



Thinking temporally when thinking relationally: Temporality in relational place-making

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with relational understandings of place and place-making, and highlights the importance of attending to the temporality of place-framing/making in analyzing place politics and place-making practices. Building temporary, strategic alliance is a key step of place-making in place contestations, however, there is so far limited attention paid to the impacts of such alliance building on place-framing/making practices, especially when different actors are positioned in uneven power relations. In this paper, I use a case study of the 798 arts district in Beijing, China to demonstrate that the need of gaining politically powerful actors as allies can have substantial influences on place-framing in the first place and on subsequent place-making results. Drawing on data collected from interviews and policy and planning documents, I show that in a framing of the 798 arts district constructed by artists for saving the arts district from being demolished, the art component of the arts district was concealed, whereas components of architecture, historical significance, and city image were strategically emphasized for gaining support from the municipal government. These elements were later incorporated into the municipal government's framings of arts districts through policies and planning, but were twisted and realigned with elements like tourism and experience, which ultimately facilitates displacement of artists from the arts district. Thus, I argue, relational approach towards place-framing/making needs to be more attentive to the temporality of place-framing/making, which would allow it to more sufficiently address how various citizen-state relationships shape place-making and to become more globally oriented.

1. Introduction

Place and the framing of place are recognized by scholars as helpful points of entry for understanding and analyzing conflicts and the broader socio-spatial processes that such conflicts are part of. These conflicts may be about land use (the right or the way to use places) or about understandings of places (the look, feel, lived experience of places); and they may range from micro-scale locales (a specific site/place) to the scale of nation-building (Davine et al., 2017; Martin, 2003; Pierce et al., 2011, 2016; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). Although not all conflicts are at first explicitly concerned with *place*, it is often found that actors tend to express their concerns or claims through narratives of either the experiences in/of a place or the imagined ideal of a place (Martin, 2003). These discursive constructions of places – place-frames – are mobilized for collective actions and movements (place-making), within which (groups of) actors form temporary, strategic alliances based on their shared interests in/of a place (Martin, 2003; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). The co-articulation of place-frames and alliances of multiply-positioned actors requires a relational approach towards place-framing/making that explicitly focuses on “the interconnections

and co-constituencies among place, networks and politics” (Pierce et al., 2011, 67; Van Neste and Martin, 2017).

This paper intends to enrich the relational place-making approach (Pierce et al., 2011) and argues for further attention paid to the temporality of place-framing/making. While existing literatures on relational place-making point out that actors who construct place-frames often need to go through negotiation or enrolling processes for gaining support from others or building alliance, these studies are insufficient in attending to how these negotiation and enrolling processes may affect place-framing in the first place and what the influences of enrolling new actors may be on existing place-frames and future place-framing/making. These aspects, I argue, are nevertheless important for understanding how places are relationally produced through networked politics, given uneven power relations among actors, and thus deserve proper attention. Specifically, in this paper, I demonstrate how the necessity of enrolling politically powerful actors affects place-framing/making in the first place and how the enrollment of such actors subsequently shape place-making, through a case study of the 798 arts district in Beijing, China. Thus, I argue that the temporality of place-framing/making reflects how the globally-varied citizen-state

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relationships shape place-making practices on the ground, and the relational place-making approach can be enhanced and become a more globally-oriented theorization¹ by being more attentive to the aspect of temporality.

In what follows, I first provide the theoretic context through a review of the literatures on relational understandings of places and relational place-making. In this literature review, I highlight the key contributions of the relational place-making approach to studying place conflicts as well as point out existing research's lack of account of the impacts of enrolling actors on place-framing/making. I then discuss conflicts around arts districts both in and outside of China through the lens of relational place-making and demonstrate that in these cases, the necessities of enrolling politically powerful actors had significant influences on place-framing and place-making strategies and results. Building on this finding, the case study of the 798 arts district in Beijing provides a detailed account of how a place-frame of arts district is constructed by artists with the goal of gaining support from the municipal government and how this temporary artist-government alliance enables the municipal government to hijack the artists' place-frame and shape subsequent place-framing/making. I conclude by emphasizing that place-frames can be both narratives of (the martial, lived, or imagined) places and discursive strategies for negotiations with potential allies, and arguing for closer attention paid to how different moments (the anticipated future and the past) of place-making affect the strategies, practices, and results of place-making.

2. Relational understandings of places and relational place-making

Places, in relational understandings, are assemblages of heterogeneous elements that are constantly in the process of emerging and becoming, and “temporary constellations” or bundles of space-time trajectories configured through individuals' acts of selecting elements (Massey, 2005; Pierce et al., 2011; Pierce and Martin, 2015). Ontologically, at any locus, there are always multiple co-existing places, distinctively bundled by individual people; for any place, that is, a bundle whose identity is temporarily agreed/shared among a group of people, the alignment of elements is provisional and unstable. In other words, a “place”, be it a city, a neighborhood, or a building, is always loaded with multiple meanings that are constructed from different sources and are subject to constant changes. Furthermore, these meanings, place-bundles, are produced through economic, social, and political interconnections that are constructed on multiple scales (Massey, 1991, 2005). Epistemologically, this ontological multiplicity and hybridity means that places can only be known partially (Pierce and Martin, 2015). One way of probing into the multiple facets of places is to gain access to and unpack some of the various meanings that a place assumes, by looking at discourses about the place, to tease out some of the bundles of space-time trajectories that overlap at one locus. The topology of these meanings, or bundles, is not one where they sit equally along with each other, but one that is characterized by competitions and contestations: an ongoing centering-decentering process that continually produces and reproduces places, namely place-making.

Place-making is political in nature. It is a process that involves (relatively) individually conceptualized and experienced place-bundles being drawn together and selectively expressed through place-frames towards social and political ends, which results in a “strategic sharing of place” (Pierce et al., 2011, 60). Place-frames, as discursive and rhetorical constructions, narrate places, either the material experiences or the imaginaries of them, for collective-action (Martin, 2003; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). Thus, a place-frame rarely expresses one single place-bundle or meaning, but consists of elements of multiple bundles that are selected through social and political negotiations among people

with shared or similar goals (Pierce et al., 2011, 2016; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). It represents partially any of the place-bundles that are drawn into the place-frame, but itself is also a bundle among many others, albeit one that is constructed with explicitly strategic purpose.

Place-frames are mobilized by groups of actors in contestations over understandings and claims of places (Martin, 2003; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). These discursive constructions of places may convey actors' goals of place-making – to shape the use of places and/or to assert the right to use places. They are not separated from the material aspects of place-making, but are embodied in and manifested through material actions such as public protest, community organizing, and lobbying. Moreover, elements of place-frames can potentially be written into legally binding definitions of places through mechanisms like legislation, zoning, and official naming, hence can have considerable influence on the future of places (although official designations of places are always open to negotiations and place-making is always-ongoing). In order to achieve their place-making goals, actors may actively enroll others and seek wider and more politically powerful support (such as that of policy or law makers) to their place-frames (Pierce et al., 2016, 86; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). As the entangled processes of competitions among place-frames and negotiations for external support simultaneously unfold, one group's place-frame may become the (temporarily) dominant narrative and understanding of the place, or a new place-frame may be constructed through negotiations, drawing elements from multiple place-frames. The result is a place with temporarily agreed identity being produced through networked politics.

Analyzing place-frames helps researchers examine the positionalities, goals, and strategies of actors in contested processes of place-making (Martin, 2003). Scholarship on relational place-making in particular articulates the relationship between the individual bundling processes and the socio-political positioning of places through place-framing, and especially emphasizes the necessity of focusing analytical attention on the bundles that are drawn into place-framing for examining place-based conflicts and right claims (Pierce et al., 2011, 2016). It then offers two major implications. First, by focusing on the bundles that inform different (groups of) actors' constructions of place-frames, it directs attention to identifying latent points of agreement and disagreement that might be obscured by place-frames mobilized by actors on opposing sides, thus opens up possibilities for alternative perspectives or resolutions. Second, by integrating relational understandings of place into discussions on the politics of place-making, it highlights the hybrid, multi-scalar, and temporary nature of any place-bundle, thus provides a means of intervention (Pierce et al., 2011; Pierce and Martin, 2015).

Existing relational place-making literatures offer an approach of studying place-based conflicts by starting with identifying key place-frames and actors, and then tracing back to some of the elements that constitute the place-frames that are in competition and the networks that actors are positioned in order to locate key points of contestation and potential points of contention and commonality (Pierce et al., 2011, 2016). This approach points out that as place-frames that are constructed for collective goals do not include elements of all individually conceptualized place-bundles and since each actor is positioned in multiple networks, it is then possible for some of the actors who are on the opposite sides of a place-based conflict to have common elements in their place-bundles due to their shared networks. And by unpacking place-frames and examining positionalities of actors, this approach can reveal potential points of commonality in opposing actors' understandings of place and identify possibilities of bridging divides and fostering compromise (Pierce et al., 2011, 67).

The above approach, while pays attention to the relationship between individual place-bundles and place-frames, lacks discussion on the processes of place-bundles being drawn into place-frames, namely how and why certain bundles and elements are drawn into particular place-frames and with what consequences. Although it can be said that

¹ I thank one anonymous reviewer for *Geoforum* for bringing this point to my attention.

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