

Reverting to the community system from the work unit system
50 years of institutional changes in China's urban management system at the municipal level

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This paper includes a historical overview of the changes in the management system of modern Chinese cities at the municipal level and describes the main stages of this process. During the first half of the 20th century, traditional communities were replaced by “legal communities” (municipal administration) while the second half of the century was characterised by a “negation of negation” process, with the legal communities first being replaced by the work unit system then reinstated.

This paper focuses on the relationships between work units and urban communities after 1949, examining three chronological periods. During the first phase, in the 50s, the communities and work units developed simultaneously. The legal communities increasingly gained influence. The work unit system, originally limited to the Communist Party, the army and the government, expanded to include all legal persons, businesses and public interest organizations either serving the public or owned by the state, thus the work unit society gradually developed. During the second phase, in the 60s and 70s, two-way development (communities and work units switching roles) brought the work unit society to its peak and pushed the legal communities out of urban society. During the 80s and 90s, the work unit society within the cities gradually lost momentum, came to a standstill and was near collapse. In contrast, the communities revived, adopted a new image, and gradually flourished, and they once again became dominant. From the 80s onwards, the concept of “community” was once again acknowledged and increasingly used in official publications, and in the early 90s, the relevant government departments officially adopted the idea of “community building”. As the new millennium approached and the work unit society rapidly deteriorated, with the successive community development and management projects put in place beginning to reap their rewards, community building became a crucial element of the urbanization process.

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