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# **Working with the Homeless: The Case of a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) in Shanghai**

## **Abstract**

This paper addresses a two-pronged objective, namely to bring to the fore a much neglected social issue of homelessness, and to explore the dynamics of state-society relations in contemporary China, through a case study of an NPO working with the homeless in Shanghai. It shows that the largely invisible homelessness in Chinese cities was substantially due to exclusionary institutions, such as the combined household registration and ‘detention and deportation’ systems. Official policy has become much more supportive since 2003 when the latter was replaced with government-run shelters, but we argue that the NPO case demonstrates the potential for enhanced longer-term support and enabling active citizenship for homeless people. By analysing the ways in which the NPO offers services through collaboration and partnership with the public (and private) actors, we also argue that the transformations in post-reform China and the changes *within* the state and civil society have significantly blurred their boundaries, rendering state-society relations much more complex, dynamic, fluid, and mutually embedded.

**Keywords:** urban homelessness, rural-urban migration, social assistance, NGOs, state-society relationship, China

## Introduction

Chinese civil society, comprising social organisations, non-profit entities, charities, independent foundations, volunteer and community groups and so forth, has expanded dramatically since the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Most of this growth can be attributed to a sharp rise in the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) concerned with the flip side of rapid economic growth (Howell 2009; Morton 2007). There has been a similarly rapid increase of international NGOs (INGOs) operating in China. The China Development Brief (CDB) maintains a directory containing more than 200 INGOs across the country, showing that almost all are working in the field of social development (CDB n.d.). The rapid expansion of the NGO sector over the past 10-odd years has gone hand in hand with the Chinese state's increasing concerns about its capacity to provide urgently needed public and social services for vulnerable segments of the population. Hence the state has actively encouraged various civic actors to complement its role in service provision, particularly in areas where the state is sometimes unable to reach, such as HIV/AIDS, sexual health for adolescents and mobile children's education (Schwartz and Shieh 2009; Zhang and Lin 2002). With this development, we have witnessed notable change in Chinese society, marked by the articulation and representation of increasingly plural interests, and emerging partnerships between the public, private and third sectors in addressing the social and cultural needs of various social groups.

This paper documents the activities of one INGO/INPO, the Renewal Centre (*rixin zhongxin*, with *rixin* literally meaning 'refresh everyday'), which operates in China's largest city, Shanghai. The Centre has worked in partnership with public and private actors to address the needs of a particularly vulnerable social group, namely, the homeless. It draws on extensive fieldwork conducted between 2005-2011, including in-depth interviews with homeless

people and staff at the Centre, observations, participatory approaches, follow-up network research and documentary analysis. The paper addresses the following two-pronged aims: (1) to bring to the fore a much neglected social issue in Chinese cities, namely homelessness;<sup>2</sup> (2) to explore, through the analysis of the Renewal Centre case, the dynamics of state-society relations in post-reform China.

In what follows, we first provide the context by delineating the increasingly visible phenomenon of homelessness in Chinese cities, and analysing the dynamics of policy responses in recent decades. Against this backdrop, we present the case of the Renewal Centre by mapping out its activities and examining how it has dealt with homelessness both independently and in collaboration with other actors. The qualitative research methods employed in the study allow the perspectives and experiences of the homeless as the target of policy interventions, and more recently, service users, to be represented so as to bring out a sense of subject and agency as against the frequent negative stereotypical representation of the group within and outside China – criminalisation, passivity, pity and helplessness (Speak and Tipple 2006). We conclude by teasing out some key themes and arguments around the two sets of the dynamics that we are concerned with, namely those relating to homelessness, and those associated with changing state-society relations in contemporary China.

### **The Dynamics of Institutional Change and Policy Responses to Homelessness**

*Institutionalisation of a 'Detention and Deportation' (shourong qiansong) System: 1950s – early 2000s*

Homelessness has become increasingly visible in China's major cities during the post-reform era, particularly since the early 2000s (Images 1-3). During a 15-month period between August 2003, when government-funded shelters were formally introduced, and November 2004, 670,404 homeless people nationwide received assistance therein (Hong 2004: 231).

Since then, the officially recorded incidence of homelessness has grown steadily: about 1.3 million visits to shelters in 2006 (Gao and Yang 2008: 23) and 1.72 million in 2010 (Ministry of Civil Affairs [thereafter MCA] 2011). This increased visibility is associated not just with the greater population mobility accompanying the market reforms, particularly rural-urban migration, but also with an implicit official recognition of the urban homeless as a socially vulnerable group who are in need of help and support. This also denotes a greater official tolerance of the so-called ‘outsiders’ (*chengshi wailai renkou*) – mostly rural migrant workers – in Chinese cities, who, until very recently, quite likely would be sent back to their rural origins by local police if caught without having the officially required documents (Hong 2004; Kennett and Mizuuchi 2010; Shan 2010).

[Image 1 here]

Image 1. Metro station dwellers in central Beijing, September 2005.

[Image 2 here]

Image 2. A street sleeper in central Beijing, September 2005

[Image 3 here]

Image 3. A pavement dweller outside a shop in central Shanghai, August 2010

When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949 there were many people living homeless in cities and towns. Composed of disbanded soldiers from the defeated Nationalist army, those fleeing from natural disaster zones, the unemployed, substance users, prostitutes and others, this group’s presence was considered a threat. As a result most city authorities began implementing combined policies of ‘detaining, offering assistance, reforming and sending back home’ (*shourong, jiuji, gaizao, qiansong*) to deal with the homeless and

consolidate the new regime. In the decades that followed, in particular during the late 1950s (when agriculture was collectivised and rural people entered the city in large numbers to meet the labour demand for industrialisation) and early 1960s (when people fled from the devastating famine in the wake of the Great Leap Forward), the central government and urban authorities further tightened control over rural-urban population mobility. Examples of such efforts include the State Council's 1957 promulgation of the Directives on Prohibiting Rural People from Blindly Moving Away from the Countryside (*guanyu zhizhi nongcun renkou mangmu wailiu de zhishi*), and the decision by China's Ministry of Public Security on the Prohibition of Free Population Movement (*guanyu zhizhi renkou ziyou liudong de baogao*) in late 1961. The latter required that large and medium-sized cities must set up 'detention and deportation stations' to send back home rural people who came to the city without official permission (Hong 2004). This led to the institutionalisation of the combined household registration (*hukou*) and 'detention and deportation' systems, which together with other measures, such as food rationing, effectively halted most autonomous rural-urban population movement during the Mao era (Mallee 1995; Zhang 1999).

The onset of the post-Mao reforms in the late 1970s brought considerable relaxation of the *hukou* institution and resumption of large-scale rural-urban migration. However, the negative perception of rural-urban migration persisted, leading to the Chinese state reiteration of its earlier policies of restricting rural-urban population mobility. In 1982 it promulgated the Measures for the Detention and Deportation of Vagrants and Beggars in Cities (*chengshi liulang qitao renyuan shourong qiansong banfa*). There were many local elaborations of the central guidelines. For instance, as late as 1999 the Beijing Municipal Government issued its Regulations on the Administration of Detention and Deportation (*Beijingshi shourong qiansong guanli guiding*), which stated that vagrants, beggars, street sleepers, and those

without assured living sources must be detained and sent back home (Hong 2004; Shan 2010).

While the departure point of the ‘detention and deportation’ system included some humanitarian consideration of providing assistance to those in hardship, in the process of implementation and enforcement in subsequent years, this was replaced by tightening control over population mobility. With the sharp increase in rural-urban migration in the 1980s and 1990s, the targeted population was significantly expanded, going far beyond the ‘vagrants and beggars’, or the ‘three withouts’ (individuals who were ‘without a valid ID, a valid residence permit or a regular source of income’ -- *wu hefa zhengjian, wu hefa jusuo, wu zhengchang shenghuo laiyuan*). For instance, in Shanghai the total number of those detained and sent back to their rural origins was less than 10,000 in 1988, but by 1997 it reached more than 100,000; in Beijing in 1999, it was 149,359 (Hong 2004: 218); and Guangzhou’s figure was 117,044 in 2000 (Li 2004: 246). It was estimated that, of the more than one million people detained and sent back home nationwide each year by China’s urban authorities during the 1990s, more than 85 percent were, in effect, migrant workers (Du 2004: 93; Zhu 2002). The duration of detention frequently exceeded the 15-day (intra-provincial) and one-month (inter-provincial) periods specified in the official regulations (Li 2004: 245).

Detainees were often treated as if they were criminals, and surveillance and restrictions on private activities (such as drinking water, having meals and visiting the toilet) were imposed. They sometimes suffered from forced labour, humiliation and beatings (Zhu 2002), which, in extreme cases, led to the death of the detainee – a key factor contributing to the termination of the system in 2003, as acknowledged by the (then Vice) Minister of MCA, Mr. Li Liguo in 2005 (CCTV.com 2005; see also note 3). As Professor Hong Dayong (2004: 219) at People's University in Beijing pointed out, ‘in the process, the freedom, dignity and rights of detainees were infringed and at times their lives put at danger’.

Enforcement personnel were often monetary-driven, leading to the escalation of the ‘detention and deportation’ practice, which soon became a major revenue source for ‘detention and deportation’ stations. This then provided incentives for arbitrarily detaining and fining migrant workers in the city (Li 2010). Any non-locals who did not bring with them any of the three certificates, namely an ID card (*shenfen zheng*), a temporary residence permit (*zanzhu zheng*) and the permit issued by authorities at the rural origin for working away from home (*wugong zheng*), could be detained, and their families had to bring the required certificate(s) and pay fees to have the family member released. Detainees who could not afford the fees were required to ‘work for free’ as payment in kind. If their families could not present the required document(s), the detainee would be sent back to the rural origin and charged for transport. Their families back home were charged an extra ‘deportation fee’ (Zhu 2002). As Professor Li Qiang (2004: 245-48) at Tsinghua University in Beijing argued, the system deprived migrants of their basic rights legally, economically and socially. With effort thus focused, those in real need of help, especially the homeless, barely received any attention or support, but were instead frequently shunned by the police based on a perceived image of dirtiness and hence a potential source of infectious diseases (Hong 2004).

*Government-Run Shelters within the New Social Assistance (shehui jiuzhu) Framework:*

*Post-2003*

By the early 2000s the fundamental flaws of the ‘detention and deportation’ system became increasingly evident against a backdrop of ever-increasing population mobility of all kinds, particularly the never-abating rural-urban migration, as well as urban-urban movement. The year 2003 represented a turning point in the Chinese official approach to homelessness. In response to the strong societal reactions to the Sun Zhigang Incident<sup>3</sup> and to the lobbying of some Chinese legal experts who pointed out that ‘detention and deportation’ was inconsistent



with China's Constitution, the State Council promulgated the Measures for the Administration of Assistance for Vagrants and Beggars without Assured Living Sources in Cities (*chengshi shenghuo wuzhao de liulang qitao ren yuan jiuzhu guanli banfa*, hereafter 'the Measures') (State Council 2003). This signalled the end of the 1982 'Detention and Deportation Measures', and a policy shift towards humanitarian consideration of the factors which contribute to homelessness. It also marked the beginning of a new support scheme, which aims to incorporate homelessness into China's evolving social assistance framework under the auspices of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Chen 2006; Hong 2004; Kennett and Mizuuchi 2010). Swiftly most of the existing 832 urban 'detention and deportation stations' were converted into 'assistance administration stations' (*jiuzhu guanli zhan*), or shelters. Within a year the number of government-funded shelters reached 909 (Hong 2004: 229) and by the end of 2010 the number further increased to 1,593 (MCA 2011). The changes are not just in name but also in the target population, objectives, nature of work, administration and funding. The new shelters are required to help those in need, such as the homeless and street children, by providing basic services on a temporary basis, including food, shelter, facilities for personal hygiene, necessary medical care, and train tickets for returning home. They are now under the jurisdiction of the MAC and funded from central and local government budgets, and the Ministry of Public Security and local police are no longer involved in their operation and administration. The new regulations require that assistance offered to the homeless should be accepted on a voluntary basis as opposed to the previous coercive, fee-charging practices (Zhejiang Civil Affairs Bureau 2009; Hong 2004).

The systematic incorporation of the shelters into the emerging social assistance system happened as the new Hu-Wen leadership began dealing with the mounting development challenges that China faced at the start of the twenty-first century by placing increasing emphasis on equity and social justice and giving a higher priority to wider human

development goals, in particular improving social security and welfare systems. While this may signify an attempt at the transformation of the Chinese state – from controlling to public-service-oriented, the appropriate institutional arrangement necessary for its materialisation requires a long time to establish and consolidate. The newly converted official shelters therefore face a range of challenges. These include the transitory and limited nature of the services provided arising partly from the relatively marginalised status of the shelters in the state apparatus, which leads to a shortage of resources in the face of rising demand for services; and a continuing influence of the former objective of sending the ‘vagrants and beggars’ back home, albeit the means have been changed from coercive to voluntary.

It is also evident that the top-down approach employed during the ‘detention and deportation’ era has not been altered much, and therefore, the voices of those targeted by the new shelters have barely been heard. Moreover, the huge imbalance of social and political power between the state shelters and the target population tends to reinforce stereotypical socio-cultural images of those being assisted. In the official and popular media, homeless people are frequently portrayed as ‘professional beggars’ or organised gangs comprising ‘hooligans, thieves, (and) escaped criminals’ who pose a threat to social order and public security (cf. Liu and Li 2006: 13). Such negative representations have effectually helped criminalise the homeless, as well as deny them agency and citizenship rights, ignoring the complex and specific circumstances under which homelessness occurs, reinforcing discrimination, prejudice and social exclusion, and creating an atmosphere of humiliation, stigma and unequal treatment. All this tends to deter the homeless from the shelter services and render them even more powerless. In the following, we present the case of the Renewal Centre in an attempt to demonstrate an alternative yet complementary approach.

### **The Renewal Centre**

The Renewal Centre, established in 2008, is a drop-in resource centre and employment assistance initiative for the homeless (Image 4). As such, it is one of the pioneering NGOs/NPOs working in the field in Shanghai, and in China as a whole. So far as we are aware, in China's largest city with a population of 23 million and nearly 10,000 registered civic organisations by the end of 2010 (Shanghai Social Organisations 2011), there are only two other INGOs/INPOs working with the homeless. One is a social enterprise working with disabled homeless people, the other focuses on homeless people involved in substance use or who require special care in physical or mental health. The Centre has registered independently as a foreign-owned consultancy company in Shanghai at the suggestion of local authorities while continuing to explore options of registering as an NPO or as a social enterprise. It currently has two full-time staff – one American and one Chinese. The financial support for the Centre's activities and projects comes almost exclusively from local-based sources, including the Australian Chamber of Commerce of Shanghai, a non-denominational international church, private businesses and individuals.

[Image 4 here]

Image 4 The Renewal Centre's staff and volunteers (August 2010)

Working closely with the local state and community, the Renewal Centre receives informal acknowledgment and support for its activities from local police and the residents committee. Located in downtown Shanghai, the Centre has mainly disseminated awareness of its services by word of mouth among its target population – those engaged in marginal forms of employment, such as collecting recyclables in the street and other public places. Because of poverty, many of them fall into sleeping in streets or other public spaces. The services that the Centre provides include showers, laundry, identity card (ID) assistance and employment training programmes. It has about 50 registered volunteers, a good number of whom are

associated with universities and local churches, while others learn about the project through the media or Internet. Almost all are local Chinese with the majority being young professionals and approximately 60-70 per cent women.

The Renewal Centre provides services complementary to those of the government-run shelters though at a much smaller scale. There are 20 official shelters in Shanghai (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2010) which together received more than 1,000 visits in December 2010 (Jiefang Daily 2010).<sup>4</sup> In spring 2009, we conducted a 90-day survey within the Centre, and found that the Centre typically received 70-80 visitors weekly, and during the three-month period provided basic services for 150 homeless visitors. The majority of the visitors were young males of rural origin, who were born in the 1980s (53.3%), though there were a number of non-Shanghai urban ‘outsiders’ as well as local Shanghainese.

### **Identifying and Meeting the Needs of the Homeless**

While state shelters have better facilities, they, converted from the former ‘detention and deportation stations’, tend to inherit the physical and socio-political conditions of the bygone era with regard to geographical location, infrastructure, personnel, job expectations, and the way in which homelessness as a social issue is conceived and handled. They are often located in relatively remote places, causing low awareness among and access difficulties for service users. Visitors are often treated as passive recipients of the services, and the ultimate aim, set out in the 2003 Measures, is still to send the migrant homeless back to their original villages, regardless of whether it is a practical solution to their homelessness or in line with their wishes.

The Renewal Centre takes a different perspective and approach. It conducted serious research between 2005 and 2008 in preparation for its establishment to identify the target population and their needs, and accordingly define the services on offer. About 20 staff and volunteers

visited different parts of Shanghai to interview homeless people. The main question asked was: ‘Aside from money, what are the daily life needs that you are struggling to meet?’ Other questions included where they were from, where they slept, how they made their living and if they were aware of any services for them. Decisions were then made to locate the Centre near Shanghai Railway Station and the People's Square/Bund tourist centre to allow easy access by most homeless people, and to offer showers, laundry, clean drinking water, and sometimes food as basic services. While the initial services of the Centre took into account the physical needs of the homeless, these cannot be detached from other basic human needs and rights such as dignity and self-esteem. As Amartya Sen (1987) noted, one is entitled to ‘appear in public without shame’. The laundry service allows the homeless visitors to exchange their dirty clothes for clean ones, and their original clothes are returned to them, washed, during the next visit. The shower service offers them the chance to keep clean and develop personal hygienic habits in preparation for their (re)integration into mainstream society. Such services are also aimed at changing the stereotypical image of the homeless as being rough in appearance, dressed dirtily and mainly beggars. Through gradually developing self-esteem on the part of the homeless, it is hoped that over time public perceptions and attitudes towards them could be altered. It is often assumed that the homeless are lazy and shun work. However, our interviews find that many actually have come to Shanghai with dreams, like other citizens, of finding a good job with better income, and once these are shattered they support themselves through marginal livelihood activities. The experience of Guoli<sup>5</sup> illustrates the point:

Born in 1986 in a village in northern Shandong Province, Guoli lost both parents in his early teens. With limited education, he started working young as a manual labourer at a local factory. Tired of the monotonous, exhausting and poorly-paid job, and determined to see the wider world, young Guoli

boarded a train at the local station which happened to be bound for Shanghai. Without a single friend or relative, knowing little about the city and having limited money, Guoli had to sleep in the public space that he found on arrival, namely, the People's Square. When he woke up the second morning, all his property – bag, cash and ID – was gone. In the next few days Guoli wandered around the streets until he saw someone collecting recyclables. Guided by an elderly collector he soon learned to gather and sell such recyclables himself, working around the West Nanjing Road Metro Station, and sleeping under the Yan'an elevated highway in winter and 'almost anywhere in summer'. After Guoli became a frequent visitor to the Centre in summer 2009 and involved in its work placement programme, he told Centre staff that he intended eventually to be able to 'support himself properly, save some money and start a family,' as well as learn some skills required by the urban job market.

Guoli's experience shows that many people fall into homelessness under circumstances beyond their control, and with contributing factors lying in the wider social structure, such as poverty, lack of employment opportunities and inadequate public services at the rural origin, as well as discrimination and exclusion at the urban destination. However, despite such adverse conditions, they have desires and aspirations common to mainstream urban citizens and most of the homeless have tried every means to support themselves. Thus the popular representation of a criminal, or a lazy, aimless wanderer unwilling to work, and without dignity or agency, is largely unfounded.

### **Livelihood Skills and Employment Training**

While homelessness represents an acute and often prolonged form of marginality and social deprivation, current measures to deal with the issue through the state shelter scheme are often transitory in nature: Basic food and accommodation are provided for a maximum of 10 days, and the goal is to persuade and facilitate their return home with purchased train tickets (Hu 2007).<sup>6</sup> Local authorities have not yet developed the capacity to design and deliver longer-term, deeper and individually tailored services. The Renewal Centre, in this context, has filled a unique niche by providing more sustained support that offers some of the homeless the opportunity to acquire a marketable skill and enhance their prospects with the goal of achieving self-discovery, personal development, and re-establishing connections to mainstream society. For others who prefer returning home, end-to-end train-bus fares are provided. Most of the Centre's homeless visitors are poorly educated and lack the skills and experiences necessary to find a job and lead a settled life in the city. Skill and employment training therefore are identified as essential livelihood needs for the homeless. This prompted launch in summer 2009 of the Centre's employment assistance project, which also includes provision of accommodation for the participating trainees for up to six months. Under the scheme, internships with private businesses have been developed (Image 5).

[Image 5 here]

Image 5 An evening training class held at the Renewal Centre (August 2010).

The Renewal Centre's business partnerships, starting with an American-owned up-market popular restaurant and later expanding to include other restaurants, a business office complex, an art gallery and an IT firm, are mainly formed through social networks between the managements of the respective organisations. The preconditions for partnership are that the management of the business is personally interested in the work and vision of the Centre and willing to cooperate in designing an appropriate programme; management actively

fostering an atmosphere of employee development at all levels in the organisation; and skills for entry-level jobs can be acquired relatively quickly by reasonably intelligent and dexterous individuals who are willing to learn but have no prior experience. To be eligible for the internship, participants must be regular visitors (at least once a week over a period of 12 weeks) and undertake initial training at the Centre for basic life skills, such as handling own laundry, keeping residence tidy, improving self expression, managing resources (such as time and money), setting goals and increasing confidence. Afterwards, they are assessed for eligibility by the Centre's staff or volunteers.

The internship involves a probationary period of two months on signed contract at approximately half the local monthly minimum wage, paid by the business partner, while the Renewal Centre provides a matching wage in kind in the form of meals and lodging. The employer assigns a mentor, who provides feedback on work performance on a weekly basis, as well as advice on the 'hidden rules' of the workplace. The Centre offers training for mentors, as well as regular progress visits to the intern's workplace. The work performed by interns includes serving as a 'prep-chef' in a Western kitchen, and framing and mounting works of art at the gallery. The idea is to offer the homeless a threshold position ensuring that it involves training for a marketable skill, useful work experience and the opportunity to adjust socially to the workplace. It is found that working in the kitchen of a Western restaurant has paved the way for job-hunting success in other catering businesses. For example, several of the graduated interns started at the monthly minimum wage of 960 yuan (Shanghai standard in 2009) and now earn upwards of 2,000 yuan. After the two-month probationary period, the intern is reviewed by the employer, and may then either be hired as full-time staff or let go. For the 'let-goers', the Centre continues to provide appropriate support by offering other opportunities.



The Renewal Centre recognises that its visitors are different from other migrant workers in that they have experienced homelessness, often for extended periods of time, as a result of deprivation of a range of basic conditions and resources – financial, emotional, relational and social – with the absence of choice and an enabling environment that would have allowed the realisation of their human potential. The Centre has therefore designed the internship scheme as an essential component of a long-term multifaceted and individually tailored approach to support the homeless economically, socially and emotionally. The Centre, based on the initial pilot practice, has now incorporated mastering such generic skills as workplace communication and conflict resolution into its training schemes. It has reached agreement with its business partners that such skills are not to be achieved overnight, and that the interns need sustained support.

### **ID Card Acquisition and Recovery Assistance Services**

As the Centre started rolling out its employment assistance programme in mid-2009, staff and volunteers found that many of the eligible candidates did not have an ID card, which has been taken for granted by urban residents since its introduction in the mid-1980s (State Council 1985),<sup>7</sup> and required for getting an urban job. Some, as Guoli experienced, lost their ID card while living homeless and a few never had an ID card or *hukou* registration due to complex reasons, which even the individuals concerned were sometimes unclear about. Such reasons include being orphaned at a young age, and parents being unaware of the procedures required, and so forth. Absence or loss of an ID card deprives the individual of his/her citizenship, reinforcing his/her status of marginality and disconnection from society. This realisation prompted the Centre to initiate its ID card acquisition or recovery assistance services.

The Renewal Centre soon realised that the homeless face a wide range of challenges in obtaining new ID cards. To start with, they are unaware of the procedures, which vary by locale. While this problem can be resolved through the help of the Centre's staff and volunteers, the applicants encounter other difficulties, including the cost of formal photographs required for the ID card relative to the income of the homeless, the missing familial links at the rural origin required for assisting application, the prohibitive expenses involved in the application process for their rural families, and the lengthy application time of one to three months as against their precarious residential condition or 'addresslessness'. Further, in many cases requiring application in person only, a round-trip home is necessary. The process, in any event, requires cooperation from the applicant's family at home. However, many of the homeless either had traumatic childhood experiences or are experiencing strained familial relations. For them, the hope is to prove themselves by finding a good job in the city, and restore familial relationships down the road through remittances. Unemployed and homeless in Shanghai, they feel ashamed to make contact with their families in the village. They thus fall into a Catch 22 situation: the individual cannot obtain legitimate employment without an ID card but refuses to contact the family until he/she earns enough cash through employment.

The Renewal Centre's ID card acquisition and recovery assistance project is open to the homeless who are willing to obtain jobs through participating in its weekly training programme. Each application is researched by a volunteer. Typically the volunteer begins by locating and communicating with the relevant authorities at the applicant's rural origin, and identifies the procedures and charges for ID card (or sometimes *hukou*) application or replacement. The volunteer, with the applicant's consent, may also communicate with the individual's family at the origin. If remote application is possible, the Centre covers the fees for photographs and postage, and provides the Centre's address for delivery of the new ID

card. Arrangements are made for a return trip or family reconciliation if necessary. Below we present a typical case of a young man who has received such assistance:

Dragon, an ethnic minority Hui, was born in 1988 near Hezuo in Gansu Province, north-western China. He had no birth certificate, *hukou* or identification of any kind. His parents died when he was very young. With no education and very poor eyesight, Dragon left home for Lanzhou, the provincial capital. When he was 16 he made his way to Hainan, South China, and worked in a university canteen and several Lanzhou noodle restaurants in Guangdong province. He later travelled to Shanghai, but without education and skills, he could only survive through recycling and watching cars outside recreational places for tips.

Dragon learned of the Renewal Centre through his homeless friends. The Centre assisted him in getting glasses that have dramatically improved his eyesight. Proving himself reliable through participating in training at the Centre, the next step for him was employment, but without even a *hukou* the staff did not know where to start. At the time, Dragon did not even know the name of his home town – he only knew how to get there from Lanzhou. A Centre staff member together with a local volunteer accompanied Dragon to his home town. Cooperating with his grandparents and the officials from the local Civil Affairs Bureau and police station, Dragon had a *hukou* in his hand and the application for his ID card submitted within 24 hours. His grandfather believed that visiting the offices together with the Centre's staff gave him the courage to engage in every conversation with the officials. The organisational presence verified the

homeless status of Dragon in Shanghai, which served as the legal justification for the unusual *hukou* application. Perhaps most significantly, the visit by the Centre's staff was able to neutralise any family issues that may have otherwise interfered. With the obstacles of his *hukou* status and ID card out of the way, Dragon started his internship at one of the Centre's employment partners in June 2010, where he is still employed. In September that year Dragon moved out of the Centre-provided residence into his own apartment shared with two other of the Centre's regular visitors. He has lived there since, fully independent and doing well.

## **Conclusion**

The increasing visibility of homelessness in large cities has caused growing concerns among central and local state and civil society actors in China in recent years, yet there has been a dearth of academic research on the issue and the dynamics of policy responses. This paper investigates urban homelessness in China, and addresses a two-pronged objective, namely to bring to the fore the much neglected social problem and to explore the dynamics of state-society relationships in contemporary China. It does so through mapping the trajectory of the official approach to homelessness, and through the case study of an INPO, the Renewal Centre in Shanghai, which has carried out pioneering work in the field. We argue that while until recently China did not experience serious urban development problems as witnessed in many other developing countries, such as squatter housing and large-scale homelessness, these were concealed under specific institutional arrangements and exclusionary practices like the combined *hukou* and 'detention and deportation' systems. The relaxation of the former and abolition of the latter in recent years, while signalling improvement in recognising universal citizenship, pose new challenges for inclusive urban governance in

respect of human-centred sustainability and development. Through the case study, we demonstrate not only the importance of engaging with civic actors in providing services complementary to the government's for those in need, but also the potentially different outcomes with regard to meeting the physical, social and emotional needs, and ultimately (re)integrating the homeless into society, which may result from different understandings of and approaches to homelessness. This, as we see it, suggests a possibility of mutual learning between government and civic actors in spreading and upscaling good practice, and hence improving services and meeting the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. We argue for a rights-based approach to homelessness, longer-term policy design and implementation, more inclusionary practices and the creation of an enabling environment that widens choices for all Chinese citizens, including the homeless.

By analysing the ways in which the Renewal Centre offers services that are different, yet complementary to the new government approach of providing support for the homeless through state shelters within the wider institutional framework of social assistance, we intend also to contribute to the broader debate about the state-society relationship in China. As Professor Yang Nianqun (2011) at People's University in Beijing points out, much of the existing and still expanding 'civil society' literature in modern China studies employs a 'binary model' underpinned by explicit or implicit understandings of an antagonistic relationship between state and society. This model has informed a dominant 'confrontational' thesis in the analysis of state-'civil society' relations in post-reform China, whereby citizens' autonomous associations and other social organisations are frequently represented as oppositional to an 'authoritarian' and 'repressive' state (cf. Pesque-Cela, et al. 2009; Spires 2011). This construction applied to China as well as to many other non-Western development contexts, however is criticised by Hann (1996: 1) as 'predicated on fundamental ethnocentricity', by which he meant the assumed universality of the Western notion of

liberal-individualism underpinning the whole idea of ‘civil society’. A different critique specific to the Chinese context is provided by Gui, et al. (2009: 401), who term this dominant perspective as a ‘state-society approach’. Such an approach, they suggest, lends a dichotomised and rather static perspective, which cannot fully explain China’s new economic, political and social relations, structure and organisation evolving from its unprecedented transformations in the recent decades. They call for fresh theoretical imaginations and frameworks to fully account for the *internal* dynamics of the *state* and *society* in addition to the dynamic interactions *between* the two (Gui, et al. 2009).

Our research provides evidence showing that the Renewal Centre as a third sector actor has worked effectively in supporting the urban homeless by virtue of its close collaboration with local government, communities and ordinary citizens through, for example, consulting, obtaining recognition and building strong networks, as well as working in partnership with local business. The Centre has been able to generate substantial social capital and establish trust in delivering services to the homeless largely based on official accreditation and local citizens’ support. Our case study further supports the argument emerging from a body of research which employs alternative analytical frameworks (cf. Gui, et al. 2009; Ho and Edmonds 2008; Schwarts and Shieh 2009; Watson 2008) that, instead of conceptualising state and society as separate and opposing entities (e.g. state as coercive and society submissive), the transformations in contemporary China and the changes *within* the state and civil society have significantly blurred the boundaries, rendering state-society relations much more complex, dynamic, fluid, symbiotic and mutually embedded.

## Notes

1. China's civic organisations have witnessed rapid expansion after a period of slow development between the 1980s and the late 1990s: only two national-level charitable groups and foundations existed in the entire country in 1978, which increased to 16 in 1992 (Pei 1998). By the end of 2010 there were 440,168 formally registered social organisations nationwide, of which the number of foundations increased to 2,168 – almost 2.5 folds of the 2004 figure of 892, and more than 135 folds of the 1992 figure (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2011). In Shanghai alone, by the end of 2010 there were a total number of 9,892 registered civic organisations in contrast to the total number of 3,878 in 2001 – an increase of more than 2.5 folds in less than a decade. Among these, 3,559 were social organisations, 6,218 non-profit entities and 115 foundations (Shanghai Social Organisations 2011). The actual number of civic organisations in China is much higher than these official registration figures.

Professor Chen Guangjin (2010: 361) at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimates that the officially registered organisations represent only about one fourth of the actual total number.

2. With a few pioneering studies as exceptions (cf. Kennett and Mizuuchi 2010; Lam and Cheng 2008), homelessness in China has received scant academic attention in the English-speaking world. While publication in Chinese on the topic is increasing, this literature has thus far been characterised by brief descriptions or short reports (cf. Gao and Yang 2008; Shan 2010).

3. Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old university graduate from Hubei Province, went to work in Guangzhou in early 2003. On the evening of 17 March, Sun was detained by local police on his way to an Internet bar for failing to present his ID card, which he had left at home. While in the 'detention and deportation station', he was beaten to death (Du 2004: 88-90; Shan 2010).

4. The number of visits to shelters by the homeless tends to be higher in deep winter than in other seasons.
5. For confidentiality, pseudonyms are used.
6. As revealed in our interviews with the homeless, the transport service provided, however, was not end-to-end. Train tickets, in most cases, were not connected with bus tickets to reach the home village – expenses that the homeless themselves could not afford.
7. The resident ID card was piloted in China's large cities in 1984 through the promulgation of State Council's *Provisional Regulation on ID Card*. The *Regulation* was passed by the National People's Congress and swiftly implemented nationwide in 1985. In 2003 the National People's Congress passed the new *Resident Identity Card Law* to replace the 1985 *Regulation*.



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Image 1. Metro station dwellers in central Beijing, September 2005.



Image 2. A street sleeper in central Beijing, September 2005



Image 3. A pavement dweller outside a shop in central Shanghai, August 2010





Image 4 The Renewal Centre's staff and volunteers (August 2010)





Image 5 An evening training class held at the Renewal Centre (August 2010).