

Sense of Community, Neighboring, and Social Capital as Predictors of Local Political Participation in China

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Abstract This study examines the state of sense of community, neighboring behavior, and social capital in the People's Republic of China, and explores their ability to predict local political participation, in the form of voting in elections for Urban Resident/Rural Villager Committees. Using a nationally representative survey, rural, older and married residents and those with a primary or high school education and higher perceived socio-economic status are more likely to participate. In rural areas, men are more likely than women to vote. For urban residents, knowing one's neighbors is more important whereas in rural areas, neighboring behavior is more important, but both predict voting. Social capital does not generally predict Chinese people's local political participation. Western definitions of social capital derived from theories about networking, bonding and bridging ties may be too culturally individualistic for China, whose collectivist society and agrarian kinship networks predate Communism. Simply knowing and helping one's neighbors, rather than more abstract

notions of trust, reciprocity or membership, may lead to the development of local democracy.

Keywords China · Citizen participation · Sense of community · Neighboring · Social capital · Community cognition · Chinese general social survey

Introduction

China is the most populous country in the world, and is becoming the dominant nation economically and politically in Asia. In the last two decades, China's economic and welfare reforms and their social and cultural impact on communities, on community-based services, and on opportunities for local community participation have generated significant interest among scholars and nongovernmental organizations (e.g., Bray 2006; Guan 2000; Li 2006; Xia 2008; Yan and Gao 2007). In contrast to the limited opportunities in Maoist China for local political participation and social capital, not to mention the limits on social research during that period, what communities in China have experienced can now be studied and compared to what has been established in Western societies, such as the definition and meaning of community, sense of community, neighboring behavior, social capital and civic participation, their relationship to each other and to political participation. Likewise, what Western theories and practices describe about community and community participation also challenges China's capacity for community building and for the development of participatory democracy, at least at the local level.

Scholars have argued that changes in the provision of community services in the context of China's welfare reform and social transformation will eventually lead to the

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development of civil society indicators such as sense of community, the connectedness among close geographic neighbors, beyond what was traditionally built upon kin and cadres (Ge 2008; Jones and Xu 2002; Liu 2008; Xu 2008; Xu and Chow 2006). Ties to communities are providing ordinary Chinese with the social and welfare support they once drew from family and employment units. Individuals' participation in community services and other community activities promises to empower community residents, add to their social capital, and consequently may help create genuine, broader grassroots community actions. At the same time, massive labor migration and urbanization throughout China has strained both formally organized public services and informal family and community ties and supports; and those strains affect both rural and urban areas, but the nature and magnitude of those effects may be different (Guan and Chow 2003/2004; Mallee 2000; Xia 2008). Citizen responses and opportunities for participation are thus likely to be different in urban and rural areas (Bray 2006; Jennings 1997; Jones and Xu 2002; Xu and Chow 2006; Zhang 1992).

Due to the paucity of research, the dynamics among community cognitions (attachments and perceptions), community organization, social capital, and local political participation in China are still unclear. Empirical studies using national datasets are few; systematic comparisons between rural and urban community participation are almost nonexistent; and surveys that include rural samples are especially uncommon. Can Western theories concerning local political participation, sense of community, neighboring, and social capital be applied in China? This study uses Chinese national survey data with random sample to answer these questions: Do sense of community, neighboring, and social capital predict local political participation behavior? How do urban and rural residents differ in terms of their patterns of community participation?

Background and Literature

Community Social and Political Participation in China

Community participation is defined differently by different people according to their social, economic and political context. On the one extreme, participation is simply perceived as the passive response of receiving services or involvement in community activities. On the other extreme, it is viewed as the complete ownership of the community and/or community organizations (Blanchet 2001; Murthy and Klugman 2004). The latter encompasses participation in both community decision-making and local politics. It has been noted that traditional Western forms of community participation based on institutionalized reciprocity and

communal self-help had very little impact in developing countries (Blanchet 2001; Midgley et al. 1986). For many developing countries, scholars have found that community participation is often linked to the governmental initiation of social service programs (Abatena 1997; Jewkes and Murcott 1996), in that community participation brings to social service programs with added efficiency, sustainability, equity, and collective community power (Gonzalez 1998; Jones 2003). Many scholars question the value of this type of community participation since community participation in service programs could only be viewed as a "contribution;" they argue that the voluntary donation of people's resources to a common good does not necessarily imply that control and direction of activities pass to the local people (Foley and Martin 2000; McConnell 1993; Murthy and Klugman 2004).

In China, community participation stems from the Chinese tradition of neighborhood mutual help, and historically has rarely involved decision-making and local politics. In the last two decades, as the Chinese government's ability to provide services and welfare programs to its citizens declined following the economic and social reforms starting in 1978, the concept of community and community-based services were introduced and adopted in the mid-1980s. The adoption of community-based services was a response to the changing family composition and aging population, and consequently growing needs in care and services (Bray 2006; Yan and Gao 2007). The shift was also underpinned by a rationale that service programs should be carried out in the community, by community members and with community input (Guan 2000; Guan and Chow 2003/2004). Therefore, citizens have been encouraged to participate in the community both socially and politically, at least up to the extent the local political environment allows. Over the last two decades, however, community participation in China, as in other developing countries, typically involves limited roles for community members in programs initiated by the government and led by Communist Party members. The result is thus too often a less than empowering, top-down experience rather than a grassroots, or bottom-up, one. Community members consequently lack necessary motivation and organizational infrastructure to participate in community decision-making process or local politics.

While studies of community participation in China rarely focus on its political aspect, local political participation, particularly in rural China, has drawn scholars' attention in recent years; and their investigations are often in the context of governance and democracy (O'Brien and Li 2000; Zhang et al. 2004; Zhong and Chen 2002). Community participation and local political participation are often distinguished in the sociology and political science literatures. In China, however, the definition of

community and the changing nature of local elections suggest that the two forms of participation may be viewed as on a continuum. The China's Ministry of Civil Affairs officially defined geographic "community" in 1994 as the lowest political administrative unit. In each unit, Chinese laws have established that the leading organization is the semi-governmental, but self-governing by law, Urban Residents' Committee or Rural Villagers' Committee.¹ Because local political participation in China refers to the participation in Urban Residents' Committee or Rural Villagers' Committee elections, as available literature has shown, local political participation is a part of community participation, specifically from the perspective of community ownership, decision-making, and collective action.

Sense of Community, Neighboring, and Community Social and Political Participation

The definition of sense of community generally focuses on the reciprocal relationship between the people and the community to which they belong from a psychological perspective. The major debate involves how narrow or expansive should be the definition. The greatest consensus on sense of community revolves around cohesive feelings of membership or belongingness to a group, in particular the emotional connections or bonds among people based on a shared history, interests or concerns (Hughes and Speer 2002; Long and Perkins 2003; Manzo and Perkins 2006). Western theories hold that such shared emotional connections to one's community motivate residents to participate in both informal neighboring behavior and formally organized neighborhood improvement and planning efforts (Putnam 2000). Evidence of the connection between sense of community, neighboring, and participation has been generally consistent across countries and cultures (Brody et al. 1999; Garcia et al. 1999; Liu and Besser 2003; Perkins et al. 1996; Perkins and Long 2002; Prezza et al. 2001).

Some see that connection as so close as to include, not only membership and shared emotional connection, but also influence and needs fulfillment as dimensions of sense of community (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Whether one prefers a narrow or broader definition of sense of community, the construct clearly relates to empowerment, or community members' shared expectations of the efficacy of collective action and feelings of community control (Kingston et al. 1999; Long and Perkins 2003; Sampson et al. 1997). Scholars indicate that without collective efficacy residents are not likely to take active part in community decision-making; and local political participation for community decision-making is key to community

empowerment and development (Colombo et al. 2001; Ohmer 2007; Perkins and Long 2002).

In China, sense of community carries features that might be different from Western theories. Historically, "community" in China was based on a patrilineal kinship network, where extended family lived proximately within a geographic area and cared for each other in times of need. Under the socialist regime (pre-1978), the employment unit (*Dan Wei*) became urban people's new community (Ruf 1998). Neither the kinship network nor *Dan Wei* encompasses the psychological or social meaning of a geographic-based community (Guan and Chow 2003/2004; Ruf 1998). Since the economic and social reforms in 1978, the dissolution of employment units as well as aggressive housing and other major construction projects, and widespread labor migration have largely dissolved *Dan Wei* "communities" and greatly strained kinship networks. Instead, new geographic communities are emerging, where residents often share little in common. For this reason, a sense of geographic community must be nurtured and collective efficacy needs to be instilled so that people will want to participate to collectively address their own community needs and problems (Luo 2007; Perkins et al. 1996).

There is little empirical study of either sense of community or neighboring (or even of the related broader concept of social support; Yuen Tsang 1999) in China. There has been even less published on how they relate to community social or political participation. Limited evidence indicates, while urban communities in today's China present moderate level of community belongingness, the importance of neighboring, neighborhood mutual help and community participation have been consistently decreasing (Gui and Huang 2006). Scholars have just begun to attend to the conceptualization of sense of community, but to what extent sense of community, neighboring, community participation, and especially local political participation correlate and affect each other in China remains unclear.

Social Capital and Community Social and Political Participation

Social capital is defined as a multidimensional construct that refers to individuals' social networks and mutual trust that people can draw upon in order to solve common problems. Social capital theory posits that through active participating in one's community, community organizations, voluntary associations and other local resident groups, individuals create collective goals that help create norms of reciprocity; individuals with high social capital are prepared to act collectively to achieve shared goals (Putnam et al. 1993). Where people feel isolated and alienated from social network and wider society, they likely withdraw from political participation (Henn et al.

¹ Sometimes called Urban Neighborhood Committee and Rural Village Committee; we will use these interchangeably.

2005). However, the connection between social capital and community social and political participation is not always self-evident. While social capital clearly involves community social participation in the forms of informal neighboring and organized volunteer service support (Perkins and Long 2002), social capital needs institutional infrastructure in order to translate into local political participation (Krishna 2002).

The content of social capital is not new to the Chinese. Social ties (*Guanxi*) have been well studied as they assist Chinese in obtaining employment, promotion, and other informal benefits (Bian 1997, 2001), and social capital does contribute to individual's health and well-being (Yip et al. 2007). Existing research also indicates that individual social capital in China is more cognitive than structural; that is, social ties and social network are primarily based on individual relationships rather than participation in civic organizations (Yip et al. 2007). However, the nature of social capital, its multiple dimensions, and its role in community social and political participation have just started to be studied in China.

Recent studies of community participation in China show contradictory results as they relate to social capital. In terms of community social participation, the social capital obtained by individuals in rural China predicts their participation in community health programs (Zhang et al. 2006); however, social ties or individual networking also became a barrier for equitable and active participation in a rural community tourism development (Li et al. 2007). As to community political participation, on the one hand, examinations of Rural Villagers' Committee elections show that social capital (both social trust and network) does not help increase participation rates (Sun et al. 2007). Observations of Urban Residents' Committee elections, on the other hand, suggest that government authorities use social capital imbedded in the community to promote a high local political participation rate (Gui et al. 2003).

Since social capital is defined differently and used in a wide range of contexts, relationships among sense of community, social capital and community participation have not been consistently documented. Scholars indicate that sense of community should be a psychological construct and a correlate of social capital (Mancini et al. 2003; Pooley et al. 2005); sense of community and formal participation in community organizations could also be viewed as parts of an individual's social capital (Perkins et al. 2002). Nonetheless, empirical studies suggest that social capital and sense of community are very important in predicting community social and political participation, but different constructs of social capital (network, mutuality, trust) may relate to community participation differently (Liu and Besser 2003) and may relate differently to political than social participation.

In summary, more than two decades of community practice would give Chinese citizens more experience and confidence to participate in their own communities. Along with their efforts in forming their new community identity and developing sense of community, China's community participation promises to move from participation as mere involvement in social service programs to participation in community decision-making and local politics. In the context of China's social transformation, this trend could be facilitated by increased sense of community and social capital, which are gradually on the rise in China. However, the disruptions in sense of community due to relocations, rural–urban migration and urbanization and unique characteristics of social capital in China present uncertainty in these relationships. While we are using Western approaches to measure sense of community and social capital, it is unclear how local political participation, sense of community, neighboring and social capital relate to each other or whether sense of community, neighboring and social capital could become valid indicators for local political participation in the context of Chinese culture and China's society. This study is an initial effort to investigate those relationships.

Research Questions and Methods

Questions and Hypotheses

This study addresses the following questions: After controlling demographic variables, (1) do sense of community and neighboring predict local political participation? And (2) does social capital predict local political participation? In addition, do rural and urban people differ in their participation patterns? Given previous research efforts and our conceptual framework, and taking into account the welfare reform and social transformation occurring in China, in this study, a community is defined as a geographic urban neighborhood or rural village. Sense of community therefore primarily looks at residents' feelings towards their respective neighborhood or village. Community political participation as a dependent variable in this study is limited to residents' participation in voting for community decision-making representatives, that is, members of Urban Residents' Committees and Rural Villagers' Committees. In contrast, we define social capital more broadly as a combination of reciprocity, trust, and participation in urban or rural neighborhood organizations. We hypothesize that (1) higher sense of community and neighboring predict local political participation, as ordinary community members in China gradually develop a connection with their community in a psychological and social way; (2) individuals' higher level of social capital predicts their local

political participation, as social capital connects them through networking and builds their reciprocity and mutuality; (3) urban and rural people differ in their patterns of sense of community, neighboring, social capital, and local political participation. Urban–rural differences are harder to predict. Due to China’s far-reaching social and economic reforms, enormous migration and urban transformation blur the traditional urban–rural division, and profoundly change the composition of both rural and urban communities (Cai 2000). Rural social cohesion and community participation may be higher due to the longer residential histories, and smaller size of village communities. On the other hand, urban residents live in closer, more dense communities and may have been more exposed to democratic and other Western ideas.

Sources of Data

This study uses data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) 2005, an annual representative sample survey of China’s urban and rural households aiming to monitor systematically the changing relationship between social structure and quality of life in urban and rural China. The survey was administrated by People’s University and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in China and Hong Kong, respectively. CGSS uses a four-stage stratified sampling scheme with unequal probabilities (HKUST Survey Research Center 2004). In detail, the sampling units at each stage are: (1) first stage—125 urban districts (including suburban districts) and rural counties (including county-level municipalities) selected; (2) second stage—four townships, town seats and city sub-districts (streets) selected; (3) third stage—two urban neighborhood committees and rural villager committees selected; and (4) ten households selected and then one eligible household member is selected to be the survey respondent. The CGSS 2005 includes 10,372 participants, 58.6% of whom are from rural areas.

Measures

Given the role of community participation played in China’s community-based service delivery, local political participation in this study focuses on community-based citizen-initiated activities that could influence community decision-making, a long-term benefit as this type of community participation would improve the community’s performance in meeting people’s needs (Jennings 2004). Local political participation was measured by a yes–no question, “Did you vote in the last election for members of Urban Neighborhood Committee/Rural Villager Committee?” Urban Neighborhood Committee/Rural Villager Committee is by law the community decision-making body in China’s cities

and rural areas. As a grassroots organization and meanwhile a mandated basic unit in China’s political hierarchy, both Urban Neighborhood Committees and Rural Villager Committees carry out numerous administrative tasks issued by the government, as well as manage certain community care and service programs on their own. This measure does not equal the actual participation in community decision making, but it represents a behavior—making efforts to change the composition of the community decision-making body and therefore influence decisions made for the community.

From questions available in the CGSS, there is unfortunately only one question that may serve as a reasonable measure of sense of community (SOC): “How well do you know your neighbors?” Likewise, there is only one good item to measure neighboring: “How much do neighbors help each other or expect to be helped?” This actually measures one’s perception of the level of neighboring in one’s community. Thus, both items could arguably be combined as a measure of community cognition, but we prefer to examine their impacts separately. Both measures use a five-point Likert scale; the higher the score, the stronger is the individual’s sense of community or perceived neighboring.

There is no widely held consensus on how to measure social capital. This study adopted three dimensions to measure social capital (SC) including: membership in a social network, reciprocity, and trust (Putnam 2000; Rahn and Transue 1998). Network membership measures people’s membership and their frequency of participation in seven different types of organizations, including sports and exercise groups, entertainment and social organizations, professional organizations, religious organizations, children’s interest groups, educational organizations, and public service organizations (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.750). Reciprocity within the network is measured by asking “how much members help each other or expected to be helped in each organization.” These measurements allow this study to estimate not only the extensiveness of individual’s network, but also quality of the network (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.801). Trust is measured by asking how much the individual trusts 13 different types of people including neighbors, relatives, friends, coworkers, group members, strangers, etc. (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.676). Each of the three social capital measures was generated by calculating the sum of seven, seven, and 13 items (respectively) within the above dimensions. The internal consistency (Alpha reliability) of the Trust measure is acceptable and of the Membership and Reciprocity measures is good.

Statistical Methods

Descriptive statistics were used to understand the demography and representativeness of the sample. Because local

political participation is a dichotomous variable, logistic regression models were developed to test the hypothesis. In addition, sub-group analysis was conducted in order to describe the difference between rural and urban local political participation.

Results

Among the 10,328 participants, there were slightly more females (52.6%) than males; the vast majority (84.6%) were married. 40.2% of participants perceived themselves as middle class, and 52.5% classified themselves to be lower or lower-middle class in China. Average age at the time of survey was 44.7 years ($SD = 14.8$); and average household size was 3.88 ($SD = 1.9$). Table 1 delineates the distinctions between rural and urban populations, suggesting two very different groups of people. Compared to urban residents, people in rural areas are more likely to be married, have less education, and live with more family members but less family income; interestingly, rural people perceived themselves as having a slightly higher socio-economic status, although that may simply reflect the comparison with poorer neighbors.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on social capital, sense of community (SOC) and neighboring, as well as urban–rural differences. In general, rural residents in China have a significantly higher SOC, neighboring, and trust

compared to urban residents. But rural people have a significantly lower level of social capital in terms of membership in social organizations and reciprocity within their social network. As to local political participation, fewer than half (43.8%) participated in the last election for Urban Neighborhood Committee or Rural Village Committee, i.e., the local community decision-making bodies. Rural residents have a much higher political participation rate (67.8%) than urban residents (27.0%). Bivariate correlations of all study variables appear separately for urban and rural samples in Table 3.

Overall model fit of five predictors (3 social capital scales, SOC, and neighboring), with Local Political Participation as the dependent variable, is significant ($\chi^2 = 2,244.79$, $p = .00$); the model correctly classifies 71.4% of the cases. Logistic regression results indicate, after controlling demographic variables, that SOC and neighboring each significantly predict local political participation. The odds ratios predict a 23.5% greater probability of participating for every unit increase in SOC on a 1–5 scale and a 14.8% greater chance of participating for every unit increase on the 1–5 neighboring scale (see Table 4). Among the three dimensions of social capital, only reciprocity within the network significantly predicts local political participation, with a 3.1% greater chance of voting for every value on the 0–35 reciprocity scale.

In addition to several demographic variables (age, gender, marital status, social economic status, and education)

Table 1 Demographics of the sample ($n = 10,328$)

	Urban ($n = 6,075$)	Rural ($n = 4,253$)	χ^2
Age (mean)	44.66 ($SD = 15.45$)	44.76 ($SD = 13.81$)	$F = .113$
Gender (male %)	46.5	48.7	4.825*
Household size (mean)	3.46 ($SD = 1.65$)	4.48 ($SD = 1.97$)	$F = 797.00^{**}$
Marital status (married %)	80.5	90.3	185.455**
Family year income (mean)	12,019 ($SD = 15,214$)	4,123 ($SD = 5,833$)	$F = 981.059^{**}$
Perceived socio-economic status (%)			150.146**
Upper	0.4	1.3	
Upper middle	5.5	8.0	
Middle	37.0	44.8	
Lower middle	33.1	25.3	
Lower	24.0	20.6	
Education (%)			2,271.496**
No education	6.0	19.6	
Elementary school	15.2	40.5	
Middle school	29.5	30.3	
High school	21.7	6.8	
Less than college	21.7	2.7	
College	5.6	.0	
Graduate school	0.4	.0	

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 2 Local political participation, sense of community, neighboring, and social capital rural–urban comparison ($n = 10,328$)

	Total (mean/SD)	Urban (mean/SD)	Rural (mean/SD)	t^f
Local political participation (%)	43.8	27.0	67.8	
Sense of community ^a	3.80/0.99	3.46/0.97	4.28/0.80	45.578**
Perceived neighboring ^b	3.02/1.12	2.69/1.06	3.49/1.03	38.635**
Social capital				
Membership ^c	9.34/3.71	10.54/4.21	7.63/1.77	−42.578**
Reciprocity ^d	3.53/5.29	5.22/5.88	1.06/2.83	−42.879**
Trust ^e	34.93/8.47	32.43/7.28	38.48/8.69	38.384**

^a Ranging from 1 to 5, the higher, the more sense of community

^b Ranging from 1 to 5, the higher, the more perceived neighboring

^c Ranging from 7 to 35, the higher, the more social group membership and more active within the groups

^d Ranging from 0 to 35, the higher, the stronger reciprocity gained from the social groups

^e Ranging from 0 to 65, the higher, the more trust

^f t scores for urban and rural group difference

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 3 Correlation table for the urban sample (above diagonal) and rural sample (below diagonal)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	–	.019	.019	.182**	−.007	.021	.140**	−.032*	−.027*	.050**	.047**	.044**
2. Age	.112**	–	−.250**	.008	.116**	.004	−.402**	.160**	.099**	−.033**	−.184**	−.151**
3. Marital status	.099**	−.063**	–	−.057**	.004	−.075**	.095**	−.103**	−.099**	−.038**	.070**	.091**
4. Family income	.177**	−.138**	−.094**	–	−.167**	−.071**	.271**	−.055**	−.026*	.075**	.158**	.135**
5. Social economic status	−.011	.063**	.082**	−.188**	–	−.028*	−.251**	.033*	−.011	−.144**	−.214**	−.201**
6. Household size	.008	.028	−.066**	−.033*	−.070**	–	−.098**	.025	.046**	−.018	−.025	−.020
7. Education	.226**	−.319**	.006	.249**	−.213**	−.037*	–	−.136**	−.071**	.140**	.311**	.275**
8. Sense of community	.041**	.085**	−.031*	.024	−.046**	−.006	−.007	–	.527**	.074**	−.059**	−.056**
9. Neighboring	.056**	−.013	−.062**	.060**	−.078**	−.032*	.074**	.387**	–	.114**	.112**	.089**
10. Trust	.108**	−.004	−.019	.021	−.098**	−.003	.117**	.054**	.096**	–	.208**	.194**
11. Reciprocity	.070**	−.140**	.077**	.083**	−.093**	.024	.251**	.006	.029	.115**	–	.877**
12. Membership	.052**	−.120**	.076**	.050**	−.073**	.017	.219**	.003	.012	.121**	.876**	–

Note: correlations for urban sample ($n = 6,075$) are presented above the diagonal, and correlations for rural sample ($n = 4,253$) are presented below the diagonal. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

that significantly predict local political participation, urban and rural residents significantly differ in their likelihood to vote for local committees. Controlling for other predictors, rural people are 5.74 times more likely to participate in community elections than are urban residents. Results from sub-group analysis indicate that SOC and neighboring remain significant within both rural and urban groups in predicting people’s local political participation (see Table 5). While all three dimensions of social capital do not relate to local political participation for people in rural areas, for urban residents, reciprocity significantly predicts community political participation.

Among all demographics that are included in the analysis, only household size does not predict Chinese people’s

local political participation. In China’s rural areas, men are more likely to participate than are women, but in cities the gender difference disappears. Meanwhile, older and married people are more likely than younger and unmarried people to vote. Education, family income, and self-perceived social economic status show interesting patterns of predicting local political participation (see Tables 5, 6). Urban residents with higher family income are more likely to vote, but income is not at all related to voting in rural areas. Residents with higher perceived social economic status are also more likely to vote (Table 6), although the contrasts are not all significant in the multivariate equation (Table 5). The pattern between voting behavior and education is curvilinear. In urban areas, the curve is tilde (\sim)

Table 4 Logistic regression model: local political participation as dependent variable ($n = 10,328$)

	<i>B</i>	SE	Wald	Exp(<i>B</i>)
Gender ^a	.103	.048	4.601*	1.108
Age	.023	.002	158.767**	1.023
Marital status ^b	−.334	.070	22.559**	.716
Family income	.078	.031	6.228*	1.081
Social economic status ^c			17.544**	
Upper	.369	.273	1.821	1.446
Upper middle	.377	.105	12.835**	1.458
Middle	.209	.063	10.895**	1.232
Lower middle	.130	.065	3.945*	1.138
Household size	−.007	.013	.252	.993
Education ^d			67.413**	
Elementary school	.411	.082	25.049**	1.509
Middle school	.581	.088	43.389**	1.789
High school	.546	.103	28.048**	1.726
Less than college	.183	.112	2.688	1.201
College	.297	.167	3.145	1.346
Graduate school	1.016	.497	4.175*	2.763
Sense of community	.211	.030	51.228**	1.235
Neighboring	.138	.025	30.750**	1.148
Social capital				
Trust	.004	.003	1.653	1.004
Reciprocity	.030	.010	9.486**	1.031
Membership	.016	.014	1.365	1.016
Rural residency ^e	1.748	.066	702.793**	5.740
Constant	−4.436	.241	339.134	.012

^a In contrast to female

^b In contrast to married

^c In contrast to lower social economic status

^d In contrast to no education

^e In contrast to urban residency

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

shaped with primary through high-school and graduate school educated citizens most likely to vote. Due to the lack of graduate-educated villagers in the sample, the curve in rural areas is an inverted-*U* shape with primary through high school educated villagers most likely to vote and those with some post-secondary or no education less likely to vote.

Discussion

Strengths and Limitations

Before summarizing our results and drawing conclusions, we will discuss some of the study's strengths and limitations. One limitation of this study is that, as required by

the available CGSS survey data, measures of participation, neighboring, and sense of community (SOC) were necessarily just proxies of the fuller, more psychometrically sound and sensitive scales measuring those constructs in many Western studies. For example, the dichotomous measure of voting for Urban Neighborhood Committee/Rural Villager Committee is an admittedly narrow operationalization of local political participation, although in the Chinese political context, it is about the only option other than running for local office. Further, our dependent variable is not intended to reflect broader forms of community participation (e.g., membership, meeting attendance, work, leadership) in a variety of community-based organizations (e.g., faith-based organizations, youth groups, public policy boards), which again are rare in China. Our measure of SOC is also necessarily limited to the one Likert-scaled survey item of knowing one's neighbors. In contrast, more commonly used SOC scales include many more items and multiple dimensions with widely tested reliability and validation (cf. Long and Perkins 2003; Peterson et al. 2008). Similarly, the single, Likert-scaled item measuring perceived neighboring (how much neighbors help each other or expect to be helped) is a fairly typical question, but a fuller neighboring scale of respondents' own behavior would have been preferable. Social capital was more fully measured using a multi-item, three-dimensional scale (which makes its insignificant relationship to political participation all the more noteworthy). However, it may still not be a close approximation of Western measures of social capital given contextual and cultural differences, language differences, and different items and subscales.

Also, CGSS data is self-reported, cross-sectional data, which prevents this study from drawing any causal inferences; for example, this study cannot examine whether a strong SOC is the *cause* of local political participation. It is likely that social cohesion and participation are mutually reinforcing, which we will expand on below. Furthermore, information derived from the CGSS may be less than perfectly representative as families and individuals who are hybrid across rural and urban lines are possibly excluded. Given that the rural–urban migration population is estimated to be 80–120 million in China (Cai 2000), there may be many families not represented in this study as they might not be officially documented in any Urban Neighborhood Committee or Rural Villager Committee. Despite this caution, a strength of the study is that the large, nationwide urban and rural sample is likely to be as representative a sample of residents as can be obtained in China at present. Access to such data has only become available in recent years and so surveys such as the CGSS provide one of the first reliable glimpses into the mentality and activities of Chinese citizens and communities.

Table 5 Regression models predicting local political participation: rural and urban comparison ($n = 10,328$)

	Urban			Rural		
	<i>B</i>	SE	Wald	<i>B</i>	SE	Wald
Gender ^a	−.033	.063	.279	.324	.075	18.558**
Age	.026	.002	122.916**	.017	.003	33.611**
Marital status ^b	−.227	.088	6.596*	−.520	.116	20.152**
Family income	.109	.040	7.433**	.001	.055	.000
Social economic status ^c			7.189			14.271**
Upper	.599	.458	1.710	.313	.330	.902
Upper middle	.311	.144	4.700*	.483	.158	9.352**
Middle	.161	.086	3.530	.258	.095	7.363**
Lower middle	.156	.085	3.400	.077	.102	.560
Household size	.010	.019	.265	−.018	.018	.910
Education ^d			34.467**			28.553**
Elementary school	.457	.155	8.699**	.332	.099	11.237**
Middle school	.672	.154	19.034**	.469	.115	16.782**
High school	.640	.161	15.746**	.494	.169	8.483**
Less than college	.326	.165	3.905*	−.271	.232	1.371
College	.439	.207	4.499*	−22.099	26,189.219	.000
Graduate school	1.195	.516	5.351*			
Sense of community	.301	.040	58.219**	.104	.046	5.030*
Neighboring	.070	.034	4.146*	.193	.036	28.093**
Social capital						
Trust	.004	.004	.851	.004	.004	.724
Reciprocity	.035	.011	10.772**	.041	.027	2.243
Membership	.018	.015	1.608	−.036	.040	.779
Constant	−4.991	.321	242.365**	−1.477	.451	10.733**

^a In contrast to female^b In contrast to married^c In contrast to lower social economic status^d In contrast to no education** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Local Political Participation, Neighboring and Sense of Community

Westerners may assume that Chinese are disengaged from political participation and that China's political structure and system impede such participation. However, the Urban Neighborhood Committee and Rural Villager Committee elections have attracted much notice in China and abroad in the past decade. The increased internal interest among urban and rural residents is due to these organizations' special position in the community, as well as their role in community service programs that affect people's daily life. In the context of China's substantial economic reforms but limited political reforms, Urban Neighborhood Committees and Rural Villager Committees have the decided advantages of being unusually autonomous and influencing local decisions and services people care about. As both kinds of

community organizations have gained more power and resources, and worked with fewer constraints, Chinese citizens want to be more involved in working together with "their" organizations on common concerns, such as elderly care, job training and employment, health and environmental safety, to name a few. They consequently want to have more of a voice in the community political process and decision-making body. While these sentiments are easily articulated, actually making the concerted effort, and potentially taking the risk, to work collectively and effectively with one's neighbors and the community organization will take some time to develop throughout China.

This study documents the state of SOC and perceived neighboring behavior in contemporary urban and rural China and the strong tie between those community cognitions and local political participation. This suggests that informal community bonds in China, which have led to one

Table 6 Demographics and local political participation: rural and urban comparison ($n = 10,328$)

Variable	Urban ($n = 6,075$)		Rural ($n = 4,253$)	
	Yes 27.0% ($n = 1,643$)	No 73.0% ($n = 4,432$)	Yes 67.8% ($n = 2,884$)	No 32.2% ($n = 1,369$)
Local political participation				
Age (mean/SD)	48.63 (SD = 14.67)	43.19 (SD = 15.48)	45.48 (SD = 13.03)	43.25 (SD = 15.24)
Gender (male %)	47.4	46.2	51.9	41.9
Marital status (married %)	86.1	78.4	92.2	86.5
Family income (mean/SD)	12,360 (SD = 14,948)	11,890 (SD = 15,314)	4,224 (SD = 5,954)	3,906 (SD = 5,559)
Household size (mean/SD)	3.49 (SD = 1.58)	3.46 (SD = 1.67)	4.45 (SD = 1.90)	4.53 (SD = 2.14)
Perceived social-economic status (%)				
Upper	40	60	74.1	25.9
Upper middle	32	68	75.7	24.3
Middle	27.8	72.2	70.1	29.9
Lower middle	27.5	72.5	65.3	34.7
Lower	23.9	76.1	62.4	37.6
Education (%)				
No education	23.8	76.2	59.9	40.1
Elementary school	29.3	70.7	69	31
Middle school	28.7	71.3	71	29
High school	27.9	72.1	73.1	26.9
Less than college	23.7	76.3	60.3	39.7
College	24.1	75.9	0	100
Graduate school	40.9	59.1	0	0

end of the spectrum of community participation—in service delivery and related activities—can also predict the more political or democratic end of participation—for decision-making. Indeed, there is a common concern that, whatever the state of SOC in general, it must be difficult for Chinese living in a time with tremendous transformation in the lives of individuals, families, and the society. With urbanization and associated labor migration, shifts toward a market economy and associated general social distrust, and massive relocation due to housing reconstruction and associated disrupted family and social ties, Chinese are assumed to be less connected to community, more disorganized at the community level, and thus unable or unprepared to participate in local political processes. This study indicates that this concern is not necessarily valid. Ordinary Chinese are willing to, and do, participate in community political processes, especially for those who have established connections with their neighbors and developed a SOC. We were only able to measure one dimension of SOC (i.e., community cognition), but that may be the most basic element of SOC as other dimensions (e.g., membership, shared emotional connection, influence, needs fulfillment: McMillian and Chavis 1986; or mutual concerns and community values: Long and Perkins 2003) depend on first knowing one's neighbors. From this point

of view, our results suggest that community cognition is an important building block in developing local political participation and democracy.

This preliminary conclusion generates both optimism and concern about community participation in China. Just as informal community bonds may lead to participation, participation in turn may also increase future SOC and neighboring. Current community practices in China focus on social service provision, program development, and capacity building of community organizations (Urban Neighborhood Committees and Rural Villager Committees). It is expected that Chinese people through these programs and activities are gradually developing SOC, and increasing neighboring behaviors. However, whether community residents are community “citizens” in more than a formal sense rests in large part on the quality and infrastructure of local political participation. From this point of view, we should not overestimate the role of SOC and neighboring behavior. True, meaningful, equal, and effective political participation at the local community level ultimately depends on China's political reforms, including the development of various non-governmental organizations, an effective system of democratic institutions at all levels of government, a more orderly, more supervised, more regularized use of political power at the

local level, and collaborations between the Communist Party, the government, and the citizens of China, which will likely take a long time.

Social Capital and Participation in Urban and Rural Communities

In this study, in contrast to what Western literature suggests, social capital failed to predict Chinese people's local political participation. Reciprocity within one's social network was the only significant social capital predictor, and only among urbanites. Social capital has very different characteristics in rural and urban China. Rural residents in China have relatively weak social capital, especially reciprocity or instrumentality of mutual expectations; rural social capital is more psychological than structural in that rural Chinese have very trusting interpersonal relationships and clearly, they have a higher voter participation rate. In contrast, urban Chinese have more social capital in general and are better connected with a wider and broader social network; they meanwhile have a low local political participation rate. We expected to find urban–rural differences in SOC, neighboring, social capital and participation and we found them. But due to China's recent economic transformation and social upheavals, and related human migrations, we were not able to identify a clear basis to predict whether rural or urban levels would be higher. It appears that the higher SOC, neighboring, and trust in rural areas may explain much of the higher levels of local political participation in rural communities, outweighing the higher levels of membership and reciprocity, as well as any greater exposure to Western democratic ideals, in urban China. The fact that urban areas are more densely populated simply makes them more anonymous and potentially alienating.

It might be too early to draw the conclusion that there is no general connection between social capital and local political participation in today's China. From a cultural perspective, in China, there might be little social capital based on Western definitions and measures emphasizing formal organizational participation. In post-1949 China, formal member organizations outside the Communist Party were few until the “emerging civil society” came in the late 70 s. Social capital in China therefore is more about social ties, as described by Bian (1997, 2001). This type of social capital is more informal than formal, individual self-interest oriented than collective common good oriented, and economic than social, psychological or political. The idea that social capital should predict local political participation is based on a presumption that people with sufficient social capital are prepared for collective action. However, political participation, even at the local community level, requires more than a desire for collective

action; it also demands an understanding of local political systems, an embrace of democracy, and collective efficacy in the community, in which contemporary Chinese history is surely deficient. Meanwhile, ordinary Chinese who experienced historical political turmoil would feel it difficult to transform their invisible social capital into visible local political participation. Social capital in China needs institutional infrastructure in order to transform into political participation, similar to the experience in India (Krishna 2002) and many other developing countries.

It appears that living in closer, denser urban communities neither helps residents develop a stronger SOC and neighboring behaviors, nor facilitates local political participation, despite urban residents' greater exposure to Western ideas. In fact, local political participation is also affected by several individual factors. Older, married people with primary to high school education are more likely to participate in general. It is noteworthy that since the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party has specifically recruited and mobilized poorer and less educated people for certain political movements. There is good reason to assume that such a pattern still prevails in the society, which may discourage those with higher education from participating. In rural villages, where rates of participation are highest, it is generally men with higher status who are more likely to vote (and run, for that matter) for Rural Villagers Committee, a scenario that has not changed for two decades since Burns documented political participation in rural China in 1988. This could be the residual of patriarchal familial tradition which has carried on for generations in China's rural villages. For women, as well as younger and single residents, until village power structures change, theories connecting SOC, neighboring, social capital and local political participation, a well-conceptualized community participation and development theory may remain just that—theoretical.

Conclusions

This study finds that local political participation, SOC, neighboring behavior and social capital are related somewhat differently in China than elsewhere. Unlike Western studies, the concept of social capital derived from theories about networking, bonding or bridging at the membership-based, organizational level failed to explain local political participation in China. Instead, interpersonal relations such as knowing your neighbors, mutual support, and the reciprocity of helping each other are associated with local political participation. This is because social capital is primarily conceptualized as a characteristic of individuals and their networks, which has not been embedded collectively at a community or societal level in China.

Successful local political participation is a collective effort through which both individual commitment and community support are realized. Beyond individual characteristics, while personal ties may be an important antecedent to political participation, community awareness and support for the possible achievement of collective good might ultimately be the determining force. The dynamic interaction between individual and community participation through local elections during China's recent social transformation has provided a viable opportunity for the development of such awareness. Over time, community cognition, neighboring, and social reciprocity can translate into assets for China's urban and rural residents, and empower them to become active community members, both politically and socially. The key ingredients of community identity, community power, and community organization will be enacted through increased participation. Only time will tell how long it will take people in China to transform their individual, personal relationship building processes into a collective capacity-building community development infrastructure whereby local democracy might flourish. It appears, however, the train has left the station.

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