public good or public interest (see introduction). Studying the linkages between claims to be acting for the public good (Brandtstädter 2013: 14) and actual practice in public goods provision, it discloses some of the ethical principles to which citizens refer when talking about these matters and carrying out community-building projects and policies. During the collectivist era, Confucian ethics combined with Maoist ethics (Madsen 1984), lending *gongyi* the meaning of the greater public interest to which private interests must be sacrificed. Over the past two decades, along with other concepts such as “compassionate people” (*aixin renshi*), the term has become increasingly fashionable and has taken on a more charitable and philanthropic meaning as an ethical orientation toward others in need, more than to the larger collective to which one belongs (Thireau 2013),³ although the notion of *gongyi* still bears both connotations.

Community-building involves what Nikolas Rose calls an “ethopolitics” that “concerns itself with the *self-techniques necessary for responsible self-government and the relations between one’s obligation to oneself and one’s obligations to others*” (1999: 188, emphasis in original). *Gongyi*-driven community-building activities such as those carried out by NGOs and trade unionists in Italy, which Andrea Muehlebach characterizes as moral neoliberalism, rest on both self- and other-oriented ethical attitudes (Muehlebach 2012).

In 2004 the CCP’s Central Organization Department issued a document on community party-building, stating its goal “to lead the community residents’ committees and support community self-governance” (Ngeow 2011: 221).⁴ This rhetoric of self-governance (*zizhi*) figures largely in central and local policy related to community-building. Reading the new focus on communities as an exercise in Foucauldian governmentality, David Bray argues that it is a project to increase the overall quality (*suzhi*) of the population so that it becomes fit to gov-

ern itself. Communities are tasked with raising the educational and moral standards of their individual members, particularly in sections of the population that are seen as problematic (2006: 544).

Luigi Tomba (2014) refines this argument, claiming that the state exercises different governmental strategies with different groups in different localities. Middle-class people in stable employment living in commercial estates that have replaced state housing in former urban units (*danwei*) rarely come into contact with their residents' committees, focusing rather on the activities of the homeowners' committees in their own gated residential complexes. In former *danwei* dominated by blue-collar workers laid off by the former state-owned factories, on the other hand, weaker social groups are subject to more direct forms of pastoral intervention and welfare allocation via the residents' committees.⁵ Tomba (2014) thus identifies a two-tiered, class-based governance system in Chinese cities, with *laissez-faire* practices and moralizing discourse among middle-class gated communities and a socialist moral economy for poorer communities.

In urban villages, however, the governance of even middle-class residential complexes (*xiaoqu*) is more hands-on and less *laissez-faire* than it may seem. This partly reflects the extension of party-strengthening policies (Wright 2010; Pieke 2012) and the return of an even more authoritarian top-down governing style under Xi Jinping. It is also due to the specific characteristics linking urban villages to their rural past. In the 1990s, the first new *shequ* were built on the institutional foundations of the existing residents' committees (*jumin weiyuanhui*). However, urban villages are considered in need of close governance, and therefore urban communities in former rural villages are not built on the foundation of residents' (formerly village) committees but governed from community centers—or to give them their full title, Party-Services-to-the-Masses Community Centers (*shequ dangqun fuwu zhongxin*). In spite of the rhetoric of self-governance that rests on the presentation of these community centers as grassroots organizations, they are only nominally so. Following the principle of *guanban fenli*, the separation of government and management, they are tasked with handling grassroots affairs and executing (*ban*) orders from the higher administrative levels that supervise and govern (*guan*). In practice, residents tend to view community workers as part of the party-state, and indeed community centers function as parastatal organizations whose key functionaries are party members appointed by subdistrict and district offices (Audin 2015).⁶ Even though some appointees may be native villagers, state and party supervision is close.

Community-center employees aim to build solidarity on a community scale. They exercise a form of graduated governance and moralized provision of care by co-opting sections of the *shequ*'s population and encouraging some people to care for others. Solidarity is generated in the service of aging natives based on gender, generational, and class divisions between old and new urban villagers via the exploitation of female migrant labor laid off from blue-collar jobs and the volunteering of younger women aspiring to middle-class status and self-improvement. Governance is moral and affective, in that community-building projects persuade community members to participate, mainly through volunteering, and teach them how to behave as good citizens. They draw on traditional Confucian moral virtues by connecting with people's desire for self-improvement (raising their "quality") and sense of altruism.

Community-building in urban villages is neoliberal in the Foucauldian sense of governmentality (Rose 1999; Rose and Miller 2010), but also in the sense of political economy, which is central to Foucault's thinking on neoliberalism, but has been downplayed by the governmentality school. As several scholars have noted, the primary aim of contemporary community-building policies is to improve the efficiency of government and reduce its costs by devolving social welfare functions to the *shequ* (Bray 2005: 192; Heberer and Göbel 2011: 4). This is also achieved, as this chapter shows, by introducing competitive funding-allocation mechanisms and utilizing low-cost and unpaid labor. The community centers are understaffed and rely on their staff and residents volunteering to perform public welfare (Hoffman 2013: 844; Audin 2017). Furthermore, "mobilizing the resources of all parties," as quoted at the start of this chapter, means encouraging commoning. This involves leaning as much as possible on the resources available among the governed population by making use of common village-funded resources and drawing on local history to secure funding.

I start by further exploring how affective governance is practiced in community-building using microgovernance techniques of the type described in the previous chapter: Mao-style mobilization campaigns and more quotidian incentives such as point-scoring systems. The emphasis is on community-center workers and citizens volunteering to care for others with the aim of self-improvement, closely monitored by state and party institutions. I next turn to a primary feature of affective community-building in urban villages and urban China in general: community residents caring for seniors. In all three locations, new forms of senior care outside the family

are being offered in cost-saving public-private partnerships that use female migrant labor, while community centers also organize events for mainly native senior citizens using mainly newcomer female residents' voluntary services. The notion that native citizens should be rewarded for their contribution to urban development also underlies the system of competitive project-based funding, where money is granted to communities able to capitalize on the affective dimensions of nostalgia for the rural past and traditional Confucian values.

Volunteering in Serving the Masses and at Charitable Events

Urban communities (*shequ*) were intended to replace the work units (*danwei*) that had formed the backbone of not only the economy but also urban social life (Read 2000; Derleth and Koldyk 2004; Wong and Poon 2005; Zhang and Yan 2014; Audin 2015). They were the Communist Party's base units, reflecting the Leninist principle of organizing the party on the basis of production and government bodies. In the 1990s, Grassroots Party organizations were demoted by both the dismantling of the urban work units (*danwei*) and the heightened importance afforded to elected residents' committees.⁷ The shift toward greater emphasis on the party's role in community-building is a response to this sidelining.

Committed to serving the people, the Chinese Communist Party has always stressed the importance of its grassroots units. These are the basic blocks of the organization's edifice: close to the people, they are in the best position to mobilize the masses and ensure social stability. The party puts forward its concern for society (*shehui guanhuai*) and has made great efforts to become a welfare-oriented and service-guided organization (Ngeow 2011: 218). To this purpose, party members become "twenty-four-hour" members, carrying out party duties both at work and at home, rather than "eight-hour" members limited to daytime work in their work units (Li 2008: 26). Previously discreet and even secret, membership now requires visibility. Clearly identifiable, party members are expected to set an example and act as model citizens.

In recent years party members have increasingly had to participate in the volunteer-based events that are central to community-building and on which most charitable and cultural activities organized as part of community-building in urban villages rely. Such events are meant to turn the *shequ* into a space beyond the workplace, where

one can participate in socially significant activity. Volunteering is a tool of affective governance, not only in the sense that it relies on citizens' affective commitment but also because it directs citizens toward working in the public interest—in this respect it is strongly continuous with mobilization techniques and the socialist morality of self-sacrifice instituted in the collectivist era (Madsen 1984). However, not only is there a new emphasis on self-improvement and raising one's quality (Hoffman 2013), but its modalities have changed: volunteering is made possible by the class and gender inequalities in present-day China. Volunteers' class positioning varies with the social properties of their urban communities, but in all cases they are mainly middle-class women, for whom this unpaid labor is additional to work performed at home.

Shenzhen: Volunteering by Migrants and Social Workers

In the promotional video released for its fortieth anniversary, Shenzhen boasts that it is “a city of immigrants ... with 1.35 million registered volunteers.”⁸ The points-based system for accessing local *hukou* includes contributions such as participation in charitable activities, i.e., donating to the local community, giving blood, and voluntary work.⁹

On a Sunday morning I discovered a small crowd in Pine Mansion's main square next to the community center. Blue tents had popped up on the basketball ground and were shading children having haircuts and elderly people having their blood pressure checked by volunteers (figure 4.1). Leaflets on one of the tables called the event the *Jushan jiyuan ri* and translated this into English as Homestead Beneficence Day. Two female social workers based at the community center were supervising the volunteers. “It is a request from above,” one of them explained, referring to the Longhua District Authority. The event is organized by the district's Organization, Propaganda, and Civil Departments.¹⁰ From March 2018 onward a Beneficence Day was to be held on the last Sunday of every month in all fifty-seven *shequ* in Longhua District as part of the district's philosophy and policy of community-building (*shequ yingzao*). The second social worker, Mrs. Yu, was more talkative (she agreed to meet me for an interview a few days later): “[The district authority's] philosophy is community-building; this is the starting point. Its purpose is to encourage this community's residents to form a model of mutual assistance.” This echoes how the main goal of Beneficence Day is presented on Shenzhen's Care Action Organizing Committee web-



Figure 4.1. Beneficence Day in Pine Mansion, Shenzhen. © Anne-Christine Trémon.

site: namely to “establish a welfare service (*gongyi fuwu*) system for community mutual assistance.”¹¹ What is not stated on the website but was mentioned by both social workers is that it follows a model developed in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

A central component of Beneficence Day is the charity fair, *yimai*. On sale are schoolchildren’s calligraphy, handmade artificial flowers, and snacks such as sweet potatoes baked by the social workers. Free health and beauty services are also available. Prices are by donation; some donate without buying anything. The sum collected is partly donated to poor mountain areas (*pinkun shanqu*) and partly used for the community. The leaflet states that a series of fundraising activities has been developed under different names: Help the Seriously Ill, Love and Help Education, Meals for the Elderly, and Warm Bundle. Every three months a round of fundraising is held in support of one of these, and the sum collected is used on the next quarter’s project. The social workers are also planning to invite people to bring books, toys, and clothing to be given to the *shequ*’s neediest households.

The beneficiaries are all migrants, non-native men and women of all ages. There are two kinds of volunteers, although all are women. The first is social workers employed by the community center; wear-

ing the same red jackets as the volunteers, they explain that volunteering is part of their job: “It’s mandatory, something you must do,” said Mrs. Yu. The community center has only sixty employees, which works out at one per one thousand inhabitants. Community volunteering helps to make up for the center’s shortage of manpower with supplementary unpaid labor, and the center’s social workers are also expected to donate a certain amount of free labor when they organize weekend events such as Beneficence Day. The second kind of volunteer is a member of the local volunteer teams: the volunteers’ association (see below) and the school volunteers who stand at the school entrance to make sure students enter and leave the building in an orderly fashion. The community-center volunteers provide services such as medical examinations, which mainly consist of checking blood pressure, while the school volunteers provide free haircuts and makeup sessions and look after the donation box in the middle of the basketball field. They explained that when they are free they can pick one of the three available shifts and simply show up. There is more pressure on the members of the volunteers’ association, who register for specific activities, and if they fail to turn up they are pushed back to the end of the waiting list for volunteering assignments.

Mrs. Gong is a slender, gentle woman originating from a village near Shantou in the northeast of Guangdong Province.¹² She and her husband moved to Shenzhen shortly after they married in 2003; her husband opened a shop, and they have been living in Pine Mansion ever since. She began volunteering when her children started at Zhenneng Primary School. Like her, most of the volunteers came to volunteering through the school. She joined the group, which operated informally for several years before registering as a volunteer association in 2016. Although it is a nongovernmental organization, she said, “the activities we do are basically for the government.” The community center regularly calls them in to help with activities, and other organizations such as the All-China Women’s Federation involve them on International Women’s Day. Every *shequ* in Shenzhen now has its own team of volunteers. The Pine Mansion group has seventy to eighty registered volunteers, who are mostly migrant women.

Mrs. Gong described their activities as “in the public interest” (*gongyi xing de*), defining *gongyi* as “getting together to organize activities and volunteer when you have time.” She characterized their group as one of like-minded people, with native villagers making up only ten or perhaps less of the seventy or so in the group. Most of the volunteers work full- or part-time while raising their children. They spread news about upcoming events via a WeChat group and

by word of mouth. The school volunteers are organized separately, but there is an overlap in membership, which is very fluid. Most volunteer as a way of making friends. “For us immigrant workers (*wailai wugongde*) it is better to have more friends,” she said. Mrs. Gong quoted a popular saying among Chinese who leave their hometown for work: *Ren zai waidi, duo ge pengyou, duo tiao lu quite*: when you’re away from home, the more people you know around you, the more potential backup you’ll have in a difficult situation.

The migrant volunteers participate in a range of charitable activities with solidary goals, including a birthday party for the elderly organized every year by the community center and, on a more regular basis, medical checkups for the elderly. In both instances it is mainly native former villagers who benefit. The volunteers provide free labor for the community, helping with activities such as environmental protection (picking up garbage in the streets) and parent-child activities (the same, but together with their children). The volunteers’ association also stages its own fundraising activities, such as organizing mini marathons, and the volunteers organize recreational activities for themselves that ratify their urban status, such as Sunday morning jogs and riding the new tramway.

High Morale on Shaky Ground in Xi’an

Community party-building is partly about reviving the party’s role as the vanguard of harmonious society. In Xi’an, Communist Party members are singled out as role models for their communities, with plaques of honor on their doors rendering them visible and identifiable.¹³ Party-building includes publicly displaying party members’ contact details for the benefit of anyone who might want to file a complaint. The community party branches also use social media platforms to disseminate party policy to members. They provide support with relocation of the displaced during the redevelopment of the village and with the resolution of disputes over compensation for their houses. Selected party members are tasked with collecting opinions in the community and communicating them to administrative bodies at a higher level. One subdistrict office worker was upset to have been selected to “go and study” (*qu xuexi*) the needs of the residents. She was in her early thirties and pregnant with her second child. She found the task far more demanding than she had imagined, and confided that she had thought it would be a mere formality.

Those working at the community center were even more outspoken about the difficulty of community-building work. The commu-

nity workers were at the front line when River Hamlet's residents were experiencing severe distress due to the demolition. They faced an increased workload: the community center had initially been created to provide social services to workers at River Hamlet's military garment factory (see chapter 1), and it organized pensions and retirement funds for the employees until the factory shut down. However, the demand for social work has increased over the past decades with the urbanization of the city's many villages. Although the sub-district administration has nominally assumed much of the former villages' power and added new functions, including the distribution of minimal social benefits (*dibao*) and poverty alleviation funds for qualifying applicants and monitoring the population via registration, checks, and security measures, in fact the community office performs most of these tasks. Most importantly, as many of the original villagers were relocated and took on urban *hukou*, they had to transfer their healthcare and other benefits from the village committee to the municipality at this office.

The community workers' emphasis on their work ethic can be understood as an effort to boost morale when the ground on which the office stands is literally shaking and they are not being paid on time. When demolition began in River Hamlet in November 2018, shockwaves from the demolition of nearby buildings, although faint, could be felt in the community center building's fabric. Yet the office seemed quiet and orderly. Mrs. Fang was answering phone calls with exemplary customer-service skills, despite not having received her modest salary for the past three months and not knowing when she would receive the overdue payment. She was twenty-eight and from a nearby neighborhood, and she had quit her job as an elementary school teacher after marrying to avoid the long daily commute. She passed the Civil Service Examination and secured a job in River Hamlet, which allowed her to begin planning to start a family. Six others working at the community center had similar backgrounds and stories.

Mrs. Fang had been a community office worker for two years, filing benefit claims and handling numerous new requests. She said the missed salary payments were insignificant compared to the frustration at work about the difference between what was expected and what she and her coworkers could manage, such as with the elderly home-care program (see next section). She remarked, "The local office just gives orders, and it's the community center that deals with the people and their needs." Acting as intermediary between the residents and the lowest branch of government, community offices have

both permanent civil servants and temporary staff. The salary for the temporary jobs is often too low for college graduates majoring in social work or sociology, who have higher expectations in terms of income and stability. Some community centers with abundant resources and close ties to the city government offer better salaries and job security, but these are hard to land. Community office positions in most communities across Xi'an are not greatly sought after by college-educated job seekers. They are filled by people like Mrs. Fang, who prioritize being close to home and in a desirable school catchment area, although they have trouble making ends meet in the context of rising living costs and salary arrears.

Community workers also have to manage the tension between their disposition to serve the people, on the one hand, and the daily frustration created by their limited resources and vast obligations on the other. The party secretary and head of the *shequ*, Mr. Tu, explained that before it had closed, the state-run factory used to contribute to community funds. He called this act of giving money back to the community *fanbu*, which means to support one's parents in their old age, to show filial piety, to repay, to return a favor. In the absence of the factory's donations, the community was unable to offer residents a full range of services. Party Secretary Tu also openly criticized the separation of government and management, for it devolves too many tasks to the grassroots management bodies, the community centers. Under the logic of this separation, the community office has to apply for specific funding for specific purposes, competing for project-based funding and keeping him and his staff under pressure. He said that even though the community center was not allocated resources by the city and did not even have enough money to pay their staff, they had to "keep up their morale and march on."

According to Mr. Tu, it was their passion for providing services to the public and their love for their profession as social workers that made it possible for him and others to continue their daily work entering health-insurance data, distributing charity funds and pensions, and offering cultural performance events. After all, they were working to support those in the most need, and if they did not do it, who would? He added that the district and subdistrict offices just gave the orders, and it was the community center that dealt with the people. Confirming the importance of work at the community level, the High-Tech District's absorption of the original village in 2018 increased the community center's workload hugely while the subdistrict office was closed during the demolition in November and December that year.

Outsourcing and Volunteering in Chengdu

In 2019 there were only fifteen or sixteen permanent staff providing information about administrative issues and dispute resolution services at the South and North Gate community centers. Each center also has a canteen and a popular outdoor teahouse, both run directly by the *shequ*.¹⁴ Apart from these, there is a social organization providing cultural classes for children and adults, a commercial teahouse run by a tea master teaching long-spout tea-pouring techniques, a massage clinic occasionally hosting a blind masseur offering residents massage at a reduced price, and a training center for young adults with intellectual disabilities. Like other Chinese cities, Chengdu has recently had a drive to outsource service provision to private social enterprises (Zhao 2012). A member of staff at one of Chengdu's oldest social enterprises, established around 2009, shared her thoughts on why purchasing services was becoming so popular. The main reason, she said, was that the government wants to control costs. A contract with a third-party organization rather than with permanent staff avoids the burden of having to pay for social benefits (*fuli*) and makes it possible to plan how much they will spend each year in advance.¹⁵

Jessica Wilczak participated in a volunteer training session for the Traditional Culture Festival organized by one such third-party social organization in North Gate community. The volunteers were all women, most retired but still very active native villagers in their fifties and sixties. There was also a group of stay-at-home mothers from other areas of the city who had heard of the volunteer opportunity via an online network. Teacher Fang opened the meeting with a speech about traditional Chinese values, and specifically the relationship between husband and wife. "When a husband gets home," Fang explained, "even if he's tired after work, he should go into the kitchen and ask if his wife needs any help making dinner. The wife, in turn, should prepare some fruit for him, massage his neck and shoulders, and ask how his day has been." One of the younger women objected at this point, saying "He should give *me* a massage!" The teacher backtracked and said that the point is that each should take care of the other. After this, a tall, middle-aged teacher gave an etiquette lesson, explaining how to stand with the hands folded, right over left, in front of the belly, elbows out, with a small smile; how to greet guests with a thirty-degree bow; how to shake hands only with the top part of your hand; and how to hand an object to someone with both hands as a mark of respect. This lesson in comportment, aimed directly at improving one's quality (*suzhi*), seemed to be taken more seriously

than the lesson on marital relations, and everyone stood up to copy the teacher's gestures.

Furthermore, across Chengdu, party-building (*dangjian*) is a key part of the new community governance strategy. Party members are expected to be the vanguard of community-building. The head of the North Gate residents' committee, Mr. Xu, told Jessica a personal story to explain his understanding of community-building. One day he was at the convenience store, and a child ahead of him at the counter was trying to pay for some candy. The child didn't have enough money, so Xu himself made up the shortfall. After he left the store he passed the child and the child's grandmother. "That's the man who paid for my candy," exclaimed the child. Xu imagined how such gestures, small to the doer, would spread throughout the community, inspiring others and initiating a virtuous cycle of altruism and goodwill. Indeed, this is exactly what is expected of party members in the vanguard of the community-building project. But in a separate conversation, Xu admitted that his work at the community center was taking a personal toll. On weekends, government officials cannot travel more than two hours' distance from their jurisdiction, and during the week they must remain within thirty minutes of it, ready to respond to any emergency. He often receives calls in the middle of the night. "You can't imagine how difficult it is!" he exclaimed.¹⁶

In April 2018 Chengdu issued its Citywide Party-Building Leading Urban and Rural Community Development and Governance Concentrated Action Plan, and implemented an online volunteer registration service for party members, who, with community-center staff, are expected to volunteer their services in the community. North Gate community is seen as a model of both party-building and community governance in Chengdu. A young twentysomething member of staff at the community center was in charge of party-building activities. She was not a community resident, but had been sent there by the local office where she had previously worked. She herself was a Party member, and described with pride the current rigorous system for joining the Party. She explained that after a person submits their application their behavior is monitored for a year, and they have to study for and pass a number of tests. She emphasized that she had not been allowed to join for two and a half years after submitting her application. Among the Party-building activities she organized were classes, training, and visits. She explained it as a way of upgrading one's personal quality (*suzhi*): "Not all Party members are of the same quality," she said, "so they need to be trained."¹⁷

The Action Plan was accompanied by a big push to attract and publicize party members and non-members as volunteers at the com-

munity, district, and city levels. Volunteering is one of the main tenets of the city's governance strategy. The number of volunteers is used as a proxy for the success of the new community governance policy. The South Gate community party secretary, Mrs. Gu, made attracting volunteers her signature project. She set up a system of points with local businesses with which volunteers could receive a discount on goods and services in proportion to the number of hours they had put into volunteering. Staff compiled a list of several hundred volunteers, most of whom, they admitted, were not regularly active, with only a handful actually showing up. The volunteers performed tasks such as tidying the community-center reading room, receiving visitors at a desk by the entrance, helping out during community events, and monitoring the public space around the center for litter or misuse. Most were retired women or stay-at-home mothers, with a mixture of both locals and nonlocals and varying income levels.

The volunteers in Chengdu were different from those in Shenzhen in several ways. First, the South Gate volunteers included some resettled residents. One of these, a retired woman from the rural outskirts of Chengdu who had recently been allocated an apartment in a nearby community after her land was requisitioned, claimed that she was volunteering simply because she had nothing to do all day.¹⁸ Second, a culture festival in North Gate community attracted volunteers from across the city who were part of a WeChat volunteer network. All but one of these were women, and most were stay-at-home mothers, whereas in Pine Mansion most women work outside the home. One woman expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to volunteer and learn about these cultural events; otherwise, she said, she would just stay at home "getting stupider and stupider." A third, much smaller category of volunteers consisted of petty criminals doing community service. A young man who had hacked computers and a middle-aged man convicted of real-estate fraud were two such reluctant "volunteers" at the teahouse in the renovated South Gate community center. A common feature across all three categories, as also among Shenzhen's volunteers, is the widespread sense that volunteering is a means of improving one's personal quality and citizenship.

Caring for Seniors

Two common elements in our three urban villages are the aging native population and the fact that many have children who have moved away to urban districts downtown. This is particularly the

case in River Hamlet, where elderly former villagers have clung to their rural *hukou* and native locality. In Shenzhen this is only partially true, as shares in the collectives can only be transmitted to the younger generation on the death of the former generation, retaining young people in the village. However, many original villagers, even those who had moved to Hong Kong, have returned to the village to live out their old age, the former village functioning as a retirement locality. In North and South Gate the situation is mixed, but the native villagers are clearly older on average than the new residents. In China, caring for seniors in the family home in the name of filial piety (*xiao*) is heavily favored over putting them into facilities for the elderly. This is explicit government policy in line with the resurgence of state-sponsored Confucianism, and is probably intended to reduce the state's burden of caring for seniors in an aging population (Yang 2016; Feng 2017). At the same time, accelerated urbanization and demographic pressures, amplified by the now-abandoned one-child policy, undermine norms of family care and lead to reinterpretations of filial piety, at the same time as the ability to pay for the high cost of professional care in institutions is becoming a social privilege (Zhan and Montgomery 2003; Zhan, Feng, and Luo 2008; Chen 2016). In addition, the economic slowdown has turned the seniors care service sector into a new growth engine, in which real estate and insurance companies have invested, with policy support from the State Council's "Opinions Regarding Speeding Up the Development of Seniors Care Service Sector," issued in 2013 (Strauss and Xu 2018).¹⁹

In the three urban villages, people talk shamefacedly about putting elderly relatives into care facilities and accuse adult children doing this of ingratitude, lack of family values, and "disregard of five thousand years of Confucian values" (*weibei le wuqian nian de rujia chuantong*).²⁰ Yet in a situation where many elderly native villagers have been left behind by their children in the former villages, community-building focuses strongly on their care. "Caring for the seniors" campaigns display filial piety toward the elderly generation. Although the community centers favor care solutions that allow seniors to remain at home (*jujia yanglao*), supporting this by offering free blood-pressure tests and consultations with medical professionals as well as basic home services including food and medical checks, care centers for the elderly are a growing phenomenon in China, including in villages-in-the-city. Free access to these services and centers is highly uneven, however, determined by people's level of income and local citizenship.

Senior-Care Centers and Seniors' Activity Centers as Cover-Ups in River Hamlet

In the eyes of two subdistrict female employees, Mrs. Hu and Mrs. Lin, who were in their early and mid-thirties and had been brought up in middle-class urban families, some businesses, especially the River Hamlet seniors' activity centers and seniors' university, are "villagers' affairs" (*cunliren de shi*).²¹ They are spaces dedicated to social and entertainment activities for the elderly, such as group dance, calligraphy, flower arranging, and singing. Subdistrict employees neither manage their funding and expenses nor oversee the type of activities they offer. Mrs. Hu and Mrs. Lin had heard about the dance groups and the competitions that used to be hosted annually in River Hamlet (see next chapter, "Rivalry over Dance Space") but never attended them.

The newly established community (*shequ*) office knew more about the ins and outs of the village but was mainly concerned with the new urbanites living in the gated communities. The district government expects the community office to provide an elderly home-care program serviced by community volunteers, care workers, and family members. However, such a program requires steady and substantial funding, which was not available to Mrs. Fang and her coworkers. When upper-level officials or university partners whose students carry out social-work internships visited, they staged a performance by recruiting some elderly residents and arranging for them to hold their activities at the community office for a few days.

Care for the elderly native villagers of River Hamlet before its redevelopment was financed by the village collectives. One of the village committees (corresponding to Production Team No. 1) focused on activities for seniors in the project repurposing the former temple complex and public square that it administered not far from its headquarters (see map 1.7). The tiny temple was dedicated to the ancestors of this former natural village's predominant lineage. The three right and left wings of the temple that one passes between to reach the altar hall at the end of the complex had been redeveloped as a village clinic, a seniors' activity center, and a seniors' university. The temple's entrance was decorated with several metal plates containing inscriptions such as "Happy seniors' *shequ*" in recognition of the care for seniors provided by the community—actually the former village collectives. The room occupied by the seniors' university was not, however, used as a classroom for courses for seniors, as the name suggests: instead it was a meeting point for elderly, mostly

female, former villagers. Calligraphy courses were offered for their grandchildren, because while they were being taken care of, their grandparents could concentrate on practicing their dance routines in the square.

The label “seniors’ activity center” was also a cover for other types of activity, with gambling parlors branding themselves as such. While these purported to be nonprofit centers for the elderly, offering activities including card games, pool, and karaoke, in reality they were commercial parlors that encouraged them to spend their money on such entertainments, and they also offered gambling for people of all ages in back rooms equipped with karaoke systems and pool tables. These migrant-owned gambling businesses were obviously thriving and redistributing some of the new wealth of the rentier native villagers. Their disguise as senior centers gave the hidden gambling rooms in the back immunity from the law. The sheer number of senior centers—ten along the two-kilometer street—falsely advertised the *shequ*’s community-building success.

Most native River Hamlet seniors live with their families, supporting themselves mainly with rent collected from migrants. They are fortunate to have a reliable source of income; although this changed with the demolition of their old buildings, many had accumulated savings over a decade of renting out rooms or houses. By contrast, many senior migrants have to work; prior to the demolition, many had lived with their shop-owner children in the living quarters at the back of their small shops. The majority of the rural migrants who initially arrived to run the shops in River Hamlet’s central street in the years following the urban reform had been doing well financially and were able to afford to house their parents in urban apartments. Making money was easy for those who opened small shops early on in the urbanization of River Hamlet. Mrs. Cheng, who ran a jewelry shop for ten years (see chapter 1), also rented the space above her shop and moved in. In 2009, when she married a local man, she and her husband bought an apartment nearby, and she was able to move her parents to Xi’an permanently. Their business provided a solid base, allowing them to care for their elderly parents, and they benefited from the childcare the parents provided. However, as houses prices grew by 400–500 percent compared to 2009, it became harder for newcomers to emulate their success. Many recent migrants working in the service economy struggle to establish a foothold in their new environment. For them, caring for their elderly parents is unattainable, as they are unable to purchase an urban apartment in which to live with them.

Before the village started urbanizing, the state-designated work unit (*danwei*) provided care for the elderly exclusively reserved for its members, that is, for the few residents of River Hamlet who already had urban *hukou* benefits. These workers were employed by state-owned factories in the 1960s through the 1980s. Many such retired workers still live in the single-family dormitories, or *tongzi lou*, with four dormitories to a floor sharing one bathroom. With the rise of the market economy and the dismantling of the *danwei* they must now pay more for drugs and healthcare out of a fixed pension that has not increased with the cost of living. Only the few pensioners in their eighties receive 8,000 RMB a month due to their long service in the socialist manufacturing sector. Most are in their sixties and seventies and live in the dormitories, which now belong to the municipality, on a monthly pension of just 300 yuan. Seniors pay a symbolic rent of about 100 RMB per year; one of them, Mrs. Huang, aged 66, could not remember when she had last paid this.

Factory *danwei* have become rarities, and people in their fifties have left the single-family dormitories in which they grew up. Unlike the previous generation of workers, who have received state care throughout their lives, those who can have to pay for commercial care. In fact, although state-provided care is still desirable, and many people apply for a government job because it will provide a good pension and senior care in the future, most people seek private senior care.

One private care provider, the Feng Care Center, which escaped demolition because it is situated in the part of River Hamlet that had already been redeveloped (map 1.7), offers care for the elderly for a premium fee in contravention of Xi'an municipal government policy, which does not issue licenses to private centers. Many such businesses skirt the rules by claiming to be social corporations. The Feng Care Center, established in 2004, justifies its social corporation status by collaborating with a Japanese research foundation that regularly sends interns to work there, and by offering internships for college students, particularly those majoring in social work. Most of the residents are 70 to 80 years old and are ranked as independently able, or dependent. The monthly cost ranges from 1,800 to 2,800 RMB depending on each resident's health and psychological condition. Their adult children usually pay six-monthly or annually, and although they are encouraged to visit every week, they do so rarely, except on national holidays and birthdays. Almost all the elderly residents are from Xi'an. Sending one's older parents off to live in any care center is not a popular or even accepted practice in Xi'an, but some seniors are saving to move to such a center later in their lives: one of them

exclaimed, “I’m taking control of my own old age by paying for care services and even a funeral service if I can—that’s the kind of freedom I want!”²²

*Nurturing Life:
Senior Care in South and North Gate Community Centers*

Care for the elderly receives more attention from Chengdu municipal authorities than it does in Xi’an, perhaps because Chengdu’s senior population is bigger than the national average.²³ The municipal government has made the community the focal scale at which senior care is provisioned. In 2016 it rolled out a three-year action plan for the construction of community nursing homes (*shequ yanglaoyuan*), actually mainly daycare facilities, which are less expensive than nursing homes offering beds. The aim was for “community care to be the core, and home care to be the support (*yi shequ wei hexin, jujia yanglao wei yituo*).”²⁴ The plan included a one-off subsidy for the construction of elderly daycare facilities, and the concrete impact was almost immediately evident: most communities in Chengdu now have some kind of facility for seniors, most commonly as part of a larger community center and sometimes as a stand-alone building. In North and South Gate, the daycare centers all seem well-used and fill a simple need for free socializing space for seniors in the community.²⁵

Offering events and activities for seniors at their daycare center during the day while they live in their own homes at night has become the model encouraged by the municipal government. The centers are only loosely programmed: most often they function as mahjong and tea rooms, sometimes with a basic health clinic or even a canteen attached, as in the case of North Gate community, which provides regular inexpensive meals for community members. Although their goals seem rudimentary, many of the events staffed by volunteers at the community center already include a senior care component.

The community centers rely on their effective volunteer programs. The services provided at the North and South Gate community centers both rely on and support a range of paid and unpaid care work. Volunteers, mostly middle-aged female native villagers and rural migrants, maintain cleanliness and order while wearing volunteer vests, circulating through the building, cleaning up trash in the square, and putting away books in the reading room. Two main groups of volunteers were present at the North Gate community event offering health advice for seniors living at home: middle-aged women, most of whom belonged to the dance group, and younger women

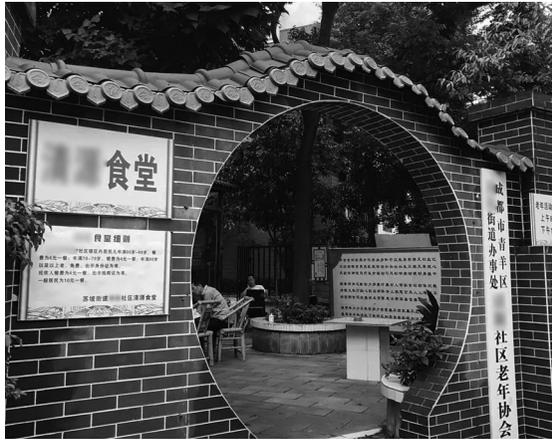


Figure 4.2. North Gate's community center and canteen, Chengdu. © Jessica Wilczak.

from outside the community. Their common goal was to facilitate the elderly's participation in community events held for their benefit. They registered attendees, handed out meal tickets, and provided information. The professionals in traditional Chinese medicine and from holistic clinics who had been invited to speak mainly offered home remedies and exercise tips rather than actual medicine. Most elderly people enjoy this type of event for the atmosphere, the free food, and the attention they receive from the volunteers.

The North Gate community center is predominantly populated by elderly villagers who spend most of their day there, eating their breakfast in the canteen before engaging in mahjong and knitting until it is time for lunch, which they also take in the canteen. Apart from the teahouse, the most popular area in the center is the mah-jong parlor. Many go home for a nap after lunch and return in the afternoon—it is a very short walk as the center is at the edge of the resettlement estates. The community center also offers a simple medical clinic for blood pressure and other basic checkups, which is not permanently staffed, and a blind masseur charges a reduced fee because the space is provided to him for free. Access to this socialization space, although it is far from elaborate, boosts the seniors' quality of life, and they have praised the party secretary for creating it. While government officials are partly responsible for enabling this space for the elderly, it is the work of the volunteers and the agency of the seniors themselves that makes their care at the community center possible.

Welfare Benefits as a Countergift in Pine Mansion

Although its overall population is generally young, Pine Mansion's native population is visibly aging, largely because it was formerly an emigrant village (*qiaoxiang*). Overseas emigrants and those who left to work in a city have returned to live out their years in the village. Since Shenzhen has opened up new opportunities closer to home, middle-aged people tend to live and work downtown, leaving their elderly parents in the former village and visiting them once a month and on public holidays. In 1994 a home for the elderly (*laoren yiyuan*) was built in Pine Mansion with contributions from the diaspora (Trémon 2022). In 2004 the building was torn down and replaced by the taller Zhenheng building, named after the Chen lineage's founding ancestor. Its ground floor is still used as a community center for the elderly, and the natives still call it the *laoren yiyuan*. However, it is now formally run by the officially registered and state-sanctioned Association for Elderly People (*laoren xiehui*), and although it still receives substantial subsidies from shareholding companies, it is also increasingly funded by the district administration. Pine Mansion's elderly native villagers spend their mornings and afternoons there, chatting and playing mahjong. Caring for the elderly is a central precept of the local lineage's moral economy. The large shareholding company gives each of the community's senior residents 1,000 RMB in a red envelope on New Year's Day, and 500 RMB on several other public holidays and on the days when ancestral rituals are performed. This home for the elderly is for both native *hukou* holders and non-*hukou* holders who have returned from Hong Kong and elsewhere, some of whom have very little by way of savings and no pension. They receive monetary assistance from fellow Chen villagers but are not eligible for the state's new schemes for elderly people described below.

All retired native villagers receive a pension from the shareholding companies and benefit from subsidized elderly care that their adult children, who often work in downtown Shenzhen, cannot provide. Most care workers employed by younger native villagers to care for their aging parents are younger seniors themselves. They describe their work as dirty and demeaning, but they have no choice. Their adult children do not live in the village, unlike many non-*hukou*-holding seniors who live in the village together with their children and care for their grandchildren as dependents on their children's income.²⁶ The care workers, or "nannies" (*baomu*), employed by the native villagers are all female migrants originating from nearby provinces, many from Guangxi, who used to work for Hong Kong-run factories but were laid off when they reached fifty, the official

retirement age. They were subsequently hired as *baomu* by a private recruitment agency.

The elderly-care industry has been expanding in Shenzhen. The districts' livelihood microprojects (*minwei shishi*) and charity organization (*Cishanhui*), both run by the Civil Affairs Department (*minzheng bu*), oversee care for the elderly as a partnership that is managed publicly but run privately (*gongbanminying*). They grant funding to selected projects set up by subdistrict governments and run by private enterprises that tender for them. One of the first pilot projects, initiated in 2017 in the subdistrict containing Pine Mansion, is a daycare center run by the Kindhearted Home Company that won the tender organized by the local office. Funding from the district's charity organization covers subsidized activities, and the subdistrict provides the company with free space for staff offices and for leisure activities such as ping-pong. The facilities are theoretically open to *hukou* and non-*hukou* holders alike.

Its most advertised and visible activity is the daily delivery of midday lunches for the elderly. The company coordinates with elderly people's associations (*laoren xiehui*) in each *shequ*; in Pine Mansion, lunchboxes are delivered to the home for the elderly just before noon.²⁷ *Hukou* holders' lunches are subsidized by nine yuan, and non-*hukou* holders who earn points by volunteering at charity events connected to the project can exchange these for food stamps to buy basic products such as flour and cooking oil at the charity shop at the Kindhearted Home center.

The company manager, an educated man in his thirties originating from a rural village in Guangdong Province, stated that public goods should be free but defined the term *gongyi* as both welfare (*fuli*) and counter-gift. He explained that prioritizing *hukou* holders is only normal, standard policy, but interestingly, he seemed aware of the potential paradox and legitimized the subsidy in moral terms. He added that although "these native people's families have money," the benefits they receive "are a kind of gift from the government in return (*huikui*) for their contributions to the local economy."²⁸ He added afterward that from his own and the government's point of view, these are welfare benefits (*fuli*) for *hukou* holders. A village moral economy to which the notion of the counter-gift is central (Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1996) here bolsters the *hukou*-based system of welfare allocation. Chapter 5 discusses how territorial entitlements remain the backbone of the state public goods regime, a view that is, though challenged by alternative visions of "the right to the city," strongly adhered to by ordinary citizens.

Competitive Funding of Neo-Confucian Projects

The status of community centers is hybrid. They are presented as grassroots organizations because they are located at the lowest administrative echelon and, in theory at least, work in close collaboration with the residents' committees. However, their staff is appointed from above, and as chapter 1 has shown, most government funding allocated to the new urban communities has been redirected to the community centers and away from the elected residents' committees.²⁹ Community centers are therefore management bodies rather than grassroots civic organizations (Howell 2016). They are supposed to be self-governing, but this is mainly to encourage them to devise their own means of funding their activities. Despite being responsible for a wide range of tasks, *shequ* are famously underfunded.

Community leaders and staff are thus in an ambiguous position and face a double bind: they are not officially a part of government, but they are expected to enact the government's community-building policies by using often insufficient funds that they have to compete for. Much of their funding is distributed by the districts' Civil Affairs Department (*Minzheng Bu*)—formerly the district's Social Security Department—via project-based competitive allocation. Most of the overhead costs for salaries and office space are covered by the district, but they are kept to a minimum. This forces community leaders to be creative with community resources such as land and facilities, using them as springboards in their applications for complementary funding—this is because part of their budget for any project must be locally sourced in cash or kind. This competitive project-based funding system operated at all three of our case-study sites. Here I compare the strikingly similar systems applied in Pine Mansion and in Chengdu.

Confucian Project at Pine Mansion's Lineage Temple

Until a few years ago, Pine Mansion's public goods were partly financed by the collectives and lineage foundation. Now most, and particularly those directly related to urban renovation, are financed by the government. The Chen head of the Chengguan stated that "basically all [the funding] comes from the government, except that related to the village" (*shuyu cunnei*, literally "part of the village," meaning activities sponsored by the shareholding companies and the lineage foundation).

Mrs. Yu, the social worker I met on Beneficence Day, stated that "investment in welfare" (or in charities—she used the term *gongyi*)

had started just before she began working in Pine Mansion in 2016.³⁰ In recent years, she explained, “projects have slowly started to come into the *shequ*,” allowing social workers to reach “more and different populations,” implying that they benefit migrant workers more than previously. “In the past, there were far fewer services for the residents, but in recent years the *shequ* has started to offer more diverse services, welfare services (*gongyi fuwu*).” The funding is limited, particularly for social work primarily concerned with non-native villagers’ welfare, and is subject to project-based competitive bidding in which different communities compete for titles such as the Most Civilized or the Most Compassionate *Shequ*.³¹

One example of such a project is the Sunshine Lunch (*yangguang wucan*) program launched in 2014 by the Pine Mansion community center’s social workers. The rationale for the project, according to the social worker Mrs. Yu, was that primary school students “buy snacks from the convenience store [and then] have nowhere to go, so all they can do is wander around the community.” The underlying idea was, as always, the fight against disorder, *luan*. While a survey counted about two thousand school-aged children among Pine Mansion’s nonregistered population, the program was restricted to only twenty from “needier families in the community, such as single parents or sick people, parents who are both working, and those who live far from the school.” Parents submitted their applications, and the children were selected following interviews and home visits (*jiafang*) that “allowed cross-checking the family’s situation with information given by volunteer parents and other data.”³²

While project-based charitable programs allow identification of the most urgent problems from the bottom up, Mrs. Yu emphasized that such projects run for a limited time and receive little funding, and therefore can have only a limited effect on needs and problems. In the context of competition for scarce budgetary resources, projects are selected according to what Mrs. Yu called “priority criteria.” She did not specify what the criteria were, but it appears that only projects aimed at the most urgent matters—that is, threats to the local social order and security—stand a chance of being funded. Mrs. Yu explained that they had to select the children rigorously because of a lack of space—they had no dedicated space, so children had lunch in an office at the community center—and of money. When I met her, the Sunshine Lunch program had been terminated.³³ It had operated for three years, during which the social workers had applied six times—each time seeking initial approval and backing from the Women’s Federation, the subdistrict office, and then the district’s

Social Civil Affairs Bureau—to different departments, which had granted funding for different periods. The funds allocated by the district are limited in scope, as each community center is responsible for its own projects and must apply for separate funding for each one from different departments; moreover, funding applications are time-limited, as the various departments provide funding for only one term.

Although it looks complex and burdensome, Mrs. Yu emphasized that the budget allocation system has been streamlined since she started as a social worker in 2016. She believes that smaller problems as well as the most urgent ones now have an increased likelihood of being awarded funding. There are more sources of funding and greater funding capacity under Shenzhen's new livelihoods project (*minsheng xiangmu*), which respond to the Chinese central government's greater emphasis on livelihood policy. Project descriptions are stored in the Shenzhen Household Network (*Shenzhen Jiayuan Wang*) database, which social workers can consult to select projects they consider suitable for their community rather than having to design and draft each new project application. Its project-based logic has intensified: the system has become increasingly based on competition for funds among urban communities and between different departments in each community.

However, the funding remains conditional on urban renovation. The beneficiaries are generally communities that already partly fulfill the criteria for "rectification"—i.e., redevelopment. The head of the subdistrict Party Working Committee and head of the subdistrict office, Bei Jibiao, declared that they will make full use of the funding for the livelihoods program "to carry out consolidation and upgrading in areas where the rectification is complete"—that is, in areas that have agreed to take part in redevelopment projects. Pine Mansion has benefited from this favorable context more than other communities in the subdistrict because it is listed as one of the subdistrict's key priorities. Mrs. Yu boasted that Pine Mansion had had more social work projects in 2016 than any other community in the subdistrict, with five running in the same year.

It is not just the stage reached in urban development that determines funding priorities. In this competitive context, community-center staff have to devise ways of distinguishing their project by its local characteristics. They exploit past village history and village-funded social goods to fulfill the requirement for creating a sense of belonging to the community and the self-funding criteria. Thus the Pine Mansion community center was granted money for its Zhen-

neng Project, named after the founding ancestor of the local lineage. This was a set of interconnected projects aimed at capitalizing on the village's local history and utilizing the Pine Mansion Chen's self-financed newly renovated ancestral temple. In 2014 the council of the Chen Lineage Foundation launched a fundraising campaign for the renovation of the ancestral temple to bring it up to the standard of the residential towers being built. The renovation plan was announced in an open letter posted in the temple square next to the usual donations board on 13 October, the day of ancestral worship, which that year involved a particularly large and lavish celebration because it was not only the Chen founding ancestor's birthday but also the centennial anniversary of the village's primary school, which is named after him. The temple had not been renovated since 1925, and its condition had deteriorated under the Cultural Revolution. The open letter calling for contributions invoked the prestige and "face" (*mianzi*) of the entire community.

A renovated temple next door would add value to the future apartments; unsurprisingly, therefore, the real-estate developer contributed a large donation, which is listed beside the donations from Pine Mansioners and their relatives in Hong Kong on a plaque inside the temple.³⁴ The temple is not only mainly the concern of the native villagers; it is also a place for ancestor worship, which is frowned upon by the party-state and therefore is not seen as having any place in community-building. The Confucian framing of the Zhenneng project legitimized the temple's renovation, and in return the renovated temple became a local material and cultural resource—an asset for driving real estate prices up and for attracting government funding.

The project funded other charitable activities, such as afterschool classes for both native and non-native schoolchildren, organized by the social workers and supervised by volunteers. These took place in the tiny Confucian hall that opened up in an old village house that, as part of the temple complex, escaped demolition. The project included an academy (*shuyuan*) inside the renovated temple, with lineage elders and invited academics offering lectures specializing in *guoxue*, "national studies" or the study of traditional Chinese culture. The term *guoxue* refers to scholarly studies of the historic roots of what is considered Chinese rather than foreign (Makeham, 2011); *guoxue* is sufficiently vague and Chinese cultural values are varied enough to legitimize almost any local project, including lineage revival.³⁵ Confucianism features centrally in national studies, and while the craze for national studies and the neo-Confucian revival started in the 1990s, it has received a significant boost in state propaganda after

Xi Jinping took power. Xi's era is marked by the reactivation of socialist values alongside the Confucian family values. The glorification of rural frugality and hard work best illustrates this mix.

Again, the project received funding for only a year, and all of its activities had ceased by 2018, most probably because they were conceived of as temporary and linked to the temple renovation. Other types of activities such as the creation of an "ecological farm"—basically, teaching children how to plant and cultivate to inculcate the values of rural frugality and hard work—were held in 2019, but these stopped because of Covid. However, as a result of this renovation, Pine Mansion was labeled "a livable community construction unit and a double-promotion key renovation area"³⁶ and "a live sample of community construction in the district," a model to be followed by other communities.

From Shareholder Collectives to Self-Funding Communities in South Gate

In April 2018, the Chengdu Municipal Party Committee announced that it would be investing 1.5 billion RMB in community-building projects and issued a number of policy directives to follow up its September 2017 decision to further develop grassroots self-governance capabilities and improve the quality of public goods and services.³⁷ These directives included purchasing, nurturing, and developing services from social enterprises; improving the recruitment, training, and advancement of community workers; improving the quality of property-management services in residential complexes; promoting the establishment of homeowners' committees and extending the reach of party organizations in residential complexes; and changing the set of performance indicators for local government officials so that their duties would no longer include attracting investment, instead allowing them to focus on providing public goods and services (Yan 2018).

North and South Gate community centers receive 80,000 RMB each year for office costs (*bangong fei*), but the South Gate party secretary said that this does not cover the building's heating and electricity costs, particularly since its renovation and expansion project.³⁸ They also receive "activities fees" (*huodong fei*) of 300,000 RMB per year for organizing community-center activities. If they need more money, communities (*shequ*) must apply to upper levels of government for special project funding. The South Gate party secretary Gu has been active and successful in applying for funds. It was she who applied

for money for the community-center renovations that were being carried out while Jessica was there.

Mr. Wang, the celebrated and popular North Gate party secretary, has held this position since the separation and creation of North Gate community in 2017. Prior to his promotion he was a community worker in South Gate community for about ten years. He adamantly maintains that communities should be entrepreneurial and financially independent of government. In his view, the addition of the word “development” has been the most important element of Chengdu’s “community development and governance policy.” Communities should not be “waiting, dependent, and demanding” (*bu deng, kao, yao*) in their relations with government but rather sustainable.³⁹ He listed three sources of income: money for overheads, i.e., office and activity fees, provided by the district; project funds (*xiangmu zijin*), for which communities must apply; and community funds (*shequ zijin*, money from third-party donors). He also mentioned a fourth source of funding: community economic income (*shequ jingji shouyi*). He made an interesting distinction between public income (*gonggong shouyi*) and the former collective economy (*yuanlai de jiti jingji*):

The former collective economy was a collective organization with members, shareholders (*gudong*); the residents, or villagers, were the shareholders, and they received dividends at the end of the year. However there are no shareholders in the community. If there are native shareholders—and the native residents account for only a fifth [of all residents]—then the other four-fifths think they cannot enjoy the public benefits of the community—that’s how it is. There’s another thing: the original type of collective economy was basically dividends distributed in cash to members of collective organizations. But now, with the development of this community and of society, even if some form of collective economy still exists I consider that directly distributing cash is unscientific (*bu kexue de*)—all of this is unscientific. Because now it is necessary to allow the citizens and residents of the community to achieve a transformation, and to participate in community development and governance (*shequ fazhan zhili*).

This strong impulse to distinguish the community economy from the collective economy implies a distinction between village commons and state-encouraged commoning of public goods. Wang sees the community economy as the successor to the collective economy. In his eyes it is a new, more evolved (“scientific,” in the evolutionary rhetoric) form of collective economy, in that rather than a shareholder economy it is a stakeholder economy. The shareholding system is

“unscientific,” he argues, because not everyone in the community is a former villager. Its backwardness is emphasized by Wang’s dismissive reference to the distribution of dividends in cash, which conjures the image of a traditional, face-to-face peasant community (since all transactions in Chinese cities are now carried out digitally), and also of tax evasion and corruption. Instead, Wang claims, collective income should be used to provide public benefits to all stakeholders.

Mr. Xu, the head of the residents’ committee, works very closely with Party Secretary Wang. He is a strong supporter of the project-based allocation of funds. “Why should the government give us money,” he asked, “if we don’t have something specific to spend it on?”⁴⁰ Unsurprisingly, as North Gate is one of Chengdu’s model communities and therefore a primary funding beneficiary, both Wang and Xu were very publicly supportive of the entrepreneurial turn in Chengdu’s community governance policies.

Partly because there is a strongly felt imperative to build community in an affective sense, and partly because activity fees (*huodong fei*) form a large part of the fixed non-project-based *shequ* budget, cultural activities dominate the daily work of the community center. Tours of the North Gate community center are also vital to the daily rhythm of the place. The party secretary and/or heads of the residents’ committees conduct tours for high-profile guests while community-center staff show lower-profile guests around. During Jessica’s time in the field, visitors included residents’ committee and party members from other recently urbanized villages in Chengdu, community leaders from other cities in China, city- and district-level leaders from Chengdu, a UNESCO delegation, and a group of Communist Party members from Azerbaijan. South Gate community also began to host tours once its community center renovation was completed, although these were not nearly as frequent or high-profile as those in North Gate.

In both communities the activities can be separated into three main categories: celebrations and performances at Chinese New Year and during National Week; classes for children and adults covering a wide selection of *guoxue*-related offerings including calligraphy, history, Confucian morality, and tea-making classes; and special-purpose charity and educational events such as temporary markets for goods from poor areas in Sichuan and taking care of the urban environment by sorting waste. In addition, there are self-organized residents’ groups such as the night-jogging group, senior choirs and bands, and a dance group for middle-aged women.

One third-party social organization managed most of the North Gate community center events. It had a special national-studies (*guoxue tang*) classroom to the side of the main community center entrance with a large plaque bearing the name of the organization, which was started in 2018 and had five permanent staff members. It was part of the city government's new community development and governance policy, related specifically to the mandates to both contract out services to social organizations and incubate social enterprises. The staff had all met through the *Guoxue Yuan*, the National Studies Academy, through which they had offered some classes at North Gate. Wang Shuji was only partly satisfied with these classes as he felt they were not tailored to the needs of Qingyuan residents. He suggested to the organization that he would be willing to hire it as an independent entity rather than as part of the *Guoxue Yuan*. The five staff members formed a new social organization, and North Gate community provided them with a space and a contract for service provision.

The new social enterprise specialized in *guoxue* classes, including calligraphy, painting, history, and Confucian morality; it also branched out with other classes such as the adult English-language classes taught by Jessica. Some of the classes were taught by the permanent staff, others by volunteers and paid teachers that the staff contacted via their personal networks. In addition to organizing classes, the company arranged events, including a Traditional Culture Festival and the National Day celebrations, and handled the community center tours when the *shequ* workers and leaders were busy. The woman in charge was Teacher Zhu, an educated, middle-aged woman who had previously worked in hospitality and hotel management. Another staff member, Mr. Fang, in his thirties, who taught Confucian morality classes and offered Confucian family counseling, said rather evasively that he had done "many things" before joining the company. He had a much more entrepreneurial orientation than Teacher Zhu.

In the spring of 2019 the residents' committee voted not to continue its contract, and the organization left North Gate community. In its place North Gate set up what it called a Culture Palace (*wenhua gong*) on the floor above the administrative offices. This is basically a space offered to local education and training companies to present classes for residents at a low or discounted price. This was not the end of the social organization, however: they had already expanded to other *shequ*, including South Gate and several similar recently urbanized communities in the northeastern part of Chengdu.

The Moralized Provision of Public Goods

Since the early 2000s, the prominence of urban communities, or *shequ*, as the key units for maintaining social stability in the context of China's rapid social and economic transformation has continued to grow in central and local policymaking. Grassroots party organizations such as these are expected to play a key role in ensuring social stability. In all three urban villages the community centers are understaffed and rely on volunteering: unpaid labor provided by their own staff and other *shequ* residents. Community leaders and staff seek to deliver public goods at the lowest possible cost to meet the goal of increasing the level of public goods provision in the context of budgetary scarcity.

The governing apparatus itself partly relies on grassroots volunteer labor. Local party members, especially those working at the community centers, are expected to set the standard with their exemplary behavior. The shift toward offloading fiscal responsibility to lower governmental levels and the amount of administrative work involved in the urbanization of villages mean that already-overworked staff are volunteering many hours a week. They are supposed to organize and execute government policies at the local level by implementing projects in response to the latest policy orientation and campaigns, and for this they have little choice but to rely on citizen volunteers. Volunteering is both the goal of and the instrument for reaching the ideal of inclusive and socially stable urban communities: the volunteers are trained to behave as good urban citizens, and their volunteering activities mainly consist of caring for fellow community residents. In Shenzhen, although not in Chengdu, the *hukou* points system is a driver of volunteer participation, even though volunteering rarely earns migrants urban citizenship. However, both settings show them acting as moral citizens.

Furthermore, the gendered interpretation of the injunction to improve oneself is a common feature of all three cases. The moralized governance of public goods provision is therefore graduated, in that it implicitly targets specific sections of the population: mainly lower-middle-class women who aspire to social mobility for themselves and their children and have internalized the injunction to improve themselves. As is often the case, women are seen as best qualified for the care tasks central to community-building projects: serving food, cutting hair, checking blood pressure, supervising children's homework, and teaching calligraphy. Local government has the intention of creating inclusivity, but in fact the charitable events mainly cater

for migrants, and activities for native villagers such as seniors' birthday parties and medical checks are largely performed by outsider volunteers. In this way senior care provision is graduated along gender and generation lines and shapes class relations, in that volunteer labor benefits elderly native residents and their adult children who have left their urban villages.

This allows municipalities to provide senior care in such a way that it resolves both the moral dilemma arising from the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and respect for the senior generation and the necessity for an efficient and productive labor force for economic growth. Local moral reciprocity values resonate with the state-organized prioritization of native seniors. In Xi'an's River Hamlet, reciprocity is more a matter of nostalgia for the socialist past, when the factory *danwei* made donations to the larger community. It is most explicit in Pine Mansion, where giving back to the natives legitimizes the government-contracted private senior care company's free services and lunches for local elderly former villagers, and less so in South and North Gate, where there is more emphasis on equality between native villagers and newcomers, although in fact resettled native villagers in Chengdu, particularly seniors, benefit most from the many services offered at the community centers.

In a context of budgetary scarcity, volunteering is encouraged by the state, as is a form of commoning at community level. Indeed the *shequ*, as grassroots management bodies, have to partly rely on local internal resources, the presence and use of which are preconditions for obtaining government funds for projects complying with its mandated policies. Such resources are drawn from urbanized villages' pasts—both their former collective economy in the form of real-estate rents and collectively funded community goods such as temples. In short, community-building in urban villages capitalizes on their past, reframing it in terms of Confucianism while aiming to develop them into “proper,” modern, urban communities populated by law-abiding, self-governing, high-quality (*suzhi*) citizens. The former rural collective economy is to be replaced by a modernized public economy deemed more scientific, in that it takes different stakeholders' interests into account and thus functions in the public interest.

While community-building is a form of cultural governance—soft power exercised by the party-state seeking to legitimize its authoritarian rule by leaning on nationalist discourse and consensual cultural symbols from the past (Perry 2013)—at the local scale of the urban community or *shequ* this governance is strongly moralized, in that references to Confucian teachings and values are intended to

shape citizens' comportment in such a way as to save higher-level government intervention and budgets. To this extent, community-building testifies to the existence of a moral neoliberalism in China, a notion to which the concluding chapter returns. First, however, chapter 5 explores the latest trend in community-building: the creation of "livable communities."

Notes

1. Shenzhen Caring Action Office Network, "Beneficence Day," 3 May 2018, http://www.szguanai.com/content/2018-05/03/content_21006404.htm. The article describes Beneficence Day (which will be presented below). The Shenzhen Caring Action Office is run by the Municipal Party Propaganda Committee.
2. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has repeatedly claimed that China is "not ready" for democracy because the "quality" of its population is, on the whole, poor (Yu 2009, cited in Nguyen 2013).
3. Particularly since the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008. On *Gongyi Zhongguo* (Charitable China), a popular TV show, candidates compete to obtain money for philanthropic projects to help the poor, the elderly and people living with disabilities.
4. Central Organization Department, Opinions by the Party Central Organization Department on further strengthening and improving street (subdistrict) and community party-building work, 4 October 2004, available at <https://www.fosu.edu.cn/jwjcc/党纪党规/规范性文件/1190.html>
5. This reflects the fact that residents' committees were established to provide services to people outside of the work unit (*danwei*) system and were—and still are—thus primarily responsible for people of lower social status.
6. *Jiedao* subdistricts ("street offices") and *qu* districts form part of the state's formal urban apparatus. Their primary tasks often involve implementing upper-level state policies on subjects such as urban administration and managing the floating population (see chapter 3).
7. Following the 1989 Law Governing the Organization of Residents' Committees.
8. Shenzhen People's Government Information Office, "Shenzhen China," 7 February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eiSBYHqX20>.
9. See "Pine Mansion" in chapter 1 and "Hopes of Accessing *Hukou*" in chapter 5.
10. In the Longhua civil administration headquarters these departments are clustered together on the same floor, and some actually overlap, with the same organization bearing different names.
11. The committee is run by the Shenzhen Spiritual Civilization Construction Committee.
12. Interview by Anne-Christine Trémon, 29 March 2018.
13. This section is based on Wang Bo's unpublished paper, "High Morale on Shaky Ground," 3 October 2019.
14. On the canteen, see chapter 3, and on the teahouse, see chapter 5.
15. Interview by Jessica Wilczak, 21 August 2019.
16. Interview by Jessica Wilczak, 29 June 2019.
17. Jessica Wilczak, *Fieldnotes*, 24 July 2019, cited in *Final Report*, 30 July 2019.
18. Interview by Jessica Wilczak, 23 July 2018.
19. State Council, document 35, 13 September 2013, http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2013-09/13/content_2487704.htm.
20. Wang Bo, *Final Report*, 31 October 2019.

21. Wang Bo, "High Morale on Shaky Ground," unpublished paper, 3 October 2019.
22. Wang Bo, interview, 5 March 2018, and Wang Bo, *Final Report*, 31 October 2019.
23. In 2018 people over sixty years old accounted for about 21.34 percent of the city's population of 14.76 million; <https://sichuan.scol.com.cn/cddt/201910/57352712.html>. In 2018 people over sixty constituted 17.9 percent of the total population in China. *Xinhuanet*, 9 February 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/09/c_137808376.htm.
24. Chengdu city three-year action plan for the construction of community nursing homes 2016–2018, [https://baike.baidu.com/item/成都市社区养老院建设三年行动计划\(2016—2018年\)/19444592?](https://baike.baidu.com/item/成都市社区养老院建设三年行动计划(2016—2018年)/19444592?)
25. This section is based on Jessica Wilczak's *Final Report*, 30 July 2019.
26. On pensions, see chapter 1, "Powerful Shareholding Companies in Pine Mansion, Shenzhen."
27. The company also monitors a database of registered elderly people to keep track of health data such as blood pressure, illnesses, etc.
28. Interview by Anne-Christine Trémon, 28 March 2018.
29. Residents' committees have also become more bureaucratized, turned into administrative agencies (Audin 2015; Wu 2018).
30. Shenzhen's Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau has made social work central to community construction. Each center must employ at least six staff, among whom 60 percent must be licensed social workers. These are hired from nongovernmental social work agencies by the district government (Tang and Sun 2017).
31. See Shenzhen Care Network, http://www.szguanai.com/node_103713.htm.
32. Interview by Anne-Christine Trémon, 4 April 2018.
33. However, the situation was resolved by the Shenzhen Bureau of Education's decision to keep public schools open all day from 1 April 2019. Until then, only private schools were open at lunchtime, and public-school students whose parents had the means to pay for lunchtime care would use private care institutions. After a fire broke out at one of the private daycare centers in 2017, all such centers' business licenses were withdrawn, although I observed that some continued to operate without a license.
34. This was the first village call for funding that was little circulated overseas and to which few overseas Chens contributed; the reasons for this shift are explored in Trémon 2022.
35. In the 1990s the government launched a new "patriotic education" campaign focused on the Confucian classics and encouraged the construction of Confucius institutes abroad and Confucian academies across the country to bolster its legitimacy after the Tiananmen Square incident (Zhao 1998). Note, however, that the Neo-Confucian revival in China is also bottom-up, resulting from grassroots citizens' initiatives (Dutournier and Ji 2009; Billioud and Thoraval 2014). On *guoxue* and lineage revival, see Payette 2016.
36. On the double promotion campaign in Shenzhen, see chapter 3, and on livable communities, see chapter 5.
37. These were issued under the umbrella of the 1 + 6 + N policy system, where 1 refers to the original thirty-point document issued in September 2017, 6 refers to the six major supporting documents, and N refers to an uncounted number of supporting documents to guide concrete projects.
38. Interview by Jessica Wilczak, 23 July 2018.
39. Interview by Jessica Wilczak, 17 January 2019.
40. Cited in Jessica Wilczak's *Final Report*, 30 July 2019. The remainder of this section is based on this report.