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**High mountains and the faraway emperor: Overcoming institutional barriers to the implementation of participatory planning practices in urban China**

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**Introduction**

At the heart of citizen participation is the principle that citizens have a right to be part of decisions that affect their lives (Lasker & Guidry 2009). Although the importance of citizen participation has been espoused in Western planning literature for decades, the principle has more recently made its way into Chinese statutory legislation and so far the implementation of participatory planning practices has been limited (Fung 2015). This paper's focus is specifically on the institutional barriers to implementation and how to strengthen participatory planning practices at the city-level in China. Yet the research theme has a universal applicability, as academics and policy makers across the globe address the acknowledged, inherent difficulty of putting the theory of citizen participation into practice (Innes & Booher 2010, Hillier & Metzger 2015).

China has witnessed enormous economic growth and social change since it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2000. This presents an unprecedentedly complex situation as to how Chinese cities are governed and planned (Wu et al 2016). The diversification of individual needs has resulted in strong pressure for central government to balance demands from different groups and introduce more participatory processes in its local governance structures (Tang 2015). At the same time, Chinese citizens have become increasingly aware of their rights to be involved in local decision-making processes, with urban planning being more advanced than other policy areas in involving civic society (Verdini 2015).

In spite of the Central Government's emphasis on the importance of having social stability (*weiwen*) and establishing a harmonious society (*hexie shehui*), local governments have put economic development as their top priority and often neglected the social and environmental implications of their decision-making (Chi et al 2014, Wu et al 2016). With increased fiscal responsibilities and administrative powers devolved to local governments, many Chinese cities suffer from unsustainable growth. Whilst local governments have been keen to improve physical infrastructure, they have often paid much less attention to how residents are affected by planning outcomes (Gransow 2014). State-sanctioned development projects have replaced self-built neighbourhoods, with tremendous demolition and eviction during the implementation of regeneration strategies (see Wu 2015, Tan & Altröck 2016, Sun et al 2016, Zhang & Li 2016). Participatory planning practices, which are concerned with inclusivity and social equity, have been, in effect, placed on a different footing (Tang 2015).

Public participation was made a legislative procedure in China's planning process through Article 26 of China's Town and Country Planning Act 2008 (Central People Government 2007, 2013). Despite this requirement from Central Government, detailed administrative procedures to implement this legislation at local government level have not been carried out in many Chinese cities (Zhao 2015). A number of critics have therefore argued for a more genuine and engaged form of citizen participation in local planning issues (see Gransow 2014, Fan 2015, Fung 2015, Zhang & Li 2016, Tang 2015, Tan and Altröck 2016). Whilst Chinese academics have more recently highlighted a growth in public engagement at the micro-level, for instance, in environmental impact assessments (EIAs) of public projects (see e.g. Li et al 2012, Chi et al 2014; Fung 2015, Qi et al 2016, Sun et al 2016) and in controversial urban redevelopment projects (see e.g. Wu 2015, Verdini 2015, Tian & Zhu 2015, Tan & Altröck 2016; Zhang & Li 2016), few have examined how and why existing institutional structures and participatory practices restrict citizen involvement at the city-level (see e.g. Zhao 2015). Nor has existing literature made specific suggestions on how such institutional structures and practices at the city-level could be modified to achieve greater citizen engagement in urban planning processes across China. The purpose of this paper is to fill this research gap, thus making a unique contribution to the growing literature and on-going policy debates around citizen participation in urban planning.

The research design is two-fold. Using Guangzhou city as a case study, and examining its regulatory planning processes in particular, the paper first outlines the underlying reasons for limited implementation of participatory practices, to date, within the city. Many of the difficulties in implementation arise from China's unique institutional structures that allow *lingdaos* (political leaders, e.g. city-mayors, town governors) to retain power in decision-making, thus shaping planning outcomes across the city, whilst citizens remain excluded from critical junctures of the planning process. Drawing on internationally acknowledged principles of citizen participation, the paper then raises meaningful ways in which these institutional barriers could be broken down to allow participatory planning practices to be better implemented at the city-level, taking into account both China's socio-political context and the inherent difficulties in putting theory into practice.

### **The principles of citizen participation in planning**

The concept of citizen participation in planning came into the limelight in the West during the 1960s, in response to the failures of the existing system (Davidoff 1965, Arnstein 1969). A rational approach to planning, that had long been adopted, assumed that the experts (the planners) knew best, which was characterised by the mentality of 'us' (planners) versus 'them' (citizens) (Allmendinger 2009). A counter to this stance, that planning was instead 'interactive process in practice, undertaken in a social context rather than a purely technical process of design, analysis and management' (Healey 2006, p.65), culminated in bottom-up pressures for greater public engagement in planning.

The significance of citizen participation in planning has been argued over the decades (Arnstein 1969; Cupps 1977; Forester 1999; Irvin & Stansbury 2004; Innes & Booher 2010, Hillier & Metzger 2015). From the public's perspective, participation enables members of the public to take part in local planning decisions that directly impact upon them (Lasker & Guidry 2009). Planning professionals are also able to explain their reasoning for pursuing decisions that would otherwise be unpopular, thereby creating mutual understanding and inclusivity with regard to planning outcomes (Healey, 2006, p.53).

The theory of citizen participation however, is difficult to attain in practice, particularly if planning professionals are unwilling to admit laypersons into decision-making processes. If planners involve the public as a means to satisfy legislative requirements, then participation becomes essentially tokenistic, with ‘real’ power sharing in localised planning decisions rarely materialising (Arnstein 1969). Empty rituals where there is no guarantee that public’s views are heeded result in apathy and at worst disillusionment and anger, whereby citizens feel powerless to influence planning outcomes (Albrechts 2002).

For inclusive participatory practices to take place, Innes and Booher (2010) argue that a fundamental rethink of the underlying roles of and relationships between planning professionals and all members of the public is required at critical stages of the planning process. If genuine effort is made at the outset to engage the public, especially those historically excluded from decision-making, mutually beneficial relationships can be established, lending credence to planning decisions and outcomes (Lasker & Guidry 2009).

Drawing on first-hand experiences from California in the USA, Innes and Booher (2010) suggest key criteria in their ‘institutional design’ to foster greater citizen participation in planning that include:

- *Incentive structures*: encouraging citizens not only to participate but also to work towards an agreement;
- *Leaders and sponsors*: providing generative-training so that participants sustain their engagement throughout;
- *Dedicated staffing*: offering support (e.g. effective day-to-day communication with participants; distribution of relevant information; consulting widely and responding to feedback);
- *A negotiating text and evolving agreement*: recording the negotiation progress that is constantly updated and shared among stakeholders to generate confidence that their ideas are incorporated.

Healey (1997, 2006) goes further to suggest that to achieve truly collaborative planning existing institutional structures need to be systematically re-designed. She details the necessary hard and soft infrastructure, as well as emphasises the construction of rights and responsibilities to which each stakeholder is beholden.

The soft infrastructure includes identifying stakeholders and arenas for collaborative processes to take place, setting the appropriate routines and styles of discussion, and sustaining a consensus among all stakeholders throughout the process (Healey 1997).

As for hard infrastructure, Healey (1997) argues that no standard mode of governance exists for inclusionary participatory practices. Instead, she proposes four dimensions in her theory of collaborative planning, summarised in Figure 1:

*Insert Figure 1*

These recommendations are acknowledged by their respective authors to be derived within Western intellectual thinking, where countries share certain fundamental political ideologies, including those of liberal democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Yet whilst acknowledging countries' different cultures, histories and geographical contingencies, Healey (1997) argues that these differences do not make general principles inappropriate. Mobilising ideas about participatory planning practices are universally applicable that need to be translated into governance structures, procedures and rules appropriate to a specific country.

### **Citizen participation in planning: the Chinese context**

Governing over 1.4 billion people, 657 cities, multiple tiers of government, and an economy and society that are becoming increasingly diverse and complex is a daunting task for China's Central Government. The scale of the challenge is aptly captured by an old Chinese saying, 'High mountains and the faraway emperor', with this phrase describing the difficult position emperors had in the past to govern China, as the country is so large with some places and issues too distant to be controlled.

China's planning system is still governed by corporatism (power concentrated in the hands of few), with a heavy emphasis on technical rationality and a criteria-driven approach (Zhao 2015). A significant distance remains between the Central Government that formulates and delivers policy and the locality where it is implemented. China's retreat from socialist ideology to pragmatism since the 1980s has meant that land use

planning has been framed around ‘economic efficiency’ and ‘technical feasibility’ (Wen 2011). With strengthened central control over provincial and city governments’ fiscal responsibility after the 1994 tax reforms, local governments have become fiscally restrained, whereby they have to make specified amounts of tax payments to central government (Perry & Seldon 2010). A ‘Chinese style’ phenomenon has occurred in which central government maintained control of political decision-making, while local governments controlled locally specific economic decisions in order to fulfill their fiscal responsibilities. Land use planning has, in turn, been used as a way to facilitate cities’ local economic growth (Tang 2015).

Due to a high degree of autonomy of local governments over the scale and nature of the planning system, the decision-making and implementation processes have been difficult to regulate (Zhang & Li 2016). As Gransow (2014) highlights, procedural requirements for citizen participation have been vague, public hearings can be manipulated and there is insufficient representation or other means to achieve clearly defined results (p.24). In many cities, land use planning simply becomes the *lingdaos*’ political tool for promotion. To prevent corruption, complacency and the accumulation of overly entrenched power at the meso-level, *lingdaos* only enjoy a five-year term in one locality. They rotate to another locality after a term; those who performed well obtaining promotion to positions at higher levels (e.g. provincial or even state-level), and vice versa.

As *lingdaos*’ performances are judged by their success in meeting quantitative targets (e.g. GDP increase during their term), this has produced a system strictly geared towards inputs and outputs. Hence, many planning processes in China have been characterised by a criteria-driven approach. As Li et al (2012) argue, the risk of not meeting planned deadlines and targets, together with limited public accountability for their actions, has been great enough for government officials to err on the side of curtailing public participation to a minimum. Once the next *lingdao* has taken over, they have tended to have a different set of policies that reflected their achievements during their term rather than those of their predecessors. As a result, planning decisions have tended to lack public consultation (Gransow 2014, Tang 2015, Zhao 2015).

Public consultation has improved in recent years as a result of better legislative control, following Article 26 of China's Planning Act 2008 that was further strengthened in Article 166 in Act 2013 (Central People's Government 2007, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. Despite Article 26 establishing broad principles for citizen participation in planning, it lacks detailed legislative requirements to support implementation on the ground (Lu 2015). As Tan & Altrock (2016) and Zhang & Li (2016) document, controversial state-led demolition, displacement and new construction has provided heated debates across China, with more attention now paid to the protests and resistances of civil society challenging top-down planning decision-making that lacks civic engagement. For Fung (2015), rather than a decide-announce-defend approach, greater public participation would instead advance the effectiveness, legitimacy and social justice of democratic governance values.

Recognising the gaps and driven by the State's 'Internet+' Action Plan 2015 to encourage the use of the internet, Cloud technology and Big Data under China's Smart City narrative, 'Internet +' technology has helped promote public participation in urban planning and the interaction between the government, planners and the public (see Cheng et al, 2015, Mao et al. 2015). Despite growing efforts to infuse public participation in planning, participative planning practices, particularly at the city-level, remain relatively under researched (Tang 2015).

## **Research methods**

Recognising the scope of this paper, the existence of 657 Chinese cities and the multiple, complex urban planning issues in China, a single-case study research approach has been adopted (Yin 2009). Guangzhou and its Regulatory planning processes have been selected to appraise how participatory practices have been incorporated into these processes, to date. The ways in which the criteria set out in Innes and Booher's (2010) "institutional design" and in Healey's (1997) "hard and soft infrastructure requirements of institutional change" can be adapted to achieve more effective participative practices at the city-level within China, is then considered.

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<sup>1</sup>Article 26 states that before a plan is officially submitted for approval, the draft plan has to be publicised for no fewer than thirty days in the form of Public Consultation Meeting, Public Hearing or others, to solicit professional and public opinions. The responsible authority should prudently consider the feedback collected and attach in the submission the corresponding reason/s of adoption or refusal of the feedback. The Act in 2008, however only required plans made in drafting stage to be consulted on, while Article 166 of the Act in 2013 emphasized that publicity should be included on the detailed plan and design aspects as well (Central People's Government 2007, **2013**).

The reasons for the case study selection are two-fold. First, being the capital city of Guangdong Province, the ‘dragon head’ of the Pearl River Delta Region and having a strategic proximity to Hong Kong, Guangzhou has often been selected to test-bed for political and socio-economic policies, with development in citizen participation in planning being one of the most advanced in China<sup>2</sup> (see map). Second, Guangzhou is considered to be one of China’s most open environments for media reporting, with its citizens potentially more active in public issues compared to citizens in other cities (see for example Gransow (2014) Zhang & Li 2016, Tan & Altrock’s 2016 studies of the controversial redevelopment of old town areas of Guangzhou). In this paper, Guangzhou’s Regulatory planning processes have been chosen for scrutiny, as they represent an important aspect of China’s planning system. Regulatory planning has the scope for considerable public engagement to address conflicts arising from material gains and/or losses during plan-making decisions. If the implementation of participatory practices in Guangzhou’s Regulatory planning processes is found to be relatively ineffectual, following this preliminary single-case study, this suggests the need for similar investigations across China (see section 7).

*Insert map*

For the purposes of this paper, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights from different planning professionals, including senior planners from Guangzhou’s planning department; members of its planning committee; representatives from the People’s Congress; and academics in planning research institutes and universities within Guangdong Province. A standard set of questions were asked to elicit their opinions on the rationale for citizen participation in Guangzhou and China’s planning system in general; the reasoning for current levels of participation in the city’s Regulative Planning processes; and suggestions on ways to strengthen the implementation of participatory practices.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Guangzhou’s 2004 Ordinances were in place prior to Article 26 in the National Planning Act (2008) (see section 5).

To crosscheck the arguments elicited from these interviews and the documentary analysis of Guangzhou's policy procedures and plans, a survey (n=250) using simple random sampling was also conducted via the internet, WeChat (a viral mobile app equivalent to WhatsApp) and street surveys, targeting residents of different age groups and genders, and varying lengths of residency within different areas of Guangzhou<sup>3</sup>. The questions focused on a number of themes including residents' familiarity with planning issues in Guangzhou and current levels of participation in its Regulatory planning processes, in particular if they were aware of the roles and duties of Guangzhou's Planning Department and the channels and procedures in providing feedback. The survey also gauged residents' satisfaction with the current system, in particular whether they considered their feedback to be taken into account. Their readiness to become more involved, particularly if suggestions to improve participatory practices were adopted was also ascertained<sup>4</sup>. The survey data were analysed using thematic coding in accordance with the key themes explored in the survey. Open coding was also applied to ensure emerging themes were identified.

## **Citizen participation in Guangzhou's regulatory planning processes**

### ***Regulatory plans and the role of Public Notices***

China's multi-layered planning system consists of Urban and Town Structural Plans and beneath these, in accordance to the level of urbanisation, Urban Plans, Town Plans, Rural Plans and Village Plans. Different government departments are in charge of preparing each of these plans that are approved by different bodies, such as the State Council, depending on the plan's strategic importance. Urban and Town plans also include a Master Plan that contains a Regulatory plan and a Detailed Construction Plan (see Figure 2). It is the regulatory planning processes that are the focus of this study.

### ***Insert Figure 2***

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<sup>3</sup> The sample included 48% male and 52% females, 41% were 18-25 years, 33% 26-35 years and 6% 36-45 years and 6% 56-65 years. Seventy six per cent had lived in Guangzhou for over 10 years, and 75% were officially registered in the city (i.e. possess a hukou). N.B it is acknowledged that the responses are likely to be subjective and not fully representative of the actual situation (Yin 2009). Moreover, with a city population the size of 14 million in 2013 (World Population Review, 2014), it is acknowledged that this sample size merely touches the surface of this issue.

<sup>4</sup> As Fan (2015) argues, gathering public opinion using questionnaire surveys is an effective research design method to elicit views on participatory planning practices.

The Regulatory plan is prepared in areas where future development projects are undetermined<sup>5</sup>. As Xia (2011) notes, “being guided by a city master plan, the regulatory plan establishes the framework for (i) the land use and control indicators e.g. the intensity of use of the construction area, (ii) the location of roads and utilities pipelines and (iii) the planning requirements in managing the spatial environment” (p.2). Control indicators include e.g., the Gross Floor Area and height limits, the green coverage requirements, and parking space requirements that new planning proposals need to take into consideration.

A key characteristic of the Regulatory plan is that its content is legally binding, which provides legal protection to stakeholders, such as developers who submit a planning proposal<sup>6</sup>. As the drafting of Regulatory plan is often a source of contention between the local government and stakeholders, it involves the highest level of public consultation compared to the drafting of other plans (Tang 2015). Yet, there still remains a lack of standardisation and reinforcement of legislative procedures to ensure that public participation takes place in the first instance, and if it does, the consultation is taken into account in final planning decisions (Zhao 2015).

Guided by Article 26 of the Planning Act 2008 (and its amended version in 2013), public consultation in Guangzhou’s Regulatory planning process manifests in the form of a Public Notice whereby any development proposal has to be displayed on-site and in Guangzhou’s planning website for at least 30 days (Central People’s Government 2007).

Members of the public are excluded from the consultation at the pre plan-making stage, despite this being a critical juncture in which citizens could potentially make a difference, with concerns being resolved at the outset, as Innes & Booher (2010) suggest from their US experience. It is only at the later plan-making stages that citizens are consulted, however, by then there is usually little room for modification of plans, as key decisions have already been made (Fan 2015) (see figure 3).

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<sup>5</sup> In Guangzhou, there are 153 Regulatory plans across its 10 districts (ChinaUP, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> In China, the state owns the land and leases the right to use the land for residential use for 70 years, commercial use for 40 years and industrial use for 50 years (State Council of P.R.C, 1990). To obtain planning approval, a developer’s proposal has to be in accordance with the control indicators set out in the adopted Regulatory plan.

### *Insert Figure 3*

There are no legal requirements for professional planners to arrange additional forms of public engagement, such as Planning Workshops, Public Hearings and Planning Meetings, if issues are controversial and/or strategically important which have a wider impact on surrounding areas. The decision to hold more extensive public consultation exercises is effectively a discretionary consideration. The professional planners interviewed, confirmed that these more consultative methods in planning were not commonly used in Guangzhou. Moreover, they agreed that providing minimal level of engagement, through feedback collection via Public Notices, was primarily a way to avoid or pre-empt conflict with the public.

A public participation report, however, is legally required once the Regulatory plan has been finalised that records the public feedback that has been collected, adopted and rejected, and the reasons for the decisions made (Central People's Government 2007, 2013). As a Guangzhou senior planner noted: 'there is no specific guidance on the format and content for the report', so their reports have been kept relatively brief, to date. Whilst planners are required to list follow-up actions on public feedback, there is no legal requirement to adopt the suggestions, even if there is overwhelming public objection to the planning decision. As a senior planner noted in interview, Guangzhou government's commitment to citizen participation is "half-hearted", with the engagement of its citizens being treated as merely a tokenistic, administrative requirement:

*"The Planning Department would feel gratified if there is no public feedback on planners decisions during the plan-making stage at all as this would mean less follow-up duties for planners"*

There were rare instances, however, when planners had actively engaged the public in specific planning issues. In the case of a small mixed-use development proposal submitted to Guangzhou's Huadu District during the plan-making stage, the planners in-charge rolled out an extensive public engagement campaign whereby over 100 Public Notices were put up not only on-site, but also at the gates of the entrances of adjacent apartments so as to gain residents' attention. Many residents were

engaged in this campaign, with a large number voting against the developer's proposal. As a result, the proposal was rejected on the ground of public opposition. One of the planners in-charge revealed in interview that the *lingdao* (in this case, the leader of the District) disliked the scheme at the very beginning, so he requested the planners to do something to turn it down. This extensive public engagement campaign was effectively the professional planners' means to help the *lingdao* achieve what he wanted. As a senior planner in Guangzhou noted:

*'If public sentiments are found to coincide with lingdao's ideas, they will be strongly supported; otherwise, they will be turned to with a deaf ear.'*

### ***The power of planning committees***

The *lingdao*'s overruling powers have been strengthened with the establishment of planning committees. According to Guangdong Province's 2004 Ordinances, every city in the Province must have a planning committee, whereby reviewing and deliberating issues during the making or revision of the Regulatory plan is within one of the committee's responsibilities.

The planning committees consist of a large group of members, including staff from the relevant government departments, including professional planners, architects and environmental experts, stakeholders such as developers and landowners, and public representatives (e.g. residents affected by a specific planning proposal). Multiple issues are discussed and deliberated in the meeting and every committee member has the right to vote on matters raised. Meetings, however, are not held on a regular basis, depending instead on whether professional planners consider the need to engage the committee on specific planning issues, for instance, if a development proposal deviates from the Regulation plan. The meeting frequency is also dependent on whether the *lingdao* is available to chair the meeting. Journalists and non-committee members are invited to watch the meeting via live video broadcasting in a room next door. Although they do not have the right to vote, they are fully aware of what is being discussed and journalists can report what is happening to the public via the Internet or live telecast. In 2015, for instance, nine meetings were convened and 59 cases were deliberated in the presence of public representatives and the media (Guangzhou's Planning

Department 2016). Yet despite each committee members' ability to vote and the media's attention, the *lingdao*'s opinions hugely influence each meeting's outcome.

As a Guangzhou senior planner noted in interview, usually the first sentence of the meeting (delivered by the *lingdao*) sets the tone for the entire meeting. Additionally, the issues deliberated at the meeting are cherry-picked and entail well-prepared cases by the planners so that they are likely to get passed by the Committee. A representative of the Guangzhou's Planning Committee commented that:

*“the passing rate in recent meetings chaired by the new lingdao has been over 90%. There was a past case where the former chief planner of Guangzhou continuously expressed disagreement with the lingdao on issues deliberated at the planning committee. He was later allocated to head the planning department of another neighbouring city”*

#### ***A 'them' and 'us' mentality prevails***

Despite participative mechanisms being in place, the level of citizen participation in Guangzhou's Regulatory planning processes has been relatively limited, to date. Interestingly, professional planners did not perceive the problem to be the result of poor participatory practices in place, instead they suggested that the main reason for such low levels of public engagement related to residents' oblivion to both the planning proposals coming forward in their areas and the channels to which they could provide feedback. Compounding this problem further, the planners interviewed argued that residents also lack planning knowledge so were unable provide constructive feedback. For example, many lack technical skills to interpret plans and the details of schemes put forward. The planners also suggested that the public were primarily concerned with aesthetics, so they become easily influenced by how appealing the proposed schemes look. This 'experts know best', denoted as the 'us' (planners) versus 'them' (citizens) mentality, is potentially hard to break among Guangzhou's professional planners. As a Guangzhou senior planner argued:

*'Residents lack proper understanding (yishi) of what planning and planning issues are due to their low education level (suzhi) and oblivion to how urban government and planning function, particularly as many are migrants from rural areas - new to urban living. Also, most of the public lack the mentality for citizen participation as a result of China's socialist legacy – so do not voice their opinions'.*

Whilst the findings from the residents survey corroborated with many of the planning professionals' viewpoints, the public had markedly different opinions as to where the root of the problem lay. 70% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were unaware as to what was being planned for across Guangzhou. 76% were unaware of the roles and duties of Guangzhou's Planning Department and 73% were unaware of the channels to provide planning feedback to the local government<sup>7</sup>. Overall, these findings suggest that majority of citizens surveyed were not exercising their right to be involved in Guangzhou's existing participatory planning processes, despite 76% of them having lived in the city for ten years or more.

Contrary to the professional planners' view that the public lacked the mentality for civic engagement and thus was not inclined to voice their opinions, the survey suggests that Guangzhou's residents apportion the blame for lack of public participation onto the professional planners. The majority did not have a positive opinion of the Planning Department, with 99% of residents sampled considering more should be done to strengthen planning procedures to engage the public. The public was also willing to give greater feedback on planning proposals. However, rather than through existing channels set up, for instance through the planning department's website, they suggested that the Internet and mobile phones, for instance, should be more readily used. If information was better circulated, 75% suggested that they would also attend planning events, such as planning workshops, public hearings or planning meetings if organised by the Planning Department. Yet to do so, channels of communication about such events would need to be improved to raise public awareness and promote greater dialogue with the public rather than the tokenistic participatory efforts, to date.

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<sup>7</sup> A likert five-point scale was used to gauge respondents' level of agreement with survey statements. Male respondents in the survey showed comparatively higher awareness (21% higher) of planning issues in their locality than female respondents. Analysing other questions by age showed no significant difference by gender.

Yet despite residents suggesting ways to improve public consultation, when asked if they considered their feedback would have an actual impact on local government's planning decisions, 37% were uncertain 47% answered 'no'. This culture of mistrust and a 'them' and 'us' mentality are likely to persist unless the balance of power in decision-making is genuinely altered. As there is no legal requirement to have public representatives at pre-plan making stages or adopt public feedback following the issuing of Public Notices, *lingdaos* are able to sustain their power. At the same time, planning committee meetings are orchestrated to limit constructive dialogue. The existing system effectively excludes citizens from real decision-making and having any lasting influence on planning outcomes. As an academic from one of Guangdong Province's planning research institutes acknowledged, in interview:

*'Planning decisions ultimately come down to interaction between lingdaos and professional planners, whereby the latter merely helps translate the former's vision into master plans, to realise lingdaos' personal goals to prove their competency, and to climb up the political ladder.'*

To change the status quo requires a redefinition of underlying roles of, and relationships between the professionals and the public at each critical stage of the local planning process, as Innes and Booher (2010) argue. Moreover, existing institutional design would also require systematic transformation at all levels of governance (Healey 2006). As an academic from one of Guangzhou's universities summarized, in interview:

*'The ultimate weakness of citizen participation in planning in China is in fact the lack of legislative support at the top. The Chinese legislation needs clearer delineation and reinforcement of citizens' rights to which everyone has to abide and respect.'*

### **Strengthening participatory planning practices at the city-level in China**

Given that China's planning system is governed by corporatism, restructuring its institutional design to implement more effective participatory practices needs to be relevant to China's situation. It is likely to be

difficult to induce greater public participation in planning from citizens themselves (i.e. bottom-up) within Guangzhou and China as a whole. As the planners' interviews suggest, many Chinese citizens suffer from inertia from its socialist era where their lives were very much governed by state actions. Additionally, the survey findings suggest that many citizens are unaware of their current rights and the channels to participate in planning matters. Although they expressed a willingness to become more involved if participatory practices were strengthened, it remains unclear the extent they would.<sup>8</sup> Greater citizen engagement in planning would therefore need to be promoted by the Chinese Central Government.

As found in the West, securing political agreement to legislative review is often the greatest barrier to institutional change, yet it must occur to allow effective implementation of practices to follow (Zhao 2015). As Healey (2006, p.295) argues, a country's legislative system needs to be implemented and reinforced 'so that relevant authorities have to answer for their actions to all members of a community'. This critique can be applied to China as well.

To be effective and demonstrate Central Government's commitment to citizen participation in planning, legislative institutionalisation in China therefore must be strengthened from the top through to the local levels. Article 26 of the Planning Act 2008 (and the supporting Article 166 amendment in 2013) need to be complemented with a corresponding legislative package at the lower levels (e.g. provincial, city, town, etc.) that provides detailed legislation requirements to support the implementation of participatory planning practices on the ground (Tang 2015). This revised legislation would clearly delineate the rights of citizens and means of participation in planning; define issues that require decision-making of authorities at various levels and those of the public; and specify the role and the distribution of duties of relevant government departments in participatory planning (Healey 2006). In doing so, this newly improved planning system at the city-level would better regulate the discretionary power of *lingdaos* and devolve more power to the citizens.

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<sup>8</sup> Whether opinions stated are followed through with action is an acknowledged drawback of surveys of this nature. Following up on whether respondents "do what they say" requires additional research (Yin 2009)

To make sure that local government support is forthcoming, tax burdens placed upon them could be reduced, with savings made being directly used for participatory practices. “Revamping the ‘resource pot’ through relinquishing tax pressures” (Healey 2006, p.301) would not only provide an effective means to move this initiative forward, it would also send a clear signal of the commitment from the Chinese Central Government.

Despite its weaknesses, China’s pragmatic criteria-driven approach that has over-emphasised economic pursuits and fuelled inter-city competition has promoted efficiency (Plummer & Taylor 2004). This in-built incentive structure could therefore be used to promote better public participatory practices. The use of polls in the West gauges public support of the incumbent political party. Similar measures to gauge public satisfaction could be included in the overall performance of *lingdaos* throughout their five-year term of office in order to improve responsiveness to citizens’ demands and monitor whether planning outcomes are better (Cheng 2013, Fan 2015).

To demonstrate further commitment to the principles of citizen participation in planning, Central Government could channel separate public resources into intermediary, social organisations to allow collaborative partnerships to be fostered (Healey 1997). Although China lacks grassroots community groups that play a crucial role as in the West, it has in fact inherited a comprehensive community structure of Resident Committees from Mao’s era that covers the entire country. As Tang (2015) documents, non-governmental resident representative organisations have long mobilised people in taking part in local policy making. This nationally institutionalised framework already in existence could be capitalised upon as a way to encourage greater civic engagement in planning matters within China. Through greater resident committee representation in existing institutional structures, the public voice could be more readily gathered, particularly at pre plan-making stages (see figure 3). Moreover, community competencies and local knowledge could enhance planning decision-making, as Healey suggests (2007). For Tang (2015), as public oppositions to current development plans mount, decision-making traditionally influenced by ambitious economic targets may be subject to revision and phased out. Greater accountability of *lingdaos* and tolerance of non-state actors may in turn allow the spheres of local democracy to be enlarged (Verdini 2015).

In doing so, public concern over government-funded mega-projects (see Qi et al 2016, Fung 2015) and controversial demolition and redevelopment of old town areas (see Gransow 2014, Tan & Altrock 2016) may be better addressed.

The media will also continue to play a strong role in transferring planning and legal knowledge thus improving the capacity of citizens to express themselves (Tan & Altrock 2016 p.256). Residents can also be engaged wherever and whenever they are connected to the internet (Mao et al. 2015). As Cheng et al (2015) contend, smart platforms will certainly revolutionise how the public can be engaged in planning and bridge gaps between different stakeholders<sup>9</sup>. Rather than China's traditional culture of compliance and its associated autocratic mode of governance (Li et al 2012), sustained efforts at cross-pressuring by more diversified stakeholders will ultimately result in local planners being unable to bypass and ignore them (Zhang and Li 2016).

As the deputy planning director of Guangzhou's Planning Research Institute summarised, in interview:

*'China's adoption of citizen participation in planning has come late compared to other countries. But it is early relative to the country's stage of economic development. Guangzhou has been improving its regulatory planning processes to integrate better public participation, and it is no exaggeration that we have been undergoing constant reforms.'*

## **Conclusions**

China's planning system has lacked an effective mechanism to distribute and balance power (Cheng 2013). Large amounts of power are concentrated at the meso-level, particularly in the hands of *lingdaos*. The strong fiscal regulation from the State has resulted in local governments' biased-orientation towards economic pursuits and downplaying the social and environmental implications of their decision-making. At the same time, China's approach to urban planning has over-emphasised technical rationality, relying

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<sup>9</sup> One pioneering platform developed is the CityIF that has been used for several key planning projects in Beijing (See Mao et al. 2015 & Cheng et al. 2015).

heavily on blueprints and master planning. Planning decisions have been, in effect, expert-led, with limited involvement from local citizens (Zhao 2015, Zhao 2015).

Yet, like in many Western countries, experts are not necessarily right or neutral, with planning being inevitably entangled in political interests (Healey 2006). The key difference with many countries in the West is that in China, *lingdao*'s political path depends upon their locality's economic performance rather than on gaining public support. Hence, 'institutional design' (Healey 2006) is lacking in China's current planning system to distribute power and balance urban development priorities in an equitable manner (Wu 2015). Whilst on the one hand, existing institutional structures and practices has allowed excessive discretionary power of *lingdaos* to shape planning decisions at the city-level, on the other hand, the majority of citizens have been excluded from critical junctures of the planning process, remaining unaware of planning issues and the limited channels that exist for them to contribute. A 'them' and 'us' mentality has persisted, with limited evidence of a rebalance in power relations in decision-making processes (Zhao 2015). Although public engagement has grown in recent years around EIA of specific public projects and also contentious urban regeneration projects (see e.g. Verdini 2015; Tian & Zhu 2015, Chi et al 2014, Tan & Altrock 2016, Zhang & Li 2016), there has been less success in changing the context of decision-making processes at the city-level, in particular shifting 'the balance of power-orientated political relationships' around urban planning decisions (Cheng 2013, p.1).

The limitations of this single case study research should be acknowledged, as the empirical findings from Guangzhou cannot represent the whole of China and some of the suggestions as to a way forward are not necessarily applicable elsewhere (Yin 2009). Cities across China are at very different stages of development. Focusing resources on strengthening participatory planning practices might therefore not be feasible where local governments are financially struggling to make ends meet for their people. Even for higher-tiered Chinese cities with sufficient resources, citizen participation in planning may not be prioritised over generating economic gains, unless national requirements originally set out in Article 26 of the Planning Act 2008 are supported through on-ground implementation requirements. Moreover, this wide disparity among cities to take on additional tasks poses considerable challenges for the Central Government to implement an

incentive structure to assess *lingdaos'* performance in engaging citizens in planning. Further research is therefore needed to consider in more detail the re-designing of institutional structures that incorporates such an incentive structure and whether strengthened participatory practices leads to fairer and sustainable planning outcomes (Deyle & Wiedenman 2014).

Furthermore, responding to the call for strengthened citizen participation in urban planning in China (see e.g. Fung 2015, Zhang & Li 2016, Tan and Altrock 2016), comes at a time when the control of media reporting, the internet and freedom of speech appears to have tightened under Xi Jinping's current leadership (Lewis 2015). Localised civic engagement in planning, however, is distinguishable from political unrest that has often resulted in suppression from China's Central Government. Moreover, by Central Government demonstrating a sustained commitment to institutional re-design of participatory planning practices, this could help towards consensus-building and mending the 'them' and 'us' cultures of mistrust that have existed. In his speech at the grand ceremony celebrating China's Community Party's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday on 1 Jul 2016, President Xi emphasized not to forget the Party's original aims (*buwang chuxin*), namely the 'Party's foundation lies in the people, its power derives from the people, and its political interests represent those of the people's' (cited in Blanchard 2016). As collaborative planning is unlikely to undermine the political legitimacy of the Community Party, it would be one of the first aspects to materialise in the Government's renewed people-centric vision. As in Western democracies, overcoming the inherent difficulties in implementing participatory planning practices necessarily takes time (Innes & Booher 2010). For China, its governments as well as its citizens will need to adapt culturally, mentally, legislatively and politically to the practice of collaborative planning.

To many critics, strengthening participatory planning practices leads to massive amounts of resources. Also citizens do not have the time to continually engage in governance; and planning issues cannot be contested all the time. Yet as Healey (1997) argues, "this misunderstands the approach (of collaborative planning)" (p.239). Full public consultation on every planning issue is not possible nor is it advocated. Yet rather than reverting to tokenistic practices, if inclusionary planning practices are translated into governance structures, procedures and rules then citizens would trust local governments sufficiently that challenges become the

exception rather than the norm. A mutually beneficial relationship becomes established that lends credence to planning decisions and outcomes. Trust is earned by demonstrating good intentions and is followed through with actions (Lasker & Guidry 2009). It is not achieved through ignoring or placating citizens (Arnstein 1969).

As each country is drawn to concerns over enhancing their cities' global economic competitiveness, the role of quality of place is receiving greater recognition. There has also been a move away from an emphasis on rational, technical planning to an understanding that physical infrastructure planning needs to be accompanied by improved quality of living environments, so that local economic performance is sustained. Accompanying this way of thinking about urban planning with better participatory planning practices will result in greater citizen support, thus enabling professional planners to carry forward the task of place-making that endures over time (Healey 1997).

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## FIGURES

### **1. The nature and distribution of *rights and duties***

A structure of challenges needs to be created so that relevant authorities have to answer for their actions. *Rights* need to be considered in relation to strengthening participative processes in governance, including:

- (i) rights to be consulted and informed
- (ii) rights to 'voice' and 'influence' outcomes.

*Duties* in collaborative planning three-fold:

- (i) paying attention to the concerns of participants and treat them not merely with respect, but acknowledging their particular circumstances and values.
- (ii) carrying out agreed policies effectively leads to an agenda of substantive responsibilities for the governing authority.
- (iii) operating within openly agreed principles and to report back to participants

### **2. The control and distribution of *resources***

A revamp of the 'resource pot' through taxation measures and to effectively utilise private and public resources via 'partnership' and 'joint ventures' to the various levels and sectors of government activity.

### **3. The specification of *criteria* for redeeming challenges**

Provide a framework within which informal alliances and intermediary agencies can flourish, but remain accountable via strict financial and reporting rules.

**4. The distribution of *competencies*** Allow different government levels to have remits appropriate to the scale of their political communities. Ensure that authorities are able to relate knowledge about particular areas to the social context of the governance relations within which their expertise is being drawn upon (Albrechts, 1991, Healey, 1991).

Figure 1 Hard infrastructure of institutional change

(source: summarised from Healey 2006, p.292-310 Four dimensions of institutional design)

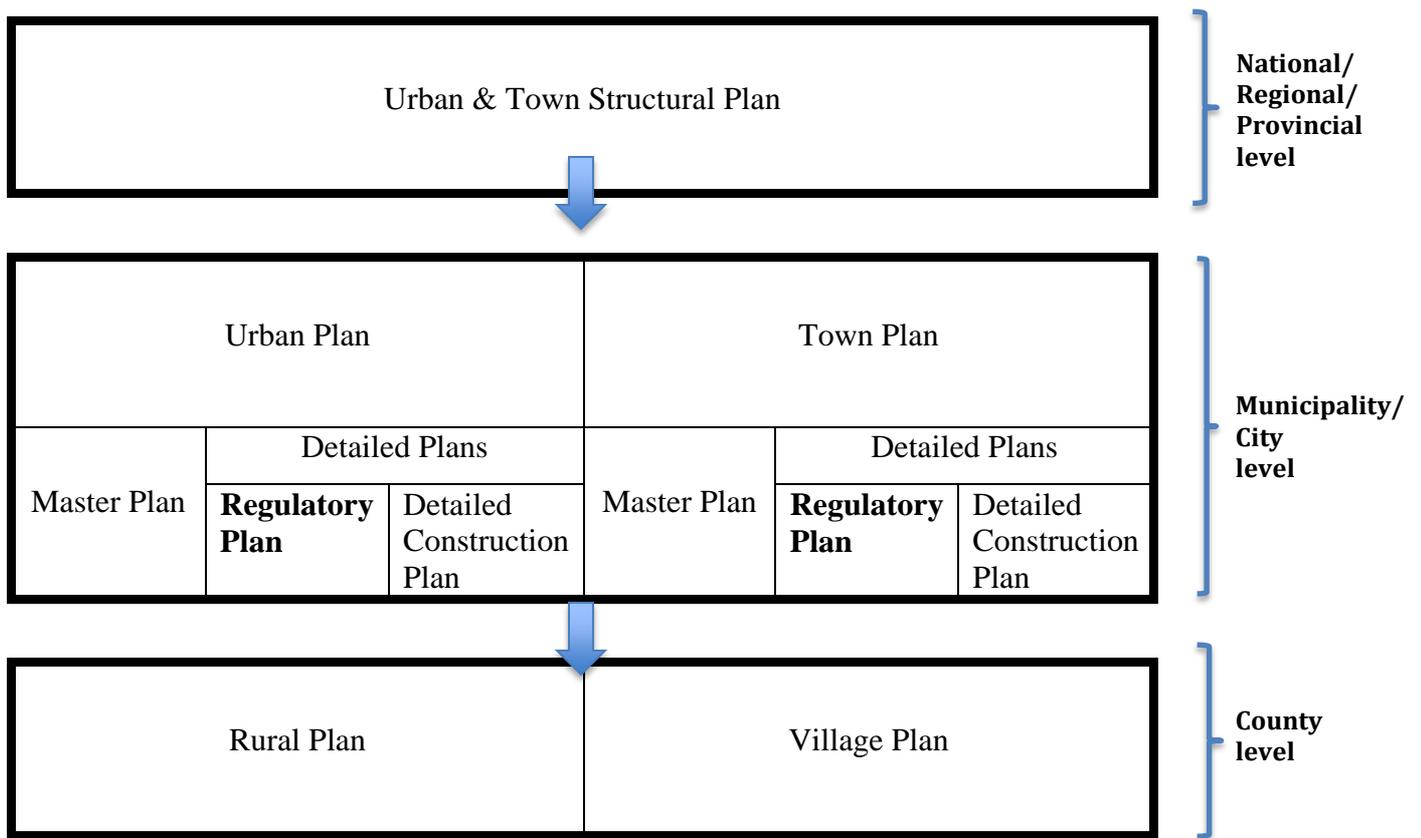


Figure 2: Hierarchy of plans in the Chinese planning system

Source: Authors, information compiled from 'Town & Country Planning Regulation of China, 2008' (LAOSC, 2008).

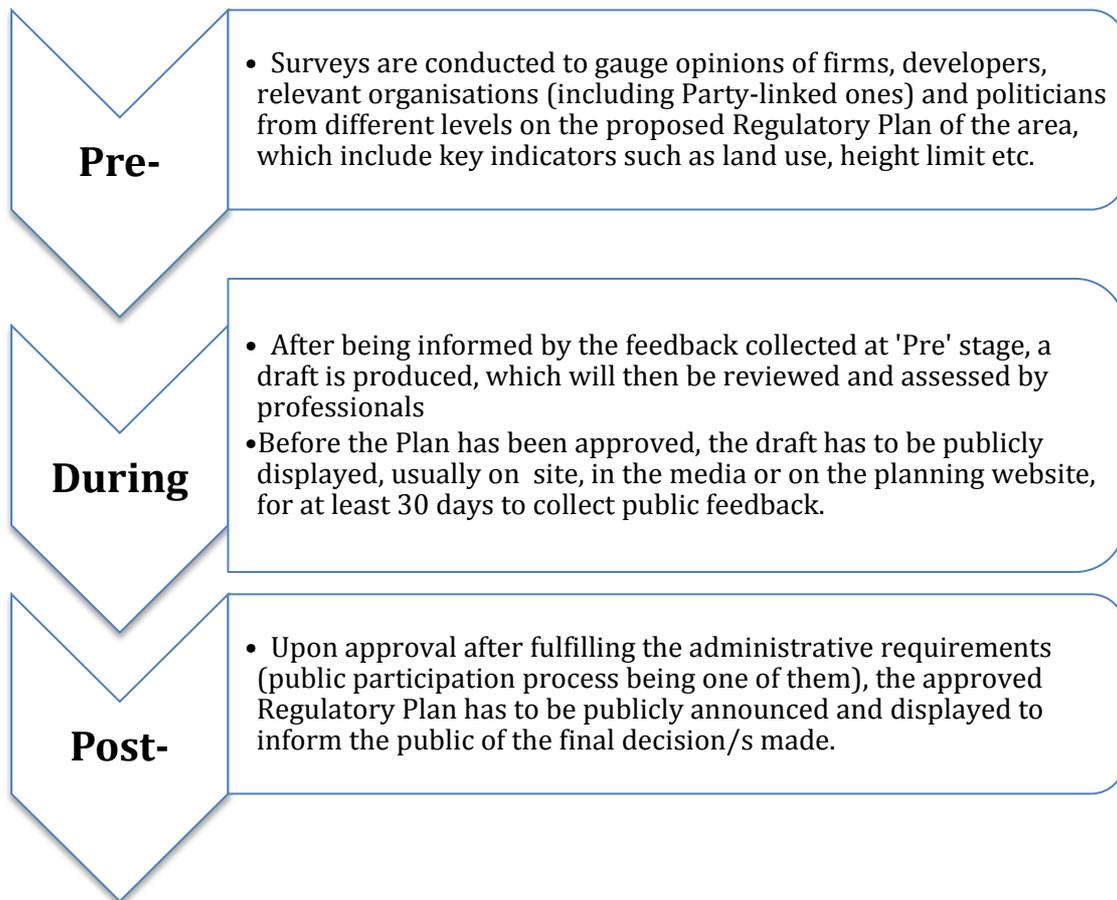


Figure 3: Key public participation processes in Guangzhou's Regulatory Planning.  
 Source: Authors, information compiled from Town & Country Planning Regulations, Guangdong (LAOSC 2013); Zhang & Wang 2013; Peng 2011; Expert interviews

