

# Research on Public Sphere, Publicity and Public Art in Chinese Context

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**Abstract:** In pursuit of a deeper understanding and fostering innovative perspectives within China's public art discourse, this article addresses the pressing issue of "publicity" as it pertains to the domain of public art within the Chinese milieu. Leveraging Jürgen Habermas's seminal theory of the public sphere, the manuscript delineates the stance that the intrinsic value of public art is epitomized by its "publicity." Through a meticulous examination of the evolutionary trajectory of public art in China, and the scrutiny of select exemplars of public artworks, the study elucidates the importance and overarching implications of "publicity" in public art. Moreover, the paper champions a forward-looking design philosophy, critically analyzing and probing the challenges associated with the "publicity" of Chinese public art, whilst contemplating potential pathways for its prospective advancement. By conducting a thorough exploration of these issues, the article aspires to contribute meaningfully to the theoretical enrichment and practical enhancement of public art within the dynamic context of China.

**Keywords:** Public domain; Public art; Publicity.

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## 1. Introduction

The emergence and formal recognition of "public art" as a distinct category within the United States during the 1960s signified a crucial juncture in the history of art's intersection with public spaces and civic life. Roughly thirty years thereafter, in the 1990s, the concept of public art began to permeate the cultural fabric of China. Within the Chinese milieu, the application of public art has predominantly been directed towards the reinterpretation and revitalization of traditional artistic expressions, including "urban sculpture," "landscape art," and "environmental art." These forms have historically garnered reverence akin to the veneration of Buddha statues in earlier periods. The term "public art" has been embraced by many within the art community as a more prestigious descriptor, supplanting the terminologies previously associated with these artistic forms.

As the final decade of the 20th century unfolded, the intellectual and artistic circles in China increasingly engaged with the philosophical inquiries of Jürgen Habermas, with a particular focus on his exploration of the "public sphere." The theoretical paradigm offered by Habermas's public sphere theory presents a vital conceptual scaffold that undergirds the analytical approach of this paper, guiding the examination and elucidation of the quality of "publicity" as it pertains to Chinese public art.

This academic inquiry endeavors to uncover and elucidate the function and significance of "publicity" within the domain of public art. It aspires to contribute to the discourse on public art by delineating the ways in which "publicity" can inform and shape the direction of forward-looking creative projects. Through an in-depth analysis of the manifestation and influence of "publicity" in public art, the study aims to illuminate how artistic initiatives can act as a conduit for community participation and dialogue. The ultimate goal is to reinforce the interconnectivity between art, public space, and the citizenry, thereby fostering a harmonious integration of these elements within the rapidly transforming urban landscapes of contemporary China.

## 2. Public Sphere and Publicity

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the scholarly inquiries of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, particularly those concerning the "public sphere," began to garner heightened attention from academics and practitioners within the Chinese art community. The theoretical construct of the public sphere, augmented by Habermas's and other scholars' examinations of its evolution, has proven to be a critical point of departure for analyzing the dynamic relationship between the public domain and the realm of public art.

In his influential work, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," Habermas articulates, "By 'the public sphere,' we mean first and foremost the realm of our social life in which the formation of public opinion can occur". He delineates the public sphere as a domain that should be, by its very nature, accessible to all citizens—a space where individuals convene to collectively form 'the public.' Within this space, citizens are engaged in discourse and deliberation over matters of mutual concern. This engagement is marked by its inclusiveness, unfettered by considerations of status, and is not constrained by specific legalities or regulations, thus fostering the conditions necessary for the open assembly of individuals[1].

Habermas postulates that the characteristic of publicity emerges as a direct consequence of the public domain executing its function. He posits, "publicity itself emerges as an independent sphere, the public sphere, which is juxtaposed with the private sphere." He posits that there are moments when the public sphere emerges as the realm of public opinion that finds itself in opposition to the apparatus of state authority. Through the perspective offered by Habermas, the notions of publicity and the public sphere become effectively interchangeable[2].

The concept of publicity is thus an independent domain, namely the public sphere, which is set in opposition to the more secluded realm of the private. The edifice upon which publicity is constructed hinges on the acknowledgment and validation of the citizenry's rights to participate in matters of

public interest. This manuscript endeavors to extend Habermas's theoretical contributions, applying his insights to the milieu of public art in China. The intention is to explore the pertinence of "publicity" in relation to public art works and its ramifications for the broader discourse on participatory citizenship and the shaping of public spaces within the socio-cultural landscape of China[3].

### 3. Public Art and Publicity

Deriving a definitive interpretation of "public art" exclusively from Jürgen Habermas's discourse concerning the "public sphere" might not be entirely straightforward. However, the conceptual framework of the public sphere—encompassing an adherence to and reverence for diversity, difference, and pluralism, as well as integrating facets such as open dialogue, social interaction, consensus-building, and rational critique—lays a fertile ground for an in-depth contemplation of the public character inherent in public art. These components echo a utopian ideal that is intrinsically intertwined with the conceptualization of the public sphere[4].

Our understanding of the "publicity" immanent in the public sphere is deeply connected to our interpretation of the publicity associated with public art. It is reasonable to posit that our conceptualization of publicity will invariably inform our understanding of the essence of public art. Publicity is not an ahistorical phenomenon; rather, it is a construct that has emerged and evolved through various historical epochs, founded upon the tenets of a modern democratic society that upholds the litigation of rights, civic participation in public matters, and the uninhibited exchange within the realm of creative works[5].

Academic discourse reveals that the term "public art" does not possess ancient origins; instead, the concept of "publicity" has gradually coalesced over time through historical development. The foundational principles of public art and its widespread implementation are commonly traced to the 1960s in the United States, characterized by initiatives such as the National Endowment for the Arts' "Arts in Public Places Program."

Publicity is a manifestation of a democratic ethos, symbolizing the recognition of citizenry rights and the engagement in public affairs, which are fundamental to human entitlements. In stark contrast, societies that operate under feudal or authoritarian regimes lack such a notion of publicity. Within the context of feudal societies, epitomized by the edict "under the whole heaven, there is no land that is not the emperor's," the emergence of publicity necessitates the acknowledgment and respect for the political, economic, and cultural autonomy of individuals. This respect extends to the freedom of thought and the independence of personality; without these elements, the concept of publicity cannot be said to thrive. Consequently, historical structures such as buildings, squares, and grottoes, although sited in public locales, may not inherently conform to the true spirit of public art. The defining attributes of publicity include its origins in civil society, democratic governance, transparency, and public opinion, as well as the principles of participation, open discourse, and dialogue[6]. Conversely, art installations that occupy public spaces but do not engage with the public, the environment, or the broader society, or those that exist without public oversight, do not fall within the ambit of what is considered public art.

Moreover, numerous scholars have noted that as the cultural education and democratic consciousness of the

Chinese populace have matured, and as civil society has begun to crystallize within the more developed regions, the conception of public art in China has progressively taken form. This maturation is not only reflective of China's strides toward democratization but also represents an intrinsic requirement of the nation's social development.

### 4. The Development of Public Art in China

The formal adoption of the term "public art" within the Chinese lexicon, which commenced around the 1990s, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the long history of Chinese art. However, this paper aims to delineate the evolution of Chinese public art through a tripartite chronological framework: the embryonic stage, the exploration stage, and the construction stage.

The interval commencing from the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 up until 1978 is categorized as the embryonic stage in the progression of Chinese public art. During this formative period, public art was in its incipient stages, primarily materializing through the mediums of sculpture and mural art. A paramount example from this era is the Monument to the People's Heroes, which stands as an emblematic representation of the public art of the time, embodying both the aesthetic and ideological zeitgeist[7]. This embryonic phase was instrumental in laying the foundations for public art in China, as it began to sculpt the outlines of a collective artistic and cultural identity within the public realm.

These formative years were pivotal in establishing the thematic and stylistic precedents that would exert a lasting influence on the subsequent stages of public art development in China. The predilection for monumental works during this period was not only a reflection of the societal values and historical narratives of the time but also established a baseline for public engagement with art. Such engagement was envisioned to be communal and accessible, serving as a nexus between art and the masses. Nonetheless, this engagement was circumscribed within the contours and directives of the prevailing political and social context. It was this early stage that set the tone for the evolution of public art, dictating a trajectory that would evolve in complexity and scope in the ensuing decades.



The Monument to the People's Heroes stands as an archetypal large-scale public art endeavor within the annals of modern China, encapsulating a synthesis of traditional

national architectural motifs and a vibrant spirit that is emblematic of the socio-historical moment it represents. The central feature of the monument, a relief mural, emerged from the collaborative effort of eight distinguished artists. Despite their individual stylistic nuances, these artists collectively adhered to a cohesive overarching aesthetic directive, ensuring a sense of visual uniformity and thematic continuity in the mural's presentation. For subsequent generations, the relief has become an indelible cultural artifact, offering a powerful and unified visual narrative that instills in its viewers a profound sense of collective memory and emotional resonance.

This manifestation of public art blossomed under the tutelage of the prevailing national ideology, wherein the themes of creation throbbled with the vigor of a "movement" and were imbued with distinctive revolutionary and political undertones. In such artistic endeavors, the primacy of communal values and narratives eclipsed individual artistic expression, resulting in artworks that epitomized a collective consciousness marked by a sense of solidarity and uniformity.

Transitioning into the period spanning from 1978 to 1999, this era is recognized as the exploration stage in the evolution of Chinese public art. The 1980s, in particular, signified a watershed epoch characterized by efforts toward urban aesthetic enhancement, dovetailing with the burgeoning development of a collective Chinese public consciousness. The following decade, the 1990s, crystallized as a crucial moment in the systemic transformation of public art, setting the stage for an era of more expansive and inquisitive artistic endeavor. It was during this phase that a noticeable shift in the thematic direction of creative works took place. The ideological consciousness among the public began to liberalize, frameworks for managing public art with an emphasis on artistic authenticity and integrity began to crystallize, and the structural construction and organizational oversight of public art received heightened attention. This period witnessed not only the physical embellishment of urban spaces through art but also a conceptual renaissance of public art in China.

One of the defining public artworks emanating from this transformative period is "A Day in the Life of a Shenzhen Man." This piece is frequently cited as a paradigmatic example that signals the onset of a pivotal shift in Chinese public art towards a more nuanced embrace of the concept of "publicity" within the domain of public art. This work exemplifies the transition from a predominantly ideological-driven form to one that seeks to engage directly with the public, reflecting and incorporating the lived experiences and sensibilities of the citizenry into the fabric of the artwork itself.



"A Day of Shenzhen People," a sophisticated and multifaceted public art installation, manifests itself through an assembly of 18 imposing bronze statues, which constitute the heart of the exhibition. Augmenting these central figures is an integrative architectural setting composed of thematic background walls, pavilions, verdant elements, intricately laid stone pathways, a well-conceived lighting system, and auditory features. Collectively, these elements extend over an expanse of 6,487 square meters. This work of art is underpinned by a philosophical commitment to embedding the collective will of the citizenry within the fabric of urban planning, thereby conferring upon the public the role of custodians over the city's public art assets. This installation signifies a seminal shift in the intellectual approach from antecedent artistic endeavors. By deliberately moving away from the traditional glorification often associated with sculptural works, "A Day of Shenzhen People" diminishes the distance between individuals and public spaces, affirming the presence of the common citizenry as the legitimate denizens of these shared environments. It challenges the archetypal commemorative nature typically associated with urban sculptures and forges a closer connection between public art and the community, thereby enhancing public interaction with such art forms. "A Day in the Life of a Shenzhen Person" encapsulates and expresses the core tenet that public art should be orchestrated by and for the populace, serving as an authentic manifestation of public life, a principle that is woven into the very fabric of the artwork's realization.

Commencing from the threshold of the new millennium, this epoch has been demarcated as the construction phase in the evolution of Chinese public art, heralding the commencement of a phase marked by brisk progression and artistic refinement. Within this epoch, the conceptual framework of public art has undergone crystallization and clarification through a series of robust deliberations, the artistic modalities have burgeoned in terms of diversity and complexity, and the practical frontiers of public art have been broadened and redefined. In the course of this dynamic period, public art in China has exhibited an efflorescence of creativity and enthusiasm. The adaptability and versatility of public art have enabled its fusion with various nascent artistic practices, including installation art and multimedia digital art forms. Simultaneously, as public art continues to flourish within the urban milieu, it has also ventured into the pastoral realms, catalyzing a wave of rural public art initiatives. This diversification is indicative of the tailored adaptation of the public art concept within the Chinese milieu, replete with distinctive Chinese cultural inflections.

The progression and maturation of public art are inextricably intertwined with the evolution of the concept of "publicity." It is through an ongoing process of redefinition and active engagement with the public domain that public art in China has carved out its distinctive path, reflecting and corresponding with the nation's broader cultural and societal metamorphoses.

## 5. Design for the Future

Within the ever-expanding context of global interconnectedness and the flourishing diversity of cultural values, the endeavor to comprehend the essence of "publicity" as it pertains to the sphere of public art becomes exceedingly intricate. This complexity challenges scholars and practitioners alike to interrogate the modes through which contemporary art, infused with the principles of "publicity,"

can be conceived and actualized within the unique tapestry of Chinese society[8].

Scholarly discourse posits that public art should evolve beyond the confines of the modernist ethos, which often privileges an elitist viewpoint, to adopt a perspective aligned with contemporary values. This transition implies that in the post-modern cultural milieu, public art is bestowed with a twofold responsibility: it must contribute to the formation of nascent social aesthetic cultures and partake in the act of cultural commentary or scrutinization. Such a role is not to be misconstrued as creating an irrevocable divide between the individual and society or between art and quotidian life. Instead, it calls for a harmonious equilibrium, one that staunchly supports the individual's pursuit of inquiry, critical thinking, and a discerning consciousness, while also acknowledging and integrating the societal requisites for heterogeneity, counterbalances, and the intricate complexity that is foundational to collective cohesion and inclusivity.

In the realm of artistic creation, contemporary public art is encouraged to transcend the limitations of introspective self-interpretation and the mere imitation of pre-existing artistic forms and methods. It should instead foreground the active participation of the public in interaction with the artwork, foster a dialogue with the social milieu, integrate themes that address contemporary issues, and employ innovative and experimental approaches.

As the conception of art has experienced a continual evolution since antiquity, so too has the concept of "publicity" adapted and transformed in response to the shifting sands of time and the evolving contexts of society. Artists are thus tasked with maintaining an acute awareness of the contemporary cultural pulse — an understanding of the prevailing spirit of the era — in order to create public art that not only embodies but also elevates the notion of excellence and pertinence. It is through this deep sensitivity to the vicissitudes of time that the idea of "publicity" can be effectively mobilized, giving rise to artworks that engage in a meaningful dialogue with, and on behalf of, the public. This is particularly pertinent in the case of contemporary China, where such engagement holds the potential to reflect and shape the cultural and social narratives of the time.

## 6. Conclusion

The term "public art" extends well beyond the confines of a singular artistic genre or the restrictive understanding of a homogenous artistic doctrine or aesthetic. It can be regarded as a conduit for dialogues among public opinions and broader society, unfolding within the collective arena of the public sphere. At its core, public art is characterized by an ethos of transparency and a predisposition towards collective engagement, both of which are fundamental to the essence of public domains.

The assimilation and implementation of "public art" in the contemporary Chinese context emerged from a confluence of unique historical trajectories, cultural underpinnings, and social frameworks. Within the contemporary Chinese context, the emergence and integration of "public art" are emblematic of a broader societal shift towards inclusivity and the democratic spirit within the public sphere, particularly during a phase of considerable social transformation. The conceptualization and operational role of public art within this framework serve as an indicator of the dynamic evolution of Chinese society. It mirrors the country's progression toward more transparent, interactive, and participatory modalities of cultural manifestation.

In this respect, the advent of public art in China carries with it significant historical implications. It serves as a reflection of the transformative processes at play within the fabric of Chinese society, underscoring a collective movement towards the adoption of democratic principles and the cultivation of an expansive public sphere. Public art in China thus transcends the realm of mere aesthetic practice; it constitutes a cultural movement that encapsulates the collective yearning for a society characterized by openness and democratic governance. It signifies a commitment to cultural advancement and resonates with the desires of the Chinese populace to actively sculpt and engage with their social and cultural environments.

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