

## Shared communities pave way for better democracy

*Shu Kexin (Shu), an advocator of self-government by homeowners in Chinese communities, believes that running shared communities is a kind of practice which can prepare China for wider democracy. But how do homeowners participate? What happens when an elite seizes power? Global Times (GT) reporter Li Yanjie talked with Shu on how homeowners' communities can train Chinese for practicing democracy.*

**GT: What worries you most among the activities organized by the homeowners' associations?**

Shu: That homeowners are reluctant to go to the polls. In one community, we once conducted a survey on management, and the result showed that over 50 percent of residents agreed to practice closed-off management, forbidding outsiders from moving freely in the community.

So the committee of homeowners, elected by the community's homeowners' association, went to the community's developer and the developer agreed to offer the money for closed-off management. The closed-off management plan was also drafted. The committee of homeowners then held a conference and asked all homeowners to vote for or against closed-off management and the plan. In three months less than 20 percent of homeowners voted.

Homeowners failing to vote happens everywhere. Hong Kong has adopted the Western solution, which is that if 30 percent of homeowners in a community vote, the rest will be counted as having agreed if they keep silent.

But in China, if people don't vote, they mean "object." And according to China's Real Right Law (the property law), only if over 50 percent of homeowners agree can a resolution be passed. The government wants to train Chinese to live a democratic life by requiring more homeowners to vote. However, this objectively makes it difficult for the homeowners' association to make decisions, but I still believe this process is very significant as it teaches people how democracy should be practiced.

A failed conference is successful, too, as it at least shows people that if they don't participate, the process fails. Democracy needs certain qualities among the public, not just elections.

**GT: How is the current situation of homeowners' associations in Beijing?**

Shu: I think around 30 percent of communities in Beijing have established homeowners' associations, but only a few are really in operation.

Elite homeowners usually aim to organize a committee of homeowners, instead of establishing a homeowners' association and holding conferences. In fact, the committee of homeowners is elected by the homeowners' association and is only coordinating votes and conferences among all homeowners.

But now most of the members of homeowner committees and those who want to be elected as members believe that once they are elected committee members, they can make decisions for all homeowners.

I've been promoting community self-government for over 10 years and haven't managed to change this way of thinking.

Civil servants at the grass-roots level also don't understand the central government's policies on grass-roots democracy. They always want to intervene in the work of the homeowners' associations.

**GT: What difficulties prevent homeowners from establishing an association?**

Shu: In today's urban communities, new social relations are based on the core of private property and co-ownership of shared property. Private property doesn't lead to democracy, only co-ownership of shared property can push people to choose democracy. Currently, most homeowners don't realize where their common interests lie.

Many homeowners believe that shared areas account for about 20 percent of a typical 100-square-meter apartment. The shared areas in this sense include lift shafts, staircases and other areas in the building one lives in and serve for all the people living in the building.

But actually, an apartment is just a cement cube and only accounts for 40 percent of the money spent on it, while land and facilities, such as lifts, parking space, green belts, and the underground garage, as the shared property of the community, account for 60 percent of the money spent on the apartment.

If no one cares about these, property management companies profit by managing them. But most homeowners haven't realized this.

**GT: If there is no one like you to organize homeowners, and they don't realize common interests, how can they establish an association for self-government?**

Shu: Under such a situation, it's nearly impossible to organize homeowners together to establish a homeowners' association. That's why I said villa owners can rarely establish homeowner organizations. They do have common property like roads and land, but these can't build strong relations to bind them together.

We have to adopt majority rule and protect the minority's interests at the same time.

For example, let's say one local government wants to use 100,000 yuan (\$14,643) to build a public bathroom in a community as there wasn't one. There are seven buildings in the community and no resident wants to have the bathroom near their building. If residents hold a meeting and most decide to build the bathroom besides one building, this is majority rule, but not democracy.

And homeowners can take the case to court and require the decision to be canceled. But if the local government decides to use part of the money to compensate residents living in the building beside the bathroom, letting residents choose, and then one building's residents say, "OK, put the bathroom here," this is real democracy.

Social management has always been veered between justice and efficiency. Many politicians use majority rule to achieve high efficiency. This is terrible. For social stability, justice should be given more attention.

**GT: How can democracy at the community level be upgraded to larger scale democracy?**

Shu: Community self-government advocates use two ways to promote homeowners' self-government.

One is to push legislators to issue laws and regulations protecting homeowners' rights and self-government. Laws and regulations make it much easier to promote community self-government. The other is to visit communities and train homeowners on how to realize democracy.

We take property management as one significant issue of homeowners' self-government. The homeowners' association is like a parliament, property management companies are administrative organs, and property management fees are like tax.

So property management is like a simulation of democracy. Homeowners need to realize that they have to decide on how to maintain and use shared property.

We can regard China as a big community and its "homeowners" need to learn to distribute and use and maintain shared property.

Western-style democracy doesn't fit the situation in China because people are in need of democratic qualities, but in 30-50 years time, Chinese will know better what democracy is.

Those homeowners performing well in homeowners' associations and homeowners' committees may later campaign to be members of neighborhood committees, and then campaign for the local people's congresses as an organization's recommended candidate or as independent candidates.