

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 advices 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

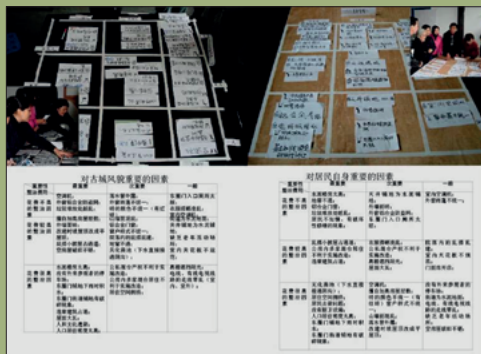
This study is based on literature review, analysis of official documents and fieldwork enquiries. Literature review looks at texts focusing on citizen participation in China and in European countries, with a specific attention to recent analyses produced by French scholars. These researches have significantly 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.

Research hypotheses are then tested on the fieldwork, mostly focusing on the city of Yangzhou (Jiangsu province). This city was selected amidst other case studies for its experience of reform of urban renewal policies, based on the adaptation of foreign knowledge, local policy ideas, central government's injunctions and the diffusion of policies from other cities. Resident participation was included in the "package" of reforms introduced by the city government but, curiously enough, it was not applied to all renewal operations, it divided political and bureaucratic personnel along divergent positions, and it also took different and sometimes puzzling features, all aspects worth to be explored.

Fieldwork enquiry is hence guided by the following research questions, aiming at seizing: the uses and interpretations of resident participation; the administrative design of participatory instruments; the unfolding of participation activities; the impacts on local policy making (expected and unexpected); as well as the actors and organisations supporting and/or opposing the adoption of participatory tools. Given that policy and instrument design have also been inspired by external knowledge, questions will also address the functions played by this external knowledge in the shaping and adoption of participatory tools in Yangzhou.



Courtesy of GTZ – City Alliance Project team



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Courtesy of Yangzhou City Government – Old City Office

Working Hypotheses and Preliminary Observations

Literature analysis and early fieldwork observations suggest two seemingly opposed interpretations to the introduction of citizen participation in Yangzhou. Indeed it can be read either 1) as a way to "democratise" decision making, a hypothesis backed by proponents of the concept of "deliberative authoritarianism"; or 2) as an instrument in the hands of a number of political and/or bureaucratic actors to reassert power in the development of public policies. This second hypothesis does not really suggest understanding citizen participation as a genuine opening of the administration to citizens' voices. Rather, citizen involvement, framed within specific boundaries and organised practices, is seen as an instrument to legitimise certain political positions and approaches within a context of fragmented decision making and political conflict.

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.