Public space without the public: State and individuals in courtyard space in Dashilar, Beijing

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Abstract
This article discusses the meaning of public space and the problem of public reconstruction by means of sociological intervention through an experimental study of community formation and courtyard space rearrangement in the old neighborhood of Dashilar in Beijing. In the West, scholars regard public space as part of public life with political or social significance. In the courtyards of Dashilar, however, residents understand public space as important as a shared property of neighboring families that is separate from public life, as they are often acquainted with but alienated from one another. To grasp this different understanding of public space, this article first looks into the historical transformation of property rights in Dashilar. The courtyards in Dashilar have clearly been defined as state-owned urban space since the 1980s but have remained neglected in administration. Therefore, residents gradually encroached upon these courtyards that were owned by the state and divided them for private use. As this act of encroaching was rooted in the relationship between the state and the individual, the courtyards were not merely changed into privatized properties with specific functions, but became places for interactions between various actors. To reveal the complexity of these courtyards as public spaces, we discuss the expansion of private space by individuals in their daily life and the “public disturbances” initiated by temporary coalitions in space construction. This complexity of courtyards as public
spaces can be well illustrated by two experiments of space rearrangement conducted in Dashilar. Both experiments introduced strong social interventions into space rearrangement: one attempted to rebuild social life in a courtyard, and the other worked on the public and private boundaries in a courtyard. The former experiment ended in failure while the latter was a success. The results of these two experiments tell us that public reconstruction is not just about rebuilding social interactions between people, but also about adjusting the state–individual relationship and establishing the rules of living together in public space.

**Keywords**
Public space, property rights, social intervention, state–individual relationship

**Courtyard space in Dashilar: Public space without the public**

**Research questions**

The public sphere and public space is one of the concerns of political science, sociology, and other disciplines, and also the major domain where urban planners carry out spatial practices. It is pointed out by scholars including Jacobs (2005) and Sennett (2008) that the lack of urban public space leads to the loss of urban public life, and ultimately results in the “death” of the city. Therefore, urban renewal focuses more and more on the design of public space as a means of cultivating social life. In this article, I will demonstrate a totally different conceptualization of public space among local residents of the Dashilar neighborhood of Beijing, as illustrated by their action in the community-building project conducted there from 2014 to 2017. Dashilar is located in the southwest of the Zhengyang Gate (also known as Qianmen), where most residents live in shared quadrangle courtyards. Forced, as these residents are, to live around the same courtyard, this type of living arrangement should bear certain characteristics conventionally regarded as ingredients for public space. Paradoxically, we witnessed three phenomena that contradict the conventional wisdom about public space. First, the courtyards are now fully “privatized” by various kinds of self-built structures and piles of materials (or junk). Second, residents are indifferent or opposed to the public utility of courtyard space as well as to courtyard life, wondering what they can do in the courtyard apart from drying clothes and airing quilts, and refusing to build public toilets in the courtyard. Third, despite an acquaintance with one another, they sustain an uncaring and tense relationship and are even caught in open conflicts. Courtyard neighbors have only a nodding acquaintance, with no visiting, lending, or borrowing let alone asking favors of one another, such as helping to look after the house. Moreover, they feel quite content with such indifference and with having no contact among one another as neighbors.
Therefore, the courtyard in Dashilar is definitely not a public space shared by several households who enjoy a collective mode of living.

This paradox of “public” and “private” as found in Dashilar allows us to raise a series of questions: Why does the courtyard fail to foster good neighborhood relations and collective life, despite its natural advantages in this regard as a public space? How do residents view the courtyards, given that their perception and utilization of courtyard space contributes to their understanding of social life in the neighborhood? How do they define “public space”? What kind of logic impels residents to encroach upon the courtyard space? How can residents’ collective life and even public life be restored under their current logic of action?

Research content and methodology

The paradox of public and private in Dashilar challenges our traditional perception of public space. This requires us to analyze such a contradictory phenomenon from a perspective other than that of the political and social significance of publicness. In the case of Dashilar, while believing that the courtyards are owned by the state, residents began occupying them for private use after the 1970s. Besides social interaction, public property management and utilization rules can also promote the reconstruction of public space. As a result, this article will first review theories of public space and its reconstruction that focus on the perception of public space from the perspective of property rights. To get a better understanding of Dashilar, this article will then elaborate on the historical process of the transformation of the courtyards from state-owned space to privatized properties. This transformation reflects not only the residents’ lack of public awareness and their personal interest-driven logics of action, but also the “state–individual” relationship.

Centering on the adjustment of the “public–private” relationship and the cultivation of residents’ public awareness, we conducted strong social interventions into public space rearrangement of two courtyards. In these two projects, we experimented with two different means of public renewal: the first appealed to the approach of “incubating social life”, and the second attempted to redefine public and private boundaries and establish usage rules for the courtyard as a public space. The two experiments differed greatly in result, with the first a failure and the second a success.

Sociological intervention. Sociological intervention is a set of research methods proposed by Alain Touraine in the “sociology of action” system, which means that instead of being a passive observer, sociologists must actively participate in social movements so that they can have a true understanding of the actors (Shen, 2006). Facing various differences in the depth and speed of development of social self-organization mechanisms during an era of tremendous social transformations, Shen (2006) advocates a transformation from “action” into “practice”, which is a stronger form of intervention into social phenomena than action. The research
will adopt the research method of sociological intervention, focusing on the issue of public space in the practice of the organic renewal of urban space driven by community construction. An organic renewal of urban space not only pursues continuity of architectural styles and historical features, but also retains the original social structure and motivates local residents to actively participate in urban preservation and local cultural reproduction. Dashilar is a pilot site for this effort.

Community construction and courtyard rearrangement in Dashilar. Dashilar is a residential area which formed gradually on both sides of the mail road running west to east diagonally northwards from the capital site of the Jin dynasty (AD 1115–1234) to the capital site of the Yuan dynasty (AD 1271–1368). Courtyards in Dashilar are mainly irregular quadrangle courtyards, which have been further transformed into mixed-household residences due to the continuous population influx during the industrialization of Beijing. Currently, the district is confronted with problems including dilapidated houses, lack of kitchen and bathroom facilities, excessive private construction without permission, and the disappearance of courtyards. From the perspective of social structure, the area has been a community of migrants at the bottom of society since the Ming and Qing dynasties (AD 1368–1912). Among the current 30,000-plus permanent residents, half are retired workers who moved in during the 1950s and 1960s as well as their offspring, who are struggling for a living, while the other half are non-local traders living on small businesses. Well-off natives have already moved out, leaving behind the economically disadvantaged. Many of these left-behind people live on pensions of around 3000 yuan per month, are trapped in poor structures and cramped spaces, are suffering from a high rate of unemployment, and have insufficient supply of public services such as medical care, pensions, and social support. Desperately yearning for an escape from their current residences, they feel quite helpless. In 2014, the Department of Sociology of Tsinghua University set up a community construction team based in Dashilar to implement organic urban renewal practices driven by community construction. We conducted oral history interviews and multiple investigations into the residents, targeting the current situation in terms of social economy, social organization, and traditional culture, and then carried out specific practices from three aspects: incubation of community-level social organizations, courtyard space rearrangement, and traditional cultural expression.

The courtyard space rearrangement practice, part of community reconstruction, is designed to build an organic renewal model of a participatory courtyard with the original residents playing a leading role. We conducted extensive surveys on problems regarding the current situation of courtyard space and residents’ daily lives. Over the course of long-term interactions with residents, we obtained knowledge about their cognition, action logic, and other aspects concerning public space. We performed three specific projects during our courtyard space practice in Dashilar: one was a community-level social organization incubator designed and constructed in 2015 at No. 43 in Sanjing Hutong; the other two were practical cases of strong sociological intervention in courtyard space rearrangement carried out in 2015 and
2016, at No. 5X in “BS Hutong” and No. 1X in “PZ Hutong”, committed to improving the indoor living environment such as lighting and ventilation while trying to explore public reconstruction paths suitable for residents in older, dilapidated neighborhoods.

**Literature review: Two connotations and paths of public space and public reconstruction**

**Meanings of social life and paths of social interaction**

**Depoliticization of social space: Meanings of social life.** Western research on public space has long been influenced by politics, with a specific focus on the discussion of the public sphere. “Public” and the “public sphere” are highly abstract concepts. According to Arendt (1999), who emphasized freedom of speech, public space, which occurs in city-states, is a political “public sphere” in contrast with the private life, where their identity as free persons is the precondition of citizens’ action and collective participation. In addition to the political function of the public sphere, Habermas (1999) suggested that the public sphere of the bourgeoisie is a sphere between the state and civil society, with a kind of public communication with reading as the medium and dialogue as the core usually occurring in material urban public spaces such as cafes and clubs. As the environment, or the material carrier, of the public and the public sphere, public space here enables the abstract concept of the public to take material, concrete form.

Publicity is the prominent feature of public space in terms of its material nature, indicating that public space should be open and accessible to all members of society. People emphasizing the political nature of public space tend to believe that public space is connected with the expression of political rights. They assume that it is a symbol of collective welfare, a showcase of leaders’ achievements, and an important place for political freedom and resistance, and highlight the public’s demand for the occupation of space, including street movements like assemblies, parades, and protests (Orum and Neal, 2010). However, public space is no longer the central topic in public, political, and cultural discussions, as recent cultural and political research believes that the emergence of new carriers like television, multimedia, and the internet has diversified public practices and political formations, which now disperse in micro-life and places such as workplaces, schools, and communities. Therefore, the public is not necessarily related to public space anymore (Amin, 2008). In fact, Habermas (1999) has long proposed a more inclusive cognition of the public, which categorizes media and publishing, culture and art, and academic thinking into non-material public spheres. Under this circumstance, public space is no longer an important place for civic enlightenment or political participation, and research on the gathering of people in space focuses more on their consultation practices concerning consumption culture and the urban environment as well as their social responses to strangers (Amin, 2008).
Sennett would later depoliticize the public sphere, bringing it back to the level of social life and emphasizing public life and social interactions in streets, gardens, squares, and other urban public places (spaces). Orum and Neal (2010) pointed out that in addition to being a “stage of power and resistance”, public space possesses other connotations such as a “stage of civil order” and a “stage of art, theatre and performances”. Among them, a “stage of civil order” refers to the role of public space in social activities such as conversations, social interactions, and public gatherings. For example, Jacobs (2005) pointed out that the street can construct public awareness on safety, social interaction, and children; Whyte (2016) observed behaviors in public life, such as the etiquette, customs, and manners of street encounters in the Street Life Project. In this way, research focusing on public space has been diverted to social life, and has gradually developed toward figuring out how to reconstruct social life through public space.

**Social interaction paths of public reconstruction.** Since the 20th century, Western cities have widely witnessed depression and even abandonment of public space. Functional zoning and the pursuit of form in modern urbanism are considered the direct causes of the death of urban public space. For example, Jacobs (2005) criticized the demolition of old neighborhoods in New York, and Sennett (2008) argued that the public square, designed around a high degree of visibility and mobility, caused social isolation. Furthermore, the more important reason for the death of public space is considered to be the decline of the public itself and the demise of public life (Sennett, 2008; Tonkiss, 2006), especially the obstruction of social life caused by social divisions brought about by the growth of slums and suburbanization (Carr et al., 1993). How to reconstruct publicity and public life has been an important issue discussed by researchers for a long time.

Social interaction is the main path of public renewal. Scholars in urban studies believe that the material and social interactions of public space play an essential role in the formation of the public and public culture. People from different cultural backgrounds gather in parks, squares, and markets with a cheerful spirit, demonstrating the collective meaning deriving from public space (Carr et al., 1993). Therefore, a reasonably organized public space seems to provide the possibility to establish a social community through interpersonal interactions. At the theoretical level, Habermas (2004) claimed to reconstruct the public sphere through communication in daily life and to establish the spatial circumstances of communicative action; Goffman (2008) employed his dramaturgical theory to analyze interpersonal interactions and behavior in public places, and pointed out the significance of unexpected encounters for social interaction; and Sennett (2000) further clarified that multifunctional public spaces can promote the occurrence of unexpected encounters through visual guidance. Meanwhile, the history of urban planning is a history full of attempts to build society and public participation through encounters between strangers by means of planning and managing public spaces (Amin, 2008; Gehl and Svarre, 2013). For example, Jacobs (2005) proposed that urban diversity be achieved through mixed usage, small streets, old
buildings, and high population density. Upsurges in recent urban beautification movements, garden city movements, urban rejuvenation, and new urbanism have all tried to return to compact housing, mixed communities, and public space practices in multiple forms, with the hope of reproducing public life through social interaction.

**Perspective of property rights and management and use of space**

*Property rights of public space: State ownership.* The issue of property rights is rarely touched upon in discussions of public space. There are three forms of property right: communal ownership, public ownership, and private ownership (Blackmar, 2006; Liu, 2018). Among them, communal ownership, different from state control and market power, refers to shared resources belonging to all people, which means everyone has the right not to be excluded. However, the negotiation cost is too high to afford for all members to unanimously take an optimal action, since it is impossible for owners to reject others’ sharing (Demsetz, 2007). Therefore, these rights are usually possessed and executed by the hyper-rational and highly efficient bureaucratic state (Liu, 2018; Qu, 2013). This causes the public to easily misunderstand the rights of communal land. Historical changes in property rights in the United Kingdom and the United States show that the rise of modern liberalism/neoliberalism and the middle class coincided with the public and private occupation and plundering of communal land (Blackmar, 2006). Public space is often considered to be communal, while in fact most of the land is owned by the government (Blackmar, 2006; Liu, 2018). Public space is often under the manipulation of the ruler. For example, the boulevards and squares built by Osman in Paris showcase the establishment of market hegemony by Napoleon III (Harvey, 2006). Public space is regarded as a public institution in the United States, and its public safety and other issues are strictly monitored by the government (Blackmar, 2006; Schivelbusch, 1997). There is also a trend of privatization in public space, which further results in the exclusion of other groups in society. The damaging of public facilities, the abandonment of streets, and the rise of suburbanization are all considered to be the outcomes of privatization and over-governance, or the complete neglect of the government (Low, 2006; Low and Smith, 2006; Mitchell, 2003; Smith, 1996).

*Space management and utilization: Collective privatism and outbreak of social conflicts.* Besides the property rights of space, management and use of space are the other two major dimensions to measure publicness (Németh and Schmidt, 2011), affecting people’s perception of space and their actions and then influencing the construction of public and collective cultures. In terms of space management, the government usually maintains the order of public space through land systems and city management systems. For example, in the UK, planning authorities, local governments, and departments in charge of roads have adopted various regulations including the Urban and Rural Planning Act, the Local Government
Act, the Highways Act, and the Public Health Act to defend public rights and the
government’s public responsibilities (Liu, 2018). In terms of space utilization, this
is usually a process of interaction between individuals and the government. The
idea is similar to the concept of spatial practice brought up by De Certeau. He
believes that through walking, people interact with the material world and thereby
transform urban space into their own space, creating their own meaning of the
governance of the city to resist against the institutionalization of space (De
Certeau, 2015; Wu, 2009). Individuals’ spatial practice confronts the macro-
structural system, and simultaneously makes a commitment to collective culture
through interactions with material and visual culture in public space (Amin, 2008).

However, Amin (2008) also pointed out that the collective culture, produced in the
interactions of people and things, is established with people’s independence, free-
dom, and national welfare guarantees as the precondition, otherwise collective
privatism featuring private intrusion into public space and resultant social conflicts
may occur. Examples can be frequently seen in shanty towns in developing coun-
tries, the protests against autocracy during the Paris Commune (Castells, 1983),
and the “Occupy” movements that broke out after the 2008 financial crisis. In
these examples, citizens fought against social exclusion and governmental control
brought about by space privatization in an attempt to find or practice publicness in
the utilization of public space (Köksal, 2012; Layard, 2012).

The courtyards of Dashilar: “State space” and the process of its
privatization

Given what we have seen in Dashilar, the political and social meaning of public
space and the social interaction pathways of public reconstruction may not be as
convincing as they appear in theory. Public space as defined above does not exist in
Dashilar. Against the unique historical background of Chinese cities, residents
perceive the public space of the courtyard mostly from the perspective of property
rights, regarding it as “state space”, whose management, renovation, and mainte-
nance should be the responsibility of the government. Courtyard space rearrange-
ment is then deemed an act of state. But, it is evident that the government has not
established recognized rules of use for courtyards for the purpose of preserving
them. However, the ensuing encroachment on public space by residents does not
aim to counter marketization and government control, as described above, nor
does it make an appeal to the “public domain”. Instead, it bears the characteristics
of “collective privatism” put forward by Amin (2008): the individual’s discontent
with the government and the expansion of personal interests in daily life during the
long-term construction of “state–individual” relations.

State space: Residents’ cognition and negative management

Land ownership in inner-city China is very complicated, having undergone the
transformation from private ownership to public ownership. Following several
stages of evolution since 1949, urban land has gradually become state-owned since the 1980s. According to the study conducted by Zhengshan Liu (2015), this evolution started during the period of national economic recovery after 1949, when the country nationalized obsolete houses and land in cities and then distributed them to public institutions, organizations, and demobilized troops for free, but the land of private houses was still managed according to the private land use system. Following this was the period of socialist transformation, when China socialized capitalist industry and commerce, individual handicrafts, and private land and property by the means of “buy outs” (shumai), “trusteeships” (jingzu), and “public–private partnerships” (gong si heying), thus forming a diverse ownership structure featuring the coexistence of “state-owned”, collective-owned, and small privately owned land holdings, with the private ownership of land accounting for the largest proportion. The situation remained unchanged until 1982 when the Constitution was promulgated, regulating that “urban land is owned by the state”. The 1988 Constitutional Amendment stipulated that “the land use right can be transferred legally”. Since then, land ownership and land use rights have been separated. Take the 4685 houses in the Xiheyan and Sanjing communities in Dashilar as an example. Among them, public housing accounts for 56.8%, while the houses of public institutions account for 10.7%, and private houses 32.4%, altogether forming a property rights structure with public housing as the majority. However, no matter what type of property right a residence holds, the land is owned by the state. As the residents of public housing only rent the use right of the house and its land, the land ownership and use right of the courtyard belongs to the state.

*Everything is national.* This is the residents’ understanding of the courtyard, especially residents living in public housing. The so-called “public space” is “national”, and “everything except the rented house is both public and national”. Therefore, the government should bear the responsibility to maintain and upgrade the infrastructure, the housing, and the environment. First, the renovation of the water and electricity facilities by the state has gained recognition from the residents. For example, one resident highlighted: “Water supply has been improved. Every household has access to tap water, and the ground of the courtyard has been paved with bricks. In addition, coal has been replaced by electricity. In the past, we burnt coal. That’s so dirty”. Second, residents believe that improving their living environment is also the obligation of the state. In our investigation, the residents kept requesting us to report their demands to the higher authorities with a view to improving their living environment. When it comes to the use of public space such as hutongs and courtyards, the residents replied, “This is an issue of national governance” or “It depends on the national law”. Through these replies, we can see that the residents hold that it is the state rather than themselves that decides the means of using the space. This can be more vividly demonstrated by their expression: “It is not permitted to plant celery and cabbages if the government asks you to plant lawns”. Similarly, they think the tidying of the piles of accumulated items in the hutongs
and courtyards is beyond their responsibility and city inspectors of the government must deal with it. In conclusion, the residents view public space as state space.

**State space in the negative sense.** The 1982 Constitution stipulated that urban land is owned by the state, but there is no law or regulation to address how to nationalize the previously non-state land and how to define property rights in relation to land ownership (Liu, 2015). As a result, there are many disputes related to compensation for demolishing private houses and houses owned by private individuals but which are leased out by the authorities to other residents. Meanwhile, the government has not established a system for the management of public housing and courtyards, such that it is now relatively disordered (Wu, 2017). Public housing is managed under the model of “maintaining properties by renting them” (yi zu yangfang) by the housing management bureau, which is responsible for property rights, property registration, rent collection, security checks, and maintenance and renovation. Even so, a large number of houses have not been repaired for many years. As of the end of the 1980s, nearly 70% of the single-story houses in Beijing were dilapidated (Fang, 2000). Although the Regulations on the Management of Urban Public Houses clearly forbid the illegal subletting and underleasing of public housing, 36% of public housing in Dashilar was illegally rented out (Yang et al., 2018). It was not until 2018 that Beijing began to impose strict management of it.

In general, the regulations on the management of public housing target houses themselves instead of courtyards. In regards to the courtyards, the government manages infrastructure and courtyard land use. In terms of infrastructure, the street offices (jiedao banshichu) have the same understanding of public space as the residents: “The government should pay for the infrastructure in the courtyard such as greeneries, paving, and the subsurface pipelines”. However, due to the limitations of the street office system, the street office is actually unable to administer or coordinate courtyard infrastructure, for the electricity supply is managed by the power bureau, the surface water pipe network by the water companies, and the subsurface water pipe network by the municipal government. The street office has limited resources to cope with the spatial rearrangement of courtyards. In terms of courtyard land use, courtyards actually become a space used by several households rather than a public space that can be used by all the people due to the complicated ownership transfer of the courtyard land as well as the closeness of the courtyard space, though the Urban Planning Law has specified the definition, demolition, and punishment of illegal building. Under the circumstance of the indefinite right of use and the government’s negligence in management, people have built structures illegally in the courtyards since the end of the 1970s. Even though in 2017 Beijing took strict measures to demolish illegal buildings guided by the policy of “improvement stimulated by mediation and renovation”, the demolition targeted only the buildings on both sides of the streets rather than in the courtyards. In conclusion, hutongs and courtyards have become state space in a negative sense, due to the lack of corresponding management resources and systems.
Individual action: The occurrence of collective privatism

Public space is not merely a physical space with specific functions, because it also involves the interaction of actors in the process of using the space and entails public action. Public action encompasses discussion of public topics in the political sphere, interpersonal communications in the social sphere, as well as urban social movements intruding on space. The intrusion of space is termed “collective privatism” by Amin (2008), who claims that it will occur when the social welfare provided by the state is not enough to make the individual an independent citizen.

In Dashilar, residents classify the courtyard space as state space, but encroach on the courtyard space by building structures on their own. Initially this was done because it was difficult for the residents to live in the cramped, densely populated space. As mentioned before, residents in Dashilar are mainly workers who came to Beijing in the 1950s and 1960s. They were settled in public housing, and usually each household had only one house. In the 1980s, living space was insufficient, due to the increasing number of family members, so the residents built structures by themselves in the courtyards. The violation of the courtyard space in recent years was caused by the relationship between the residents and the state, especially after 2010 when the actual residential density of local residents declined significantly. As young people and well-off families moved away, those who remained were mainly ordinary workers or employees who retired from factories or institutions. They were very old and lived on meager pensions. Some of their offspring had difficulty fending for themselves. For residents living in public houses, their terrible life was deemed the result of the government’s negligence in the demolition, renovation, and maintenance of their houses, insufficient retirement benefits, and the poor treatment they received. For residents living in private houses, their dissatisfaction was on the verge of breaking out, as they were plagued by ownership disputes over their houses and courtyard land due to the policies of state-led public–private partnerships and trusteeship in the 1950s. The residents kept complaining about the low quality of the houses renovated by the housing management bureau. For example, renovated walls became thinner so that they could not resist cold winters; the new surface of the courtyards started to sink only two or three years after the renovation; the new drainpipes would become blocked as before, and so on. Their perception was that while everything belonged to the state, it was reasonable for them to encroach on the public space in order to meet their life requirements and pursue future interests, as they were uncared for by the state. In all the government-led space construction, residents actively impeded the construction under various pretexts, seeking interests while expressing their discontent.

Daily action: The expansion of the private fields. Acts of encroachment on the public space in Dashilar began in 1976, in the form of the building of earthquake-shelter tents, and became more and more rampant during the marketization reform, with
the building of coal-storage sheds and later vehicle-storage sheds. Later, there were self-built rooms such as small kitchens, utility rooms, and small bedrooms, and “people occupied a space even as small as a flowerpot with junk”, which finally “caused the doorways to be blocked”, with only one passageway left empty. “We can put up with the junk, as long as we can walk through it”, one resident said. The residents recognized that this was an act of encroaching on a public space which was “state space” or “owned by your uncle”. The relationship between neighbors became more delicate in the spats about occupying space. Some neighbors tried to maintain the superficial harmony in the neighborhood. For example, they might say “you cannot chat there, as that is X family’s space”. The residents occupied the courtyard in order to expand their living space and, more importantly, to be able to ask for more compensation in return for their land during future demolition and relocation from the public houses—described in their own words as “selfish interests”. The government is also keenly aware of the wishful thinking of residents who believe that “the space I occupy will be counted in the compensation for demolition”. Therefore, residents made the protection of their self-built structure and the overall occupation of courtyard space their top priority.

The individual act of encroaching on the public space of the courtyard was not merely two-dimensional (e.g. a plane), but also three-dimensional (e.g. a space), including the space people can see or feel. This can be seen in the “public disturbance” (minrao) events during the construction of the social organization incubator at No. 43 in Sanjing Hutong. The residents on the north side of the courtyard opposed the incubator’s proposed skylight because “it encroached on their privacy” and “would ruin their view and block their line of sight when opened”. The residents on the east side of the courtyard objected to putting the entrance to the incubator in the eastern alley. They believed that, on the one hand, the entrance would lead to more visits and obstruct their getting in and out; while on the other hand, the entrance being opposite their own doors would disrupt feng shui. They also pointed out that the eastern room of the incubator, which was taller than the older structures of the homes, affected lighting and ventilation of their home. What’s more, a glass brick area of the eastern exposure of the incubator building was deemed to resemble the gun aperture of a bunker or pillbox, and thus was a source of psychological disturbance. Finally, the residents on the south side of the courtyard thought the door and window openings opposite their doors disrupted feng shui as well. From these “public disturbance” events in the courtyard, it can be seen that residents divide the three-dimensional (one might even propose an additional psychological dimension) space from the perspectives of lighting, ventilation, sightlines, view, privacy, mentality, and feng shui, situating public space as subservient to individual authority. Residents held that in contrast to inviolable private space, state space could be encroached on. Therefore, “they opposed putting the public garbage can anywhere except in the entrance to the government’s
incubator, and sometimes they took their kitchen garbage out into that garbage can", a staff member of the incubator recounted, to convey their discontent with the government.

**Active “public disturbance” events in the construction of space.** When public space is deemed state space, the construction of public space is thus recognized as a national act. The daily actions of the *hutong* residents have also escalated into active protests during renovation and construction projects. During government-led and government-funded courtyard renovation projects, residents have brawled with the government and even jumped to their death in response to issues of construction schedules, design, and house relocation, the result of the rent-seeking psychology of residents who thought that state-led renovation violated their interests and therefore asked for “compensation”. This was a violent display of the terrible state of state–individual relations, also embodied in the “public disturbance” events in the construction of the social organization incubator. Although the incubator is in a detached courtyard with clarified ownership, the facts have shown that in Dashilar, there is no purely physical reconstruction of the space that bears no relation with the residents. Under any circumstances, the residents would actively get involved in public disturbance when the opportunity arose.

The construction of the incubator began in October 2015, but did not go smoothly due to obstruction from the nearby residents. The “shed event” on the north side of the courtyard was a typical example of a “public disturbance”. There were two sisters over 60 years old living in the private houses on the north side of the courtyard, and their sons and daughters did not live with them. They opposed the demolition and renovation of the No. 43 courtyard, because they had built a shed by the northern wall of the courtyard. After the government promised to reconstruct their eastern room, they finally made a concession. However, the government’s compromise stirred up discontent among the residents on the eastern and southern sides of the courtyard, who were all retired workers. Being free every day, they displayed strong capacity for action. They firstly created a disturbance at the construction site, impeding the work of the construction workers, then kept calling the relevant office in the street office to prevent the officials from working normally; furthermore, they “went to the housing management bureau every day” and “appealed to the higher authorities for help via calling 12345 and mailing complaint letters”, among others. The residents of the three sides of the courtyard appealed for different reasons. The residents of the north side objected to the public space project because they considered that the noise of the incubator’s use in the future would influence their life. At last, the government reconstructed the eastern room of the house on the north side of the courtyard, and removed the skylight on the northern side of the incubator building. One resident on the east side of the courtyard appealed for mental damage compensation, in order to claim economic benefits from the state-led space reconstruction. The household asked for 30,000 yuan per room, 90,000 yuan in total (three rooms). As a result, the
government gave 20,000 yuan to this household to avoid further trouble. These compromises made by the government encouraged the rent-seeking behavior of other residents.

The neighbors are all taking a wait-and-see attitude, planning to overcharge the government after the construction is finished. They demand compensation for various odd reasons. For example, the new building has one more brick than the original one. The government must compensate me as long as the construction affects me.\footnote{11}

The action of the residents deepened the misunderstanding and mistrust between the government and the residents, making the positive interaction in public space more difficult.

**Two strong-intervention courtyard rearrangement experiments and reflections**

Residents believe that the public space of the courtyards is state space. Their encroachment on courtyard space is a behavior of expanding their private interests as much as possible, driven by their mentality that they have “been abandoned by the state”. Driven by their understanding of the “state–individual” relationship, this behavior has not improved but actually worsened their indoor living environments. Under such circumstances, we tried to make strong sociological interventions. We hoped to mobilize residents in courtyard rearrangement to achieve two goals. First, that residents would realize the publicness of the courtyards and their significance to social life and social interactions, thereby achieving public renewal by adjusting public–private relations. Second, that progress would be achieved in the improvement of the living environment, the restoration of the courtyard, and the establishment of an orderly management, maintenance, and organic renewal mechanism for the courtyard. To this end, we conducted experiments in two courtyards, Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong and Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong, and respectively adopted two public reconstruction strategies for “incubating social life” and establishing public space usage rules for these two courtyards. The two experiments ended in failure and success, respectively. The results of these two experiments further demonstrate public space cognition and public reconstruction paths based on property rights.

**Failed intervention: Life, memory, and emotional mobilization**

As one of the famous “eight hutongs” of Beijing, BS Hutong is located at the southwest corner of Dashilar Street. Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong used to be the site of the well-known “Xiaoxiang Pavilion” (Xiao, 2007) entertainment venue during the period of Republic of China. However, it had lost its traditional style over years of use and was now a large courtyard with only one passageway. There were seven households around the courtyard, of which six were inhabited by
elderly residents. These residents were ordinary workers or employees of state-owned and collective enterprises. Many younger generations were born in the courtyard. Only the residents on the west side of the courtyard had moved there after 2000. The reasons why we chose this courtyard for experimentation were that its residents met the basic condition of having lived there for a long time, and that it was possible to achieve space rearrangement. After surveying and mapping the courtyard, conducting investigations into residents’ demands, plan discussions, and so on, we formed a solution for the courtyard space rearrangement: “demolition of illegal construction, restoration of original appearance, and rearrangement of functions”. The features of this plan were its “low cost, small scale and easy-implementation”. “Demolition of illegal construction” signified the removal of small kitchen and bathroom structures built by residents in the courtyard, so as to reveal the wooden structure of the courtyard houses. In order to recover the use area lost in the demolition of self-built houses, the plan proposed to construct an enclosed porch next to the wooden structure of the main houses, which could help restore the historical style and offset the area lost by each household. On this basis, the plan further adjusted the layout of each household to improve indoor lighting and ventilation, among other things. The adjusted courtyard would not only restore its original style, but also restore the public life of the residents of the courtyard.

We mobilized residents through both collective meetings and individual communication with each household, so that they could agree to the courtyard rearrangement plan. There were three specific mobilization strategies. The first was the “mobilization of collective life in the courtyard”. We introduced the residents to a courtyard renovation scheme in the Dongsi district and a renovation of single-story houses carried out by Dream Home, a television program created by Dragon TV, so as to stimulate the residents’ imagination of their happy courtyard life. The residents expressed their admiration for these projects, but at the same time they felt powerless to change the courtyard where they lived. The second was the “mobilization of private-life needs”. We introduced the design plan for the courtyard and for each household to the residents in detail, pointed out the root causes of the poor indoor environment such as dim lighting and poor ventilation, thereby trying to make them aware of the importance of the courtyard space. The last was the mobilization of “memory and emotion”. We tried to reshape residents’ living memory and courtyard consciousness with past life scenes. Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong had previously appeared in literary works as “Xiaoxiang Hall” (a building in the famed Chinese novel The Dream of the Red Chamber), so we sent one or two old photos of this to the residents’ WeChat group, and asked them to recall stories and scenes from their childhood.

After more than two months of mobilization, most residents were still unwilling to demolish their self-built structures. Their relationship with one another was indifferent and there was no possibility for them to organize themselves to have discussion. During our mobilization of each household, they all expressed that they did not need a courtyard, had no interest in courtyard life, and had no money to
renovate. Therefore, the residents’ committee stopped the mobilization of residents when the street office announced the necessity for residents to play a principal role in courtyard renovation and to cover part of the costs, and none of the residents took the initiative to mention courtyard renovation again. Our practice of renovating Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong also ended.

**Successful intervention: Defining public and private boundaries and “semi-private space”**

The experiment at Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong encountered the problem of a lack of initiative among residents and inaction on the part of the street office and the residents’ committee. As a result, we proposed a “residents-initiated courtyard renovation” model, trying to encourage residents’ self-governance through public policies and establish a mechanism for interaction with the government, thereby creating a system to maintain the promotion of courtyard renovation. The specific method chosen was that the street office would fund the renovation of the environment and infrastructure in the public space of the courtyard, including work on paving, water supply and drainage facilities, demolition of illegal constructions, wall painting in the courtyard, lighting improvements, additional construction of rain shelters, greenery, and so on, but excluding the reconstruction and decoration of residents’ own houses. According to the requirements of this “Courtyard Renovation Fund”, the residents in a courtyard would act as a unit, and the head of courtyard or the person in charge elected by the residents would convene resident meetings to clarify the preliminary needs and work plans for courtyard renovation, and then apply to the street office social office through the residents’ committee. After a trial of 10 courtyards, Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong was chosen as being the most representative.

In terms of adjusting the public space of the courtyard, we conducted an in-depth spatial and social survey and clarified the priorities of residents’ needs. We learned from the practice of the “half good house” project in the Chilean slums and proposed the solution of a full-cycle dynamic design, adopting the renovation approach of “long-term overall planning and design, phased implementation”, based on the gradual realization of several key elements, such as the reduction of residential density, the gradual dismantling of residents’ self-built structures, and follow-up government funds and public services. The restoration of the courtyard was the ultimate long-term goal, requiring three stages of work. The first stage was the renovation of the public space. Each of the residents collectively defined the boundaries of the public space in the courtyard and the boundaries of each household on the site, and then determined the public space renovation plan and the conventions of its subsequent use. The process of residents’ defining public and private boundaries revealed an interesting phenomenon: all residents first defined their self-built structures as public space, yet said “self-built structures are private and cannot be taken down” while discussing the courtyard convention which stipulates that public space cannot be invaded. We therefore put forward the
concept of “semi-private space”, namely the part that residents temporarily occupy in what they perceive as public space—a recognition of both the historical demar-
cation and the private use rights of the public space. The second stage was the
renovation of each household’s space, including the demolition of self-built struc-
tures in this “semi-private space” to restore the courtyard. This first required a
consensus on the boundaries of each household among residents, and then called
for them to vacate parts of their households or adjust their household space. The
third stage was the restoration and subsequent maintenance of the entire court-
yard. After four rounds of discussion among the residents, this dynamic design
plan reached a consensus and was finally submitted to the street office, so as to
apply for funds to complete the first phase of public space renovation.

Summary and further reflection

Comparison of two courtyard rearrangement and intervention experiments. We witnessed
typically indifferent and tense neighborhood relations in Courtyard No. 5X in BS
Hutong. The residents in the courtyard had little interaction with each other. They
thought that the courtyard and courtyard life were meaningless. According to the
theory of “rebuilding public space through communication, social interaction, and
other pathways”, forwarded by scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, Richard
Sennett, and Jane Jacobs, we attempted to stimulate collective and private-life
needs and carried out memory- and emotion-led mobilization among the residents,
but achieved no success.

In the perception of residents, courtyards are neither a cultural space, represent-
ing the traditional style of Beijing’s quadrangle courtyards, nor a social space,
symbolizing and accommodating public life, but a public property and state
space in the sense of property rights. The interaction in the space is not a social
interaction between people, but between people and material property, that is,
residents’ competition for “their” courtyard space. They fought fiercely to
encroach on and carve-up the state space of the courtyards; defined their respective
boundaries in the long-term “fight”; and established the rules, tacit behaviors, and
philosophy for living together in a high-density environment. But the result of such
competition was not a harmonious relationship in an ideal society, but a terrible,
warren-like environment that everyone wanted to escape from. This is also the
reason why courtyards with natural advantages of public space have not fostered
good neighborhood relations. In the intricate neighborhood relationship, restoring
courtyard life and public space is tantamount to utopianism on the part of
practitioners.

In the process of attempting to rearrange the space of the courtyards, we had a
glimpse of the residents’ logic of property and their interests regarding public
space. In the spatial rearrangement of Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong, residents
on the southern side of the courtyard complained that “the space of their small
kitchen was reduced too much”. Residents on the west side believed that, “it’s
troublesome in case of future demolition and relocation as there is a projection
Residents in the northeastern household emphasized that “there is no point in making up for the lost area. If you set up a door on this side, I have to move the refrigerator over there. The total area has not expanded”. Residents adopted an attitude of indifference or resistance to any government actions other than demolition or granting benefits, which doomed the intervention experiment at Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong. On the contrary, in our experiment at Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong, we started directly from the perspective of property rights, defined the boundary between public and private space, recognized and respected the historical facts of residents’ occupation of public space, and formulated a phased and long-term mobilization plan, which made it easier for residents to reach a consensus.

The construction of the relationship between the state and the individual. The courtyard is regarded as “state space”, and the behavior of residents is the result of their construction of the “state–individual” relationship. In this process, we have witnessed the complex changes in land ownership and use rights in old cities, and problems in the government’s management of state space such as public housing and courtyards. For example, when discussing the pilot renovation of Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong, we proposed to set the fund and public policy for the courtyard public space renovation scheme, and build an open and transparent website platform for residents to apply, so as to promote the institutionalized operation of space renovation. The street office said, “If you are going to set it up [online], it will be an unsolvable problem. Why would you set it up online? Everyone will come and ask you to fix things, what are you going to do?” The street office also expressed their powerlessness in terms of social public services such as evacuation, community elderly care, public kitchens, and elderly care facilities in courtyards. Regarding the simple construction needs of the residents of Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong for the public part of the courtyard, the department in charge under the street office had, at the time of publication, not yet arranged workers to come to the courtyard for construction after the residents’ application report was submitted in July 2016. In this case, residents are dissatisfied with the government because of its insufficient public services such as housing, and as a result, individual or collective actions and conflicts occur in daily life and space renovation, which become “poetic” protests to a certain extent (Wu, 2009). Whether in the case of Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong or the case of Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong, the residents were unwilling to make changes to the courtyard with their own money and efforts, believing that the government should be responsible for everything. The residents of Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong constantly questioned, “how about the construction cost?”, and some residents were blunter, saying, “The renovation is unlikely to succeed. Who will pay for the cost? It is difficult even to have each household pay 10,000 yuan in this courtyard. No one will pay for that”. The residents’ committee of the BS community also felt that the government should pay for it: “The street office director said that it is not appropriate to let the residents pay for it, maybe the street office should cover the cost”,
said the secretary of the residents’ committee. The residents of Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong not only believed that the government was responsible for the courtyard’s public space and their property, but also required the government to plan and construct their self-built structures in a unified manner.

Although there is no social interaction or public life among the residents, they can always unite and take collective actions when fighting for benefits from the government. In the renovation of Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong, residents could meet under the organization of the head of the courtyard, reaching agreements on many aspects including renovation demands, public space division, renovation plans, and subsequent maintenance conventions, especially on the defining of public space boundaries by residents, saying “Everything outside the house is public”, “[Self-built structures] are all public. Self-built structures have no property rights certificate, but occupy the public space in the original courtyard”, and “[The space occupied] belongs to the public, not individuals”. These residents, displaying surprising public consciousness and consensus, actually aimed to obtain benefits from the government so as to maximize their private interests, namely in the hope that the government would rebuild all self-built structures, for the “application-based courtyard renovation” clearly pointed out that government funds support “the renovation of public space, excluding private space”. Therefore, we can see that collective behavior against the government occurs when all individuals can get more benefits. This is not simply caused by the insufficient social welfare provided by the state (Amin, 2008), but is also related to the individualization process controlled by the state. Based on Beck’s (2004) proposition on individualization of the “structural transformation of the relationship between individuals, society, and the state”, Yunxiang Yan (2016) put forward that the process of social relations reconstruction and individualization in China is controlled by the state. The process includes two stages—“individualization of collectivist methods” and “individualization of market economy reforms”—with its core being the changes in the state–individual relationship as a special strategy or method to pursue modernity, rather than the category transformation of the society–individual relationship in Central and Western Europe as Beck described. The individuals in this process are utilitarian. They are not complete individuals with both power and responsibility, and they have no respect for others (Yan, 2016). The individualization process of space and housing is also controlled by the state, with a complex and distorted state–individual relationship constructed.

In the period of socialist collectivization, state power not only expanded rapidly to space resources such as real estate, but also penetrated deeply into the lowest end of community life. The Constitution of 1982 confirmed the state as the owner of urban land. The 1988 Constitutional Amendment stipulated that “land-use right can be transferred”, endowing the use of land with property meaning. After the reform of the housing system, the rise of commercial housing communities and the promulgation of the Property Rights Law essentially served for real estates and economic development, yet the state that seemingly withdrew from management has never loosened its grip on daily life in essence (Guo and Shen, 2012).
social life in the hutongs is the result of government’s organization, which has led to private house owners’ strong sense of deprivation and public housing tenants’ heavy reliance on the state.

During China’s marketization, on the one hand, the state’s investment in resources, infrastructure, and public services in the hutongs declined dramatically; on the other hand, income from the commercialization of land use rights became the principal part of residents’ property. Such cases have further deepened the long-term unbalanced mentality of residents in the hutongs and strengthened the individualization trend dominated by private interests.

Under such circumstances, the infringement of public space is not just a simple matter of civic morality (He, 1994), but also a vent of dissatisfaction among ordinary citizens, which, in turn, intensifies the government’s distrust of the residents, as the government believes that the residents overcharging the government are always causing trouble and profiting for themselves at the expense of the government. Therefore, with the mentality of “the less trouble, the better”, the government has tried to shun negotiations with residents. Such state–individual relations have become the root cause of the dilemma faced in public spaces such as courtyards. It is also the first problem that public reconstruction must deal with, which requires cultivating individuals with public consciousness on the basis of sorting out property rights relations and guaranteeing people’s livelihoods. This has also provided another path for public reconstruction besides social interaction.

The spatial path for public reconstruction. Property rights are the basis for residents’ perception of public–private relations. “The possession of property means possessing the necessities of one’s own life, thus potentially becoming a free person ... Private wealth becomes a prerequisite for entering public life” (Arendt, 1999). With the promulgation of the Property Rights Law, Yuhua Guo and Yuan Shen (2012) proposed that housing has transcended its own residential function and has gradually become a fertile ground for social development and advancement. For public housing residents in the hutongs, their right to rent public housing has actually been treated as the right to use, but they further expanded this private right to the public space of the courtyard. Similarly, even in commercial housing communities with private property rights, most residents show indifference to the owners’ committee. Members of the owners’ committee are profit-oriented, with only a few proprietors showing strong public awareness. There still exists the dilemma of nationalization or marketization in social production (Shi, 2014). With the new thinking of urban community governance in the past two years, the government no longer takes over everything, but hopes that residents can solve problems autonomously. However, we found in the residents’ questionnaires on the renovation of old communities in Beijing that the residents’ strong sense of rights is still abstract and one-sided, with emphasis on their own interests rather than responsibility. They believe that the government should play a principal role in community reconstruction, and rely on government investment to solve problems. We found that it is far from enough to let individuals own property rights, for problems often
emerge in the shared space. We therefore propose a spatial path for public recon-
struction, namely to let residents define the public and private boundaries, take
responsibility for common property while emphasizing private rights, and establish
rules for the use of public space. Meanwhile, it is necessary to adjust the state–
individual relationship, cultivate people’s initiative, and reconstruct social relations
via public space, which will be a long-term intervention process.

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1. Statistics source: The street office housing information in the Sixth National Census in
2010, sorted out by the research group in 2014.
2. A resident’s statement in the seminar on the renovation of the BS community environ-
ment organized by the research group on 8 April 2015.
3. A resident’s statement in the seminar on the renovation of the BS community environ-
ment organized by the research group on 8 April 2015.
4. A statement by the director of the street office when the research group reported the
transformation plan of Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong to the office.
5. A resident’s statement in the seminar on the renovation of the BS community environ-
ment organized by the research group on 8 April 2015.
6. The attitude of a resident from Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong in the discussion on the
courtyard transformation plan on 25 July 2016.
7. A statement of a resident from Courtyard No. 1X in PZ Hutong in the discussion on the
courtyard transformation plan on 25 July 2016.
8. A statement of the party secretary of the sub-district office in the mediation meeting
about the transformation plan of Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong on 9 July 2015.
9. An interview with a staff member of the street office on 25 April 2016.
10. An interview with a staff member in the housing management bureau responsible for the
construction of social organization incubators on 25 April 2016.
11. An interview with the architect who designed the social organization incubator on 15
March 2016.
12. Speech of the secretary of the residential committee while negotiating the renovation of
Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong with the research group on 8 June 2015.
13. Attitudes of residents at Courtyard No. 15 in PZ Hutong on 25 July 2016 when they participated in the discussion of courtyard renovation plans.

14. The attitude of the director of the street office on 1 June 2015 when the research group reported on the “Reconstruction Plan of Courtyard No. 5X in BS Hutong”.

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