

The urban history that makes China's coronavirus lockdown possible

March 3 2020, by Toby Lincoln



Credit: Kate Trifo from Pexels

Hundreds of millions of people in cities in China have been affected by measures to contain the novel coronavirus. It [has been reported](#) that people have been asked to provide information such as their temperature

via mobile phone, and that in some neighbourhoods only one member of a family is allowed out every few days to buy food. Visitors from outside residential complexes have been forbidden from entering, and public gatherings have been cancelled.

Although some of the monitoring of people's health and movement has been done using mobile phone apps, much of it relies on hundreds of thousands of volunteers. They stand guard at the gates of residential complexes, enforce quarantines and conduct temperature checks.

A recent [World Health Organization report](#) praised the efforts of the Chinese government and its people in limiting the spread of the virus. The report noted the importance of community participation in the decision to lock down the cities. However, the mobilisation of the volunteers who guard buildings and conduct temperature checks relies on a system of governance built on [China's urban history](#). This means similar measures may not work elsewhere.

Local volunteers

Chinese urban governance—and the current coronavirus lockdown—is overseen by local [residents' committees](#). These have their origins in the 1950s, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established control over cities. Urban districts were sub-divided into residents' committees, made up of several hundred households, and residents' small groups, composed of fewer still. They were staffed by CCP officials and local volunteers, and were responsible for keeping order, putting up propaganda posters, and running political campaigns.

The committees gained greater importance during China's period of economic reform, which began in 1978. Private sector growth meant the number of people employed in work units—state-owned organisations which provided housing, schooling and social activities—declined. The

work units' [responsibilities shifted](#) to the residents' committees. Today, the committees have control over unemployment and pensions payments, public health and the local environment. They arbitrate in domestic disputes, promote cultural activities, and help people find work.

Since the late 1990s, it has become more common for two or three residents' committees to be amalgamated into a larger community, [known as a *shequ*](#). These can comprise as many as 16,000 people from diverse social backgrounds and include organisations such as companies and schools from the local area. Within the *shequ*, a neighbourhood delegate assembly elects the members of the residents' committees, who are often women. The CCP retains control by having party secretaries elected or appointed. Local urban governance is, at least in part, the responsibility of [people in the communities](#) themselves.



Credit: Kate Trifo from Pexels

This evolution of Chinese urban governance gives the CCP the ability to monitor cities closely, especially when it is combined with [modern hi-tech surveillance](#) systems. This has certainly resulted in draconian measures to control the urban population in recent weeks.

However, while the Chinese government is certainly capable of repression, to see residents' committees as simply the arms of an authoritarian state bent on total control is too simplistic.

A shared experience

Many of the staff of these committees are drawn from the local community. This means that for many Chinese, the inconveniences of the lockdown, such as guards outside residential complexes and temperature checks, do not necessarily feel like something that has been imposed on them. Instead, they are a shared experience that can bring people together, as [shouts of support](#) from tower block to tower block in Wuhan show.

As the coronavirus spreads around the world, other countries must be careful about looking to China for examples of how to manage it. Cities in other countries do not have a political culture that would allow them to replicate what China has done, or the same governance structures. The Chinese model of urban development in the 20th century is not entirely unique, since it derives some of its inspiration from the USSR, but it has certainly diverged from the West.

Instead, if locking down urban populations is proven to be the most

effective way of containing the virus, officials must look at the tools they have in their governance armouries.

This includes the police and other emergency services, but also charities and community groups. They often already work closely with city government, and are able to mobilise their members to take action. This could include checking up on vulnerable residents or helping to deliver food supplies to families who might be under quarantine. The coming weeks will test the resilience of our cities and our communities.

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