Redeeming The Public
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A Study on Chinese Public Space and Public Sphere
Introduction

When comparing public life in China with that of Western Europe or the United States, it often seems as if despite the massive population, something seems to be missing in China: a vibrant and social public life. On sunny days, squares and parks such as the Tiergarten in Berlin or the Spanish Steps in Rome seem to buzz with people enjoying themselves in small groups, and sharing their experience with complete strangers as they enjoy food, listen to music or watch the crowds parade by. Although the streets of Shanghai are buzzing with crowds, one rarely finds a true social gathering taking place in China's public spaces – the country's parks and squares seem largely void of music festivals, picnics or performing artists to entertain any lingering crowds. Indeed, China's most famous public space, Tiananmen Square, is most often assigned the adjective “vast” to describe the emptiness it breathes, even when millions of tourists pass it on a busy day.

This difference seems to be almost embedded in Chinese public life. While an Italian piazza allows for political gatherings and social interaction amongst strangers, urban squares in China often seem to be characterized by political representation and an absence of social life. While a western person goes to a bar at weekends, sits among dozens of strangers and occasionally goes for a dance in the crowd, most Chinese would prefer to stay in an enclosed karaoke room with friends, separate from similar groups in the same building, all interacting with each other in their “private” public spaces.

The central problem addressed in this paper is the lack of social interaction in public spaces in China. Although architects are tempted to address this problem through better design and by providing public facilities, their success in influencing social behavior seems limited. Attempts such as the Linked Hybrid project in Beijing to create genuine public urban space seem to be repeatedly confronted with difficulties of fostering public interaction in China.

The hypothesis of this paper is that the lack of public interaction in Chinese public spaces is not primarily the result of inadequate architectural design, but rather caused by a deeper, underlying difference in the use and function of public space between China and the West. This hypothesis is addressed through the research question of this paper: what is the cause of the lack of social interaction in Chinese public spaces, and what are its implications for the practice of architecture?

In the first chapter, the problem statement is further examined through a more extensive comparison of western and Chinese public spaces. An analysis of both public urban squares and public interior spaces serves to illustrate the absence of social life in China briefly addressed in this introduction.

Chapter two aims to identify the underlying cause for the problem through a sociological analysis of Chinese society. Borrowing theories from Lewis and Habermas, an examination is made of the correlation between public space and public sphere – the social realm between the private and the authority. By studying the historical transformation of the public sphere in the West and its equivalent concept of ‘gong’ in China, chapter two hopes to determine whether the public sphere defined by Habermas is present in China, and to offer a sociological explanation to the absence of interactive public spaces in China.

Chapter three focuses on a historical examination of Chinese public space, which serves to validate the findings from the first two chapters. Firstly, the comparisons made in the
first chapter are put into historical perspective to assess whether the central problem is merely a modern phenomenon. Secondly, whereas chapter two looks for the root cause of the central problem through a behavioral lens, chapter three seeks to offer historical support for a possible correlation between sociological structures and spatial renderings. Thirdly, a historical analysis of public spaces may reveal types of public space and social interaction that are missed when merely looking for an equivalent of western public spaces in modern China.

Finally, chapter four addresses the second part of the research question, which focuses on the challenges and opportunities for architects to address the lack of social interaction in Chinese public spaces. A reexamination is made of the public sphere in China under modern-day conditions and its transformation, to identify to what extent and how, architects can contribute to thriving public life in urban spaces in China.

As a whole, this paper hopes to contribute to the discussion among practicing architects and planners in China. It aims to offer a theoretical framework on public space and public sphere in China, and hopes to help reevaluate contemporary design strategies on public spaces in China.
1. The Missing Public

The first chapter will address the relevance of the problem statement of this paper, by showing that public spaces in China are, in fact, different from those in West in that they often miss the interactive social element that lies at the core of many public spaces in the West. Chinese and Western public spaces such as city squares and public interiors will be analyzed to identify some of the key commonalities and differentiations. This analysis is divided into two categories: national public spaces and privatized public spaces.

1.1 National Public Spaces

Tiananmen Square vs. National Mall

Located in the center of Beijing, Tiananmen Square refers to the open space in front of the Tiananmen (“Heavenly Gate”), which was built during the Mind Dynasty in 1415 as one of multiple gates to the Forbidden City. Back in the Ming and Qing eras, there was in fact no real public square at this area. The open space between Tiananmen and Damingmen (“Great Ming Gate”) was four times smaller than the Square we know today, and was filled with offices for imperial ministries known as Qianbulang (“corridor of a thousand steps”), which were rarely open to the public (Wang, 2011).

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Great Ming Gate, by then known as Zhonghuaemen (“the Gate of China”), was demolished to allow for the enlargement of the area. In November 1958, a major expansion of Tiananmen Square was started, following the wish of Mao Zedong to make it the largest square in the world with the capacity to hold over 500,000 people. During this expansion, a large number of residential buildings and other structures were demolished, whereas the Monument to the People’s Heroes was erected on the square to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of the People’s Republic of China. In 1976, after the death of Mao, a Mausoleum was built right next to the site of the former Gate of China, and the square was further expanded to its current size (Lilliam, 2007).

Since the early 20th century, Tiananmen Square has witnessed a number of political events, including the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China by Mao Zedong in 1949, and the Tiananmen Square protest of 1989. American historian Lucy Barber identifies the spatial implications of such political events as the emergence of “national public spaces”, where the people of a country gather to address national issues. Barber lists other examples of national public spaces, including the National Mall in Washington, Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park in London, and Potsdamer Platz in Berlin (Barber, 2002).

Similar to the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the National Mall is an open space in Washington that has immense national significance. With memorials and monuments placed on the site, the National Mall is a public space associated with the national memory, history and identity of the United States. In the 20th century, the Mall became a premier site for public protests, celebrations, presidential inaugurations, and gatherings. Lisa Benton-Short, studying national public spaces, lists a range of civic demonstrations on the Mall that fostered social democratic values in the United States, including the 1894 protest by unemployed civil worker Jacob Coxey, the Women’s Suffrage Procession in 1913, the Veterans March of 1932, the Civil Rights March in 1963, and various antiwar marches during the 1970s (Benton-Short, 2007).

Despite the strong symbolism of the state and its commem-
The National Mall also caters for cultural and recreational need at times. The National Park Service, a federal agency that manages the Mall, states that the purpose of the Mall is not only to “provide a monumental, dignified, and symbolic setting for the governmental structures, museums and national memorials”, but also to “retain a public park for recreation and enjoyment of the people” (The National Park Service).

For example, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival takes place every summer on the National Mall*. The festival is an international exposition that brings together musicians, craftsmen and performers to showcase the skills and knowledge that embody their cultural traditions (Smithsonian Institution). Cultural events like the Smithsonian Folklife Festival show that, apart from its symbolic purpose, the National also has an important social function. On these occasions, the national public space accommodates non-political social encounters between the general public:

“The Festival is an exercise in cultural democracy, in which cultural practitioners speak for themselves, with each other, and to the public. The Festival encourages visitors to participate—to learn, sing, dance, eat traditional foods, and converse with people presented in the Festival program.” (Smithsonian Institution)

In comparison, interactive public activities are limited at Tiananmen Square. Since 1949, the area in front of the Tianan Gate was enlarged, flattened, and redesigned carefully by the Chinese state to create a public square for political representation, and not for social encounters. Even though it can be accessed by multiple roads and three subway stations, the vast 440,000m² space features no shops, benches, trees, shade, or even trashcans.

Sociologist Craig Calhoun believes that at Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government used the imagery and representations of popular sovereignty to elicit an acclamation of nondemocratic party rule (Calhoun, 1997). He points out that although Tiananmen Square is a place for popular political gathering, it is not a place of discourse: “It was not an Italian piazza; it did not house a New England town hall. It occupied over a hundred acres and could accommodate crowds of perhaps a million people; but once there, the people were addressed as a mass, not a differentiated body of interlocutors capable of discourse among themselves or with the government (Calhoun, 1997)”. Instead, it has become a place “which people come to in large crowds to witness displays of leadership and to grant leaders authority by acclamation (Calhoun, 1997)”. Although Tiananmen Square and the National Mall are both national public spaces with politically symbolic settings, Tiananmen Square does not provide the non-political social life which the National Mall provides for at times, with social interaction taking place between individual members of the public.


Are Tiananmen Square and the National Mall exceptions?
Looking at other western countries, most of the national public spaces are marked by a duality of both political and civic functions of some sort. Place de la Bastille in Paris for instance, is not only the place where the French commemorate the July Revolution and celebrate their National Day, but also where people come for the large open-air flea market every Thursday and Sunday. In Amsterdam, Dam Square is used to celebrate National Memorial Day in front of the monument, but also a public square that hosts multiple fun-fairs, summer concerts, and beach soccer tournaments each year.

In China, Tiananmen Square is not an exception either. The absence of social life and the symbolic national function are common themes among Chinese urban squares. One of the examples is Tianfu Square in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province. In 1997, the Chengdu government constructed a 20-hectare city square, after relocating numerous families from the old city center, removing almost 100 old trees and demolishing a group of famous historical buildings (Calhoun, 1997). Today, it is a flat open space with grand fountains and green patches, but without seating furniture or commercial vendors, and it is not commonly used as a place for social gatherings.

This is not just the case for central city squares in China, as secondary urban squares are often constructed according to a similar pattern. One such example is the Millennium Monument, constructed on the west side of the city center of Beijing in 1999. Planned as a public square to compliment the art museum, the 4.5-hectare vast open space and its symmetrical layout reinforce the monumentality of the building. Here again, no sun shading elements, benches or intimate subdivision are present to accommodate spontaneous public gatherings or social life.

In “Brave New City: Three Problems in Chinese Urban Public Space since the 1980s”, Prof. Pu Miao identifies a “window-dressing” phenomenon of national public spaces in China, which typically feature oversized open areas in the city centers, vast and unused green spaces and monumental government buildings (Miao, 2011). This type of public space is present in almost every major city in China. According to a study by Yan Wang, the 12 squares in the provincial capitals have an average area of nearly 13 hectares (Wang Y., 2002). Even in a smaller city such as Gaomi in Shandong Province, the local government built a central square as large as 60 football fields (Miao, 2011). Similar to Tianfu Square and the Millennium Monument, they are devised first and foremost to represent state authorities.

**Political Conditions**

The nationalization of public spaces in China is closely related to political conditions, which influence their design in three ways.

Firstly, the top-down political system in China separates the political agenda of the authorities from the direct needs of
the local people. Prof. Miao explains that “administrators of all Chinese cities are appointed by provincial or national government…[which] has its own motives and priorities to develop the economy, which do not necessarily match those of the people (Miao, 2011).” These tendencies are reflected in the design of public squares, which are not necessarily built to accommodate the needs of local individuals, but rather, as Miao concludes: “public squares are often aimed at showcasing the administration’s accomplishments to upper-level officials, tourists, foreign investors and other short-term visitors (Miao, 2011).”

Secondly, national public spaces are often used by the state for expressing national identities and promoting patriotism. This is underlined by using a symmetrical layout, grand lawns and fountains, and by the absence of pedestrian-friendly furniture and shading elements to emphasize size and grandeur. In Miao’s view, it also explains why the architectural layouts of these public spaces are often tailored to government-sanctioned functions, such as to allow for national parades, or to offer a magnificent backdrop for governmental buildings facing the park or square (Miao, 2011). Upon the completion of the China Millennium Monument in Beijing, Chinese online media Sina reported that “as China’s symbolic and commemorative building”, the Millennium Monument was to “promote the national spirit at the turn of the century and serve as inspiration for patriotism (Sina).”

Thirdly, the emphasis on preserving political stability influences the design and planning of public spaces in China. Public spaces that are not meant for official mass events are often designed to prevent gatherings of large groups or at least make these more manageable. Professor Richard Kraus at the University of Oregon identifies several city squares in China that have been renovated towards this purpose. People’s Square in Shanghai, for example, was a parade ground for mass rallies after 1949. Over the decades, the city square has been turned into a formally designed open space with greenery, sinuous walks and signs urging visitors to keep off the grass, which grows behind the fences (Kraus, 2000). Today, People’s Square is an intersection of major traffic roads, bus stations and metro lines. It has become a public space merely for the motion of the mass, leaving few traits of static groups of people or static public activities. Another example is the May First Square in Fuzhou, which has been planted with trees to create a pleasant urban forest that make mass gatherings or protests on the former demonstration site nearly impossible. Kraus describes the relationship between the political sphere and physical public spaces in China:

“Demobilization of the populace is facilitated by making sure the public squares will not become a part of anyone’s counterhegemonic public sphere. ‘Political stability’ is prized above all public virtues in China. The state’s officials can rest comfortably only if they physically restrict public squares in order to ensure lack of protest that fills the public sphere. The state therefore often encourages new commercial uses on public squares, challenging the no longer urgent public demand for them as places to hold meetings.” (Kraus, 2000)

1.2 Privatized Public Spaces

Karaoke Boxes vs. Bars

Looking mostly at modern urban life, sociologist Richard Sennett defines modern public space as “places where anonymous individuals interact” (Sennett, 1977). Here, the act of encountering strangers determines the nature of a public space. According to Sennett, urban leisure venues such as
cafes, bars, restaurants, cinemas, and theme parks can be regarded as modern public spaces, as they allow the public to congregate and interact with each other.

Following Sennett, scholars such as Christoph Grafe and Franziska Bollerey regard cafes and bars as an important type of modern urban public space springing largely from the 19th century. Types of cafes and bars such as the Grand Café, the Konditorei, the English public house, or the American bar operate as commercial enterprises offering a place for forms of informal contact, news-gathering, social exchange, and business transactions (Grafe & Bollerey, 2007). According to Grafe and Bollerey, the interaction of visitors at cafes and bars requires an act of private persons coming together and entering an environment publicly accessible. Modern public space is shaped as “a type of place where one could meet people from a large range of social backgrounds and the suspension of hierarchical relationships” (Grafe & Bollerey, 2007).

To allow for public contact and interaction, modern western cafes and bars adopt an open floor plan with bars and tables placed in one interior space. Visitors share a public space that is accessible to everyone, that is, a place where they can see and be seen, hear and be heard.

Public spaces for social interaction are also present in China. However, the concept of encountering strangers in an entirely open environment is much more limited. Bars are relatively rare on a national scale and mostly seen as a western phenomenon. In terms of popularity and social function, the closest Chinese equivalent to western bars is the popular recreational karaoke venue. Originated in Japan, karaoke has found a substantial market in China since the early 1980s. As opposed to the open venues commonly known in the West, karaoke in China is mostly built up as a public building with small enclosed “karaoke boxes” - private rooms equipped with microphones and a large television screen (Moskowitz, 2010). By the year 2007, more than 30,000 karaoke venues featured a total of 1.5 million karaoke boxes in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007). They are distinctive from western karaoke bars, in which people sing in front of strangers. In contrast, karaoke boxes create a sense of intimacy among the friends sharing the room (Moskowitz, 2010). In this respect, karaoke boxes become privatized, combining both the intimacy of a private living room with the vibrancy of a public venue (Zhou & Tarocco, 2007).

Casey Lum, professor at William Paterson University, points out that the karaoke boxes reflect China’s collective culture: karaoke’s social contract is a collective, communal code of decorum that does not seem to sit well with the North American or, more specifically, Anglo-American conception of human interaction in public, which is individualistic in nature (Zhou & Tarocco, 2007). Hiroshi Ogawa, studying karaoke in Japan, also argues that karaoke boxes enforce a sense of belonging within a group. Instead of interacting with anonymous individuals, sharing a “karaoke space” and singing in the presence of family and friends reinforce group consciousness (Mitsui & Hosokawa, 1998).

As most activity takes place in the separate karaoke boxes, the chance of meeting strangers is limited to new people that are somehow related to the group, often a friend’s friend. In this case, the idea of public display and social contact among anonymous individuals is almost intentionally avoided. Unlike cafes and bars, Chinese karaoke boxes represent a privatized form of public spaces.

Other Privatized Public Spaces

Karaoke boxes are not the exception, as public are often
privatized in some form or shape in China. Restaurants are often arranged into single rooms, allowing little connection or interaction among different groups. These single rooms are called baofang (private room), and typically feature a big round dining table that enhances group cohesion. Some of the modern baofang are equipped with separate toilets and wardrobes, offering full enclosure and a more intimate dining experience to a group of friends or a family.

The privatization also extends to spaces such as pubs and clubs, often introduced as western places in China. The open and public setting of these venues usually appears foreign to the local Chinese, so many of them now also feature baofang or a variation of the western “VIP area” found in clubs, in order to offer the desired intimacy in public in China. In some cases, the baofang reflects one’s social status in the Chinese society, as one might be considered superior being able to afford the highly valued privacy.

On a larger scale, residential buildings in China are often clustered and enclosed by a perimeter of walls and fences to form gated communities. Some communities are staffed by private security guards, while others have their gates locked at night. Gated communities enforce a sense of ownership and separate residents from the public outside of the compound. Here again, collective privacy is valued over spontaneous encounters with strangers. Public spaces within the enclosed neighborhood, such as the alleys between the houses, green patches, and communal facilities, are often privatized by the residents.

According to Sennett, public realm should encompass a region of social life with a wide diversity of both acquaintances and strangers, which is located apart from the realm of family and close friends. The nature of western public space is therefore to intermix people and accommodate diverse activities (Sennett, 1977). In this regard, Chinese public spaces showcased here do not qualify as public spaces as defined by Sennett. Instead, they are transformed into private domain by segregation and enclosure.

1.3 Conclusion

A comparison between Chinese and Western public spaces shows that Chinese public spaces are less likely to foster social interaction between strangers or accommodate a spontaneous public gathering. Public squares in Chinese cities are mostly employed by the state for political use. Public spaces in buildings and communities become segregated and occupied by families and friends for private use.
2. Public Space & Public Sphere

The case studies in the previous chapter reveal that both national and privatized public spaces in China lack the interactive public life which is commonly found at public spaces in the West. For the architect, it is important to know if this lack of public interaction is the product of the design of these public spaces themselves or if this behavior has a deeper, underlying cause. In case of the former, the architect can merely adapt the designs to influence behavior, e.g. by providing benches or shadow, while in case of the latter, any attempts to foster public interaction though “better” design of public spaces may be futile. In this chapter, possible behavioral and social causes are analyzed to pinpoint the underlying cause for the limited social life presented in these spaces in China, using theories taken from social and political sciences. Chapter three will then focus on the architectural aspect, through a historical analysis of Chinese public spaces.

2.1 The Underlying Social Model

The case studies of public spaces in China reflect two types of spaces dominantly presented in Chinese cities in a polarized structure: one focuses on the nationalized use of space by the masses, while the other focuses on a private use of space. They are used by the state authorities at one end, and by private entities at the other. In the West however, places such as the National Mall are used both by the state and by the general public. The plurality of the users and meanings of these spaces reflect the hybrid, overlapping functions of public spaces in the West. It is when private and national come together, that a true interactive “public” seems to emerge.

These different models have been a subject of research in social science as well. Amongst others, British scholar Richard Lewis notes that a similar “vacuum” exists between the state and the family when it comes to social life in China. In “When Cultures Collide”, Lewis presents two social models based on Fukuyama’s theory on the difference between high- and low-trust societies. Lewis shows that in countries like China and Korea, both the family and the state wield great influence, leaving an “empty middle” – a kind of social activity or extraneous influence. In such societies, according to Lewis, the demands of both state and family take up much of the individual’s time, causing little spare time left for other social engagements. In contrast, in countries such as Sweden, Germany, Britain, Canada, and the United States, individuals enjoy a superabundance of free time, as little of it is claimed by either the state or the family. Therefore, a plethora of leisure, educational and volunteer organizations offer the individual rich social and personal opportunities (Lewis, 2008). These social organizations actively group people together under same religion, culture, hobbies or inter-
ests, which belong to neither private families, nor the state. It is within the realm of these social groups that individuals encounter each other as strangers and express their opinions. According to Lewis, these social groups remain numerous and strong in western societies while they are much less prominent and influential in societies such as that of China.

**Social Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Empty Middle</th>
<th>Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>e.g. churchgoers, music and drama groups, sport clubs, boy scouts, charities, associations, and societies</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited power</td>
<td>Numerous strong</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Richard Lewis, “When Culture Collide, Leading Across Cultures”

The act of interaction in and among these social groups in the West represents a sociological concept of public sphere, which lies between the private sphere and the sphere of authority. The term is first put forward by German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who sees public sphere as an area where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action (Habermas, 1989). According to Habermas, it is this sphere that breeds the many social entities in the West, and transforms an open space into a public space, neither nationalized by the state nor privatized by the family.

Lewis’ model seems to point to a correlation between physical forms of public space and the sociological concept of public sphere. In “The End of Public Spaces”, Professor Don Mitchell describes public space as “the location that renders the public sphere, as it constitutes an actual site, a place, a ground within and from which social interactions and political activities of all members of the public occur” (Mitchell, 1995). If public spaces are in fact the physical rendering of a public sphere, one could direct the search for the intermediate public spaces in China to the investigation of a public sphere in China.

### 2.2 Public Sphere

**Habermas and the Western Public Sphere**

The contemporary concept of public sphere rests largely on the studies of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, as laid out in his book “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society”.

Habermas traced the notion of public domain (*res publica*) back to Classical times. The term *res publica* referred to public affairs and common property in the Roman times and had been kept alive continuously in the tradition of Roman law (Rowe, 1990). Later, during the Middle Ages, the notion of public was confronted with an ambiguity regarding the relationship of the public sector with the political authority, especially when “publicus” was used in reference both to the court of the feudal lord and to the commons (Rowe, 1990). Habermas points out that in medieval documents “lordly” and “publicus” were used synonymously - *publicare* meant to claim for the lord and the attributes of lordship, as the ducal seal, was called “public” (Habermas, 1989). In this context, Habermas believes that the term *res publica*, which resonates
a notion of the common man, was in the feudal era transformed into a private concept of lordship. In his view, such publicness (or publicity) of representation could not be constituted as a social realm, or a real public sphere, but rather a status attribute (Habermas, 1989).

During the Renaissance, an aristocratic society emerged which no longer had to solely represent its own lordliness. The state became “an entity with an objective existence over against the person of the ruler” (Habermas, 1989). While feudal powers became limited, the notion of “public” took on a denotation of “public authority”, represented by the servants of the state, rather than the lord. Lordliness and religion, which previously represented the public, now fell into the sphere of private autonomy. In contrast, parliament, judicial organs, and occupational status group organizations formed the “public authority” (Habermas, 1989). For Habermas, it was at this moment that private and public spheres became separate for the first time in a specifically modern sense (Habermas, 1989).

The emergence of finance and trade capitalism in the 17th century gave birth to the printing press and a growing exchange of information, which was quickly used to serve the interests of state administrations. The promulgations by the authorities usually did not reach the general public, but a new stratum of “bourgeois” people, which arose in the late 17th century. This new stratum of “bourgeois”, firstly composed of jurists, doctors, pastors, officers, professors, and scholars, and later joined by entrepreneurs, manufacturers, and factory owners, soon became the real carrier of the public. Through the periodicals, this new social group became continuously critical of the state administrations and began to challenge the public authorities. By the 18th century, the bourgeois class had developed into a valid social entity, nurturing public debates and political engagement (Habermas, 1989). Habermas concludes after the historical review on the concept of “public”:

“The inhibited judgments were called ‘public’ in view of a public sphere that without question had counted as a sphere of public authority, but was now casting itself loose as a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion. The publicum developed into the public, the subjectum into the [reasoning] subject, the receiver of regulations from above into the ruling authorities’ adversary.” (Habermas, 1989)

For Habermas, the transition from “public authority” to the new “bourgeois public” is essential in defining a modern public sphere. Whereas the “public” before the 17th century...
was synonymous with “state-related”, the “public” in the late 17th and 18th century was formed by private people, standing opposed to public authority. The earlier “public” with representational meanings changed into a new democratic culture. The possibility for the public to venture ideas and host political debates eventually becomes a primary criterion in addressing public sphere: “Öffentlichkeit (public sphere) is a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.” (Habermas, 1989)

After the establishment of Öffentlichkeit, Habermas devotes himself to depict a structural transformation of public sphere in modern times. Influenced by the commercial mass media, consumption, and a capital-driven society, Habermas believed that public sphere was slowly disintegrating. The welfare state also plays a role in diminishing the boundary between state and society, leading to “a struggle between a critical publicity and one that is merely staged for manipulative purposes” (Habermas, 1989). For Habermas, an autonomous yet critical public that seeks open discussion on political matters remains essential.

Public Sphere & Democracy

Although Habermas related the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, a turning point in the chronology of western public sphere, to the emergence of a capitalist society in the 18th century, one should not oversee the cultural influences of the Enlightenment. New streams of thoughts by the intellectuals were nourished in the advocation of social reform through science and reasoning. The Enlightenment also led to more democracy and liberalism, especially for the bourgeois society. Venturing public opinion on political matters in the bourgeois public sphere was an embracement of democratic freedom. In this respect, the western public sphere can be interpreted as a democracy-rooted phenomenon, thriving on the philosophy of individualism and liberalism.

This correlation between western public sphere and democratic ideology is worth reviewing in the Chinese context. China went through a transition similar to the Age of Enlightenment in modern times, although it led to a different emancipation for the people and eventually a different form of society. Rana Mitter, Professor of History and Politics of Modern China at the University of Oxford, suggests in his book “A Bitter Revolution”, that under liberal democracy and communism, both China and the West went through a phase of 'Enlightenment modernity', and despite their different definitions of the term both advocated democracy (Mitter, 2004).

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Chinese reformers like Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen first introduced the modern concept of democracy to China, which ideologically catalyzed the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the last feudal empire in China. As an upsurge of the revolution, the May Fourth Movement in 1919 was believed to be the first attempt to substantially expand and alter the arena of public politics in China (Fincher, 1981). Mitter believes that the democratic movement in early 20th century China helped the nation abandon some assumptions of the Confucian world-views and brought it into the modern era (Mitter, 2004).

However, Mitter points out that the May Fourth Era did not bring China full democracy as it had developed in Europe, but rather led to a new era of nationalism. The overwhelming emphasis on mass political participation and scientific rationality was a way to achieve “national salvation”, that is to “unite China” and make it “strong and prosperous” (Mitter, 2004). It was a collective effort to redeem a nation with modern visions opposed to feudalism, rather than to fulfill the interest of a bourgeois class or singular individual. It was
not necessarily an era that nurtured free thinking and liberal democracy. In other words, individualism never prevailed in the collective culture, and democracy never fully took root in China, despite repeated attempts. Consequently, China today remains an authoritarian state.

The retrospect of democracy in China here is not intended to deny the existence of a public sphere in China. Rather, it reminds us that the concept of “public sphere” with the strong political denotations assigned to it by Habermas, is limited in scope in China. One could however borrow Habermas’ historical perspective and look into the historical perception of “public” in ancient Chinese language and society. It might shed some light on the contemporary public sphere in China, as it did in the West.

The Chinese Notion of “Public”
The Chinese term for “public” is 公 (gong), a character that was first documented in the 3rd century BC dictionary Er Ya. It was then merely defined as “not private” (wusi). Then came Shuowen Jiezi in the early 2nd century Han Dynasty, which was the first dictionary that offered an etymological analysis of Chinese language and is still widely referenced by Chinese scholars. There, gong was not only explained as a negative form of private, or literally “turning one’s back on the private” (beisi), but also conveyed a sense of “collective” or “communal” by indicating an equal share of property by all (pingfen) (Rowe, 1990). A more classical use of the word gong comes from the Book of Rites (Liji), one of the five Confucian classics, where it states “all under Heaven is gong” (tianxia wei gong). Here, gong adopted a clear connotation of “collective”.

In “The Public Sphere in Modern China”, William Rowe, Professor of Chinese history at Johns Hopkins University, points out that only later was gong associated with the notion of government, through a process strikingly similar to that undergone by “public” in the West (Rowe, 1990). In Tang and Northern Song Dynasty, gong was largely appropriated by the government authorities to refer to properties of the imperial bureaucratic state. By the mid-Qing in 18th century, gong was generally employed as a synonym of “governmental” in words such as gongwen (state documents) or gongsuo (government offices) (Rowe, 1990).

However, Rowe identifies another parallel use of the word which developed during that time, that is gong in an extra-bureaucratic local communal sense. A wide range of terms such as gongtian (public land) and gongjuan (public contributions) were used exclusively to refer to properties and accounts supervised loosely by local administrations, in contrast to the realm of formal government (Rowe, 1990). An autonomous public sphere emerged in the late imperial era at the end of 19th century. Rowe defines it as a public sphere of local proprietorship, led by the local elite who gathered and took on managerial responsibilities such as repairing
waterworks and other local installations. Slowly, local elite
groups also demanded a greater voice in national policy mak-
ing. This was influenced by the underdevelopment of institu-
tions of formal government at the local level in the late
imperial era. The withdrawal of the formal state apparatus
gave rise to a growing sense of local self-dependency and led
to an elite public sphere, promisingly similar to Habermas’
bourgeois public sphere.

Although this community-centered public sphere remained
intact in early Republican China, it faced considerable op-
position since the establishment of modern China in 1949.
The new nation led by Mao Zedong reverted to a highly cen-
tralized form of government. In this respect, the notion of
public in China has again come to represent state authori-
ties, reflected in the use of gong in modern words such as
gong’an (police, or public safety). The local autonomy that
once sprung from falling imperial power was replaced again
by formal state administrations. The public sphere of local
proprietorship, the form which Rowe most closely associ-
ates with Habermas’ democratic public sphere, was therefore
short-lived.

The Chinese State & Family
Based on this comparative study on the perception of “pub-
ic” and “gong”, the empty middle in Lewis’ social model
can be understood as a lack of public sphere, that is, a lack
of democracy-rooted realm where individuals gather as a
counterpart of the state power. In the West, it developed
from the bourgeois class resisting and opposing the “public
authority”. In China however, such a liberal interpretation of
an autonomous “public” did not overcome the strong state.
Until today, Gong remains to resonate “public authority”.

With such strong influence from the state, an autonomous

public realm seems more likely to stem from the familial end than from the public realm. The temporary local public
sphere in late 19th century was a clear example of a sphere
originated on a small-scale communal level. Although cultur-
ally, social interaction and encountering is limited by a strong
sense of kinship, as one can see from the clusters of karaoke
boxes, it is not entirely impossible to expand the intimate
circle and shape a social group beyond the realm of family.
Social groups comparable to churchgoers or sport clubs
do exist in China. Interestingly, once such social group is
somehow founded, and bond, it quickly turns into a collec-
tive entity and becomes powerful and exclusive. The Confu-
cian concept of solidarity and collectiveness applies in social
groups as well. However, these social groups and their ac-
tions are censored carefully under the state apparatus.

Often, as soon as an independent society or body becomes
truly popular, it is subjected to restrictions by the govern-
ment. The religious practice Falun Gong is one example of
this. First introduced as a spiritual discipline in 1992, the Fa-
lung Gong grew into a religious group of around 40 million
practitioners throughout China by 1999 (Tong, 2002). The
Chinese government increasingly viewed the Falun Gong as
a potential threat due to its size, independence from the state
and spiritual teachings. In July 1999, a nationwide crackdown by the state eradicated Falun Gong, along with massive propaganda campaigns declaring Falun Gong as a “heretical organization”. Later that year, China’s National People’s Congress promulgated an “anti-cult” law (article 300 of the Criminal Law), effective retroactively, to suppress not only the Falun Gong movement but also thousands of religious sects across the country (Lum, 2006).

American sociologist Craig Calhoun notes how the Chinese state “absorbs” the empty middle otherwise occupied by public institutions: “the government and corollaries such as the Communist Party define the political community, provide for social integration, and determine what opportunities people are to have for collective action. The state not only dominates the public realm, but also prohibits non-state organizations” (Calhoun, 1997). Calhoun interestingly points out an intrusion of the Chinese state into the societal realm, intentionally suppressing a possible public sphere that may spring from the familial end.

2.3 Conclusion
This chapter reflects on the national and privatized public spaces in China showcased in chapter one and looks for the sociological cause for a seemingly empty middle. It is concluded that social structures in the West and China are different – whereas a democracy-rooted public sphere is fully developed in the West, the public sphere is not present in China. Does this sufficiently explain the lack of public interaction in public spaces in China? The next chapter will study the historical development of public spaces in China to further examine the correlation between public sphere and public space.

3. Collective Spaces
Chapter two looks into the relationship between public space and public sphere, and verifies an absence of public sphere defined by Habermas. To confirm the correlation between the lack of public sphere and the lack of physical public space, this chapter will touch upon the relationship between the development of public sphere and public space in the West, before comparing this to the development of public space in China.

3.1 The Agora & The Yamen
Western public spaces are generally believed to originate from the Greek agora in the ancient Greek city state or polis. The agora served both as a market place for local merchants to sell goods and as a political gathering space to summon the citizens. Its Roman successor, the Forum, served the same dual function of political and commercial use, and Italian piazzas and Spanish plazas in medieval times resemble similar civic public spaces in the center of the cities.

These forms of spaces are mostly open and accessible squares in round or rectangular shape. They provide meeting place for strangers and allow nearly unmediated interaction amongst them. Hartley describes an agora as “the place of citizenship, an open space where public affairs and legal disputes were conducted . . . also a marketplace, a place of pleasurable jostling, where citizens’ bodies, words, actions, and produce were all literally on mutual display, and where judgments, decisions, and bargains were made” (Mitchell, 1995).
Although western public spaces in this agora model seem to have maintained their civic function until today, they were shaped by the social changes throughout the centuries. In the Middle Ages, when the “public” was strongly tied with the feudal state and its coupled religion, city squares and church squares were often used for what Habermas called “the publicity of representation” (Habermas, 1989). Later in the 18th century, public sphere emerged in the new liberal democratic society. Urban public spaces, too, no longer only represented public authorities but, from then on, served the general public.

Modern public spaces in the West developed in parallel with the modern concept of “public” – a post-bourgeois public sphere under transformation in modern societies. Habermas is concerned that public sphere is becoming less politically engaged under the influence of mass media and the development of a consumer society. Sennett sees a similar downfall of the “public man” in the increasing forms of intimacy and self-absorption. Nevertheless, the agora-originated public spaces in the West can still be easily identified as public spaces. Perhaps they accommodate an increasing amount of commercial activities and fewer political debates, yet they mostly still serve a general public and seldom only serve to represent the state.

The Yamen

In China, agora-like public spaces were never present in ancient cities. In “Seven Characteristics of Traditional Urban Form in Southeast China”, Pu Miao, Professor of Architecture at University of Hawaii, traces the Chinese city planning back to the period from 11th to 6th century B.C., when the book Zhou Li (Rituals of the Zhou Empire) was compiled by Confucian scholars serving the Han emperors. Zhou Li consists of a set of rules for an idealized city plan, including proper ritual procedures, behavior standards, and the layouts of palaces and cities for different social classes. The diagram in Zhou Li indicated a palace in the center of a square city with an orthogonal grid honoring the emperor’s power in simple and strong geometrical language (Miao, 1990).

The centralized place in the diagram was mostly planned as the compound of Yamen, known as the local administrative government. It is important to note that the open space here was exclusive to the authorities and not used by the public. In fact, commercial activities were prohibited within a certain distance from the front yard of the Yamen or a Confucian temple (Miao, 1990).

This diagram, symbolizing a good society according to the Confucian doctrine, was later widely adopted in Chinese city-planning. Today, the ring roads in the city of Beijing are reminiscent of the traditional orthogonal planning, and the Forbidden City in the city center resembles an ancient Yamen compound. Miao believes that the centralized space in the orthogonal planning reinforces state authority:

“The collage plans of ancient Athens and Rome might have reflected these cities’ polytheistic religion and political pluralism, and the various organic layouts of European medieval cities symbolized their autonomous status. The uniformed and ordered spatial configuration of Chinese traditional cities worked in a similar way: the model and its wide application successfully reinforced the notion of a centralized political system and a perfect universe.” (Miao, 1990)

There was in fact little sign of public squares equivalent to an agora in traditional Chinese cities. Throughout history, the central open spaces in Chinese cities did not have any civic functions. Apart from the Yamen, there are some open
spaces in front of important public buildings, at the ends of bridges, or near city gates, these spaces are however much smaller in size. Miao points out that the impression of smallness was reinforced by “the lack of unifying design elements, such as ground paving or similar treatment of surrounding building facades” (Miao, 1990).

Open Space and Public Space
Exclusively for the authorities in traditional China, the Yamen resembles national public spaces in current Chinese cities. They are designed to represent state power rather than to accommodate social life, in the same way the Yamen did in ancient China. They are “open spaces” but not interactive public spaces.

Perhaps because of the lack of precedent public squares in traditional China, public spaces seem to be understood in China more ambiguously as “open spaces”. Etymologically, places such as piazzas or plazas are understood as 场 (chang) in Chinese, literally meaning “open space”. City squares, similarly, are called 广场 (guangchang) or 广场 (guangchang) for trading). The translation of these terms does not particularly pick up on the notion of “public” or anything that indicates social contact or interaction.

Sennett differentiates open spaces from public spaces based on the degree of social interaction taking place (Sennett, 1977). According to him, public spaces like People’s Square in Shanghai are meant predominately as places for movement of the mass. They lack a static public that lingers and communicates with each other. Gregory Bracken, studying public spaces in Shanghai, also relates the lack of public feeling in China to the characteristics of these commonly seen “open spaces”: a place of transition, not a place to linger, certainly not a place to await any brush with the unexpected (Miao, 1990).

The Yamen vs. The Agora
Looking back at the case studies of national public spaces in China and the West, the Yamen and the agora seem to give some historical reference to the public spaces observed in chapter one. Places such as Tiananmen Square and Tianfu Square seem to reflect the Yamen motif, used by and representing the authority, whereas spaces such as the National Mall and Place de la Bastille, to certain extent, resemble the dual-functioning agora.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>China</th>
<th>The West</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>State</strong></td>
<td><strong>State</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yamen</td>
<td>Agora</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tiananmen Square/ Tianfu Square/ China Millennium Monument/etc</td>
<td>National Mall/Place de la Bastille/ Dam Square/etc</td>
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What the Yamen and the agora also provide is a historical support of the correlation between countries’ sociological structures and their spatial renderings. As a strong state has dominated the upper realm of this spectrum in Chinese history, physical urban spaces like the Yamen were politicized, barely accommodating the activities found in the intermediate social realm. In the West, a less dominant state and a well-developed public sphere are reflected by the agora, which accommodates both political and civic functions that are found in the middle of the social realm – between state and family.
3.2 Collective Spaces

Streets, Alleys, Courtyards

Around the administrative center, traditional Chinese cities were built up with orderly laid-out communities and houses. Before Song Dynasty (10th to 13th century), a gated Li Fang was the basic residential pattern in Chinese cities. A Li Fang is a square of land of about hundreds of meters in perimeter, completely enclosed by high walls on each side. Li Fang was only for residential use and commercial functions such as city markets and handicraft workshops were strictly separated from residential areas. In a thesis about urban vitality, Jing Zhou states that the gated Li Fang reflected the strong political control of the central government on city life before the Song Dynasty (Zhou J., 2012).

As cities became more affluent in the late Tang and Song Dynasties (the end of 10th century and early 11th century), the enclosed urban form of Li Fang could no longer meet the growing need of business and commercial activities. Gradually, the Li Fang walls were demolished, and shops, handicraft workshops, and markets started to emerge on the streets and mix with housing. Song government replaced the Li Fang with a managerial system called Fang Xiang, which allowed for a more open structure and mixed land-use.

The Fang Xiang system developed steadily in China. Civic facilities such as markets, shops, teahouses, and restaurants started to form shopping streets, which frequently ran along canals. The streets and alleys between the houses were later transformed into the well-known Hutong in Beijing and Lilong in Shanghai. Courtyard houses were also developed as a new typology in Yuan Dynasty. Siheyuan, probably a best-known representation of this housing typology, featured a single side entrance open to the alley, multiple hierarchical courtyards inside that are commonly shared, and houses holding families of three to four generations.

The Fang Xiang urban structure lasted for centuries in China, until 1949, when the Communist China was founded and adopted new urban models. In the Fang Xiang structure, social life took place in the streets, walled alleys, and enclosed courtyards. Courtyards functioned as a garden shared by families and clans. People went on the streets to bargain with vendors or watched street entertainers. They also met at teahouses and in the courtyards of public institutions (Zhou J., 2012). The emergence of the Fang Xiang urban structure was therefore regarded as an important turning point in Chinese urban history, as it marked the beginning of a more open society and the rise of public activities on the streets (Zhou J., 2012).

Collective Spaces

In pre-Communist China, streets, alleys, and courtyards accommodated public life in much the same way that a Western market or piazza did. Studying urban vitality in China, Jing Zhou depicts the vibrant social life in Hutong alleys, which served as “the main public place for social contacts and business activities”: they were spaces of intimate scale where neighbors greet, meet, chat, sit, play and buy things from street vendors (Zhou J., 2012). While the central Yamen compound remained exclusive to the authority, these seem to be the main places used for social encountering and interaction. Streets, alleys, and courtyards indicate signs of intermediate public spaces in traditional China lying between the state and the family.

However, some scholars question the “publicness” of these spaces due to its scale and limitation. After depicting an exuberant public life on historical Chinese streets, Miao points out that public gatherings rarely occurred at the
level of the whole city (Miao, 1990). Rather, they occurred in scattered small groups, in places strung along major circulation routes and separated from one another (Miao, 1990). Social interaction in courtyards and alleys were also often only among people in a single community or within a family clan.

Yin Mu, studying the history of gated communities in China, argues that the specific structure of Fang Xiang and the element of walls enhanced the sense of belonging and territorial control within the community (Mu, 2011). Zhou believes that it also had to do with ‘a social culture of Chinese people to hold personal and family business, especially the inglorious matters, behind private doors, and not discuss them publicly with others’. She concludes that city life in traditional China was very much based on family life in their own enclosure (Zhou J., 2012).

In this regard, the limited functions of linear public spaces in China are also important. Miao compares Chinese streets to western markets that were used by merchants, the church, the municipal administration, and the general public for political and other gatherings. In China, whereas Yamen represented the centralized political power, narrow streets and alleys reflected a segregated society that prevented the majority of residents from forming local power. In other words, streets, alleys, and courtyards remained predominately non-political commercial or civic spaces, shared by local residents.

In “The Wall behind China’s Open Door”, scholar Jeanne Boden argues that the top-down centralized administration and the spatially enclosed places disqualify these spaces from becoming real public spaces: Markets with shops, drugstores, wine houses, and restaurants were walled. They could not serve as public spaces where people gathered to form or voice a political opinion. Nor was there a space provided for such an activity (Boden, 2008).

In this respect, streets, alleys, and courtyards might be better defined as collective spaces instead of public spaces. They are spaces used, shared, and sometimes occupied by families and communities. Their function is predominantly civic rather than political. Social interactions that occur in these spaces constitute a public life primarily on a communal level.

Similarly, spaces such as streets, alleys, and courtyards contribute to social life in the West as well. Spanish architect Manuel de Sola-Morales defines collective spaces as important urban spaces that are not strictly public or private. According to Sola-Morales, they are public spaces used for private activities, or private spaces allowing for collective use, and include the whole spectrum in between (Meyer & Versluys, 2000). Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger also regards collective spaces as the main carrier of social interaction and devotes much of his work to creating spaces such as streets, courtyards, and corridors with what he calls the “best possible conditions for social life” (Hertzberger, 2000).

A differentiating factor here, however, is the influence of a comparably weak body of family and a lack of collectivist culture in the West. Streets are more likely to be open instead of walled. In her book ‘The Death and Life of
Great American Cities’, Jane Jacobs sees great importance of streets and sidewalks in shaping a vibrant and safe urban community. Her view, however, also indicates a more public and urban nature of the streets in western cities:

“The point of ... the social life of city sidewalks is precisely that they are public. They bring together people who do not know each other in an intimate, private social fashion and in most cases do not care to know each other in that fashion... The sum of such casual, public contact is a feeling for the public identity of people.” (Jacobs, 1961)

This urban nature of streets that “brings together people who do not know each other” reminds of Sennett’s concept of “meeting strangers” in public spaces. This concept reflects the social structure in the West with a weak body of family and a strong public sphere, fostered in a more individualistic liberal culture. In this context, collective spaces in the West can be seen as the realm that stretches from the private end to the public middle in the state-family spectrum. In comparison, collective spaces in pre-Communist China served for a more private and small-scale group of people. They compose a realm more communal, lying towards the familial end and reflecting China’s collectivistic culture.

3.3 The Chinese Middle

The centralization of the Yamen compound and the collective use of streets and alleys are a historical reflection of the polarized social structure in traditional China. Comparing the different spaces that are used by the general public in China, a vacuum seems to remain in the place normally occupied by public spaces in the West. This vacuum signifies an absence of public space beyond the collective use, an absence of a politically engaging public, and an absence of a public body that addresses and perhaps sometimes challenges the state.

This lack of political public spaces seems to be an accurate reflection of the absence of a Habermasian public sphere in China discussed in chapter two - a democracy-rooted social team that stems from individualism. A public functioning as a counterpart of the authority, as it is stressed by Habermas, was not evident in traditional China. Instead, a “collective” sphere in between family and state was present in pre-Communist Chinese cities. It is a sphere that lies much closer to the family end of the social model, on the basis of its small scale and non-political characteristics.
Whether this collective sphere is of public nature is an on-going debate. What does seem to be agreed however, is the difficulty of applying theories embedded in western conditions to non-western societies. Habermas’ definition of public sphere is strongly rooted in western philosophy and ideologies and cannot be fully applied without problem to countries like China. William Rowe, amongst others, points out that Habermas’ concept of public sphere is limited to the “arena of political debate and political action”, instead of “a domain of proprietorship and of managerial responsibility over collective goods and services” in the sense of “public utilities” (Rowe, 1990). What Rowe suggests by the “domain of proprietorship and managerial responsibility” is indeed the non-political collective sphere presented in traditional China, which is excluded from Habermas’ theory.

The Habermasian definition of public sphere therefore serves perhaps better as a critical mirror. It helps to examine, and in this case, to verify a Chinese social structure greatly influenced by collectivist ideologies. What thrives in a collective culture is a sense of unity, which tightens familial and communal relationships. Very much in contrast to modern western societies, this sense of unity in fact enhances the Chinese state, for it represents an ultimate form of a collective body, or in Confucius’ view, a “world family” (天下为一家). The absence of the political sphere in China is therefore not simply the result of political suppression, but also the result of an idealized image of the powerful centralized state.

It is in this culture that a collective sphere comes to occupy the middle realm, neither political nor completely private. Collective spaces rendered in this sphere are of great importance. Regardless of their scale in society as a whole, they are the spaces where people first ‘leave’ their private realm and begin to interact with each other. This very idea of stepping out of the private is for many philosophers indispensable in human societies. Fukuyama, searching for the essence of political order, borrows Hegel’s philosophy of recognition to illustrate a human nature that desires to be seen and recognized. According to Fukuyama, Hegel’s idea of this intrinsic human need for recognition echoes Plato’s idea of thymos - one of the three constituent parts of the human psyche. Plato described thymos to be a desire for worthiness and recognition, while the other two parts of human soul represent desire (eros) and rationality (logos).

Chinese philosophy places value on human interactions outside of the private realm as well. The Confucian virtue of Ren (仁), a pursued order in Chinese moral philosophy, is a character symbolizing “two people coming together”. It addresses values and ethnics in human interrelations and recognizes that one is never alone in its privacy. To practice and achieve Ren, one departs from his privacy and enters a social realm among the others. In a collectivist culture, this social realm resembles a big family, where the participants of Ren are identified as “family members” tied by either kinship or other commonalities. This offers some reason why the social realm in China remained collective and familial in traditional China. It also addresses the essential importance of the collective sphere and, correspondingly, the collective spaces rendered by it.
3.4 Conclusion
A historical analysis of traditional urban spaces in pre-Communist China, including the Yamen, the streets, the alleys, and the courtyards, confirms the division between urban spaces used by the state and those used by the family. At the same time, it reveals a range of collective spaces, which can be neither classified as private nor public in Habermas’ theory. The collective spaces indicate the possible presence of a collective sphere in Chinese society, and may bear great importance for the interactive social life in China.

4. The Changing Middle in Modern China
In this chapter, the Chinese social model proposed in chapter three will be reviewed under the modern-day conditions in China. Particularly with the emergence of information technology and rapid urbanization in China, this chapter hopes to illustrate the transformation of the social realm in modern China and addresses contemporary challenges for collective spaces in China.

4.1 Emerging Public Sphere

Internet & Green Public Sphere
The emergence of modern information technology in the past decades has stirred debates on the political implications of the Internet. Prof. Kehbuma Langmia argues that the Internet has now become the alternative medium for citizens to exercise their rights and privileges and the Internet discussion now constitutes the people's public sphere to debate, analyze and examine community issues affecting their lives (Langmia, 2008). Scholars Nissenbaum and Introna suggest that the Internet has emerged as a dominant interactive medium and serves as a special kind of public space (Nissenbaum & Introna, 2004).

In China, information technology has stimulated academic inquiries on whether it will catalyze a democratic public sphere within the existing authoritarian political system. Some are positive of the emergence of a cyber public sphere. In “Information Technology, Public Space and Collective Action in China”, Zheng and Wu give example of a number of websites developed independently of the government, some of which serve as intellectual forums for discussing political affairs (Zheng & Wu, 2005). In regard to the government censorship, Zheng and Wu believe that it is
an enduring battle between the state and society, and new strategies are developed to conduct public discussions. One example is Jin Yong Martial Arts Novels – a website that first appeared as a nonpolitical forum for those who share a common hobby of martial art novels. Later, it gradually developed to cover an increasing amount of political topics, such as the democratic election in Taiwan and the 1989 Tiananmen movements (Zheng & Wu, 2005).

While political forums are still vastly censored, Chinese social media websites are making a more visible scene of public discussions. With almost 200 million users at the end of 2011, Chinese microblog Weibo is slowly nurturing more communications and debates on social and political affairs (CNNIC, 2011). Michael Anti, a Beijing-based journalist, gives examples of Internet celebrities such as Yaochen, who regularly raises educational and environmental issues in China among her 35 million followers on Weibo (Anti, 2012).

Anti also sees the conflict between the increasing Internet-users and the authoritarian state, particularly regarding issues that directly point at the central government. The arrest of activists such as Ai Weiwei and the crackdown of their microblogs show a strict censorship on public voices that the state finds threatening. Nevertheless, Anti recognizes that government censorship is slowly being softened by the increasing demand for information and communication. Anti sees a growing tolerance of public debates on political matters, which are in line with the state agenda, such as anti-corruption act, environmental issues, school education, and so on (Parello-Plesner & Anti, 2013).

The tolerance on some public speech has led to a number of issue-specific public spheres in China. One of them is what Craig Calhoun and Guobin Yang call “green public sphere” – a fledging public sphere of environmental public discourse (Calhoun and Yang, 2007). Calhoun and Yang believe that the triggering event was the intense public debate on the hydropower project planned on the Nu River in Yunnan Province in 2004, which eventually suspended the dam-building project (Calhoun and Yang, 2007). Such direct citizen voices were relatively absent from China’s public arena and seldom influenced government policymaking. Ever since, a public sphere of environmental issues was approved and sometimes even fostered by the state. Here, Calhoun and Yang believe that the mass media and the Internet provide the communicative spaces in the green public sphere, which are “prerequisites for citizen involvement and political participation” and are essential for “sustained and ongoing public discussion” (Calhoun and Yang, 2007).

Calhoun and Yang regard the green public sphere as an exemplary of the general development of the public sphere in China. Other examples of issue-specific public spheres include social arenas regarding rural poverty, where “citizens and voluntary associates are similarly engaged in public discussion and in finding ways to engage policymakers” (Calhoun and Yang, 2007). Guobin Yang concludes that issues more politically tolerable and more resonant with the public are more likely to enter the public sphere in China (Yang, 2009).

The Voice
The emergence of issue-specific public spheres reveals an intricate play between the state and society in China. While public discussions on rural poverty and sustainability could make an impact on political decisions, other permitted public discourse on issues such as Sino-Japanese relations and Taiwan independence seem to be more in line with the state propaganda. While mass media increasingly cover...
local corruption cases in support of China’s anti-corruption policies, coverage on central political leaders and their associates is monitored carefully.

Whether a full-scale democratic public sphere is to exist in China remains a much-debated question. In regard to the ongoing quest for freedom on Chinese cyberspace, however, Zheng and Wu believes that information technology has promoted some political liberalization, in a situation O’Donnel and Schmitter called “liberalized authoritarianism” (Zheng & Wu, 2005). In their account, “authoritarian rulers may tolerate or even promote liberalization in the belief that by opening up certain spaces for individual and group action, they can relieve various pressures and obtain needed information and support without altering the structure of authority, that is, without becoming accountable to the citizenry for their actions or subjecting their claim to rule to fair and competitive elections.” (Zheng & Wu, 2005)

In this context, Zheng and Wu suggest that the emerging public sphere in China rests on a liberalization of people using the “voice” - an attempt to change the practices, policies and outputs of an organization that people identify with. They regard it as a strategy for conducting collective actions that do not challenge, undermine or overthrow the state. Rather, “through a voice mechanism, the state receives feedback from social groups to respond to state decline and improve its legitimacy” (Zheng & Wu, 2005).

The public sphere shaped by these voices has significant meanings in altering the political arena in modern China. No less important, however, is its limitations in an authoritarian state. The form of the public discourse remains mostly on the Internet and in a small amount of unofficial literature.

4.2 Disappearing Collective Spaces

Urbanization

The Fang Xiang structure remained dominant in China’s city-making for centuries until 1949, when People’s Republic of China was founded. Since then, the urbanization process started to develop under a socialist political framework. Courtyard houses and Hutong areas were drastically demolished. Some remaining courtyard houses were overpopulated by the drastic increase of residents. Meanwhile, former Soviet Union planning doctrines were adopted, including the Danwei (work-unit) – a system of placing residential neighborhoods near the factories so as to make living close to the work (Zhou J., 2012). Work unit compounds were self-contained neighborhoods with high level of social mixture and close affiliation. In the work
unit structure, communities were composed of workers and colleagues, instead of families and relatives. There, new social groups were tightened, creating new forms of “families” of workers and comrades in the Communist Era. This sense of collectivism and belonging was again reflected by the surrounding walls built by the residents to protect their collective territory (Mu, 2011).

In 1978, China implemented the “open-door” policy that led to not only China’s surging economic growth, but also a full-scale national boom in commodity housing markets in the following decades (Zhou J., 2012). To fulfill the need of the massive urbanization and to comply with the market economy, China took a few steps in legalizing land policies in the middle of the 1980s. They include the commercialization of land-use rights, the beginning of mortgage systems in the banks, the resumption of private property ownership, and the permission of foreign investments in the Chinese market (Zhou J., 2012). From the late 1990s, the old work-unit welfare housing system was officially terminated, and housing became completely commercialized in China (Zhou J., 2012).

These policies led to an upsurge in new housing developments in urban cities. Satellite towns in suburbs become new frontiers, where large quantities of new housings are built. The influence of globalization, coupled with China’s quest for a modern identity and international recognition, results in a widespread adoption of western modernistic urban models in China. Prof. Ian Cook describes that Chinese cities are “caught in the midst of a marked Corbusian frenzy, of destruction of narrow roads and low-rise dwellings, and replacement via construction of mega-scale expressways and high-rise buildings” (Cook, 2008).

China’s drastic urbanization, particularly since the 1980s, is historically unprecedented. In 2011, the country had 691 million citizens living in towns or cities, taking China’s urbanization ratio past 50 percent for the first time in history (Miller, 2012). The pace of China’s urbanization doesn’t seem to slow down. McKinsey’s report in 2009 indicates that slightly more than 350 million people will be added to its urban population by 2025, among which more than 240 million will be migrants (McKinsey, 2009). 221 cities will have over one million inhabitants, compared to 23 in Europe. 23 Chinese cities will have more than five million inhabitants. By 2030, China’s urban population will likely hit the one billion mark (McKinsey, 2009).

The implication of new urban constructions in China includes the eradication of traditional urban fabric and the collective housing typology. Whereas multi-generation families lived under one roof in pre-Communist China and “work comrades” lived together in work-unit dormitories, urban dwellers are now composed of both local families and the increasing number of rural migrants, living in tightly packed residential towers. Newly built housing complexes sometimes accommodate up to thousands of households. The socio-demographic change in modern Chinese cities weakens the sense of community that used to be fostered in small-scale courtyard- and alley-houses. Chinese architect Wang Shu believes that it will take a long time for urban dwellers to establish mutual trust amongst each other and the sense of belonging in modern housing complexes, and it requires collective spaces where this can be done (Wang S., 2012).

Many others share the concern of the loss of collective living in modern China. Jing Zhou, for instance, points out that the traditional Chinese housing did not have much central public open space like the modern neighborhood does (Zhou J., 2012). Social contact, street life and mixed-use
programs in traditional urban fabric like narrow alleys and intimate courtyards can hardly be found in large-scale open spaces in modern communities. Zhou reminds that the lifestyle in Hutong- and Lilong-houses had a profound impact on people. Their social values and the negative impacts of their disappearance were widely and intensively debated, and finally memorialized after people were moved into multi-story apartment buildings in the 1980s and 1990s (Zhou J. , 2012).

**Western Practices**

Influenced by the prosperous real estate bolstered by China’s urbanization, most of the housing developments continue to adopt similar models with high-density apartment towers and large patches of greenery, which are gated with a commercial ring or security walls. Meanwhile, the issue of a vanishing public social life in these developments starts to concern some architects and planners.

In 2009, American architect Steven Holl completed Linked Hybrid - a housing complex Holl designed in Beijing, China. The 220,000 square meter ensemble, housing over 2,500 inhabitants, features a design concept of a three-dimensional public urban space. In Holl’s account, the building “aims to counter the current privatized urban developments in China by creating a new twenty-first century porous urban space, inviting and open to the public from every side”. Holl hopes to guide people through the linked buildings, and promote “interactive relations and encourages encounters in the public spaces” (Steven Holl Architects, 2009).

The initial to promote social interactions in modern high-density urban housings in China is a valuable intention. The idea of the open structure with a large and fully accessible public space, however, encountered much resistance. Two years after its completion, a wall with Chinese characteristic gates was built around the property, opposing Holl’s initial idea of the open plan. The “public from every side” in Holl’s vision is for the Chinese the strangers whom they don’t necessarily welcome in their living space.

The difficulty with revitalizing the neighborhood with a public life is multifold. Firstly, the collective lifestyle in traditional Chinese cities relied on the small scale of communities. The livelihood of Hutong and Lilong was created by neighbors, families, and visitors, who are within a small social circle, mostly in similar social status. The urbanization in China has shuffled and mobilized the urban dwellers, who no longer identify themselves within a certain stabilized group of people. Wang Shu believes that many Chinese are confronted with the loss of collective living, and it’ll be tremendously difficult to find it back in urbanized modern China (Wang S. , 2012).

Secondly, public spaces that allow social encountering, as one can see in traditional Chinese cities, are shaped in small-scale pedestrian-friendly spaces, such as streets, alleys, and inner courtyards. The public space in Holl’s design reminds one more of a western public square, which the Chinese do not associate as a place to have an interactive social life. Instead, it is likely that the large open space here offers more of a symbolic importance for the residents to identify Linked Hybrid with. The accessibility of the property from all sides probably enhances this openness, which does not translate the space into a public space in China.

Thirdly, a western public sphere that nurtures social interaction among individuals did not take shape in China. Instead, Chinese public sphere rests largely on a collective level amongst communities and families. Enclosure, a concept ensuring a sense of collectivism and belonging, is
reflected in every form of public spaces presented in Chinese history. Walled alleys, inward courtyards, and linear streets all share the same nature of enclosure. They are revealed in different hierarchies of publicness. What Linked Hybrid misses, rather essentially here, is the concept of enclosure that western architects often find contradictive in creating public spaces in China. Despite the much controversy of gated communities, one questions whether they are a struggling attempt by the Chinese to regain some of the enclosure they were once accustomed to.

4.3 Conclusion
Modernization in China is triggering a transformation of the Chinese public sphere. While the once-empty public realm of political discourse now sees sparkles of public engagement by the Chinese on virtual spaces, the once-vibrant collective sphere faces challenges posed by China’s unprecedented urbanization.

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<td>Issue-specific Public Sphere</td>
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| Family |

| The Changing Middle |

Whether China will develop a Habermasian public sphere as a counterpart of the state remains to be seen. Its future development is most likely to be determined by China’s political nature and the social-demographic changes in the coming decades. In comparison, the disappearing collective realm is resulted by, amongst others, the loss of collective spaces in modern China. This has more spatial relevance and consequences. To redeem this social realm that allows for human contact and social recognition, and to rethink the models being applied in modern Chinese cities, is therefore a task for not only the policymakers, but also architects and planners.
5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of public spaces in China and the West has introduced the phenomenon of the nationalization and privatization of public spaces in China, and the absence of an interactive social life in Chinese public spaces.

This has drawn the attention to the different underlying social models in chapter two, particularly the contrasting public spheres in China and the West. Reflecting on Habermas’ theories, chapter two presented a predominantly state-associated notion of “public” in China, in contrast to a counter-state association with the public sphere in the West. It also showed that the under-development of individualism in China may have a substantial impact on the absence of a democratic public sphere, and that China’s prevailing collectivistic culture reinforces the strong state and family, resulting in an empty middle in between.

The historical examination of Chinese urban spaces in chapter three showed that interactive public spaces have never truly existed in China. This validates the hypothesis that a lack of social interaction in Chinese public spaces is not merely a symptom of the current political situation or architectural preferences, but rather a reflection of cultural and social phenomena identified in chapter two. At the same time, the investigation of urban spaces in pre-Communist China has led to the discovery of collective spaces - neither private nor public spaces - which essentially accommodated the social life in Chinese cities for centuries.

The final chapter identified that in modern-day China, although a virtual public sphere is slowly emerging, collective spaces are vastly disappearing in contemporary high-rise residential models demanded by drastic urbanization. It recognized the confronting challenges but also opportunities for architects and planners to address the lack of social interaction through the design of Chinese collective spaces. While drawing the attention to the loss of collective spaces and its social consequences, this paper asks for a reassessment of the contemporary residential models adopted in China and calls for a revitalization of collective spaces in Chinese neighborhoods and communities in the practice of architecture and urban planning.
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