



# Contextualizing public art production in China: The urban sculpture planning system in Shanghai



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## ABSTRACT

This research examines urban sculpture production to understand how a public art (called “urban sculpture” in China) scene is produced in the country, using Shanghai as a case study. Theories of Chinese urban planning are innovatively applied. The findings generate theoretical implications for “contextualizing” public art production in geographical studies. All the chief officials in charge of urban sculpture planning in Shanghai were interviewed, and documentary analyses were conducted. The article argues that urban sculptures are conceived of as both symbolic capitals and didactic tools in the cultural policies of Shanghai. Urban sculpture planning plays an important role in coordinating and manipulating development of symbolic resources to advance urban entrepreneurialism within the ideological framework of the Communist Party’s leadership. The main features of the urban sculpture planning system of China are twofold: (1) The two-tier planning structure combines a master plan at the municipal level and detailed plans for site analysis and design guidance at the district level, all collaboratively working to create an attractive city image for urban entrepreneurialism. (2) An authoritarian style of planning system controls the contents and expression of urban sculpture within the ideological framework of urban sculpture planning.

Urban sculptures should be for my (Chinese Communist Party or CCP) employment, for the people to love, for the habitat to embrace. [Municipal Urban Sculpture Committee Office, 2013](#)

## 1. Introduction

Sculptures were first introduced into public spaces in Shanghai during the Republican period when artists imported the concept from the West. The development of the art scene was disrupted by wars and the succeeding political movements of the Communist Party. An urban art scene was resurrected in the 1980s and prospered as a state-led sculpture initiative in urban development in the late 1990s. In 2004, *The Urban Sculpture Master Plan of Shanghai* was enacted. According to this plan, 5000 urban sculptures would be produced and erected in public spaces in Shanghai by 2020 ([Shanghai Municipal Government, 2004](#)). A few iconic sculpture projects, such as the Shanghai International Sculpture Space and the Shanghai Expo, were marked by international design competition schemes, and this move led to a vibrant urban scene. Thus, “urban sculpture” (*chengshi diaosu*)<sup>1</sup> has

emerged as a prominent topic in Shanghai.

Public art generally refers to artworks specifically designed and displayed in spaces accessible to the general population. It can be categorized into “traditional public art” and “new genre” (e.g., [Deshazo and Smith, 2014](#)). The former is considered elitist because of its one-way communication in conveying a top-down didactic message. Public art purely for decoration attracts investments and visitors, creates place identities, promotes civic pride, and caters to upper-middle-class living, working, and recreation ([Hein, 2002](#); [Chang, 2008](#); [Hall and Robertson, 2001](#)). New genre art is activist art devoted to empowering disadvantaged social groups and addressing community needs. Furthermore, public art has the goal and desire to engage the audience and actively create spaces ([Sharp et al., 2005](#)).

The geographic perspective on public art focuses on the way in which the environment shapes the production and consumption of art through cultural policies or the economic, social, and cultural dynamics of creative spaces. Governance is the central issue involved in the production system. It encompasses two dimensions: first, policymaking determines the adoption of public art and provides the descriptive context of public art production ([Cartiere and Willis, 2008](#); [Chang, 2008](#); [Miles, 1997](#); [Pollock and Paddison, 2010](#); [Selwood, 1995](#)).

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<sup>1</sup> “Urban sculpture” refers to state-sponsored artefacts installed in accessible public spaces. These sculptures serve limited functions, such as narrating the Party-endorsed history of the nation or city, or decorating the environment for aesthetic pleasure. For details, see Section 3.2.

Cultural policies vary across contexts (Bertelli et al., 2014; Pollock and Paddison, 2010; Zebracki, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Inadequate research on public art planning across geographical contexts has been well noted, however public art is embedded in the planning processes underpinning urban physical regeneration. It serves as a means to revisualize urban spaces (including recapitalized spaces and their neighborhoods) as part of a new social orthodoxy. The perspective of “contextuality” rests on the revived interest in planning and an awareness of its limitations in shaping the production of art (Pollock and Paddison, 2010; Gibson and Kong, 2005; Harvey et al., 2012; Hutchinson, 2002). The literature, to date, on public art planning is based in Euro-American contexts. Other contexts (such as those of Asia, which are characterized by different social structures and governance) have not been well examined yet.

The present study aims to innovatively apply Chinese urban planning theories to understand how urban sculptures are produced by the planning system there. This study has theoretical implications for the “contextuality” of public art planning in geographical studies. It sheds light on an entrepreneurial-style authoritarian state and the corresponding planning system in China.

The Chinese context shares certain similarities with, but also differs from other contexts of authoritarianism in Asia.<sup>3</sup> For example, state intervention in the market and the lack of transparency in election and governance in China resemble those in Singapore.<sup>4</sup> However, unlike Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore, China lacks a public sphere for the free circulation of information and the expression of state politics critique/criticism.

Shanghai is used as the case study because of its significance as the first Chinese city to have developed a complete administrative structure for urban sculpture planning. Although many other cities in Asia (e.g., Tokyo, Taipei,<sup>5</sup> Hong Kong, Seoul, and Singapore), South America (e.g., Sao Paulo and Brazil), and the Middle East (e.g., Istanbul and Turkey) may have political and planning systems similar to that of Shanghai, they omit public art planning in their systems. While growing scholarly interest in China’s cultural development in recent decades can be witnessed (Wu and Zhang, 2008; Currier, 2008; Zhang, 2008; Zheng, 2010, 2011, 2013; Wu, 2004; King and Kusno, 2000; Wai, 2006; Pow and Kong, 2007; Ren, 2008, 2016), urban sculpture and its production system in China have not been examined.

What does “urban sculpture” mean in Shanghai’s cultural policies? Specifically, how do cultural policies and urban sculpture planning in Shanghai birth urban sculptures, or how are urban sculptures produced through cultural policies and urban planning? What are the characteristics of the urban sculpture planning system and how does it operate? This research aims to use China’s urban planning theories to explain the urban sculpture production system there. It will fill the gap in geographical studies on public art planning by examining the Chinese context. It will also fill a gap in the literature on Chinese urban planning, in which, urban sculpture planning has not yet been explored.

This study adopts qualitative research methods that are effective in exploring the nature and characteristics of an authority or institution. Semi-structured in-depth questions were used in interviews with

<sup>2</sup> In the United Kingdom, the local authorities support public art for a number of reasons: promoting artistic excellence, enhancing the quality of life for local residents, promoting social cohesion, and creating a flourishing artistic environment, to name a few (Selwood, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Some countries in Southeast Asia pursued open market and investment whereas others were characterized by high levels of government intervention and industrial policies (Terry, 1996; Knowles and Garces-Ozanne, 2003; Rodan and Jayasuriya, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Singapore’s authoritarian model is a hybrid regime; embracing capitalist dynamics but restricting democratic space. This model of authoritarianism results from unequal access to resources, media, and institutions (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Planning is used to revitalize declining communities by converting spaces to accommodate artists’ activities in Taipei (Ng, 2014). Through the enactment of the Public Art Ordinance in 1998, public art in various forms entered the public domain in places such as Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) stations, schools, and government organizations. Public art works that have interactive qualities attract attention.

government officials, including the chief officials of the Municipal Urban Planning Bureau who supervise urban sculptures and those of the district government departments responsible for urban sculpture projects. Art experts in the art committee who acted as consultants to the authority were contacted, and leading artists participating in state-led projects were interviewed. Over 30 case studies were conducted with the involvement of the district or municipal authorities for urban sculpture planning to investigate the sites. Site reconnaissance was adopted as a research method.

## 2. Situating public art within China’s cultural policy and urban planning system

A theoretical framework is developed to address the three research inquiries based on the geographic literature on public art and China’s cultural policies and urban planning system.

### 2.1. The conceived role of public art in China’s cultural policies

The role of public art conceived in cultural policies varies across social and political contexts. According to a review by Zebracki (2011), policy discourses of public art usually involve: a utopian physical-aesthetic (enhancing the aesthetic qualities and attractiveness of a place for place marketing), economic (attracting and increasing monetary investments in the arts and boosting economic regeneration conditions), political (ideological control and political didactic functions), cultural-symbolic (creating symbolic value, promoting national identity, etc.), and social claims (addressing community needs and enhancing social and community interactions). Social claims support collective memories embodied in statues and memorials on the role of public art in urban public spaces.

The catalytic or utilitarian role of public art as a driver of local economies emerged in the 1980s. Public art, as a type of cultural capital, has the potential to contribute to a city’s economy and vitality through landscaping, advertising, urban boosterism, place marketing, and legitimizing urban development (Hall, 2003a,b; Hall and Robertson, 2001; Knight, 2008; Fleming, 2007; Miles, 1997, 2007; Sharp et al., 2005; Bianchini et al., 1988; Bianchini, 1993). Public culture provides attractive and affordable popular urban entertainment and commercial branding in proactive and site-specific environments. Public art, as one genre of public culture, is framed as artistic experiences and disseminates a consumer-oriented urban imaginary (Hannigan, 1998; Evans, 2003). Quality architecture and urban planning boost vibrancy and vitality. Additionally, cultural facilities, festivals, and public art are seen as part of quality cultural supply, partially through artistic and scientific institutions in cities (Miles, 2007). Public art represents a city’s soft asset or cultural investment to create a desirable urban image (Zavattaro, 2010). It enhances the attractiveness of a place, boosting it as a financial or tourist center and enabling economic regeneration in a city (Selwood, 1995; Becker, 2004; Pollock and Paddison, 2010; Chang, 2008; Reynolds, 2012). A crucial perspective of urban studies reveals the association of public artists to real estate developers in that they are hired to design decorative components for the urban environment, which leads to an increase in real estate’s economic worth. This increase, however, may be opposed to the interests of the community (such as acquiring affordable housing and community spaces for daily activities) (Deutsche, 1988; Babon, 2000).

Traditional public art uses artistic language to narrate a specific version of history (endorsed by the authorities) for ideological purposes. For example, public monuments and historical statues installed in publicly accessible spaces aim to sustain the power of the ruling class by promulgating mainstream values in society (Miles, 1997; Babon, 2000). They serve to defend and legitimize the cultural production processes controlled by the authorities.

Public art-led urban development programs are not limited to

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