



Understanding Chinese Public Sphere through Public Space

Xinyue Hu

PhD candidate, School of Social Sciences, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Xhu187@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Abstract. This study explores the characteristics and significance of the Chinese public sphere through public space. Previous studies of China's public sphere have focused on public life sustained by informal public spaces but have not further analyzed public space. Based on the library-based method, this study analyzes the concept of the public sphere, reviews the Chinese public sphere scholarship, and combines the discussion on the publicity of space to argue that public space, as a physical and accessible medium for public life, is also the prerequisite for forming public life, and more importantly, it is an essential perspective for understanding Chinese public sphere.

Keywords: Chinese public sphere, public space, public life, media studies

1 Introduction

The digital age has inspired people to reflect on the body and physical space, leading communication studies to a spatial turn and re-exploring physical space^[10]. As a classic communication theory, the public sphere includes various abstract and physical spaces as media of public life. Chinese public sphere also involves various media. Previous Chinese public sphere scholarship focuses on modern local public life, political movements, and alternative communities, and it also mentions that various informal public spaces maintain such public life. However, more studies need to be conducted on public space.

This study hypothesizes that public space is an essential perspective for understanding the public sphere. By tracing back public sphere theory and Chinese public sphere research and referring to public space theory, this study addresses how to understand the public sphere by public space. Moreover, this will spark a broader discussion on the public sphere and emphasize the importance of rethinking space in contemporary China.

Hence, this paper sets three chapters: the first chapter traces back the public sphere theory and points out its differences with the Chinese context; second, in the Chinese context, this chapter sorts out the characteristics of Chinese public sphere scholarship and the relevance of these studies to public space; then referring to the theory of publicity of space, the third chapter explores the mutual relationship between public space

and public life. Finally, based on the analysis in the three chapters, this study concluded the importance of discussing public space in understanding and exploring the public sphere.

2 Tracing the concept of public sphere

Chinese public spheres should belong to the alternative public sphere. The concept of the alternative public sphere first came from the critique of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere in *Public Sphere and Experience* (1993), which was co-authored by Frankfurt School theorists Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, who challenged while inherited some of Habermas's ideas to theorize them as the alternative public sphere^[12]. Their theory has also inspired other scholars to extend and revise Habermas's public sphere and disengage from relevant European contexts, in order to propose multiple new public spheres according to specific social contexts. Hence, this study categorizes all other public spheres besides Habermas's bourgeois public sphere as the alternative public sphere. Considering further exploration of the alternative public sphere, this study should first introduce Habermas's public sphere.

In the 1960s, Habermas proposed the public sphere theory in German, also known as the description of the bourgeois public sphere. He described the public sphere as consisting of three main parts: the public, public opinion, and mass media or salon activity^[1]. First of all, mass media or salon activity can arouse the attention of people with topics such as politics or literature, thereby bringing together private individuals and engaging in open, equal, and accessible expression and communication; when communication gradually converges into a voice, public opinion is formed. When public opinion is generated, the public is also formed, and the public sphere emerges.

Habermas's bourgeois public sphere superficially derives from public interaction, while its existence is ultimately determined by state power and political formations. The bourgeois public sphere emerges in its difference from the representative public sphere, which refers to the European feudal monarchy, where the state and society were not yet separated, and the monarch's discourse represented the direction of public life. So there was no distinction between the "public" and "private." The bourgeois public sphere appeared in the modern capitalist society, along with the collapse of the feudal system of governance; the state and society were divided, and that brought a clear distinction between the "private" and "public," allowing people to participate in public life and produce public opinions in their private status. With the popularity of modern mass media, Habermas critically refers to the tendency of the mass media to blur the boundaries between the "private" and the "public" in the process of gradual commercialization, thus leading the bourgeois public sphere towards refeudalization^[1].

Habermas regards the public sphere as the middle ground of dialogue between the state and citizens and believes that the public sphere performs a regulative function between the state and society by producing "public opinion," which is an essential practical space for the public to realize democracy. Although some scholars proposed dissents from Habermas's public sphere, realizing democracy was undoubtedly an ideal of all public spheres. In the 1970s, Kluge and Negt criticized the limitations of Habermas's

public sphere, which was confined to the cultural elites of the citizen stratum. As a film director, Kluge even took the film as a new public medium and proposed the public sphere of production and the proletarian public sphere, in which groups other than the bourgeoisie, such as laborers and women, could be participants ^[11]. In the 1990s, American scholar Nancy Fraser expanded Habermas's public sphere. She proposed the concepts of the pluralistic public sphere and the subaltern public sphere, arguing that not only the unitary public spheres exist in a capitalist society but also subaltern public spheres composed of marginalized groups ^[16]. It can be seen that the public sphere, as a theoretical approach, can differentiate into new forms with the changes in research groups, media, and political background.

3 Reviewing Chinese public spheres and alternative public life

In the 1990s, Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was officially published in English, which triggered a strong interest among Chinese scholars. As a result, they began to explore the possibility of establishing a similar model of democratic life in China and re-examining whether a realm similar to the public sphere had ever existed in Chinese history. However, there are vast differences not only between Chinese social developments and that of the West but also in different domestic regions or cities in modern Chinese history. Hence, early studies of the Chinese public sphere were concerned almost merely with the local level of social movements and community life, focusing on alternative public life different from the mainstream or general media, organizations, and groups as ties. That demonstrates the rise and fall of the Chinese public spheres are closely related to domestic political changes. According to Habermas's concept of the public sphere and taking the socio-political changes in modern China as a case study, Philip C. C. Huang indicates that the essential difference between the Chinese public sphere and the Western model is the lack of a clear boundary between the state and society in China. Huang points out that China's socio-political conditions are much more complex than the Western model of the dichotomy of state and society. In addition, there exists a third realm in which both the state and the society could interact, such as the local commercial association, the rural self-governance institution, and the modern community school run by village-state cooperation, which supports the coordination of the relationship between the state and society in China ^[2]. In addition, Huang extends the historical background of the state-society study to ancient China. By analyzing the evolution of the third realm between the state and society from ancient times to the present and the inside logic it showed, Huang argues that Chinese state-society has always had multiple and dynamic relationships, such as interaction, complementarity, and mutual shaping ^[3]. Furthermore, the multiplicity of such relationships is also reflected in the flourishing and decline of Chinese alternative public spheres over the years.

Yanshuang Zhang provides a literature review of Chinese public sphere studies. She takes the period before and after the year 1949 as the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC hereafter), the collective era (1949-1977), the reform era (1978-1989),

and the post-socialism era (1990-Present) as the historical junctions, to sort out the various forms of Chinese public spheres which constructed on the basis of the local social movements under different political conditions ^[4]. In addition, Zhang also notes how the turbulence of the political and social environment has affected the decline of the public sphere. For instance, during the period of the Republic of China and before the establishment of the PRC, China experienced warlordism, the Second World War, and the Civil War, which made it difficult for third-realm organizations to survive in a turbulent social environment. Hence, the shadow of the public sphere became even more remote. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the state monopolized almost all the crucial resources and implemented strict and comprehensive control over all social life, which also curbed the emergence of publicity in people's collective living. However, since the Reform and Opening-up Policies in 1978, the political environment in contemporary China has become more inclusive. With the popularization of digital media and social networks in the 21st century, a broader space for online public discussions has been brought. There even was a trend of studies on the online alternative public sphere. On the other hand, the post-disaster reconstruction of the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 drew many social organizations to participate in the reconstruction process, which led China's nonprofit organizations to reach a new milestone in the number and degree of participation. As a result, 2008 has even been called the "Year of Civil Society" in China ^[5]. In *Media, Civil Society, and the Rise of a Green Public Sphere in China*, Yang and Calhoun take the public controversy surrounding the construction of the dam building on the Nu River as a case study and find that environmental nongovernmental organizations played a central role in public discussions, which forces the government to change the dam project by producing public opinions ^[6]. This is a classic case of the contemporary alternative public sphere promoting social change. The above literature demonstrates that the rise and fall of the Chinese public spheres are closely related to domestic political changes, have strong local characteristics, and are more likely to emerge among specific social movements and groups.

Veg and Cheng review studies of the Chinese public sphere in the 20th and 21st centuries from the perspective of alternative public life, with a greater emphasis on the political context and significance of these public spheres. They note that the political environment at that time was relatively tense, "Lacking an institutional framework that guaranteed the freedom of expression and publication, the public sphere undoubtedly came under continuous pressure and constraint throughout the 20th and 21st century" ^[7]. Meanwhile, under the control and intervention of the state, spaces of the alternative public sphere are more diverse and dynamic. "These spaces could be extraterritorial (foreign concessions in the Republican era), transnational (Tokyo during the late Qing, the British colony of Hong Kong), local (during various times of weak central control, such as in western China during the Sino-Japanese war), underground (Cultural Revolution reading groups), or virtual (in the present time)" ^[7]. Veg and Cheng argue that China's alternative public spheres are sustained through various informal public spaces of communication, which construct a continuous history of their own evolution. Furthermore, these alternative public spheres can help people understand the connection between political practice and social discourse in China.

In addition, Di Wang states in his study on Chinese social space, *Teahouse*, that indigenous public sphere should be interpreted based on Chinese historical, social, and political relations ^[13]. When analyzing the significance of teahouses as local public spaces, Wang tries to avoid misunderstandings of Chinese spatial practices by Western theories. He emphasizes that "Our concern is not whether Habermas's concept can be used to analyze the structure of modern Chinese society—a subject that has long been debated among historians of China—but how his concept considers physical public space as a social arena from which to draw political significance"^[13]. That is to say, Habermas's theory of the public sphere should be more of an inspiration or perspective than a theoretical model for scholars to explore Chinese local public life and its political significance.

4 Constructing public space and publicity

From the perspective of urban planning and architectural design, public space in the physical sense includes a wide range of spatial types, and the delineation is also closely related to the development level and geographic pattern of different cities. Therefore, it is hard to categorize the types of public space. On the other hand, architectural scholars have also realized the importance of understanding "public" to recognize public space. Combining political philosophy and sociology on the issue of public space, Stéphane Tonnelat incorporates conversation and participation in democratic politics into the concept of public space, proposing "accessibility and communication" as a prerequisite for urban public space design ^[8]. In this way, Tonnelat re-examined the political and sociological significance of some representative public spaces in the United States and France, such as streets, stations, and commercial centers. This emphasizes that the motivation for designing public space is closely related to people's public life. In the study of the publicity of space, Lei Yu also discusses the relationship between publicity and spatial form, "Although the physical attributes of space such as scale, form, and style are often used to express publicity, the publicity of space is not directly related to these physical attributes... and once a simple living room even of several square meters is turned into a salon for public discussion, it immediately produces publicity"^[14]. This illustrates that the ideal public space is largely derived from the behavior of participants in the space rather than being defined by the material form of the space. In other words, public space is not exactly the same as open space; it refers to the space in which people carry out their public life.

As mentioned above, the publicity from public interaction is an important attribute that defines public life. Admittedly, publicity is an older and broader concept, and the definition of its connotations, boundaries, and other essential issues are constantly evolving, with different disciplines interpreting it accordingly; While the practical value of publicity is a universal necessity for human society. Ying Xiao, in his book *Publicity and its Practic*, briefly summarizes publicity as "The experience, recognition, and action of common emotions, values, and interests outside the private sphere, the premise and foundation of the possibility of society and the continuous expansion of social interaction; and it is constantly produced and reproduced in social interactions"

[15]. When public interaction and discussion produce publicity, this form of interaction can be defined as public life; the place which is the carrier of public life would thus be shaped as the ideal public space. One of the aims of public space research in architecture studies and urban planning is to explore how to utilize public life as a spatial practice to guide public space to reproduce "publicity" as a social resource.

Zheng and Xu also admit that the publicity of contemporary urban space does not only come from the physical characteristics of the space. At the same time, in addition to the nature of public life, they suggest that another crucial criterion for reconstructing publicity lies in people's maintenance of spatial justice, such as the maintenance of equality in space distribution. "Spatial justice is the embodiment of the concept of social justice in the spatial dimension, and it is a way to explore how to realize equality and fairness in the allocation of reconstructing space"^[9]. Zheng and Xu argue that the lack of publicity in contemporary urban public space stems from the absence of spatial justice. In other words, the spatial resources have been socially allocated with inequality and injustice. While exploring how to reconstruct publicity, they "introduce the spatial justice theory that links publicness to equitable access, inclusion, and public participation, which are broadly distributed in terms of people, objects, physical environments, meanings, and emotions"^[9]. That is to say, the publicity of space concerns the political dimension of whether public interactions are democratic, accessible, and fair, and it also concerns the spatial dimension of whether the distribution of resources is just.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the formation of public space depends on the nature of public life, that is, publicity. Publicity is reflected in the fact that everyone can equally share the space to express their opinions freely. Since such space that the study discussed, excluding the official control and intervention, then reveals the "alternative" characteristic of China's public sphere from a spatial perspective. On the other hand, this study believes that understanding the public sphere from the perspective of public space has practical significance for public life in the post-epidemic era. In particular, people have experienced a unique period in which access to physical space is restricted. So, reconstructing public spaces in various places through public life allows people to establish and explore the local public sphere through spatial practices.

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