



Attitude and willingness toward participation in decision-making of urban green spaces in China

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ABSTRACT

Urban green spaces serve a variety of residents with various perceptions, preferences and demands. Their effective governance and precision provision increasingly require public input. Due to the unique political regime, public decision-making in China has long been controlled by governments with the public neglected. With increasing civic consciousness in recent years in urban China, this research investigated attitudes and willingness toward participation in planning, management and design of urban green spaces in Guangzhou. Face-to-face questionnaire surveys were conducted at the 24 green sites across the city with 595 respondents successfully interviewed. The results demonstrated the positive attitudes and strong willingness toward participation despite socioeconomic variations, fitting into a global trend of increasing civic consciousness and strengthening the theoretical base of public participation. Practically, the positive findings lay a sound social foundation for the participatory decision-making in urban China, and help to drive local governments more open and inclusive and develop effective governance strategies and mechanisms to promote public participation in decision-making of urban green spaces.

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Introduction

As public places in cities, urban green spaces (UGS) serve a variety of citizens with various perceptions, preferences and demands (Janse and Konijnendijk, 2007). This leads to that decision-making of UGS, whether planning, management or design, often confronts very complex situations and involves a wide range of stakeholders today (Kaplan, 1980; Hjortsø, 2004; Van Herzele et al., 2005).

A traditional top-down or bureaucratic approach has been increasingly criticized as inappropriate (Yuen, 1996; Jim and Chen, 2006a; Huang, 2010) because it is largely based on professional assumptions rather than users' needs, and these assumptions could be patronizing or even anachronistic (Burgess et al., 1988; Jim and Chen, 2006a). Bureaucratization regards the public as passive users of UGS and fails to reflect diverse needs of different social groups (Yuen, 1996; Tan and Neo, 2009), including their aspirations to actively engage in relevant decision-making (Van Herzele, 2004; Sanesi and Chiarello, 2006). All of these could engender exclusion of certain sectors of people, low use and even nonuse of UGS, improper use and damage of facilities, further creating an additional financial burden for local government (Jim and Chen, 2006b; Huang, 2010).

Alternatively, public participation has been highlighted as one of innovative solutions for public problems (Gyynn and Landry,

1997; Palerm, 1999; Ward Thompson, 2002), and employed as means to involve the public into decision-making processes of UGS (Kaplan, 1980; Lindsey and Knaap, 1999; Hjortsø, 2004; Janse and Konijnendijk, 2007). Further, it has been emphasized that active public participation is the key to success (Wall et al., 2006).

Public involvement can not only reduce the cost and pressure on local governments (Kobori and Primack, 2003) and enhance the effectiveness of management programs (Donaldson-Selby et al., 2007), but also produce citizens' greater satisfaction with outcomes resulting from their efforts (Sommer et al., 1994; Kobori and Primack, 2003). Participation in decision-making could provide citizens with a valuable opportunity to express their views and needs, thus enabling relevant decisions more responsive to their diverse needs. More importantly, through such participation, citizens could gain a sense of empowerment and control and further promote their citizenship and willingness to take part, e.g., good use of and even care for urban parks (Kaplan, 1980; Kobori and Primack, 2003). For example, an empirical analysis in Helsinki, Finland has shown that both the participants and planning authorities agreed with the usefulness of the participatory approach in urban forest planning (Sipilä and Tyrväinen, 2005). A latest study has shown that community engagement promotes the effectiveness of neighborhood parks programs and strengthens users' attachment to the communities and neighborhood parks (Huang, 2010).

Effective public participation is not in reality an easy task, however, because of high complexities and various difficulties (Thomas, 1995; Buchy and Hoverman, 2000; Sipilä and Tyrväinen, 2005),

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such as appropriate use of participation methods as well as contextual and environmental effects (Thomas, 1995; Rowe and Frewer, 2000). A review has indicated that some case studies on participation processes failed to find the expected positive results (Buchy and Hoverman, 2000). For example, Boon and Meilby (2000) reported the objective of increasing the influence of local users of forests was only partly achieved in Denmark. Simply half of the respondents (member of forest user councils) harbored a good perception of having gained influence with one-third perceiving no enhanced influence. A study in Turkey found that the effectiveness of public participation in forestry was mixed with a long tradition of top-down management (Atmiş et al., 2007).

In China, public participation has increasingly been required by the central government in dealing with public issues since its introduction during 1990s when the reform was extended into the public sectors (Yang, 2008; Zhong and Mol, 2008). Unfortunately, the practices of nearly 20 years have indicated that public participation has rarely been effectively implemented in China. In addition to legal and institutional deficiencies (Yang, 2008; Heberer, 2009), the public attitudes and willingness toward it constitute another key factor. For example, Yang (2008) clearly pointed out that the public lacks willingness to participate in environmental protection and suggested to change the attitudes through education and training programs. Li (2011) stated that public participation in the transforming society represents mainly mobilized participation and instrumental participation, reflecting weak willingness to participate. Relevant literature mostly comes from community governance, environmental governance and planning fields (Yang, 2008; Zhong and Mol, 2008; Heberer, 2009; Li, 2011), however, very few studies have been found to address public participation regarding UGS in China with the public attitudes and willingness toward it unknown. Such attitudes and willingness concern a social base of public participation generally and success in involving the public into decision-making of UGS in particular (Wall et al., 2006). Research on the attitudes and willingness could also help to integrate complex details of local dynamics into early stages of planning and management processes of UGS (Balram and Dragičević, 2005).

To fill this gap, the present research aims to investigate residents' attitudes and willingness toward participation in decision-making of UGS in China. Attitude here is understood as a learned and brief evaluation affecting thoughts and actions, stated in a favorable or unfavorable way (Balram and Dragičević, 2005). Guangzhou, the largest municipality in South China and a pioneering city of the reform and opening, is chosen as a case study.

Increased access to information (Davis, 1996; Thomas, 1995), rising civic consciousness (Heberer, 2009; Huang, 2010; Wang, 2010), a strong desire for good quality of life against poor environmental quality, enhanced concern for UGS (Jim and Chen, 2006b) as well as dissatisfaction with and mistrust on governments (Balram and Dragičević, 2005) may conspire to generate residents' strong aspirations to engage in decision-making of UGS, which concern quality of urban living on a daily basis and urban sustainability in the long term, but suffer from heavy development pressure in most Chinese cities (Ng and Xu, 2000; Li et al., 2005b). It can be expected, therefore, that Guangzhou residents harbor positive attitudes and strong willingness toward participation in decision-making of UGS.

However, the attitudes and willingness may be varied across specific social groups due to the ongoing fast socio-spatial transformations. For example, due to the distinct social and political environments (open versus closed), the younger appear to be more active and willing to participate than the elder (Wang et al., 2004; Heberer, 2009; Wang, 2010). More knowledge and higher awareness of the value of UGS can promote participation aspirations (Balram and Dragičević, 2005; Xiao and McCright, 2007). Therefore, residents with higher education level may have stronger

willingness than the less educated in Guangzhou. In addition, during continuous suburbanization in the city (Zhou et al., 1998), the young, highly educated and wealthy people moved to new districts and composed the majority of population there (Wang and Li, 2006). The spatial changes of population may engender that new districts embrace stronger willingness to participate than old ones.

Study area and methods

Study area

The study area concentrates on the urbanized areas of the eight central districts of Guangzhou city (Fig. 1), the capital of Guangdong Province. The area of 335.42 km² accounts for 23.38% of the total area of the city (Guangzhou Statistical Bureau, 2006). It accommodates a population of 4.52 million (Guangzhou Census Office, 2002) with a high population density of 13,482 km⁻². Rapid economic growth has enhanced aspirations for a better quality of urban life, e.g., leisure and UGS.

In 2005, urban Guangzhou embraced 244.03 km² green spaces, accounting for 33.2% of the total area (Guangzhou Statistical Bureau, 2006). The green ratio and per capita level were just higher than the corresponding national criteria of 30% and 10 m². With some green areas encroached by fast urban growth and transformations, however, increasing needs for recreational places has induced heavy use of existing green sites.

Like other Chinese cities, the municipal government owns the land and controls decision-making of UGS under national and provincial legislations (Fig. 2). Specifically, the Guangzhou Bureau for Forestry and Urban Parks as a government unit is actually in charge of planning, management, design and funding of UGS through its affiliated departments, such as planning, park and finance departments, as well as the District-level Bureaus for Forestry and Urban Parks (Fig. 2). Experts and professionals can contribute to decision-making of UGS through their expertise, but the government still has decisive power in almost all the aspects. Under the bureaucratic administrative structure, little or only tokenism-level public participation (e.g., informing) (Arnstein, 1969) is introduced, which could make mismatches between resident demands and provision of UGS (Jim and Chen, 2006b).

Methods

Following a pretest, data in this research were collected in December 2005 through face-to-face questionnaire surveys at the 24 green sites across Guangzhou city (Fig. 1). Four undergraduate students from a local university were recruited and trained as research assistants in the pilot test and full survey.

First, the sample was stratified by the population of the eight districts. The sampled population of individual districts was proportional to the ratio of their respective population to the total population of the study area in 2000. The 2000 Guangzhou census data (Guangzhou Census Office, 2002) was used for calculations, which is the most updated source available for this study. Then, the respondents were randomly selected at the sites through a systematic sampling scheme (Gobster, 1995; Kornblum et al., 2001) and asked if it is necessary for Guangzhou residents to participate in planning, management and design of UGS (attitudes toward participation), and if they themselves are willing to participate given the opportunities available (willingness to participate). Each question was followed by a five-step Likert scale with the responses from very necessary or willing (coded as 1) to very unnecessary or unwilling (5). Several socioeconomic variables were also gleaned. The descriptive statistics presented the general situations, while

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