

# How Do Urban Public Spaces Engage and Promote Civic Participation

## A Comparative Historical Study Based on Ancient Chinese and Western Societies

Huirong Cheng<sup>1, a, \*, †</sup>, Min Lei<sup>2, b, \*, †</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Nanjing University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

<sup>2</sup>Lingnan University, Hong Kong SAR, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: <sup>a</sup>mg20100022@smail.nju.edu.cn, <sup>b</sup>minlei@ln.hk

<sup>†</sup>These authors contributed equally.

### ABSTRACT

With the development of urbanization, urban public space and civic participation have become an exploratory topic of academic research in many disciplines. Nevertheless, few papers have involved the relationship between urban public space and civic participation through a comparative perspective on the West and the East. This article applies comparative research methods to study public space and civic participation in ancient Western and Eastern cities mainly focusing on Greece, Rome, and the Han Dynasty in China. This research paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, it studies the public space of Western cities represented by Athens in Ancient Greece and Rome. Secondly, it analyses the public space of Eastern cities represented by Chang'an and Luoyang in the Han Dynasty. It can be found that urban public spaces both in the East and the West can be classified into political, economic, cultural, religious, and amusement types. Finally, the relationship between public space and civic participation is explored through a comparative view, which can be found that urban public space can promote civic participation in 3 ways: establishing community awareness, enhancing public collective coordination, and promoting the benign interaction of various social strata. Therefore, looking back into nowadays, for the practical significance, this paper can provide a practical reference for today's urban planning, construction, and management.

**Keywords:** urbanization, urban public space, civic participation, practical reference

### 1. INTRODUCTION

With the establishment of the Empire and the expansion of the scope and degree of control over the country, urban design was influenced by the political ideas of the ruling class and reflected the ruling form, which was embodied in the design of public space and citizen participation. The design of public space in Greece, known as the hometown of democracy, was very spontaneous. Influenced by ancient Greece, the Roman Empire continued the ancient Greek concept of urban space layout while it had a more concrete and clearer division of public space to undertake citizens' public activities on its basis. In the same period, it was the Han Dynasty in China. Although China tended to express the intention of rulers and the concept of feudal hierarchy in the division of public space in urban design, it did not

mean that the participation of citizens had never existed. It is clear that the layout of the urban area was linked to rulers' intentions and civic participation.

The association of public space design and civic participation is not an initiative topic among scholarships. To review the discussion of public space among scholarship, Mumford discussed the design of public space and the development of cities from a view of urbanology[1]. Habermas first has explored the emergence and dismantlement of public space in capitalism from the history and sociology aspects[2]. From Marcel's discussion about public space and democracy, various formats of space could be identified in a matrix, the horizon as human-oriented or religion-oriented, and the vertical identification separated from private to common[3]. Public space did relate to the origins of democracy in Rome. In Rose's opinion, the

official public space in Rome emerged in relation to local interests and everyday trades spontaneously developed in Rome[4]. Among China, Huang Yang discussed the public space in ancient Greece with the view of the dominance of public space and the subordination of private space, which reflected the important feature that democracy was higher than freedom in city-state politics, which was different from modern western liberal democracy. Contrasted to Greece and Rome, from common sense, the public space in China was usually considered disappearing among public eyes with the attributes of feudalism. The public activity space in the Han Dynasty was relatively limited because the grand scale of the Chang'an palace area severely suppressed the living conditions of ordinary residents. While in deep research, although the public activity space in ancient China was relatively restricted, the scale of the public space available for public activities in the capital of the Han Dynasty had been very considerable, by Chinese historian Zijin Wang[5]. As a place not limited to economic or social conditions with accessibility and sociality for anyone, public space can be applied as an important topic to explore and compare the evolution of Chinese civic participation in ancient Greece, Rome, and China and its impact on later cultural characteristics. However, few papers discuss the public space of ancient Greece, Rome, and China from a comparative perspective. Therefore, the focus of this article will be on the relationship between the association of civic participation and application of public space between Chinese and Western civilizations from ancient Greece, Rome, and the Han Dynasty on a comparative view in various aspects from politics, economic activities and cultural activities respectively.

## 2. WESTERN PUBLIC SPACE AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Discussing the formation of the Greek city-state and the relationship between public space, Huang once proposed that in the Greek city-state, the public sphere or city-state field was represented by public living space, and the public space was formed through the pattern of public buildings[6]. At the same time, the division of city-state public buildings was from the perspective of archaeologists, the places of municipal, religious and civil society, and cultural activities. Therefore, the analysis of this part will explore the different nature of public buildings in Greece and Rome, and take the city-state municipal, religious, civil society, and cultural activities as the criteria to distinguish, to explore the promoting relationship between public space and civic participation.

### 2.1. Origins of Public Space – Agora as An Example in Ancient Greece

The public space was defined as a large area, non-

interactive and unrestricted public space, which promoted civic participation and increased interactive and independent possibilities to civic life. In English, the earliest recorded use of the word “public” was to connect “public” with the common interests of society. In 1470, Mallory said, “emperor Lucius... Dictator or recipient of Roman public welfare”. By the end of the 17th century, the usage of the word “public” gradually approached our current application of “public” referred to be open to anyone’s examination, which was an open and comprehensive field of social communication and civic interaction. In the 1960s, the “public space” was introduced and explained as a certain terminology from the aspect of history[7]. To begin with the argument, the concept of civic participation should be identified. Civic was originated from a Latin word, which was the word for a citizen of Ancient Rome. The participation had the implication of commutative interaction with voluntary willingness, which could implicate the underlying sense of identical belonging. Therefore, in this paper, the concept of civic participation will be determined into the civic willingness for activities that can reveal the political authority and the sense of belonging for identities. Mutually, activities that citizens participated in can promote the sense of identity belonging tied up with the political authority forwardly and inclusively.

The existence of public space had existed since the birth of the city, which could be identified in Athens, in ancient Greece. Ancient Greece was a city-state composed of many fragmented states in the modern perspective on separate islands. In contrast to ocean island politics in Greece, the enfeoffment by the emperor in the Zhou Dynasty and the feudal system later in the Qin Dynasty, kind of mainland politics was neglect of the development of civic life. In the political vocabulary of Ancient Greece, the word ‘Politics’ comes from ‘Polis’, which referred to a fortress or *Acropolis* in Homer’s epic. As opposed to “*Demos*”, *Acropolis*, on the top of Athens, was often referred to as “*Polis*” by Athenians. The periphery field around the fort was “*Asto*”. Later generations collectively referred to the *Acropolis*, urban areas and rural suburbs as a “*Polis*”, with the meaning of “*State*” in modern concept, and evolved into the name of “*city-state*”, which had the characteristics of independence and fragmented land. As the birthplace of democracy, the urban design of Greece could reflect the characteristics of democracy, with profound extents on civic participation, especially in the design of public space.

The *Agora* in Athens was located in the center of ancient Greece, the core area around the ancient track of the *Panathenaic Way*, which was a path that originated from the northern city gate to the southeast to the *Acropolis*. *Agora* literally referred to “gathering” or “meeting”. It was said that *Odyssey* had its own specific actions in *Agora*, and *Agora* was just a space for people to get together[8]. By the 5th century BC, *Agora* had

become an indispensable part of Greek citizen life. *Agora* was surrounded by public buildings, such as *Assembly*, *Bouleuterion*, *Law Court*, *Tholos*, *Stoa Poikle*, *Metroon*, *Mint*, which provoked and remained the social communication, civic interaction, and thoughts debates. For its location, the *Agora* was located on the main street loaded with various people and markets. With the advantage of its location, it could provoke civic interaction and social communication. As in the *Aristophanes*’ ‘*Birds*’ and ‘*Frogs*’, supported *Agora* was the public center for citizens which was also depicted by the analyzation from Murphy. [9][10]. Besides, the layout of *Agora* could reveal the *Senate* valued civic life and the effect of civic participation in politics. Therefore, the *Agora* was regarded as the birthplace of Western democratic thought supported by various civic participation with the stage of political participation and deliberation in ancient Greece. However, *Agora*, as a miscellaneous collection of civic daily religious activities, political, judicial, social, and commercial activities, had not separated and differentiated the urban layout of public buildings responsible for civil life compared with Rome.

## 2.2. Transmission to Roman Empire

In 265 BC, Rome took over the colonial leadership in Greece, integrated and developed the culture of ancient Greece. In the first century BC, Rome was no longer a single city, but an empire composed of many colonies and enfeoffed cities, which occupied a large territory. Meanwhile, culture integration occurred in the period of colonization, the important part of Greek civil life, features of public space, were also inherited and carried forward by Rome.

### 2.2.1. Politics

*Agora* in Greece was an extension of residential areas, and public space was derived from the needs of civil life. More distinctive from *Agora* in Greece, the public space had more meaning of political control revealed in the affiliation of *Forum* and emperors at this time. The *Forum*, which was mainly connected with emperor ruling palaces in previous dynasties, was located on *Capitoline Hill* enclosed by several public buildings, city offices, and Basilica. Civil life was mainly concentrated and integrated into the imperial forum with the characteristic nature of the empire. For example, Although the social function of the *Forum* was similar to *Agora* with the nature of civic participation, it could be seen as more controllable under the leadership of the imperial authority, civil life had associated with political leadership more than before, which was closely related to political authority. The *Julius Caesar Forum* was the first of the imperial forum ascribed to Emperor *Julius*, who provoked the initial so-called imperial forum appended with commemorating nature. Thereupon, the series of imperial forums imitated the *Julius Forum* not only in

format but also with the nature of connecting civic participation with political authority, completed by *Augustus* in 29 B.C. *Trajan Forum* was the embodiment of the most commemorative square. Among them, the most memorable construction that could appropriately reflect the purpose of political authority was the *Trajan’s Column*, which recorded people’s contributions to the maintenance of the country. According to Gibbon, the beauty of the stone pillar was still reflected in its full performance of *Trajan’s victory in Dacia*[11]. This kind of behavior of displaying their achievements and artificially striving for glory for themselves through the square was that citizens obtain a sense of honor through national honor, which reflected the combination of civic participation and political authority. With the developed political controls in the period of the empire, though the public space was closely under the association of empire, some might argue it restricted the promotion of civic participation. However, in the *Trajan’s Column*, it indeed reinforced and promoted the civic participation, especially, with the nationalism, political authority.

### 2.2.2. Civic Life

Apart from political controls of the empire, the *Forum* was accounted for religious and public activities surrounded by temples, churches, shops, or markets nearby. Theatres and public baths were also common. Later, the boundary of the *Forum* became clearer and more closed, consisting of a series of separated spaces. According to the expansion of territory in Rome, the composition of citizens was more diverse. Thus, the requirements for civic life were more diversified, whereas the public space for civic life had clearer divisions of functions from trades, religions, and amusement.

#### 2.2.2.1. Trades

For the expansion of Roman Empire territory and the increase of population, the economic trading activities in the ancient Roman Empire were not limited to a centralized square. The scope of public space in terms of transactions has been expanded, and the control was more subject to the emperor. *Martials*, a Roman historian described that emperor *Domitian* announced the prohibition barbers, bartenders, butchers going on the street in order to alleviate the congestion of the market[12]. In Pompeii, shops were not centrally arranged but set up along the street, which was conducive to promoting the mobilization of citizens to go out of their homes and trade in different streets[12]. Imperceptibly, it provided many opportunities to interact with cross-culture people to provoke the cultural interaction within the large territory and diverse population additionally.

During the period of the Rome empire, the trades were not occurred and focused on a centralized public space (*Julius’s Forum*, *Trajan’s Forum*, etc.), whereas

differentiated from forums and established a certain marketplace (*Mercatus Traiani*) with an obvious nature of imperial authority from construction. The *Mercatus Traiani* located next to *Trajan's Forum* was mainly responsible for the trading activities of Roman citizens. Functionally, compared with *Agora* in Greece, the public trading space in Rome was completely differentiated from the deliberative function and formed an independent functional area. Moreover, *Mercatus Traiani* was built by the emperor and named after the emperor, which was distinctive from China's restrictions on commercial activities under the influence of "emphasizing agriculture and restraining business" in traditional Confucius thoughts, but reflected the characteristics that commercial activities promoted civic participation in political activities and combined commercial activities with associations with political power in management nor restriction.

#### 2.2.2.2. Religious and Amusements

In the period of the Rome Empire, religious public space was tied up with the imperial authority closely. *Basilica* in Rome was adjacent to the forum, for worshipping the spiritual presence of the emperor, to consolidate associations between the glory of imperial governance and the sense of civic identity belonging, to promote civic participation. Aside from imperial-oriented public space, there were various public spaces for reinforcing the identity of Rome which was distinctive from other's cultures. For instance, for provoking public leisure admiration, every Roman city had at least one *Theatre*, which was sourced from Greece. The *Circus Maximus* and the *Colosseum* were introducing animals to amusing in civic life and promoting the identity of warriors in Rome. Besides, the *Roman Bath* was established as a big enclosed public bathing space for not only washing their body but a distinct characteristic in Rome. Therefore, it can be concluded that the ruling thought was closely related to the design of urban public space. From Greece to the Roman Republic and then to the Roman Empire, public space was gradually solidified and managed with the strengthening of regime control. Nevertheless, Rome developed in ancient Greece based on democratic culture, compared with the Han Dynasty in the same period, the civil life of the Roman Empire was still diverse.

In summary, Western cities represented by Athens and Rome had urban public spaces such as *Agora*, *Forums*, *Trajan's marketplace*, and *Basilica*, which could promote civic participation.

### 3. CHINESE PUBLIC SPACE AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The scale of public space in the capital city of the Han Dynasty has been very considerable[5]. There have been

records of the application of urban space for public activities in Chang'an in the Western Han Dynasty, and Luoyang in the Eastern Han Dynasty had more abundant venues for public activities. Public space provides the basic conditions for the public to participate in political, economic, and cultural activities.

#### 3.1. Politics

"*Que*" was the building for observation on both sides of the gate of the ancient imperial palace. *Que* was an important public space because there was a wide space in front of it, which could accommodate more than a thousand people. The emperor could announce government orders here, and people could gather here freely. The several imperial college students' movements with greater political influence in the Han Dynasty all took advantage of the "*que*" space. For example, there was a story of "*Wang Xian raised banners to save Bao Xuan*" recorded in *Han Shu* Volume 72 *Biography of Bao Xuan*[13]. This was a collective movement of *Taixue* students (imperial college students) during the regime of Emperor Ai of the Western Han Dynasty. Thousands of students headed by Wang Xian stopped the prime minister Kong Guang's carriage to intercede and then went to the "*que*" to file a complaint with the emperor, and Bao Xuan was eventually saved from death[14]. In addition, Zhu Mu, an upright official in the Eastern Han Dynasty, was convicted for conflict with the eunuch clique and sentenced to hard labor. Thousands of people including the *taixue* student Liu Tao wrote a letter, expressing their willingness to be punished in place of Zhu Mu. Under pressure, Emperor Huan had to pardon Zhu Mu (*Hou Hanshu* Volume 43 *Biography of Zhu Mu*) [15].

"*Taixue*", the imperial college, was also a public space for citizens to conduct political activities. "*Taixue*" was the highest educational institution in ancient China which taught Confucian classics and trained future officials. There were a large number of *Taixue* students. Since Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty established "*Taixue*", the number of students has been increasing and even reached more than 30,000 during the Eastern Han Dynasty. "*Taixue*" had a large scale, and there was also a vast public space outside the gate of *Taixue*, which could gather more than a thousand people. The imperial college students' movements mentioned above were gathered here.

#### 3.2. Trade

*Shi*, the market, was the most typical public space in the Han Dynasty. The markets of Chang'an City in the Western Han Dynasty and Luoyang City in the Eastern Han Dynasty were close to the areas where residents gathered, adapting to the needs of residents, and the service industry was developed and prosperous. There

were many merchants settled in the “*Shi*”, and people operated and consumed here. However, “*Shi*” in the Han Dynasty was not autonomous and free. It was controlled by the government. Officials such as the “*Shizhang*”, “*Shiling*”, “*Shicheng*” were specially set up to manage it. In addition, the public execution of the death penalty in the Han Dynasty was usually held in the “*Shi*”. The administrative propaganda and social deterrence effect caused by the execution of the punishment also show the role of the “*Shi*” as a public space.

### 3.3. Culture

“*Shi*” was not only a market for historical business transactions but also a place for people to conduct cultural activities. In the Western Han Dynasty, there was a special market in Chang’an, namely “*Huai Shi*”. “*Huai Shi*” was named because of the many “*Huai*”, locust trees, here. It was a regular market for the gathering of scholars and trading books and stationery. The commercial atmosphere here was relatively weak, while the academic atmosphere was quite strong. Scholars and students met here at the beginning and the middle of the month, and exchanged with each other with hometown products, classic books, and musical instruments[5].

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, “*Shu Si*” in Luoyang City was also a market for book transactions. Compared with the “*Huai Shi*”, “*Shu Si*” was more professional and normalized, and it was an important place for cultural dissemination.

### 3.4. Religion and Amusement

“*Lixiang Qianmo*” means alleys and roads. “*Lixiang Qianmo*” was a public space that should not be ignored, where religious sacrificial activities and entertainment and competitive sports could be held here. Sacrificing to the “*Xiwangmu*” was an activity with the worship of the “*Xiwangmu*” as the theme of belief. This activity might not be religious, but it had religious fanaticism and could gather an extremely powerful social impact.

In “*Lixiang Qianmo*”, you can also set up “*Boju*”. “*Boju*” referred to gambling equipment such as “*Liu Boqi*”, which was a common entertainment activity for the people in the Han Dynasty. In the book of *Salt and Iron Theory*, there were records of “*Zhuchi*” (horse racing or hunting animals) and “*Taju*” (football), both of which were collective entertainment and competitive sports[5]. People could form and strengthen the consciousness of community by participating in the above religious belief activities and entertainment and competitive sports.

In summary, Eastern cities represented by China’s Chang’an and Luoyang had urban public spaces such as *Que*, *Taixue*, *Shi*, *Huaishi*, *Lixiang Qianmo*, and *Shusi*, which could promote civic participation.

## 4. PATHWAYS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PUBLIC SPACE

In the above two parts, Athens, Rome, Chang’an, and Luoyang are examples to explore the public spaces in the East and the West respectively. Although there are differences in the scale, design purpose, and actual functions of public spaces in those cities, it can be found that public space can promote civic participation, which is a commonality. In this part, we will determine how the public space can promote civic participation in three aspects from establishing the social community for the willingness of civic participation, common civic collaboration in horizontal, and cross-society deign integration in vertical.

Firstly, public space can be conducive to the establishment of a social community and provide citizens with the willingness to participate in public activities. To identify the internal triggers, public space is a space for various information and public opinions transmitting. Through the interaction and transmission of information, people in the public space find commonalities between each other, generate trust, have a psychological sense of identity and belonging, gradually form a sense of community, and then establish a social community no matter in Eastern and Western. In the West, the sports hall was an important public space in both ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. As Buchhart said, the spirit of competition was the most important spirit of the Greeks. Later, in the period of the Roman Empire, there was a saying that “If the Grand Arena is in, Rome is in, if the Grand Arena is dead, Rome is dead. If Rome is dead, the world is dead.” Whether in ancient Greece or the Roman Empire, in the arena, the winner would receive great rewards and glory. For example, at the Athens Games, the junior sprint champion could get 50 cylinders of olive oil, and money or sculpture for it[6]. The competitive victory was regarded as an excellent quality in Greece itself, which could be said to be a national honor in the Roman Empire for continual expansion of territory through years of war. In terms of spirits and prizes, it could promote the willingness of civic participation in the public space. In China, the activity of *Xiwangmu*’s religious belief held in the alleys and roads of the Western Han Dynasty was beneficial to the formation and enhancement of community consciousness, which made people have the willingness to actively participate in public activities, considered as civic participation as well.

Secondly, public space is the basis for citizens’ collaborative actions, which increases public coordination. Public space can provide a venue for the collective actions of citizens. In the West, drama appeared in Athens in 6 BC. As a place for drama performance and viewing, the open-air theater was a typical public space on a large scale. The most typical theater, Dionysus theater in Athens, sometimes the civic assembly would be held here. Actually, the drama performed here itself was

an activity of citizen groups. The actors and the performance team consisted of citizens, which was represented the collective of the city-state.[6] They were not only the receivers of the drama but also the participants with the responsibility of collective organization and management for the performance of the drama, which could cultivate the collective spirit of citizens. In China, the power of the collective was greater than that of the individual, so the public had the opportunity to bargain with the ruling class. The petition movement of the *Taixue* students in the Han Dynasty used collective force to exert pressure on officials and emperors to achieve their political goal of saving upright officials. It would not be possible to achieve their goals with the power of one or two *Taixue* students alone. Although there were different methods to promote civic participation in the West and in China, both public spaces could improve civic participation in enriching the public's social capital, promoting the public's social status, and increasing the coordination of public actions.

Lastly, public space can promote the benign interaction of different social subjects. The bureaucracy and commoners belong to different classes, and there is less interaction between them, but the existence of public space breaks the boundaries and creates a way for communication between them. In Sparta, the common meal system was implemented, and the king ate at the same table as ordinary citizens. At the citizens' assembly, Aristide, the famous leader during Greco-Persian Wars, was even regarded as ordinary citizen by the people around him. Even the tyrant of Syracuse had no special privileges in public space.[6] In the Roman Empire, Trajan market and Trajan square sat next to each other, which suggested that the public space not only promoted the horizontal communication and interaction between common but also promoted the vertical interactive and communicative mobilization between citizens and elites. In China, bureaucrats and citizens were of different social classes, and they had little contact with each other. The public space gave them more opportunities to communicate. For example, in the *shi* of the Han Dynasty, merchants engaged in business activities in the market, customers consumed in the market, and bureaucrats managed these commoners in this place. Meanwhile, those officials could consume in the market as well, therefore this public place promoted communication and interaction between different subjects of society.

The above three points have enlightening significance for current society. With the development of urbanization, modern cities have become societies of strangers, whether in the West or the East. Even people living in the same community no longer know each other and no longer have an awareness of community. Without this awareness, people are unwilling to participate in public activities and therefore lack the basis for collective collaboration. They cannot enrich their social capital and

obtain the opportunity to negotiate with the government through collective power.

To solve this issue, the government should consider public space when designing cities. For example, China is building a 'Community Neighborhood Center' in many cities, which is a public space where residents living in the same community can discuss public affairs and engage in recreational life. The existence of this place can enhance the public's sense of community and improve their enthusiasm for participating in public affairs, which can promote the healthy development of individuals and society currently.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Public space mainly refers to an open space that urban residents can enter and exit freely and can be used by the public without restrictions. This paper studies the public space in Western cities and Eastern cities, as well as the relationship between public space and citizen participation. The innovation of this article lies in the use of the perspective of comparative research between the East and the West, selecting Greece and Rome as the representatives of Western cities, and taking Chang'an and Luoyang in the Han Dynasty as examples of Eastern cities.

This article firstly lists the typical public spaces in these four cities: *Agora* in Athens; *Forums*, *Trajan's marketplace*, and *Basilica* in Rome; *Que*, *Taixue*, *Shi*, *Huashishi*, and *Lixiang Qianmo* in Chang'an; *Que*, *Taixue*, *Shusi* in Luoyang. Through classification research methods, the above-mentioned public spaces can be divided into political, economic, cultural, religious, and entertainment types according to their functions. Secondly, this article applies the method of comparative research to compare the several types of public spaces listed above and argues that the urban public spaces of the East and the West have commonality to promote public participation. Finally, this article is terminated that public space can promote citizens' public participation in three aspects: establishing community awareness, enhancing public collective coordination, and promoting the benign interaction of various social strata. In view of the shortcomings of urbanization in the world today and the significance of public space, this conclusion has a practical reference for current urban designing, construction, and management, which can be reflected nowadays, the construction of 'Community Neighborhood Center' in China.

However, this paper would be imperfect in answering the associations between public space and civic participation in a universal way, considering the space limitations. This article compares limited regions from Greece, Rome, Chang'an, and Luoyang as examples to compare Eastern and Western cities. Whether these four cities are typical and whether the conclusion drawn from

them are universal remain to be verified. In addition, in the second part of this article, the Chinese urban public space discussed refers to the open space in a physical sense, rather than the autonomous “Public Sphere” proposed by Jürgen Habermas [2]. It also should be noted that this article does not make a conceptual distinction between citizens and bourgeoisie and citizens mentioned in this article are people who live in cities. There are still controversies among scholars concerning from terminology about grimly distinguishing “Bourgeoisie”, “Public Sphere”, “Democracy” and “Autonomy” in ancient China, which could be distinctive concepts furthermore with further studies on clarification of terminology.

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