

Documentation

The Neighborhood Committee *An Organ Not to Be Underestimated*

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One of the special characteristics of China's municipal administration is the extreme care with which it sets up its local administrative bodies. Generally speaking, local municipal governments under the jurisdiction of the provincial government are sub-divided into districts and county (or regional ethnic minority county) governments. Differing from other countries, China has gone further. In addition, it has set up neighborhood committees usually called street offices. These are roughly equivalent to township governments which are under the county government.

Nanjing City, the provincial capital of middle size Jiangsu province, can be cited as an example. This city is divided into 10 districts (i.e., Xuanwu, Dachang, Pukou, Qixia, Xiaguan, Gulou, Baixia, Jianye, Qinhuai and Yuhua) and 5 counties (i.e., Jiangning, Jiangpu, Liuhe, Lishui and Gaochun). Under these ten districts there are 40 to 50 neighborhood committee township governments.

Ordinarily, each of these neighborhood committees oversees a population of from 30,000 to more than 100,000 persons. There are also neighborhood committees which oversee only a few thousand persons.

The legal status of these neighborhood committees was established in December of 1954 at the Fourth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the First National People's Congress. These laws were entitled: *Regulations Concerning the Organization of Neighborhood Committees*. Below is a sampling of some of these regulations:

Article 3: Cities under the jurisdiction of the Provincial Government divided into districts and cities without fixed boundaries having populations of more than one hundred thousand persons must set up neighborhood offices. If these two types of

cities have a population of over 50,000 but less than 100,000, neighborhood offices can also be established if the work so requires. Cities with a population of fewer than five thousand do not, as a rule, need to set up neighborhood committees.

Article 4: The duties of these neighborhood committees are: to oversee the work of their subordinate departments in urban areas, i.e., those cities under the jurisdiction of the Provincial government and those with undefined districts, and administer all matters pertaining to them; manage government affairs at their Neighborhood Committee level; convey residents' opinions and demands, and make suggestions to the People's Government.

Article 5: The neighborhood committee or street office will have a chairperson and several assistants in proportion to the complexity of the work and the size of the districts. A Vice Chairperson can also be appointed, if needed. These neighborhood Committees should also have from three to seven trained cadres, one of whom looks after women's work. (for details of Local People's Governments, cf., PRC Constitution, esp., Articles 106-111).

After 40 years, the function of these neighborhood Committees has continually expanded and the number of cadres involved with them has increased immensely. Although *neighborhoods* are the smallest units of government, the personnel resources the government has expended on these offices is nothing short of overwhelming.

The Hong Kong *Overseas Chinese Daily News* dated August 4, 1994, reported on a survey carried out by Beijing University's Department of Political Science and Government Administration on Beijing's Haidian District. This district, together with eleven collective villages, has 14 street offices or neighborhood Committees and a total population of 1,094,000. There are 2,093 cadres working out of these offices. Ordinarily, in China, each *neighborhood* has a population of approximately 78,000 inhabitants. The average number of cadres for each district office is 152.8. This means that for every ten thousand inhabitants there are close to 20 cadres working in each Neighborhood Committee. These figures readily show the degree of expansion this establishment has undergone. Some people see

these as the "nerve endings" of the local government. Concerning the present function of these neighborhood offices, the same *Overseas Chinese Daily News* reports: "The administrative functions of these street offices include two to three hundred items. They comprise such matters as civil administration, administration of justice, public security, communications, fire-fighting, city upkeep, public health, planting of trees, etc., environmental protection, civil defense, planned parenthood, labor control, culture and education, collective economy, service economy, market supervisor, social services, etc."

Furthermore, according to friends on the mainland, the relations between the cadres and the residents is a link so close that they consider whatever happens among the people in their districts to be, in principle, their concern and responsibility. Most of these are retired cadres over 40 years of age, the majority of whom are women. In most cases they have the necessary tenacity to acquaint themselves with the living conditions of every individual in these neighborhoods. It can be truthfully said that concerning matters in their districts there is nothing these cadres will not ask about and nothing that they do not know.

Since the street offices have such a comprehensive knowledge of matters in their districts, it is no wonder that the recently published *Registration Procedures For Venues for Religious Activities* puts these places under the control of the street offices.

In May of this year the Religious Affairs Bureau of China's State Council, according to Decree #145 *Regulations for Controlling Places for Religious Worship*, formulated the *Registration Procedures for Venues of Religious Activities*. Article 3 of these *Regulations* states:

At the time of the application for registration, the venue for religious activities must provide the following documentation:

1. *An application form;*
2. *Documentation and credentials related to the venue;*
3. *The opinion of the village (or township) or of the city neighborhood committee.*

In other words, if religious bodies wish to make an application for the registration of their places of religious activities,

they must first get the nod from the neighborhood committee. However, according to the present situation in China's cities, getting the recommendation of the Neighborhood Committee is the equivalent of having all the religious activities of the registered groups watched over by and open for inspection by local cadres.

Article 6. The Religious Affairs Department of the People's Government at the county level or above will, within sixty days of the decision to consider the application, grant registration and issue a registration certificate to those venues which, based upon investigation and the opinions of related parties, comply with the regulations found in Articles 2 and 3 of these Procedures, and with related provisions in the "Regulation Governing Venues for Religious Activities". Venues which do not fully comply with the regulations, will, upon review, be granted temporary registration or deferred registration or be denied registration. They will be notified in writing and given an explanation for the decision (Emphasis added).

The opinions of the authorities sought in Article 3, Section 3 are precisely those of the neighborhood offices. In other words registration means accepting the office's *pervasive intelligence gathering*.

What is exceptional about these new *Procedures* is that they no longer demand that communities wishing to register belong to government sanctioned religious organizations. Article 2, Section 4 of the *Procedures* simply mentions "professional clergy or persons who meet the requirements of the particular religious group to conduct religious services;" these words leave a hint foreshadowing future developments. They leave enough space for Religious Affairs Departments above the County level to maneuver. It does not matter. For once religious communities formally apply for registration, they have already bared themselves to the *pervasive intelligence gathering* of the neighborhood committee and no longer need even to call in an officially approved religious organization to act as an instrument for their supervision.

The entire text of these *Procedures* shows that China's Religious Affairs Bureau wants, on the one hand, to loosen its "suppression" but at the same time heighten its "oppression".

The aim, however, remains the same: to bring all religious activities under its control.

The Chinese government wants to normalize its work of control over religious activities. It would indeed be good for the government to curtail its suppression of religious groups, allow them to enjoy religious freedom, develop their power for a spiritual civilization and work for a better society. What we see, however, is the Chinese government now using enormous human and material efforts to intensify its control over religion as well as encouraging elements that harass religious bodies. The stage is now set for increasing corruption, and when no one is looking, this will provide those elements within government circles bent on corruption, and who need only a slight pretext, to use their power for their own selfish aims. They will create great difficulties for the country and be a cause of concern and worry to thinking people.

International Symposium on Religion and Culture

An International Symposium on "Religion and Culture" in Commemoration of the Fourth Anniversary of St. Paul's University College in Macao will be held in Macao between 28 November and 1 December 1994. The symposium is entirely sponsored and organized by the Government of Macao (Cultural Institute of Macao), and has the cooperation of the Jesuits of Macao and of the Ricci Institute of University of San Francisco. All interested persons are welcome to attend. An organized visit to Shangchuan Island, where Francis Xavier died, will follow on 2-3 December. For further information, contact the Cultural Institute of Macao.

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