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Negotiated Public: Investigating the Streetscape of Beijing's Old City

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Abstract: The emergence of conflictual practices in the street life of Beijing's old city has challenged the conventional use of the concepts of public and private in the design of public space. This paper proposes a novel way of reading and understanding the street as a public realm under negotiation by exploring the controversial and conflicting spatial practices and ambiguous social expressions of a traditional type of street in Beijing, namely the *hutong*. It argues that the street is best understood as a dynamic public realm negotiated through common agreement, spatial conflict, and ephemeral intervention. This argument hopes to open discussions towards a more localised and comprehensive understanding of public space in Chinese cities.

Keywords: appropriation; negotiation; public space; the streetscape

Introduction

This paper's interest in renewing the way to read and understand public space in Chinese cities emerged from the observation of the enormous spontaneous and undefined activities taking place in the old city of Beijing. For instance, the hanging of personal laundry above the designed public facilities on the street defies the formal expression of urban public space; similarly, people inhabit the street by bringing out their chairs and tea tables from their living rooms, as if the street were their private ground. At first glance, the design principle of public space is not able to grasp the nuances and complexities of such a socio-spatial condition, where people exhaust the maximum availability of public properties and resources.

The deficiency, in my opinion, lies in the theoretical perspective in our contemporary design thinking of public space in Chinese cities. The current theoretical debate on the Chinese city has touched upon the particular characteristics of public space related to the Chinese urban culture (Lu, 2006, Li, 2014). In the design processes, however, there remains a generalisation of understanding the street as an obvious and legitimate public realm, assuming a rather consistent public behaviour. Other possibilities for a conceptual change also in the design practices of public space are not fully recognised and explored.

In this paper, I want to propose an alternative conceptual expression of the street as a negotiated public realm, in which the public is conditional and dynamic. In order to do so, this paper has conducted a



qualitative study of a specific type of street—namely the *hutong*—which is the alley aligned with traditional courtyard houses in the old city of Beijing (Figure 1). The living culture of the Chinese and how they perceive the public and private dimensions of their living environment find their full expression in this traditional urban typology. By using the methods of drawing, photograph, and interview, this paper investigates the spatial and social practices in the *hutong*, discussing three ways of negotiation in the making and using of the street space: common agreement, spatial conflict, and ephemeral intervention.



Figure 1. A typical example of the *hutong* (Source: author photo)

The Common Agreement: Negotiation in the Using of Public Space

Let us explore this new perspective of negotiation concerning using the street as public property from its most basic meaning: setting up a common agreement (Oxford English Dictionary, 2019). That is to say, the public or private use of spaces in the *hutong* is initially operated by agreements among residents themselves rather than determined by land property as in Western cities. The logic of the common agreement, according to my exploration, is the main cause of the so-called ambiguous status of land ownership and the privatisation of public space.

Street appropriation has been a common practice in the history of the Chinese city. As depicted for instance, in literature, the *hutong* in Beijing was commonly inhabited by shops displaying commodities for public viewing and purchase in the past. Swedish art historian Osvald Sirén (1924, p.8) addresses this phenomenon in his book *The Walls and Gates of Peking* that ‘a good deal of the business is transacted in the street, by the shopkeepers as well as by itinerant vendors, particularly at the food shops which display their delicacies outside’. However, some Western scholars have considered such a practice as the privatisation of public space and criticised it as displaying ‘a lack of public spirit’; the assumption was that people in the city lacked senses of responsibility and respect regarding public properties and public rules. As shown in the book *Chinese Characteristics* written by the American missionary Arthur Henderson Smith (1894, p.110), one of the earliest Western texts that present Chinese culture to foreign readers, appropriating public spaces was such a common practice in Chinese cities at the time that it was disturbing to a Western eye. ‘The wide streets of Peking are lined with stalls and booths which have no right of existence,’ as Smith complains, adding that ‘...the space opposite to the shop of each belongs not to an imaginary “public” but the owner of the shop’.

I would argue that the prevailing of space appropriation in the *hutong*, which seems firmly embedded in the Chinese tradition of living, is an initial result of the common agreement in negotiating the right to use spaces. There are many ways to establish a common agreement in the *hutong*. A typical example is making a personal statement in the public street by displaying private belongings such as home furniture, vehicle, and laundry. The places where people make such a statement are often peculiar: the crossing of two alleys, the street corner, or the front door of their house, where they have the best view towards the



Figure 2. People sitting at the crossing of two streets and talking to the passing-by (Source: author photo)

various things going on in the surroundings (Figure 2). Next to displaying personal stuff, we find simultaneously different approaches in making agreements. When a conflict of interests occurs in using the shared spaces between two neighbours in close proximity, people set up a rule in a more implicit way and sometimes even by a long-term effort to defend the territory. In an interview, a *hutong* resident identifies the unique pattern of bike parking in front of his door: the left side is fully parked while the right side is empty (Figure 3). ‘This is because,’ he explains, ‘the neighbour living in the right door does not want bikes parking next to his door, while we do not care so much.’

About how this became a common agreement in the community, he puts further, ‘maybe he once kept moving away bikes from his front door for about two months, and this is perhaps how he set up this rule.’



Figure 3. The bike parking on both sides of the door (Source: author photo)

The perspective of the common agreement illustrates that the street has been negotiated to become a public realm or a private territory not by land property or public rules but rather by autonomous spatial practices. Sometimes the common agreement is made explicit by personal occupations of the street space, and in other cases, it is more veiled behind the social scene of the community.

The Spatial Conflict: Negotiation in the Contention of Public Space

The second act of negotiation I want to specify is spatial conflict, which refers to the conflictual spatial practices occurring in the public street due to the diverging needs and interests of different social groups. As Donald Appleyard (1987) notes, ‘...streets have always been scenes of conflict. They are and have always been public property, but power over them is ambiguous’. These conflicts manifested in spatial practices have transformed the street into a battleground, where people exercise their power, as what Sharon Zukin (1995) claims, to experience, to conceptualise, and to control those spaces.

The spatial conflict takes over in the negotiation process when people fail to set up a common agreement. One of the conflictual points I have discovered through observation and interview is the catch basin for rainwater in the *hutong*. In many places, the water wells supposed to be used for drainage have become the dumping points of left-over food; such a practice not only blocks the rain water but also deteriorates the street environment. To stop this uncivilised behaviour, the residents first attempted to negotiate through written communication by putting a sign on the wall: ‘do not pour rubbish to the catch basin’. However, this strategy to set up a common agreement failed to change the situation, and eventually, people have to put a cover on the catch basin to physically prevent the rubbish dumping (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The covered catch basin and the warning sign on the wall (Source: author photo)

Taking a close look at the urban transformation process in the past years, we could understand that the spatial conflict is also a result of the emerging inequality in the right to public spaces caused by external forces. In Beijing’s old city, the rise of real estate development since the 1990s and the massive building process of tourism since the 2000s have been decisive in this sense (Beijing Municipal City Planning Commission, 2005). Notably, the cultural values embedded in the historical city generated an opportunity for developing tourism: within five years, many traditional courtyard units were sold to wealthy real estate developers and private owners (Fang, 2000a, 2000b). The locals were gradually pushed aside, and the limited public facilities in the old urban areas were taken over by the boosted domestic and international tourist trade. The economic benefit brought by tourism development has dramatised the spatial issues in the *hutong*: both posh courtyard houses as restaurants or offices and crowded shantytown style living units exist in one urban block, displaying a polarised economic and social condition with both global business elites and the urban poor (Zhang, 1997).

Among the changes in the social and economic landscape of the *hutong*, representatively, the arrival of automobiles has generated a crucial point of spatial conflict. Since the 1980s, the *hutong* has been forced to accommodate cars despite its limited traffic capacity. Car occupation intensified the issue of space scarcity in the *hutong* and resulted in various social confrontations articulated by the conflicts in space. One eye-catching phenomenon is the placement of old and broken bikes underneath the back window of a house or along the street. These bikes, which seem like ‘pieces of installation art’, are placed purposefully by some *hutong* residents to stop car parking next to their windows (Jia and Wu, 2014, p.104). As displayed in this street scene (Figure 5), the juxtaposition of the rusty bicycles and an expensive car on the potential sidewalk showcases people’s struggle to refine the condition of being invaded by a privileged use of the street by certain groups.



Figure 5. Broken bikes lying on the ground (Source: author photo)

We can understand from these objects negotiation through the spatial conflict is a radical and spontaneous attempt to resolve contentions in using public spaces and to maintain a social balance in the *hutong*. The public street is taken for granted by people as shared resources, but only if shared equally. By reframing the privatised urban spaces into public resources again, the spatial conflict has emphasised the characteristics of the street as a social arena mediating conflicts among the claims and interests of different social groups.

The Ephemeral Intervention: Negotiation in the Making of Public Space

The third way of negotiation, which I call the ephemeral intervention, is to my understanding the most relevant to our design perspective of public space. We used to think in the fixed categories of design and appropriation, but this context has urged us to change our perspective towards the equal importance of the two in the making of public space. Rather than the permanent intervention implemented from formal design proposals, the private-driven ephemeral intervention does not have a legal right of existence, and neither does it last long. Initiated by people, it is a practice that temporarily exists but has the potential to catalyse a change of spatiality in the public realm.

The ubiquitous laundry drying, a remarkable characteristic of the *hutong*, might be one of the most illustrative examples of the ephemeral intervention. For the locals, public facilities such as utility poles, trees, and cables are available materials for setting up a laundry drying space. As in this situation (Figure 6), the iron pole used for electricity is perhaps too smooth to tie a string, and thus a small piece of wood has been added on top to resolve the problem of friction. This additional spatial device, as an ephemeral intervention, has changed the nature of the pole from a public facility to a domestic tool. By ephemeral interventions like laundry drying, people reappropriate and restructure the street space to adapt to their daily needs of domestic life.



Figure 6. (Source: author photo)

In the *hutong*, the two types of interventions — the permanent and the ephemeral — co-exist and collaborate in the making of public space. There are good examples that illustrate the controversial results of this collaboration. One of them is the street corner connecting the main street to the small alley, a favourite place to stay and to gather among the *hutong* residents. While the public sector implemented a top-down restoration of the area by paving the ground with bricks, the ephemeral intervention took over the social design of the place. On the one hand, the corner space is not pleasing to the eye because of a dirty ground with a stack of trash, and its dark and oily surface indicates a lack of responsibility among the residents; on the other hand, the dirtiness does not prevent people from claiming the space. Chairs and tea tables mingling with bike parking and even with

discarded waste — the whole set up of things presents a fluid situation, where the officially designed public space is easily overturned by a set of positive and negative appropriations (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The ephemeral interventions extracted from the space and highlighted in red (Source: author photo and author drawing)

Besides the ground pavement, the refurbishment of the urban historical centre has equipped some places with designed elements such as stone benches and landscape sculptures. According to the residents, a large part of those interventions come from the municipality to block the open facades of the illegal shops and cafés in the *hutong*. Using hard material like stone reveals the intention of the designer to introduce a permanent intervention to the street, aiming for a positive change in the quality of public space. It turned out that these benches are only occasionally used by the passing by tourists and most of the time occupied by the laundry drying activity: as the line above the bench hanging bedroom items shows (Figure 8). The bench's hardness and the laundry's softness have not only created a striking visual contrast but also manifested a conflict between the designer's ideal and people's perception of the space. In the two types of the spatial interventions, the juxtapositions of objects, combinations of activities, and collisions of ideas have constituted a new spatiality: a spatiality that articulates the public realm as a social arena under constant negotiation between different actors in the development of urban projects.



Figure 8. The drawing has mapped the two types of interventions from the photo: the bench and the vegetation as the permanent interventions and the hanging laundry as the ephemeral intervention. (Source: author photo and author drawing)

The prevailing of the ephemeral interventions in the hutong has showcased that the making of the public realm is by nature a dialogue between public agencies and citizens. While the authority imposed its will to shape the urban environment, the people simultaneously pose their claims to the city; while the designers offered their insights on the public space, the citizens tend to restructure it with their spatial

practices. Such realities also challenge us to re-identify the significant limitation of architectural and urban projects in shaping the social behaviours of people in the public realm.

Conclusion

The paper has offered a new understanding of the street as a public realm under negotiation and has briefly discussed three ways of negotiation as common agreement, spatial conflict, and ephemeral intervention. When looking at the street activities through the lens of negotiation, we recognise the complex and dynamic nature embedded in the using, contention, and making of the public realm.

The idea of common agreement, the primary form of negotiation, invites us to think about another way of defining the public and the private territories in Chinese cities. We have been focusing on parameters such as ownership, accessibility, and public laws to define what is public and what is private. Now we should start to question the availability of public space as something conditional, fluid and bound with specific cultural norms.

The practice of spatial conflict urges us to pay attention to the characteristics of the street as material conditions enabled by contentions over the evolved social inequality. Space is a product of social action, and the reordering of space is also a reordering of social relations (Lefebvre, 1991, Lu, 2006). The spatial conflict — alleviating or intensifying the contentions in the use of the street — embodies the nature of public space as the arena that mediates social issues and different interests as well as a result of the issues and divergence.

The perspective of ephemeral intervention challenges us to reconsider the approaches and actors in the shaping of public spaces. By re-defining appropriation as an ephemeral urban intervention, we understand better the design of public space as a matter of common and dialogical practices. It could, I believe, open up different views on the design of public space in Chinese architectural and urban practices.

Moreover, the results of this paper correspond to the contestation of ‘a unified public, the desire for fixed categories, and the rigid concepts of public and private space’ (Crawford, 1995, p.4), which has been ongoing since the 1990s. This paper, however, has used an utterly different example from the early scholarship that has mostly concentrated on American cities. Especially given the qualitative methods employed in this research, the reflections on the phenomena of negotiation are limited within a certain scope of scholarly perspectives and will not show the whole picture of public space in Chinese cities. But it hopes to steer future discussions towards a more localised and comprehensive understanding of public space and to help practice act in and respond more adequately to the conditions of Chinese cities.

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