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Author: World Watch Research analyst / Asia

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Grassroots control is here to stay

A [60-page report](#)[1] entitled "Pandemic State-building: Chinese Administrative Expansion in the Xi Jinping Era" was published on 16 February 2023, law experts Yutian An and Taisu Zhang (from Princeton and Yale universities respectively) discuss how law enforcement and information collection were delegated by the government to local authorities to cope more effectively with the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that this shift of power down to a lower level is now permanent:

> This transformation has centered on the two lowest levels of urban government—the "subdistrict" or "street" ("jiedao"), and below them, the "neighborhood community" ("shequ") — both of which previously wielded very little coercive power, but are now perhaps the most salient and significant nodes of governmental power in Chinese social life. Through a massive campaign of legal and administrative empowerment, these two layers of govern-ment are now the **first line of defense against any significant social problem**. (Page 2, emphasis added)

Neighborhood-level organizations were originally created in China for delivering public services and for engaging in genuine consultation with residents. They retained a certain veneer of self-governance by having local officials elected by residents, although such elections could only take place under the strict supervision and control of higher levels of government (Page 27). Throughout the pre-Covid era, policies aimed at strengthening subdistrict governments or neighborhood-level organizations were consistently paired with the need to strengthen top-down oversight over them. As with any internal control mechanism inside the Chinese government, such supervision could work either through the 'state' or the 'Communist Party', and heavy use was made of both (Page 31).

The authors sum up the changes accelerated by COVID-19 by showing how neighborhood-level organizations were converted into "social control command centers" (Page 34) through an official document of empowerment:

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[1] On 30 March 2023, China File published an [interview](#) with the authors which offers a much shorter summary and discussion of the findings.

> *In the very same document that emphasized public service provision, the State Council stated that neighborhood organizations should also beef up their policing capacity and enhance their ability to resolve basic disputes. In particular, they should make sure they had the capacity to deal with local incidents of domestic violence, drug use, **cult activity**, and any kind of "emergency situation".* (Page 46, emphasis added)

Although Christian churches are not generally categorized as 'cult activity', in a climate where pastors of unregistered churches are increasingly facing accusations of economic crimes, financial fraud or the catch-all crime of 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble' ([WWR, 13 March 2023](#)), it is easily imaginable how the subdistricts and neighborhood communities can feel empowered to care for this problem as well.

However, with this empowerment come challenges as well. As of 2022, there were 8,980 subdistricts in China, with some 'meta'-subdistricts overseeing a population of over 300,000 people. The authors take the well-known Haidian District in Beijing as an example:

> *To illustrate the sheer magnitude of the change, consider some numbers from Haidian District in Beijing: it contains some 3 million residents, spread across 29 subdistrict-level entities and nearly 700 neighborhoods. Each subdistrict had perhaps 100-150 staff members, and most neighborhood organizations employed 10-20 staff, depending on size. All 29 subdistricts had to be trained in administrative law enforcement, and the nearly 700 neighborhoods all had to transition from largely benign but also largely powerless public service suppliers to real governance units overseeing the movement, health, and safety of a few thousand people.* (Page 54)

In terms of neighborhood-level organizations, the numbers become even more impressive. There are a staggering 117,000 of them nationwide and the sheer cost of monitoring them, be it by state or Communist Party means, are exorbitant (Page 56). However, as security and the survival of the Communist Party is paramount, the latter is willing to bear these costs since they are seen as necessary.

Another indication of the sheer effort this undertaking demands can be seen in the [numbers for Yunnan province](#) provided by CSW on 10 May 2023. These impressive figures are based on a February 2023 report by the Yunnan provincial United Front Work Department (UFWD) and refer specifically to ethnic and religious management grids:

- *A leadership team, headed by leaders of UFWD and an ethnic and religious affairs commission, consists of personnel from 29 departments/groups.*
- *All 16 prefecture-level administrative regions and 129 counties in Yunnan have ethnic and religious work departments as legal entities, and all 1,419 townships in the province have special ethnic and religious officers.*
- *The province has been divided into 9,370 ethnic and religious management grids, with 1,227 coordinators in place, covering 86.4% of the province's 1,419 townships, and 12,473 grid officers (informants), covering 84.73% of the province's 14,721 villages/communities. All 'spots' that are considered to be risky, hidden, dangerous or weak with some ethnic and religious factors are comprehensively and regularly investigated. For the investigators, the*

effective transformation from "when something happens, go find the people responsible" to "people looking out for things that may go wrong" has been achieved.

Too late to turn the demographic tide?

In an in-depth article, Foreign Affairs described on 1 May 2023, why an autocratic China will not be able to change demographic numbers any time soon, and most likely, not at all.

World Watch Research analyst Thomas Muller comments: "The headline that India took over China as the most populous country in the world in recent weeks was widely reported across the world. But it will be interesting to see whether a top-down bureaucracy, very much focused on the leadership of Secretary-General Xi Jinping, can find ways to cope with a 'graying future' or even turn the demographic tide. Traditionally, countries facing this sort of demographic challenge have used three particular 'tools': i) They have raised the retirement thresholds, ii) facilitated labor immigration, and iii) encouraged child-bearing and stable family units. While the first tool goes against the grain of prioritizing the country's stability, rumors of a rise in retirement age have been circulating for quite some time. This may be a more likely litmus-test for true reforms than opening up the country for immigration. As for incentivizing family, the Communist Party seems to be waking up to the challenge and is establishing model cities of 'new era' marriage and childbearing culture (SCMP, 9 May 2023 and Reuters, 15 May 2023)."

Thomas Muller continues: "The Communist Party may well find that social engineering is easier when it comes to imposing punishments (e.g. for having too many children) than when incentives need to be offered for changing behavior. In that respect, it is interesting to note that the very association which was responsible for a policy of forced sterilizations and abortions, the "Family Planning Association", is now responsible for propping up the birthrate. At the same time, cultural expectations may also limit the effectiveness of such policies, as does an increasing mindset among young people of moving back to their parents to become "fulltime children" again (The China Project, 2 May 2023). Being a middle class phenomenon, this shows how families can still afford to take their children back. At the same time, these are the very young adults China needs for its economy – and for being the next generation of parents. How the Communist Party approaches this conundrum beyond the reach of ideology will be interesting to see."

Thomas Muller concludes: "The ageing process has consequences for the urban-rural divide as well. While studies from China reveal that elderly people even in urban areas experience above average levels of depression, the situation in rural areas (which often consist almost exclusively of elderly citizens) shows a much more challenging picture. Author Li Jianjun, a professor of sociology and president of Anshun university, states in his book "A study on suicide" published in 2020:

Suicides among the elderly have gradually increased, especially among the elderly in rural areas. Statistics show that the suicide rate in the countryside in China is higher than that in urban areas. The suicide rate of the rural elderly is five times that of the urban elderly; and 90% of all elderly suicides occur in rural areas. ... There are many reasons for suicide among the elderly, including loneliness, illness, poverty, unfilial children, empty-nests, etc.

This is a challenge for rural churches, too - but also an opportunity. Given that many people converted to Christian faith in the rural areas of Henan and other provinces in the 80s and early 90s of the last century, there is still a 'Christian residue' among the elderly to build on. This is despite the fact that many may have received only minimal teaching, had no opportunity to join a church on a frequent basis, or may even have lost their faith altogether. An openly Christian ministry among the elderly, however, would only be possible in a very limited number of cases, given the growing restrictions on such endeavors.