

# The grid management system in contemporary China: Grass-roots governance in social surveillance and service provision

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## Abstract

How should we understand the formation of the grid management system (网格化管理) of grass-roots governance in China? In this article, I argue that the grid system is an extension of existing governance structures. Facing conflicting central messaging, local grid development encountered isomorphic pressures, leading grids to resemble higher-level administration and to inherit a top-down and stability-focused mode of operation. To support this argument, I analyse five aspects: shifts in elite-level discourse, the proliferation of the grid system, recruitment standards for grid members, grid members' tasks, and their assessment. Showcasing wide local variety, the grid system retains a managerial approach while collapsing service provision into security.

## Keywords

grass-roots governance, grid management system, surveillance, service provision, institutional isomorphism

In February 2020, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic in China, party members from the Beiliu City court in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region participated in disseminating knowledge about the virus in local communities. For some of them, this proved to be a surprising opportunity. As one judge put it,

Epidemic prevention work is more detailed and comprehensive than the census . . . even some criminal fugitives cannot escape it. With the cooperation of local grid members tasked with

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epidemic investigation, why should we not use this opportunity to search for people we were unable to find before?<sup>1</sup>

With the help of grid members (网格员; the primary contact for citizens) and the population data they had collected, addresses were completed, and missing phone numbers added. Thirty-one new and previously undelivered court summons could then be presented in person. The grid management system (网格化管理) was therefore chiefly responsible for furthering justice.

This brief story is remarkable for three reasons. First, it sheds light on the dual role of the grid system in China. As part of the broader administrative system, grid members both monitor the grass roots while at the same time providing services to them. In this case, the data collected for epidemic prevention work was a two-edged sword and could be used both for public health and as a means of surveillance. For grid members, this reveals a tension between serving the community and managing it as agents of the party-state. Second, it showcases a top-down administrative approach that negates the people's agency. Grid members collect information, spread knowledge, and liaise with other agents. This leaves little space for non-state actors. Third, more broadly, this story shows how the party-state attempts to re-invent grass-roots governance. Grids were introduced as the lowest level of urban governance below urban communities and defined as the 'basic supervision and management unit of digital city management'. They each cover a small area of 'around 10,000m<sup>2</sup>', with their size adjusted according to terrain, urban density, or management needs.<sup>2</sup> Originating from computing language, grids use mapping and geo-coding technology to gather information on the urban landscape, including events and urban elements such as public utilities.<sup>3</sup> This information is then locally centralized and shared with government agencies which dispatch teams to resolve problems. While grids were first piloted in 2004 to improve grass-roots management, their value for social control and service provision only became fully evident during the coronavirus pandemic when high levels of accurate tracking and information were required.

This article examines the grid management system. Notwithstanding its alleged novelty, I argue that it can primarily be understood as an extension of the existing bureaucratic system to the grass-roots level. Responding to conflicting signals from the Centre in Beijing, local authorities adopted a top-down management approach to their grids. This has important consequences. First, it blurs the barrier between 'stability maintenance' and 'service provision'. The grid system relies on a variety of techniques, such as information gathering, daily patrols, evaluations of people's satisfaction levels, as well as liaising with political-legal agencies such as the police, judiciary, procuratorate, and the wider administrative system. Here, the invasive management of grids by functional departments and grid members renders service provision indistinguishable from stability maintenance. The state becomes inseparable from the people. The second consequence of the management approach is the gradual suffocation of grass-roots autonomy where people are administered rather than given the space to resolve their own issues. Instead of being included in the governance of their own communities or the assessment of grid members, citizens are subject to rather than part of local governance.

Analysing the grid management system is then important for several reasons. First, it means to understand the future of grass-roots governance in China. As of 2020, Jiangsu,

with its population of over 80 million, reportedly had 120,000 grids and nearly 300,000 grid members.<sup>4</sup> The grid system therefore has become widespread and a new normal in grass-roots governance. Second, exploring the grid system can shed light on how the party-state governs the grass roots. With 1 grid comprising on average 670 people in Jiangsu, grids are the lowest level of governance and directly touch the people. They are used to ensure public security and provide services. Third, the grid system therefore is also an embodiment of state–society relations, wedged between the people and the party-state hierarchy. Exploring the grid system then provides insights regarding the potential for citizen self-governance and public participation. Fourth, on a broader level, analysing the development of grids can also explain how new institutions at the grass roots are formed.

Many scholars have focused on the potential of communities for surveillance and control. As Benjamin Read noted, throughout their history, residents' committees have always been a 'key component of the surveillance network'.<sup>5</sup> Thao Nguyen argued that community construction ensured that 'collective actions' did not 'pose a threat to social stability'.<sup>6</sup> Hence, rather than enabling the grass roots to become autonomous from the state, the state further embeds itself in the community. Likewise, Miu Chung Yan and Jian Guo Gao likened community construction to 'social engineering'.<sup>7</sup> Luigi Tomba argued that the development of responsible stakeholders and private agents in communities contains social conflicts.<sup>8</sup> Beibei Tang's comprehensive treatment of the grid system sees it as part of the broader stability maintenance apparatus, which is primed to resolve conflicts 'before they escalate to larger-scale social unrest'. Hence, the grid system primarily aims at achieving social stability at the grass roots. It does that, as Tang noted, by pooling resources and integrating various actors.<sup>9</sup> The grid system therefore combines horizontal and vertical linkages across departments and along the party-state hierarchy.

While social stability is an important angle, in practice it often cannot be separated from service provision. For example, Yousun Chung showed that grass-roots governance serves new community needs such as welfare provision and social services. However, at the same time, they are linked to political control.<sup>10</sup> This idea finds its equivalence in policing. Tracing policing strategies since the Mao era, Lena Zhong demonstrated that they always relied on notions of the 'mass line' where 'the police are the public and the public are the police'.<sup>11</sup> Police are expected to deliver services to the community which are not necessarily crime-related. Allan Jiao suggested that the police have a strong service orientation rooted in a 'deviance-equals-illness' philosophy that required them 'to intervene early' and adopt a 'comprehensive approach' with close relations to the 'government, factories, enterprises, schools, neighborhoods, and other institutions'.<sup>12</sup> At this point, it becomes increasingly hard to differentiate between social stability and service provision, and state–society binaries do not hold anymore.<sup>13</sup> As Tang demonstrated, the grid system takes this further by collapsing functional barriers between bureaus and integrating municipal administration, public security, and social service management into one comprehensive network.<sup>14</sup> Within this system, locally recruited grid members are critical since it is they who engage in the everyday administration of the grid. All of the agents involved thus have the dual role of providing essential services to citizens and social control, which often are indistinguishable from each other.

The Chinese-language scholarship on the grid system mirrors this division.<sup>15</sup> Apart from analysing it as an organizational innovation, scholars are torn between a seamless governance approach focusing on service provision and stability maintenance.<sup>16</sup> Grid formation therefore incorporates an extension of the community level further down to the grass roots. Actors at this level are wedged between their relation to the administrative apparatus that focuses on social stability and favours a more static and reactive approach and the citizens' need for services that require a more flexible and active method. While these seem to be opposites, practice blurs the difference between stability maintenance and service provision. As Michael Lipsky noted, 'what to some are the highest reaches of the welfare state are to others the furthest extension of social control'.<sup>17</sup> This leaves us with a top-down bureaucracy that, instead of enabling people to resolve their own problems, is suffocating. However, scholars do not see the grid system's development and this division as a consequence of central ambiguity. Hence, they have difficulties understanding the variation and top-down management focus that have come to characterize the system. Isomorphic pressures can best explain how the grid system has developed in this way. I consider them in the next section.

### **Isomorphic pressures and the grid management system**

According to Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, isomorphism 'is a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions'.<sup>18</sup> They differentiate between three types of isomorphism. First, under mimetic isomorphism, organizations imitate other organizations. This happens especially if organizational technologies are poorly understood, goals are ambiguous, or the environment is uncertain. Ambiguity results in the mimicking of existing bodies and in significant local variation. Similarly, faced with conflicting statements from the Centre, the grid management system adopts the bureaucracy's top-down management culture with priorities trickling down from higher levels. Furthermore, confusion leads to significant local variation in grid formation. Second, coercive isomorphism stems from political influence. Thus, a changing legal environment results in organizational changes. For example, rules regulating grid members' functions and assessment have a big impact on how grid members see their role and how the grid system is conceptualized. Vice versa, a changing landscape adds to uncertainty and local variation. Finally, normative isomorphism stems from professionalization. Here, education produces a pool of 'interchangeable individuals', which overrides variation. Likewise, the filtering of personnel through recruitment and promotion leads to greater convergence within the organization. In the grid system, the outlining of specific recruiting and assessment standards establishes a norm for how its members are to operate.

Institutional isomorphism therefore suggests that uncertainty about aims and practices, legal changes, as well as recruitment, can result in significant organizational changes. This demonstrates that an organization's development is often divorced from its supposed functions. It is deeply influenced by the wider field within which the organization develops. The development of the grid system is a result of these different isomorphic pressures.

In the following section, I analyse how the discourse from 2004 until May 2020 fostered an uncertain environment that significantly influenced the development of the grid system. I then evaluate this impact from four particular angles. First, the proliferation of various forms of grids that sprung up in the wake of uncertainty. The operation of these grids demonstrates how public participation is curtailed and how public security and service provision are merged. Second, recruitment standards expose how grids seek to employ people who are adept at administration, politically loyal, and local. Third, the responsibilities of grid members showcase the need for administrative approaches and the redefinition of service provision as the absence of public security threats. Fourth, the assessment of grid members further provides evidence for these claims. Here, I demonstrate the merging of public security with services and the focus on top-down management rather than mass participation. After this evaluation, I conclude. In the analysis I rely on leaders' speeches and central policy documents, online sources including news items and case studies, local regulations, a unique database of 88 grid member recruitment notices, and Chinese scholarly studies of the grid system.

### **Creating uncertainty in the grid management system**

Introduced as an experiment to integrate resources at the grass roots, the elite discourse on grids shows an uneven transition from public security and top-down management to endorsing service provision and public participation. This can be traced back to two pilot projects in Beijing's Dongcheng District and Zhejiang's Zhoushan City in 2004 and 2007, respectively. The hallmark of Beijing's new system was the vertical and horizontal integration of administration. Every 1 of the 589 grids in Dongcheng was assigned a grid manager, a grid support manager, a police officer, a supervisor, a grid party branch secretary, a judicial worker, and a firefighter grid member. This meant that every grid had a representative from functional departments as well as a vertical link to higher levels through an information platform that centralized reports and data. Dongcheng's working principle of 'three things that happen at regular intervals, three things that do not leave' (三定期, 三不出) was meant to extinguish conflicts at their source, firmly positioning it in the stability maintenance corner.<sup>19</sup> While Dongcheng focused on stability, Zhoushan concentrated on service provision. Hence, Zhoushan established grids with the family as a basic unit. A grid comprised 100 to 150 families, and it was allocated a 'service team', which horizontally integrated public resources and enabled Zhoushan to provide targeted services.<sup>20</sup> The two pilots established a binary of public security and service provision. However, in the absence of central endorsements, localities were unsure about which model to emulate.

Throughout the entire time, the grid system was understood as a hybrid system that enabled the party-state to both control and service the grass roots. However, it was Beijing's model that was endorsed by public security czar Zhou Yongkang in 2010. This tilted the system towards stability. In contrast, Xi Jinping in 2011 saw the grid system primarily based on services rather than security, pointing out that 'social management mainly means providing services and management'.<sup>21</sup> While affirming the grid system's potential for top-down grass-roots governance, Zhou and Xi highlighted different aspects. Balancing these factors, in July 2012, Zhou mentioned the necessity to 'promote

grid management' to 'understand social conditions and public opinion, collect and manage information, serve the community, and resolve conflicts and disputes'.<sup>22</sup> This further affirmed the grid system's administrative aspect while cementing the tension between stability maintenance and service provision.

Zhou's fall from power moved the focus from public security towards service provision and mass participation. Hence, the party's Third Plenum in 2013 saw the function of grids as being rooted in the idea of 'governing at the source' to 'timely reflect and coordinate the various interests of the people at all levels'. This opened up the possibility for popular input and linked the grid system to service provision. However, while services became more important, they were still nominally separate from the grid system. This redefinition was short-lived, and Zhou's legacy lived on. In 2015, the aim of establishing a 'public security prevention and control network' was formulated, with the aim of achieving 'full coverage' of the grid system in key districts by 2020.<sup>23</sup> This decisively prioritized public security and top-down management over service provision and mass participation. As a consequence, the grid system was in limbo, shifting between public security and management and a focus on social services and public participation.

In the years thereafter, the rhetoric again slowly drifted back towards service provision and mass participation. In 2017, the term 'grid service management' (网格化服务管理) was introduced. Here for the first time, service was rooted in the grid system and prioritized over top-down management. While the 2019 Fourth Plenum reverted to 'grid management and services' (网格化管理和服务), the focus on public security vanished entirely and participation from social organizations and groups as well as self-governance was explicitly encouraged. However, it was the May 2020 Government Work Report that brought back grid service management. Noting that grids had played an important role during the coronavirus pandemic, the report formally encouraged mass participation and advocated a strong centralization of local resources at the grid level.

Hence, the understanding of grids continuously shifted. While the initial local experiments were important, in the absence of central directions, localities were unsure about which model to pursue. It was only in 2019 that the Centre affirmed service provision and mass involvement. This was at odds with the system's top-down management origin in Beijing and the 2015 directive focusing on public security. Throughout these years, the changing perceptions at the top led to uncertainty at the grass-roots level. In turn, this resulted in a plethora of different organizational arrangements and local regulations. Facing ambiguity, grass-roots authorities imitated higher levels of bureaucracy in their quest to build grid systems. Ultimately this resulted in a top-down management focus that fused social stability with service provision and diminished mass involvement in local governance.

### *The proliferation of the grid management system*

Uncertainty had major consequences for grid formation: the localities had immense leeway in the organization and operation of grids. As a result, local departments merely expanded their original functions to the grass roots, leading to unclear relationships between functional and regular grids. In turn, this resulted in the construction of 'grid management centres' that integrate resources and centralize data collection.

In the absence of clear central guidance, local departments built their own grids or inserted themselves into existing ones. Hence, in some areas, agencies formed grids themselves. For example, in Shuangkou Town of Beichen District in Tianjin, a ‘family planning grid’ divided households into seven categories of families and assigned responsibility to a family planning cadre.<sup>24</sup> The system itself was data-driven and linked individuals to their living spaces, automatically summarizing information for reporting, review, and monitoring. This happens in real time so that village family planning specialists are able to intervene and provide ‘targeted services’. A more specialized type of grid is the ‘police grid’ that has mushroomed throughout China. Here, local and higher levels of police are vertically integrated. For example, in Jiangyin City in Jiangsu, the municipal police divided the city into 17 primary, 271 secondary, and 1558 tertiary grids. In addition, a horizontal linkage management network was formed that connected 117 departments, associations, and units. This redefined the role of the police, skewing towards work unrelated to crime and law enforcement. In these examples, government agencies responded to the lack of central instruction by adopting a top-down management approach and expanding their functions to the grass roots rather than innovating new strategies of governance.

The existence of functional grids leaves the grid member in an auxiliary role. In one conflict in Fuxing urban community of Yanjiang Subdistrict in Nanjing, an elderly resident of Runfu Garden Community, Mr Ji, reached out to his grid member because of problems with his son who suffered from mental illness and ‘might hurt residents of the community’.<sup>25</sup> Since the Ji family could barely afford the medical expenses for their son, they had to seek help from the community. The grid member verified the situation, liaised with community leaders, and sought out the help of political-legal grid members. Eventually they found a hospital willing to treat the son at a relatively low cost. Here, the explicit aim was that ‘small conflicts do not leave the grid, bigger issues do not leave the urban community’. In this case, the first point of contact was the local grid member, who then brought in more specialized grid members for assistance. The role of the grid member vis-a-vis functional grids is therefore one of integrating, liaising, and supporting.<sup>26</sup> While this shows the horizontal integration of the grid system which breaks down the borders between functional roles, it also suggests significant problems regarding coordination and the relationship between functional and regular grids.

The integration of resources and the centralization of data at the local level was a response to this. Grid management centres were formed to house data platforms. According to a Notice issued in February 2019, these platforms ‘coordinate party-building, social security, comprehensive management, emergency management, social assistance and other work within the grid to achieve “multi-network integration”’. Platforms should integrate ‘information resources of party building, comprehensive management, community governance, digital urban management and other systems’. Further, video surveillance at higher levels should be connected to ‘the grass-roots integrated command platform as much as possible to realize interconnection, information sharing, real-time monitoring and comprehensive monitoring assessment’. The ultimate aim was to ‘achieve inter-departmental and cross-level coordination of grass-roots management’.<sup>27</sup> After information is uploaded to a platform, it is then automatically shared amongst departments and with different levels of government, which then coordinate to resolve a given problem.

Grid management centres house command platforms, share data, assign tasks, coordinate the work of grid members, and monitor their responsibilities. While in theory this enables agencies to react in a more coordinated fashion, as Sun Baiying and Yu Yangming showed, it can cement fragmentation rather than resolve it. The emergence of management centres and functional grids multiplies institutional links and can lead to departmental turf wars. Combined with lacking regulations to govern these relationships, grids often depend on local leaders to endow them with power.<sup>28</sup> This then leads to problems once leaders are reassigned. Rather than integrating actors, the grid system therefore can complicate inter-agency conflicts. Grid formation is therefore akin to the disaggregation of the grass roots into classifiable units followed by their centralization, re-organization, and sharing along horizontal and vertical lines through a new agency.

The resulting top-down management approach dissolves distinctions between service provision and social control. The abovementioned Beichen District regards its solution to family planning as ‘seamless’ governance, which breaks down the functional differences between departments and the distinction between the governing and the governed. Here, data drive the provision of services, and the ubiquity of grid members helps to provide targeted services. Likewise, finding a hospital for treatment is far different from ordinary law enforcement. However, from another perspective, the addition of a new layer of administrative governance merely introduces a new type of integrated and highly potent surveillance. The logic is straightforward: the provision of services squashes points of contention before they become problems. However, this requires vast amounts of data and deeply invasive measures, where the target of ‘governing at the source’ is the individual or family unit. Intimately integrated with the grass roots, the grid system therefore renders the difference between service provision and stability maintenance increasingly obsolete.

As a management mechanism, the grid system resolves problems in a reactive and top-down fashion. Instead of encouraging citizens to resolve their own disputes, the state’s involvement is highly visible, invasive, and top-down. An effective grid system depends on extensive and thorough data collection. In grids, this process relies on manpower rather than state-of-the-art surveillance technologies. Grid members conduct patrols, site visits, gauge public sentiment, write reports, and then upload them into a database. It is they who form the foundation of the grass-roots governance system.

### *Recruiting grid members*

Grids are built on data and their classification. Information on households, organizations, businesses, and incidents is collected and stored in a centralized database housed with the grid management centre. Grid members are crucial in this regard. It is they who collect, classify, and upload data. The quality of the data and therefore the party-state’s response to emerging problems directly depends on the abilities and loyalty of grid members as well as their ability to relate to the local community. It is thus important to analyse recruitment standards for grid members. The subsequent analysis draws from 88 recruitment notices collected from recruiting websites such as yingjiesheng.com and zhaopin.com as well as WeChat from 2019 and 2020.



Political requirements are highly important for aspiring grid members, and these play a role in 57 notices. Indeed, of the 88 notices, 37 directly mention the Chinese Communist Party in tandem with protecting its ‘leadership’. To this, others add the requirement to protect the party’s ‘line’, ‘guiding principles’, or ‘policies’. Yet others even mention the need to protect ‘socialist institutions’. Forty-seven recruitment notices mention a political or ideological requirement. This takes different forms. Some look for people with a strong sense of political responsibility. Other advertisements require the applicant to have good ‘political and ideological quality’. Others stress the need for applicants to be ‘politically reliable’. Yet others include the need to have a high level of ‘political consciousness’. As for other sections of the application process, during the interview, some advertisements stress the necessity for applicants to exhibit the proper ‘ideological and political behaviour’. However, even after applicants pass the exam and interview, the process is not over. In Shiyan City of Hubei Province, a physical examination is followed by an assessment of the applicants’ ‘politics and ideology, moral qualities, abilities, and performance’.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, political loyalty is critical. For example, in many cases educational standards are relaxed for retired military personnel or party members. They are often also given extra points in the application process. Hence, the majority of positions advertised for grid members comes with specific political requirements. Even though there is no requirement to join the party or be a party member, these requirements nevertheless ensure that grid members are part of a political and administrative hierarchy.

The formal link to the party-state is important because grid members are bound to it through the contract system. Thus, they are neither public servants nor attached to a work unit. This is despite being assessed in the same way as a civil servant. For example, the physical abilities of grid members are assessed according to the standards used to evaluate public servants. In another case, a job ad lists as a requirement that aspiring grid members must ‘meet the criteria for political review of civil servants’. They are employees who signed a contract with their local grid management centre or a third party to carry out a set of clearly defined tasks. Michael Dutton argued some two decades ago that ‘good social order has become the “product” that police are contracted to supply’.<sup>30</sup> Police forces are now complemented by grid members feeding them with data, intelligence, and taking over some of their responsibilities. More importantly, the contract system renders grid members even more susceptible to administrative requirements.

This adherence to the hierarchy is balanced by recruiting locals to the position of grid members. Thus, of the 88 job advertisements, 45 have specific hukou requirements. While this indicates that locals are preferred, it is not surprising. Unlike people from the outside, locals have advantages in communicating, blending in, and socializing with citizens – which aid service provision and social control. Moreover, they likely have a better understanding of the problems and issues within their own city. This makes them a better fit for anticipating incidents within the grid. At the same time, this guarantees a form of mass participation, given that employees are locals and therefore more susceptible to demands and pressure coming from their own people.

In sum, the grid system envisions a dual role for grid members. They are both responsible to the state and the party, as well as being rooted in the locality. This has two implications. First, contractually bound to the hierarchical management system, they are agents of the party-state. Ezra Vogel noted long ago that bureaucrats ‘are not expected to be

politically neutral; even if they are not party members they are expected to be devoted to the Communist cause and to specific policies as well'.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, grid members are expected to implement local policies and participate in party activities such as anti-crime campaigns. At the same time, the casualized working relationship guarantees that they are compliant with the requirements regulating their position. This top-down approach therefore severely diminishes the role of the people in governance. Here, the masses are to be administered and guided rather than enabled to resolve their own problems. Second, the grid system nominally positions grid members as being *of* the people and *for* the people. The focus on recruiting locals therefore strikes a balance between allegiance to the hierarchy and locals and between social control and service provision. The recruitment process sets up and reinforces the functions that grid members have to fulfil as part of a top-down contractual bureaucracy. I discuss the tasks of grid members in the next section.

### *Tasks of grid members*

Grid members' role as administrators rather than service providers is reflected in their work tasks. Here, the tendency to see the local population as something to be 'managed' is built into the system. Rather than having, as Tomba argued, the 'need to service and police' at its core, service collapses into policing.<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, while grids break down barriers to bridge the gap between the party-state and the people, they also cement this division. This is because responsibilities trickle down from higher levels and are accumulated at the grid level, thereby increasing the workload of grid members, who have to adopt an administrative approach to achieve their tasks. In turn, this implies a smaller room for mass participation and a redefinition of service provision.

In a typical example, Jianyang City in Sichuan breaks down grid members' responsibilities into four parts. These are then sub-divided into specific categories and specific tasks (see Table 1).<sup>33</sup>

The sheer breadth of grid members' functions makes it impossible to satisfy all of them, resulting in an administrative approach to the grid system. In Jianyang, grid members have to fulfil 135 specific tasks, from discovering 'hidden dangers', information collection, dispute resolution, to propaganda and mobilization work. As Lipsky argued, when coping with impossible workloads, local bureaucrats often resort to a variety of mechanisms including tackling the easiest problems or disposing of more difficult ones.<sup>34</sup> The breadth of tasks therefore leads grid members to pursue the line of least resistance and it encourages a technical and managerial approach.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the sheer number of tasks pressures grid members to adopt top-down administrative tools for managing their jurisdiction. This in turn diminishes the opportunities for meaningful mass participation in local governance and increases the distance between the people and the party-state's bastion at the grass roots.

Most notable from Jianyang's grid members' task list is the absence of service provision as a specific duty. This is a prime example of the grid system reflecting the priorities of its superior agencies. Here, urban communities and functional departments devolve their stability maintenance and public security tasks to the grid level. Grid members in Jianyang therefore focus on the passive collection of information and the discovery of hidden dangers that could snowball into major problems, with their main task reduced to

**Table 1.** List of job responsibilities of full-time grid members in Jianyang City.

Category	Sub-categories	Number of tasks in each sub-category
Discovering hidden dangers and collecting reports	Public security	9
	Environmental protection	7
	Labour and social security	9
	Urban management	9
	Culture and publishing	8
	Production safety	6
	Food and drug safety	4
	Education supervision and management	11
	Building safety	4
	Fire safety	7
	Other public security	4
	Social conditions and public opinion	3
'Civilized city' construction	2	
Collecting basic information	Public security	12
	Environmental protection	3
	Labour and social security	3
	Organizations	3
	Food and drug safety	3
	Fire safety	1
Investigation and persuasion work in disputes	Writing investigation reports	8
	Persuasion	1
Propaganda and mass mobilization	Policies, laws, and regulations	2
	Public security	6
	Environmental protection	1
	Labour and social security	1
	Urban management	1
	Culture and publishing	1
	Production safety	1
	Food and drug safety	1
	Fire safety	3
Education supervision and management	1	

Source: 简阳市专职网格员职责清单(试行) (List of job responsibilities for full-time grid members in Jianyang City (trial implementation)), 31 October 2018, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/vIEjMOP4hgI\\_kKQoE2lI8A](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/vIEjMOP4hgI_kKQoE2lI8A), accessed 28 February 2021.

accurately depicting local developments. They also take part in mass mobilization and the propagation of party and state policies and in the settling of labour or housing disputes. This echoes the recruitment standards where grid members are part of both the community and the hierarchy. It also redefines service provision as the absence of hidden dangers and resolving of 'disputes' as well as the presence of a detailed picture of the people's needs, removing the border between service provision and public security.

However, as a consequence of central uncertainty and the lack of directives, grids are far from being an air-tight apparatus and there is enormous variation. Thus, grid management centres often receive faulty or incomplete data, are unable to process data, fail at analysing data, or cannot adequately share data with departments. Furthermore, the role of grid members remains unclear. For example, grid members do not have investigative powers. In Jiayang, their role in public security is ‘under the guidance of the police’. In the writing of reports and collection of information, they also merely ‘assist’ authorities. In Gaoming Township of Chengdu, grid members conduct public security work under ‘the party committee and the government’.<sup>36</sup> As He Ruiwen noted, there is no legislation defining their position, and there are no rules governing their relationship with other government agencies.<sup>37</sup> This leads to immense local discretion and variation when it comes to the powers, duties, and actual practice of grid members.

The functions of grid members further position the grid system as a top-down management mechanism. Grid members’ tasks trickle down from higher levels and multiply. This also exhibits a form of social management involving a broader understanding of public security. Leading to the adoption of administrative techniques to deal with the workload, this diminishes the space for mass participation in local governance. At the same time, given grid members’ ambiguous position within the grid and their broader community, information collection or the discovery of hidden dangers are redefined as services, further blurring the difference between public security and service provision. Grid members’ assessment standards lend further evidence to this conclusion.

### *Assessing grid members*

As Lipsky noted, evaluation influences behaviour in grass-roots organizations.<sup>38</sup> The top-down bureaucratic nature of the grid system also translates into specific assessment standards for grid members that are heavily skewed towards managing the population and social stability rather than mass participation and providing services (see Table 2). At the same time, uncertain signals from the Centre result in a lack of coherent assessment standards for grid members. This means that central requirements regarding a shift to service are mainly contingent on the local bureaucracy’s incentives to draft respective rules. Looking at what local governments value can therefore give us clues about the work of grid members and the function of grids.

The provision of services plays a minor role in the assessment of grid members. In Hanzhong, a prefecture-level city in Shaanxi, the 5 broad categories can be subdivided into 20 different items. Among them, only one item under ‘regular work’ is connected to the provision of services and accounts for five points. Touzha Town in Pingluo County in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region distinguishes between seven categories: basic information gathering and updating; recording and reporting people’s sentiments and opinions; resolving factors of instability; services; visiting residents; writing a people’s sentiment journal; and participating in training and meetings. While services are not defined, every time a grid member does not help or assist citizens in need of services, two points are deducted. If the services provided are not in time or inadequate, or if household inspection work is not carried out properly, one point is deducted. While the allocation of points is different, the masses are still considered an entity to be

**Table 2.** Grid member assessment standards in selected localities (allocated scores in brackets).

Shaanxi	Ningxia	Shanxi	Sichuan	Zhejiang	Sichuan
Hanzhong City <sup>1</sup>	Touzha Town <sup>2</sup>	Ziyan Township <sup>3</sup>	Qingxi Town <sup>4</sup>	Duqiao Town <sup>5</sup>	Shuangluo Township <sup>6</sup>
Overall quality (15)	Information gathering (15)	Patrol (10)	Being active (22)	Floating population management (20)	Patrol (15)
Regular work (50)	Recording people's sentiments (15)	Information and statistics (80)	Handling issues (15)	Fire, production safety (20)	Information and statistics (20)
Mass evaluation (15)	Resolving instability (15)	Mass evaluation (10)	General tasks (63)	Food safety (20)	Coordination and management (25)
Attendance (10)	Services (15)			Regular work (15)	Mass evaluation (40)
Extra items (10)	Visiting residents (20)			Focus people (4)	
	Sentiment journal (10)			Vulnerable people (3)	
	Training and meetings (10)			Focus places (13)	
				Propaganda work (5)	

**Sources:**

<sup>1</sup> 汉台区汉中路街道办事处关于印发网格员工作考核管理办法(试行)的通知 (Notice of the Hanzhong Road Subdistrict Office of Hantai District on issuing measures for the evaluation and administration of the work of grid members (trial implementation)), 汉中市汉台区人民政府 (People's Government of Hantai District of Hanzhong City), 18 January 2016, <http://www.htq.gov.cn/hzshhtqzf/zwgf/zcwj/qtwj/201503/b4e7b926450d92e2ca07745213e362e8.shtml>, accessed 28 February 2021.

<sup>2</sup> 关于印发《头闸镇2019年网格员考核管理实施办法实施方案》的通知 (Notice on issuing the '2019 implementation plan for the evaluation and administration of grid members in Touzha Town'), 26 July 2019, [http://www.pingluo.gov.cn/xxgk/zfxxgkml/wj/bmwi/201907/t20190726\\_1631498.html](http://www.pingluo.gov.cn/xxgk/zfxxgkml/wj/bmwi/201907/t20190726_1631498.html), accessed 28 February 2021.

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<sup>6</sup> 关于印发《双洛乡网格员网格工作绩效考核奖励实施办法》的通知 (Notice on issuing the 'Measures for the implementation of the evaluation and reward of grid members' performance in Shuangluo Township'), 24 May 2018, <http://www.xichong.gov.cn/show/2018/05/24/57682.html>, accessed 28 February 2021.

administered rather than served. Hence, even visits to residents are meant for gathering information on people's sentiment or targeting potentially disrupting segments of the population such as migrant workers or recently released prisoners. Rather than being a service, this reinforces grid members' stability maintenance role. In Duqiao Town of Zhejiang, service provision makes up 6 items out of a total of 46 – however, service provision is conceptualized as identifying hidden issues. Here, service is a front to discover potential problems that might lead to instability. In Ziyang Township (Shanxi), Qingxi Town (Sichuan), as well as Shuangluo Township (Sichuan), service provision is not part of the assessment. Mirroring grid members' functions in the earlier section, service provision is redefined as resolving issues that could become public security hazards. However, at the grass-roots level, this in practice results in blurring the border between public security and service provision.

Because service provision is negligible, the people also have little to no impact on how grid members are assessed. For example, in Hanzhong, 'mass evaluation' takes up only 15 per cent of the overall score, a mere 5 points above 'attendance'. Thus, including service provision, the maximum score that involves interaction with the people does not exceed 20 points. In Ziyang Township, mass assessment makes up 10 points, as does patrolling (10 points); with the most points being awarded to information gathering (80 points). In other places, the local people play no role in the assessment of grid members. For example, in Qingxi Town, amongst the items for assessment, there is no mention of mass evaluation. However, grid members can gain five extra points if a citizen praises their work. Likewise, in Duqiao Town, mass evaluation plays no role. Thus, while there is local variation, in these cases mass evaluation plays a small role in the assessment of grid members. However, there are also cases where the masses play a substantial role. Thus, in Shuangluo Township in Sichuan, mass awareness and satisfaction play an important part, amounting to 40 points. Likewise, in Liu An's survey of Q district, mass assessment and dealing with people's demands takes up 50 points, which leads to the conclusion that the district pays attention to 'responsiveness' and conducts work with an aim towards service.<sup>39</sup> In general, these cases seem to be outliers and, even then, assessment is driven by the need to administer. Thus, responding to people's demands is a measure of management. This reinforces the top-down management aspect of the grid system while not leaving any space for autonomous mass participation in governance.

In sum, the key task is to keep abreast of population developments within the grid, gather data, report incidents, and resolve conflicts rather than actively providing services or enabling the masses to participate in local governance. The space for the people to participate in the grid system and steer it through their own actions is therefore small and vanishing quickly.

## Conclusion

Formed below the existing urban community level, grids use mapping, data gathering, and information sharing to enhance local governance. However, rather than reinventing local governance, grids are an extension of the bureaucratic system to the grass roots and the result of a chaotic and uncoordinated local response to conflicting central directives. As a result, the grid management system emulates its environment and emphasizes

top-down management rather than mass participation, and social stability rather than service provision. Working under a contract, grid members gather the data necessary to categorize objects, organizations, incidents, and people. Information is centralized at the street level and shared horizontally with functional departments and vertically with higher levels of administration. The role of the grid member as an agent of the bureaucracy is manifested through recruitment standards, tasks, and assessment standards.

This analysis highlighted three additional points worthy of elaboration. First, while this article focused on formal construction, it neglected the people's reaction to it. However, if the literature is any guide, Read noted that grass-roots organizations have 'considerable appeal to many'.<sup>40</sup> Second, paradoxically, while the grid management system is designed to overcome fragmentation, it can lead to further strengthening of fragmentation. On the vertical level, the installation of a coordination agency increases the number of links, shifting governance towards the grass-roots level. Responsibility to deal with issues is therefore concentrated locally. On the horizontal level, the emergence of new actors multiplies the number of links between decision-makers and implementers. This is exacerbated by the absence of rules to regulate the roles of grid members and grid management centres vis-a-vis functional departments, which leads to problems of jurisdiction and disparities in the way grids are built and managed even within the same urban district. The introduction of the grid system and the restructuring of the grass roots thereby can lead to greater fragmentation overall.

The third point concerns the future of grass-roots governance. The managerial roots of the grid system have significant implications. While at the central level the discourse has been slowly changing towards an emphasis on the provision of services rather than population administration, this is clearly not reflected at the grass roots. Here, the relationship between the party-state and the people remains one of management rather than governance. Where governance is concerned with the maximization of public interest and cooperation between the state, civil society, government and non-government organizations, management understands the state as the only agency involved.<sup>41</sup> Thus, management implies a state-led reactive approach to arising social issues and service provision, while governance is preventive, integrative, and collaborative. Given the increasing involvement of the state and its agencies, service provision will remain the prerogative of the state, an outgrowth of the social stability apparatus, and it will not allow for autonomous space for the people. This article also casts doubt on Beijing's ability to alter the system's direction from management to governance. Here it is likely that the 2019 and 2020 reorientation of the grid system towards greater services and mass participation came too late – grids had already been institutionalized as top-down and security-focused mechanisms. Thus, while this does not preclude punctual changes, these adjustments are unlikely to have fundamental structural consequences for the grid system as a whole.

Hence, the management attitude of the bureaucracy coupled with the grid system's already significant level of institutionalization render the transformation of a reactive and bifurcated bureaucracy into an active and comprehensive system improbable. Even if discourse at the top changes, structural constraints make it unlikely that this translates into change within the grid system. This makes it doubtful whether the transformation of the grid system from managing to providing services – as heralded at the top – can actually be

successful. Perhaps the true test is the COVID-19 pandemic that highlighted the usefulness of the grid approach both as a tracing mechanism and coordination platform for service provision. Whether the ‘opportunity’ of the pandemic led to a reorientation or consolidation of the grid system remains an issue for future research to investigate.

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