

Conference Paper

Collaborative Public Space in China: Two Waterfront Projects, Shanghai and Suzhou

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Abstract

This paper discusses public space in China and explores how theories of public space can be applied to two waterfront projects.

As case studies the paper compares two public waterfront projects: The 18 km Jinji Lake project in Suzhou and the 45km Huangpu River waterfront project in Shanghai, both completed in 2018. The Jinji lake development in the heart of Suzhou designed by EDAW later AECOM also boasts inclusive 24/7 access and people centered design. Democratic theory is commonly used in the West to discuss public space however Limin Hee argues that the discourse as understood in the western democratic tradition is not adequate for Asian cities (Hee, 2017). Constructing Singapore Public Space, Springer) This paper finds that although the idea of public space in China is argued to be an evolving concept (Gaubatz, 2008, pp 72-83), notions of democratic participation, Human Centered Design (HCD) and place-making methods are central development policy in Chinese cities. Whereas terms like vibrancy and vitality are commonly used by scholars to evaluate and discuss public space in China, rather than democratic theory, theories from western scholars such as Habermas's theory of the *public sphere* are also relevant and collaborative practices between civil society and the state are key to the participatory nature of Chinese public space.

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1. Introduction

When Chantal Mouffe formulated the concept of the democratic paradox, she described how a contradiction lies in the very heart of 'liberal democracy' between 'liberal' and 'democracy'. She argued that the logic of liberal (rule of law, individual liberty) was in conflict with democracy (rule of the people). For Mouffe liberal democracy is more of a liberalization of democracy than a model of democracy. (Mouffe, 2000)

If one looks at the question of public space, the theoretical discourse on public space in the west is historically associated with participation. It derives from ancient Greece where the participatory nature of democracy meant that public space was a central component of the *polis* (people, space, and politics). Public space therefore could be seen to

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have formed the infra-structure of Athenian democracy that took place through public practice rather than representation. Spatial and democratic theorists concerned with public space have used democratic discourse to understand transformations to public life and space. They have been particularly concerned with the erosion of participatory practice as a result of commercializations and privatizations of both public space, public administrative bodies and public institutions. In late neo-liberal societies and particularly in the UK and USA, on-going privatization means that it is now impossible to conceive public space outside the social generalization of private space. (Carmona, 2008)

In this paper I argue that public space is a necessary component of the participatory idea of the public sphere. Two key texts that document the decline of the public sphere in the West are: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man*. Habermas argues that the public sphere provided an intermediate sphere between the private sphere of the family and the state and this provides a space for deliberation on public affairs. In *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett argues that "public" life was once a vital part of one's life outside the circle of family and close friends. He documents how public life has become commercialised and asks how we can reconnect our communities through participation in public life. (Sennett, 1977)

The paradox of public space is therefore that while the West is dismantling its participatory infrastructure through neo-liberal policies of privatisation. China is experiencing the opposite phenomenon, a huge expansion of what appears to be mostly genuinely public, public space. Suzhou and Shanghai are just two cities amongst numerous cities in China to experience enormous infrastructure projects providing vibrant public spaces to the city. The 45km Huangpu River waterfront project in Shanghai and the 18 km Jinji Lake project in Suzhou, both completed in 2018 are just two examples of projects taking place in cities throughout the entire country. For urban geographer Piper Gaubatz, "new public space in China has coincided with a rising public sphere". (Gaubatz, 2008) In contrast, in 're-theorising contemporary public space: a new narrative and a new normative', urban theorist Matthew Carmona, argues that in 21st century late neo-liberal society in London the wider context of public space is often neglected and sometimes scary. He advocates for public space design to be focused on highly managed micro-spaces, usually squares, that exist within the context of neglected space. These new often private, public squares can be successful and vibrant public spaces if they are highly managed and protected. (Carmona, 2015)

In the paper 'Public Man and Public Space in Shanghai Today', Anthony Orum, et al, following Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1991) claims that "if residents are able to freely

occupy public space then this is a testimony of the fundamental and free and democratic nature of the city". The team conducted interviews in a number of public space sites in Shanghai such as streets, parks and squares, to examine if the spaces could be freely occupied. They found many activities in the streets including informal street sellers and domestic activities such as cooking and washing. In the squares they found dancing, singing, opera, performance, martial arts. Their conclusion found the opposite to Sennett's decline, they found that public man (and woman) in Shanghai are alive and well (Orum, A et al, 2009).

Theories of vibrancy and vitality are commonly used by Chinese scholars in research to evaluate and quantify the value of public space rather than democratic theory commonly used in the West. (Mouffe, 2007) Vibrancy can be defined by the desirability to go to a public space or the number of activities taking place in that place. However 'vibrancy' can also be seen as an important concept in democracy. For Mouffe 'I see as the core of a vibrant democracy, is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured.' Therefore one could argue that collaborative methods can be seen to be a key factor in the production of vibrant space.

2. The Context of Public Space in China

For Yiping Dong, the whole idea of public space as we see today in terms of rights of access is something new in China. 1911 was the year that the Republic of China was founded and therefore was also the beginning of citizenship in China. Before that there was the Empire, a Confucius system where people obeyed the Emperor. Public spaces, for example, the temple existed but these were limited and shared through a hierarchical system of society. Public space could be seen to be associated with ritual rather than rights, which is more the way that public space is understood in China today.

Brown argues that:

"In the imperial, agrarian China of the Qing dynasty, and then in the republican and Maoist periods, there was no "public sphere" in Habermas's sense. There were constellations of political forces around intellectuals, bureaucracies, landowners and court rulers; but the world of coffee-shop debate and free discussion in places like Paris or London since the 18th century, which planted the seeds of a public domain, was lacking in China. And Maoism was antagonistic to any articulation of public aims not dictated by the state. It is only since reform and opening up progressed since around 1980 that what could be called a Chinese public sphere has begun to evolve." (Brown, 2014)

In *Cultural Intellectuals and the Politics of the Cultural Public Space in Communist China*, Edward Gu argues that the period of Deng 1979-1989 following the Mao era saw the creation of a new cultural public space formed through collaborations between cultural intellectuals and the state. (Gu, 1999, p.389) He claims that the new public space was made through collaborative practices by transforming state controlled public spaces and institutions and reclaiming their autonomy. New books were published, and many new autonomous magazines of cultural orientations were produced. This period saw a structural transformation in the intellectual public sphere brought about by a series of institutional changes between state and society. (Ibid. P.390.) Gu examined a number of groups that formed during that period. He found that although civil society was starting to take shape in China through the formation of cultural groups, none of the cultural groups he examined adopted the approach of civil society against the state. All of the groups were instead focused on creating a new public space of autonomy while having a cooperative and relationship with the state. Their focus therefore was not oppositional but focused on the creation of collaborative intellectual public spaces. (Ibid. P. 341)

An example of appropriation can be seen through the popular activity of Yangge dance in public space in China. Florence Bideau argues that the popular culture dance has been an intentional strategy from Chinese authorities for governing national cultural practices and formed a cornerstone of the Maoist cultural policy. The secular ritual was taken over and transformed into a tool of political propaganda, creating a national model of entertainment. However she also argues that the practice has now been appropriated by the dancers themselves and this has coincided with the emergence of a civil society in China. (Bideau, 2008, pp.52-60)

Now in the 21st century ideas from Deng's period can be seen to be taking shape, literally in the formation of physical public space. A place-making project in Wuhan claims that: "China is entering a new phase: old functions cannot meet the requirements of new urban development and thus improving the urban public space, by means of place-making, is becoming central to urban renewal. But place-making in China is more than just beautifying cities. It is about creating new collaborations between officials, professionals, and communities." (<https://isocarp.org/activities/collaborations/wuhan-placemaking-week-wuhan-china-7-12-december-2018/>)

3. Case Studies

3.1. Huangpu River Project



Figure 1: ‘Towards a People Orientated Waterfront’ Huangpu River, Shanghai, photograph Wang Rongjiang/SHINE.

The Huangpu River project is part of Shanghai’s Urban Plan 2035 that aims to build Shanghai into an eco-city. The project is focused on sustainable green development with emphasis on human-centered design (HCD). (Shanghai Master Plan 2017-2035, www.shanghai.gov.cn/newshanghai/xxgkfj/2035004.pdf) “HCD focuses on the interactions between humans and the spaces they occupy. By incorporating HCD, Shanghai’s urban planners intend to optimize the urbanization process for the city’s residents and transform Shanghai from a frenetic metropolis into a cultivated global center”. (Shanghai’s Road to a Global City: Innovations in Human-Centered Design, PD&R Edge)

The urban plan is also focused on sustainability and the city plans a green and open eco-network by developing pilot spaces and infrastructures, these include:

- Ecological land will account for at least 60% of the total land area
- Forest coverage will be 23%
- Park green space will be up to 13 square meters per capita.

The Huangpu River project originated from a design competition to create an urban waterfront of both sides of the Huangpu River in Shanghai. The brief was to create a space with both local and global appeal aiming to further unlock Shanghai’s potential by creating world-class green spaces and public places along the river’s edge. (<https://www.archdaily.com/tag/huangpu-river>) Eight practices were invited to submit proposals. The winning concept came from the international design practice HASSELL to create an urban forest along both sides of the Huangpu River. HASSELL’s aim was to ‘activate

the waterfront space to enliven its commercial, cultural and tourism facilities while connecting the waterfront with its surrounding urban fabric.’ It featured a network of connections that included grand boulevards, public promenades, cycle paths, parks and plazas. The 45km Huangpu river project was designed under the consultancy of the Danish global leader in people centered urban design, Jan Gehl, and delivers a livability and green mobility plan for the Huangpu district, in the heart of Shanghai (see Figure 3).

“The four strategies from “Towards a People Orientated Waterfront” has with it’s simplicity and quality focus, helped us with the complexity of succeeding with the completion of 45 Km of connected public space along the Huangpu River in only a few years”

Director Zhu from Shanghai Huangpu River Waterfront Developing Office.

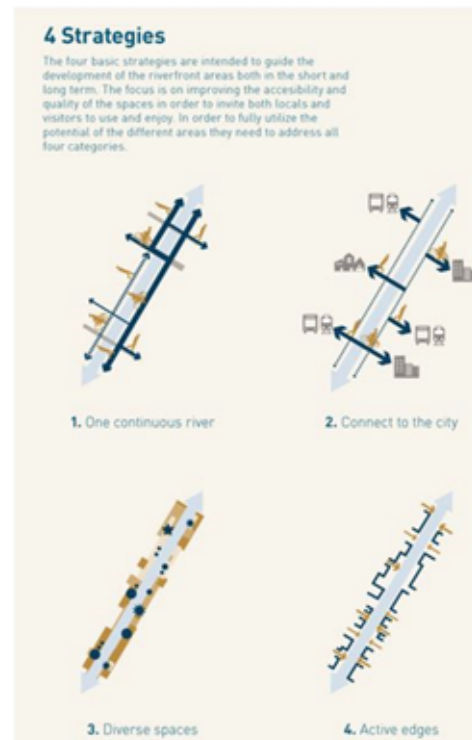


Figure 2: ‘Towards a People Orientated Waterfront’ Huangpu River, Shanghai.

The project has 45 km completed in 2018 with a further 5.5 km to be completed by 2020. The further 5.5 km part will also include 1.6 square km of parks and public spaces in historic industrial dockland area.

For Zou Junwen, urban planner from the Shanghai Urban Planning and Design Research Institute, in charge of the Huangpu River master plan “The Huangpu waterfront will become an international first-class public ‘sitting room’ as well as an ecological corridor.” (<https://archive.shine.cn/metro/society/Topclass-public-waterfront-space-set-for-Shanghai/shdaily.shtml>) Implying that people’s ability to freely occupy the space is central to the plan. Zou’s idea of the public and international ‘sitting room’ could be seen to be a space for international civil society and a 21st century equivalent of Habermas’s 18th century coffeehouses

3.2. Jinji Lake Suzhou



Carroll describes the water city of Suzhou as an ancient city that has remade itself as a modern city. (Carroll, 2006) Suzhou's 2500 year old centre is one of the largest best preserved historical city centres in China. The old town is surrounded by river moat that connects to a network of vibrant public spaces frequented by both local people and tourists. The city also contains a number of successful water street conservation projects such as the award winning the Pinjiang road project and the Shantang Street. (Xie J. and Heath T. 2017).

Suzhou combines an ancient city with two distinct new areas the Suzhou New District (SND) and the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP). In 2008, SIP was one of 3 eco industrial park demonstration sites in China and contains two large lakes. Jinji Lake and Dushu Lake are both in the heart of SIP.

The Jinji Lake Suzhou waterfront project can be seen as a modern day city equivalent of the ancient city moat that surrounds the old city, that creates a waterfront public space that circles the old city (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: City Moat surrounding Suzhou Old Town.

The Jinji Lake project was completed in 2018 and like the ancient moat gives 24/7 access to the waterfront. The Jinji Lake development is a network of public spaces that combines pedestrian bridges, open public park land, boat yards, art installations, children's play grounds, wetland gardens, fishing pier, water side promenade and includes cultural activities and tourist destinations. The waterfront provides pedestrian connections to some of SIP's major destinations: the restaurant area of LiGondi at the south of the lake, the Culture and Expo centre and the shopping district Times Square at the north of the lake. The newly built Suzhou Centre at the west of the lake. The new ferris wheel at the east of the lake. The waterfront project allows the public to walk around the entire lake and is the site for Suzhou's annual half marathon (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Jinji Lake, Suzhou Mater Plan 2003, EDAW (later AECOM), Drawn Michael Cannon and Don Lee.

The space was designed by the American landscape company EDAW who were later taken over by the also US company AECOM, the largest foreign company in China who finished the project under their name. In an interview with AECOM's head of landscape Lee Parks, Parks stated that AECOM are now designing hundreds of kilometers of waterfront space in China and their main method for attracting the public is through planting. People come to see the different colours at different times of the year. However more recently they have been working with communities to produce for example community gardens in Shanghai. For AECOM: "These parks and open spaces are open day and night all year round, changing in character and subtleties over the seasons. Safety and maintenance procedures have been implemented and maintained as envisioned in the design. As Chinese culture embraces the idea of public open space, the peoples' love of the land has been re-ignited. On the weekends the parks are flooded with crowds escaping the old city to the open landscapes and waterfront parks along the lake" (www.landscapeonline.com/research/article-a.php?number=3838 accessed)

4. Conclusion, Collaborative Public Space

The notion of collaborative public space that first came about in China during the reform period through collaborations between intellectuals and the state can be seen to be key to the China's public space today.

If we define the participatory nature of the city as the ability for residents to freely occupy public space then we find that the Huangpu River project and the Jinji Lake project are two examples of China's commitment to create people centered inclusive design. However the Huangpu waterfront could be seen to have more collaborative methods of design than the Jinji Lake project in Suzhou as the project involved the collaboration between state officials, international and national professionals and communities. Jinji Lake's commitment to 24/7 public access means that it is open to appropriation from a multitude of diverse practices and it promises to develop into a modern day equivalent of the vibrant city moat.

As Brown puts it: 'For the next few years a vital theme in China will be, so to speak, "watch this public space". For the first time in history, an authentically Chinese public sphere in the People's Republic of China is struggling to be born. Indeed, its painful, slow and complex evolution is one of the great struggles of the modern world.' (Brown, 2014)

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