



Is the incipient Chinese civil society playing a role in regenerating historic urban areas? Evidence from Nanjing, Suzhou and Shanghai



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ABSTRACT

Urban regeneration in Western countries can count on a long-lasting tradition of experiences in which civil society has played a fundamental role in counterbalancing the system of power, resulting in profound urban governance readjustments. This has been the result of the increasing centrality of horizontal alliances between citizens and associations involved in urban affairs since the late 1960s in the West. Similar theoretical frameworks have been applied in China. However, these have frequently resulted in conceptual shortcuts that depict civil society as immature or lacking and the state as authoritarian. This paper will explore whether these categories are still entirely valid to urban regeneration in China. While the regime has traditionally prevented horizontal linkages of associations in urban governance (supporting their vertical integration to ensure a certain degree of soft control), there are signs of change. In particular, three cases of urban regeneration in historic areas will be used to discuss the changing role played by civil society in China. The ultimate goal is to examine whether horizontal linkages across groups of heterogeneous citizens are arising at the micro-level of urban governance.

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1. Introduction

Western urban planning practices, which arose during the twentieth century, have been mainly (and deeply) shaped by opposite ideologies, either in favour of a central role of the state or of a free market in society and economy. The former has been accused of leading to centralised and ‘command control’ policy-making, featuring economic inefficiency and democratic tightening; the latter leading to unwanted individualistic behaviours and a constrained role of government, the preconditions of any market failure. A minority stream has advocated a communitarian and self-organised management strategy for city transformation. Overall, the tension between the state, market and community-centred planning has shifted interest to institutional analysis and communicative approaches in planning theory in an attempt to frame the challenges of planning within systems undergoing policy rescaling and increasing societal fragmentation (Healey, 1997).

The urban regeneration practice, in particular, is quite paradigmatic of such tension especially when applied to historic areas. The articulation of voices around historic areas is growing much more

complex than for other ordinary urban transformations, ranging from local citizens directly affected by the regeneration projects to external societal components intellectually committed to protect the universalistic heritage value embedded in historic areas. As a matter of fact, the history of planning practices reveals the central role that heritage or historic areas have played when threatened by redevelopment pressure. They have shaped public opinion strengthening vertical collective opposition to arguable projects as well as forms of horizontal societal network densification. This dates back to the 1950s and 1960s when cases of urban renewal plans ended up with the demolition of important inner city areas or stimulated new-born grass-roots local movements, supported by cultural elites, leading to the work’s suspension and eventually to the withdrawal from the original plan (Klemek, 2011). Regardless of whether or not regeneration plans have been completed, that period has contributed to the awakening of civil society in respect to urban transformations.

Civil society in the western tradition is inherent in the concept of the state. It is the organised society, which ‘do[es] not exist independently of political authority, nor vice versa, and, it is generally believed, neither could long continue without the other’ and can be conceived as ‘a set of interlinked and stable social institutions, which have much influence on, or control over, our lives’,

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beyond the formal authority and political control (Robertson, 2004, p. 75). In Chinese political studies, civil society is a relatively new concept that becomes fashionable especially after the dramatic and brutally repressed student protest in Beijing of 1989 (Chamberlain, 1993). This has pushed the international debate into very different positions. Some have reinterpreted the history of China through the lens of social movements and protests emphasising the ‘incipient’ civil society (Strand, 1990). Others have fiercely opposed such an interpretation and read the ‘civil society’ exclusively as a Western concept irrelevant to China (Dean, 1997). Assuming a position in between, some scholars have argued for improving the current theoretical interpretation by which to observe the civil society in China (Salmenkari, 2013). As a matter of fact, an increasing amount of studies have been produced in several fields, from urban development to environmental studies, showing an effort to understand the increasing role bottom-up associations, groups, and leading individuals are playing in the contemporary Chinese governance system (Lu, 2007; Ming, 2011).

This brings up another point of relevance in the urban planning field: the positive relationship between civic culture and the devolution of power in urban affairs when becomes participation requiring trust in institutions of all types (Docherty et al., 2001). Thus, containment of authoritarianism and civil society development are quite interwoven, although it is difficult to argue which comes first. The Chinese system of power, makes such a relationship especially ambiguous. The pragmatic approach adopted by the Chinese government in recent years to involve non-governmental actors in the decision-making process or to experiment with participatory approaches in urban transformations has drawn criticism. The party reformism in respect to the apparent devolution of power has been understood as a way to defend and strengthen the authority and influence of the party itself, in response to the urgent social instability induced by the intensifications of protests, especially since the year 2000 (Shi, 2011). In addition to that, the Chinese governance system has usually co-opted elite groups, especially in its intermediate structures, to expand its control and soft power (Cheek, 1992). Overall, successful capacity-building at the local level in China has proven easily with a formal governmental commitment (Plummer & Remenyi, 2004) and the party expanding its influence into the third realm by interacting with grassroots movements (Thornton, 2013).

This might lead to the conclusion that a perspective by which one can observe and understand the ‘incipient’ civil society in contemporary Chinese urban studies must consider at least three fundamentals and interrelated aspects: the resistance of groups and associations to the structurally conflictive urban governance system, due to the complex transition from a centrally planned to a market system (Zhao, 2015); their contextual integration in the governance system (Landry, 2008); and the forms of horizontal relations within the society, without which it would be inappropriate to consider such associations as constituent of a real civil society (Walzer, 2002). However, the Chinese system of power, although highly influential, has been interpreted as lacking in systematic approaches to policy implementation and, for this reason, has been described as ‘fragmented’ (Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992). As a consequence, the decision-making process of Post-Mao China has often resulted in a high level of flexibility and a certain degree of ‘improvisation’ in policymaking (Feuchtwang et al., 2015). At the same time, attempts to understand the role of civil society in China have advocated for alternative interpretations, critical in adopting *tout court* the traditional lesson of Toqueville about the civil society as an autonomous sphere, more inclined to favour a Gramscian approach to the hegemonic power inherent to the system of Chinese governance (Salmenkari, 2013). To a certain extent, this interpretation has its roots in the Western context as well,

particularly in the case of socially disruptive advanced capitalist systems, where the concept of ‘network of equivalents’ has been appropriately introduced to frame the convergence of interest of heterogeneous and fragmented groups against or in favour of a specific cause (Purcell, 2009).

This analysis, aiming at combining 1) the fragmented state authoritarianism, 2) its attempts to exert hegemonic (although not systematic) power via co-opting and 3) the functioning of heterogeneous groups of opponents, can shed a light on the particular Chinese institutionalised ‘third realm’ that has been quite for long under observation (Huang, 1993). The intention is to outline the potential formation of a space for social innovation and local democracy in the current practices of urban governance. Thus, the aim of the present paper is to explore the theoretical and practical implications of such redefinitions by analysing some case studies of controversial urban regeneration in historic areas in China where the civil society has emerged in different ways. Assuming the truthfulness of point 1 and 2, given the consolidated body of literature reported here, it will achieve this task by looking at the way in which vertical and horizontal integration of citizens’ groups in the decision-making process has happened in three cases in the Yangtze River Delta Region, alongside the achievements and the limitations they have encountered in the overall process.

2. Governance of urban regeneration for historic areas in China

Urban regeneration arose as an urgent need for dilapidated inner city areas in China since the 1980s, especially in major cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Alongside a process of state reforms toward greater administrative fiscal decentralisation and privatisation of land and the housing market, inner city demolition and redevelopment has become a common practice in China (He & Wu, 2009). While decentralisation has exponentially increased the economic appetite of local officials, the season of urban entrepreneurialism has had a direct consequence in boosting property-led urban redevelopments in inner city areas (Ye, 2011).

The pace of redevelopment has been exacerbated by the particular regime of property in China. While the transference of land use rights is allowed, land remains state-owned in cities, and, due to the dual system of the real estate market, local governments can gain from leasing to private developers (He & Wu, 2009). The ambiguity of individual property rights determines a high capital gain between the compensation of urban dwellers and the leasing charge to private developers, and this has generated a dynamic land development process for the maximisation of the land use (Yeh & Wu, 1999). For this reason, although different in nature, the Chinese property-led model of urban development has been associated with the western growth machine (He & Wu, 2005). The behaviour of utilitarian local officials and profit-driven developers has generated alliances between local government and private developers, the so-called local pro-growth coalitions (Zhu, 1999). Excluded from those coalitions, local neighbourhoods have suffered from social injustice (Zhang, 2002). In the Chinese case, injustice is normally the result of unfair displacements and compensation treatments, and this has led to increased conflicts between local residents and the government (Shin, 2008).

However, within the profound change of the urban governance structure of China, some new key actors of community life have emerged. Local state organisations, such as Street Offices (SOs) and neighbourhood Residents’ Committees (RCs) have played more important roles. In particular, they have become integrated power structures of local communities and consequently ‘the site in which the interests of government agencies, commercial organizations, and citizens are negotiated’ (Fayong, 2008, p. 235). In this respect,

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