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**Agency in the formation of West Lake Landscape: the governance of Hangzhou  
1949-2006**

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**Abstract**

*The landscape of West Lake, Hangzhou plays an important role in the formation of Hangzhou city and the modern Chinese nation – its designation of World Heritage Cultural Landscape was regarded as an outstanding achievement which transcended many of its predecessors. However, the formation of West Lake landscape, though has been studied by myriad researchers, has not been fully investigated through the lens of social governance, especially during the years 1949-2006. This paper is devoted to the study of the agencies behind the changing landscape to figure out the interaction between agents. The actions of different governmental, societal and international agents in Hangzhou local politics considering the governance of West Lake during 1949 – 2006 are studied. In this way, it is hoped to unveil the local dynamism in the making of West Lake and the city of Hangzhou, which stresses the background forces behind the evolvement of urban landscape.*

**Keyword:** West Lake, Agency, Landscape, Politics, Governance

**Introduction**

Locating on the western side of Hangzhou City, West Lake as both a cultural resort and centre of art, has inspired hundreds of poems, paintings and traditional music eulogizing its natural and architectural beauty, making it one of the major muses of the private garden constructions in Jiangnan (Yangzi River Delta, YRD) region (Yang & Wang, 1982). In fact, it is the combination of all physical beauties with literary depictions – ancient poems, novels, dramas and folk lures – that makes West Lake famous. No other places in China enjoy such an abundant collection of literatures and cultural accumulations, making West Lake one of the most important symbols of Chinese identity. In the governance of West Lake, this paper has noticed its significance for the national, provincial and municipal government, local merchant groups and the broad public. Since 1950s, national government has used West Lake as a diplomatic site, especially in the signing of the first US-China Communiqué (Li, 2017). It limited real estate development around West Lake in the 2000s to promote its application for World Heritage site and the final designation in 2011 was no wonder regarded by the national government as a great achievement of Chinese cultural influence in the world. For the municipal government, West Lake is a widely known cultural label for Hangzhou as an ‘international scenic tourist city’ (West Lake Master Plan, 2012) which can help the city win the urban marketing race (Bianchini & Schwengel, 1991) against Shanghai, Suzhou and Nanjing, its major rivals in the YRD region. With this positioning of West Lake, it encouraged real estate development around it to attract investments from around the world. During 2000-2010, local and international merchants are trying to build hotels, resorts and commercial complexes

around the scenic area for commercial benefits. Besides, the public amenity groups also take their parts in the making of West Lake landscape through the course of the history. This paper, particularly, investigates the changing governance frame of West Lake where all these agents either are getting involved or having been involved during 1949 – 2006. By doing so, this paper tries to show the changing power structure in the local governance of Chinese cities and to consider the major background forces that promote urban marketing as well as heritage tourism in China.

## **Background**

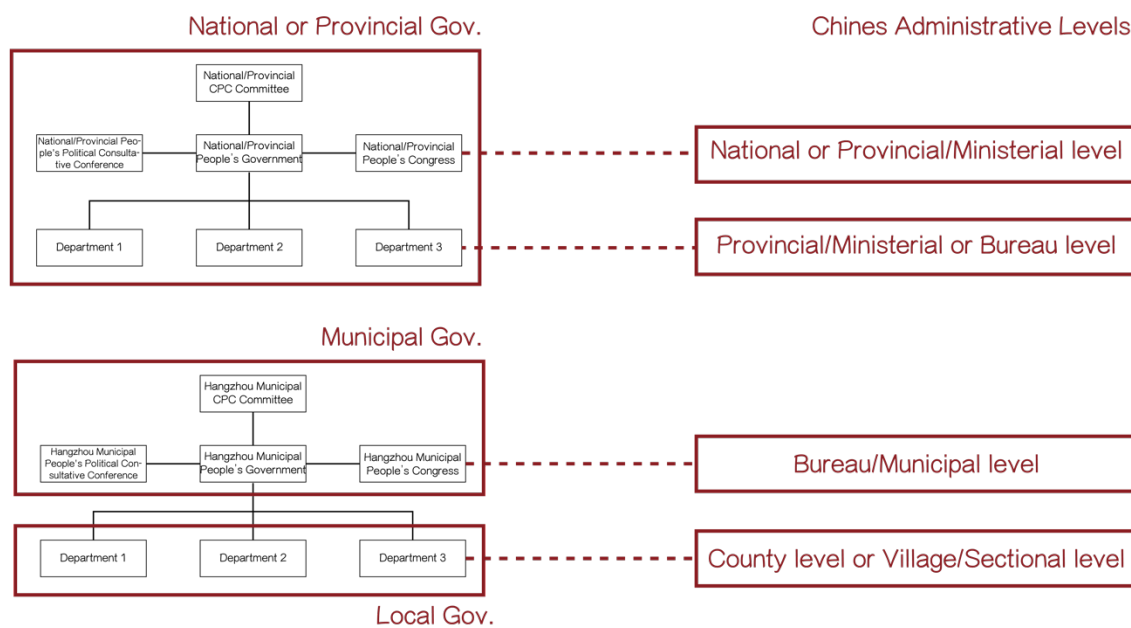
The major background to this research paper is framed under research on ‘heritage led development’ (Zhao *et al*, 2020) and the so-called ‘entrepreneurial urban governance’ (Zhu, 2011) in current Chinese cities. The former theory considers how the protection of heritage has been regarded as a way to generate monetary revenue through tourism (Svels, 2017) or real estate development (Lazrak *et al*, 2014). Specifically in China, the political process managing heritage sites may even promote urban new district constructions (Zhao *et al*, 2020), which often involves extensive real estate developments around heritage sites, whether in the form of commercial centres, hotels or luxury residential housings (Lai & Lorne, 2019). The latter theory stresses the ‘paradox’ of political control and the market orientation particularly found in Chinese local governments, making those who have the largest power as ‘entrepreneurs’ in charge of the future of their cities like companies (Harvey, 2005; Zhang, 2006). It is this special political structure that facilitates real estate development in many Chinese cities, which allows more collaborative interactions among agents outside governments, like developers and social groups (Li *et al*, 2012). However, this paper argues that entrepreneurship in the governance of Chinese localities is not the full map; rather, the dynamism in real practices includes more prevalent forces like nationalism from either the society or the national government. In the case of Hangzhou, it was citizens who asked for the improvement of West Lake environment during the 1970s and it was the central government who promoted West Lake expansion during 2000s. In conclusion, the two streams of thoughts as the background of this paper provide the basic knowledge for Chinese local governance, but they are not enough to explain the full map.

## **Methodology**

This study is based on the collection of historical documents of the Hangzhou Municipality: *The West Lake Years* (Party History Research Office of CPC Hangzhou Municipal Committee & Hangzhou West Lake Scenic Area Management Committee, 2008). By browsing the governmental documents and records in the book, the paper considers the frequency and influence of actions done by governmental (national, provincial and local), societal and international agents in the governance of West Lake from 1949 to 2006. Besides the investigation on historical documents, interviews and mapping are also included.

## **Results and Discussions**

This paper identifies 3 major types of agents in the governance of West Lake during 1949 and 2006: the governmental, social and international agents. Governmental agent, the type that this paper has been aiming to study, includes governments on the national, provincial, municipal and local level. This is a simplification of the current Chinese political system. In fact, China has 5 administrative levels descending from national to section level (national level, provincial/ministerial level, bureau/municipal level, county level and finally, village/sectional level; each level contains 2 sub-levels: the principal and deputy level, forming totally 10 levels of administrative system). Each government leader or civil servant must be placed on a specific administrative level in order to get paid and treated respectively. At the same time, they should be working in specific governmental institutions inside the Chinese administrative system as well. As an extremely simplified way of understanding, the level of a specific institution can be understood as determined by the administrative level its leader is placed on. Therefore, as in the provincial government, only the 4 teams (CPC committee, people's government, people's congress and people's political consultative conference) are on provincial/ministerial level, for their leaders are the only persons placed on this level. The departments of provincial governments, unfortunately, are placed on lower levels as their leaders cannot be on the same level as provincial 4-team leaders. Therefore, in the practice of Chinese politics and especially considering normal provinces (like Zhejiang province, where Hangzhou belongs to), departments of provincial governments are on the same level of municipalities. Similarly, departments of national governments are on the same level of provinces. In this paper, however, considering the difference between Chinese administrative level and the de facto governmental agents in the governance of West Lake, this paper is combining the national government and its departments and provincial government and its departments respectively together as two levels rather than four levels (see figure 1). As for the municipal government and its departments, this paper continues the division applied by the Chinese administrative levels so that the differences between actions done by Hangzhou municipality government and the bureaus of Hangzhou municipality government could be seen clearly (also see in figure 1). Therefore, there are 4 levels of governmental agents considered in this paper.



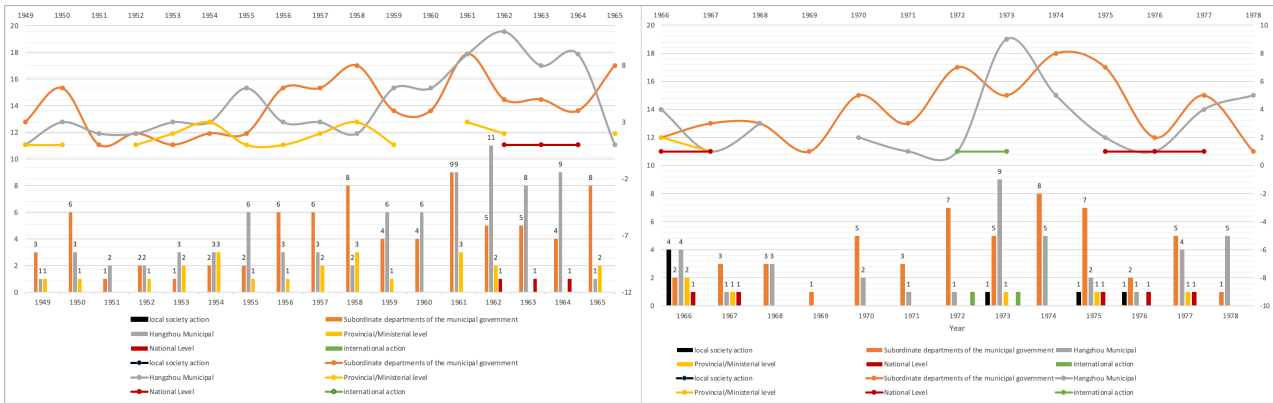
a. The categories of national, municipal and local political institutions applied by the paper

b. The de facto levels political institutions are placed on in the Chinese Administrative Levels

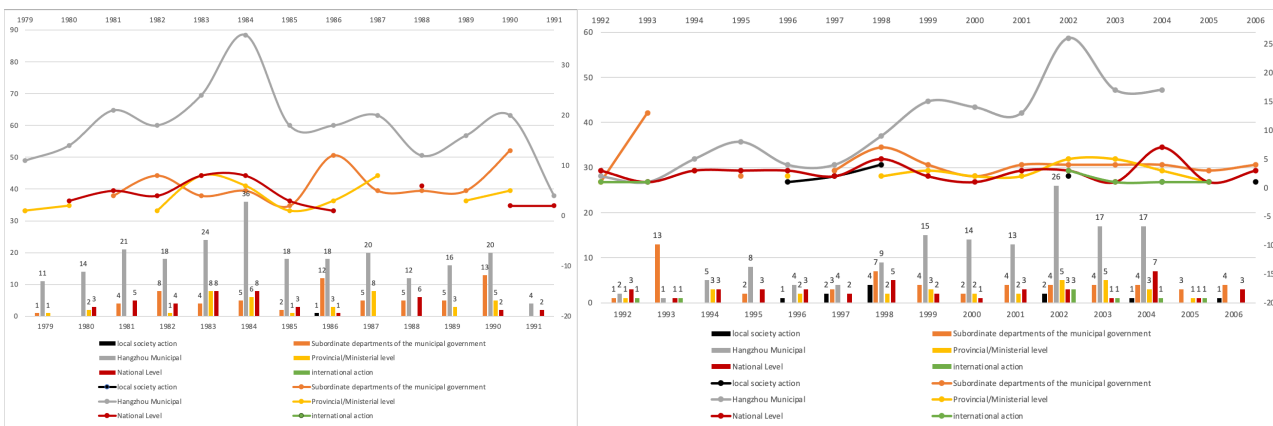
**Figure 1.** The category of local governments applied by this paper (a) and the relative positions these political institutions virtually take in the Chinese Administrative Levels (b). Drawn by the author.

The paper also identifies social players and international players in the governance of West Lake. The two are in fact both social actors, therefore should have been categorized in the same group. However, considering the specific history of P.R. China, domestic and international social actors are treated differently by the government and have different influence on the governance issues. Regarding to this difference, the paper remains on the dichotomy. Generally, social players include Chinese universities/colleges, citizens, villagers, communities and privately-owned corporations. Relatively, international players include foreign leaders, capitals and important organizations (e.g. UNESCO), conferences and competitions.

Looking into the history of West Lake and based on studies done by former morphological research (Fu, 2015), this paper divides the history between 1949 and 2006 into 4 different periods. From 1949 to 1966 is the post-Civil War and Reconstruction period; 1966 to 1979 is the Cultural Revolution period. The 1979-1992 is the first phase of Reform and Open while the period 1992-2006 is the second period of Reform and Open. Within this time division, the paper studies the frequency of different agents in involving into the governance of West Lake. The result of agent-involvement frequency is shown in figure 2 and 3.



**Figure 2.** The frequency that different agents involved in the governance of West Lake, 1949-1979. (Left: 1949-1966; Right: 1966-1979)



**Figure 3.** The frequency that different agents involved in the governance of West Lake, 1979-2006. (Left: 1979-1992; Right: 1992-2006)

During 1949-1966, the paper notices very few national and provincial existence in West Lake and the low correspondence between provincial and municipal activities, which reflects that the governance of West Lake at this time was mainly local issue. However, after 1956, a drastic increase of municipal government and subordinate branches involvement is recorded. Checking the contents of each of the documents made before and after 1956, the paper finds that different from simple rule-making and institution-establishment, the municipal government as well as its subordinate departments were trying to work on political – especially, ideological – constructions. The municipal document made on Nov. 23<sup>rd</sup> 1956 said the government will try ‘making Hangzhou an industrial and scenic city’, according to the 1957 master plan. Another document made by the propaganda department of the municipal CPC committee on Nov. 28<sup>th</sup> 1964 drafts the plan for West Lake to “destroy the old and establish the new” (*Po Jiu Li Xin*). This is also the first time when an ideology-related department of the municipality is involved in the governance of West Lake since 1949. Therefore, the increase of municipal/local player actions in later 1950s should be accounted to the political construction attempt in West Lake during the later 50s and former 60s.

In the Cultural Revolution, it becomes quite clear that for most of the time, only the local agencies – the branches of the municipal government – are working to get things in order. The increase of municipality involvement after 1970s are basically the result of foreign actors – the US president Richard Nixon and French president Pompidou visited West Lake in 1972 and 1973 respectively. The relatively high frequency of local societal agents' involvement in the governance of West Lake is also very impressive, despite the fact that this was the result of the chaotic social environment. In the single year of 1966 West Lake witnessed 4 times of social actor-involvement. However, this was the result of debate between Hangzhou middle school students and college students considering whether or not to demolish Lingyin Temple, one of the major historic relics around West Lake. After Nixon's visit, in 1973, 1975 and 1976 three letters were written by Hangzhou citizens directly to either the provincial or the municipal government requiring the cleaning of West Lake environment in order to provide better image of China for foreign visitors. The emergence of this letter-writing politics was due to the disfunction of normal political system. Not much information could be collected normally by the municipal and provincial government considering the condition of West Lake during the chaos in 1966-1976.

After the end of Cultural Revolution and especially since 1979, the actors in the governance of West Lake changed drastically. Since 1980, the frequency of municipal actions increased dramatically and reached its peak in 1984. 36 decisions, documents and announcements were made in a single year, which outstripped any other year during 1949-2006. However, the intensity of municipality's involvement decreased apparently after 1986, paralleling with the decrease of intensity of national players. This could be explained by the decrease of support coming from the latter. Before 1986, the nation decided to get rid of the 'illegal constructions' in and around the scenic area which were basically built during Cultural Revolution in order to provide better environment for foreign visitors as well as strengthen the central control over localities. These constructions, whether in the forms of hotel, gardens or sanatoriums, were built by provincial and national departments, which were on levels higher than Hangzhou municipality. Therefore, the city government did not have enough power to demolish the buildings. On Sep. 20<sup>th</sup> and Oct. 8<sup>th</sup> 1983, the general secretary of the CPC and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CPC ordered all constructions ongoing or planned in West Lake be stopped and investigation started on the then existing 'illegal' buildings. These national actions provided political power to local governments, making them relatively stronger than the agents owning buildings in West Lake so that they could involve deeper into the governance of West Lake. After 1986, however, the national support 'waned' (no new actions were needed) and the municipality was implementing regulations decided before 1986. For implementation, lower bodies became more important, as the frequency of subordinate branches' involvement increased. On Jan. 14<sup>th</sup>, Apr. 3<sup>rd</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>, Oct. 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> the municipality had several conferences, documents and orders to implement the central government's decision and the landscape bureau became one of the direct decision makers. Surprisingly, during 1979 and 1992, the period when China first opened its door to the world, very few international actors and social actors

existed in the governance of West Lake. This could be attributed to either the ignorance of societal actors by governmental documents or the low interest these actors shed to the governance of West Lake at this time.

In the last historic period, 1992-2006, though the national government's support remained not changing much through the decades, the municipality's involvement increased a lot after 2000. Two factors accounted for this sudden increase of municipality's frequency: first, Hangzhou had a new secretary of the municipality's CPC committee who had been working in the provincial government for several years and was very ambitious. Second, in 1999 the municipality decided to apply for World Heritage status for West Lake scenic area, which received national support. In fact, the Chinese government was trying to make the West Lake Exposition, restored in 2000, to be one of the first and official stages to present China to the world. World heritage status would even more help the national government to 'show China to the world'. The new ambitious secretary and the nation's desire to make West Lake international collaborated harmoniously, thus produced the rapid change to West Lake landscape in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. During this time, the municipal government established several strong but temporal groups – the "West Lake tourism south line 'double scenery' project coordination group, the Hangzhou 'Tourism Westward' leading group, 'West Lake Westwards' project headquarter and the West Lake Expo preparation office. Except the last one was concurrently led by the national and provincial government, the first three groups were fully in the hand of municipal government. Therefore, the power of municipality grew conspicuously in preparing for West Lake heritage application: the continuous existence of national government's support, though without much change in the frequency of their actions, did help the municipal government in promoting changes around West Lake. At the same time, the changes on West Lake landscape was also made possible with helps from social actors and international players. Domestic social actors like Baida Group Co. Ltd. and international players represented by West Lake International Development Co. Ltd, US contributed greatly to reshaping the West Lake landscape, making the lake a better tourist destination. Obviously, they were benefited in the process expanding West Lake westwards as well.

## **Conclusions**

The results this paper discovers in the history of West Lake governance has two important senses. First, it discovers that in terms of West Lake, the attempt to 'develop' it, whether in the forms of clearing 'illegal buildings' or expanding the boundary of the scenic area (claiming more area from nearby agricultural lands as well as urban communities), have been backed by nationalism from the central government besides the power of capital coming from the society. Second, even though the social and international actors are active – and sometimes play decisive roles – in the making of West Lake landscape, it has been the national government that decides whether they are legitimated to join the political system governing West Lake. Without the central government's permission (and initial plan), Nixon and Pompidou may never visit West Lake in 1970s and real estate developers from Hong Kong and US will never enter West Lake to develop hotels

and commercial complexes around it. In this sense, it could be a pity and even major flaw for the urban researchers developing 'entrepreneurial urban governance' theory to omit the influence of nation-states. Here, West Lake witnesses political control winning over market orientation, suggesting that we had better call this phenomenon as 'Entrepreneurial State/national Governance' rather than urban governance.

Admittedly, this simple research is based solely on Hangzhou municipality's collection of historic documents made in 2008. This was the time when the ambitious CPC committee secretary was still on his post. Therefore, he might have exaggerated his contribution (as well as Hangzhou municipality's) to West Lake during 2000-2006 and thus cause distortion to the study this paper has made. Further exploration is therefore certainly required to verify the conclusion made by this paper in the future.

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