Social control in the urban danwei system

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China’s economy, 1955-1978

A centrally planned socialist economy

Production targets

Central Ministry

Province

City, Town, or Commune

Factory or Farm
A cellular social structure

- The lowest level economic unit was the work unit/danwei (單位) in the city, and the commune (人民公社) in the countryside.
- Not just a workplace; also a political and social unit.
- An institution for social control (Shaw, 1996).
“Discipline and punish” – how does social control work?

• Power does not work only through repression, punishments, and fear.

• Control is exercised through surveillance and the definition of normality/abnormality.

• The most effective social control is non-violent, subtle, and operates on the soul rather than the body.

• Discipline through caring: “This is for your own good”.
The urban work unit (單位)

- A factory, university, institute, hospital, government department.
- The “Iron Rice Bowl”: lifetime employment.
- Provided housing, education, health care, pensions, child care.
- Distributed ration coupons – tied to household registration.
Control of space

• A self-contained city-within-a-city. All needs provided in one place.
• Enclosed inside high walls.
• Space arranged to foster a collectivized social life.
  – 3 to 5 families shared a kitchen and toilet.
  – 2 to 3 apartment buildings shared laundry room, bike sheds, recreational open space.
  – All danwei residents share the school, nursery, clinic, sports grounds, meeting halls, bath houses, canteen.
Control of space: Surveillance through residence

- Residential committees oversaw housing compounds.
- “Reliable” people were recruited to be leaders. E.g. work unit leaders, CPC members, retired officials, elders, older housewives.
- Both surveillance and community care functions.
  - Dispute mediation, security & petty crime, public health campaigns, family planning.
  - Care for the needy, organizing entertainment, community services (e.g. lost property, newspaper delivery, lift maintenance, rubbish collection)
Control of virtual space:
Surveillance through records

- Everyone has a **secret dossier (file)** from the start of primary school until death, maintained by their danwei.
- Your dossier contains your biographical information, school and work performance & history, political attitudes, lifestyle and ethics, and any records of any negative behaviour.
- Information in your dossier affects your career chances.
- **No one is allowed to see their own dossier.**
Control over activities and time

• Calisthenics. Morning exercises led by radio broadcast.
• Eating together in the canteen. People were discouraged from cooking at home.
• Mandatory weekly political study meetings to study important government documents and news.
Control over activities and time

Biopower – control over bodies & population.

- **Travel & transfer:** Employees needed permission to travel or transfer their job to another danwei. Any overnight visitors had to be registered with the RC.

- **Dating:** Work unit leaders would often introduce singles of marriageable age to suitable partners. Premarital or extramarital affairs would be penalized.

- **Marriage and divorce:** People needed permission from their danwei to get married or divorced. This practice was ended in 2003.

- **Childbirth (after 1980):** Danweis were responsible for enforcing the one child policy. Couples had to apply for a birth quota permit before having a child.
Training and Education – control of the soul

- Each danwei included a Communist Party Branch, trade union, Women’s Federation, and Communist Youth League.
- Loudspeaker, radio, CCTV, posters. People were always surrounded by messages about correct behaviour.
- Weekly political meetings to learn about new policies or the “correct understanding” of current events.
“Model workers” are identified, praised, and awarded. The pressures of being a role model?

• Promotion
• Bonuses
• Transfer requests more likely to be approved
• Better housing assigned to your family
• Public praise and awards
• Recognition and fame (for being a model worker, best performance in a campaign, or exemplary behaviour in an emergency)
Training and Education – control of the soul

“Need-to-improve workers” are singled out for warnings and criticism.

• Public warning
• Criticism by your unit leader (private or public)
• Required to conduct a self-criticism
• Loss of bonuses, reduction in salary
• Loss of promotion opportunities
• Negative mark in your dossier
• Loss of reputation, social ostracism
Resistance

- Power is not an automatic privilege, but requires the active & constant use of tactics, strategies and schemes.
- “Power is everywhere”: everyone can exercise power in some way.
- Wherever there is power, there is also resistance.
Strategies of resistance

• **Silence**: Unit leader proposes an idea and asks for comments. No-one says anything.

• **Avoidance**: People go to political meetings, but do not pay attention.

• **Concealment**: To avoid intervention by the residential committee, people argue with their families quietly and avoid gossiping with neighbours.

• **Complaining**: Occasionally to bosses, but usually amongst peers.
Strategies of resistance

- **Ignoring incentives:** A woman refuses to marry the man her unit leader recommends, knowing it will have a negative impact on her career.

- **Innovation:** Individuals use creative strategies to get around the rules. A whole division may do this as a group.

- **Work slow-down:** Individuals may become unproductive in response to being denied a promotion, raise, transfer, etc. A whole division might slow down to sabotage a control tactic from higher up.
Strategies of resistance

• **Confrontation:** People may openly challenge lower level supervisors, especially if they have protection from higher up. This is a risky strategy damaging to both parties.

• **Exit:** Transfer to another danwei. This is difficult and costly. People must find another danwei to accept them, and get approval from their current danwei to leave.
The Danwei in the Reform Era (1978 onwards)

- Deng Xiaoping’s opening up policy unleashed the private sector and required state-owned enterprises to compete on the market.
- In the 1980s and 1990s, the control of danwei over urban residents’ personal lives gradually weakened.
- The reforms resulted in major changes in the urban structure and population movement.
The weakening of the danwei

• **End of the rationing system**: People could buy and sell goods on the open market and no longer needed ration booklets.

• **“Jumping into the ocean”**: People left the danwei to work in the private sector, or worked side jobs for extra income.

• **Benefit reductions**: It was uneconomical to provide so many welfare benefits to employees. SOEs began cutting back.
The weakening of the danwei

- **Housing privatization:** In 1993, danweis started selling housing units to residents. Subsidized housing allocation by danweis was ended in 1998. Separation of work and housing.

- **Layoffs:** After 1995, the government began selling or leasing smaller SOEs to the private sector. Old danweis were inefficient and employed too many people; many were laid off. Approx 60% of urban SOE workers, (20-30 million people) were fired between 1994 and 2005.
What replaced the danwei?

• **Community organizations** set up to govern private housing estates or *xiaojue* (小區). Most private housing is still built in the form of walled, self-contained compounds.

• Larger than old residential committees: 3-6 permanent employees, a hierarchical network of volunteers (often Party members)
Community organizations: More freedom, or subtler control?

- **Community care**: support for the elderly, sick, poor, unemployed.

- **Public health and sanitation**: including enforcing the one child policy. Monitoring of contraception and reporting of all births.

- **Educational and cultural programmes**: Dissemination of government policy. Cultural celebrations on national holidays.

- **Security**: cooperation with police, patrols, neighbourhood watch, monitoring residents.

- **Liaise with other organizations**: especially the Street Office and the local CPC branch.
Community organizations are concerned with “lifting moral and educational standards, particularly amongst those sections of the population that are seen as problematic, such as migrant laborers, petty criminals, delinquents, and the unemployed”

“The community has been increasingly mobilized as a player in the broader national campaigns to raise the overall “quality” (suzhi) of the population.” (Bray, 2008)
References


