

Effects of Chinese Traditional “Public & Private” Notion on Public Design

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Abstract. At present, public design is relatively underdeveloped in China, for the essential reason that public affairs administration lacks publicity. The strength of publicity thought has always been weak in Chinese ideological history, so for this reason, this paper started from Chinese traditional “public & private” notion for an inquiry into its effects on contemporary Chinese public design.

1. Current Status of Urban Public Design in China

Despite the rapid development of Chinese cities at present, the corresponding public design develops relatively slowly. Taking the urban pedestrian signage system for example, according to the survey, “In Beijing, a megacity with a population of much more than ten millions, the difficult to get around and ask the way has caused great inconvenience to Beijing citizens, taxi drivers, and tourists from home and abroad. Beijing people also ask the way from time to time, outlanders frequently wander in confusion in the streets with a map in hand, and taxi drivers often feel quite helpless in the face of new residential quarters and place names. Owing to the lack of road and public transport signage, foreign guests generally have to choose a taxi during travel time, so tourists always complain that in Beijing, they can do nothing but to ‘visit temples by day and sleep at night’. According to the result of 15,000 questionnaires distributed at Capital Airport, Beijing Railway Station, Beijing West Railway Station, Inter-city Bus Station, commercial districts and communities, 85.1% of the respondents from other places thought: it is not convenient to find the destination or ask the way in Beijing. 67.1% of the Beijing residents interviewed held the same view.”[1] Taking municipal refuse collection facilities as a second example, according to Qilu Evening News, the urban area of Tianjin was furnished with more than 6,000 varied stainless steel dustbins within only 2 years, but 95% was stolen or damaged. Especially when the weather became cold, some people walked off with a dustbin and transformed it into a stove.[2] As another example, there are also many problems in the construction of accessibility facilities in Chinese cities, including the most common ones: accessibility facilities are less standard and systematic, and that the relevant technical standards for non-barrier construction cannot be fully enforced effectively; most cities haven’t ever transformed part of the existing facilities into accessible facilities; barrier-free facilities aren’t managed effectively, but confusedly.

There are many reasons for these problems, but the main cause is the lack of publicity in public affairs administration in China. The strength of publicity thought has always been weak in Chinese ideological history, so for this reason, this paper started from Chinese traditional “public & private” notion for an inquiry into its effects on contemporary Chinese public design.

2. Effects of Chinese Traditional “Public & Private” Notion on Public Design

2.1 Analysis of Chinese Traditional “Public & Private” Notion

In China, character “gong” (public) is first understood as common facilities and properties. For this interpretation, evidence can be found in The Book of Songs. Moreover, it’s derived from this book: “gong” meant a public place for collective labor or sacrifices to gods or ancestors, such as palace and law court, as well as honorific title for the clan elders that dominated these places. Later, after the founding of a unified country, “gong” was used in the title words related to the ruling authorities, such as imperial court and government [3].

Next is fairness. In *Origin of Chinese Characters*, the first Chinese dictionary compiled by Xu Shen, the author explained character “gong” as “sharing”. In this book, Xu Shen broke “gong” down into two parts: the lower part means “private”, while the upper part refers to an opposite meaning. This interpretation came from *Five Kinds of Social Beings* by Han Feizi, in which “si” (private) is explained as self-encircling, while “gong” as the antonym of “si”. According to *Five Kinds of Social Beings* by Han Feizi, the lower part of “gong” means “self-encircling”, extended as self-centered, while the “upper part” means deviating, namely deviating from self-centeredness. So, “gong” and “si” were made a pair of adversative concepts.

However, at that time, “public and private” were not only antinomies politically, but extended to the field of morality and justice, given ethical features, and used to refer to fair, just and righteous, as well as partial, selfish and under-the-table. This public and private notion characterized by moral color, such as good and evil, is endemic to China.

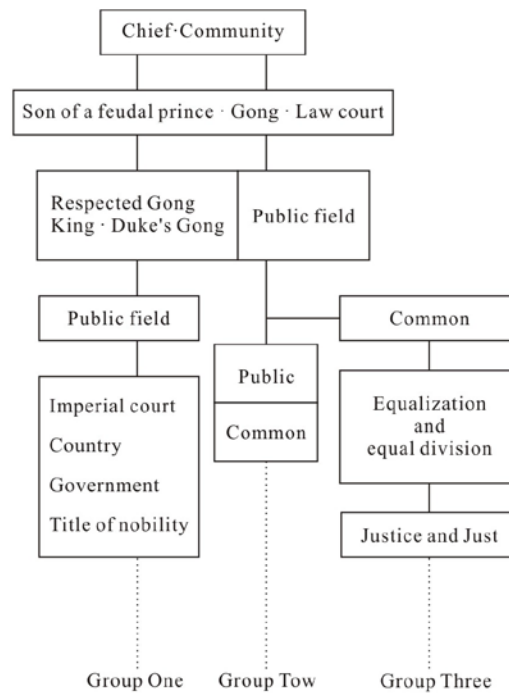


Fig. 1 The origin of the meaning of "gong"

On this basis, we can come to the following conclusion on the origin of Chinese character “gong”: “gong” first refers to community facilities and properties, as well as an honorific title for the chief of a community. Second, to character “gong”, some ethical concepts, such as justice and fairness, were added at the end of the Warring states period. From then on, as shown in Fig.1, for “gong”, new meanings, such as official institution, imperial court, state, and government (Group I), were derived from chief; common cropland, public and common (Group II), were derived from community; equal, and just (Group III), were derived from sharing[4]. “Equal and just” derived from sharing are meanings peculiar to Chinese character “gong”.

What needs to be explained is that after rising to the level of monarch, state and official, Chinese “public and private” notion rose to a higher level: the fairness of heaven. This is a fundamental and moral concept. This fundamental concept of public and private notion in turn affected Chinese political public and private notion. It can be seen that Chinese public and private notion has multiplicity.

2.2 Effects on Chinese Public Design

People usually shy away from talking about “private” owing to the ethical view on good and evil unique to Chinese “public and private” notion. Or they dare not mention “private” due to the shackle of the ideology that “collective interest is more important than anything else”. So, “human selfish desire” is often kept out, as a result of which public and private are cut apart severely and run in opposite directions. Therefore, neither designer nor public manager pays much attention to the usage requirements of public design. In particular, when there is a conflict between a user’s interest and a

common interest, the user's interest will inevitably be sacrificed, so it is not surprising that there is often an irrational public design, such as 10-cm sideway, or a barrier-free path on which even an able-bodied person cannot walk smoothly.

This discrimination against private also breeds the thought of "public standard" in public affairs managers. When it is reflected in real life, it manifests as that public administration is still conducted around the will and interest of the state and government, while individual citizens' will and interest must be subject to the state's will and interest, and cannot be realized unless through a channel provided by the state. As a result, the interaction and relevance between public administration and society, as well as citizens, are cut off.

Actually, public and private are not opposite to each other. As argued by Marx, individuality and publicity are in essence not two opposite establishments or interests. For an individual, it is a real existence, and everybody, to gain the highest individuality, must give up some of his right and transfer it to his community, which then will accumulate publicities practically to recover and augment individual power to enhance individuality [5]. Marx explained human nature and essence from a perspective of "labor-based" social relation. He regarded people as the product of "relation", and understood this "relation" as follows: The transference of personal energy and resources to the community is nothing more than a means by which individuals acquire energy and resources from the community when required. So, publicity and individuality are a unity in the original ecology. Publicity is a part of individuality that has been transferred, and it is in itself an extension of every community member's individuality rather than the sum of individualities.

3. Conclusion

When public design renders services to a city, it also serves as an important medium by which the public perceives and experiences the city. As a representative of urban image, it represents a city's design level, service level and administration level. Designers and managers should pay more attention to it, improve their weak consciousness of altruism, avoid the idea of preferring public to private, enhance citizens' public consciousness, and strengthen the respect for "private" in public design.

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