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*Authoritarian Deliberation Revisited: What Does It Mean for Our
Understanding of Democratic Governance?*

**Make things public through Critical Spatial Practice:**
*Revisiting the production of public event across the political boundaries in Wenzhou.*

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**Abstract**
The concept of *third-realm has* pictured a public space within the social-political structure in China, where the public action is always steered by the governmental power. This paper revisits the process of a public participatory game in Jiangxin Island in Wenzhou. Drawing on author's experience as the initiator and designer of the event, this research exposes the different power agencies within the third realm, being the officials, the citizen, the social medias and the architect. Furthermore, it shows how things are made public through the political deliberation by intermediating between the governmental power and the people in China.

# Introduction

Jurgen Habermas has outlined a bourgeois public sphere in the western world, where the citizens gather together and propose their political opinions, and make them heard by the governmental power. The deliberation is the key part of the political process in the public life. In public sphere, deliberation helps us to form the reasoned argument and weigh the arguments on both sides before we come to a decision forms the basis of discursive judgment. We can make the best kinds of decisions that form our public opinion and then transmit the public opinions to those who are leading us in government. It is worthy to notice that the deliberation often emphasizes on citizen power and citizen agency. Here, the agency refers to the capacity of making decision and acting efficaciously to accomplish something, and the independent social agency will take part in the deliberation. More importantly, Habermasian public sphere has the potential power of making things public and to challenge the state.

As one of political devices, it is not surprise that the form of deliberation also exists in Chinese society. By re-examining the notions of the public sphere, Philip Huang (1993) has illustrated a concept of *third realm* which functions as the public sphere in traditional Chinese society. Historically, the deliberative decision-making and problem-solving often take place in *third realm*. Both the governmental power and the representatives of the people will participate in order to resolve the public affair such as building infrastructure for the community. In contrast to the Habermasian one, however, *third realm* merely helps to deliberate the public issues with the help of governmental agency, that barely threatens the top leadership. Moreover, the public actions are often carried by the agency who represents the leadership.

Today, under the one-party leadership, the political practice of authoritarian deliberation has reflected the legacy of *third realm*. The public events are often facilitated by the power of *third realm* that integrates the both agencies of the government and the people. Public space is often produced out of the power play between the state and the citizen. To make things public, it will be inevitable to face the political intervention and deliberation with the authority. Just as He puts "… there are powers of obstruction and de factor petition: Chinese citizens are often insistently ingenious in organizing protests or engaging in public discussion in ways that work around official controls and while leveraging official rules and promises." (O'Brien and Li, 2006; He and Warren, 2011: 14)

Regarding the deliberation process as a political battle today, this research asks who can intermediate between the different powers as to make things public in China. In order to facilitate a public event in Jiangxin Island in Wenzhou, the author had accessed to the *third realm* with the help of a representative of local NPC (national people's congress). He acts as an architect of activism, plays a role of in-between agency, moves across the boundary of political system and intermediates between the authority and the social power. Through the self-reflection, this research is trying to represent network of the power agencies within the Chinese social-political structure. Furthermore, it is to rethink of the limitation of making things public through the spatial approach in China.

## 1. From public space/sphere to third realm in China

Public space has always been imagined as a concrete spatial creation due to the impact of modern architectural and planning language. Architects and urban designer are always regarded as the maker of the public space. They draw the public space in terms of square shape, the street width, the seats number, etc. Chinese city is no exception. The past three decades have seen the expansion of urbanisation. By demolishing the ancient buildings and putting the city into rid, the public space is created in-between the buildings in terms of the squares or the wide roads. Public life is thus expected to unfolded in those spaces under the certain guides. (Fig. 1)



Figure 1. Prohibitory sign in one of Beijing's public space.

Currently, we see a turn in the in the western world that aiming to rethink of the urbanisation since post-war. Many architects have advocated to improve liveability by bringing human dimension back to the city design, and fight against the alienation by the urbanisation. For example, Jan Gehl's *cities for people* (2013) has outlined the basic elements for a better public space design for human scale. In the light of Gehl's practical guides, many humanistic designers have produced good public space with the better sitting and walking space. Besides, many architectural researches today are conducted on the improvement of public space by shifting the focus from the object of physical forms to the subject of users. People's social lives are thus analysed as to create a more inclusive public space. For the designer, however, their spatial remediation is often limited within the formal lens. The reasons behind the collective behaviours are often overlooked. One should not forget the political role of public life, just as Gehl (2013: 29) reminds: "public interests determine the playing rules in the common space of the city and thus help to ensure people's opportunities to exchange personal, cultural and political messages." Indeed, public space has taken the social and political role in people's life. In a modern sense, the public space also points to the sites where people have the right to enter and discuss freely. Here, we step outside of the architectural discourse, and ask who is making the public space, and what is the role of public space beyond the physical spatial form?

While the contemporary architectural field connects more with the Henry Lefebvre's (1991) interpretation that focusing on the social production of social space, Habermas shows us the spatial production in the political dimension. He illustrates a public space that existing between the states (the countries, governments, etc) on the one hand, and the individual private life (family, workplace, etc) on the other hand. It is a space for the rational and critical discussion as to formed the public opinion. Habermas defined the space of the phenomenon as the bourgeois public sphere, which came into being only with the rise of

commodity exchange and bourgeois family. (Habermas, 1989: 14-26; Huang,1993: 217) The bourgeois public space has a strong political purpose based on the individual value that seeking for literal expression. This was an idea that Habermas developed by tracing all the way back to the days of enlightenment. People talk, discuss and debate in places like the literary clubs, salons and coffee houses. It was during these conversations that people inform themselves about social affairs. People made their public opinion known to those who were involved in government, and "…to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor." (1989: 27)

Before the end of 20th century, there was little evidence of Habermasian public sphere in traditional Chinese society, which was under the ideological controls of the Confucian-based family and the state power. A concept of Minjian (民间) needs to be introduced here to help us understand the tranditional social environment. Minjian literally means the folk society, which is often thought to be opposite to the state power. It mainly refers to the society in the countries and villages which was autonomous and self-governed. In other word, Minjian is free of the direct influence from the state power (Liang, 2001), but greatly relied on the traditional principle. It was the Confucian principle of loyalty and filial piety that has play the main role in regulating Minjian. Lives thus were founded on the Sangang (three cardinal guides), saying "ruler guides minister, father guides son, husband guides wife". (Zhang, J., 2014: 28) In traditional Minjian, women remained silent, family and royalty should always be the priority, and the individual had to submit to his superior. The top-down social structure was so tight that leaving no space for any private, not even to mention the bourgeois public space (Jin and Liu, 2003: 33-34).

In this closed power structure, Philip Huang has found a quasi-public space and defined it as the 'third realm', as to "free us of the value-laden teleology of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere." (1993: 225) In Qing Dynasty, formal administration of the state could only reach to the county level. Below that level, the governmental power was too limited to complete many public actions like tax collection and disaster relief. The county government (named *Yamen/衙门* in Chinese) would usually turn to the local community to complete the public activities. The local gentries and quasi-officials would thus extend the governmental hand, and create the third realm for deliberation and execution of the public issues. Unlike the bourgeois public sphere, the third realm has little political function as it is nominated by the community and confirmed by the state. Especially for the large scale public event, the deliberation was always involved by the agencies of power from both state and Minjian, but excluding any other dissidence.

Interestingly, the third realm did function politically for a short time in the turbulent period. The first two decades of 20th century witnessed the social revolutions which were pushed by a new third realm. Unlike the old one, the new one was developed by the gentries and intellectuals, who were mainly educated in the western world. The third realm started to include wider social issues that went beyond the Confucian guide. It encouraged people to went outside of the family and engaged in the political decision, such as publishing public opinion and criticizing the government, which latter leaded to the subversion of the Qing Dynasty. (2003: 40) The new elites desired a new world, however, neglected that fact that majority Chinese, especially those below county level, were still framed in the Confucian guides. When the old social Confucian principle was suspended, the new public space failed to convince the people to create a society of new order. The development of political role of the realm third thus ceased.

Spatially speaking, the social structure of later imperial China looks like a stack of three blocks of different sizes: the formal apparatus of the state at the top and Minjian at the bottom. The in-between part is the third realm, where the public activities were undertaken. (1993: 228) The public affairs were thus the trinity play of the state, the Minjian, and the third realm.

## 2. The Public Sphere in Modern China and the-between Agency

The emergence of social agency in China today, which acted as the public institutions, gave the birth to the possibilities of public space where people are encouraged to discuss and negotiate with the public issues regardless of their classes, ages, ethics and cultural backgrounds. In last one decades, the cyberspace seems to create more space for the comments on the social and political issues freely, yet anonymously. People use the social media, for example *Weibo*, to criticize the government, engage in the public events, and make their voice be heard by the others.

An independent public space seems to be formed and work politically, whereas the governmental authority holds a negative attitude. On the one hand, the government wants to create enough space to for the cultural and social diversity. However, on the other hand, most officials regard the public sphere as the threaten because the online rumours could ruin their career directly. Moreover, the authority considers the public space needs to be regulated and supervised. As a result, the CAC (Cyberspace Administration of China) was established and Cybersecurity Laws was made. Any sensitive comment on the governmental issues would be filtered, blocked and erased promptly in the social medias. More interestingly, many governmental departments start to have social medias accounts. Through entertainment, they branding the patriotism, nationalism and traditional culture such as Confucian principles as to guide the public opinions, which namely to create positive social atmosphere. Although modern technique has seen the embryo of bourgeois public sphere, it is far from autonomy or Habermasian civil society. Apart from online political discussion, even the leisure activity such as public square dance is thought to be "guided with national standards and regulations" (Agence France-Presse in Beijing, 2015)

Since the founding of PRC in 1949, the stability and national security always come as the priority for the state. Furthermore, the one-party state "coercive power has grown stronger, and Chinese citizens appear to convince their social existence in term of obligation and interdependence rather rights and responsibilities." (Zhou ,2014: 49) It is often observed that the independence of the social power is suspended in the third realm. It was common that there is always a branch of the Party Committee Secretary in the formal social organization. The social agency is thus inevitably institutionalised by the lead power of the CCP state, and gradually incorporated into the governmental forces.

The big socio-political picture of the three-block-stack seems to be still valid today. While the Confucian legacy still functions in the family, CCP's political advocacy on the legitimacy of one-party regime has been saturated into the people's daily life with the help of the institutional education and the *centrally controlled media*[1]. The social structure remained as top-down: the power of CCP is at the top, the society is at the bottom, and the in-between accommodate the public opinion which will be always censored by the governmental power.

# 3. Public Event Project Setting
## 3.1. The island of the city

The public event project takes place in the Jiangxin Island, in Wenzhou. Wenzhou is a coastal city locating in the Zhejiang Province in south-eastern China. The original plan of the ancient city town had taken the advantage of the hilly terrain. By orienting location of town to the natural topography, the form of urban aimed to symbolize the pattern of stars. It was to interpret the implication of astronomy with the help of the existing geography. The principle of ancient town planning is strongly rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy that underlining the meaning of formal symbolization. (Zhang. H., 2014: 16-17) The original ancient town was shaped as the turtle, Jiangxin island was the head. (Fig. 2) According to the traditional Chinese culture, the metaphor of a turtle expressed a willing for the *longevity* (Allan, 1991) of the city, and the head just represented the essential part of the life.



**ASTOMETRY**

This oldest extant star chart (around the years 649-684) found in Dunhuang Cave (Gansu, China). It firstly represent the classical Chinese constellations.

**THE TORTOISE**

In the traditional Chinese culture, people believe that tortoise is sacred and symbolizes longevity, power, and tenacity.

**THE TOWN BASED ON THE METAPHOR**

The morphology of Wenzhou town is based on the form of the Big Dipper as well as tortoise. The town was oriented to accommodate the eight mountains that shaped a Big Dipper. Furthermore, the roads, waterways and gates were planned within the pattern of the tortoiseshell.

The pictogram approach was trying to embody spiritual meaning in the urban morphology, hoping for a better life.
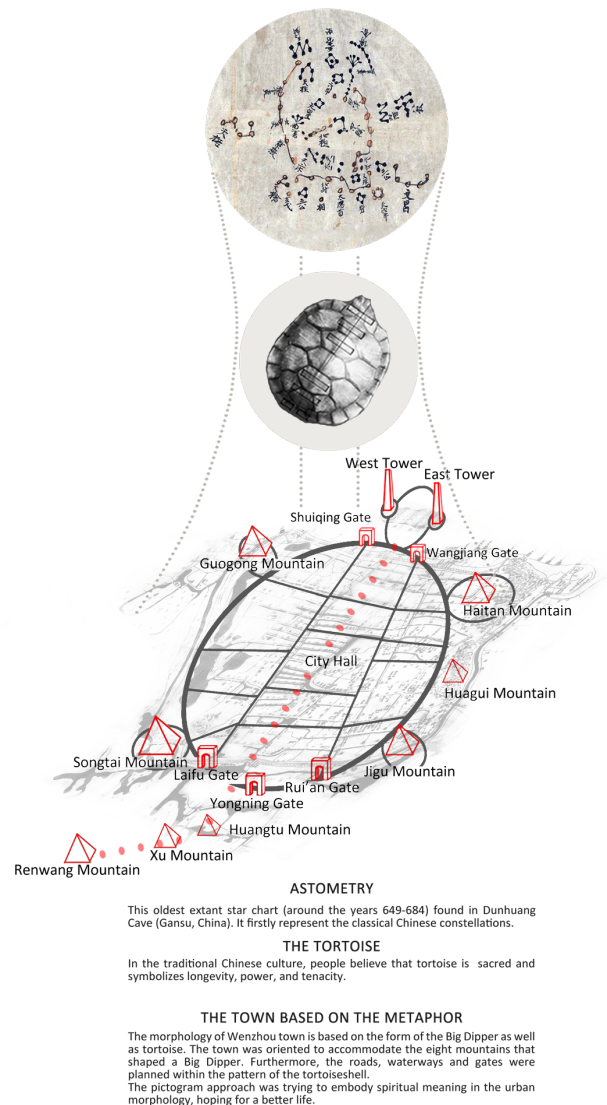
Figure 2. Form of Wenzhou town imitates the form of tortoise by referring to the Big. Jiangxin Island is the head of the tortoise.

During the past ages, the function of the island has been altered several times as a part of city. The different types of fabrics were built as to meet either the social or the political needs. In the ancient time, the original island was considered as the "*islet of poetry*". Pavilions were built for poets' visiting. Buddhist temples and pagoda were constructed for religion uses. Later in the modern age, Wenzhou became a treaty port in 1876 after second Opium War. On 1<sup>st</sup> April 1877, the British consulate building was completed in the island for the colonial purpose. Today, Jiangxin island covers an area about 700,000 square meters that consist of two parts: the expanded artificial part in the west and the original ancient eastern park. The current expanded island is embedded with diverse entertainment functions such the water park, the theme park and the hotel. People can either pay the ferry to the eastern park, or drive to western part through the Dongou bridge completed in 2000. (Fig. 3)
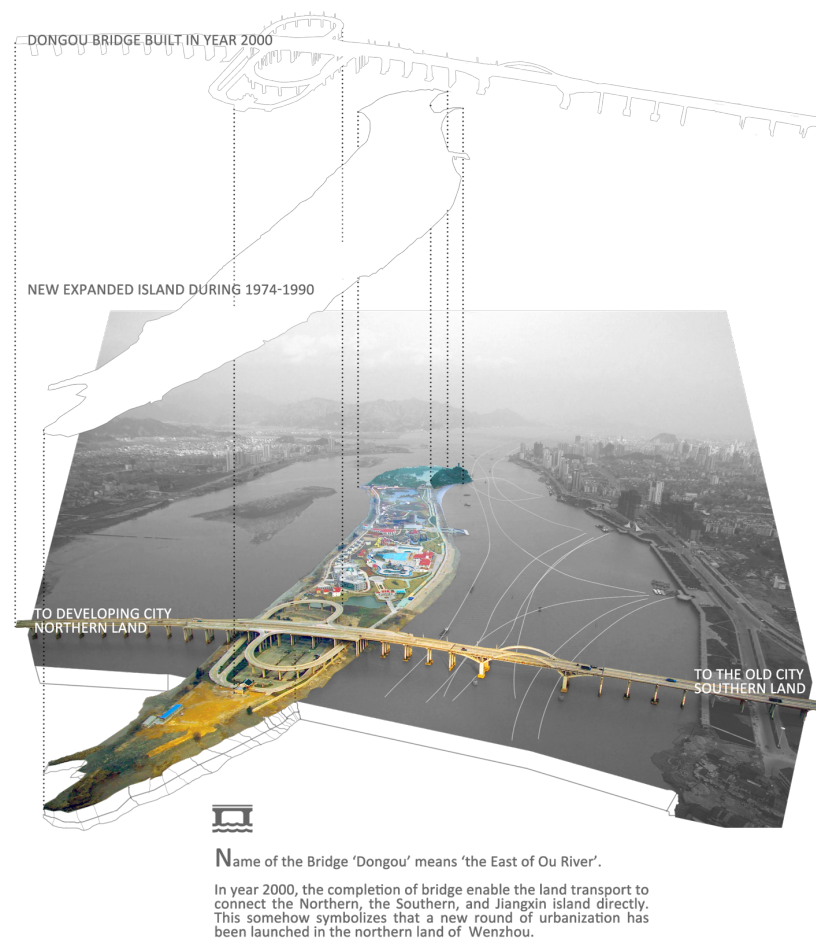


Figure 3. people can either take the ferry to the eastern island or drive to the western park

Although expanded in the last two decades, the eastern part of the Jiangxin island remains its original taste with ancient buildings and delicate landscape and garden. In the daytime, most visitors are groups of young and middle age people who are making fun by visiting the museums of folk, boating, fishing or just strolling. At the weekends, there will be some religion events and rituals hold in the Jiangxin temple that attracting some seniors. Furthermore, the theme parks in the western park are also the alternatives for the entertainment. The former British consulate buildings also becomes one of popular place for the visitor. Jiangxin island has witnessed the changing society, accommodated diverse cultures and social values, and become a place beyond a simple leisure place. (Fig. 5, 6)
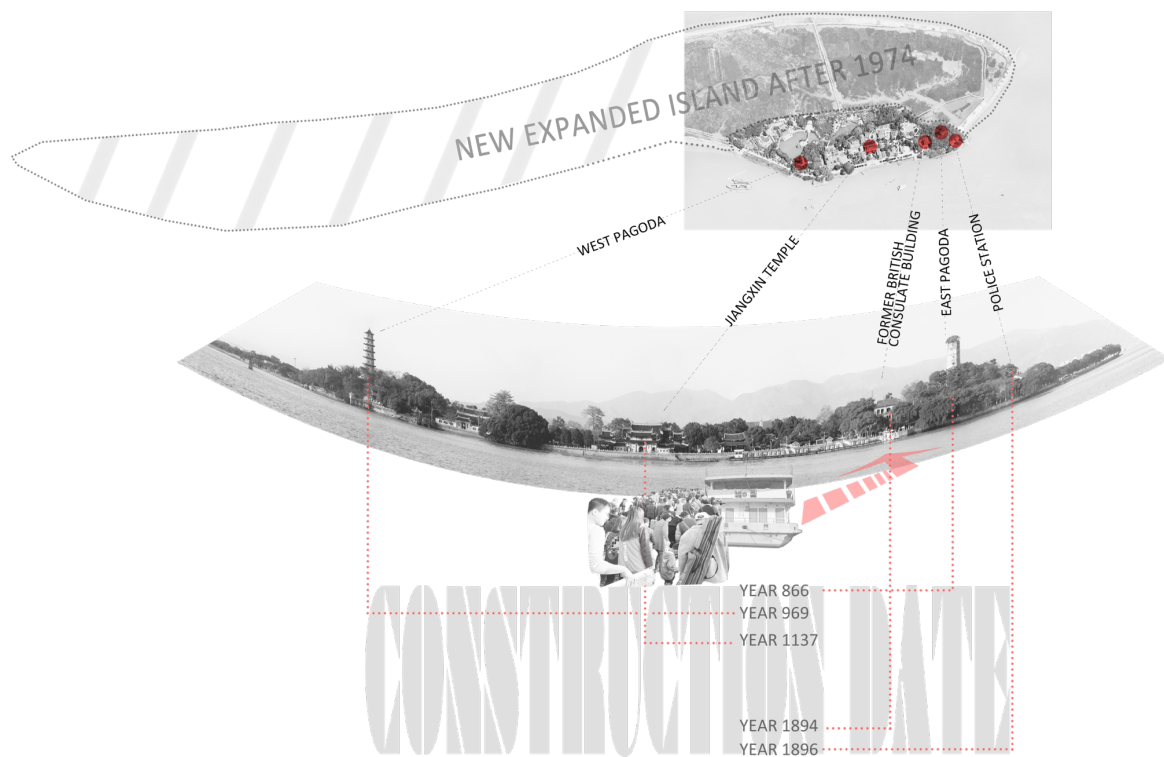


Figure 4. Main architecture in the eastern park.

Figure 5. The current functions and activities in the island.

## 3.2. The island of Identity

Since 1990s, Wenzhou has been one of the fast economy developing cities around coastal area. It attracted many urban migrants to come for better lives from other cities in the surrounding provinces. People in Wenzhou, wherever they come form, hold diverse views on the island. Some regard it just as tourism site, some say it is an entertainment place for kid due to the theme park in the western part of the island; some argue it is more like their private backyard rather than a public park for them because they do exercise in the island every night; some have never been there before, and they regard the island as the icon of Wenzhou culture; by naming it Lover Island, some it is a place for the lovers and most popular place for the wedding photography. Nevertheless, it is commonly observed that the island is qualified as a utopian public space. The buildings have consolidated the utopia where people share some common identifications and expectations. The former British Consulate Buildings is one of typical cases. (Fig. 6)
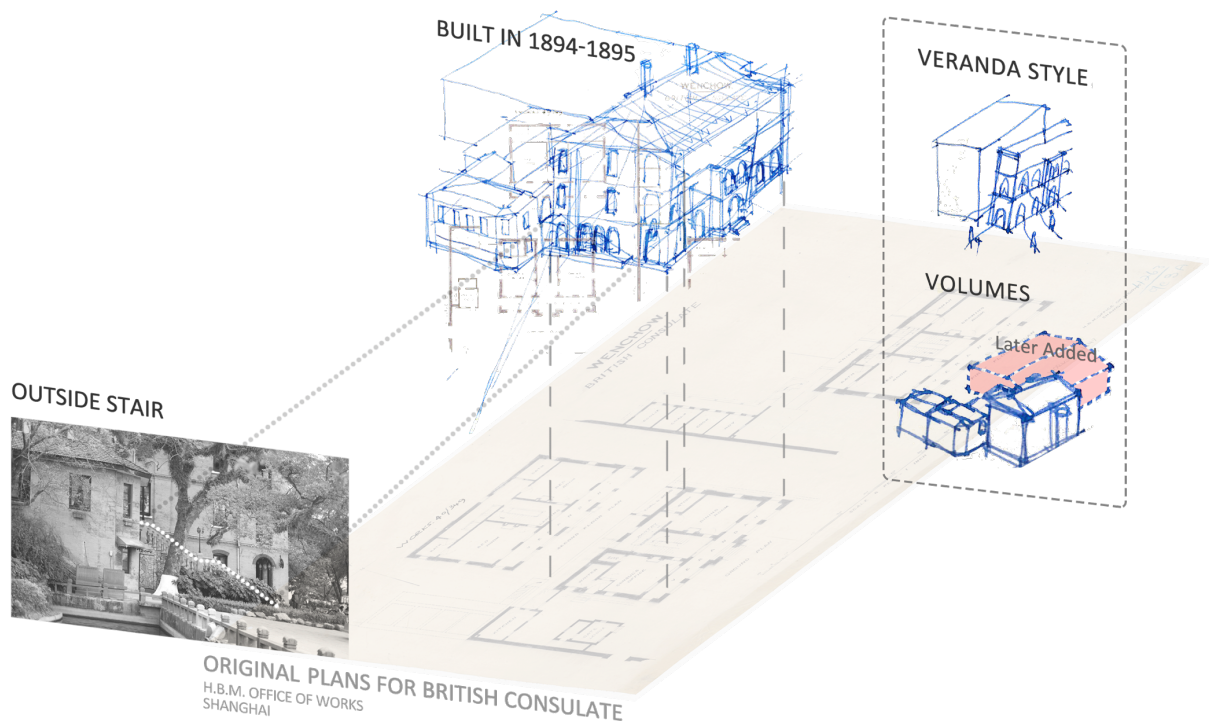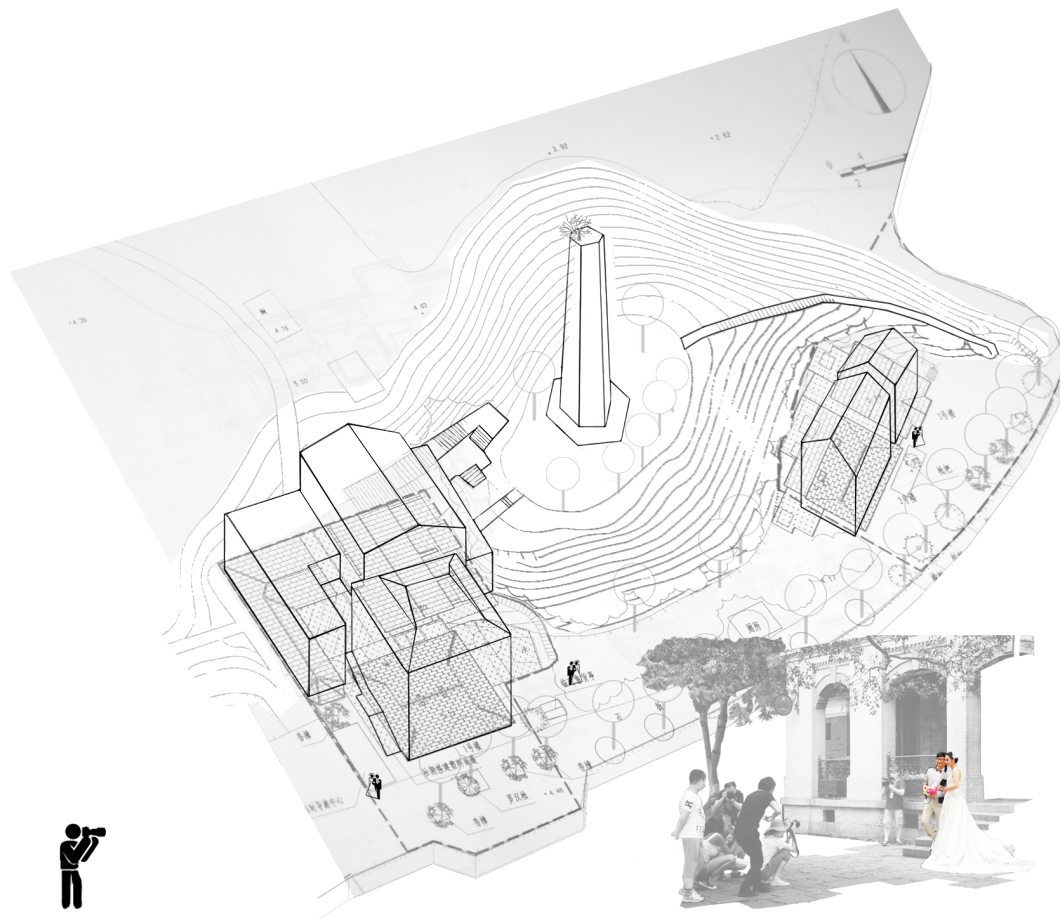


Figure 6.        The Former British Consulate Buildings

The nature of the colonial culture still has a great impact on everyday life, and specifically, on self-identity. For example, Chinese people often use word westernised (in mandarin:洋气) to describe something superior while belittling the local ones. This collective consciousness is not just limited in the linguistic practice, while the hybrid buildings have also offered the best arena for consolidating the cultural identity. On almost every day, there is plenty of couples taking wedding photography in front of the former British Consulate buildings. (Fig. 7) Latter, it was officially designated as the base for Wedding photography. Because the exotic architectural elements symbolize the western and the modern, the buildings become the best choice for decorating their life event. The colonial buildings offer the space where the xenocentric attitude was practiced and enhanced through the daily lives as well as the commercialised rituals. The couples define their own identities, which thought to be superior, by associating them themselves to the westernized images during the social activities.



The former British Consulate Buildings is one of the most popular sites because of the architectural factors. The exotic images represents what people consider as *westernized (yangqi)* which literally means superior in Mandarin. Many photography studios have made full use of the consulate buildings and choose them as the background for the wedding photography. On almost every sunny day, there are more than 20 couples come. Interestingly, most of the couples are the young migrant workers from outside of Wenzhou.
Later in 2015, the city tourism bureau has officially designated the site as the wedding photography Base.

The colonial buildings produce a space where the xenocentric attitude was practiced and enhanced through the commercialised rituals.

Figure 7.　　　Wedding photography around the British consulate

### 4.3. "My" Jiangxin Island: Participatory Game and the Public Space

A public event was initiated by the author as an architect, and assisted by a workshop including two artists, a professional architect and volunteer students from the local university. (Fig. 8) It aims to produce the public space through an artistic game. The day-long event was successfully hold on Saturday, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2016. The site was small leisure square not far away from the British Consulate buildings.



Figure 8. The participatory games started in the morning.

Both exhibitions and series of games had appealed to a plenty of people ranging from young to old. Especially the youths were greatly keen on the graffiti and cupping on the scroll. Some families participate in the game since their children were attracted by the form of free drawing that showing their ambitions in playing with watercolor and pens. Besides, the card-exchange and planting flags have drawn both young and senior people where they talked and shared their instinctive feeling about the Jiangxin island. (Fig. 9,10,11) Most participants of the drawings sections were the young people while a few adults had showed

their interests in the exchange game which was more interactive. The painting and installation were completed mostly by those youngsters and the children along with their parents. Interestingly, the safeguards and working staffs mainly stood by and rarely participate in any game.


Figure 9. Gift/Card exchange game


Figure 10, 11.Watercolour cupping as to draw a shape of the island

According to some participants, the artistic notions of the games was the main reason that appeal to them. Two foreign visitors were curious to participate in because of the western taste they could feel. They said they didn't experience such public artistic atmosphere before in Wenzhou. The media also helps to publicize the event. One senior man heard the event through a social media. He said he had a lot of stories about the island, and it is worthy for everyone to share their stories as well. Moreover, a famous local TV program reported this event and interviewed some participants. A lady said that she was visiting the island

occasionally with her son. She had lots of memory about this island. This event somehow provided an opportunity for her to share her story with her son. (Fig. 12)


Figure 12. The local TV Program is interviewing the mother who is the participant

## 4.4. Who is making the public event

The game-event indeed had aroused the public atmosphere. The game is open and free to the anyone. People felt free to appropriate the space, enjoyed sharing their stories and play with art products. More importantly, it has aroused the public's awareness about the island. However, was Jiangxin Island a public space? On the one hand, the answer is yes because anyone is able to go to the eastern park as long as he/she bought the ticket for ferry. On the other hand, however, it is not possible for every public event. Since the land of the island belongs to the state, some governmental departments were responsible for managing the land. For example, the eastern park of Jiangxin Ilsand is managed by the Tourism Administrative Bureau of Lucheng District (STABLD), which is an official department in the city. The STABLD was responsible for the overall managements of the eastern park. Any large-scale event will be impossible without the bureau's intervention. The management work was mainly carried out by its subdivision, the Scenic Management Office (SMO). Then, how was this public event made possible? Story started with the STABLD.

Stationing in the island, the SMO basically deals with the security, maintenance and cleaning. According Ru SU, who is the Vice head of SMO, the office will censor any potential event directly, Su explained from the governmental perspective that it is better to avoid any large scale public event spontaneously made by the people. In their views the openness of public event usually means the 'uncertainty', which was the least thing they expect in their responsible area. Su also emphasized that in the island, any relatively large public event was required to be organized formally and obey their management regulations. In other word, large public event in the island would always involve the governmental hands. But how to define the scale and what is the difference between the big and the small public events? The criteria were unclear because the

most important decision finally depends on the leader. "In fact", Ru Su smiled, "a call from the leader can solve everything."

In China, the control of the state power was widespread throughout the city because urban lands belong to the state. Most the social institution and formal organization are involved by the governmental agency. The STABLD was defined as a public institution. Even though this functional department is supposed to run commercially and independently, it has Party branch and it is a part of the large political system in China. For an ordinary citizen, it was not easy to access to STABLD. "It is in the governmental system. You will not be able to access unless you know anyone inside. Otherwise, you will be regarded as nobody." Said a representative of local people's congress, who is familiar with the political games. Indeed, any collaboration with official department was a political game. It would be impossible for a non-governmental individual, as an outsider, to get into such a political game.

## 4.4. The power agencies and deliberations within the political System

In order to create the project in the island, the first decisive step was to access into the system as to gain its trust, or officially saying, the permission. It was a long process to get in touch with the STABLD. It was realized with the help of Rong Lin, who was author's mother. Lin was the deputy of the Local People's Congress in Wenzhou. In March 2015, one year ago before this plan of project, the author assisted Lin and submitted a bill to the Local People's Congress. The bill discussed about the regeneration of former British Consulate buildings which is just locates in the administrative area of the STABLD. As the result of the consideration by the Standing Committees, STABLD was one of the three departments that required responding to the bill. Latter in July 2015, a meeting organized by Minjian Xie, who was the director of the Office in STABLD. Rong Lin met Xie and introduced the author as an assistor. The black-box of the political system then opened. (Fig. 13) Xie was convinced that a successful public game event would benefit both the STABLD and the people, and bring more social attentions for the island. After that, we went through official service process, submitted a letter of project plan to the leader of the STABLD, and get official permission. (Fig. 14)



Figure 13. A formal meeting in the Office of STABLD as to respond to the Representative's bill.
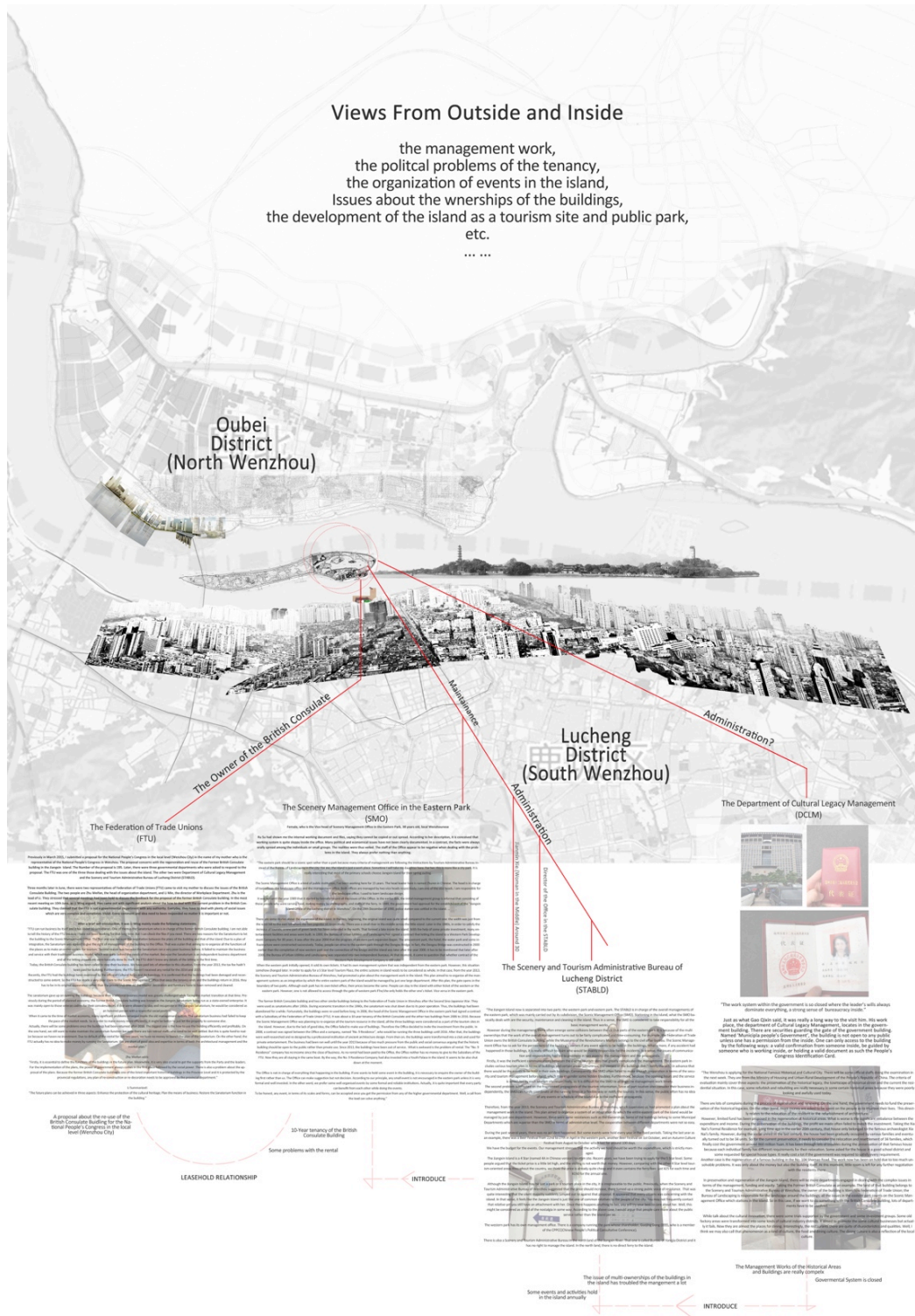
Figure 14.      Mapping based on the information of the official departments which are responsible for the managing and running of the island. The author access to the different departments with the help of the representative of local people's congress, who has the power and right to address inquiries to state organs.

Since then, however, the initial public event project was greatly affected by the deliberation between official power and author. Many original ideas had to be changed, such as the event venue, forms, timetable, and scale. When official process came to the final step, the author met Zhong Chen, who was the chief of staffs in the SMO in the island. Although introduced by Xie, the author seemed to be not so welcomed by Chen. His attitude was negative since the public event looked like a trouble for him. He stressed that the event venue, timetable and the scale need to be fixed based the management regulations. It will be easy for them to set the safeguards around and ensure the security. Otherwise event would be impossible. Eventually, the event was made just one day in a square near the SMO office buildings. As Chen put, the site would be convenient for both the visitors and management working staffs.

## 5. Questions as Conclusion: The in-between Position towards the Production of Public Space?

Finally, the public event was realized through the deliberation between the author and the STABLD, but compromised with STABLD to a much greater extent. It was because the empowerment by the Party delegate, that the author could become the in-between agency in the third realm, who intermediate between the governmental will and the people, between the inside and outside. In other word, in China, public space is neither the extension of private field nor the independent realm. It is rather an in-between space that empowered by the state.

During the political process, each agency has his own position and judgement, that will steer the process to some extent. The public is better defined as result of deliberation within state's institutions. Rather than operating with the in-between position, is there any alternative space could be open up for the public? Is there any alternative approach to make the public space in China? The answer still remain to be explored.



Figure 15.        The author and the representative of Local People's Congress has formed a power group and reach to the official department through a official process. The public event will be impossible without this empowerment.

## Note

[1] The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT) is responsible of censoring the cultural standards for the formal medias in China. It is argued that the SAPPRFT is directly controlled by the ideology of Communist Party.

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*\* In Chinese Language*

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