HUMANITIES ESSAY

The collective realms in the Chinese city: Towards an alternative framework for public space

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Abstract

A western discourse of public space, originating in ancient Greece and Rome, has been widely used in architectural and urban research in China and is constantly contested in this geographical and cultural context. The contestation often stems from the cultural differences in understanding and operating the collective realms in Chinese and western cities, which is manifested through the distinctive features of their public spaces. This essay frames an alternative perspective on public space in the Chinese context by exploring the cultural, social, and spatial constructions of collective realms in the Chinese city. Starting from the conceptual origin of the 'public' in Chinese philosophy, this paper elaborates on three culturally grounded ideas related to collective patterns of space creation and practice – the relational circle, the realm of strangers, and the marketplace – and examines how these ideas are articulated by architectural and urban archetypes and in urban developments in Chinese cities.

Introduction

The modernisation process throughout the twentieth century gave rise to new Chinese cities with various new functions and urban experiences to match western conceptions of urban life and public space [1]. In Chinese cities there not only emerged a range of places for social gatherings, including cafés and bars, but new leisure activities facilitated by open spaces – such as parks and city squares – also became prevalent. Meanwhile, Chinese cities have responded to and contested emerging programmes with different cultural, social, and spatial dynamics compared to those developed in ancient Greece and Rome, and then spread throughout western cities: thereby drawing attention to the conception of the city and urban spaces that are indigenous to China. In recent decades, sociological and cultural studies have tended to reconnect the situated social practices of publicness in urban China to the historical and geographical particularities of the Chinese city, going beyond the theoretical notions and norms conceived in the west and searching for a localised understanding of Chinese public space [2; 3]. However, in the fields of architecture and urban design in China, research into public space still relies upon a framework of knowledge originated and used in western countries rather than focusing on its own cultural and historical particularities.

This paper explores an alternative perspective on public space in the modern Chinese context since the late-nineteenth century, one that pertains to the cultural disposition of Chinese people and which gives shape to – and maintains

its existence through – the evolution of the urban physical environment. This perspective comes from a clear awareness of cultural differences in understanding and inhabiting public and collective spaces in Chinese and western cities. In the west, public space, stemming from the public sphere, has been framed with clear categories of discourse: parameters such as usage, ownership, experience, connectivity, and accessibility are often applied to define public space [4]. What then could be the parameters for defining public space in the modern Chinese context? This paper frames this alternative view by exploring the cultural, social and spatial constructions of collective realms in the Chinese city. The investigation starts from the conceptual origin of the 'public' in Chinese philosophy. It then elaborates on three culturally grounded ideas concerning the collective realms of the Chinese city which urban spaces share or use to certain degrees: the relational circle, the realm of strangers, and the marketplace. Two of these ideas relate to collective patterns of space creation embedded in the social realities of China, while the final idea considers a type of space that forms the most significant physical and conceptual component in any Chinese city, and which has existed as a collectively used and openly accessed urban space throughout the nation's history.

The first key idea is the 'relational circle' (关系, *guanxi*), which comes from an ideological commitment to the family in the Confucianist tradition, and hence has been a social convention in China. The social space formed around the relational circle is initially reflected in the realm of dwelling. By examining two distinct case studies of dwellings from different eras, this essay explains how this social space maintains its features through a spatial and social construct of 'inside' and 'outside', thus drawing a physical and social boundary between the domestic and public realms. In contemporary Chinese cities, this boundary also separates most social spheres from non-related outsiders. The second key idea is the 'realm of strangers', referring to the spaces outside the relational circle where people encounter other people in the city. In contrast with the relational circle, which conceived as social space, the realm of strangers roughly represents the public domain in Chinese cities. As such, regarding the public domain as the realm of strangers has led to spatial consequences, such as the ubiquity of barriers and spatial appropriation. The third key idea is the marketplace. Unlike the first two ideas, which can exist independent of space, it derives from the physical properties of the traditional Chinese city in which the marketplace is a major compositional

element. As heterogeneous commercial and social spaces throughout the long history of Chinese cities, the marketplace and its derivative, the market street, have indisputably impacted the formation of the contemporary public space. This essay is based on a literature review of relevant material to understand the Chinese city and its public space in various ways, assembled by reading the work of Chinese and western scholars. The investigation first focuses on philosophy and sociology before applying the ideas to architecture and urban design.

An 'Absence of Public Spirit'?

'The Absence of Public Spirit' is the title of a chapter in the 1894 book, *Chinese Characteristics*, written by the American missionary Arthur Henderson Smith, one of the earliest western texts that presented Chinese culture to foreigners. Composed more than a hundred years ago, this Anglo-Saxon text contains an introduction which posits Christian civilisation as 'a faith which reaches to heaven and furnishes better guarantees for public and private morality' [5: p. 14]. It seems that Smith, who had lived in China for more than two decades, assigned both public and private factors a central role in studying cultural differences between China and the west, thereby making this book an early reference work in what can be considered 'public' in Chinese culture. In his book, Smith briskly assumes that people in the Chinese city lacked a sense of responsibility and respect towards public properties and public rules. Smith criticised the common practices of spatial appropriation as displaying 'a lack of public spirit'. He wrote: 'The wide streets of Peking [Beijing] are lined with stalls and booths which have no right of existence', adding that 'the space opposite to the shop of each belongs not to an imaginary public but the owner of the shop'. [5: p. 10] Smith's criticism shows that it was disturbing to his western eye to perceive public property not being properly respected by people, and instead appropriated for private use, thereby losing its public quality. This situation truly perplexed Smith and made him doubt if a public spirit existed at all in nineteenth-century China [5: p. 114].

But is public spirit – vital for public space and civic rules in western cities [1: p. 98] – really absent in Chinese culture? It would be false to claim so without first identifying the cultural premises that shape the meaning of this notion within a Chinese context. The assessment of what might lie behind 'the absence of public

spirit', if indeed there is any, must depend on a philosophical understanding of what is meant by 'public' in China. In the western context, public spirit may refer to civic virtue, which is within the foundation of classical republicanism in both ancient Rome and Renaissance Italy, as noted by the German philosopher Hannah Arendt [6; 7; 8: p. 24]. However, in traditional Chinese society, what might be called 'public spirit' has a completely different genesis. According to the philologist Ruoshui Chen, the original meaning of the Chinese word 'public', *gong* (公), is the state or government, which is also the most commonly used concept for the term in ancient Chinese literature [9]. In the same way, *gongmin* (公民) means 'public people', thus citizens, associated with their rights and obligations. The best relational antonym of *gong* may be *si* (私), which connotes the 'field of the self', hence meaning personal, private, individual, or civilian [8: pp. 74–76], yet not so much as a citizen. Thus, *gong* and *si* constitute a first binary relation resembling public and private in the ancient Chinese political system.

Another significant meaning of *gong* in Chinese history, as Chen notes, derives from the writing of Confucius in 200 BCE, as recorded in *The Book of Rites* (礼记): 'When the grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky'. [10]. Confucius considers the spirit of *gong* to be a supreme rite and virtue that both a state governor and their people should possess. As a universal consciousness of morality, *gong* represents the Confucian vision of a just society that is under the governance of a wise emperor who is surrounded by courteous civilians. Hence, as Chen points out, the Chinese concept of 'public' primarily connotes the state, and secondly, the moral construct of the state governor [8]. We can thus see that the concept of *gong*, to which we refer as 'public' today, in the present, is in fact the government itself. This connotation of the public as directly related to the state and the government plays a vital role in constructing public order and arranging the physical domain of the Chinese city throughout history.

Besides its semantic genesis, the western concept of 'public' often carries a spatial implication [8: p. 29]. For instance, Arendt associates the public domain with the marketplace (*agora*) of the ancient Greek polis, for it was the place of appearance and the stage for political action [6]; what became known as public space, following Jürgen Habermas' analysis, also includes a staging function for the emergence of western democratic politics [11; 12]. In contrast, Chinese conceptions of the 'public' involve only rite and morality, yet not a sense of a physical domain; this,

according to Chen, explains why divisions between public and private properties in cities have remained ambiguous within Chinese society. This 'clear in concept but blurred in practice' character has thus led to further discussion about the very different perception of public space by Chinese people if compared to a western perspective [9].

This being said, the divergence in an understanding of 'public' in Chinese and western cultures was not widely recognised in China until the late-nineteenth century, when the evolving internationalisation and cultural exchange started to destabilise the feudal regime and the dominant Confucian tradition [8]. Qichao Liang, the renowned apostle of the Hundred Days' Reform – also known as Wuxu Reform (戊戌变法), and a political, cultural, and educational reform movement in 1898 under the Qing Dynasty – was one of the first progressive intellectuals to introduce western ideas about the 'public' to China [13; 14]. Having seen the fall of the feudal regime after the 1840s Opium War, Liang initiated a reshaping of Chinese culture, especially Confucianism-based traditional culture. To promote Western technology and the idea of democracy, he wrote the influential political commentary, *Xin Min Shuo* (新民说) [*New Democracy Theory*], as a series of publications from 1902 to 1906. In one of the commentaries, entitled 'Lun Gong De' (论公德) ['On Public Morality'], Liang criticises the social ethics of Confucianism, particularly the five basic relationships (五伦, *wulun*) – i.e. ruler/subject (君, *junchen*); father/son (父子, *fuzi*), husband/wife (夫妇, *fufu*), older brother/younger brother (兄弟, *xiongdi*), and friend/friend (朋友, *pengyou*) – that had dominated the discourse about Chinese social values. Liang held the view that these relationships, while valued, only dealt with family members or a ruler, while one's relationship with strangers, which is considered to be the essence of the public realm in western countries, had been left out. Friendship was the relationship in Confucian ethics that vaguely addressed a public relationship, however it was clearly incomplete [8]. For Liang, this has explained the lack of 'public morality' among Chinese people:

> 然朋友一伦, 决不足以尽社会伦理. 君臣一伦, 尤不足以尽国家伦理. 何也? 凡人对于社会之义务, 决不徒在相知之朋友而已. 即绝迹不与人交者, 仍于社会上有不可不尽之责任. 至国家者, 尤非君臣所能专有. 若中国之五伦, 则惟于家族伦理稍为完整, 至社会国家伦理不备滋多, 此缺憾之必当补者也. 皆由重私德轻公德所生之结果也.

[… *The ethics of friendship cannot cover the whole picture of social ethics. Why is this? The obligation one has to society is not limited within friendship circles. Even those who never make friends have obligatory responsibilities for society. Moreover, the country is never possessed only by the emperor and his ministers … It seems that the Chinese ethics of five relationships are complete merely in terms of family ethics but not society nor state ethics. This is a defect resulted from valuing private morality and devaluing public morality, which must be remediated.*] [15]

To substantiate his arguments, Liang borrowed the western notion of 'society', which was later translated into Chinese as *shehui* (社会), from the identically written Japanese word *shakai* (社会) [8: p. 121]. Thus, the concept of society, in which people are able to engage with strangers, is not indigenous to Chinese culture. That is to say, at the heart of Confucian ideology there was a strong commitment to the feudal ruler and one's family, rather than any explicit awareness of a public-private distinction as being historically distinct, as was the case in western cultures. Hence, other more modern interpretations of public life in the western framing, such as Arendt's concept of the 'public domain' or Richard Sennett's 'heterogeneous sociability' that is generated by encounters between strangers, are not of great use in helping to understand the public sphere in traditional Chinese cities [6; 16].

The relational circle

If the heterogeneity among strangers is what forms social spaces in western cities, and personal relationships are the social values behind *gong* in China what then constitutes the sociability of space with respect to strangers in Chinese cities? As many scholars have proposed, although rather simplistically, it is the 'relational circle', or *guanxi* (关系) [1: p. 108; 17; 18]. As a defining value in Chinese society, the relational circle is fundamentally built upon commonalities among individuals or individual entities. These commonalities include kinship, same geographical origin, working in the same company, and graduating from the same school, among others [19]. In Chinese cities, a space shared by a closely related group – such as a family, community, or institution – is a realm often intensively protected and taken

care of collectively [1: pp.108–110]. In contrast, strangers outside a relational circle, such as passers-by on the street or in places like railway stations and shopping malls, belong to an unknown and unimportant category. Consequently, people's care and protection of these spaces in Chinese cities cannot be directly perceived: instead, they are ubiquitously appropriated for myriad uses. As a result, two types of collective realms form within Chinese cities: spaces for the relational circle and spaces for strangers. This twofold condition creates a unique conceptual framework for 'public' space in China.

The intensive valuing of relational circles and the absence of care for strangers within Chinese culture result therefore in the rigid separation of specific spaces, both physically and socially. For example, it can be seen in the form of Chinese dwellings, particularly the traditional Chinese courtyard house (四合院, *siheyuan*), a compound surrounded by buildings on its four sides (Figure 1). As the Swedish
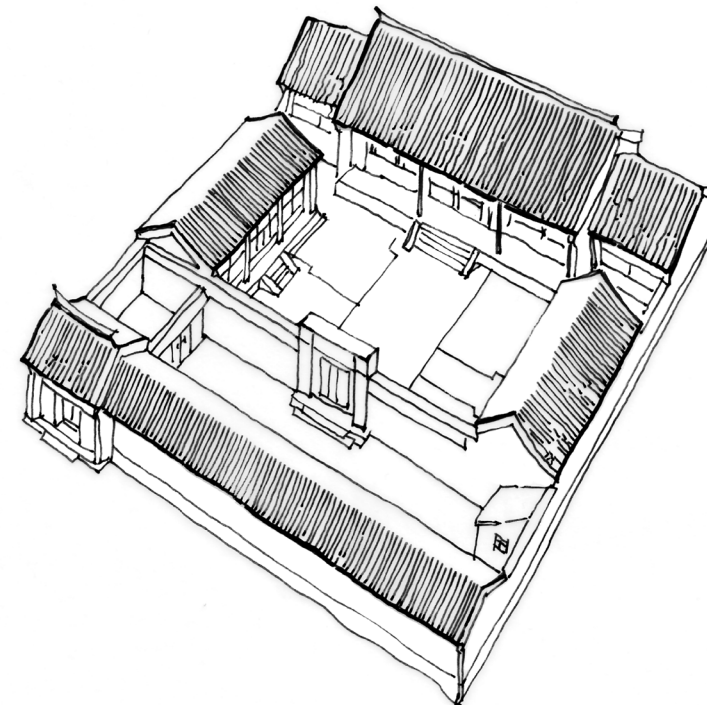

Figure 1:
Arrangement of the traditional Chinese courtyard house
(Drawing by the author).

art historian Osvald Sirén observed so precisely in his 1924 book, *The Walls and Gates of Peking*:

> *The home of the Chinaman* [sic] *is an extremely well-guarded place. Every family forms a little community by itself – often quite a numerous one, as the married sons share the parental house – and the walls that enclose it are often just as effective for confining the inmates as for protecting them against intruders.* [20: p. 6]

Thus, the walls of the courtyard house function not only as a protecting element, but more importantly, as a spatial element to define territories. The wall is perhaps the most notable feature of traditional Chinese dwellings and acts to separate the home and the outside realm as two opposing social spheres, creating a binary based upon inside (内, *nei*) and outside (外, *wai*). On a social level, the meaning of the *nei* can be extended to mean being inside a network built on a close social circle [1]. Those in the *wai* are naturally regarded as outsiders, in that they do not belong to this intimate social circle, and so the wall keeps them out. Therefore, the relational circle is symbolically materialised by the archetypal Chinese dwelling, in which the outside is synonomous to the public space within the city.

Shiqiao Li and Liangyong Wu, two of the most significant figures in Chinese architectural and urban studies, stress this binary relation of inside/outside in their research and practice [1; 21]. It helps understand why Sirén considered Beijing to be the most extensive and enduring materialisation of the urban walled enclosure; as he notes, its walls 'form an unbroken chain with the past and renew at many places with new links' [20: p. viii]. If we relate his observation to the relational circle within Chinese culture, then the walled enclosure, one of 'the most basic features of the traditional Chinese landscape' [22: p. 49], thus becomes a key design reference for present-day architectural and urban transformations.

The second example of a dwelling displaying this inside/outside separation is hence a more contemporary one: the Chinese-style gated community, also known as a 'micro-district', or *xiaoqu* (小区). The micro-district, a contemporary Chinese term for a residential area, is a hybrid concept partly deriving from the idea of the 'microdistrict', or mikrorayon (микрорайон) in the Soviet Union, and the 'neighbourhood unit' formulated in the USA in the 1920s. According to the Chinese

scholar Duanfang Lu [23; 24], the 'neighbourhood unit' was first implemented in some Japanese colonies in parts of China under occupation during the 1930s Republican era. Urban designers in China subsequently experimented with the principles of the neighbourhood unit schema in the 1940s and 50s, but mixing it with the superblock housing model from the Soviet Union. As Lu writes in *Travelling Urban Form: The Neighbourhood Unit in China*:

> *The superblock schema consisted of a grouping of four-to-six-story blocks of flats arranged around a quadrangle with public facilities in the centre. The schema stressed symmetrical axes and aesthetically co-ordinated street façades, which was more directly influenced by the Beaux-Arts concern for formal grandeur than by Marxist theory.* [24: p. 378]

By this point in the post-war era, when the influence of the Soviet Union was still strong, Chinese urban designers started to adopt the micro-district/mikrorayon concept in 1956. However, due to a lack of finances under Maoist Socialism, most of the Chinese micro-district projects remained on paper until housing provision was reformed under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s to encourage a more market-orientated approach. By the early-2000s, a national scheme for a community building was propelling the large-scale implementation of the micro-district concept, now promoted as 'the new basic unit of urban governance' [24: p. 370].

The micro-district has gradually dominated Chinese housing development ever since, inaugurating extensive 'privatisation' within cities and leading to a different kind of urban space (Figure 2). Under this impetus, some state-owned properties in Chinese cities were transferred into the hands of private corporations. Moreover, soaring demand for market-sale housing has forced the Department of Housing Bureau to hand over management for that sector of housebuilding to estate management companies, relieving pressures on local authorities to have to build so much; this approach was standardised as law in 1994 [21; 25; 26; 27]. The transfer of responsibility from the public sectors to private entities had led in turn to the social demarcation of residential areas, rather than the traditional demarcation of inside/outside like in courtyard houses. For estate management companies, gating these residential areas with secure borders became a matter of convenience. For residents in such micro-districts, it was seen as a guarantee for safety as well

Figure 2:
Micro-district of a gated community in Xi'an, China, as viewed through a bus window. The wall demarcates the community from its outside urban environment (Photograph by the author, 2018).

as preventing the need to share urban services with strangers. Residents pay a service fee to the management company to support this arrangement [28: p. 111].

In these gated communities, the creation of shared spaces within a neighbourhood is thus now controlled by the interests of a particular collective. Most micro-districts

have well-designed and maintained public space, often promoted as a symbol of high-quality urban living in marketing campaigns [28: p. 111]. The use of this outdoor public space in gated communities is presented as being exclusive for residents even if not part of their purchased properties. As such, the development of gated communities in China is the result of an urbanisation process initiated by governmental reform and driven by private economic interests: the public sector earns money by selling off urban lands to real estate developers, while residents pay for well-maintained shared public spaces that are exclusive and secure.

Hence, the reasons behind the emergence and profusion of micro-districts in Chinese cities are complicated. Some scholars argue that the Chinese gated community is simply a product of rapid urbanisation and the associated housing demand, and little to do with traditional walled courtyard houses [28: p. 116]. Others, however, describe the trend as a 'derivative of the protected home', given the long history of gated residential settlements in China [1: p. 107]. For this essay, what is important is the relationship of present-day 'gated communities' to Chinese people's longstanding preference for a protected living environment encircled by a wall. Micro-districts, in this sense, can be seen as a modified spatial format derived from the socio-cultural longevity of walled settlements, but which are no longer modelled upon Confucian-type family ties but instead a different kind of relational circle that has its own common goals and interests. The public space of the contemporary Chinese city can hence be regarded as being divided into many collective realms which are organised as all kinds of socio-spatial entities.

The realm of strangers

Against the relational circle, the realm of strangers can be defined as spaces within the city where no familial relationship or common interest is maintained. Western theories tend to assign a central role to strangers in constructing the public sphere and thus public space. In the Greco-Roman tradition, public space became 'the pre-eminent ideal basis for the organisation of Western cities' [4: p. 94], and even today, as Richard Sennett writes: 'a city is a milieu in which strangers are likely to meet' [16: p. 48]. From this point of departure, the emergence of modern public life is linked to the assemblage of strangers, being maintained by new social conventions that Sennett calls 'civicness'. In other words, public space is seen as

an important measurement of the care given to and by strangers in western cities [1: p. 99]. Such considerations have clear cultural affects on the spatial construction and social practices of the public sphere.

What spatial and social conditions can an encounter with strangers entail in Chinese cities, and what are the reasons for those? It is crucial here to point out the difference in perceiving strangers within Chinese culture. The German sociologist Max Weber described a marked difference he noted between China and western countries when dealing with strangers or with unknown factors in the intellectual sphere or in trade deals [29: pp. 231–232]. From his analysis of dominant religions in Chinese culture, including Confucianism, Weber wrote in his 1951 book *The Religion of China* that 'there is an extraordinary and unusual horror of all unknown and not immediately apparent things, which finds expression in ineradicable distrust'. In contrast to the relational circle and the world of the known, the unknown situation created by strangers became regarded in China as making it very difficult to sustain trust. It is a phenomenon that is still more apparent in present-day Chinese culture than in western societies. The seemingly solid ideological divide between the relational circle and the realm of strangers has, in practice, led to continued resistance against purposely established spaces that are intended to attract and unite strangers.

However, the spatial development of the realm of strangers within Chinese cities has slowly transformed due to the evolution of globalisation throughout the twentieth century. Traditionally, there seemed no space for strangers in Chinese cities until the emergence of the public park, or *gongyuan* (公园) in the late-nineteenth century. Having become today an indispensable part of Chinese urban public life, parks therefore first emerged as a western notion. It has transformed Beijing with, for example, parts of the imperial city that belonged to the ruling class becoming public parks open to everyone. Aimed at improving public health and civic virtue, as in western cities, park design was promoted by Chinese urban reformers who considered themselves progressive and socially advanced. These were supported by an ambitious urban elite which offered financial support for this movement. Parks, therefore, according to Mingzheng Shi, not only destabilised the imperial hierarchy in Beijing but more crucially also led to 'the emergence of a modern urban culture', especially among the middle- and upper-class citizens [30]. This modern urban culture thus entailed a reformation of Chinese urban lifestyles

and, in particular, a new manner of social interaction with strangers in the city, thereby introducing a public sphere in addition to the existing collective spheres. In the early-Republican era, parks in Beijing were designed as publicly accessible places, albeit with some rules about dress code and behaviour [31]. In the park, people no longer met with their friends, as they had done in teahouses and restaurants, but instead came across strangers. The public park movement in 1920s and 30s China was ideologically connected to the cultivation of modern citizenship by the government, based on western concepts and values, which referred to the desire for a healthy and civilised lifestyle and an idea of 'public' interest and 'public' order [3: p. 21; 30]. Catalysed by the elite class in Republican China, socialising with strangers in the city – as a western idea and practice – was eventually normalised and reshaped in public culture in Chinese cities (Figure 3).

In the more recent context of globalisation since the 1980s, public space in Chinese cities has gone through an even greater transformation from being dominated by collective realms based on the relational circle – as demonstrated in courtyard houses and micro-districts – to embracing heterogeneous urbanity, reaching out to strangers, as shown in the use of overtly public spaces such as parks and shopping malls. This change has generated increasing ambiguity in the understanding and practice of the public sphere in China, affecting the design of new public space. Consequently, these intensely protected social spaces today are neither absolutely private nor public, as understood in western discourse: contemporary Chinese cities still mediate between a profusion of relational circles and the public realm of strangers, resulting in simultaneously blurred and enhanced spatial boundaries.

The culture of the marketplace

From a western perspective, the agora of the Greek city-state (*polis*), a central gathering place in time which also served as a marketplace, is often put forward as the archetypal exemplar for what public space still is or should be today. Arendt, for example, praised the agora's function as a stage for free discussion about political issues among citizens. Such public spaces became essential places for people to be seen and heard [6; 32]. Under Chinese feudalism, the central place in the city was reserved for the royal palace, and/or the government, whereas

marketplaces were spatially distributed across the different neighbourhoods. They had little to do with politics, yet marketplaces were open access gathering places where information was naturally circulated. By the period of the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE), an extension of the marketplace – the market street – was also playing a similar role, being jammed with shops and stalls and used by merchants, performers, and a wide variety of ordinary citizens [33: p. 189]. Although political debate was largely absent, the marketplace was probably the only urban space in Chinese cities that at least partially resembled western public spaces in its social practice.

In this way, the marketplace must be regarded as another archetype of Chinese public space. The Chinese word *chengshi* (城市), meaning 'city', comprises two characters, *cheng* and *shi*, respectively meaning 'the ward' and 'the market'. It shows that the marketplace (市, *shi*, or 市场, *shichang*) is as essential to the concept of the Chinese city as is the walled enclosure. Equally important, past research shows that imperial Chinese cities were the materialisation of the strict hierarchical order of the feudal regime, and so, in that context, the marketplace seems to have been able to operate beyond that imposed political framework [1; 34].

Throughout the centuries, increasing demand for foodstuffs and goods enabled urban life to develop through the prosperity of marketplaces in Chinese cities. Typically, from the Han Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty (202 BCE – 907 CE), two marketplaces were located within any imperial city, the East Market and West Market (东市 and 西市). The commercial activities of these markets were constrained within the walled quarters (坊, *fang*) around which the imperial city was organised (Figure 4, Figure 5). By the time of the Tang Dynasty, the West

Figure 3 [previous page]:
Self-organised group dancing activity at Tiantan Park, next to the Temple of Heaven in Beijing.
(Photograph by the author, 2019).

Figure 4:
Drawing of an ancient marketplace based on a brick relief from the Eastern Han Dynasty (206 BCE–23 CE), now held in Chengdu Museum.
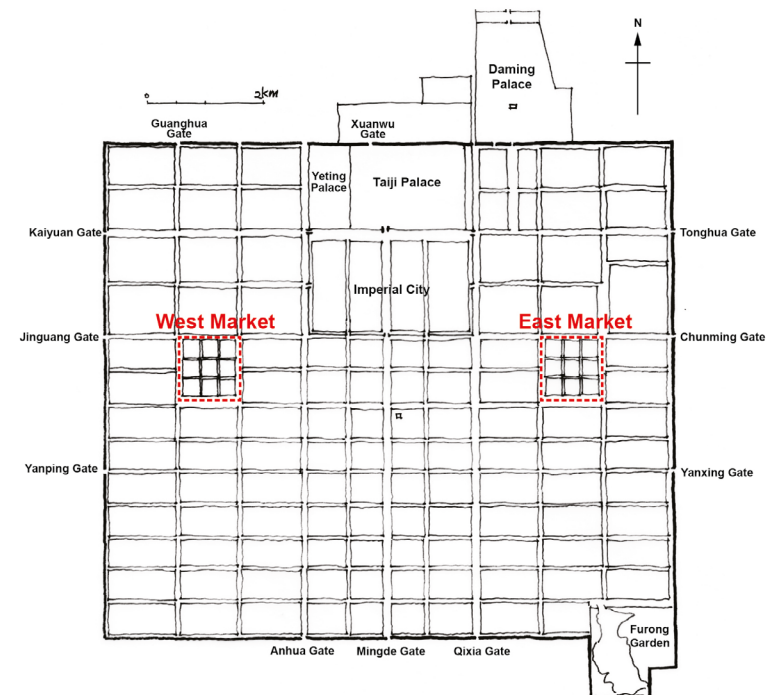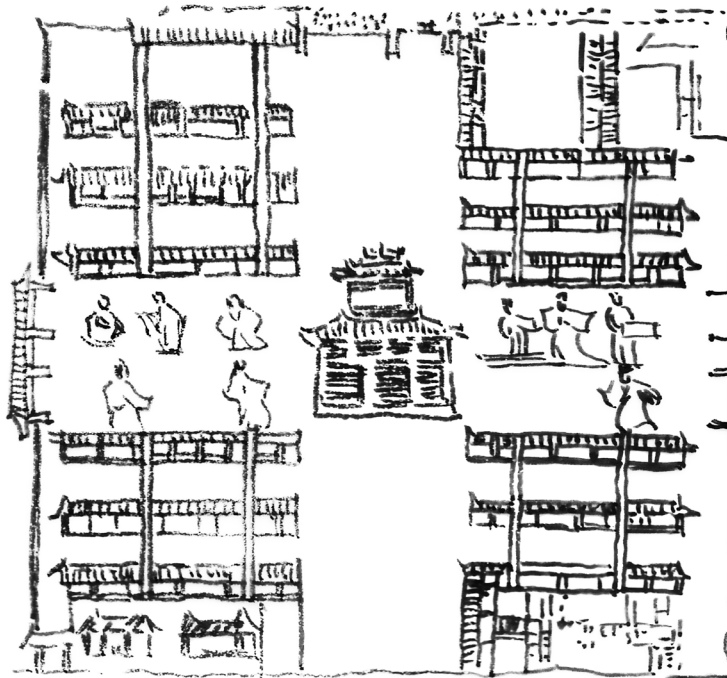(Drawing by the author).

Figure 5:
City plan of Chang'an during the Tang Dynasty, organised into walled quarters and showing the location of the West Market and East Market.
(Drawing by the author, adapted from Chinese Archaeology website at http://www.kaogu.cn).

Market in its capital city of Chang'an (长安; today Xi'an) served as the starting point for the 'Silk Road', distributing silk, porcelain, tea and goods to the Middle East and Europe. Additionally, the city possessed an East Market in which 'Chinese brush sellers, musicians, performing artists, ironmongers, cloth dealers, butchers, wine shops, printers, etc. congregated' [33; 35].

Besides functioning as a place for trade and consumption, the marketplace possessed a symbolic meaning: it denoted the common people, helping to materialise the social order of the Chinese imperial system. Marketplaces were originally designed for commerce with those outside the imperial city and were therefore mainly occupied by merchants. In the Chinese imperial system, merchants were explicitly labelled as the very lowest social class. In an important legal treatise writing around 26 CE by scholar Liu Xiang, called *Writings of Master Guan*, or *Guanzi* (管子), four descending categories of civilians were described as the 'main pillars of a country': scholars (士), peasants (农), artisans (工), and merchants (商). One of the book's chapters, entitled 'Da Kuang' (大匡), clearly linked this hierarchical order to the spatial structure of the ancient Chinese city: '凡仕者近宫, 不仕与耕者近门, 工贾近市 [government officials live near the palace; non-officials and peasants live near the city gate; artisans and merchants live near the marketplace]' [36]. Marketplaces were also inhabited by those not included in the four main groups, such as musicians, entertainers, or thieves, not even counted as citizens in the feudal society. In this sense, the marketplace indeed assembled all strata of Chinese urban society.

If the imperial city was the materialisation of the Chinese feudal regime's social order, marketplaces epitomised the mundane through their temporary assemblages and distributions of people and goods. *The Book of Changes: The Great Treatise II*, often known as *I Ching: Xi Ci II* (易经: 系辞下), a key essay collection of Confucianism composed during the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE – 771 BCE), described the daily routines involved:

> 日中为市, 致天下之民, 聚天下之货, 交易而退, 各得其所, 盖取诸噬.
> [*They caused markets to be held at midday, thus bringing together all the people and assembling in one place all their wares. They made their exchanges and retired, everyone having got what he wanted. The idea of this was taken, probably, from Shi He (the twenty-first hexagram).*] [37]

Moreover, the marketplace represented 'city life' due to the vigorous and varied activities and exchanges it accommodated, which contrasted with the more predictable and repetitious pattern of everyday rurality. The historical text entitled *Book of the Later Han*, or *Hou Han Shu* (后汉书), observed: '山民愿朴, 乃有白首不入市井 [the countrymen keep their rusticity, and some would never enter the marketplace for their entire life]' [38]. The marketplace here semantically denotes the city itself. Even today the Chinese language still uses the word *shi min* (市民), literally meaning 'market people', to also refer to citizens. While this term may include a larger range of people than in ancient times, it nonetheless complements the meaning of *gong min* (公民), 'public people', used as a synonym. Without doubt, therefore, the meaning, concept, and space of the marketplace is crucial for understanding not only the formation of the Chinese city in its physical and social structure, but also the origin of citizenship as equivalent to the condition of being 'public' within Chinese culture.

Likewise, as one of the – if not the only – archetypes of public space in Chinese cities, the marketplace also profoundly influenced the form, practice and perception of the 'street' (街, *jie*). Marketplaces started to transform into open commercial streets at the end of the Tang Dynasty and then flourished throughout the Song Dynasty. In the pluralistic, mercantile, and pragmatic society of the latter period, market quarters were overwhelmed by an expansion in commerce that was prompted by a newly prosperous social class in the city: the professional bureaucrat. Commercial activities were pushed beyond the walls, leading to the disappearance of the enclosed marketplace and the emergence of a more open street system. Chye Kiang Heng considers the emergence of this new urban paradigm as 'one of the most dramatic and important changes in Chinese urban history' [39: p. 46] Although based on the needs of commerce, the 'market street' also irreversibly altered the urban landscape of Chinese cities and thus had a far-reaching and pervasive impact on public space.

In the present-day urban system, due to demands for a more concentrated economic consumption and social interaction, commercial activities in Chinese cities have been gradually taken over by shopping malls and pedestrianised shopping streets. The marketplace is changing from a place for daily necessities to personalised cultural and gratifying experiences. Existing traditional market streets such as Huiminjie (回民街) in Xi'an and Wangfujing (王府井) in Beijing have

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**Figure 6 [previous page]:
Huiminjie (Hui People's Street) in Xi'an, China, as a modernised example of the traditional market street.**
(Photograph by the author, 2019).

instead become tourist attractions (Figure 6). It marks a new status for the market street as a deeply rooted cultural element and a physical presence within the Chinese city.

Social plurality and its associated visual representations are the recurring features of these market streets: informally speaking, their messiness or chaotic nature is often highlighted as distinctive. Commercial streets in Chinese cities have long been decorated with countless signs and objects, as seen in major shopping districts like Nanjing Road in Shanghai or the traditional *hutong* (胡同) alleyways formed by *siheyuan* in northern cities like Beijing. This visual mess, created by displaying commodities for public viewing and purchase, as well as the interactions between shops and the crowd, between street vendors and passers-by, generate a collective and vigorous street life. The intersection of visual, functional and social properties is the most prominent feature of market streets, related to marketplaces, but forming their own archetype of Chinese public space.

Conclusion

When reviewing the concept of the collective realm in China based on the conceptual origin of the 'public' in Chinese philosophy and sociology, three ideas can be found in the socio-spatial realities of its traditional and present-day cities: the relational circle, the realm of strangers, and the marketplace. Each is articulated by specific Chinese urban and architectural archetypes. They form an alternative frame of knowledge through which to perceive and understand public space, complementary to the western conceptual framework rooted in Greco-Roman culture.

The fixed known space of the relational circle and the heterogeneous unknown space of strangers, taken together, recast the ways in which we can describe private and public spaces within Chinese cities. From a cultural-historical point of view, the networks of collective realms form a matrix of relational circles, manifested through a layering of 'inside' and 'outside' in the built environment, and reoccurring in new spatial forms in modern urban developments such as gated estates. The realm of strangers in-between the enclosed and protected urban spaces generated by relational circles creates another type of public space that is occupied and

practised by people who are unfamiliar. Here, a heterogeneous urbanity exists that is also challenged by the established culture of relational circles. The marketplace and its derivative, the market street, as defining elements of the Chinese concept of the city, provides another form of heterogeneous public space within Chinese cities. It is a place for all social classes, where urban public life can flourish. The spatial and symbolic meanings representing the marketplace in China's urban history have ensured its remarkable and enduring existence.

By identifying these three ideas and their archetypal forms, this essay establishes a critical conceptual basis through which to understand and research public space in Chinese cities. The findings relied primarily on literature from the fields of philosophy and sociology, while also bridging these insights with the typological analysis of architecture and urban design in historical and contemporary Chinese cities. It thus offers typological references and cultural perspectives, hoping to inspire future research into contingent meanings and features of Chinese public space, and how this might be incorporated into design practices.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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