

## THE CRITIQUE OF SOCIETY OF SPECTACLE AND PRODUCTION OF URBAN SPACE

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### ABSTRACT

*Currently, in the period of market transition and polity transition in China, because of the imperfectness of regime and the puniness of civil society, the production of urban space is more controlled by public power and capital, and the conflict of different interest groups becomes more and more serious in Chinese society. Based on the thought of spectacle of society and critique of everyday life defined by Guy Debord, this paper tries to analyze the mechanism and the problem of production of urban space in China. Through the research of the practice of Chinese urban development and the case of Hanzhengjie Area, Wuhan City, this paper shows the citizen's right how to be excluded and their way to resist in the process of production of urban space. The results of this study reveal that the production of space is a complex political process involving the effect of power, knowledge and capital among the different interest groups. Therefore, this paper puts forward some proposals on how to facilitate the interests balance in the process of production of urban space, including the formation of space knowledge, the direction of capital accumulation and the operation way of power balance.*

*Keywords: spectacle of society; everyday life; urban space; production of space*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Post-War II rapid French modernization brought a sense of huge change, a feeling that new society was coming. Dramatic changes have taken place in the everyday life in France where there are skyscrapers, expressways, shopping malls, retail stores, consumer commodities and popular culture. Guy Debord (1931-1994) who put forward Situationist International (1957-1972) combined radical arts and social politics with the critique of consumer society and regarded the consumption capitalism emerged after the World War II as a new social control form, and proposed some important concepts such as spectacle of society and alienated everyday life, etc.

Currently, Chinese urban modernization is also developing at a high speed. During the transition from planned economy to market economy, due to their ever-increasingly intensified capital attribute, urban space and land have inevitably become new battles for seeking capital profits. And in the process of regime transform, all kinds of social power relations are constantly changed and adjusted, and public power and capital lacking efficient constraint and balance become dominant force in urban development. The production of urban space in China today is more controlled by public power and capital. However, ordinary citizens, especially low-income class, are always neglected and find it hard to benefit from urban development. Such unbalanced power relations have caused more and more serious social issues and contradictions in the rapid development of Chinese urban economy. A review of Debord's spectacle of society and critique of everyday life enables us to reconsider Chinese space development and urban renewal from different perspectives and to sketch the improvements needed.

## 2.0 COMMENTS ON CRITICAL THOUGHT OF SPECTACLE OF SOCIETY

In his *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1967) creatively alternated commodity society in Capital by Karl Heinrich Marx into spectacle of society, which undoubtedly was his most profound and persistent contribution to social critique theory. In summary, spectacle of society is a world made up by capital, commodities, consumers and media's illusion. In this society, capital logic abstracts all commodities into a kind of representation, and what people consume is not commodity itself, but its representation relationship—a value system comprised of symbols, namely, spectacle. In the view of Debord, spectacle is not gathered images, but the social power relations mediated by images. This image system shields the oppression and inequality in reality and nonparticipation and non-dialogicality are important strategies of control. In spectacle-dominated society, the majority are audiences, being obsessed, astonished and absorbed. This means that the public are controlled and obedient, which leads to both social atomization and degradation of social force.

Critique of everyday life is another significant issue pondered by Debord. In his opinion, everyday life is the field that is oppressed the most severely and torn into pieces by modern power and regime (Liu Huaiyu, 2007). Everyday life has become an organized object. In this society where consumption is controlled, real everyday life gives way to false spectacle consumption, while life itself is agonizingly absent. The logic of capital has penetrated into all respects of everyday life, and even urban space is organized systematically accordingly, and everyday life including leisure and entertainment is organized like consumption. The excessive organization of everyday life has made it a field reigned by specialized activities and ideology, and knowledge also is generally outside of real everyday life and becomes a technical and bureaucratic symbolic language as well as an exclusive occupation of culture. The abstract theoretical knowledge continuously substitutes for concrete social reality and knowledge becomes a rule tool of power. For Debord, our life is totally under the rule of spectacle, and that is the most profound self-alienation of capitalism.

## 3.0 CONTROL AND RESISTANCE IN THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Debord's concept reveals the power relations in the spectacle of society and decomposes and denies, to some extent, the values and cultural logic in modern capitalist society. Just as the comment of Simon Sadler (1998), author of *the Situationist City*, the open-endedness of Debord's thought of spectacle of society is his source of power, which creates a visual angle to review urban space in a critical manner and opens a real space full with heterogeneity and diversity.

### 3.1 The Production of Space Embodies An Overall Ideology

In modern cities where media and consumption are main social characteristics, urban space as a kind of social product must have an overall ideology hidden behind it, and such ideology actually embodies necessary political and economic orders. Therefore, space is a unique form of governance and is full of power manipulation. Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault had penetrating analysis on this. According to Lefebvre (1991), the group controlling production also controls the production of space, and every specific society will historically produce its own specific space mode and projects ideology into the space. Therefore, space is always produced strategically and in turn reacts on society. While Foucault (1979), by using genealogy, believes that modern society is a society of discipline and space is an important locale or medium for power manipulation. Power intervenes into space through elaborate arrangement and allocation of time and space, with abstract and orderly knowledge being a tool of explanation of its legitimacy and a kind of power technique. We may see that the explicit structure, functional zoning and traffic organizations, etc. stressed by

urban planning theory of modernism are just the embodiment of a kind of abstract political aesthetics principle and capital operating logic. Hence, the “planning theory as a kind of spatial knowledge is not only technical category, but actually a form of state intervention and ideology” (Gao Jianguo, 2006). Space is never absolutely “objective” and “neutral” but is always political and strategic. It is the product that is really flooded with various ideologies.

After the reform and opening up in the 1980s, market has become one of the major means of economic control in China, the economic value of land has stood out, and the capital logic of space utilization has become obvious. Meanwhile, because Chinese land is state-owned according to the country’s ownership system, land becomes a public resource directly under local government and its main source of finance. As a special social product, urban space’s attribute of commodity economy has been constantly strengthened. While the objective of economic growth is placed emphasis upon, the production of urban space is always restricted by capital, and government usually declines to capital-intensive regions in public investment, which further aggravates urban spatial differentiation. In China nowadays, under the urban development dominated by public powers and capital, stage scene-style landscape avenues, large lawns, large squares and landmark buildings have become symbols of urban modernization, abundant traditional street life has been integrated into few large-scale shopping malls and leisure centers, and a great deal of urban public space has become consumption places exclusively for the social stratum with enough economic capabilities. However, on account of lack of legal protection of private property and inefficient surveillance of public powers, urban low-income settlements, such as “Hanzhengjie Area” in Wuhan city, are always eliminated by city government in the name of public interests and promoting economic development, replaced by shopping malls, office buildings and high-price housing (Figure 1). Such commercial housing development mode expels the poor people in the city to urban fringe and deprives of their original space for livelihood, making them become the biggest victims of urban renewal.



Figure 1: Urban renewal project “No.1 Ave. of Hanzhengjie Area”

### 3.2 The Interest Appeal of Others in the Production of Space

China now is in the phase of political and economic transition. The conflicts among different interest groups protrude in the process of rapid urbanization. In the production of urban space, in face of powerful groups, vulnerable groups including migrant workers and low-income class are usually excluded from prevalent power discourse in the aspect of space interest. However, just as the statement of Michel de Certeau (1984), a contemporary French ideologist, there is a dominant force of discipline at the stage of everyday life in city and resistance tactics which is against this force and changes the outline of power mechanism.

As a commercial street enjoying the longest history in Wuhan, China, Hanzhengjie Area has diversified and mixed population and space types. This is just like what Jane Jacobs (1961) said,

“Under dirty and chaotic appearance, any place in the old city has successful operation and maintains the vigor of streets and the freedom of city in an incredible manner.” The everyday life here has not been completely alienated and there are implicit appeals to space rights of others besides the power controlling the production of space. Here, in addition to abstract space produced by public power and capital, residents have never ceased self-construction and informal use of urban space. Such space is similar to the differential space defined by Lefebvre (1991), “it is a space created and controlled by users based on given conditions.” One example is the spontaneous mobile commercial street in Hanzhengjie Area (Figure 2), where various commercial activities with flexible forms make full use of all kinds of street space elements during different periods of time (Ye Jing, 2005). Although the street is crowded and retailers often have to carry out “guerrilla” against urban management personnel, their business is flourishing, while the adjacent large-scale indoor markets with good planning and superior conditions have few visitors.

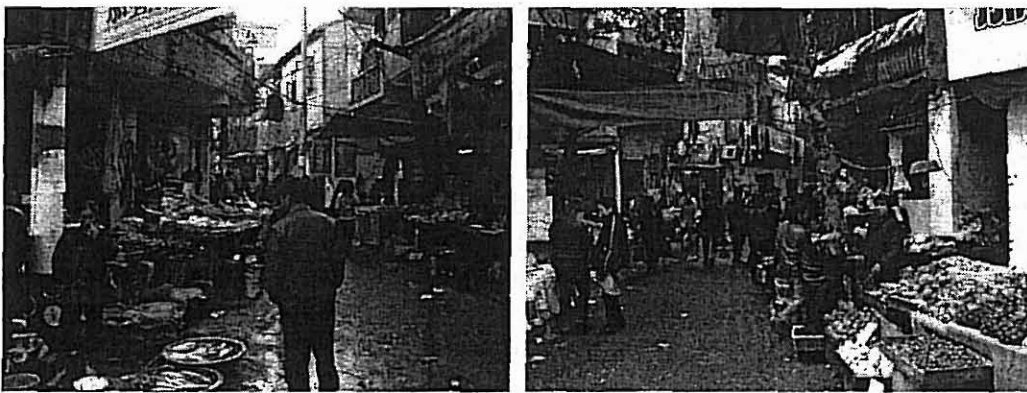


Figure 2: The Mobile Commercial Street

Another example is the Jing Chang Piece Market located in commercial and living buildings constructed in the preliminary phase of the 3<sup>rd</sup> urban renewal project of Hanzhengjie Area in 1993. On the transition terrace between some 500m<sup>2</sup> first floor shared by five commercial and living buildings and upper living apartments (Figure 3), nearly all adjacent residential houses are transformed into all kinds of small shops doing trades from hairdressing to beauty treatment, breakfast to restaurant, and grocery to small supermarket, and there also are kindergarten, neighborhood committee, tax bureau, etc (Xiong Yi, 2005). The original transition terrace planned for passage only is evolved into a multi-functional mini-community center full of flavor of life. Just like the stories often happen in old settlements in most Chinese cities, the ceaseless contend for space interests here is always accompanied by negotiations and disputes between local residents and government management department and between private house property right owners and real estate developers. This also continuously impacts the shaping of urban space.

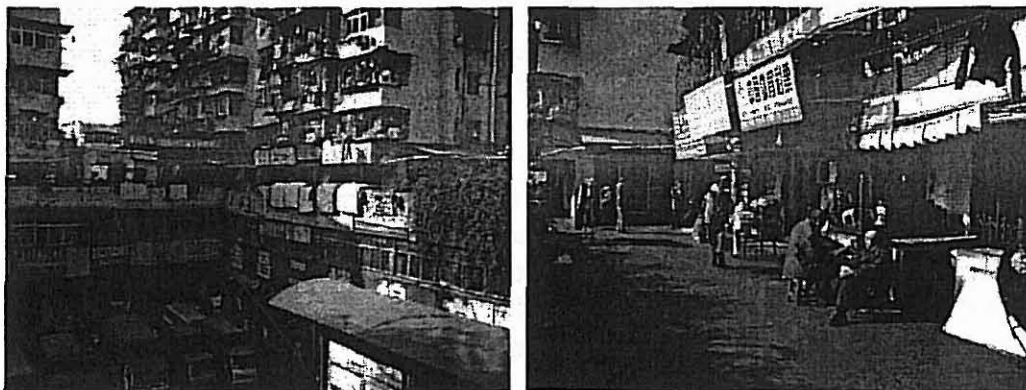


Figure 3: The Transition Terrace of Jing Chang Building

The case of Hanzhengjie Area shows that, the production of urban space is not completely subject to the abstract logic of power and capital and the real face in everyday life always appear on the basis of residents' spatial practices. In reality, residents usually reinterpret the space in a down-top manner according to their daily needs, create their own living space, and change the appearance of urban space.

#### **4.0 INTERESTS BALANCE MECHANISM IN THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE**

##### **4.1 The Power Balance in the Production of Space**

Real urban space is full of discourse of power and incommensurable heterogeneity. And the production of urban space is, to a considerable degree, a continuous and changing process of operation of practices comparing powers. That is to say, the production of space is not only related to a single community subject to imposing array of power, but to interactive plural powers, and there always are power discourse and resistance tactics of others besides predominant power controlling the production of space. If such power relationship is not dialogue-based, non-participating, or even oppressive, the contradictions may be intensified in some cases and bring about conflicts and confrontations. Certainly, we cannot deny that there is asymmetric distribution of social resources including power, capital and information, etc. Local authorities and capital groups always have greater discourse power to control the production of space, while common citizens who are users of urban space usually lose their power of discourse. As a result, different power subjects often communicate and cooperate with each other in a nonstandard and dishonest way and therefore the consensus in communication is distorted and public participation becomes mere formality.

Thus, Chinese city governments must transform their governing modes, coordinate interest relations among different social groups by means of public policies and laws instead of administrative orders, and get rid of the trend of centralization of power in the production of space. At present, city governments should guarantee the tenure security of low-income stratum by complete laws and strengthen the protection of ownership and use right of private residential housing, which are effective means of protecting the interests of vulnerable groups in society. Just as what is pointed out in the Global Report on Human Settlements 2003, "the protection of the use right of housing is one of the fundamental steps to realize the residence right and it can provide legal protection against violent expulsion" (Philippe Cabane, 2007).

At the same time, governments should promote the development of non-government organizations (NGO) and community-based organizations (CBO) through multiple channels, and should give them more empowerment of planning and decision-making, so as to form a power pattern of pluralist democracy and effective channels of public participation. In addition, as to the unequal distribution of powers in reality, supervisory and balance mechanisms of public powers should be perfected by laws and systems, in particular, supervisory mechanism based on public opinions should be formed to avoid public powers being alienated into the speaker of some interest group.

Urban planners and architects with special knowledge and information also have a certain discourse power. In face of the power game in the production of space, they should not abandon their professional tradition of pursuing social equality and justice. They should pay attention to vulnerable groups and disclose distorted facts and misleading information and take these as their responsibilities, strive to become bridges between different power discourses, and guide urban space to develop in a healthy way.

## 4.2 Production of Urban Space Should Be in Favour of Capital Accumulation of Common Citizens

Urban space is surely of the attribute of capital. The problem is, under the development mode directed by public power and capital, the accumulation of space capital is monopolized by political elites and capital groups and common citizens are always excluded. The accumulation in such a direction has aggravated social polarization and inequality, and it is the cradle both of myth of wealth and of urban poverty. Therefore, we should pay full attention to social vulnerable groups in city in policy and system relating to urban space planning, enable them to enjoy the economic efforts of urban development, and enhance their capabilities to control their living environment. This requires city governments to give proper priority to vulnerable groups in the supply of public goods and the determination of public policies. For example, city governments should increase input to improve infrastructure and material conditions of urban poor communities, strengthen the construction of housing for low-income class, and support poor residents to renew their houses independently by development policies and loan systems. These are all effective approaches to adjust the direction of capital accumulation.

Certainly, the concept of capital is not limited to physical form. Researchers like Chambers (1995) and Amis (1995, 2001) extend the traditional concept and hold that intangible capital such as social capital is of great significance to the improvement of people's capabilities to withstand plights in life and economic risks. Consequently, the method of accumulating space capital not only should enable urban residents to share the economic efforts brought by urban development, but also should facilitate the formation and development of social capital. This will be instrumental in enhancing residents' capabilities to earn their living and to obtain employment and in forming a sense of belonging to society and social cohesion. And the increase in social capital also helps to improve residents' political capabilities and widen their power discourse of controlling physical space environment. The formation and accumulation of social capital rely on relatively stable urban space environment and social structure. This demands that urban renewal should be pushed forward "on a small scale and in a progressive way" and cultivation and protection of community culture and social network should be emphasized, instead of large-scale reconstructive mode of space development only aiming to speed up capital accumulation and circulation.

## 4.3 The Formation of Spatial Knowledge Should Return to Everyday-Life World

According to American researcher John Friedmann (1993), spatial knowledge could be divided into two major types, i.e. codified expert knowledge and uncoded experiential knowledge. Urban planners tend to regard the Euclidian planning model as the only "academic" planning theory and the experience in and narration of space of "common people" as trivial matters. Such formation mode of spatial knowledge splits the channel for the communication and fusion of above two types of knowledge and is prone to cause misunderstanding of meaning, or even resistant interpretation of implicit meaning. Everyday-life-world is the center generating possibilities and meanings, by encoding which the realm of human experience and knowledge may be explored. Hence, the production of spatial knowledge must return to everyday-life-world.

Firstly, just like the abovementioned mobile street in Hanzhengjie Area and transition terrace of Jing Chang Piece Market, the production and daily use of urban space can never be completely classified into the spatial knowledge and theory abstracted by planning theory of modernism. Urban planners and architects as experts in space planning and design must alter the mode of cognizing urban space as external observers, with subject and object separated from each other, but should observe and experience how space in everyday life is practically defined and used by citizens. They should fully understand the meaning of city by experiencing urban everyday life and direct the actual practices of space planning on that basis.

Secondly, as a kind of language semiotic system and the same with language, knowledge itself is socially constructed and essentially interpretive, even abstract models of urban spacial structure appear as one amongst a variety of different urban narratives (Simon Sadler, 1998). Here, the key point is not to counterpose some narratives 'truth' with another but rather to recognize the multiplicity of cultural narratives that shaped and continue to shape (David R. Green, 2002). Thus, facing a diversified and heterogeneous world, we should place emphasis on the discontinuity of communication and view points between texts, languages, and human beings and should integrate different cultural narratives in space planning and production by methods of communicative action and public participation, etc.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

In the tide of current Chinese market economy, city governments place more emphasis upon economic growth rather than social development in an all-round way. Meanwhile, because of the imperfectness of regime and the puniness of civil society, the production of urban space is still directly controlled by urban government and capital groups and mainly maintains the social value order needed by public power and capital, and therefore there must be oppression of human nature and phenomenon of social materialization within a certain range. The spectacle of society described by Debord has gradually appeared in the production of urban space in China.

However, just as analyzed previously, there are complex interest relations under the "objective and neutral" appearance of urban space. With the production of space dominated by top-down power, common citizens are still rewriting the significance of urban space in a down-top way and producing their own urban space. The production of urban space is actually a multi-dimensional political process involving different interest subjects. A really democratic country must defend the fairness and justice of the process by perfecting the regime and comprehensively using all kinds of policies and legal means and harmonize interest subjects with discrepant objectives, in order to promote the effective communication and cooperation among government, investors and citizens and satisfy multiple appeals to power. Finally, just like the fact that human being's self-emancipation is a process needing constant modification and anti-alienation, the realization of fairness and justice of the production of urban space is inevitably a social action calls for unremitting reinforcement. This requires joint efforts and collaboration of the public, government, investors, urban planners and architects.

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