



Toward community engagement: Can the built environment help? Grassroots participation and communal space in Chinese urban communities

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ABSTRACT

The scholarship in building community capacity by way of cultivating community social capital and community spirit through neighborhood design has spawned heated debates in urban and community studies. This paper contributes to this scholarship by examining the neighborhood contexts of grassroots participation in Chinese contemporary urban communities. In particular, it explores the relationship between neighborhood communal space and community participation, using a city-wide survey of 1809 households in 39 commodity housing estates in the city of Guangzhou.

It is found that local residents' participation in community affairs is conditioned by both the social milieu (measured by the overall level of social cohesion) and the physical environment (indicated by effects of communal space) of a neighborhood. Notably, communal space exerts positive indirect effects on grassroots participation by facilitating the development of place-based social capital and neighborhood attachment. These findings point to a civic virtue of communal space and provide nascent evidence regarding neighborhood contexts of grassroots participation in urban China.

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Introduction

Community participation, that is, a local population's voluntary involvement in community political or social affairs, is a critical component of sustainable community development. Extensive efforts have been made to enhance citizen participation by way of cultivating community social capital and community spirit through neighborhood design. The rationale behind these efforts is that strong associations exist between the neighborhood physical context, individual behaviors (e.g., walking and neighboring), and community sentiment (e.g., sense of community) (Hanlon, 2010; Leyden, 2003; Long & Perkins, 2007; Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001), which in turn are expected to contribute to collective activities. However, the direct relationship between the environmental context and community participation remains unclear. Although some arguments, exemplified by the New Urbanism discourse, have been made about the role of certain community design features, e.g., mixed land use and (semi-)public space, in shaping local participation, few empirical studies exist to substantiate these arguments. The question raised by Fried (1982) 30 years ago remains open for discussion – does the residential

environment “derive its functional significance from a commitment to places as physical resources for various activities and experiences, or because it serves as a context for social interaction and interpersonal intimacy, or by virtue of its aesthetic and/or symbolic properties” (p. 109)? This paper aims to contribute to this scholarship in the context of contemporary Chinese communities, drawing on a city-wide survey in the city of Guangzhou.

Due to limited opportunities for grassroots civic participation in the Maoist era, such concepts as community social capital, neighborhood attachment and community participation have been rather new to Chinese urbanites. Studies exist in understanding capacity building in rural communities in China (e.g., Plummer & Taylor, 2004), yet few intellectual efforts have been devoted to urban community experiences. Over the past three decades' market reforms, China has been exposed to strong forces of globalization dominated by the ideas of free market, small government, and political democracy. Tremendous spatial and social transformations have challenged the logic of neighboring and community spirit that have been long established in traditional close-knit neighborhoods (Zhu, Breitung, & Li, 2012), where the residents were colleagues and community services were delivered by socialist work units (*danwei*). Newly developed urban communities, i.e., commodity housing estates, with distinct physical characteristics and social composition have witnessed mushrooming development, where

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residents are private market consumers and buy into a desired residence. While some scholars argue that traditional forms of social bonding and civic trust have eroded in these new neighborhoods (Ma, 2002), others believe that privatization of community service delivery and emerging grassroots community organizations, e.g., Home Owners' Associations (HOAs), have granted the local population greater autonomy over community affairs (Tomba, 2005).

The objective of this paper is two-fold. First, it makes an early attempt to explore the neighborhood contexts, as well as individual determinants, of community participation that are unfolding, yet are not well understood, in post-reform China. Second, it aims to examine the role of the built environment, particularly communal space, in shaping community participation.

Dynamics of urban communities in post-reform China

Neighborhood transformation

The market-oriented reforms since the late 1980s in China have given rise to tremendous transformation in urban neighborhood landscape, community experience, and grassroots governance. In the Maoist era, state-owned work units, or *danwei*, served as an integral part of the socialist system of production and welfare provision (Bjorklund, 1986). Housing was provided by work units as social welfare. Respective *danwei* developed self-sufficient integrated compounds for employees, comprising workplaces, housing, and various common facilities. Community management and services were delegated to local neighborhoods via top-down governmental policies (Li, 1993; Xu, 2007), and residents enjoyed little autonomy in community affairs. These socialist neighborhoods featured socio-economic homogeneity, low homeownership rate, and relatively static residential mobility. The integration of work, residence, and social facilities resulted in intensive neighboring and strong social cohesion among residents (Hazelzet & Wissink, 2012; Li, Zhu, & Li, 2012).

A series of housing reforms since 1978 ended the welfare provision of housing, which stimulated heated real estate development and dramatically changed the socio-spatial landscape of Chinese cities. *Danwei* housing was privatized and sold to sitting tenants at a discounted price. As market reform deepened after the early 2000s, the state-led urban redevelopment projects swept the urban land of the nation (He & Wu, 2007). Dilapidated traditional neighborhoods were replaced with commercial housing projects which have now become the dominant neighborhood form. The 2005 micro census data (State Council & National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007) show over 50% of urban households in China live in commodity housing, compared with less than 40% for those living in former work-unit housing. In the city of Guangzhou, households in commodity housing reached over 60%, as opposed to 25% for dwellers in work-unit housing.

Commodity housing estates (CHEs), also referred to as *xiaoqu* (literally small district), are enclosed residential compounds built by private real estate developers. Varying in scale and location, these neighborhoods mostly take the form of gated communities although the degree of "gatedness" varies from one place to another (Miao, 2003). They also incorporate some design features of New Urbanist neighborhoods in United States, such as communal spaces and facilities, and mixed land use. Some large estates contain education, healthcare, and commercial amenities.

The growing freedom of choice in housing market has intensified residential mobility among neighborhoods and diversified socio-occupational mixes within the neighborhood. As a result, the traditional cohesive social fabric gave way to individualistic pursuit of privacy and anonymity in modern neighborhoods. Scholars have

observed diminished social contacts and group activities among residents in CHEs (Chan, 1993; Forrest & Yip, 2007; Hazelzet & Wissink, 2012). However, less neighborly interaction does not necessarily lead to weaker community affection. Zhu et al. (2012) found stronger place attachment for residents in CHEs, despite more superficial socialization, than in *danwei* compounds.

Transformed community governance

The socio-spatial transformation parallels with changes in grassroots governance in contemporary neighborhoods (Read, 2003; Tomba, 2005; Xu, 2008). As the state retreated from social welfare provision and community service at the local level, a top-down approach of "community building" was implemented by the central state to restore social control under the propaganda of "building a harmonious society". Specifically, grassroots government agencies,¹ e.g., Residents' Committees (RCs), were consolidated to maintain the Communist Party's social control at the grassroots level (Bray, 2006; Ma, 2002). Among other responsibilities, such as basic social service delivery and organization of state-led community building campaigns (Bray, 2006), the most important responsibility of RCs is to oversee community activities, e.g., establishment of HOAs, to limit the chances of possible social turmoil.

To date, urban neighborhoods in China have been incorporated into the administrative territory of RCs – *shequ* (Chinese translation of community). The geography of *shequ* is officially demarcated by municipal governments mostly along with existing neighborhood boundaries. A *shequ* may consist of several neighborhoods, comprising a population between 3000 and 16,000 (Heberer, 2009). The establishment of *shequ*, coupled with the empowering territorial agencies (i.e., RCs), serves as a spatial strategy to manage urban space and residents (Bray, 2006; Fu & Lin, 2013b). Unlike in the U.S. context, the propaganda of "community building" in China is essentially an institutional model rather than a civil activity.

In CHEs, neighborhood issues are generally handled by a professional property management company (PMC) and owner-elected Home Owners' Association (HOA), while RC maintains a distant relationship and plays an oversight role (Read, 2003). PMCs provide service regarding property management and maintenance under a contract with homeowners. Meanwhile, HOAs are growing as civic territorial agencies to assert their property rights on behalf of homeowners (Fu & Lin, 2013b; Read, 2003), as demonstrated by many collective endeavors by homeowners to influence the practices or decisions of PMCs, developers, or administrative authorities. While some scholars juxtapose HOAs with the rise of civil society with Chinese characteristics (Shi & Cai, 2006), others (e.g., Spires, 2011) claim that mass organizations in China "survive only insofar as they refrain from democratic claim" (p. 1). Nonetheless, the rise of HOAs has offset the power relations between the state and the society, creating social space for civic participation (Bray, 2006; Read, 2003, 2008).

Changing meanings of communal space

The omnipresence of the party-state in community life in the pre-reform era provided little room for grassroots autonomy. In

¹ The communist Party and the state in China penetrate widely and deeply to the grassroots level. There exist certain types of state-sponsored administrative bodies to manage "the grassroots", such as Residents' Committees. These administrative bodies at the very basic level are often referred to as grassroots government agencies in the literature (Bray, 2006). They are juxtaposed with other less constrained grassroots community organizations, such as HOAs, which enjoy more social autonomy.

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