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Practising Collectivity: Performing public space in everyday China

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Abstract

This article investigates the specific cultural and collaborative nature of China's public spaces and how they are formed through performative appropriations. Collective cultural practices as political participation were encouraged during the Mao era when cultural activities played a key role in workers' education and participation. Since the opening-up period, performance in public space has become widespread in China and creates alternative community spaces that constitute alternatives to capitalist spaces of consumption. Using Habermas's theory of communicative action, we argue that cultural practices performed in public space create a proletariat public sphere that plays a wider role in governance and China's democratization. Further, the article examines performative practices in public space. It traces the popular activity of public square dancing through history and counters this research with a parallel study of a much younger skateboarding practice. The two practices are very differently rooted. Yet both practices appear to move through cycles of disruption and appropriation, followed by an affirmation of governmental rule. The studies reveal that western ideas of citizenship and individual leisure are less applicable. Public spaces are largely managed through collaborative practices, whereas contemporary scholarship reaffirms Fei Xiaotong's description of Chinese society as individuals positioned within a complex network of concentric circles.

Keywords

performativity, democracy, collective, dance, skateboarding, *guānxi*, Yangtze River Delta

Introduction

During the past three decades, China has seen a huge transformation of ex-industrial spaces into new civic public landscapes (Gaubatz 2008; Shi 1998). Much of the new public space appears to be genuinely public as it is open to a wide variety of practices by the communities. The policies for the production of new public space in China are in stark contrast to the policies that regulate urban developments in many western countries, for example the United Kingdom, where for the past three decades, public space has been dismantled through neo-liberal policies of privatization (Hoskyns 2014). Consequently, public space in contemporary western cities is typically a space of transition (Lootsma 1998). If social activities are permitted, they are bound to commercial activities, i.e. a meeting in a plaza's cafe or restaurant lasts for as long as the purchased meals and drinks last. According to Richard Sennett, public space in contemporary western societies reflects the shift of meaning of 'public' from a focus on the 'well-being of society' to 'being exposed to everyone's view', which occurred in parallel with society changing its orientation from outwards to inwards beginning with the fall of the Ancien Régime in the eighteenth century. The decrease in public or social space in the city is a mirror of the decrease in the public or social capacity of humans (Sennett 1977; Westermann 2003).

In the paper 'Public man and public space in Shanghai today' Anthony Orum et al. state that if residents 'are able to freely occupy such space, like parks, then this is testimony to the fundamental free and democratic character of the city' (2009: 370). Orum and a team of researchers from Fudan University, Shanghai, observed diverse spaces with a focus on streets, squares and parks in Shanghai over a number of months. They found a great diversity of uses ranging from vendors who sell their wares to people in the streets, to heated and extensive political discussions, to performers of Beijing Opera and ballroom dancing in the squares and parks. Their conclusion, following theorist Richard Sennet was that 'public man is alive and well today in Shanghai' (Orum et al. 2009: 385; see also Gaubatz 2021).

One could argue that community groups' involvement in the production and management of public spaces in China means that the criterion of free occupation is fulfilled, and therefore, these public spaces contribute to the democratic nature of the city. This is a fundamental difference from public space in many western civilizations.

An example of community performance can be seen in the form of public square dancing (Figure 1), which developed from a series of appropriations of traditional folk dances beginning with the *yāngge*, a popular dance of China's northern regions that was appropriated in the 1950s as a state-sanctioned revolutionary dance by the Communist Party (Graezer Bideau 2008; Hung 2005). Likewise, skateboarding can be seen in public squares all over China (Figure 2). In western societies, the performative act of skateboarding is commonly theorized as being rooted deeply in the act of rebellion against any form of authority and challenging the intended use of public space. The western-style counterculture is reflected in an attitude of disruption at the beginning of skateboarding's emergence in the streets of China in the late 1980s (Li 2018, 2022). Yet, like the *yāngge* dance, the Chinese government appropriated skateboarding. It became a state-approved sport with huge investments in new state-of-the-art

skateparks when the 2020 Olympic Games hosted skateboarding for the first time in history (Li 2022; Du and Wu 2021).



Figure 1: Dancers at Hanlin Plaza in Suzhou Industrial Park. Photo by Claudia Westermann, September 2022.

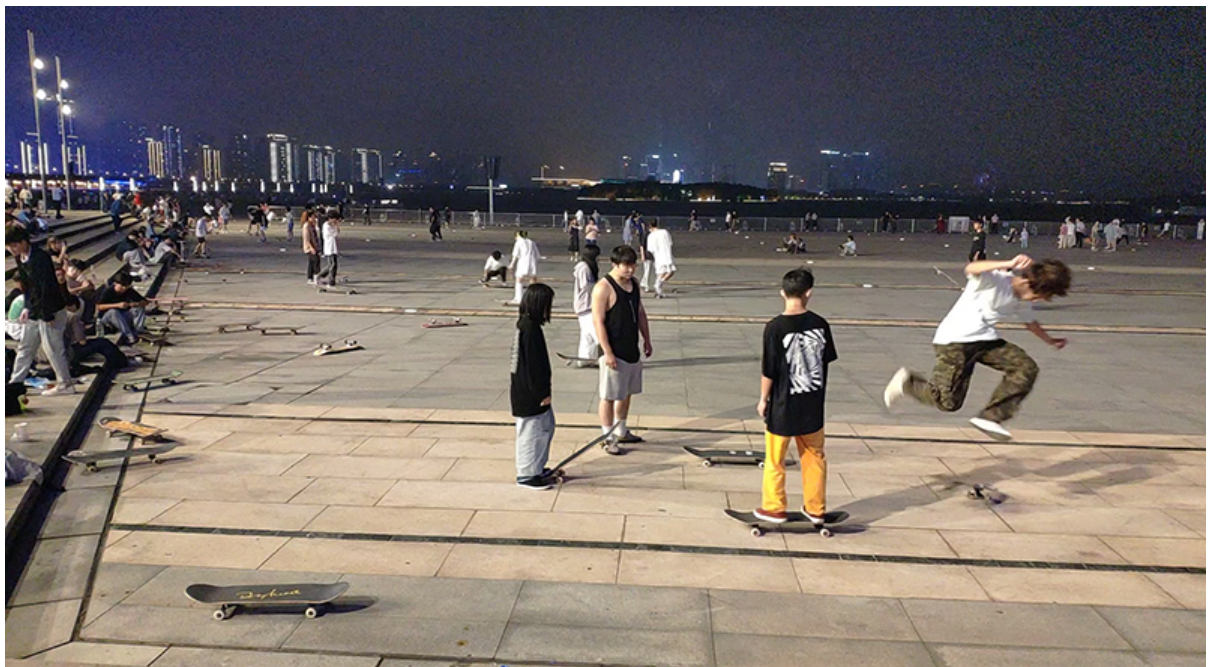


Figure 2: Skateboarders at Jinji Lake in Suzhou Industrial Park. Photo by Claudia Westermann, September 2022.

The ability to freely occupy public space was diminished during the pandemic. COVID-19 revealed the complexity of China's public spaces. The zero-COVID-19 policies and lockdowns

resulted in multiple shutdowns and tight control over its normally vibrant public realm. Unlike in many western civilizations, the public space controls were a collaborative effort between communities and the state and not delegated to an abstract institution. COVID-19 presented an opportunity for the further development of a grassroots neighbourhood management system, strengthening the link between community organizations and the government. The Communist Party of China (CPC) had attempted to establish a location-based urban management system via a network of primary party organizations (PPOs), but it was largely not until the COVID-19 pandemic that this management system came widely into place (Du and Tan 2022; Liu and Tang 2021). Chunrong Liu and Yanwen Tang outline as follows:

The Leninist party in power must be able to constantly engage its members and prevent the alienation from the masses, which entails a highly cohesive, effective and pervasive grassroots infrastructure of Primary Party Organizations (PPOs). As such, the CPC's evolving modes of grassroots organising is a key to understanding the dynamics of political resilience in contemporary China. (2021: 34)

Before China's economic reforms, most PPOs were workplace-related. Yet the dissolution of state-owned enterprises, the dislocation processes linked to modernization and the growing independence of economic actors, withdrew purpose from the PPOs and undermined bottom-up participation in the CPC. Nevertheless, there are some successful examples of PPOs reinventing themselves as service agencies for emerging economic actors (Liu and Tang 2021).

The pandemic can be seen as creating new purposes for neighbourhood PPOs. Facing the pandemic as an external threat, the Chinese government was able to rely on the participation of resident volunteers. The delocalization of individuals, which is generally part of modernization processes and entails shifting trust relations from local places to disembedded abstract systems, was, to some extent, reversed as residents re-engaged with their neighbourhood PPOs (Du and Tan 2022). Sociologists Shengchen Du and Hongze Tan refer in this context to Anthony Giddens's ([1990] 2013) ontological security and argue that there was a turn to location-based ontological security. According to Du and Tan, this differs from western localism, which is also marked by the re-evaluation of the local, yet lacks the participation essential for location-based ontological security (Du and Tan 2022).

Nevertheless, the relationship between the public and authorities in China is not always collaborative. The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed the fluidity of public space when public space transformed again for a short period at the end of 2022 and became the site for protests against what was thought to be too strict COVID-19 controls. Following the protests, pandemic restrictions were eased and largely removed (Tse and Zhang 2022).

As China moves into the post-pandemic period and autonomous cultural groups start to reappropriate public space, the new strength of the PPOs could either be seen to be increasing CPC's control over public space or be seen as a powerful new collaborative infrastructure enabling citizens to participate in local governance.

The expansion of public space in China

China's move into a post-industrial era initiated a shift from the industrial to the civic in many Chinese cities. The transformation has included hundreds of kilometres of ex-industrial spaces turned into new public spaces as well as spaces for tourism and commerce. Like many other cities, Suzhou and Shanghai in the Yangtze River Delta have seen a huge expansion of public spaces created from neglected and polluted ex-industrial water landscapes (Hoskyns 2019). Examples in the Yangtze Delta region can be seen in the 45-km Huangpu River development, which boasts to be a new urban sitting room for Shanghai. The 53 km Suzhou Creek and the 18 km Jinji Lake development in Suzhou encompass a series of diverse public spaces, some commercial, some civic and some cultural, linked by walkways, wetlands and parks. The large open spaces designed to encourage gatherings and celebrations mark China's changing attitude towards public space. In Suzhou, the new spaces create a contrast to the ancient city's walled gardens and narrow waterways (Berstrand et al. 2021).

New public spaces in Chinese cities can be seen to be the latest development of a structural transformation between the state and society that started following the Mao era during the period of Deng Xiaoping (1976–89). Edward Gu (1999) argues that the public sphere started to emerge in China through the creation of cultural groups. Cultural intellectuals and activists gained autonomy by focusing their energies on the creation of cultural spatial practices and the appropriation of public spaces rather than on oppositional political practices to the state. Their attention was on transforming state-controlled institutions into spaces organized through collaborations between citizens and the state. Gu argues that the shift towards public space during this period saw the creation of a new cultural public realm formed through collaborations between cultural intellectuals and the government (Gu 1999: 389; Hoskyns 2019). The elites who had been eliminated under Mao as mediators between the people and governance began to re-emerge. Yet, unlike in many western civilizations, intellectuals were not the only ones to engage in the cultural sphere. With the commercialization of leisure spaces and the restructuring of China's economy under Deng Xiaoping, workers began to appropriate public space for performance and leisure (Seetoo and Zou 2016).

The focus on the production of public space by both the state and society in China can be seen as a paradox. The production of new public space in China began at the same time as western powers started dismantling, asset stripping and selling the public realm through neo-liberal policies of privatization, first introduced in 1979 by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and by Ronald Reagan in the United States (Hoskyns 2014: 58). Paradoxically, in the West, public space has been theorized for centuries as the space of democracy, whereas in China, the view of public space as a civic space with a focus on the rights of citizens' access is new. Revealing the relevance of Chinese society's rural origin for any analysis of society, Fei Xiaotong, in 1948, highlighted that the conception of the public in China differed radically from the conception of the public as civic. Public spaces are the streets in which one sits and cooks. They are the canals into which one can pour wastewater while others wash their clothes in them. This is different from civic public space controlled by state or private institutions.

‘Once you mention something as belonging to the public, it is almost like saying that everyone can take advantage of it. Thus, one can have rights without obligations’ (Fei [1948] 1992: 60).

For Mingzheng Shi, public space associated with rights of access is a western concept and only entered China at the beginning of the twentieth century when imperial gardens were transformed into public parks. Imperial gardens were historically privately owned and hierarchically organized with restricted access (Shi 1998). However, while the civic notion of public space has been embraced, it is continually contested through appropriations that integrate public space into a traditional understanding, effectively returning public space to the community.

Europeans travelling to China find a conflict between the lived experience of inhabiting the Chinese city and the projected view of China in the western media, as multiple activities taking place in public space generate a sense of freedom, not oppression. It is widely stated in western media that collective action is seen as a threat to social stability in China. Yet people gather on a daily and regular basis, in parks, streets or squares to carry out a variety of activities together (Mazzocco and Kennedy 2022).

China’s democratization

China’s current model of governance has developed from democratic centralism, a revolutionary strategy introduced to reorganize China after 1949 (Boer 2021). Lefort argues that in communist states, the participatory practice of democratic centralism was totalitarian. Participation was presented by the Communist Party as the expression of social power, but because the Communist Party was the only party, power was constructed without a discursive outside (Lefort 2007).

A recent white paper published by China’s State Council Information Office titled ‘China: Democracy that works’ describes a ‘whole-process people’s democracy’. The CPC upholds participation at every level of the party-state and explicitly lists ‘advancing democratic elections, consultations, decision-making, management, oversight, progressing electoral democracy, consultative democracy side by side, and expanding political participation’ (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China 2021: 6).

According to the white paper, the aim is to ‘better represent the people’s will, protect their rights and fully unleash their potential to create’ (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China 2021: 6). However, ‘whole process people’s democracy’ refers to participation in the CPC and, therefore, like democratic centralism, is criticized by commentators as totalitarian because it does not offer multiparty alternatives. In this article, we argue that the expansion of public space in China has resulted in the emergence of a more spatialized model of democracy. Since the opening-up period started in 1978, public leisure and performative spatial practices have played an important role in activating public space for civic groups and democratic governance, as they provide city-wide democratic infrastructure for participation outside state institutions. Cultural spatial practices taking place in public

spaces play a strong role in the creation of active citizens. At the same time, they produce new spaces of participation that create alternatives to the conventional institutions of the CPC.

The CPC political theorist Wang Huning claims that ‘it is a society’s *cultural factors* (rather than its economic organization) that create its politics’ and argues that ‘social “software” – values, feelings, psychology, and attitudes – [...] shape a society’s political future’ (Johnson and Ownby 2021: n.pag., original emphasis).

The model of governance emerging in China has been likened by many scholars to the deliberative model of democracy developed by political theorist Jürgen Habermas (Brown 2014). His democratic model has been developed from the theory of communicative action, which introduced the distinction between lifeworld and system. The system is the state and the economy or market, which are integrated. The lifeworld is the everyday world that we share with others and takes place between the private sphere of the family and the state. For Habermas, the activities that take place in the lifeworld form an intermediate public sphere (Habermas [1981] 1984). The public sphere generates opinions and attitudes which serve to affirm or challenge the affairs of the state, therefore becomes a counterbalance to the state. In ideal terms, a strong public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to legitimate authority in any functioning democracy (Fraser 1990).

Sociologist Guoxin Xing argues that while Habermas’s theories can be applied to China, the public sphere in China is not the same as the public sphere described by Habermas (Xing 2011). Habermas idealizes the bourgeois society of the nineteenth century and therefore describes a bourgeois public sphere that has class exclusions. For Xing, the public sphere in China is a proletariat public sphere that has its roots in the Cultural Revolution and the *dānwèi* (单位), the work unit that regulated all the three dimensions of a worker’s life – workplace, the sphere of the family and leisure activities (Xing 2011; Lu 2018). A *dānwèi* is essentially a walled enclosure that includes the facilities for work and living in close proximity. The larger *dānwèi* were like miniature cities, including facilities for education and leisure, such as schools, theatres, concert halls and cinemas (Lu 2006). Mao’s cultural theory advocated socialist mass culture, essentially a proletariat culture, to serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers. In addition to the facilities of the *dānwèi*, following the Soviet model, workers’ cultural palaces (工人文化宫, *gōngrén wénhuàgōng*) were built in most larger and medium-sized cities, which offered cultural activities and education and encouraged literature and creative self-expression (Xing 2011). Following 1978, the cultural palaces and the cultural institutions of the *dānwèi* were closed or transformed into commercial enterprises. Leisure activities and cultural performative practices started to appropriate public space. This move can be seen as a cultural shift from participation in the system to the lifeworld and saw the creation of a discursive outside where independent public opinion can be formed.

The findings of a Stanford University study into the question of public opinion in China contrast the US government’s common understanding that the CPC largely shapes Chinese citizens’ views: ‘People in China have diverse and well-formed views on a wide range of public policy issues. Not all citizens are supportive of current government policies, nor do all their views reflect state propaganda’ (Mazzocco and Kennedy 2022: n.pag.).

In a study of public gatherings in Tianjin, Isabelle Thireau (2021) examined the nature of cultural groups, their relationship with the local environment and the formation of public opinion. She found that people meeting for daily exercises engage in discussion about ordinary subjects, for example the environment, the family and food. They share their ideas within the group. They identify material traces of places undergoing transformation and participate in a collective commemorating effort. In her review of Thireau's book, Graezer Bideau states that '[t]hese different experiences thus contribute to the establishment of a "we" through the setting of a collective narrative that sometimes diverges from the official history' (2021: 76).

For Thireau, the 'we' (2021: 435) emerges from an experience lived together and is not bordered but reconfigured every day.

For sociologist Junxi Qian, public leisure is an important cultural terrain on which new social relations and cultural identities are enacted, negotiated and performed. He argues that cultural performance in China plays an important role in the production of collective identity and, therefore, the collective 'we' described above. Public performance can be viewed as a collective project of self-actualization, lived experiences, expressions and self-explorations (Qian 2014).

Qian suggests that collective leisure in public space appropriates certain cultural legacies of the socialist past, a continuation of habits and cultural preferences bred by the Maoist collectivist values. These cultural spatial practices have resisted social transformations brought about by the commercialization of modern China and produced an autonomous cultural public sphere. 'The existence of an active "public man" in collective leisure suggests an alternative cultural configuration to the individualization and commercialization in other spheres of post-reform China' (Qian 2014: 35).

According to Qian, the activities are not state-organized but spontaneously organized by cultural and leisure organizations where the social members are autonomous and stay largely outside direct state intervention. However, the role of the state is collaborative. A complex participatory management system is in place involving community members and the state. Each cultural group has representatives. The authority of the space allocates each group a specific time slot and checks are made to monitor noise, petty crimes and other nuisances (Qian 2014).

Following the initiation of the Chinese economic reform or opening-up (改革开放, *gǎigé kāifàng*) in 1978, when workers' cultural palaces and the cultural facilities of the *dānwèi* were commercialized, and leisure was no longer freely available, appropriations of public space by performance and culture groups became widespread. Nowadays, it is within the policy of the Ministry of Culture to provide spaces for public square dancing and public leisure activities. A 2015 circular for guiding the 'healthy development of public square dancing' states that the government will make use of the resources such as commercial plazas, enterprises, community venues and open space in urban and rural areas. Authorities are advised to increase the free opening of public cultural and sports venues, fully improve the utilization rate of venues and implement staggered opening hours according to the characteristics of the needs of the masses (Ministry of Culture et al. 2015).

However, public square dancing is not the only practice seen in public space. There are multiple activities, including, amongst others, karaoke, tai chi, yoga, Chinese opera, martial arts, water calligraphy and giant chess. These activities have traditionally been performed by the older people with excess leisure time, but there are some activities more popular with younger people, and western skateboarding is one of the new popular leisure activities. The next sections provide a historical framework for public space and collective practice in China. They compare the traditionally rooted Chinese square dancing with new skateboarding practices, both of which can be contextualized in the Chinese model of society, structured by differential patterns of concentric circles.

Guānxi circles and performative collective practices

According to scholar Fei Xiaotong, Chinese society, in its rural origins, also referred to as *guānxi* (关系) society, is marked by a sophisticated network of concentric circles that embeds individuals in a set of horizontal and vertical relations. Chinese society differs radically from constitutionalized western societies in structure and formation (Fei [1948] 1992). Some scholars refer to a network model of society, but because of its circular structure and the relevance of the position of each individual within that structure, this type of network contradicts common western ideas of networks. The *guānxi* network model is not based on ideas of decentralization. Structured by overlapping concentric circles, *guānxi* society centres on individuals. It situates them and is also described as egocentric (Chen 2018; Herrmann-Pillath 2016). Further, while the western model of society is defined through the relationship between individuals and the state and relies on constitutionality that emphasizes the equality of each individual vs. an abstract organization, such as the state, the equality between different individuals is not the focus of the traditional Chinese model of society. ‘Differentiation is at the centre of the egocentrism model’ that makes the *guānxi* networks, writes scholar Chen Qi and continues that ‘individuals are circulated by interpersonal relations and fixed to a position in the social hierarchy’ (Chen 2018: 66).

Yet the term fixation requires some exploration in this context as the system’s rule – as for all of traditional China – is ritual (礼, *lǐ*) and not law (法, *fǎ*) in the sense of codified standards (Fei [1948] 1992: 94–100). The rule of ritual demands contextualized or situated judgement. The critique of *guānxi* society is that it is problematic because of corruption during feudal times and the Mao era, which was used to assure fixed positions for a ruling elite (Herrmann-Pillath 2016). Yet the model is meant to be fluid. Any attempt to establish fixed hierarchies, whether through legal or illegal means, such as corruption, eliminates openness and, with it, the future. Scholar Chen Qi reports on the practice of play inherent to *guānxi* society (Chen 2018), which supports the analysis that any fixation of individuals in the context of *guānxi* society is meant to be temporary. According to scholar Carsten Herrmann-Pillath, Fei Xiaotong’s conceptualization of *guānxi* society, emphasizing circularity and relationality in the horizontal and vertical dimensions as well as the embeddedness of individuals, is more complex than the common idea of Chinese society as a collectivist society (Herrmann-Pillath 2016). Herrmann-Pillath critiques the dichotomy of individualism vs. collectivism dominant in comparative

studies and emphasizes that it is created through bias and reliance on a western classification system (Herrmann-Pillath 2016: 27). Herrmann-Pillath's multi-aspectual methodology aims for 'a balance between "indigenization" and "universalization" in the study of culture' (2016: 26). He argues for a re-evaluation of Fei Xiaotong's theory and its importance in the analysis also of contemporary Chinese culture.

While in capitalist society, the public sphere is situated between the separated realms of the private individual and the state, the Chinese model of concentric circles positions the individual in a continuum that integrates the public and private spheres. The model is circular. Enacting the links between the public and the private spheres through performance, communities generate themselves again and again by the rule of ritual. Consequently, Qi Chen states that '[t]he public and private spheres are [sewn] together by *guānxi* networks. Personal authority and state power are inseparable in the rule of ritual' (2018: 70).

The astonishing mastery of collective performance in China, linked to the long history of the rule of ritual, could be witnessed at the 2008 Olympic opening celebrations. Some critics suggest that these types of collective performances are the result of the Chinese tendency to embrace an authoritarian system (Osgood 2022). Yet this is too simple. Collective singing and dancing were an essential part of ancient rural society's traditions. They were the practices that generated the communities which performed them. Linked to the agricultural calendar, collective rituals were performed to ensure 'peace, prosperity and abundant harvest for the community' (Seetoo and Zou 2016: 42). The northern folk dance *yāngge* (秧歌), for example, is a seasonal dance with theatrical elements. Rooted in Shaanxi province, it translates to 'Rice Sprout Song' (Seetoo and Zou 2016: 42) and was originally performed on the region's terraced fields when the rice seedlings were planted. The oldest depiction of a *yāngge* dancer dates to the northern Song dynasty, spanning from the tenth century to the twelfth century (Graezer Bideau 2008, 2012). Like other traditional rituals, over the centuries, the *yāngge* separated from the agricultural practices, following the decline of the folk religions. It was kept alive in secular events, such as the Chinese New Year celebrations that last around two weeks in the spring of each year (Graezer Bideau 2012). Marked by a particular liveliness, the *yāngge* is considered one of the most distinct Chinese folk dances, encompassing song, dance and elements of theatre (Hung 2005). The *yāngge* gained national cultural importance, as it happened to be the local dance of the Yan'an region in northwest China, where the Communist Party took refuge preceding its rule. Today, the so-called Yan'an era (1936–47) is considered constitutive of the communist revolution as a mass movement. Within less than ten years, the communist base in northern Shaanxi increased from around eight thousand members who had survived the Long March to nearly 2.8 million people. Among those who came to Yan'an were numerous painters, writers and intellectuals, some of whom had played important roles in the May Fourth Movement, a student-led patriotic mass protest that began on 4 May 1919.

Published in 1943, the text *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art* (McDougall and Mao 1980) presents Mao's conclusions from discussions on the role of artistic freedom in an art that serves the revolution. Mao rejected critique about a lack of artistic freedom, calling them expressions of privileged bourgeois who have not yet fully understood the concerns of the masses. Outlining the importance of literature and art for the revolution as a means of mass

education, *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art* provided guidelines for what kind of works writers and artists should produce. The guidelines became constitutive for what the Communist Party deemed appropriate art in the years to come. Within this context, the appropriation of local folk culture was declared an important means to make the new revolutionary art more appealing to the rural population. Yet the ultimate aim was mass education through art, as only through education the Communist Party could hope to gain the people's support (Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research 2022).

Hugely popular at the time when the Communist Party lodged in Yan'an, the *yāngge* was re-created as New Yangge Movement and became one of the means to disseminate communist values. The appropriation of the popular dance was a well-thought-out strategy by the Communist authorities, serving the aim to govern national cultural practices, and it formed a cornerstone of Maoist cultural policy (Graezer Bideau 2008, 2012; Wilcox 2020). What was once folk ritual, and later folk culture, beginning in the late 1930s, was transformed into a tool of political propaganda, creating a national model of entertainment and political education. This form of popularized education was not necessarily passively absorbed. As anthropologist Graezer Bideau argues, the re-appropriation of the cultural practices by the dancers created 'a space of resistance at the heart of society' (Graezer Bideau 2008: 52, translation added from French).

As part of the reorganization of the whole country, after 1949, most people living in the cities were organized into the so-called unit system (单位制度, *dānwèi zhìdù*). Every student and every worker were part of the *dānwèi* system (Lu 2018). The term *dānwèi* (单位), usually translated as 'work unit' and used for a wide range of institutions in socialist China, reflects the relationality of the traditional *guānxi* model as '单dān' translates to 'individual' and '位wèi' to 'position' (Chen 2018: 70). This transformation of the *guānxi* model into a model of society that could respond to the demands of modernity, however, appears to have emphasized fixation as permanent, which, as critics suggest, effectively turns the hierarchical model into a system of subordination (Chen 2018; Yunqing 2017). A study by the urban theorist Lu Duanfang, comparing the *dānwèi* to the contemporary 'world factory' represented by Foxconn, however, arrives at the conclusion that the *dānwèi* was a lot more humane as it provided long-term employment and the support of women and families, all of which is absent in the 'world factory' (Lu 2018). Integrating the young and old and families, the *dānwèi* also assisted in creating communities.

The work units, schools and street resident committees formed hobby groups to engage in various kinds of cultural and artistic activities. In 1956, when Shanghai's overall population was around 6 million (Macrotrends LLC ND n.d.), data provided by the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture reveal that there was one cultural and artistic group for every 1000 people. At the school level, there were 72 singing groups with 9243 pupils and 152 dance groups with 4211 pupils (cited in Seetoo and Zou 2016: 44).

The *yāngge* transformed after 1949 and new variations and model dances were created for different purposes that re-emphasized collectivist practices. They became an essential part of everyone's life in China. Integrating folk dances of the southern regions,

the *yāngge* transformed into PRC folk dance with a variety of choreographies and was considered a representative art form of the PRC. While simpler dances, such as the so-called loyalty dance (忠字舞, *zhōng zì wǔ*), were developed as a propagandist tool and integrated into the daily life of the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution (Martin and Chen 2020), PRC folk dance remained an important form of artistic expression in festivals and international exchanges (Wilcox 2020). Until 1979, numerous government-organized public art festivals engaged dance groups in politicized mass performances. The opening-up initiated in December 1978, however, put a radical halt to such events.

Development of public square dancing

Walking to the Hanlin community centre in SIP on any evening, one will hardly miss the groups of mostly women dancing on the public square situated between the street and the community centre complex with its markets, restaurants and numerous small service shops. Typically, there are several groups of dancers sharing Hanlin plaza.

*When I arrive, there are three groups . All groups dance in lines. A battery-powered speaker placed in the front of each provides the music. Each group has its own selection of songs. The group of dancers closest to the street appears to be the most organized. At times the dancers use props. This group has folding fans; another has ribbons (Figure 3). Later in the evening, the group next to the market dissolves its lines and engages for the next hour in a form of ballroom dancing. Line dancing is *pái wǔ* (排舞). Ballroom dancing is *jiāoyì wǔ* (交谊舞). Between the groups, a man practises Tai Chi. Some children run after a ball. At the plaza's north entrance, a man has placed a mobile karaoke station. Some passers-by stop and sing.*



Figure 3: Groups of dancers with ribbons at Hanlin square in Suzhou Industrial Park. Photo by Claudia Westermann, September 2022.

Public square dancing (广场舞, *guǎngchǎng wǔ*) is ubiquitous in China (Xu and Tian 2017). As the narrative in the previous paragraph highlights, it has nothing to do with the so-called square dance that has its roots in the United States and was highly popular among teenagers in the 1980s. China's public square dancing is not a teenage sport, even though recently, it has gained popularity among the younger generation as a magazine edited by undergraduates of Duke University highlights (Huang 2021) (Figure 4). Typically practised in the morning or evening hours, public square dancing has engaged mostly female performers in their pension age – in China, 'pension age' means females older than 50 and males older than 55. Public square dancing is a mix of exercise for health and personal pleasure and competitive performance for an audience (Seetoo and Zou 2016: 24). Dance groups can vary in size, from just a few dancers to very large groups. Reflecting the traditional *guānxi* model, there is always a dance leader (領舞, *lǐngwǔ*), who is not only the dance teacher but also the person who negotiates with the local community. As research shows, dance leaders often have extensive experience in collective and competitive practices of the pre-opening-up period (Seetoo and Zou 2016; Martin and Chen 2020).



Figure 4: Young urbanites dancing on a public square. Photo by Li Lin (northwoodn) via Unsplash, 10 November 2020. Public domain.

There are three main factors that led to the rise of public square dancing in China. After 1978, with the opening-up, the government withdrew financial support from the cultural centres of the *dānwèi* that had previously provided free leisure activities. While the options for leisure diversified immensely, commercial leisure was too expensive for the unemployed or workers in poorly paid jobs (Lu 2006: 145–46). Yet Chinese cities suddenly had an unprecedented number of residents who did not have much money to spend on leisure as tens of millions of workers were laid off when the state-owned enterprises were reorganized and millions of people migrated from rural locations into the cities (Friedmann 2005; Fan 2011). Dancing in public squares, thus, in the 1980s, emerged as the cheapest and most convenient way for workers to ‘satisfy their social and fitness needs’ (Seetoo and Zou 2016: 44). Monthly contributions are paid often but tend to serve just the maintenance of the audio equipment and are usually less than CNY 40 (≈GBP 5) per person per month (Qian 2014; Qian 2017).

In the 2000s, public square dancing was given another push by a new type of award scheme for cities, the National Civilized City Award. It was created to foster initiatives that could counter the enormous social and environmental imbalances of the first twenty years of the opening-up period. The award scheme led to extensive support for affordable mass sports and arts by local governments (The China Story 2013; Li et al. 2022). A document published in 2004 outlined the criteria for the award. It listed that each community should have at least fifteen amateur cultural and sports groups and at least eight cultural events in public squares per district each year. Promoting public square dancing as a mass cultural and sports activity was one of the easiest ways to meet the standards set by the award scheme.

When local governments organize contests or performance events, they cooperate with and even help broaden the connections of the [dance] leaders. A robust network of communication, management, and mobilization links resident committees, subdistrict offices, district governments, and municipal governments in supporting the dancing.

(Seetoo and Zou 2016: 45)

The Chinese term for public square dancing, *guǎngchǎng wǔ* (广场舞), is very new. Its first use can be traced to a local newspaper in northern China, *Ningxia Pictorial*, in 1999. There was only occasional media attention until around late 2013, when suddenly several hundred pieces of news could be counted in the media per day. They primarily reported on conflicts. People fought over the plazas’ use, for example, or loud music (Martin and Chen 2020: 29). While exact numbers are not available, it is generally assumed that there are more than 100 million people regularly participating in public square dancing (Sun 2017). Despite the astonishing numbers, *guǎngchǎng wǔ* has only recently become a mass phenomenon.

Taking advantage of the popularity of public square dancing, the Chinese State integrated it into its public health programme. It first became clear in March 2015 that the government was effectively promoting public square dancing nationwide when the general administration of sport published guidelines titled ‘Twelve Public Square Dance Workout Routines’ (General Administration of Sport of China 2015). In August 2015, the ‘Twelve Routines’ were followed by a circular titled ‘Guiding the Healthy Development of Public Square Dancing’, emphasizing the relevance of public square dancing to improve citizens’ health and fitness but also calling

on local grassroots organizations to solve conflicts (Ministry of Culture et al. 2015). Unlike the press, which often primarily reported on negative aspects, the circular was positive and supportive in tone.

China's modernization is often referred to as marked by a vast array of contradictions. Yet contradictions in social analysis are often the result of the employed methodology's frame of reference (Steier and Jorgenson 2003). According to Herrmann-Pillath, the problem with the dominance of collectivism in the scholarship on Chinese society is due to a particular frame of reference that overvalues abstract categories, which eventually leads to a false dichotomy between individual and collective practices. Confirming the relevance of Fei Xiaotong's model of concentric circles for modern urban society, Chinese society could be described as structured by autonomous agents who are relationally embedded in a collective value model (Herrmann-Pillath 2016; Chang and Lee 2012). Considering this, it would be misleading to describe collective practices in contemporary China as appropriated by an authoritarian state. Such description would presuppose a frame of reference that conceives individuals and the state as related by an abstract category and consequently assume the muting of the individual agent. The history of collective practices in China is better described as a history of performative, participatory practices which affirm the continuity between the individual and the state. Such analysis, however, does not suggest that there never was or cannot be malpractice. The dynamics of the *guānxi* network of concentric circles must be maintained.

Integrating skateboarding into the *guānxi* circles

Public space in China differs from public space in the West as it is produced through collective practices embedded in a complex relational system, whereas in western society, public space is defined by individual rights. The performative act of skateboarding is theorized as a disruptive practice, redefining spaces of the city and challenging the intended use of public space (Borden 2001). The sport was imported to the streets of China with the attitude of a counterculture in the late 1980s (Li 2018: 13). Yet, like the *yāngge* dance, skateboarding went through cycles of appropriation and re-appropriation, becoming a 'sport' with significant investments for new state-of-the-art skateparks when the 2020 Olympic Games hosted skateboarding for the first time in history (Li 2022).

As mentioned above, Orum's definition of the democratic city relies on the idea that 'residents are able to freely occupy public space' (Orum et al. 2009: 370). To test whether his definition can be applied to Suzhou, co-author Siti Balkish Roslan skateboarded in the new public spaces surrounding the lakes Jinji (金鸡湖, *jīnjī hú*) and Dushu (独墅湖, *dúshù hú*) in SIP. Her individual activity could be seen to assert an outside understanding of individual rights of access, making an attempt to map this understanding onto the complex collective value system that assumes a relational individualism. Roslan could confirm that public space is largely open for use; nevertheless, her imported frame of reference led to contradictions.

Suzhou is an ancient city that has rapidly expanded in the past three decades. The city now contains two distinct new areas, Suzhou New District and SIP. SIP contains two large lakes,

Jinji and Dushu, both in the heart of the expanded city. The Jinji Lake masterplan's mission was to improve the environment and restore the economic vitality of Suzhou (Deitz 2007). It divides the area into eight distinctive neighbourhoods with diverse uses, connected by a continuous park system and preserves a zone of 50 m to 100 m around the lake as a lakeside wetland of aquatic plants to create both a biodiverse ecological environment and a 24/7 accessible landscape. Construction of Jinji Lake started in 1999 and in 2003 won the national design merit award from the American Society of Landscape Architects after two neighbourhoods were completed. The project was finally completed in 2018 when the last sections of the waterfront were linked, allowing the public to walk the entire 18 km around the lake (Hoskyns 2019).

A mix of futuristic buildings with fantastic flat spill-overs and a labyrinth of mazes in the old town, Suzhou's urban fabric is representative of many other city developments in China that situate themselves in a play of tensions between traditions and the hyper-modern. Whereby the old city with its narrow street system appears to recognize an old human scale, recent developments are made for China's future everyday. The new urban fabric of SIP comprises high-rise compounds and wide open streets. It is pierced with neighbourhood centres, mixed commercial and community developments with public plazas reminiscent of the *dānwèi* urbanism (Lu 2006). While the square dancers flock to occupy the new plazas, reclaiming the human scale, the large-scale wide open streets and parks appear empty, inviting new inventions of the future everyday.

Co-author Siti Balkish Roslan took her skateboard to explore these new urban spaces. Introducing a new frame of reference, the spaces that had appeared empty now became interactive and tactile. A new form of play space emerged. Without skate stoppers, the long and wide-winded pathways wrapped around the two main lakes of Jinji and Dushu became an elongated Mecca for cruising and carving, abundant for all types of skateboarding styles. Despite the successful slow ingress to palpability and experientiality, there were instances where complications presented themselves in the forms of the *bǎo ān* (保安), a term which literally translates to 'who preserves the peace'. The *bǎo ān* manage decisive ambiguous borders to a given public space. They could be described as neighbourhood security, but this is, to some extent, misleading as they enact the collective rules of the space.

As an inconsequential skater enthusiast, I cruised the city of Suzhou quietly on my Carver board and unintentionally went on a hunt for other potential spaces to skate in. What came as a surprise was the subtle nods of validation from other skaters that cruised by and sometimes weaved around each other as we skated in the same direction – a form of camaraderie that somehow became the starting point of finding a community. The skateboarding community of Suzhou, which I approached in Jinji Lake, was inviting, despite me being a foreigner and the prominent language barrier. Through observation and interaction with the 'leader' of the skate community, a form of social hierarchy became obvious.

Roslan's account confirms recent scholarship on skateboarding in China that situates the formerly disruptive practice within the concentric circles of the *guānxi* networks (Li 2022). These newly integrated practices constitute an alternative to the official practice of

skateboarding and its commercialization, which led to the construction of two privately funded, major skateparks in Suzhou. Relying on the payment of fees, these commercial training spaces are geographically bounded, with walls, fences and security and minimal connection to the urban fabric.

The emerging skateboarding networks serve to exchange information through virtual communication channels and identify popular and safe areas to skate, such as the open squares around the lakes. Connecting with the 'Jinji Lake' skateboard group, Roslan spoke with the *gē* (哥), which translates to 'elder brother', a connotation of sentiment and obligation that refers to the more experienced members of the skateboarding community who act as the group leaders (Li 2022). The *gē* described how the open spaces allow for freedom of expression of skateboarding styles compared to the commercial skateparks. He further explained that public squares cater to the three main skateboarding practices – street skating, carving and longboarding – that are commonly practised, allowing the community to gather and engage in skateboarding as a collective performative practice.

Conclusion

In his theory of the 'empty place', Claude Lefort states that democracy requires a site of power that is empty, not literally empty but produced through differentiated activities and practices of the social. The empty place separates democratic public space from spaces of identity as it is a space that can be appropriated but not dominated, a space that contains different identities but none that identify with it (Lefort 1986: 279; Hoskyns 2014: 176–77). The resistance to commercialization and the widespread appropriation of public space for public leisure and performance in China's post-industrial new public spaces can be seen to be the provision of democratic infrastructure on a huge scale and can play a major role in its emerging democracy.

As China continues its path of modernization, whose contradictory development is likely caused, at least partially, by its enormous pace, whether Chinese society is about to transform into a society of western-style individualism, as many suggest, or a society that integrates the old circular *guanxi* society model with western individualism, is not yet decided (Shi 2017; Herrmann-Pillath 2016). In this context, the rise of public square dancing could become a qualitative seismograph telling us something about the development of society. A society that is primarily interested in individual self-expression will likely prioritize the rule of a fixed law over the rule of ritual and will consequently as well lose interest in public space as a performative space. Yet, to date, the transformed Mao era cultural practices appropriating public space throughout China are producing new forms of democratic space.

The practice of public square dancing offers a case study for the contemporary relevance of the concentric circular *guānxi* networks, structuring the individual state relationships and the physical enactment of democracy. Roslan's exploration of public space in Suzhou through a western lens of skateboarding reveals that space is largely free access. Yet her account of the encounter with security also reveals how easily one can be misled to map a capitalist society's

model that separates individual and state onto a complex model where the individual is positioned within the collective practice of society.

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