



## Public participation in China's green communities: Mobilizing memories and structuring incentives

Alana Boland<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jiangang Zhu<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography and Program in Planning, University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 3G3

<sup>b</sup> School of Sociology and Anthropology, Sun Yat-sen University, No. 135, Xingang West Road, Guangzhou 510275, China

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been heightened interest in creating more environmentally sustainable forms of urban development in China. Central in these greening initiatives has been increased attention on promoting public participation in community-based environmental activities. Focusing on China's green community initiatives, we examine the production and effects of participation in a state-led development program. Our analysis considers how incentives for program organizers and participants are structured by broader political and economic imperatives facing Chinese cities. We also consider what influence China's history of neighborhood-based mobilization campaigns had on the meanings and methods of participation in green communities. To understand how urban development processes and memories of mobilization influence participation at the local level, we present two examples of the community greening process from the city of Guangzhou, comparing policy outcomes between a new and older neighborhood. This article seeks to demonstrate that the participatory processes associated with such an urban environmental initiative cannot be adequately understood without reference to earlier participatory practices and broader policy priorities guiding development in Chinese cities.

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### 1. Introduction

As the ecological costs of China's economic development mount, there has been growing interest among policy makers in increasing public involvement in environmental governance. This interest is evident in the expanded scope of participation in environmental impact assessment and pollution monitoring (Gu and Sheate, 2005; Tang et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2004). While these initiatives target productive sectors such as construction and industry, participation has also become a priority in programs addressing consumption. The green community (*luse shequ*) model falls into the latter. It is an approach to urban sustainability that combines an environmental makeover of residential spaces with participatory initiatives that seek to change individual and collective consumption practices. What began in the late 1990s as pilot projects in a few cities has since become a widely promoted model in the country's efforts to create more livable urban centers. By 2009, 236 communities had earned the designation of 'green community' from the national-level environmental protection agency, while approximately 15,000 communities had earned similar green designations from lower-level provincial or municipal authorities (MEP, 2009).

The emphasis on participatory approaches in China's urban environmental management reflects a global trend towards greater local involvement in sustainable development initiatives (Kapoor, 2001; Portney, 2005). Promoters of the green community model in China celebrate the participatory aspects of this approach (e.g., Chen, 2005; Deng, 2004; SEPA, 2007). In practice though, residents' involvement tends to be organized around environmental activities that are pedagogic in function and performative in form; absent are the sort of open forums typically associated with more consultative modes of engagement. Formalistic styles of participation are not uncommon to donor-driven and state-led development initiatives in China and they are often dismissed as ineffective and simply political theater. It is not however our intent to offer another summary indictment of this form of public engagement. We seek instead to understand the conditions that support such choreographed participation in contemporary urban China.

Our approach answers calls for engaging participation as situated practice (Cornwall, 2002; Kesby, 2007; Williams, 2004). This entails examining what happens under the name of participation in particular places, as opposed to framing participatory practices with reference to idealized models of democratic process. To situate participation also means attending to the contexts of its production and examining how the spaces and social relations emerging under new participatory initiatives interact with expectations forged through earlier experiences (Henry, 2004; Masaki,

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 416 516 4979; fax: +1 416 946 3886.

E-mail address: [boland@geog.utoronto.ca](mailto:boland@geog.utoronto.ca) (A. Boland).

2004; Vincent, 2004; Williams et al., 2003). Given its history of participatory development under socialism, China provides an important case for exploring the interaction between endogenous approaches to participation and the liberal democratic model being circulated by development agencies and civil society organizations around the world.

Focusing on China's green community programs, we track participatory policies as they are implemented by government officials, community administrators and property management companies. We consider how the production of orchestrated events and similar forms of enlistment are shaped by governing structures, economic and political incentives, and institutional memories. The fact that these initiatives are urban *and* environmental is not inconsequential; indeed, the imperatives and incentives guiding the green community programs can be directly linked to the restructuring process as it has transformed the Chinese city. What is important to consider is the institutional interplay that emerges from the grafting of green community programs onto the existing array of state strategies targeting community governance and sustainable urban development. How does this overlap influence the participatory approach adopted under the green banner in China's urban communities? And given that the promotion of 'community' as a scale of socioecological regulation owes much to new policy priorities guiding urban development, how is it that earlier socialist mobilization techniques still continue to shape the meanings and methods associated with public participation?

The paper is organized around five sections. The first section introduces our analytical point of entry through discussion of current debates regarding participatory approaches in development and sustainability initiatives. This is followed by an introduction to the key elements of China's green community programs. We then consider how the implementation of these programs has been propelled by their convergence with broader development agendas reshaping Chinese cities. To understand how participation has been influenced by its antecedents under socialism, in the fourth section we identify links between the tradition of mass mobilization and the meanings and methods associated with participatory programs today. In the final section, we shift from this discussion of the institutional and historical factors shaping participation in policy to an analysis of their influence on participation in practice. We present two illustrative cases of green community projects in the city of Guangzhou, one involving an older inner-city residential district and the other, a relatively new suburban commercial housing development. Our primary focus here is participation as it is staged within community spaces: who is organizing it, who takes part, and the institutional relationships that shape participatory outcomes at the local level. Comparison of the two cases suggests that the dominance of passive forms of participation can be attributed to aspects of policy design as well as to earlier ways of thinking and doing that have remained salient in the new social fields of 'community' and the 'environment.'

## 2. Situating participation in China

Within environmental policy and planning circles, it is widely accepted that public participation is important to achieving more sustainable forms of urban development, and this support for participatory approaches continues despite evidence that participation does not necessarily advance the environmental goals of sustainability initiatives (Portney, 2005; Rydin and Pennington, 2000). The promotion of participation in this and other social policy arenas has been the focus of critical attention for many years now. Perhaps the most well-known analyses of participation use typologies defined by the purpose, form, or outcomes of participatory processes (Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995; White, 1996). These

typologies are typically organized as continuums that locate 'meaningful' forms of participation, initiated and organized by communities, at opposite ends from passive and top-down styles of engaging the public. The other dominant approach is more critical and explicitly normative. It considers participation in principle to be a good thing, able to empower people by giving them greater say in local development matters. It is the mainstreaming of participation that concerns these critics. They see the widespread adoption of participatory approaches as a largely populist veneer for projects that facilitate an all too familiar top-down exercise of power (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Rahnema, 1992).

While the broad contours of participation research continue to be shaped by these two perspectives, our analysis draws on scholars who seek to go beyond ideal-type classification schemes and political critiques of mainstreamed participation (Cornwall, 2002; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Jupp, 2008; Kesby, 2007; Williams, 2004). These scholars call for more context-specific analyses of the discourses and practices of participatory development, informed by a diffused or relational understanding of power. This approach can bring into view otherwise hidden transformative possibilities in participatory development, even in settings that are highly structured. It also enables an understanding of the effects of established repertoires and historical meanings on new participatory processes. And while the general emphasis here is on grounded investigations of participation, Williams (2004, p. 566) usefully notes that a fuller understanding of the production and political meanings of participatory interventions also requires consideration of the wider institutional context within which they are located.

This analytical wish list coheres as an approach that seeks to understand participation as a situated practice, but not as a bounded one. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for the study of participation and urban sustainability in China. For one, it helps to counter the general tendency for 'green' participation, like other urban environmental initiatives, to be examined apart from the broader economic and political milieu within which local understandings of sustainability and participation emerge and have effects (Brand, 2007; Whitehead, 2003). Secondly, this approach helps to highlight overlooked aspects of participatory development more generally in China. In research on China's participatory initiatives, a conclusion often drawn is that when it occurs, public participation typically falls far short of what is considered meaningful (e.g., Cheng, 2002; Enserink and Koppenjan, 2007; Plummer and Taylor, 2004; Wang, 2006). While we agree that such initiatives may fall short of the normative ideals associated with participation, we also believe that categorical conclusions of this sort may hide what can be multiple or ambiguous outcomes. One of our central aims is to demonstrate that these outcomes cannot be adequately understood without reference to the wider context of China's restructuring process and its earlier participatory practices.

Our concern for the effects of history further sets our analysis apart from most other studies of participation in China, where the treatment of historical legacies tends to be cursory at best. Even Plummer and Taylor's edited volume (2004) on participatory development programs in China – one of the more comprehensive collections to date – makes limited mention of socialist mobilization, only to identify it as an obstruction to meaningful participation. We believe instead that because the reach of mass mobilization in the earlier socialist period was so broad and deep, this history deserves closer consideration in efforts to understand the unfolding of 'modern' participatory programs.

This article is based on findings from a larger research project on community development in urban China. We draw on program documentation and reports, together with observations from site visits and discussions with community administrators, residents

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