Yang Shan · **Investigation into Shanghai Spatial Publicness**

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An Alternative Discourse on Public Space and Its Urbanistic Manifestation

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Bauhaus-Universität Weimar
Satz und Gestaltung: Monika Aichinger, Jonas Verlag
Gedruckt in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
ISBN: 978-3-95773-201-9

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind über http://d-nb.de abrufbar.

For Vera and Tintin

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Acknowledgments

This book is based on my doctoral dissertation. My greatest intellectual debt is to my mentor and advisor at Technische Universität München, Prof. Sophie Wolfrum, who guided me through her teaching and discussions, and whose careful readings and insightful criticism challenged and inspired me over the course of writing and revising. Her patience and tolerance created a free atmosphere of thinking and writing for me in this long intellectual journey. I would also like to thank the colleagues of Lehrstuhl für Städtebau und Regionalplanung who offered me much help and academic support for developing my research.

Many thanks to my old friends: Wang Daoseng, Li Zhigang, Yang Chen, Qin Yi, who either encouraged me to go through with the doctorate or provided insightful suggestions at various point along the way, and also to some new friends in Germany: Judy Wise Jones, Andrew Jones and Anna Mayr, who gave me, a non-native speaker, lots of precious suggestions on English and German language. Special thanks are due to my editor, Doctor Bettina Preiß. With her support, my work can finally "appear in public" and "can be seen and heard by everybody."

Another man I would like to offer my appreciation to is Cui Jian, whose songs motivated me to face tough challenges, follow my own mind and keep walking.

I would like to express my gratitude to my parents and my mother-in-law, whose support was quite significant to me. My final and deepest appreciation is offered to my wife, Ji Yuzhong. Without her, I could not have accomplished the book.

Contents

Preface **9**

Introduction **11**

Chapter 1 · Meta-Spatial Publicness **19**
1.1 · Hannah Arendt – The Agonistic Model of Public Spheres 20
1.2 · Jürgen Habermas – The Discursive Model of Public Sphere 22
1.3 · Richard Sennett – The Public Sphere as "Impersonal" Sphere 24
1.4 · Hans Paul Bahrdt – The Public Sphere as a Social System with Incomplete Integration 26
1.5 · Rosalyn Deutsche – The Public Sphere as a Debatable and Conflictual Sphere 28
1.6 · Defects in the Meta-Spatial Theories 30

Chapter 2 · Distance – Relation-Equilibrating **37**
2.1 · The Production of Public Space 38
2.2 · Distance – A Prerequisite for Publicness 40
2.3 · The Spatial *Triad* of Distance 41
2.4 · Body – The Dividing Line 43
2.5 · Mask and Role 44
2.6 · The Institutionalization of Distance 47
2.7 · Disciplining Public Spaces 49
2.8 · Community – Institutionalized Collective Distance 51
2.9 · Complexity and Paradox in Distance 54

Chapter 3 · Representation – Meaning-Presenting **57**
3.1 · Representation – The *(Re-)* Presentation of Meaning 58
3.2 · The Crisis of Representation in Architecture 61
3.3 · The Crisis of Representation in Politics and Art 64
3.4 · Total Mediations – Artistic Performance 67
3.5 · Spatial Performance – A Technique for Meaning-Presenting 69
3.6 · Presence and Atmosphere – The Lived Space 72
3.7 · Enabling Stage or Performative Kulturtechnik? 74
3.8 · *Consensus* and *Dissensus* ***78***

TRANSCRIPT UNIVERSITÄTSVERLAG

Chapter 4 · Genealogy of Shanghai's Social Spaces **83**
4.1 · *Gemeinschaft* Versus *Gesellschaft* 84
4.2 · *Chaxugeju, Heyuanzhuzhai* and *Li-Fang* 88
4.3 · Early Citizenship, *Lilong* and Early Public Spaces 92
4.4 · Socialism, *Danwei* and *Gongren xincun* 97
4.5 · Social Segregation, MRD (Gated Community) and Informal Urbanism 103
4.6 · Community Gene with Public Potential 107

Chapter 5 · Spatial Publicness in Shanghai **111**
5.1 · (Politically) Ritual Spaces 112
5.2 · Consumption Spaces 121
5.3 · Historical Symbolic Spaces 127
5.4 · Neighborhood Communal Spaces 134
5.5 · Parks and Green Spaces 142
5.6 · Metro Stations 148
5.7 · Public Reachability or Public Accessibility? 155

Chapter 6 · Aesthetics Dissensus **159**
6.1 · Three Pairs of Paradoxes 160
6.2 · Critical Architecture Versus Projective Practices 162
6.3 · New Babylon and The Fun Palace 165
6.4 · Building Versus Edification or the Third Way? 169
6.5 · The Combination of Law and Freedom 174
6.6 · Mega-Structure or Mega-Form 180

Chapter 7 · Politics Dissensus **187**
7.1 · Situationist International 188
7.2 · Tactics for Urbanism 189
7.3 · The Return of Distance Dimension 201
7.4 · Urban Staging 203
7.5 · Hospitable Practices and Urban Infill 211

Bibliography **219**

List of Figures **229**

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Preface

The discourse on the urban publicness and public space might wane, were it not always possible to update it under new conditions. The rapidly transforming cities of China offer this discourse a contemporary field of empirical research and intellectual challenge. In this case, the discourse focuses on Shanghai, the hometown of the author. On the one hand, Chinese cities are integrated into a global network of city production and interpretation, while on the other, the specific conditions of China's urban society lead to the specific nature of urban spaces. *Investigation* – reconnaissance, research, exploration – describes the intellectual path of this book, an *intellectual journey,* in the course of which a theory of the character of public spaces in Shanghai develops. Various sociological theories are brought into play, and orientation is found in the company of – to name only the most important – Hannah Arendt, Rosalin Deutsche, and Jaques Rancière.

The author's intellectual background is that of an architect who is in on-going struggle over what position architecture can assume in this field of discourse, dominated as it is by the social sciences, in order to be able to act as an architect. Not least to withdraw from the common imputations of urban discourse on public space – defined types of urban space are usually ascribed established public functions – Shan Yang calls for a new terminology: *spatial publicness.* He thus lays a path through theoretical space. The usual radical polarity between the private and public sphere as a condition of urbanism and the city that characterizes Western urbanism is questioned from other cultural contexts than the European.

The concept of *spatial publicness* is theoretically established in the first part of the book, and applied to Shanghai in the second part. In the crucial final section, the role of architecture is questioned. A *Logical Diagram* supports the reasoning of the argument. This is not evident at first, but the reading of a very dense text is thus well guided. T*he Logical Diagram* also allows a linear reading of the text or as a tableau of theories and reports on architectural practices in the light of *liminality, consensus/dissensus.* In particular, the dialectic between consent and dissent is expanded into a theoretical foundation.

A wealth of considerations is presented that relate not only to the specific case of Shanghai, but which significantly enrich the professional discourse on urban studies with regard to the relationship between the production of space and the public sphere. Shan Yang manages to carve out an independent position in the already crowded field of urban theory.

Sophie Wolfrum
München, March 2016

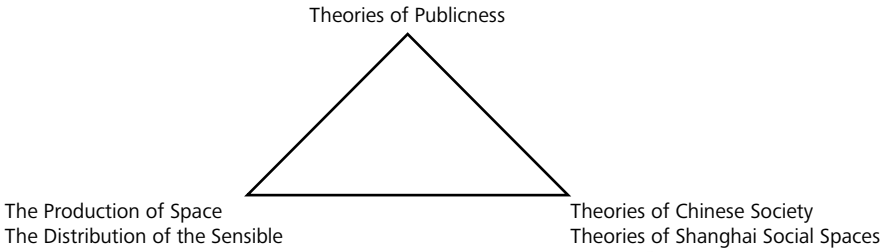
Introduction

This research investigates *Shanghai spatial publicness* by virtue of the theoretical reflection on the essence of public space, the empirical survey on social spaces in Shanghai, and the instantiative exploration of professional responses from architectural and urbanistic perspectives. The whole discussion pivots on a new concept *"spatial publicness"* that is deduced to overcome the defect of the conventional concept "public space", when confronting the complexity, fluidness, and polysemy of contemporary urban phenomena. The new notion with its inherent nature of indeterminacy, instability, and temporariness can facilitate disclosing the vibrant but long-overlooked potential in Shanghai's social space. Lastly, some new strategies and tactics for promoting *spatial publicness* in recent architectural practices, including those in China, are explored in two ways – politics and art, two forms of *dissensus*. In fact, the research tries to answer the following three questions:

- What is the public space *(spatial publicness)?*
- What is the public space *(spatial publicness)* in the context of Shanghai?
- What can architecture (urban design) do for public space *(spatial publicness)?*

All theoretical resources involved in the dissertation can be identified as three categories: the first one comes under the heading of public space, public sphere, or publicness; the second refers to the theory of space and the discourse on aesthetics and politics, *dissensus* and *consensus* (the distribution of the sensible); the third is mainly about the studies of social spaces in Shanghai and China. The three topics represented by them – publicness, spatialness, and locality – will converge on the main issue of the dissertation, namely, *Shanghai spatial publicness*. Their mutual relations can be illustrated by a triangular figure **(Figure 0.1).**[1]

1 The triangular illustration, reflecting the major theoretical resources of the dissertation, would be constructed on three major aspects: firstly, theories of publicness, in particular the theories of Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Hans Paul Bahrdt; secondly, Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Rancière's discourses on aesthetics and politics; thirdly, theories of Shanghai social spaces – the classical research about Chinese social structure and urban space, especially about Shanghai.



0.1. The Triangular Illustration of the theoretical foundation.

Chapter 1 Meta-Spatial Publicness

The concept of public space is closely intricate and easily confusable with that of public sphere which is primarily concerned in political, philosophical, and social fields. Redolent with metaphysical and political elements, the public sphere is actually a kind of *meta-spatial publicness.* When *spatial publicness* or *public space* discussed, this *meta-spatial publicness* is an ineludible departure.

There are several key theories about *meta-spatial publicness* introduced in the chapter, including doctrines of Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Sennett, Hans Paul Bahrdt, and Rosalyn Deutsche. Among all of them, Arendt's definition of public realm as "two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena" – *common world* and *public appearance* – is established as a keystone to navigate the slippery territory. Subsequently, the two essential facets of publicness will be replaced by two spatialized terminologies "distance" and "representation" in the next two chapters.

Chapter 2 Distance – Relation-Equilibrating

The concept of "distance" represents the mutual tension in-between social relationships in *spatial publicness.* Their equilibrium is maintained by the distance, which manifests itself in the three dimension of spatial production: the physical, mental, and social. The researches of Edward T. Hall, Richard Sennett, and Erving Goffman echo the fact that the success of public life relies on the existence of a set of distance regime. However, the decline of public life was also attributed to inflation of the codes – the institutionalization of distance regime, because the over-powerful regime would suffocate another aspect of *spatial publicness – meaning-presenting.* The metropolitan personality like "indifference", "reserve", and "aversion" described by Simmel is exactly an essential impediment to the birth of new meanings. And the spatial segregation lasting from the 18th century to the present day demonstrates a trend of institutionalization of collective distance too.

As an essential factor for production of *spatial publicness,* distance finds itself in a subtle balance between its institutionalization and disappearance.