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Communal space as a nurturing ground for grassroots participation in urban China

As a rapidly growing economic power, China has recently experienced internal transformations in terms of housing. In this post, [Yushu Zhu](#) discusses her research on contemporary neighbourhood communal spaces in China, and argues that these spaces foster grassroots participation by enabling place-based social relations among local residents and neighbourhood attachment.

China has been known as an authoritarian state with strong surveillance over civil participation. Here, based on a recent empirical research ([Zhu, 2015](#)), I would like to argue that in contemporary urban China, neighbourhood communal spaces – common spaces (public or semi-public) that are shared by and accessible to a local population – have emerged as a nurturing ground for grassroots participation.

Market reforms of the past three decades have exposed China to strong forces of globalisation and neoliberalisation, resulting in tremendous transformation in neighbourhood landscape, community governance and grassroots activities ([Hsing, 2010](#)). A series of housing reforms since the late 1980s ended the welfare provision of housing, which stimulated heated real estate development and dismantlement of the socialist system of community governance. Dilapidated traditional neighbourhoods were replaced with commercial housing projects, known as commodity housing estates (CHE), which have now become the dominant neighbourhood form in urban areas. CHEs are enclosed residential compounds built by private real estate developers. These

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neighbourhoods mostly take the form of gated communities although the degree of “gatedness” varies from one place to another. They also incorporate some design features of **New Urbanist neighbourhoods** in western contexts, such as delineated boundaries, incorporation of communal spaces and facilities and mixed land use.

Unlike in the socialist times, Chinese residents in contemporary communities have started to get involved in management of their own community affairs. According a city-wide survey^[1] conducted in 2012 in the city of Guangzhou (the third largest city of China in terms of population and economy), about 64% of the respondents participated in at least one community activity over the past year (Figure 1). 59% had participated in organised associational activities, such as voting for homeowners’ association (HOA) leadership and voting for residents’ committee. Another 30% participated in various informal activities, such as reporting neighborhood problems or discussing community issues with others. Although Guangzhou is not representative of all Chinese cities, this graph suggests that Chinese urban residents have started to concern about self-governance and self-management of community affairs.

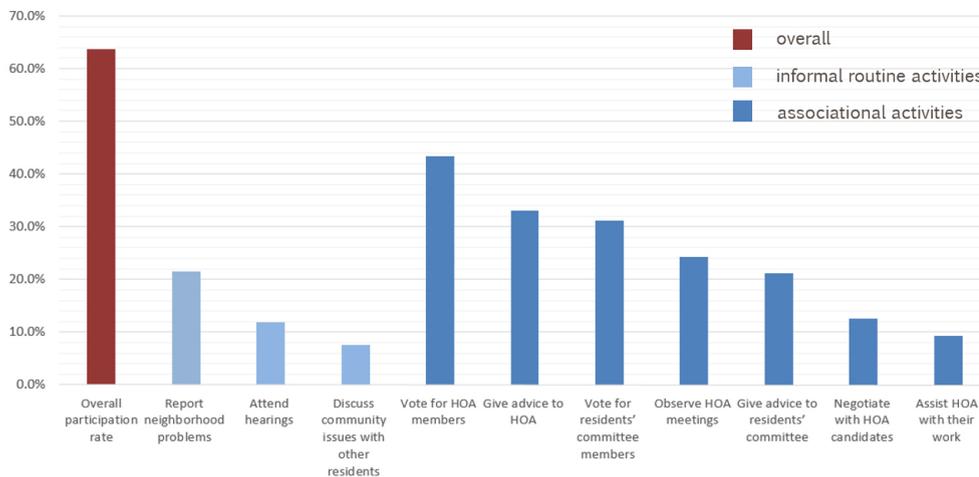


Figure 1. Community participation in commodity housing estates in Guangzhou, China, 2012.

Communal spaces in contemporary neighbourhoods like CHEs embrace a civic virtue by facilitating community participation. In urban China, the civic function embedded in conventional public spaces, such as city parks and squares, is rather weak in that the use of any public space for collective activities is under strict state surveillance^[2]. In contrast, collectively owned community spaces in CHEs, such as planned group activity space (e.g., club house), open spaces (e.g., playgrounds, garden,

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basketball court), and informal meeting places (e.g., cafes, grocery stores), which are at arm's distance from state power, tend to enjoy stronger social and political autonomy, providing space for associational and community life.

Today, communal space has been charged with different functions and meanings from the past. First, communal space is seen less as a locale for intensive social interaction than as a setting imbued with personal meanings and identity. Second, in addition to its social functions, communal space serves a platform for community associational activities, such as homeowners' assembly and neighbourhood activism, which were lacking in socialist residential compounds. In such spaces, common interests are formed and grievances are shared among residents (esp. homeowners), which could possibly translate into collective activities (Tomba, 2005).



A resident voting at an election for Homeowners' Association leadership which took place on a basketball court in a Chinese urban community. Credit: Yushu Zhu.

My study shows that communal space facilitates grassroots participation mainly through place-based social relations among local residents and through affective bonds between people and place — neighbourhood attachment.

First, **shared spaces in a neighbourhood provide opportunities for both passive and active contacts among residents which may otherwise be very limited in an increasingly fluid society.** Moreover, these spaces allow community members to deliver various community

messages and organise associational activities, which reinforce social norms and shared values. These in-group processes allow residents to share information, discuss community issues and transmit interpersonal influences. It is such place-based social capital that unifies community members to work together for the common good.

Second, **communal space is the material basis for the formation of neighbourhood attachment, which tends to derive from the use value and economic value of the residential space.** The use value of communal space lies in its importance as a locale for daily life. A good living environment can facilitate the development of a sense of place, whereas a dissatisfying environment tends to disrupt place attachment. The economic value is articulated through collective property rights over the shared properties by homeowners as well as collective incomes generated from communal spaces (such as advertisement fees and parking fees). Residents with neighbourhood attachment perceive this neighbourhood as his/her own place and regard the use value and economic value of communal space as common stake shared by local residents. Such positive people-place affective bonds produce internal incentives for individuals to act independently or collectively to solve community problems or to enhance community stability when their common interests are at stake.

Spontaneous grassroots participation in urban China has grown slowly and cautiously. This study shows that residential space in CHEs has started to form a civic ground for grassroots participation. However, whether these contemporary forms of community participation will eventually lead to the formation of a civil society remains to be seen.

[1] This survey was the first large-scale survey about community engagement and Homeowners Associations in urban China. It was a collaborative effort by Duke University, Hong Kong Baptist University, Sun Yat-sen University (China), and the **Community Development Center of Guangdong, South China.**

[2] The Law of the People's Republic of China on Assemblies, Processions and Demonstrations (1989), Article 7, stipulates that "for the holding of an assembly, a procession or a demonstration, application must be made to and permission obtained from the competent authorities in accordance with the provisions of this Law".

About the Author

Yushu Zhu is currently a postdoctoral researcher in [Population Studies and Training Center](#) and [Spatial Structures in Social Sciences](#) at Brown University. Her research focuses on community governance and grassroots participation in urban China and residential differentiation among different social groups in terms of race, ethnicity and socio-economic status. She employs both quantitative (including spatial analysis) and ethnographic approaches. Her work can be accessed [here](#).

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