

Patriotic Rhetoric in Chinese Public Space

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Abstract

This paper begins with the analysis of the socio-cultural phenomenon known as “public space.” This analysis is followed by the reflection on distinctive features of public space in contemporary China. Subsequently, I focus on the use of public space by Chinese authorities for spreading official political and ideological discourse. For this purpose, I analyse the form and content of messages displayed in places of public utility. I conclude by showing what, how and why these are being displayed and widely promoted by the authorities. I argue that public space in China, on the one hand, is “public” in the sense that it is accessible and used by citizens; on the other, it is “arrested by authorities” and used for their socio-political and ideological purposes. Such an arrangement is a statement of the unvocalised agreement between the authorities and citizens that allows the former to avoid major conflicts with the latter and legitimise political power. In return, the latter enjoy a wide range of socio-cultural freedom and are being provided with psychological comfort resulting from identification with a greater endeavour of restoring the glory of the Chinese nation.

Keywords: Chinese rhetoric, Chinese nationalism, ideology, Chinese values, socio-political slogans

Introduction

In 20th-century Chinese propaganda and rhetoric, the power of slogans used by the authorities have played a major role in establishing and legitimising political and ideological leadership. Besides newspapers, radio, television and recently the internet, public space has also been employed as a means of communication between the authorities and society. The analysis of the form and the content of the messages displayed in the public space is then no less important than studying newspapers, TV news or official speeches. It not only reveals the content and motivation behind socio-political discourses promoted by the authorities but also shows how the public accommodates the space employed by the authorities for their political and ideological purposes. Concluding from data obtained in several geographically distant locations in China, we can then state that the public space in China, is “public” in the sense that it is accessible and used by citizens to conduct non-political socio-cultural activities. However, the design and control of socio-political and ideological messages displayed is entirely controlled by the authorities. Such an arrangement, rarely, if at all, challenged by the public, is a display of the unvoiced agreement between the authorities and citizens. It allows the former to avoid major conflicts and keep political power. In return, the latter enjoy a wide range of socio-cultural freedom and psychological comfort of identification with the greater good of the “nation’s rejuvenation”.

What is “Public Space”?

"Public space" is a term that appears across a wide range of academic disciplines. The idea as such does involve quite a few aspects of the physical and social life, and a single approach could hardly exhaust the meaning of the concept. The adjective “public” turns our attention to the socially shared nature of the space, and the noun “space,” indicates the necessity of the spatial factor for social interactions to happen. “Public” then includes roads, squares, parks, beaches, government and privately owned buildings, places of religious cults and all access-free zones and buildings with all instalments that are accessible to members of society. Even if some of them are not available to everyone, the message presented in their visible and accessible parts has its impact on the socio-political discourse. It brings us to another feature crucial for space to be considered “public” which is its relation with “public sphere,” understood as “forums of public discussion” (Habermas, 1998). It has even become a task for practitioners and academics alike, to “conceive spaces that are at once accessible to everyone and which also foster a sense of shared concern, the emergence of a local public sphere” (Tonellat, 2010). Any form of fully, or partially, opened space that “fosters a sense of shared concern” can then be considered public. The accessibility of a public space can be moderated or negotiated. Especially in the era of the appreciation of the private property on the one hand, and the growing regulatory efforts of governments on the other, what makes space “public” is more a shared image than a physical “here and now.” Another interesting observation of researchers in recent years is the fact that the “focal” point of interpretation moved from open space in general towards accessible “zones” with clearly marked boundaries and limited capacity of accommodating participants. Schools, hospitals and even public buses are good examples here. Despite all these limitations, public space must be in some way accessible to an at least certain number of citizens who are not the owners of that particular place. French philosopher Henry Lefebvre went even further arguing that public space is what he called the “right to the city,” the right of the inhabitants to have better control over the production of the space of their daily life. In Lefebvre's thinking, public space is an object of creative transformation remaining in a dialectical relation with the notions of power and control. It is not just a physical vacuum that can be utilised by society for certain purposes but is the *sine*

qua none condition for the emergence and existence of a particular type of society (Levebre, 1991).

Public space is then an arena of social interactions for which the presence of actual space is necessary or at least very desirable. However, for public space to be considered truly “public,” it must be more of a part of the shared mental landscape of the participants than just a physical place that human beings pass through.

Public Space in China

Without a doubt, the concept of the public space is a product of Western civilisation derived from the notion of *agora*, the place of citizen interaction in ancient Greece. Habermas argued that it was the *agora*, the spatiotemporal and mental construct with all the socio-political interactions taking place that led to the emergence of the public sphere and phenomena like civil society and democracy (Habermas, 1989). Public space as a phenomenon also occurred in other places around the globe as well, but at different times and not in quite the same form. In China, for instance, despite the long history of its civilisation, public space as a publicly used and imagined place is quite a recent invention. A family-oriented lifestyle, ruled by the strict socio-ethical code, to a large degree limited citizens’ activity to strictly drawn boundaries beyond which the world often virtually did not exist (Sun, 2004). This is not to say that people in Imperial China were not aware of the concept of a greater space, going beyond the boundaries of their family business world. Quite to the contrary, the notion of *tianxia*, “under the heaven,” had been a concept recognisable to most of even the least educated Chinese. However, the concept itself was referring to such a geographically and mentally broad scope that it remained somehow “aloof” (Sun, 2004). As the famous proverb says, “The Heaven is high (above us), the Emperor is far away (from us).” The proverb then “recognises” the significance of these two factors for the perseverance of the very existence of the cosmos. However, as it exemplifies, their significance for the everyday matters seems to be of little importance. Such perception of *tianxia* contributed to a further expansion of the realm of a family on the cost of the space shared by the members of different households. The model of Changan, the ancient capital, displayed at the City Museum in Xi’an, provides us with a visual representation of the way the urban space was arranged and perceived in Imperial China. Massive city walls surround the city. Inside the city walls, we see the space divided by smaller walls creating separate segments with the Imperial Palace overlooking the entire city from behind another wall. The everyday experience of a common citizen was then confined to the boundaries of a walled part of the city s/he lived in. He, and even to a greater degree, she was rarely leaving their compound, making the encounter with individuals from beyond these inner walls sporadic. Streets, markets, temples and schools that were certainly used by the public could hardly compare with the Athenian *Agora*. For instance, the markets that emerged during the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) were controlled by guilds and “native-place associations” (*xiangtong hui*) (Gaubatz, 2008). Temples were either family-owned, or they belonged to a particular religious denomination. Moreover, starting from the time of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), they were put under strict control, further limiting the free exchange of ideas and the possibility of creating an independent public sphere. The actual civic public space emerged in China only as a result of modernisation movements in the early 20th century. The event that could be classified as a first example of an active participation of citizens from different classes that utilised larger space for public purposes was the May 4th Movement. On the 4th of May 1919 students of universities in Beijing, followed by merchants and ordinary citizens, took their political agenda to the streets. Soon, the people of Shanghai and other large cities followed them. The May 4th Movement paved the way

towards wide usage of the open space for socio-political movements and propaganda. This situation, rather unknown in Imperial China, soon became a norm leading to the great worries for the ruling class. As a result, the open space for socio-political activity was soon “arrested” by government forces (Zarrow, 2005). Similar situations repeated a number of times in the later history of China with three instances of particular importance. The first one was the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when bands of young Red Guards took to the streets, thus making them a scene for the display of their political agenda. At first, not very well controlled by the central government, young “guards” soon ignited a quasi-civil war. The authorities had not much choice but to take over control of public space once again and send most of the “active” participants out of towns and cities. The second was the so-called “Wall of Democracy” time between November 1978 and March 1979. Citizens were encouraged to put forward petitions and critique of the ruling regime. The uptake of this chance was slow at the beginning but soon grew and become so forceful that the critical tone of the petitions and street banners made authorities quickly re-establish their control (Vogel, 2011, pp. 250–257). The most recent issue regarding public space in China happened in the 1980’s when, communist intellectuals, partly supported by the authorities, were searching for a “new identity” (Schoppa, 2006). As Philip C.C. Huang has pointed out, it was “a space intermediate between state and society in which both participated”, “a third realm” (Huang, 1993: 224). According to Edward Gu, it was “an intellectual space comprising (1) state generated public space, (2) society-originated, officially-backed public space, (3) societal public space and (4) dissident public space” (Gu, 1999, p. 391). The resulting Tiananmen tragedy was, on the one hand, a culminating point of display and utilisation of public space understood in such a way. At the same time, it was a final breakaway from it. As a consequence, it led to the elimination of “dissident public space,” or at least in restricting its scope to secret, underground zones.

The doubts regarding the applicability of Habermas' theory of the public sphere to China put forward by Huang can easily be applied to public space as well. Public space in China, at least to a degree, is designed, overlooked and simply controlled by the authorities. It is almost impossible to find a place of public use, especially in urban China, that has been designed without a state permit. The state strictly controls any, public or private, display of pictures, art, written messages and slogans. No art or musical performance, not to mention any religious activities, can happen without an involvement of the local government. With the occasional exception, this rule is generally adhered to by citizens. Such an observation would correspond with the theory that Asian cultures have a collectivist element playing an important role and are inclined towards authoritarianism (Pye, 1988). However, it would be an oversimplification to conclude with such a statement. A short look at the variety of activities in the public places and the way they are being performed brings us to a slightly different conclusion.

Writing about the use of public space in China, Stephen McDonnell, a BBC reporter, quite correctly noticed a core feature of the Chinese public, namely *renao* (lit.: “hot-noisy”). As he put it: “To be 热闹 (*renao*) is to be bustling with noise and excitement” (McDonnell, BBC News, 11 March 2017). The space in China to be called “public” must be loud and ideally full of people. A visit to Starbucks or McDonald's, must-go places for the Chinese middle-class, provides a sufficient proof of such a claim. Public squares and most streets are similarly populated. It is quite difficult to see an empty street in any even mid-size city or town, and there are always people dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, doing *Taiji* or simply chatting or conducting commercial activity in public parks. Shopping malls, markets and even hospitals are the places of public encounters where all sorts of social

interactions can be seen and heard. In short, in China, there are always people visible where there is a place or zone available to them. Moreover, those people are very audible and not shy to interact with others. Even if the interactions are usually limited to the group of family acquaintances (Sun, 2004), the public space in China is very much “alive”, *renao*. Participants are often organised in groups spending their time and money on a specific activity, and the obvious opportunities for interactions and deliberation could then suggest that the public space in China is very close to the Habermas’s ideal type. Some researchers then would like to see the public space in China as a place of the display of the individuality of the citizen, and even the birthplace of any future “democratisation”. However, the design and control of this space flooded with citizens who use it to display their lifestyle, aspirations and individuality, is in the hands of authorities. Moreover, the authorities, following the steps of the past regimes, do not hesitate to use it for their particular purposes. These “design and usage” of public space is to be analysed in the following.

Patriotism in Chinese Public Space

Methodology

In China, access to public space is open to every citizen. However, we would call this access “passive” or at least “conformed”, since the right to design it and determine the message that can be spread through it is in the hands of the authorities. The focus of the present research is then on the official slogans promoting patriotism and appreciation of Chinese culture and current politics. These slogans are widely distributed and can be seen in parks, public squares, on buses, on the streets and in public buildings. The banners, posters, planks and similar displays of official propaganda used for analysis have been photographed and translated by the author. The obtained results have been verified for accuracy by native Chinese speakers with a high command of English. Another source of the material for the current study were the overheard conversations, talks, discussions and short verbal exchanges of ideas between Chinese citizens in the parks, public squares and other places of public use. All the material analysed in this study were collected during the author’s trips between Feb 2015 and March 2017 to different locations in China, such as Fuzhou, Xi’an, Chengdu, Shanghai, Xishuangbanna and Suzhou.

Findings

What is the message that the authorities try to disseminate among the citizens with slogans displayed in public space? How is the message justified? What is the motivation of such actions? What do the banners, posters, planks and similar displays of official propaganda tell us about the authorities that put so much effort into popularising particular values? Probably the most appealing slogan that is constantly reproduced through the entire spectrum of public space is *Zhonghua Minzu de Weida Fuxing* (中华民族的伟大复兴), which can be translated as *The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation*. In recent years it is usually paired with a main ideological slogan of the current administration *Zhongguo meng* (中国梦), *The China Dream*. It was originally mooted by Jiang Zemin after he came into power, replacing *Invigorating China* (振兴中华) that was used by Sun Yat-sen back in 1894, and later by the CCP (Ho, 2014: 176). Sun Yat-sen's original slogan was a call for an “awakening” of a sense of Chinese national identity among the subjects of the Qing Empire (Harrison, 2001). Nation-building rhetoric was never actually abandoned by Chinese Communists (Wu, 2014, p. 63). However, for Jiang Zemin, who took over the power from Deng Xiaoping in the 1990’s, the appeal to the “rebirth of nation” became necessary for at least two reasons. First, it legitimised him and put him in line with the other “great leaders of the new China”. Second,

it justified his departure from the communist principles and furthered the development of a market economy. The particular item making him “great,” was his work towards “rejuvenation” of the most precious Chinese nation. This “great” task could have been accomplished only through proper socio-economic policies. Even though Jiang Zemin is probably the least favourite leader in the recent history of China, his call for national revival seems to find a resonance among citizens (Link et al., 2013, p. 3), and the current administration also made it into a crucial element of its ideological agenda.

Another essential term commonly used in regards to making China into a “strong country” (强国, *qiangguo*) is *tuanjie* (团结), “unity” or “solidarity”, an almost indispensable element of public space in China, especially in regions populated by ethnic minorities. One of the common banners then reads *Jiaqiang minzutuanjie, cujinminzujinbu* (加强民族团结, 促进民族进步, *Strengthen national unity, expedite national progress*). The term *minzu* in the first part of the sentence refers to all ethnic groups living in China. In the second part, it means the Chinese nation in general. The People’s Republic of China, as its constitution states, is the “unitary multi-national state built up jointly by the people of all its nationalities” (Preamble). China currently recognises 55 ethnic minorities, besides the dominant Han (Macceras, 2011, p. 111). The authorities that often face socio-cultural and political conflicts in some areas inhabited by minorities try then to spread the message that only through “unity and solidarity” among different ethnic groups can economic and political “progress”, be achieved. Knowing the level of tension in areas such as Xinjiang, and Tibet (Xizang), the message and the purpose of such a slogan is clear. Not only will the “solidarity” between ethnic groups bring prosperity to the entire nation, including those minorities, but, since “progress” is the most desired historical necessity, such a “unity and solidarity” are also unavoidable historical necessities.

Zhongguo jingshen, zhongguoxingxiang, zhongguowenhua, zhongguobiaoda (中国精神, 中国形象, 中国文化, 中国表达), *Chinese spirit, China’s image, China’s culture, Chinese expression* is another example of the appeal to Chineseness as the value of utmost importance. This appeal to Chinese values, national character and Chineseness in general, has become an integral part of the socio-political agenda of the regime after Jiang’s call for national rejuvenation. Chinese values, lifestyle, and a way of communication and culture, in general, have thus been officially recognised as being at least equal to, if not even superior, to their western counterparts. Through slogans like the one above, the authorities try to provide socio-psychological comfort to the citizens who on the one hand are “proud descendants of the Yellow Emperor”, but on the other face the hardships of everyday life. However, there is also a political consideration hidden behind this appreciation of Chinese values, culture and lifestyle. It demonstrates that Chinese ambitions to become a world superpower, are believed to be achievable through the use of soft power. Language and culture are primary tools that can be utilised to this effect. It is then of the utmost importance to preserve and cherish this language and culture among the Chinese themselves. Another noteworthy fact in this respect is the appreciation of hierarchy and social inequality in traditional Chinese culture (Pye, 1985). Despite claiming equal status for every citizen, starting from the time of Deng Xiaoping Chinese authorities accepted not only market economy, but also social inequality. As Deng himself put it once, “Some must get rich first”.¹ The following administration went even further and put much more emphasis on “harmony” than “equality.” An appeal to the Chinese character of such an arrangement seems to be a very handy justification for such a shift.

¹ <http://bbs.tianya.cn/m/post-news-192008-1.shtml>

Renminyouxinyang, minzuyouxiwang, guojia youliliang (人民有信仰, 民族有希望, 国家有力量), is another slogan that can be seen in many places around China. It translates to *(If) People have faith, there is hope for the nation, and the country is powerful*. As we can see, the future of the nation, its prosperity and very existence depend on the “faith of people”. The “strength of the country” can only be assured by the faith of the “people”. However, to which faith is this slogan referring? For those living in China, this “faith” refers to the policies pushed forward by the current regime. The not always popular reforms marking the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy “reinstalled” class divisions (Goodman, 2013), and left many citizens economically and socially behind. Faith in the “right” direction of the socio-economic changes is presented as necessary for the happiness and success of the entire nation and the country. Even the ones left behind, struggling with day-to-day survival, should recognise the utmost importance of such an endeavour.

Another slogan which has been around for decades and still is visible in many parts of the country, is *Mei yougongchangdang, meiyouxinzhongguo* (没有共产党, 没有新中国), *Without Communist Party, there would not be/is no new China*. It is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it emphasises the value of this “New China,” that the Mainland is equal with the PRC, the state established by Mao Zedong. “New China,” a term widely used since then, means the state of equal rights and opportunities when the exploitation of one class by another has been/will be eradicated. The PRC is then this “New China,” the promised land of progress and happiness of the strong nation. The second interesting feature comes from the enigmatic character of Chinese grammar in which the tenses are not always very distinct. The second part of the slogan can be then translated as “there would not be a new China” or as “there is no new China”. As the first translation praises the CCP’s contribution to establishing this “promised land of Chinese people”, the second bears a strong political message. Although indirectly, it states that without the CCP the New China, so much desired by everyone, is impossible. In other words, the leadership of the CCP is irreplaceable, and any move towards such a replacement would endanger the entire project.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, the transcripts from the discussion regarding the importance of the Chinese nation, identity, patriotism and China in general recorded cannot be fully presented here. It is worth noting, though, that if the “officials” are often subjects of criticism from common citizens, the historical role of a great Chinese nation is almost never questioned or denied. Quite to the contrary, Chinese across classes, genders and different age groups are almost unanimously proud of their Chineseness, cherish Chinese values and believe that China and the Chinese nation should play a greater role in the future history of the world. This does not mean that common Chinese people are fully aware of the nature of Chinese values or know China's history. It also does not mean that the often ostentatious demonstration of class differences and the disrespect for compatriots of lower status is inexistent. Neither is it the case that Chinese are not keen on obtaining foreign passports. It is quite to the contrary. Many Chinese know very little about “Confucian values”. Many Chinese also love to display their social status and are not shy to let everyone around them feel their superior position. Finally, quite a number of Chinese are more than keen to become citizens of a foreign country. However, all this does not prevent them from “being proud of being Chinese”. All this leads us to the conclusion that this appraisal of the Chinese is a result of an unwritten agreement with authorities and peers and does not simply follow from official discourse. Rather, it is an amalgamation of all of these ingredients.

Discussion

As demonstrated above, one can learn quite a few things about the aims and objectives of authorities from the messages displayed in places for public use. First of all, it becomes apparent that the appeal to “traditional” culture is a vital element of the current regime’s socio-political agenda. The positive appraisal of Confucian values such as family and social harmony stays very much apart from the basic principles of communism. Except for the remains of older murals, often remembering the times of Cultural Revolution and barely readable, we could not find any examples of a call for class-struggle, overthrowing bourgeois elites or a call for social and economic equality. Instead, the emphasis on harmonious (hierarchical) family and a harmonious (economically unequal) society is overwhelming. Moreover, love of country and nation, the concern for its future and international recognition are also leading themes to be pushed forward by the authorities. At the same time, the leading role of the CCP is emphasised. The CCP is presented as guardian of the interests of the masses, the only guarantor of socio-political stability. Additionally, the CCP and the government are praised as the only powers working towards the honour and international recognition of the “Great Chinese nation” (Gries, 1996). Any sign of counter-arguments cannot be found. This is mainly due to the fact that authorities design and control the physical aspect of public space. Authorities actually do grant citizens a certain level of freedom in the way of using public space. It makes places *renao*, a desirable feature of “the place to go” in China. Since the identification, or at least compliance with, the authorities’ policy is a *sine qua none* condition for being allowed in public space, the larger the audience is, the greater the pressure on the individual to respect the equilibrium. Citizens largely remain self-restrained and respect the boundaries in exchange for the freedom to perform the activities that make a place *renao* and thus satisfies the need for sociability. Intentionally or not, citizens by their physical presence in the places of public utility do consume, digest and reproduce the authorities’ messages, even if they do not always find them plausible and convincing; they seem to be quite cosy with most of the ideas presented to them. As a result, both parties attain their goals; the authorities spread their messages through which they legitimise their right to rule and control the public space by drawing the boundaries for citizens’ activities. Citizens on their behalf, through at least verbal and superficial acceptance of such arrangements, are granted a considerable level of freedom to use the public space the way it suits their needs (entertainment, socialising, commercial activity). Moreover, the content of the messages is not anymore an appeal to the class-struggle, but directs citizens’ attention to the “greatness of the Chinese Nation” and provides a sense of belonging and psychological comfort (Ho, 2014). Of course, the whole process is an ongoing “negotiation” and a result of an un-vocalised compromise between two parties. Looking at the content of internet discussions, still largely dominated by the official discourse reproduced by authorities and citizens alike, different voices can be heard. However, they might be difficult to identify, especially for one unfamiliar with the modes of Chinese communication that are very much fond of indirect speech, the use of euphemisms, quotations from the literature and the application of numerous nicknames (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012). On the one hand, authorities claim the right to define acceptable criticism and on the other pre-empt any anti-establishment discourse by informing the public on a daily basis about yet another high-ranking state or party official being investigated for “corruption and other crimes”. Authorities then apply the well-tested strategy of controlling the discourse and criticism directed towards themselves and this especially so since the current leader assumed his post and the anti-corruption campaign became a vivid element of his political agenda, and anti-corruption discourse has been incorporated into state-sponsored propaganda. Similarly, the authorities leave some room for the unhappy voices but designing and controlling the shape

and the size of it. Intentionally or not, citizens reproduce the official discourse produced by the authorities and make it an integral part of their political and socio-cultural perception.

Conclusion

Contemporary western inquiry into the nature of public space in China focuses much more on the specific exemplification of the public space than on the utilisation of commonly accessible places for specific political and cultural purposes. The structure of shopping malls, public parks, and the social dynamics of these places have become the object of numerous studies and articles (Jewell, 2016; J.P. Sniadecki, 2012; 2015). With some notable exceptions (Pan, 2011), most of them pay more attention to the activities performed by the attendees and the discursive interrelations between the physical setup and these activities, than to the way the public space is being used for political purposes. What we tried to achieve in this article, was to pay close attention to the message transmitted through social arrangements of the public space and with the specific installations that are being deployed. We then investigated the content and sources of the message, the rationale behind particular examples and their intended aims/purposes. The importance of such an analysis stems from the fact that, throughout the ages, politicians, educators and religious leaders have used all possible channels of communication to propagate their doctrines and ideologies. Through the analysis of the relationship between the message and the mode of its presentation, not only can the addressees of the message be identified, but also the motivation behind the publication of certain slogans. Political elites in contemporary China, allowing *renao* places of public utility, nevertheless try to spread the official cultural and national discourse through semantically simple messages. They also try to provide socio-psychological comfort to prevent masses from focusing on the ideological and practical contradictions of the system. Citizens prefer not to openly resist the official discourse, finding it often quite appealing and in a way being in line with their need for raising their self-esteem. In other words, the psychological comfort of “gaining face” prevails over the possibility and freedom of (anti-government) speech. Authorities do not hesitate to utilise this socio-psychological need for their own agenda.

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