THE SPONTANEOUS ACTIVITY OF PLACE MAKING: CHINESE SQUARE DANCING THAT ACTIVATES CITY OPEN SPACE AND RECONSTRUCTS COMMUNAL IDENTITY
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ABSTRACT:

The study explores the spontaneous place making of Chinese square dancing which makes a significant difference in public space activation and community identity reconstruction. The square dancing is self-organized and allows the convert of the roles of the performers and the audience, distinguished from traditional dancing. Through field research, similar patterns of space usage can be observed, showing the intelligence of bottom-up place making. In the city scale, the distribution of the site also demonstrates the square dancing’s popularity and the participants’ preference. While the rapid urbanization brought much negative space around the city, the vivid dancing activity revives the site by offering human-scale experience, providing communal security and promoting awareness of using the open space among people of all ages. Moreover, it has far-reaching significance in public city life by providing a place for people to interact and helping rebuild the communal identity making up for the problems during urbanization. The square dance is playing an important part in the citizens’ culture life. The study of square dance indicates the success of spontaneous place making and suggests it as important supplement to the professional design and planning top-down.

Keywords: square dance, spontaneous place making, space usage, space activation, communal identity

1. introduction

Chinese square dancing is a group entertainment which has thrived during the last decade or two throughout China. It has gained great popularity among the mass and takes place in all kinds of public space every day, which has made a big difference in city life as well as forming a new city view.

Several researches on Chinese square dancing have been done before this paper, major in the field of sociology focusing on the participants’ composition and preference or the dancing style itself, without much attention on its spacial properties. This paper focuses on the participants’ behavior as well as its effect on space and the impact on the city life as an extension. Fieldwork research was taken as the main research method in the study. Since the concept of square dancing is not accurately defined but a collective call of the group dancing in the public space, a number of dancing sites were observed among varied environment among cities to discover their similarities in making use of the space, as well as the changes it brings to the site and the surrounding environment.
Individual cases are taken an in-depth study into to discuss the effects it brings to the citizens’ life, especially in their communal identity in specific time of urbanization nowadays in China.

2. The characteristics of the square dancing
Chinese square dancing is a group entertainment that’s not defined by its specific characteristics of movements, but its characteristics of being spontaneous organized, group involved, concordant in movement and usually taking place in squares. Depending on the local dancers’ preference, the square dancing also varies from place to place. There are two assumptions of its origin. It could have evolved from worship ceremony in early times, or be spontaneously generated from people’s work song during physical labor. For either origin, square dancing nowadays is a spontaneous cultural event that plays an important role in the citizens’ daily life.

2.1 the sites of the dancing
Since the requirements for dancing site are no more than hard-paving ground to dance on and a set of stereo for the music to dance with, the site can be the city plazas, station squares, open playgrounds, wide boulevards in park, public space inside residential quarters, or technically any vacant public lot with hard paving.

Figure1: different types of dancing sites

If possible, the participants would prefer a site that is visually accessible, for example besides the road or surrounded by living buildings. Sites with fine views and usually good ventilation since the activity usually calls for much exercise with perspiration during a long period of time. In the research of Ezhou city’s square dancing sites, the
major are two types of sites including the open space inside or besides a large living area and the linear park along the river.

The time of dancing is fixed every day, decided by the local dancers. It usually takes place in late evening when the mass get off work and finish their dinner, lasting for an hour to three hours. Some may also take place in the early morning, usually the retired elders as the dancers, or both time in the day. In the other time, it’s hard to tell whether there the square dancing would take place on the site or not.

2. 3the composition of the participants
In previous study of the square dancing, taking the example of the Nanning city, the participants are usually in their middle age or aged, with an average age of around 54 years old. The major participants are between 40 to 60 years old with more than half of the population. People in 30’s are between a seventh to a sixth, approximate with the proportion of people older than 60. People under 30 are very rare and the 2.5% of the under-twenty participants are kids and teenagers brought along by their parents, who are usually between 40 to 60 years old.

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Table 1: Age distribution of the surveyed participants.

In the sex ratio, the majority of the dancers are female with the percentage from 70% to 100%, depending on the types of the dancing. The gentler the dance is, the less male participants there would be. With the thrive of all kinds of dances varied from slow to fast, the proportion of the female tends to decline as more male begin to join in this activity.

From the figure we can see that the major of the participants have an income between 1000 to 2000 yuan with the proportion of more than 60%. This indicates that the participants are usually low-income, that are more likely to be attracted by the low-cost activity of the square dancing, while the high income may have better alternatives of daily exercise or entertainment. The dancers’ education is also below average, with the vast majority of high school degree or below.

<table>
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<td>62%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Income distribution of the surveyed participants.

While the typical participants of the dancing are middle aged or aged women with relatively low income and low education, which led to the expression of square dancing aunty to refer to the dancers, the dancing group appears to enlarge and absorb more and more people with higher income or younger age regardless of their gender.
2.2 Performing–Spectating relation of the dancing

The square dancing is distinguished from the traditional dancing styles by its characteristics of no threshold as well as its boundary obscurity. Typically, the dancers would stand in squares facing a same direction with the best or the most sophisticated dancers in the front, which makes it visually accessible for others to observe and learn. Also, the movements are with high rate of repeating, which makes it easy for the onlookers to imitate. In this case, new dancers can always feel free to join the dancing square from the back row or either sides at any time without interrupting the previous dancing activity, making the boundary between dancers and watchers flexible. Since the site is open for observation and friendly for new participants, together with its rhythmic and brainwashing music, it makes every passing-by a potential dancer. The previous dancers may also quit the dancing when tired, usually in eternal of the tracks, and watch their companions dancing. The convert of the roles of dancers and audience makes the performance and watching of square dancing in ever-lasting change.

3. The pattern of space usage

3.1 The pattern of space usage in individual site

Among all those dancing sites, similarities can be observed in space usage regardless of the scales and forms. In most sites that's besides a building or a huge construction, for example on the Ezhou Museum square, the dancing square prefers to be backing the main building façade and be facing the main street. And usually they would face the streetlights so their faces can be lighted. In fact, though different from the traditional dancing inside the theatre, the square dancing group still unconsciously turns the public space into a stage with invisible edge, with the building façade as the stage background, and the flow of people in street as audience, where the dancers are under the spotlights and the best dancers are always in the very middle and front.

When in open ground without buildings around, for example in one site of the waterfront park, the dancers would face a common view like a fountain or a sculpture, that functions as a visual center that keeps the group together and remains unchanged even when new dancers join in from back or either side. The pattern is very similar to
the dancing activities on ancient worship ceremony.

Figure 3: visual center pattern (compared with Aobao worship of the Mongolians)

While the site is of neither advantages, the dancers can still find a way to adapt it. Based on the typical dancing activity dancing in squares, the square dancing varies and becomes more creative. For example, in a quiet footpath along the waterfront since the other possible sites are already occupied, the dancers choose to stand in linear group with people of each half facing the other, which makes the participant a performer while being the spectator of those in the other half. New participants are still free to join the group from each end without interruption.

Figure 4: performers-as-audience pattern in two ways (restricted by the site)

While the activities are spontaneous and varied from each other, the participants can always find a way of maximum utilization of the space by making it a visible stage or making the group centered and united or adapting themselves to match the site. While the participants are usually low-educated in the research, their behavior of the square dancing demonstrates the intelligence of space using of the un-professionals.

3.2 The pattern of space using in city
The spontaneous activities splatter in varied public space in the city in different scales and forms. Statistics were made in downtown of Ezhou city about the distribution of square
dancing groups to discover its pattern in the city scale. Besides those close sites in zonal distribution on the waterfront, the sites inside the city present a relatively homogeneous distribution in the residential area with a certain radius. When taking a serving radius of 300 meters for the sites, 70% of the city area is covered. When taking a serving radius of 500 meters, more than 95% of the area is covered. This means the very most of the citizens are able to reach a square dancing site in between 5 to 10 minutes by walk, indicating its great participation by people all around the city.

For the sites on the waterfront, large numbers of people are attracted to gather here, leading to relatively denser distribution of individual sites. In fact, more than 10 sites can be observed with the closest distance of twenty meters between two dancing group. Though the sites appear to be close, their serving radius are actually much larger than the sites inside the city since residents living far away may even drive to the site to join the dancing for its advantageous location and micro environment, especially the cool breeze during summer.

The numbers of the participants are mostly between 20 to 30 persons and may vary from at least 5 to more than 60 depending on the popularity of the dance and the population of the surrounding residents. In most cases, the residents prefer to join a specific site in a long-term participation. The site may move for some reasons like the surrounding residents’ complaint, and the dancers would stick with the previous dancing group even when the new site may be farther than another adjacent site that he/she didn’t join before, showing a strong loyalty that’s less affected by physical distance change. Meanwhile, friends’ recommendation may change one’s choice of the site, which means the choice of site is actually a choice of companions and interpersonal relationships.

4. the evaluation of the square dancing’s affections

4.1 affections in public space
This spontaneous activity demonstrates common people’s intelligence in space usage, with which a vast amount of public space has become extensively used. As a matter of fact, in the last twenty to thirty years, China has gone through rapid urbanization which led to lots of random space fragments between newly constructional areas and the un-constructional area. Those fragments are neglected as vacant lots all over the city without public facilities or any pleasant landscape for people to stay with. On the other hands, plenty of city squares also emerged during the cities’ expansion many of which are too large in scale or too solemn for civilian activities as the outcome of the city governments’ preference at certain period of time.

While other daily activity like stroll and chat hardly takes place in such negative space, the lots of low utilization are now activated by square dancing activity with its unique characters and advantages. Its requirements of the site are no more than the ground to dance on and a set of stereo playing the music to dance with, so the absence of public facilities means an even opener and broader environment for the dance. In addition, the group activity is both self-entertaining and exercising, which has great appeal to common people that would create a series of sceneries themselves. What’s more, the group effect of the activity frees the participants from scruples about the huge scale or solemn atmosphere that they usually have when alone.

Taking the city museum square as an example, despite its 200m*50m scale, there are no benches or vegetation where people can stay. Few people would come here when the museum was closed. After residents around picked up the square dancing, the plaza became even more vivid in the late evening. Now three square dancing groups can be identified on the plaza. The groups divide the big square in several smaller zones, so the plaza no longer appears empty and deserted. The dancing groups also function as a city landscape that provides human scale as well as a vivid view for the citizens to stay and enjoy. Also, since the dancers are usually residents around, functioning as street eyes and providing security for the space, young parents and grandparents become more willing to take their kids here to play, making the square a place for all ages.

Figure 7: the behavior distribution on the city museum plaza
It’s easy to see that the square dancing activates the space with both dynamic and steadiness. Its dynamic in the continual movements and rhythmic music has brought vitality to the site. The steadiness of keeping in a relatively same area for hours has made it a continual city landscape that appeals to more onlookers to join and use the space. The change brought to public space is not only from the dancers themselves, but also from the promotion of awareness of using the public space among all citizens, who make a real difference in space activation.

4.2 affections in communal identity
Besides space activation, the square dancing also has great impact on people’s daily life and helps to reconstruct the communal identity.

After the warfare houses of Unit Compounds were replaced by the
commercial residential building, people lived in the same area no longer because of their working together, but being classified by their economic ability. The traditional lifestyle of the neighborhood is also gone, leaving people hardly knowing their neighbors, from which the elder generation suffered much more. The lacking of public space also exacerbates the problem since the neighbors can’t find a place to build new acquaintance. The major participants are middle-aged or aged, as discussed above, because this population has faced a common problem of communal identity issue during this process. What’s more, the elders used to play the center role of the family in less than half a century ago. As the living rhythm quickens, the younger generation gradually wins out with their ability to gain information and adapt to new environment. The elders are gradually marginalized in the family, especially when they get retired and then alienated from society, leaving them starve for belonging.

When the square dancing activity has become a daily event of their life, it actually plays the role of spiritual ballast for the elders. When people from all the community join the dancing, it functions as a coherent that binds people together, thus forming a visual and mental communal center that providing much sense of belonging.

Two cases of Aunty Xie and the old couple Mr. and Mrs. Yang as typical individuals of square dancing are taken into deep research to discuss the issue. Aunty Xie is 46 years old and works at a supermarket. Every evening she would join the square dancing activity at 19:30 after dinner near the living building of hers, which hardly belongs to any community since the area is without a clear edge or any well-designed open space. Half of the street lamps have been broken down, leaving the surroundings lame and unpleasant to walk around at night, which made the place always deserted after evening and the residents unwilling to go downstairs to communicate with each other. After the emergence of the square dancing, around twenty residents joined it at the little vacant lot besides the road and soon attracted the other residents to gather and watch. In the case of Aunty Xie, she finds it not only a place to dance and exercise, but also a place to talk to her neighbors and make new friends in the long evening.

In another case of the old couple Mr. and Mrs. Yang who have spent most of their lives in the countryside, they came to the city months ago to help their son take care of the little grandson, which is very usual for the elder generation in China. Though the family live in a well-organized residential area, the old couple found it hard to build new acquaintance after leaving their old neighborhood lifestyle and old friends in the countryside. Then Mrs. Yang were introduced to the community’s square dancing in the museum plaza where she could meet surrounding residents of the same ages of both them and their grandson. While Mrs. Yang dances, Mr. Yang looks after the kid with the other kids and grandparents around. The kids would play around together, and the adults would share their experience about babysitting and the stories of their own kids while looking after them. The old couples used to be lost in the city now gather together in the dancing site and form a new micro society where communal identity is reconstructed by the unguarded communication of dancing together and babysitting together that bridges the gap between the previous strangers.

In this sense, the square dancing is more than just a physical activity, but also an event where people’s psychological demand for communal identity is satisfied. Its
significance is beyond its effect during the few hours of the dancing activity and has extended to the catalyst for bringing the direct and indirect participants together in the rest time as well.

5. Conclusions

The square dancing has become a common view for the city and an unseparated part of most participants’ life. Through studies of various sites and individual cases, we can discover that the square dancing has gained great popularity for good reasons. Firstly, it’s an excellent activity that’s self-entertaining, exercising and at the same time accessible to all. Secondly, it’s without thresholds so everyone may join it and enlarge the group. Thirdly, it extends its effect from the dancers themselves to all the other residents by activating the public space. Last but not least, the interaction of people during or around the dancing activity, including the dancers, the onlookers, the passers-by, the babysitters and the kids, has creates a place where people can feel the sense of community, which would last and function during non-square-dancing time.

Its existence indicates a missing part in people’s city life before. When comparing the city life to traditional life, its equivalent of traditional festival activities can be identified, such as the dragon-boat racing, village opera and antiphonal singing, which are fading away in the cities nowadays. They have significant similarities of being music-engaging, entertaining and providing a place for people to gather and interact. While the traditional festivals are yearly events and usually cost much manpower and finance, the square dancing is a daily event with little expense. The difference of frequency indicates people’s ever-increasing demand of culture life and the far lower expenses leads to much less restrictions and higher participation. In this sense, the square dancing not only realizes the spontaneous place making by collective effort and intelligence, but also plays the important role of the traditional culture events while adapting itself for new demands.

The square dancing’s popularity declares the success of the spontaneous place making and at the same time reveals the deficiency of the top-down urban planning during china’s rapid urbanization. This research appeals for more attention on the bottom-up place making as supplement to the professional design and planning, and wishes to add to broader social discourses about public space renovation and communal identity rebuilding.

References

