

OUTSIDE THE BOX | LI YANG

Easing pains of urbanization

Urbanization seems to be robbing people of their sense of belonging, says Chen Kai, associate professor of communication studies at the Communication University of China.

To illustrate her point, she reads out from the blog of one of her students: "The house in which my family had lived for 23 years was bulldozed two years ago. Today, a flashy residential complex stands in its place, awaiting rich homebuyers. Whenever I pass the luxurious marbled gate of the complex, I feel a slice of my soul hanging there. The new residential complex represents a loss of a way of life, of the happy times we spent there with our neighbors."

Community has a special meaning for Chinese people. Traditionally, a community is built around regular meetings and exchange of views with neighbors, the eagerness to help each other and share good and bad times with neighbors. These give rise to fellow feeling and a sense of belonging and camaraderie, something we see in the few hutongs left in Beijing and the old neighborhoods in other Chinese cities.

By breaking down old neighborhoods, urbanization is also breaking down such values, Chen says. Many families uprooted from old neighborhoods lose track of their neighbors. Even if they are rehabilitated in the same building or residential complex, their relations are never the same.

For such people, especially senior citizens, improved living conditions are no compensation for the social and emotional loss they suffer by being forced to move to new (and, most often than not, alien) environments.

"People who lose their homes become violent at

times because they cannot bear to see their social existence being blown away with the dust rising from their demolished houses."

Chen has just returned from the Journalism School of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she was visiting scholar for a year. She says: "There are palpable differences between communities in the United States and China. Contrary to popular belief, modern Chinese residential complexes are less interconnected than their counterparts in the US ... Banks, newspapers and churches are regarded as basic components of a community in North America. And a community newspaper reflects the spirit of a community and plays the role of a forum."

Some would argue that many modern residential complexes in China do have community forums. But given the existing digital gap, many senior citizens cannot take part in such forums. A community newspaper overcomes these obstacles. It provides stable advertising revenue for the publishers, too.

A community newspaper is one of the media that can reduce senior citizens' sense of loss, help them understand their new surroundings better and express their feelings. Chen says that the attention a community newspaper pays to community affairs and the priority it accords to its members can in some ways lessen the loss of senior citizens' sense of belonging.

"The easiest way to turn a loose residential complex into an organized and well-knit community is to give its residents a platform to communicate with each other and encourage them to turn their verbal interactions into concrete activities. The spirit of helping fellow residents voluntarily and of being dedicated to and responsible for the common

cause are defined as ideal characteristics of a community."

A community newspaper helps people understand their fellow residents and encourages them to interact with each other, thus building a community bond. Besides, community newspapers can help organize "a series of interactive community activities, which can serve as a chain connecting people's verbal and physical spheres."

Chen says participation in such activities is an effective way of breaking the wall of strangeness and promoting a sense of belonging.

More importantly, shared experiences and interests, especially teamwork, can consolidate mutual trust and closeness. Governments can lend a helping hand by encouraging property owners, residential committees, sub-district offices and newspaper groups to start community newspapers.

Chen says community newspapers not only connect households within a community, but also promote interaction between civil society and governments. Community newspapers provide resident-oriented public and commercial information and function as platforms for discussions on concerns shared by readers.

"It is easier for local governments to understand the opinion of a community by reading its newspaper. Community residents can exert pressure on local authorities, too, by using their newspaper to air their views and call for public debates on certain topics", she says.

With the development of the economy, communities will play a bigger role between individuals and governments in China. And community newspapers, as social bonds, can play a positive role in the country's urbanization process.

LETTERS

Plan for green, healthy action

Comment on "Bring action plans, not empty words" (China Daily, Nov 26)

"Please consider taking the stairs if you're going to one of the first five floors"

This sign by the elevators in an office building of the National Development and Reform Commission is a great example of how to change behaviors, because it is specific.

Rather than just suggesting that people take the stairs, the sign creates a specific social norm that people should walk up the stairs if their destination is between the second and the sixth floors.

It will make people violating the norm feel guilty, too. Let us hope, fellow passengers in elevators will object to people getting out between the second and sixth floors and help implement the rule.

PATRICK MATTIMORE, on China Daily website

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FROM THE CHINESE PRESS

Schools should be made safer

More than 40 students were injured in a stampede in a primary school in Aksu, the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, on Nov 29. Sadly, the incident is not the only one of its kind, and once again reminds us how important it is to improve safety mechanisms in schools, says an article in Beijing News. Excerpts:

The old school building in Aksu where the latest stampede occurred holds classes for more than 1,800 students. So strong was the impact of falling students' weight that even steel bars of the handrails bent under them.

Last year, a 10-year-old boy died and two students were injured in a similar stampede in Jinqiao Shuyuan School in Ninghai county of Zhejiang province. Later, eight students were killed and 26 injured in a stampede in Yucai Private High School in Xiangxiang, Hunan province.

The Aksu incident has set the safety alarm bells ringing again. The recurrence of such incidents exposes the hidden dangers that students face in schools.

Many school buildings and other teaching facilities are ill-maintained. Their situation is even worse in rural areas. But to improve safety mechanisms in schools, educational institutions need more funds because the current allocation for education is far from enough to ensure that.

Besides, architectural designs in many schools are hazardous. Safety management on campus has loopholes, too, and many schools are reluctant to spend more money on strengthening safety, and very few schools have regular safety education and training classes.

To ensure safety, schools need to establish a mechanism of democratic management, inviting parents to participate and supervise in safety programs. More importantly, governments should allocate enough funds for maintenance of school buildings and safety education, and rectify faulty designs and structures.

Not every city can host Olympics

Hardly had the 2010 Asian Games closed when the host city Guangzhou announced its plan to bid for the Olympic Games. A Guangzhou official says the city's economic success shows it is capable of hosting the sports showpiece. But a city needs more than just economic competence to host the Olympics, says an article in China Youth Daily. Excerpts:

Some people say Guangzhou can bid for the Olympic Games after the 2010 Asian Games were declared a big success. The capital of Guangdong province has every right to feel competent enough to host the greatest sports event in the world.

It is true that the Olympics can boost a host city's economy and enhancing its international image. But it also true that a city's economic success is not and should not be the primary criterion to bid for the Olympics.

And if that is the case, other major cities in China are as qualified as Guangzhou to host the Olympic Games.

More importantly, the advantages the Olympic Games is said to create for a host city may not necessarily be as beneficial to its people. Hosting the Olympics cannot boost a city's economy in the long run, because economic development depends largely on essential traits such as industrial structure and innovation capability.

Besides, the real cost of hosting international events like the Olympics and World Expo is paid by a country's people, especially the host city's residents. If the population of the entire country pays the taxes, the host city's residents pay more by suffering inconveniences such as noise from construction sites and traffic restrictions and jams.

Instead of bidding for major international events, local governments should pay more attention to the well-being of the people and put up their ambitious plans for public discussion.

The opinions expressed on this page do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

DANIEL LEVIN

US should listen to the mice roar

In Leonard Wibberley's classic novel, *The Mouse that Roared*, a tiny nation — the Duchy of Grand Fenwick — hatches an absurd plot to attack the United States as a desperate measure to ensure its economic and political survival. In the delicious satire, nothing goes quite as planned, yet Grand Fenwick defeats the US by capturing the world's newest and most destructive bomb — one that makes the atomic bomb seem like child's play.

Despite the fantastic plot, the Duchy's David-versus-Goliath victory is not entirely accidental. Grand Fenwick's knights have the advantage of a political process that works in their favor: The decisions of their head of state, Duchess Gloriana XII, are honestly debated by leaders of the two major political parties, the Dilutionists and the Anti-Dilutionists — look it up in the book, it's worth it! Then, the matter is put to a democratic and honest vote, and the decision is executed by Her Majesty's faithful servant, Tully Bascomb.

We can laugh at the image of this motley crew forcing a superpower to its knees, but we have to admire the efficiency of a political process that is brilliantly simple and simply brilliant.

Wibberley's novel should be mandatory reading for any political science student for many reasons, though none more important and relevant than to demonstrate what a country with efficient structures of governance can accomplish. Duchess Gloriana's government makes decisions based on the interests and needs of the general population rather than a particular, narrow ideology or interest group with access to power. And the government actually implements those decisions. The simple, efficient and effective government structure that works so well in and for Grand Fenwick could not be more different from today's political reality.

US President Barack Obama moved into the White House with many ambitious goals that included fixing healthcare and Wall Street, closing Guantanamo Bay, developing energy alternatives to fight climate change and reduce our dependency on fossil fuels. Irrespective of what we may think of those goals or the president himself, his exasperation at the pathologically inept ways of the US' capital and its bruising political battles is palpable.

So, is it necessary to fix Washington before fixing the many things we are relying on Washington to fix? Is this even feasible, or (to mix some metaphors) has that ship sailed and the inmates are now running the asylum?

Take financial reform in the US as an example. Is the recent legislation — the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of June 2010 — really the best the US can come up with to address one of the worst financial crises? Can it not even agree on what constitutes bad behavior by financial institutions, and that it should try to prevent it? After the Goldman Sachs hearings, was it not obvious to everyone that things in our capital markets had gone horribly wrong? Should a bank be allowed to make a fortune betting against the very investments it advises its clients to make?

It is hard to fight the uneasy sense that the US is witnessing a significant breakdown of its state governance, especially the utter lack of civility and dignified discourse. The US' political system seems to have deteriorated to the point where the government may have lost the ability to look after its people (all of its people, that is). Perhaps it has become too detached, too convoluted and, yes, too big to be an advocate of its citizens.

Maybe bigger is not always better, and maybe Washington can learn a thing or two from some of the world's real mice, for instance, the Principality of Liechtenstein. A small country of about 36,000 people sandwiched between Switzerland and Austria, Liechtenstein has carved for itself a niche in private banking and wealth management. Over the past years, however, Liechtenstein's financial and fiduciary industries have come under global scrutiny for offering a haven for undeclared money because of their stringent privacy and bank secrecy laws.

When certain countries — the US among them — started to crack down on tax havens, triggered to no small extent by the global recession and sharply reduced tax revenues, Liechtenstein became the focus of unwelcome attention. Its political leaders realized that this was not a war they could win and, therefore, they embarked upon a

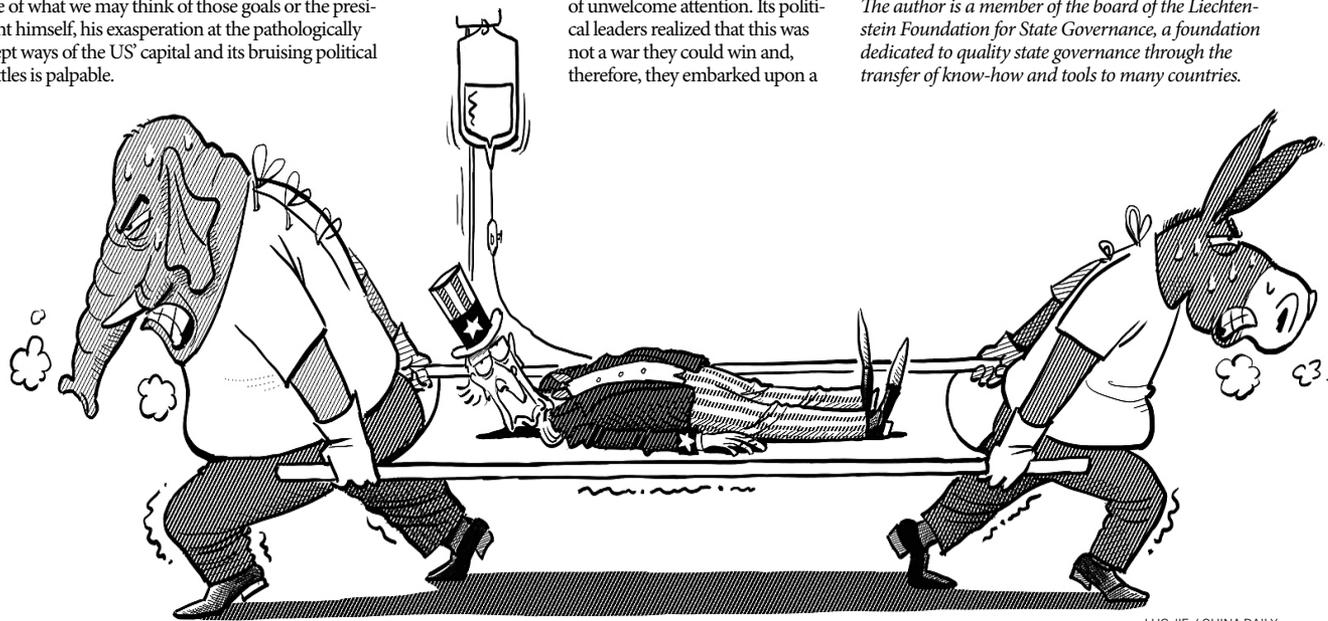
gutsy new transparency strategy, culminating in the "Liechtenstein Declaration" of March 2009. Cynics were quick to ask whether this new policy would be implemented, or whether it would remain just a fancy piece of paper with lofty goals.

Only time will give that answer, but one test occurred when in February 2010 a Swiss newspaper ran a sting operation with two undercover reporters who entered several banks in Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein, claiming they had inherited 750,000 Swiss francs and asking to open "black", undeclared bank accounts. Liechtenstein was the only country where neither of its two "tested" banks was willing to take on the new clients. The undercover journalists were advised to do themselves a favor and seek a good tax adviser to help them declare the money, rather than live a life in fear of being caught.

We should take note of Liechtenstein's effective reaction to new and significant challenges, and its implementation of necessary, painful and not always popular changes. Political leaders can actually make decisions in the national interest and ensure that those decisions are implemented in letter and spirit, despite vocal and powerful opposition. If the US has lost its ability to accomplish this, then it may need to go back to the drawing board and challenge some of the sacred cows of its political system, including the distorting role of money in politics or even the two-party system, where the degree of paralysis is directly proportional to the amount of hollow bipartisan pronouncements.

In *The Mouse that Roared*, Tully Bascomb speaks some wise words: "Victory sometimes carries more responsibilities than gains. That is because it marks the return of conscience." The US certainly has many victories in its history, but it seems that in recent times it has fallen short in some of its responsibilities — to itself and to others. And maybe, just maybe, it could learn a thing or two from the mice of this world.

The author is a member of the board of the Liechtenstein Foundation for State Governance, a foundation dedicated to quality state governance through the transfer of know-how and tools to many countries.



LUO JIE / CHINA DAILY