

# Waking Up a Sleeping Town

New vision for social governance energizes communities

By Wang Hairong

Cheng Shukun enjoys working for the Baidu Group, a leading technology company renowned for creating the most popular Chinese search engine. It was the commuting to work that he used to hate.

Cheng lives in Huilongguan on Beijing's northern outskirts and driving to work to the busy tech hub was a nightmare. Then a new project kicked in.

An over 6-km bicycle road, the first of its kind in the capital, came up in May, connecting Huilongguan and the Shangdi business area. It has two green lanes with an orange one in the middle serving as a tidal lane.

"It used to take me an hour to drive to work, but now I spend only half an hour to cycle there," a beaming Cheng said. "It's so convenient!"

About 11,600 people, or 13.8 percent of Huilongguan's working population, commute between Huilongguan and Shangdi, and the new road is a blessing for many.

## Improved infrastructure

Improving infrastructure in communities as per residents' requirements is part of the three-year Huitian Plan formulated in 2018



Cyclists ride on the bicycle-only road that connects the Huilongguan residential neighborhood and the Shangdi business area in north Beijing on November 15

by the Beijing Municipal Government and the Changping District Government that administer the area. Huitian, an about 63-square-km area, consists of two large residential neighborhoods, Tiantongyuan in northeast Beijing and Huilongguan in the northwest. In the late 1990s, they began to be developed from rural into urban residential areas to provide affordable housing for city dwellers.

With accelerated urbanization and the rapid development of the surrounding hi-tech areas, the population of Huitian soared. By the end of 2017, it had about 860,000 permanent residents. The denser population triggered problems like traffic congestion and lack of public service facilities like schools, hospitals and cultural and sports facilities.

To develop the area, the local government focused on the administration of Huitian so that it would serve as a governance model for large communities.

The Huitian Plan brings investment of about 20 billion yuan (\$2.85 billion) to be used in three years to upgrade transportation, medical, educational, cultural and sports facilities and senior care institutions.

In addition to the bicycle-only road, bridges have been renovated, traffic hubs built and public transport capacity expanded. Lack of affordable pre-school education services and schools to provide compulsory education was a major problem. In China education is compulsory and free for generally nine years. To provide their children with better education, some parents had to leave their bigger apartments in Huitian and move into cramped ones in other districts with better school facilities. To meet the need, the Huitian Plan is building 15 new schools.

Projects to expand medical services as well as the capacity of water supply, sewage treatment and flood prevention have also been carried out.

The Huilongguan Sport and Cultural Park has benefited from the sprucing up. Greened with a variety of trees, it is today a much-sought-after destination with its decorative structures and sports facilities. Joggers run along its winding green synthetic track, dancers spin and swirl on a circular terrace surrounded by trees, and grandmothers trail after their toddling grandchildren.

Though the autumn chill has set in with strong winds that have swept away much of the fall foliage, a 71-year-old regular at the park, affectionately called Uncle Yao, has turned up to play the saxophone as usual. He is accompanied by several other seniors playing either the saxophone or the flute, forming a mini orchestra of their own, a regular sight in many Chinese parks and public spaces.

"The park looks much prettier than

before," said Yao, who moved into the neighborhood from downtown Beijing in 2003.

## A partnership act

The Huitian Plan also promotes a five-party co-governance model for communities. The five parties are the residents' committee, the homeowners' association, the property management company, social organizations, and the community branch of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which plays a leading role.

A residents' committee is a community-level self-governance body, which acts as a bridge between a sub-district government and residents. It handles affairs such as resolving disputes, maintaining safety and providing public services. Members of a homeowners' association are property owners who are elected. In Hualongyuanbeili Community in Huilongguan, the five parties hold joint monthly meetings to discuss the problems that crop up after collecting residents' opinions on them.

Wang Cuijuan, Secretary of the CPC Branch and head of the Residents' Committee of Hualongyuanbeili, tells how problems are addressed in her community, a cluster of 3,300 permanent residents. For instance, when the old security system for entering the buildings broke down, a five-party meeting was held to discuss how to replace it. After mutual agreement, a modern system was purchased with the community's revenue from leasing parking spaces and advertisement space.

## Social participation

The social governance model was highlighted at a key leadership meeting in October. The Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee focused on advancing the modernization of China's governance system and capability, underlining the importance of meeting people's rising aspiration for a better life. The social governance system, the meeting agreed, should be based on collaboration, participation and common interests.

Social participation plays a significant role in Huitian's community activities.

In a cultural activity room, a dozen or so elderly women are practicing a traditional dance that requires strapping a small drum to the waist and tapping it in time with the music. The teacher is a retiree volunteer, Kang Lanxiang. The team often performs for the public during festivals. Kang said teaching the dance makes her retired life more fulfilling. There are five such volunteer art teams in the community, with more than 100 volunteer performers.

The district government encourages social organizations and private enterprises to provide social services to meet the diverse



A children's activity room in Hualongyuanbeili Community, Beijing's Changping District, on November 19

needs of residents and buys services from them. Last year, a social service center was established in Huitian to incubate non-profit organizations and private enterprises.

"In the future, social enterprises will play an increasingly important role in solving problems in Huitian, bringing new changes in governance," Zhang Duo, head of the service center, said.

These changes are a delight for residents like Zuo Zhaohui. Zuo, who has lived in Huilongguan for 18 years, said the Huitian Plan has boosted his confidence and sense of belonging to the neighborhood. In the past, he shied away from telling people that he lived there for fear that they would look down on him for living in a backward area with few amenities.

"Huilongguan used to be a sleeping town, but now it has awakened," he said. ■

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