Dancing with shackles? The sociopolitical opportunities, achievements, and dilemmas of cycling activism in Guangzhou, China

Hongze Tan & Miguel A. Martínez López

To cite this article: Hongze Tan & Miguel A. Martínez López (2019): Dancing with shackles? The sociopolitical opportunities, achievements, and dilemmas of cycling activism in Guangzhou, China, Journal of Urban Affairs, DOI: 10.1080/07352166.2019.1592650

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2019.1592650

© 2019 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

Published online: 09 May 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

View Crossmark data
Dancing with shackles? The sociopolitical opportunities, achievements, and dilemmas of cycling activism in Guangzhou, China

Hongze Tana and Miguel A. Martínez Lópezb

aCity University of Hong Kong; bUppsala University

ABSTRACT
Over the last decade, urban cycling has re-emerged as a popular mode of transportation in Chinese cities. This article examines how grassroots activism contributed to this cycling renaissance by considering the case of Guangzhou. In the wake of rapid economic development, the Chinese government modified its transportation policies such that cycling was revived, with Guangzhou playing a role in the “rise, fall, and re-emergence” of China as a “cycling kingdom.” We contend that these sociopolitical circumstances of economic development and political opening up provided a structural opportunity for cycling activists, who gained public visibility and institutional recognition through their strategic interaction with both governmental and nongovernmental actors. In addition, activists empowered themselves by accumulating and transforming their social capital. Their example resonated with other marginal organizations and the resulting alliances enhanced the legitimacy of cycling as a movement. Finally, we identify the dilemmas and limitations of cycling activism in urban China due to the closure of local governance channels and the perception that cycling issues are “nonurgent.”

Introduction
Since the beginning of the 21st century, cycling has either appeared or been revived as a mode of transportation in large cities all over the world. Urban cycling research has also become the new “apple pie” (Spinney, 2016, p. 451) in the social sciences. Numerous studies have approached this topic with a focus on relevant actors and their interests, beliefs, and relationships with governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), scholars and urban planners, and other civic groups (Aldred, 2012, 2013; Qian, 2015; J. Yang, Chen, Zhou, & Wang, 2015; Zacharias, 2002). Moreover, researchers have paid increasing attention to how urban cycling groups, as key players or stakeholders, influence the political process, sometimes producing tension (Pucher, de Lanversin, Suzuki, & Whitelegg, 2012). As representatives of urban movements that are global in scope, activists can potentially influence policy from below in an interactive process (Carlsson, 2014). Nevertheless, most studies have focused on a single category of actors rather than on the evolution of their social interactions in the aggregate. Little attention has been paid to the sociopolitical consequences of cycling activism, especially from historical and relational perspectives in urban governance (Davies, 2011).

In China, civic groups promoting urban cycling have evolved with the country’s “cycling renaissance,” ending the era of the bicycle’s decline between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s (Zhang, Shaheen, & Chen, 2014). In this renaissance, both the government and the public recognized...
the benefits of cycling as a transportation mode. Against this backdrop, cycling advocates and their civic organizations emerged and grew in some of China’s larger cities, despite the nation’s authoritarian political regime. Today, as a new kind of social actor, urban cycling activists try to influence policy by participating in a decision-making process that has been traditionally “controlled by the government” (GZ_02, April 25, 2016). They strategically interact with governmental authorities and with nongovernmental actors such as academics, the media, and other civic organizations. According to our theoretical approach, their interactions are mainly structured by certain economic and sociopolitical circumstances, although these can be altered in contentious processes. Hence, it is worth inquiring into the nature and operation of these structural constraints and identifying the causes of policy change in urban cycling. In particular, we analyze a case of cycling activists gaining political leverage and exerting their influence on urban policies, taking into account the environment of their relational networks and political governance.

Thus far, there has been no research adopting a historical and relational perspective on the evolution of cycling activism in China. Studies that are somewhat related have focused on certain significant actors; for example, the government (Zhang et al., 2014), urban planning experts (J. Yang et al., 2015), and local cyclists (Pan, 2011; Zhu & Cao, 2008). As a result, the topic of interactive networks has remained unexplored in the cycling context. This gap motivates us to examine the case of Guangzhou, where cycling activists challenged aspects of the local power structure and initiated policy change. We investigate how their relations with state agencies and other social actors were part of that change process, given China’s rigid framework of urban governance (Logan, 2002; Ren, 2013). Finally, we aim to identify the limitations and dilemmas faced by contemporary cycling activism.

We outline our conceptual framework in the following section, referring to the literature on cycling and governance. Next, we present our methods of data collection and analysis. The following section reports on the empirical features of our case study and offers a detailed discussion of our major findings. The conclusion highlights the main contributions to the literature and the implications of our research for cycling governance and urban cycling activism, which are especially relevant to China.

**Theoretical framework**

**Cycling advocates and urban governance in China**

To date, some studies have addressed how actors aim to influence urban cycling governance. Aldred (2013), for instance, studied how bicyclists in London created a “pop-up” campaign to pressure London’s mayoral candidates over cycling issues. She found that in addition to seeking to improve cycling infrastructure, the campaign wanted to generate “a positive cycling identity in the context of stigma” (Aldred, 2013, p. 194). Therefore, the goal of cyclists was not only issue based (distributional) but also identity based (recognition). Additionally, Jones and de Azevedo (2013) argued that cycling was placed on the political agenda of many Brazilian cities due to its adoption by the middle class, who cycle for leisure and sport.

In general, most research on cycling activism has recognized its newfound political legitimacy (Darnton, 2016; Macmillan, Roberts, Woodcock, Aldred, & Goodman, 2016). However, such studies have not ascertained why and how, at given historical periods, cycling activists can influence policy making, and their analyses have rarely addressed social relations, economic cycles, and sociopolitical structures.

Furthermore, research in this field reflects a strong Western bias, with Chinese urban cycling receiving little attention. In the 20th century, there were only a few published articles on urban cycling in China, whether in English or Chinese. Several exceptions exist in the form of policy reports, which mainly focus on the “negative” (dangerous, muddled, and hard-to-manage) effects of
urban cycling and offer recommendations on how to demote urban cycling (Liao & Tan, 1998; Lu, Tan, Lao, & Cai, 1990).

In the new century, not surprisingly, more studies highlighted the government’s role: “China’s unique urban pattern results from national policies aimed at shaping urban growth” (Song & Timberlake, 1996, p. 285). For instance, Zhang and colleagues (2014), looking at major Chinese cities, explored the relationship between governance and cycling across two successive historical eras, namely, that of economic growth (1978–1995) and that of the bicycle’s decline (1995–2002). They stressed that since 2002, the responsibility for dealing with cycling has rested with municipal governments, which have increasingly committed to reviving cycling (Zhang et al., 2014). Other researchers have started to focus on less visible social actors. For example, J. Yang and colleagues (2015) analyzed how urban planners ignore the rights of cyclists. Similarly, Zacharias (2002) recognized the attitudes of cyclists and residents in Shanghai, highlighting the weakness of the traditional top-down and expert-led regulation of transportation. The role of market forces, mainly private companies, in shaping urban cycling has also been considered (Lohry & Yiu, 2015; Pan, Tang, Mai, & Mu, 2010).

Although urban cycling and nongovernmental influences have attracted researchers’ attention, these studies have mainly considered actors as discrete units of analysis, foregoing an examination of their relationships in the historical context of urban cycling governance. Hence, to fill this gap, the next subsection builds upon the theoretical tenets of the “field approach” and related sociological theories.

Contentious actors in changing contexts

Although there is diversity within the field approach, the basic sociological assumption is that “to think in terms of field is to think relationally” (Wacquant, 1989, p. 39). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), the concept of a “field” refers to “a patterned system of objective forces (much in the manner of a magnetic field), a relational configuration endowed with a specific gravity which it imposes on all the objects and agents which enter it” (p. 17). The social world in its entirety is treated as a structured space within which both organized and unorganized occupy different positions according to the size and kind of their valued resources—namely, their “capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). This approach involves the analysis of how actors implement strategies to maintain and improve their positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) in a field of multiple interactions (Bourdieu, 1998).

Capital is an important concept in the field approach. The term capital denotes “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). In addition to its Marxist orientation, this expanded concept of capital refers to all of the resources that are valuable and at stake in a specific field of social relations, allowing capital to be understood as “the medium through which struggles are organised and positions are attained” (Townley, 2014, p. 44). The distribution of capital is therefore reflected in the distribution of power among actors. Bourdieu (1977) also introduced the concept of “strategy-generating principles” (p. 72)—the “habitus”—to describe the “translation” of structured field relations into individual perceptions and guidelines, which in our view diverts attention from the strategic practices of social groups (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011) and their historical contexts. Therefore, we stress the contentious features of social interaction within any demarcated field, along with the role of social capital and political power. Such factors can induce structural change, in accordance with theories that bridge “contentious politics” and “political economy” approaches (Martínez, 2019).

Our interpretation of the field approach considers the historical context and prioritizes socio-political change, political conflict, and structural constraints. “Fields can and do change, with the result that the habitus that develops within one context, i.e. the field and its capital in one configuration, may no longer be suitable for new configurations” (Townley, 2014, p. 47). When
habitus is viewed not in individual terms but rather as an expression of collective identity and as essential to the struggle for legitimacy and even hegemony, we contend that the field approach can provide insights beyond those of prevailing institutionalist approaches.

First, organizations and interests evolve within a larger social structure (Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006) that becomes the foundation of their institutional legitimacy: “government actions may encourage (or discourage) the mobilization of interests by recognizing the legitimacy of particular claims or even by providing these persons with the opportunity to voice their complaints” (Immergut, 1998, p. 20). This concept is closely related to Bourdieu’s “symbolic capital,” and their shared constructivist approach to understanding social groups can be balanced with a more realistic account of how strategic interactions yield different degrees of legitimacy. This leads us to distinguish “who is who” when it comes to the struggle to gain sociopolitical legitimacy and influence public policy.

Within any given field, there are organized or unorganized actors who can respond strategically to institutional pressure, economic constraints, and the sociocultural distribution of status. To varying degrees, all social groups are capable of lobbying for new ideals and policies and working to legitimize their proposals. These groups are sometimes defined as “institutional entrepreneurs” and described as those “to whom the responsibility for new or changed institutions is attributed” (Hardy & Maguire, 2008, p. 198). The literature on institutional entrepreneurs has identified drivers of institutional change such as “proactive community mobilization,” involving leadership and member focus, and the strategies used to gain legitimacy, including success stories and rhetorical discourse (Tassabehji, Hackney, & Popović, 2016). Our approach considers institutional entrepreneurs as remarkably similar to “activists” as the latter are usually understood (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) and comparable to “challengers” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). However, institutionalist approaches seldom note that activists show great variety in terms of degree of formalization and level of responsibility. These approaches often fail to observe that some activists mobilize or engage in protests only occasionally, as sympathizers or one-time participants (Martínez, 2019). According to the Bourdieusian approach, we should investigate how activists acquire (and value) different forms of capital through their social relations under specific structural constraints and how they foster change.

Scholars of social movements have provided another useful strand of analysis. Although not all forms of urban activism scale up to engender social movements, civic engagement is influenced by larger economic structures and political regimes, the mobilization of collective identities and meaningful frames, and the modular repertoires of protest at play (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; Mayer & Boudreau, 2012; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). In our view, this scholarship has the advantage of examining the extent to which the working class and other groups with specific grievances can become politically active. This approach allows for deconstruction of how the distribution of economic and political power may overlap with quality of life issues such as cycling. More important, this approach can shed light on the outcomes of urban activism because of its focus on the history of social mobilization, cycles of protests, and transnational networks. These areas are usually downplayed by prevailing institutionalist and field approaches, but our empirical analysis restores their importance to our understanding of urban activism and governance in Guangzhou.

Methodology

Guangzhou is the capital of and largest city in Guangdong Province in southeastern China. It is the third largest Chinese city and holds subprovincial administrative status. In 2015, the residential population of Guangzhou’s administrative area was more than 13.5 million (Statistics Bureau of Guangzhou, 2016) (see Figure 1).

The role of urban cycling in Guangzhou’s transportation system has experienced great change over the last 3 to 4 decades, as explored in the next section. In recent years, the role of cycling in the urban mobility system has been revisited by both the government and nongovernmental actors. In
addition to the government, increasing numbers of nongovernmental actors have recently emerged: organizations advocating cycling, private companies, influential social media users, scholars, and urban planners, among others. These actors have pursued various strategies to promote cycling, with most targeting governmental policymaking. Therefore, the interaction between civic actors promoting urban cycling and the Guangzhou government is representative of the conflictual and cooperative practices of cycling activism, especially within the unique Chinese political and urban context (Ren, 2013). We adopted a qualitative approach to address our research questions because of its advantage in analyzing meanings, experiences, events, and historical changes over a long period (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The data used in this article stem from several sources.

First, we collected relevant documents and applied discourse analysis. The documents fit in five categories depending on their authorship: the central government, the local government, the Guangdong provincial government, local NGOs, and other social groups advocating for urban cycling. In total, 61 relevant documents were collected.

Second, we conducted personal interviews and group discussions to obtain more in-depth information. From October 2016 to April 2017, we talked to more than 60 respondents in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Among these, 25 interviewees were selected as vital because of their relevance of their contributions. Table 1 shows the details of these respondents.

Third, we traced online groups focusing on cycling issues in Guangzhou. In recent years, online interactions between cycling activists have become increasingly standard and important in Guangzhou, especially after the social media app WeChat became widespread in 2011. To overcome the shortcomings of face-to-face interviews and group discussions, one of us participated in five
WeChat groups (see Table 2) and followed their discussions for more than 6 months\(^1\) to obtain fruitful data over a relatively long period.

All of the documents and transcripts mentioned above were subject to a process of coding, analytical operations, and interpretation according to the research objectives, hypotheses, and theoretical concerns. This process included making a timeline of events, identifying actors and their interactions, and attributing meanings and attitudes.

### Findings

**Transitional urban cycling embedded in political economy structures**

In Guangzhou, urban cycling and its advocates emerged in an economic and sociopolitical environment that has been in transition. Over the last 3 decades, after the economic reform in 1978, Guangzhou has experienced rapid economic growth, with significant expansion of its second and third industrial sectors. Starting in the mid-1990s, however, tertiary industries increased much more rapidly than secondary ones, and this trend was further strengthened at the beginning of the 21st century (Figure 2). Car production was initially an export industry but became increasingly oriented toward domestic consumption.\(^2\) The economic interests of this industry heavily influenced urban planning and transportation policies, as occurred in Western cities in the 20th century (Oldenziel,
More automobiles and heavy industry has turned Chinese metropolitan regions into some of the most polluted in the world and at the fastest rate.  

Cycling was a core part of Guangzhou’s transportation system before the 1980s. At the time, bicycle companies (all state owned) built cycle tracks on all of the main roads and even provided members of governmental agencies and institutions with financial subsidies to purchase bikes (Liao & Tan, 1998). However, the government’s attitude toward urban cycling changed markedly in the mid-1990s, when the government (both central and local) started to focus primarily on motor vehicles and treated bicycles as a competitor. In 1995, in a meeting with some mayors, the former Prime Minister Li Peng pointed out that bicycles took up too much space on the roads, slowed

---

**Table 2.** The traced online groups focusing on cycling in Guangzhou.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group name (a)</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
<th>Constitute</th>
<th>Period traced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue—the governance and prohibition of electrical bicycles</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Members of BIKE-GZ; researchers; bicycle and electric bicycle users (for leisure or transport); police officers</td>
<td>December 1, 2016–September 1, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The earnest talk about public bicycles</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Managers of public bicycle enterprises in Guangzhou; members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference; researchers; members of cycling advocacy groups</td>
<td>April 23, 2016–October 1, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Flower City Square Group</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Members of BIKE-GZ; bicycle commuters affected by the prohibition of cycling in the Flower City Square; recreational bicycle users</td>
<td>December 2, 2016–April 20, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring bicycle back to cities—expert thinks tank</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Researchers, scholars, and professors from many Chinese cities; for example, Beijing, Shanghai, Chungking, Xiamen, etc.; journalists; governmental officers; members of cycling advocacy groups</td>
<td>November 5, 2016–October 1, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group of BIKERS</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>Members of BIKE-GZ; people with relationships with “BIKE-GZ”; for example, volunteers, bicycle users; businessmen; journalists; researchers; members of other NGOs, public servants, etc.</td>
<td>October 15, 2016–September 1, 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. aAll groups’ names are in Chinese, translated by the authors.

---

**Figure 2.** Economic transition in Guangzhou (1985–2010). Data from Guangzhou statistical yearbooks (Guangzhou Statistics Bureau, 1999, 2005, 2011).

---

Manuel, de la Bruheze, & Veraart, (2016; Pucher et al., 2012). More automobiles and heavy industry has turned Chinese metropolitan regions into some of the most polluted in the world and at the fastest rate.  

Cycling was a core part of Guangzhou’s transportation system before the 1980s. At the time, bicycle companies (all state owned) built cycle tracks on all of the main roads and even provided members of governmental agencies and institutions with financial subsidies to purchase bikes (Liao & Tan, 1998). However, the government’s attitude toward urban cycling changed markedly in the mid-1990s, when the government (both central and local) started to focus primarily on motor vehicles and treated bicycles as a competitor. In 1995, in a meeting with some mayors, the former Prime Minister Li Peng pointed out that bicycles took up too much space on the roads, slowed
traffic, and should be gradually removed from urban roads (Tan, 1998). Previously, in 1993, the Transport Master Plan of Guangzhou had articulated the goal of reducing the bicycle’s share in overall transportation from 33.8% in 1992 to 13.3% in 2010 (Ma, 2004). Thus, the Guangzhou government took many measures to “remove bicycles from this city” (GZ_08, November 26, 2015), which included replacing cycle lanes with motor lanes, banning bicycles from some main roads, overlooking bicycle theft, and removing bicycle parking sites (Zhang et al., 2014). By the end of 2005, the share of bicycling in all urban commutes fell to 8% (Ma, 2004, 2005).

However, an opportunity for a renaissance in urban cycling presented itself in the mid-2000s, after more than a decade of the automobile being considered the solution. The intervening period had not witnessed the expected benefits of efficiency, orderliness, or modernism and had instead, quite noticeably, seen increased energy consumption, traffic congestion, road accidents, and air pollution. This led to increased environmental concern within society at large, with more people, who had been recently exposed to worldwide environmental movements, calling for a “green urbanism” (Ng, 2019, p. 1). Surprising, in 2005 there was a governmental seminar about urban development in Guangzhou in which cycling was redefined as a sustainable travel mode that “should be brought back” (GZ_08, November 26, 2016). In 2008, under the provincial plan, the Guangzhou government started to build a greenway system consisting of six regional greenways and amounting to a total length of 1,690 km (Guangzhou Municipal Culture Broadcasting and Press and Publication Bureau, 2012). In the same year, Hangzhou (Zhejiang Province) followed the example of Paris in setting up public bicycle programs, demonstrating a significant political turn; many cities in China quickly followed suit. The Guangzhou government started investing in public bicycle programs in 2010, and in 2015 it announced that it would invest 120 million yuan (approximately US$18 million) to promote public bicycle programs. It was evident that the attitude of the entire government toward cycling had changed drastically, and it is against this background that a body of cycling advocates emerged and grew.

In general, throughout Guangzhou’s phases of transition, which synchronized economic developments with cycling trends, its government enjoyed almost unfettered power in terms of distributing and redistributing economic resources to infrastructures and industries, urban planning, setting regulations, and controlling public debate. This, as expected, made the government the dominant actor in the accumulation and distribution of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Townley, 2014). Subaltern activists coped with this overwhelming capacity and domination by adopting sensible strategies. Nevertheless, the local authorities quickly implemented urban policies without visible or significant opposition.

Guangzhou’s local government also experienced internal change during this time. In particular, political officials and urban planners challenged prevailing urban cycling policies, reflecting the belief that the policies of 1 and 2 decades previously, respectively, had to be rectified. Top-down governance with an absence of nongovernmental actors finally seemed to be addressing the urgent problems and contradictions of urban transportation. Despite the Guangzhou government’s adept policy turns, they undermined their public legitimacy and opened windows of opportunities for activists. This is clearly illustrated by one interviewee, a core member of a cycling advocacy organization:

“There is disbelief in the idea that “the government and the way it works are always right” among the public or at least among certain “active” people—that is, the background and the foundation of our emergence and development [as nongovernmental actors]. The government also recognizes that it is not infallible, and that is why they allow us to grow and do not “hate” us. They also need our help at times, although still to a very small extent. (GZ_02, April 25, 2016)

The emergence of cycling activists through cooperative relations with local authorities

Based on the opportunities opened up by the policy turns mentioned above, an array of civic actors engaged with the cycling issue. Among them, urban cycling activists were the most salient (Carlsson, 2014), and traditionally they had also been the most excluded in the logic of top-down governance.
Given this power structure, these cycling advocates may be characterized as “marginal institutional entrepreneurs” because the issue of urban cycling had low status and their own role as civic actors lacked legitimacy. However, the local authorities also became interested in a renaissance of urban cycling. Cycling, according to official political instructions, was once again treated as a “good” thing for Chinese cities. Therefore, activists could find ways to gain visibility and recognition: “Traditionally, transportation is entirely the government’s responsibility and a ‘professional’ area. … Civic actors? What can they do? Nobody knew at that time” (GZ_21, April 15, 2016).

For the activists, the way out of this deadlock was to increase their strategic interactions with both the government and other nongovernmental actors. The first strategy entailed approaching senior government officials, especially the mayor, and portraying themselves as useful cooperative partners in policy-making, instead of taking a confrontational stance. They used traditional mass media and newer digital social media to highlight their meetings with the authorities. This provided the activists with crucial social, cultural, and symbolic capital for the following reasons: (a) they were seen not as isolated but rather as actively engaged in social relations with politicians, civil servants, professionals, media figures, and different social organizations; (b) their proposals were rooted in accumulated knowledge, which was the product of both their own research and that received through their social networks; and (c) they became perceived by society as legitimate public actors, professional, and trustworthy.

A turning point in cycling activism occurred on January 11, 2010, when six activists presented Zhang Guang-Ning, then the mayor of Guangzhou, with a bicycle in front of gathered media and put forward six suggestions about urban cycling in Guangzhou. This event took place when the Guangzhou government had started to build its greenway network and invest in public bicycle programs. The mayor accepted their request for a meeting, seizing the moment to laud the government’s own “achievements” (GZ_01, February 3, 2016).

The media, in particular, state-owned newspapers and local television stations, were eager to report this kind of event, because it addressed growing environmental concerns. Therefore, there was intense media coverage of the mayor praising cycling activists. Combined, the mayor’s interaction and the resulting media attention created even more opportunities for activists to grow their social capital. For instance, higher-ranking officials and urban planners in state-owned research institutes also started to meet the activists, who were then invited to attend conferences, seminars, and public meetings that had formerly been strictly “closed door” for nongovernmental actors. Hence, the activists became legitimate participants in setting the sociopolitical agenda of urban cycling.

These positive outcomes from the first attempts to promote urban cycling in a manner beyond state control reinvigorated the activists’ confidence. Their accumulated capital allowed them to maintain their social relations (Bourdieu, 1989, 1998). Therefore, the activists tried to take advantage of each and every opportunity to meet with senior governmental officials. In 2012, they held another meeting with the new mayor, Chen Jian-Hua, and rode bicycles together for 20 min in front of the media. Importantly, in November of that year, the organization registered as a legal NGO (BIKE-GZ), established its first full-time staff, and obtained the financial support of several foundations.

Growing together: The evolution of cycling activism

The greater visibility of activism, often due to media exposure, does not immediately translate into influence in any field, but it endows political legitimacy and, in turn, multiplies the opportunities to interact with other relevant actors. We thus observed that BIKE-GZ played a central role in linking an array of cycling groups by becoming a node that connected the media, scholars, urban planners, cycling activists, NGOs in other areas, charitable organizations, and the general public. In doing so, cycling activists empowered themselves through the accumulation and transformation of various categories of capital, economic resources included.

First, for BIKE-GZ and other cycling advocates, as a general rule their social capital mainly accumulates as the product of two kinds of time-consuming activities: online interactions and offline events.
BIKE-GZ manages several social media discussion groups, which provide a communication platform for once-marginalized individuals to exchange information and share their experiences. The members of these online groups are diverse and include reporters, scholars, urban planners, police, governmental officials, local cyclists, and even car drivers. Activists also cooperate with other actors to organize offline events for the general public, such as “Crossing Haizhu Bridge With Your Bike” on September 22 of every year and the “Ride of Silence GZ” every November. BIKE-GZ is usually the main organizer of these events, but there are normally several co-organizers, usually environmental NGOs, charity organizations, and/or private sponsors, and sometimes a governmental department. These co-organizers not only provide financial resources (economic capital) but also augment the legitimacy (symbolic capital) of activists. If online interactions can be perceived of as “[people who care about the cycling issue] talking among themselves” (GZ_10, April 2, 2016), then offline interactions contribute even more to raising the public profile of civic actors. The media is usually happy to report on these events because they reflect the “sustainable” facet of this city (GZ_12, April 2, 2016). Therefore, BIKE-GZ has developed good connections with most local newspapers and television stations, which can be useful for public exposure.

Second, Guangzhou cycling advocates in the BIKE_GZ network tried to gain cultural capital through their interactions with experts in this field. Scholars and urban planners were eager to cooperate with the activists because this is “a kind of application and transmission of our [scholars’] academic work” (GZ_08, November 26, 2015). As a result, civic activists learned a lot from this “professional” knowledge. For instance, the cycling policies, infrastructure, and transportation plans of Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Berlin often appeared in activists’ publications and brochures and on their social media. In addition, with the help of some university professors, BIKE-GZ conducted several empirical studies regarding local cycling issues, such as the cycling environment in the central urban area (BIKE-GZ, 2015). Consequently, activists became capable of challenging the local authorities’ knowledge about urban cycling and, in the eyes of the public, developed a reputation for professionalism.

Capital includes not only resources but also the social relations that can change within a given field. Capital can be transformed from one category to another, resulting in changing social positions and power structures (Bourdieu, 1986). In Guangzhou, the cycling advocacy NGO managed to transform its social, cultural, and symbolic capital into economic capital. BIKE-GZ’s main source of income was donations from nongovernmental foundations, environmental organizations, and charities, many of which allocate funds to support civic and nonprofit groups. Urban cycling, as a form of green infrastructure, can raise interest and garner support, but “unorganized individuals usually cannot get the donations” (GZ_03, April 25, 2015). The formalization of BIKE-GZ as a legal entity, its social connections, and its increasingly “professional” image improved its capacity for raising funds. For instance, in 2015 the organization received more than 1 million yuan in funding from various agencies, covering the employment of nine full-time paid members and several part-time interns.

Policy proposals and policy changes

Guangzhou activists succeeded in changing the field of urban cycling partly by joining forces with other social groups (Townley, 2014). To pressure the government into making the city more cycling-friendly, cycling advocates built a sense of solidarity with other nongovernmental actors while putting pressure on state agencies.

The best example of this alliance formation was manifested in the discontent surrounding the riding of bicycles across a bridge in the Haizhu District. The residents had been complaining about the hazard for a long time, but they had not attracted any governmental attention until activists arrived on the scene. In 2013, the members of BIKE-GZ aimed to press the government into rebuilding the bridge. On May 24, they submitted their proposal to the Guangzhou Construction Committee and the Haizhu District Construction Bureau. On May 30, the committee responded by shifting responsibility for this issue to the transportation committee. On June 9, the District Construction Bureau replied that it was the municipal government’s responsibility. On June 14, the NGO applied for information disclosure to the transportation committee about the reconstruction plan, only to be informed that it was the responsibility of the
District Construction Bureau. As a core member of the NGO summarized, “For nearly a month, after many rounds of communication with various governmental agencies, we didn’t get a definitive response of yes or no to our proposal.” The activists were not discouraged, however, by their foray into the bureaucratic labyrinth.

What ultimately initiated change in the policy toward the bridge was the cycling advocates’ decision to elicit support from other civic actors. The first group to lend its support was the public, particularly residents living near the bridge. BIKE-GZ launched an online poll on social media, which made the claim visible to the public. Residents and anyone who “suffered from this bridge” could express their opinion and offer suggestions on social media. BIKE-GZ also organized some “behavioral arts” near the bridge to let residents, especially daily commuters, understand their aims.

The second category of ally was the elite within the political establishment, or at least a portion of that elite. In particular, the activists contacted members of the local National People’s Congress (NPC), who enjoyed the right to introduce motions and make inquiries within the Chinese political system. Starting in 2012, the email addresses of the NPC members were publicly released. Cycling advocates seized this opportunity and emailed them their bridge reconstruction proposal. Some NPC members lent their support and helped the activists communicate with local governmental agencies in the areas of transportation and construction. Due to the legal and political status of the NPC members, their support can be instrumental in any effort to influence local government.

Professional scholars and urban planners represent the third category of cooperative partners that helped the activists. The leader of BIKE-GZ cultivated relationships with an urban planning professor from Sun Yat-Sen University, a well-known and reputable university in Guangzhou, and several urban planners in a local state-owned research institute. These experts threw their support behind BIKE-GZ’s proposal to rebuild the bridge and helped justify its feasibility and rationality (GZ_02, April 25, 2016; GZ_08, November 26, 2015; GZ_18, February 5, 2016).

The NGO disseminated the news about these endorsements on their websites and social media, attracting the attention of mainstream media and helping spread the story of the activists’ proposals winning “scientific and professional support.” This story resonated with the public, enhanced the legitimacy of the activists’ claims, and increased pressure on the government. Consequently, governmental officials began to take the issue more seriously. On July 10, the Guangzhou Construction Committee held a meeting with the members of BIKE-GZ and accepted the reconstruction proposal. By August 2014, the reconstruction project was finished. A core member of the cycling advocacy NGO said the following:

“Our power, if it really exists, comes from the public. We need to try to enable the public to accept that cycling is good, public participation is good, expressing your own voice is good, not all governmental decisions are good … and finally, we [cycling activists] are good for them, ha-ha … the more people support us, the more seriously the government listens to us. (GZ_02, April 25, 2016)

**Structural dilemmas and limitations**

The activists’ achievements, however, may conceal the constraints and limitations they faced. As an emerging and subordinated category of civic actors aiming to bring change to the field of cycling, their action repertoire unfolded under circumstances that they did not choose (Bourdieu, 1977, 1998). Today, cycling activists in Guangzhou are, in fact, in a contradictory position. On the one hand, they have labeled themselves as cooperators with the local government and transformed the central government’s current procycling attitude into political clout. On the other hand, there are no regular institutional channels for their interaction with officials in Guangzhou. Therefore, more unstructured encounters and alternative proposals must be actively pursued. When activists express criticism of local regulations and policies, the government usually reacts passively. At this point, activists often perform soft forms of street politics to encourage a more positive reaction. Because their actions have been peaceful and relatively small scale, they do not provoke the authorities into taking repressive measures. To illustrate this, a traffic police officer declared the following:
When they [cycling activists] really want to do something, they need to make things big, no matter if on the Internet or in the real world. They need to find ways to have many people pay attention to and discuss the problem. Then the media, especially the governmental media, will report it, and the government may react. They may be seen as “society constructors” or “trouble-makers.” Fortunately, the basic attitude of the government is to promote cycling. In addition, their [civic actors] actions are generally soft and peaceful and won’t cause “real” problems for “social stability,” which is really important. (GZ_10, April 2, 2016)

The above statement reveals the potential risk facing civic actors. The central government is still the most central and dominant actor in the structure of Chinese governance. Activists shield themselves with the central government’s own documents in favor of cycling, using them to justify their criticisms and protests. However, if the central government reverses its view toward cycling once again, which has happened twice over the last 2 decades, what does that mean for the activists?

Moreover, the “nonurgent nature” (GZ_03, April 25, 2016) of the cycling issue increases the complexity of the dilemma, compared with more “urgent” issues such as labor protests (R. O. Yang, 2015) or environmental pollution (Hu, Liu, & Chen, 2017). For nonurgent issues such as urban cycling, if the government does not react, civic actors usually cannot bring about change because “the support from the public, and the pressure we [activists] can exert on the government, are at a lower stage” (GZ_01, February 3, 2016).

For instance, in October 2014, a regulation forbade residents from riding bicycles in or through Flower City Square, in Guangzhou’s central urban area, and on part of the greenway system. These restrictions led to public debate on the Internet and in the media. Several cycling activists wanted to discuss this issue with the government. Their requests for a meeting were initially rejected, forcing them to explore feasible alternatives. At the beginning of 2016, they were invited to a meeting with Guangzhou City Investment Asset Management Co., Ltd., a state-owned enterprise responsible for management of the square. Two of the company’s senior managers warmly received the activists, who quickly came to an unfortunate realization:

They just want to use us to justify and claim their decisions rather than listen to our requests seriously. … This square is the “face” of Guangzhou, and when important visitors come, they will be invited by the government to have a look at it. This decision [the prohibition of cycling] is supported by some senior officials, as they still think bicycles are dangerous and disorderly. Then, this decision cannot be really challenged, at least not by us. (GZ_02, April 25, 2016)

The only outcome of this meeting was that some small warning signs (i.e., “No Cycling”) were replaced by larger ones and put in more visible locations. As this case manifests, the strong control of central urban areas by the local government and a state-owned firm and the informal nature of the interaction between authorities and activists revealed the major structural constraints that precluded a more positive outcome.

Conclusions

Drawing on the theoretical insights provided by the field approach (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Townley, 2014) and social movements scholarship (Martínez, 2019; Mayer & Boudreau, 2012; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007), we examined the evolution of cycling activism in Guangzhou. This activism, we argue, produced significant changes in the field of urban cycling due to its effective mobilization of social networks, alliances, and coalitions. The Chinese political regime and larger economic cycles defined the opportunities and constraints that activists had to take into consideration. In this authoritarian regime, there is not much institutional openness to grassroots participation, but this case shows that the local authorities were forced to rectify their prior policies and accept the activists’ proposals, especially because they enjoyed the support of the central government. The environmental problems resulting from rapid industrial growth and the increased production and consumption of automobiles raised concerns among the central authorities, at least in theory, which facilitated the activists’ framing of their claims and some partial wins.

This analysis adds new layers of explanation that are absent in the research on urban cycling and activism (Aldred, 2012; Oldenziel et al., 2016; Pucher et al., 2012), especially in the Chinese context.
Urban studies can also benefit from the evidence of urban activism influencing transportation policies in China, despite the dominance of motor vehicles (Lu et al., 1990; Song & Timberlake, 1996). As a contribution to larger theories approaching activism and social movements as strategic fields, we identify the historical periods and transitional phases in which activists’ interactions with other groups were able to put urban cycling on the sociopolitical agenda and keep it there. Furthermore, we illuminate the mechanisms by which activists accumulated and converted various forms of capital to gain legitimacy, institutional access, and the capacity to mobilize supporters. Finally, the structural limitations of China’s governance framework led cycling activists to develop cooperative repertoires of protest rather than highly contentious ones. We explain this trend by focusing on another structural condition: neither the political establishment nor the logics of capital accumulation were threatened by urban cycling activism, despite its sociopolitical expansion. These three aspects, we contend, are rarely considered in institutionalist approaches to social movements or in Bourdieusian approaches that either ignore collective action or do not consider it to be embedded in social processes.

Cycling activists in Guangzhou were most successful when, as part of a formal organization serving as a node in a network, they linked marginalized individuals and social groups. By building alliances with political elites and forming coalitions with academics, urban planners, residents, and social media users (netizens), cycling activism became visible and legitimate and expanded its sociopolitical influence. A mutually reinforcing relationship emerged between these social relations on the one hand and the activists’ social, cultural, symbolic, and economic capital on the other, providing the activists with the momentum needed to empower themselves and enjoy the leverage to demand effective policy change, at times by increasing tensions with the local authorities. During this process, the activists also made alliances with other groups and encouraged positive media coverage, helping them resonate with the general public. Despite starting out as marginalized cycling activists, they brought a critical mass of supporters to life, fostered alternative policy proposals, and achieved incremental change in the area of urban cycling.

The story of cycling activism in Guangzhou is not all positive. The issue of cycling has traditionally been seen as nonurgent in urban and transportation policymaking (J. Yang et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2014). This has slowed the pace of mobilization, resulting in brief episodes of protest or in campaigns with uncertain potential (Martínez, 2019). Moreover, Chinese urban governments, noted for their rigid hierarchies, do not provide citizens with regular and efficient channels of participation (Ren, 2013). In addition, disruptive protests are severely repressed. Therefore, as we have seen, cycling activists have been cautious when resorting to street protests, simultaneously looking for institutional cooperation. In hindsight, if the relationship between activists and authorities had been more contentious, the activists’ capacities to advance proposals would have been at risk.

Finally, our case study in the city of Guangzhou has advantages and disadvantages in terms of further generalization. Compared to other Chinese cities, Guangzhou has a long historical legacy of openness to Western influence and shows a higher level of economic globalization (with the exceptions of Beijing and Shanghai). It also enjoys a relatively active civil society (especially regarding labor and homeowner-ship conflict) and a larger number of civic organizations than other Chinese cities. These features facilitated local activism in Guangzhou, but we cannot predict the same development across the country. However, we observe soaring automobile rates and worsening environmental pollution, which have led the central authorities into a series of dynamic policy turns. If we add the possibility of strategic collective action, even for seemingly minor issues such as urban cycling, then we can imagine a scenario in which China experiences another round of urban cycling advocacy.

Notes

1. Except for the “Flower City Square Group,” which only lasted for 4 months.
2. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the total number of motor vehicles produced in China was 87,166 units in 1970; 222,288 in 1980; 509,242 in 1990; and 1,452,697 in 1995 (MotorWorld, 1997). Other sources recorded 938,0000 automobiles sold in 2008, increasing to 28,080,000 units by 2008 (China Association
of Automobile Manufacturers, 2019). China’s automobile production and sales volume ranked first in the world for 10 consecutive years (Gao, 2019). In 2018, the stock of motor vehicles in China reached 327 million, of which more than 200 million were small passenger vehicles (The Ministry of Public Security of China, 2019).

3. Despite the reluctance of the authorities to measure air pollution before 2013, acute unhealthy Air Quality Index values have since led to the spread of alert systems (Scientific Experiment Group on PM2.5, 2019).

4. Information disclosure on the NGO’s website and their published financial auditing report (BIKE-GZ, 2017) was also confirmed during a face-to-face interview (GZ_01, March 26, 2017).

5. We first saw this statement on an online news site. The webpage, however, has not been accessible since 2016. However we confirmed it with the interviewed member and her colleagues during a face-to-face group discussion (GZ_02, GZ_03, GZ_04, April 25, 2016).

Acknowledgments

An earlier edition of the article was presented at the American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting 2017. Suggestions from the audience are appreciated. This article has benefited from data contributed by Jiajun Chen. We are also grateful for the constructive comments given by two anonymous reviewers. The usual disclaimer applies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

About the authors

Hongze Tan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Nankai University. His research interests lie in urban governance, mobilities studies, and sustainable development. He is currently working on exploring the socio-political dimension of urban transportation, especially urban cycling. His most recent work focuses on the cycling advocacy activists in a motorized city, “Has Urban Cycling Improved in Hong Kong? A Sociopolitical Analysis of Cycling Advocacy Activists’ Contributions and Dilemmas” (co-authored with Miguel A. Martínez López), which is in Contested Cities and Urban Activism (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Miguel A. Martínez López is Professor of Housing and Urban Sociology at the Institute for Housing and Urban Research at Uppsala University. He has conducted studies about urban sociology, social movements, and participatory-activist methodologies. He is the editor of The Urban Politics of Squatters’ Movements (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and co-editor of Contested Cities and Urban Activism (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Most of his publications are freely available at: www.miguelangelmartinez.net.

References


