THE APPROPRIATION AND ADAPTATION OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN A CHINESE CITY: A STEP TO “DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION”, AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER REASSERTION AND/OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Research Background and Aims

Inspired by studies dedicated to citizen participation in European countries, this research project brings our focus to Chinese cities, which in the last decades have witnessed the introduction of several participatory instruments (allegedly) aiming at improving state-society relations, governmental transparency, and at gathering support and advice for the development of new policies and for the realisation of urban projects. Observing these developments, this research project wishes to interrogate the meaning(s), purposes and uses of resident participation in a non-democratic context. The project in particular focuses on resident participation in urban renewal projects, investigating the framing, the practices, the instruments and the aims of the local administration in the introduction of spaces for participation. It does so by trying to unearth the logics behind the adoption of resident participation, analysing this instrument within the dynamics specific to bureaucratic and political action.

Research Method and Questions

This study is based on literature review, analysis of official documents and fieldwork enquiries. Literature review looks at texts focusing on citizen participation in China and in European countries, with a specific attention to recent analyses produced by French scholars. These researches have significantly enriched our understanding of participatory tools, having combined the analysis of citizen participation to the analysis of public policy and of the sociology of public action. This particular approach has permitted scholars to develop fine-grained analyses of citizen participation in French case studies, resituating the development of these practices within the broader context of local public action. This research project largely draws from these contributions, fundamental for the development of research hypotheses.

Working Hypotheses and Preliminary Observations

At the current stage of research, neither the first nor the second hypotheses are excluded, and it is even hinted that resident participation may serve multiple purposes. This consideration is in line with an understanding of public action as an activity that is not single goal-oriented, linear and single actor-led, but rather made of different impulses, negotiations, interpretations and re-interpretations that increase its complexity. Early fieldwork enquiries already showed that the use of the word “citizen participation” is also instrumental to state withdrawal from welfare provision, based on a political discourse that encourages citizens to make use of self-support. Hence, given that different interpretations are plausible, we can hypothesise that resident participation represents a multi-purpose tool in the hand of the administration, and that the various purposes it serves are not only the result of prior administrative design, but also of new attributions resulting from the unintended effects of its application and the lessons learnt by the administration.