Article

Communities in Transitions: Reflection on the Impact of the Outbreak of COVID-19 on Urban China

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Abstract: "Community", as a basic category of urban socio-space, has undergone evolution within academic, policy, and day-to-day life contexts in China. Through years of transitions, a kind of dual community emerged in Chinese cities before the epidemic. It encompassed a "conceptual community" based on the concept of (social) co-governance and an "experiential community" based on citizens' daily living. The disparity between the two had given rise to a paradoxical situation in local community governance practices. The outbreak of COVID-19 brought fundamental changes to the transition process. Through the analysis of 21 recording reports during the outbreak period, we found that to contain the pandemic, the community epidemic prevention measures necessitated both these communities to overlap within a brief time frame. This led to reinforced community boundaries, the coexistence of multiple actors, the reconstruction of a sense of security-based belongingness, and the reformulation of the governance symbolic system that temporarily resolved the paradoxical governance practices. What happened under the preface of co-governance logic during the outbreak period was the coverage and shaping of the conceptual community over the experiential community, which may continue during the post-epidemic era. This study offers a relatively new approach and valuable insights into examining the long-lasting impact of the epidemic on urban social space and sustainable development in the post-epidemic era.

Keywords: COVID-19; community governance; Sheqv; China; Lefebvre

1. Introduction

In recent years, the community ("Sheqv", in Chinese Pinyin) has become the basic kind of living socio-space for Chinese urban residents [1,2], and it is also an essential aspect of urban social space studies in China [3]. As the state and transformation trend of urban social space serve as critical components of urban sustainable development [4,5], exploring the evolution of urban communities plays a pivotal role in comprehending the socio-spatial dimension of sustainability in urban China. The COVID-19 outbreak at the beginning of 2020 has presented immense challenges to grassroots social governance and management in China [6,7]. The epidemic reminded people to pay attention to the complexity of health issues and called for joint responses to health threats by various actors, such as government officials, researchers, and workers across sectors at different levels, guided by the One Health approach [8]. In the anti-epidemic response, communities have assumed a critical role, functioning as a stronghold for epidemic prevention and control [9,10]. The implementation of government-led community-based epidemic prevention measures has yielded positive results and has become a vital approach to addressing the pandemic nationwide [10]. Starting from December 2022, China has in fact fully liberalized its epidemic control [11], marking the "end" of the epidemic and the arrival of the post-epidemic era, which endures the profound and long-term impact of the epidemic.

The impacts of the epidemic on Chinese cities and urban governance have been explored by burgeoning literature, generating a series of achievements focused on the changes that

emerged in various dimensions of local governance [12–14]. As the core and basic area of anti-epidemic actions, local neighborhood/community governance attracts significant research attention. Existing studies have provided insights on certain key research areas such as community governance effectiveness [15], local government responsiveness and public acceptance [16], the construction of co-governance anti-epidemic local order [17], local transportation and mobility governance [18], and valuable guidance for improving policies and management practices [19]. This epidemic, working as a kind of breaching experiment [20], is a shared experience for all Chinese citizens, and it will bring not only short-term but also long-term impacts on Chinese urban communities in the future.

To understand the more invisible and long-term influences of COVID-19, it is necessary to put the epidemic into a diachronic and historical transition process of Chinese communities [3] and explore it as a stimulus variable within the changing process. This kind of study must be a retrospective and theoretical analysis that only can be conducted when we basically "go through" the epidemic. For now, as the epidemic in China is in a controllable (if not finished) state, it is imperative to review the experiences and practices of citizens and analyze the impact at a more theoretical level. As such, this article will address this crucial matter by focusing on the most dramatic stage of change—the outbreak period—and its influences on the transition process of Chinese communities. This article starts with a historical and analytical review of the evolution process of "communities" in urban China followed by a review of the contradictory local governance pattern before the outbreak. The methodology is then introduced in detail. Finally, we present the main findings of this study and a critical and open-ended discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our study.

2. "Dual Communities" in Urban China: A Historical and Analytical Review

2.1. The Evolution of the "Community" in Urban China

The term "community" and its meaning in China have undergone a significant process of evolution [21]. Historically, prominent scholars such as Tennis and Weber used "Gemeinschaft", although with different theoretical concerns, emphasizing the importance of social connection based on emotions, identity, affiliation, and geographical or spiritual ties [22,23]. Later, American Chicago School scholars, represented by Parker, translated this German concept into English as "community" and incorporated this concept into urban ecology studies, highlighting the geo-political dimension. Some Chinese sociologists, such as Fei Xiaotong and Wu Wenzao, influenced by functional anthropology and the Chicago School, later translated the term into Chinese as "community" (Sheqv) as a conceptual tool for distinguishing the local region from the general society [21]. Some other scholars, however, opted to translate the German term literally to form another expression of "community" under the name of "Gongtongti" [24], forming another kind of Chinese expression of "community". Since then, this German concept has had two interrelated but different translations in Chinese. The situation became increasingly complex as the concept of "community" (both "Sheqv" and "Gongtongti") become an increasingly frequently used term by the government, academia, and the public. The concept of "community" in China exists in three contexts, namely academic, policy, and daily life contexts, and changes within the combination of the three contexts. The transformational process can be classified into four stages.

The first stage was the translation and introduction period of the concept of "community" spanning from 1930 to 1949. During this phase, the term "community" was confined to the realm of academia in China. Some Chinese scholars continued the Chicago School and functionalist anthropology traditions, considering "community" as the gateway and focal point for comprehending Chinese society more holistically [21]. In their opinion, "society" is an abstract concept that describes collective life, and it is the general term for all complex social relationships and systems; "community" is a specific expression of the actual lives of people in a certain area, which has a material basis and can be observed [25] (pp. 423–433). This period saw a significant and lasting impact on the academic field's examination of communities. However, the concept of "community" had yet to become a topic of public discourse or have practical implications for citizens' daily lives.

The second stage is the community absence phase from 1949 to 1985, which encompassed China's Reform and Open era. Throughout this phase, the concept of "community" dwindled in China, becoming virtually non-existent as both the academic and political spheres ceased to prioritize it. The unit under the planned economy (Danwe, in Chinese Pinyin) served as the fundamental organizational and management structure of Chinese society at this time [1]. The implementation and eventual disintegration of this system represented a significant transition experienced by both the government and the public alike [3].

During the third stage spanning from 1986 to 2012, the community re-introduction and visualization phase witnessed the emergence of "community" in three contexts. Firstly, in the policy context, communities were recognized as a kind of grassroots unit [2]. The Ministry of Civil Affairs introduced the term "community service" in 1986 with the aim of promoting social force participation in supplementing social welfare [26]. Consequently, the term "community" became an integral part of China's policy discourse. In 1991, the then Minister of Civil Affairs, Cui Naifu, underscored the importance of prioritizing "community construction" in grassroots organization reconstruction. This approach was further emphasized in his remarks at the founding meeting of the China Social Workers Association [27]. As a result, "community service" expanded to "community construction" primarily focused on facilitating the development of grassroots civil service systems, organizational structures, and local infrastructure. This direction of community construction was the mainstay in the policy context of this stage [28]. The "Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Promoting the Construction of Urban Communities Nationwide" issued in 2000 offered an "official definition of community" as "the Sheqv (community) is a social life community comprising people residing in a specific geographical area", with "the scope of urban communities typically encompassing residents' committee jurisdictions that have undergone scale adjustment after the community system's reform" [29]. The government determined to utilize communities as an innovative social management tool following the dismantling of the unit system based on the planned economy.

In the policy context, there was a focus on the regional/geographical aspect of the concept, while in the academic realm, emphasis was placed more on the social and emotional dimensions. Some classic Western scholars such as Tennis and Weber underscored the way industrialization and modernization alter social relations in different ways [22,23], while contemporary scholars such as Giddens stressed the reduction in significance associated with residential areas as a form of social connection [30]. These all affected Chinese scholars' understanding of community. There was also a concerted effort by some Chinese scholars to draw on the diverse perspectives of new urban sociology and resistance research to examine the development of communities and the formation of "community members" [21,24]. This approach highlighted the reshaping of civil society based on residential areas and the critical importance of communities [31,32]. Overall, scholars in this period basically adopted a state–society dichotomy approach in discussing whether to preserve, liberate, or abolish communities, revealing top-down management logic and power dynamics.

In this stage, however, despite the growing recognition of the significance of "community" in policy and academic circles, Chinese citizens did not yet witness a parallel influence of this concept in their daily lives [1]. Contemporary urbanites, for the most part, witnessed a resurgence of the street dwelling management model and an increase in commercial housing residential areas [33]. Consequently, most residents lacked a significant sense of community identity and had weaker connections with their neighbors [34]. These developments led to a decline in local social interactions and limited levels of community participation, resulting in decreased inclination towards grassroots "community construction" endeavors.

The fourth stage, spanning from 2013 until the outbreak of COVID-19, marked the community governance phase. During this period, both academic and policy contexts had increasingly recognized and coalesced around the concept of community [35], culminating in the political agenda's prioritization of community co-governance [36]. The government hoped to encourage more relevant actors to participate in dealing with community affairs.

This shift was attributable to the government's absorption of governance research, which had transformed the perspective of social management into a logic of public issue response with active participation from multiple stakeholders [37]. Additionally, researchers studying Chinese communities began to perceive a sense of dislocation when attempting to apply conceptual tools based on the state–society binary framework to Chinese reality. Consequently, they endeavored to introduce more diverse analytical perspectives into this field [38]. Notably, the political field had also played a vital role in shaping academic discourse.

In the daily lives of Chinese residents, gated commercial residential communities became a dominant residential mode in urban areas. With the assistance of property management companies, citizens pay for community services, and their understanding and acceptance of community governance had grown. However, most urban residents primarily viewed communities as places of residence, with social interaction and participation taking a back seat [39]. In theory, local government, grassroots organizations (led by the government), property companies, and relevant economic committees were key governance stakeholders that interact with residents. Nevertheless, for many urban communities, the property company was the primary or even sole visible actor involved in community affairs.

2.2. "Dual Communities" in Urban China before the Epidemic

As a result of the above evolution process, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, Chinese cities showcased two distinct types of communities (Table 1). The first type, aptly referred to as the "conceptual community", emerged as a platform for local management and comprised politicians and academic elites who formulated planning ideas, academic concepts, and policy documents. The second community, known as the "experiential community", was shaped by the daily life experiences and perceptions of ordinary residents. It is important to note that these communities are not physically separated and exist concurrently in urban China, thus creating a duality of communities within this nation.

Table 1. The evolution of "community" in China and the formation of dual communities.

Stage	Core Issue	Policy Context	Academic Context	Daily Life Context
1930–1949	Translation and introduction of the concept of "community"	—	Introducing the concept of "community" to academia (methodology and ontology)	—
1949–(1978)–1986	Community absence	(The establishment and disintegration of the Danwei system within the planned economy regime.)	—	(The establishment and disintegration of the Danwei system within the planned economy regime.)
1986–(1991)–2012	Community re-introduction and visualization	From "community services" to "community construction". (Social management approach.)	(1) Community extinction vs. community liberation. (2) Empirical and theoretical research on "community construction". (State–society approach.)	Street dwelling system, urban renewal, and community construction (low participation).
2013–2020 (COVID-19)	Community governance	Community co-governance (The multi-actor/stakeholder governance approach.)	Community co-governance (The multi-actor/ stakeholder governance approach.)	Commercial residential community life experiences.
		The "conceptual community" based on the concept of (social) co-governance.		The "experiential community" based on citizens' daily life.

The term "conceptual community" is utilized to describe the tangible embodiment of abstract concepts and ideas that are adopted by urban managers and researchers and carry social engineering significance. It serves as a conceptual representation of social plans and management logic and shares certain features of the ideal type in the Weberian sense.

However, it is not a purely abstract concept; it exists as a material and structural entity in the practical reality of urban social space. This can be observed in policy texts and the implementing procedures of government agencies, urban development and redevelopment schemes, official and academic discourse, dissemination and replication in various media, and daily actions and interactions of stakeholders involved in local management.

Likewise, the term "experiential community" refers to the local social space that emerges from the daily life experiences and sentiments of community residents, in which they live and experience the community. It can be conceptualized as a spatial representation of perception, in contrast to the spatial reality of concepts that constitute the conceptual community. Although different individuals experience different feelings, affiliations, evaluations, participation intentions, and behaviors in the same community, there are certain general characteristics that they share with respect to the constructed space, residents' behavior and interaction, public issues, and daily life patterns in this locality. The experiential community is primarily a collective "feeling" shaped by the daily lives of residents that provides a backdrop affecting their daily practice.

In this sense, Lefebvre's perspective on spatial production offers valuable insights into understanding the relationship between two communities. According to Lefebvre, "space" in a capitalist society has three forms [40] (p. 33): "representation of space", which is an abstract and conceptual space constructed by the economic and power elite groups in society; "representational space", which refers to the perception and imagination of space formed by ordinary residents based on their daily life experiences; and "perceived space", which is the spatial practice carried out by different subjects through daily life in this differentiated dual space. The representation of space and the representational space are not coordinated, and their differences are one of the important sources of urban conflict and the driving force of social change. Powerful actors/managers often produce abstract spaces related to commodity exchange and political control through spatial practice and invade the space of life [41] (p. 746). Lefebvre's theory is aimed at post-capitalist society, and the discussions are not entirely applicable to current Chinese society. But the contradiction between abstract space and living space is an insightful approach for us to analyze the current community governance in urban China. The conceptual community is based on the concept of co-governance adopted by governors, and the experiential community is based on residents' daily life experiences. The former emphasizes order, stability, and public participation, while the latter has experienced a continuous decline in the sense of belonging and participation in residential areas, highlighting the contradictory nature of these two communities.

2.3. The Practice of Contradictory Governance in "Dual Communities"

The current state of community governance practices in China is shaped by the tensions between the conceptual community and the experiential community. In accordance with Lefebvre's analysis of the dialectic relationship between cognitive space and experiential space, these differing communities offer distinct action logics for actors. The development trajectory and logic of the conceptual community call for the establishment of grassroots organizational systems and social lifestyles based on the social and emotional dimensions of communities (Gongtongti) [36]. This is reflected in various policy documents, such as "The Report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China", which advocated citizens implementing self-management, self-service, self-education, and self-supervision in urban and rural community governance. Similarly, "Decisions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform" promoted citizens' self-management, self-service, self-education, and self-supervision in urban and rural community governance, grassroots public affairs, and public welfare. Furthermore, "The Report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China" stated that community governance systems must be strengthened, giving social organizations a more significant role. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council clearly defined the objective of community governance as the

creation of harmonious, orderly, green, civilized, innovative, and inclusive urban and rural communities that are residents' happy homes. The Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee has proposed the development of a social governance community where everyone is responsible, has a responsibility, and enjoys benefits.

To achieve the above goals, the encouragement of social participation, social responsibility, and social organizations' capabilities at the grassroots level is necessary [38]. Therefore, an increased emphasis on social connections and social activities within residential areas is shown in local governmental plans and actions to create a strong sense of belonging among residents [17]. In recent years, the government has been guiding residents towards community public affairs by involving them in various grassroots organizations, including party and league organizations, social work organizations, neighborhood committees, and industry committees, under its guidance [31].

Contrary to the direction envisioned by the government, however, the daily experiences and practices of residents in urban China are becoming increasingly isolated and unfamiliar in the experiential community [1]. This is leading to a decline in the importance of residential areas as a means of social connection and, consequently, the disappearance of social life based on such areas [33]. Furthermore, in a residential area that is predominantly commercial housing estates, residents' sense of social relevance, belonging, and participation in public activities is low [36]. Existing studies have discovered that the basic level of Chinese residents' willingness to participate in community collective activities was low and decreasing [42]. Moreover, for those residents who had a willingness to participate, there was still a significant gap between actual participation and willingness to participate [43]. Even in cities where community construction was relatively well carried out, such as Shanghai, the situation remained the same [44]. As a result, for individuals living in urban commercial housing residential areas, the intersection of their daily life and the "community" (Sheqv) they live in is diminishing. The community has become an unfamiliar place for most citizens, with minimal visibility of community actors such as industry committees, neighborhood committees, and party and league organizations in the daily lives of residents [39].

So, a paradoxical phenomenon emerges. The government and the academia aim to create a "community" (Gongtongti) based on residential areas while residents tend to be isolated and unfamiliar with each other in their daily lives in communities (Sheqv). Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, China's grassroots community governance operated under the context of the separation of the conceptual community and the experiential community. However, with the outbreak of the epidemic in early 2020, there has been a coercive overlap of dual communities, temporarily eliminating the paradox of governance and creating a unique pattern of social–spatial practice, which is the research concern of our study.

3. Materials and Methods

This article utilizes empirical materials that were analyzed from 42 observation reports compiled by undergraduates at a Chinese university during the outbreak period from early January to late March 2020. All students gave their consent for the use of the reports for research purposes. Each report contained over 5000 words and chronicled the recorder's experience during the pandemic in their living communities in various cities. The recording content includes the measures taken by the government to combat the virus, changes in lifestyle, personal experiences and emotions, and other relevant changes. We meticulously screened all 42 reports to select key reports for depth analysis. Identifying key considerations based on the research concern is useful for considering the range of sampling [45]. We identify three considerations for case report selection: (1) the recorder lived in an urban community during the outbreak of COVID-19, and the community was affected by the epidemic; (2) there were certain changes that occurred in his/her (and his/her neighbors') daily spatial experience and actions during the outbreak; and (3) certain new local management measures emerged in the community observed. Communities from different contexts were included as much as possible, and 21 reports were selected for the depth analysis (Table 2). As we employed non-probability sampling in this study, it

surely possesses limitations in terms of the generalizability of the findings. However, it is noteworthy that the affected Chinese cities share similar dynamics and constraints owing to China's centralized system of governance [46]. Therefore, the findings of this research are valuable for understanding the changes brought about by the outbreak of COVID-19 in the evolution of local living space in urban China.

Table 2. Characteristics of the recorders of 21 analyzed reports *.

Recorder No.	Gender	Location during the Outbreak of COVID-19	Community Type
1	Female	Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region (West)	Gated community
2	Male	Zunyi, Guizhou Province (West)	Gated community
3	Female	Tianjin (East)	Gated community
4	Female	Chuxiong, Yunnan Province (West)	Gated community
5	Male	Langfang, Hebei Province (East)	Gated community
6	Female	Zhuzhou, Hunan Province (Central)	Gated community
7	Female	Chengdu, Sichuan Province (West)	Old non-gated community
8	Male	Rizhao, Shandong Province (East)	Gated community
9	Female	Tianjin (East)	Gated community
10	Male	Weifang, Shandong Province (East)	Gated community
11	Female	Qiqihar, Heilongjiang Province (Northeast)	Gated community
12	Male	Wuzhong, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (West)	Gated community
13	Male	Anshan, Liaoning Province (Northeast)	Gated community
14	Female	Huainan City, Anhui Province (Central)	Gated community
15	Female	Tianjin (East)	Gated apartment building
16	Male	Tianjin (East)	Old non-gated community
17	Male	Kunming, Yunnan Province (West)	Gated community
18	Female	Beijing (East)	Gated community
19	Male	Tianjin (East)	Gated community
20	Female	Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province (Central)	Single residential building
21	Male	Zhoukou, Henan Province (Central)	Village

* Notes: (1) A "gated community" refers to a residential area with a clear geographical scope (including gates, fences, and security guards); most gated communities were commercial housing estates built after the commodity housing reform in China in 1998. An "old non-gated community" refers to a residential area built by the government, in which the units existed before the commodity housing reform; most old non-gated communities are old and lack maintenance. (2) All of the recorders were undergraduates, aged between 19 and 21 years. (3) Recorder 21's place of residence was situated in a rural setting that was geographically adjacent to, albeit on the outskirts of, an urban locality grappling with a comparatively grave epidemic. The precautionary measures adopted locally were similar to those implemented in the nearby urban zone, and thus we selected this case.

These 21 reports were recorded by 10 male and 11 female recorders, with 9 from the eastern region, 4 from the central region, 6 from the western region, and 2 from the northeastern region, based on the "Classification Criteria for East, West, Central, and Northeast Regions" instructed by the National Bureau of Statistics. Moreover, 17 of these individuals lived in gated commercial residential communities. Our research question pertained to the emergence and transition of changes caused by the pandemic, and we analyzed and interpreted the texts accordingly. The analysis process comprised two rounds of text analysis. The first round was about basic information about recorded communities, such as location information, timeline, and involved actors and their categories. The second round focused on observed changes recorded in the documents, especially the actions of different involved actors and the interactions between them. All reports were in Chinese, and the quotations in this article were translated by the authors. Additionally, we supplemented our analysis and discussion by collecting representative policy documents and public media reports (from traditional sources and We-Media).

4. The Outbreak of COVID-19 and Its Impact on "Dual Communities"

4.1. Strengthening of Community Boundaries

During community-based anti-epidemic efforts, there were slight variations in practices across different cities; however, a fundamental starting point was to establish boundaries around specified residential areas and enforce closed management therein [10]. Given that

gated commercial residential areas represented the prevailing residential mode in contemporary cities, the common governmental response involved utilizing residential areas as a core management unit while simultaneously strengthening existing closure measures. One integral measure was to clearly identify "insiders" and "outsiders" of a given community and proceeded to categorize them accordingly. The community members were granted unencumbered entrance and exit privileges, while non-residents were required to register or even completely denied entry. To achieve this boundary reinforcement and identity differentiation, a series of government-led measures were commonly utilized, such as having a sole entrance and exit gate, increasing security personnel, enacting unified registration of permanent residents, and releasing access cards. As an example, in Recorder 1's community:

> "*(Following January 29th), only one gate of the community was authorized for access, with public security bureau officers posted at the gate. There were also strict inspections of residents returning from other locations, and they were required to undergo a 14-day isolation period at home with signage reading 'Isolated at home, please do not approach' affixed to their doors. Long-term residents were required to present a work certificate if leaving for work or a 'pass' if leaving for shopping, up to once per day per person*".

To effectively implement necessary epidemic prevention measures, clear boundaries were redefined, additional guards were posted, and closed residential areas were established for certain old residential areas that did not have defined borders prior to the outbreak. This was exemplified through the experience of Recorder 16, who resided in an unfenced apartment complex built in 1998. Previously, the entrance was unrestrained, with the entrance access system having been damaged for many years. However, with the escalation of the epidemic, the closure measures for the entire community systematically improved. Initial prevention and control measures were executed on 22 January including the installation of a new remote-control railing at the entrance, though it was not initially operational. During this period, motor vehicles entering the community were disinfected using watering cans, but non-residents were not forbidden from entry. The community property employed additional staffing and gradually increased preventive measures until access was restricted to non-residents without permits, and strict temperature checks were implemented at the entrance beginning on 17 February.

Moreover, beyond the mere demarcation of physical borders, social divisions based on identity were reinforced through processes of identification, registration, and assessment of non-local individuals. Many neighborhoods instituted comprehensive household inspection and registration initiatives to monitor the influx of external or migrant populations, owing to the epidemic outbreak, as verified through the expression of Recorder 4:

> "*(Such measures) included inspection of individuals on a per-household basis by local hospital personnel or community representatives, and the completion of surveys soliciting basic information such as the number of household inhabitants, incidents of physical discomfort, and the presence of non-local residents*".

4.2. The Co-Presence of Multiple Governance Entities/Actors

The severity and specificity of the epidemic led to the emergence and active involvement of various actors related to community governance [15,17]. This was reflected in the accounts of the recorders, who noted the presence of community staff visiting households, temporary security guards at entrances and exits, and property management personnel and community staff taking turns working. Additionally, online groups with multiple representatives were established by most communities during the epidemic. As a result, the actors involved in community governance during the anti-epidemic action were more diverse and conspicuous than usual, including members of neighborhood committees, property workers, members of the grassroots branch of the Communist Party of China (CPC), community volunteer groups, policemen, and medical personnel (Recorders 5, 7, 13, and 14). This increased visibility of these actors made many residents aware of their existence and role in the region they live in. Multiple governance actors—promised by

the concept community—effectively emerged in the daily experience of ordinary residents during the epidemic, thereby highlighting the importance of cooperation and collaboration.

Amidst the backdrop of "distancing" during the anti-epidemic efforts, the actors engaged in community governance became more diversified and visible than usual. This included members of neighborhood committees, property workers, members of the grass-roots branch of the CPC, community volunteer groups, policemen, and medical personnel, all of whom have made simultaneous appearances in the community. The outbreak resulted in the concept of community, with multiple actors and subjects, being effectively demonstrated in the daily experiences of ordinary residents, thereby making them aware of the existence and role of other relevant actors in their region. However, this combination was not based on power balance and information interaction, but on the coverage and transformation of the experiential community by the conceptual community. It then has led to dislocation and incoordination on the local scale. Many citizens, during the epidemic, have encountered mismatches between the communities based on governance concepts and those based on daily life experiences, resulting in problems that were not previously acknowledged. For example, Recorder 16's experience is as follows:

> "The university requested students to engage in voluntary activities led by local CPC organizations. However, during that (out-break) period, the local party organization in my community did not make the registration available through the government's designated volunteer registration app, until they had hired enough temporary staff in March. Many of my acquaintances shared similar encounters during that time. It is evident that community organizations didn't fulfill their designated roles satisfactorily".

This kind of experience served as a clear illustration of the disparate nature between communities that were founded on the principles of governance and those that were centered around daily life experiences. The changes encountered by a considerable number of citizens were indisputably indicative of the unanticipated intersection between the two aforementioned communities regarding their day-to-day practices.

4.3. The Reconstruction of the Community Affiliation and the Symbolic Management System

In contemporary Chinese urban communities, one of the paramount needs of the residents is to have a secure and high-quality residential environment. As shown in recent studies [9,15], the boundary changes in residential communities during the pandemic have led to significant impacts on residents' perception of their living spaces. This, in turn, has accelerated the process of restoring a sense of belonging and identity based on the sense of security within the community. It is apparent that Chinese urban residents are experiencing a transitional phase in which the social significance of residential areas is gradually diminishing. The outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated a return to residential areas as other functional zones in the city were suspended [14], leading to a heightened sense of insecurity and uncertainty outside the home. Consequently, a security classification based on the living location is being developed, where most urban residents perceive their home (usually a gated apartment) as the safest and most secure place, followed by the gated community. These community-based anti-pandemic measures serve as an important avenue for promoting a heightened sense of security amongst the residents.

The implementation of anti-epidemic measures resulted in the establishment of a social boundary and a sense of affiliation based on residential location. While the enforcement of certain measures, such as access control, might cause inconvenience to residents, they generally exhibited a cooperative attitude in understanding the necessity of such measures. Residents also consciously safeguard their community, as detailed in Recorder 6's account:

> "During the period of the outbreak, a friend of mine paid a visit to her grandmother who resided alone in a gated community. Upon her arrival, the grandmother expressed her desire to host three families for dinner. Despite concerns regarding safety and the potential spread of the virus, my friend and her father were hesitant to directly refuse the invitation. Instead, they approached the community staff and shared that a gathering

of more than a dozen individuals was being planned. Surprisingly, the staff did not take action to prevent the gathering and even went so far as to commend their meal arrangement. Consequently, a group of 'outsiders' entered the community even without undergoing temperature checks".

However, this type of belonging consciousness also created a one-dimensional understanding of the community that did not accurately reflect the experienced community. Such was illustrated in Recorder 14's observation when an outsider, who was the son of an elderly resident within a gated community, faced conflict with the guard who prohibited his entry to visit his mother. Thus, the restriction of communal boundaries presented issues regarding the conceptualization of community vis-à-vis the experienced community. The conceptual community, similar to the representations of space, is initially formed and expanded through symbolic expressions [41]. Amid the epidemic, the symbolic urban management system, which employed text, sound, and images, served as a crucial tool for the invasion of the conceptual community into daily life. This has been evidenced repeatedly in a series of reports, such as:

"On a regular basis, a vehicle equipped with a loudspeaker was stationed on the street to disseminate information regarding pandemic prevention to residents. Community staff had diligently undertaken investigations of residents and disseminated brochures to raise anti-epidemic awareness. In addition, city management staff utilized loudspeakers to promote slogans such as 'wearing a mask, paying attention to protection . . . ' on a daily basis. Online WeChat accounts for local officials were also established to share simple daily anti-epidemic slogans". (Recorder 7)

"Notifications and updates concerning the epidemic were disseminated through various channels including electronic display screens in every community, hanging banners, loudspeakers, WeChat notices, and other local media outlets within the city". (Recorder 11)

Simultaneously, the advancement of electronic information technology has augmented the visibility of information not only in public domains but also in private ones, both online and offline. For illustration, commercial advertisements showcased on television switched to epidemic prevention ads automatically (Recorder 16), and WeChat messages were received automatically (Recorder 11), with daily ultra-high-decibel loudspeaker advertising clearly audible even indoors (Recorder 19). These diverse promotional technical methods collectively constitute a symbolic community governance system in the context of the outbreak. This system encompassed technical and specialized organization of activities, ensuring the conceptual community and its re-creation at a local level [40]. In fact, before the outbreak, symbolic systems such as these were already present and functional in most urban communities, but their importance was amplified significantly during the outbreak, particularly within local residential areas. As a result, their visibility and perceptibility in the daily life experience of residents increased notably.

5. Discussion

The inception of the "community" notion in China since the 1930s [15,18] has undergone various stages of development in diverse settings, resulting in the emergence of two discernible types of communities in urban regions prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. The first is the conceptual community developed by the government and academia based on the approach of social co-governance. The second is the experiential community formed by the daily lives of ordinary urban residents. This division is similar to the dialectical relationship proposed by Lefebvre between "representation of space" and "representational space" [40,47]. Prior to the epidemic, the coexistence of these two types of communities was mutually contradictory, leading to paradoxical governance practices by multiple actors. On the one hand, actors in the conceptual community, such as the government, aimed to foster grassroots organizational structures and social lifestyles that are relevant, self-organizing, and highly socially interactive. On the other hand, residents in the experiential

community increasingly experienced atomization, unfamiliarity, and isolation in their daily practices, experiences, and expectations.

The inception of the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 resulted in substantial ramifications for the urban communities of China. One of the most notable changes that took place was the implementation of nationwide, unified, community-based anti-pandemic measures that quickly brought together dual communities. These government-led actions established residential areas as a central social bond through a series of systematic and institutionalized measures, based on the need to reconstruct community identity in light of the epidemic's threat. As a result, previously isolated residents and service providers were brought into interaction with one another. However, the overlap of dual communities was not a symmetrical and equal interaction but instead primarily involved the (re)shaping of the experiential community by the conceptual community. Achieving this process involved establishing a symbolic system that would affect residents' daily lives, which also reflected a spatialization of social order. The COVID-19 outbreak presented a unique state akin to a wartime scenario. To combat this extraordinary threat, a community-based anti-pandemic action model was implemented. As a result, the dual communities overlapped in terms of a kind of top-down shaping process. However, the corresponding reflexive process was largely absent. Although there was some information exchange between different entities, it predominantly followed a top-down management approach. Numerous actors followed the same action logic, which was primarily based on one-direction information infusion rather than information feedback and multiple interactions.

The benefits and effects of the overlapping of dual communities in responding to sudden public events such as COVID-19 were evident [9,15]. However, it is imperative to consider that this shared experience may have long-term implications for urban management in China in the post-pandemic era. During the outbreak, the conceptual community invaded and altered the experiential community to some extent, resulting in the (re)construction of a new grassroots management unit and symbolic system. It is predictable that the two communities will combine into a single cohesive unit in the post-epidemic era if we consider the outbreak experience as a kind of practical and managemental "test". It is important to note that the changes that occurred during the outbreak period exhibited more of an overlap rather than a combination. This was due to the absence of a bottom-up institutional information flow and feedback, equal interaction among the various actors, and active participation and involvement environment promised by the conceptual community. It remains to be seen whether this overlap was a temporary interlude within a specific context or a hidden stimulus variable that will have long-term effects on China's urban community. Further follow-up and comparative empirical research are necessary to determine this. However, it is essential for community managers who wish to apply lessons from the outbreak period to daily community management to prioritize creating an environment that promotes equal and interactive integration between dual communities.

Contemporary health issues often present as intricate, cross-border, and multi-dimensional challenges, affecting various species [8]. Therefore, achieving sustainable development goals calls for a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach that works at the local, regional, national, and global levels [48], which is guided by the One Health approach. The findings of this study revealed the complexity and socio-political dimension of the influences of the epidemic on a category of the shared environment—local community—in urban China. The integration of shared health risks as a societal element and the acknowledgment of the social dimension as a critical component of health concerns serve as a vital reminder for sustainable development research in this publication. The finding of this research places a critical emphasis on sustainable development research by highlighting the significance of shared health risks within society. Furthermore, it highlights the crucial role that the social dimension plays in health-related matters.

6. Conclusions

In the field of urban sustainable development studies, the evolution/transformation of urban social space and its influence on multi-dimensional urban sustainability is attracting increasing academic interest [5,49]. In the past decades in China, urban residents' local living space and its governance experienced an evolution process, on which the outbreak of COVID-19 exerted fundamental influences. Based on the analysis of 21 observation reports conducted during the outbreak period, this study discovered that containing the epidemic necessitated the overlapping of the conceptual community and the experiential community, which were the result of community evolution in the past decades. To achieve this overlap, various governmental-led spatial governance measures were conducted, such as the reinforced community boundaries, the coexistence of multiple actors, the reconstruction of a sense of security-based belongingness, and the reformulation of the governance symbolic system. These actions temporarily resolved paradoxical governance practices that existed in the dual community. The co-governance logic that was implemented during the outbreak period led to the coverage and shaping of the conceptual community over the experiential community. This effect may persist during the post-epidemic era. Our study provides a new perspective and insights into studying the enduring effects of the shared anti-epidemic experiences on urban social space and sustainable development in China, as well as in other post-epidemic societies.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, S.D. and H.T.; methodology, H.T.; writing—original draft preparation, S.D.; writing—review and editing, H.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University (20211210).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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