

Making Urban Commons: The Art Project of “Everyone’s East Lake”

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1. Introduction

The urban commons is a public resource that citizens collectively manage and enjoy, but it is also a collective political experience beyond the state and the market (Huron, 2017). Thus, the urban commons is not just a thing, but a particular social relation and the struggle towards the urban commons is also an ongoing social practice that makes alternative relations (Harvey, 2012; Caffentzis and Federici, 2013; Tan, 2018). It is worth noting that the digital commons are emerging with the development of Internet technologies (Stalder, 2010). People in the digital world can access data, information, and knowledge at a lower cost and are more likely to produce based on the motivation of communication and sharing rather than on profit and exchange (Benkler, 2008).

Of course, the online and offline commons are often interconnected. The digital commons support collective practices in the real world, while offline actions in turn stimulate co-creation and collaboration in the digital space (Bollier and Pavlovich, 2008). This essay examines the relationship between cultural production in the digital creative commons and the real-world struggle toward the urban commons, using the example of the “Everyone’s East Lake” (EEL) art project in Wuhan, China, which began in 2010.

2. Privatization of Common Space: OCT’s Real Estate Development

Wuhan is known as the “City with Hundred Lakes” in China. As the Yangtze River crosses from the city center, the river has silted up inland and gradually formed more than a hundred lakes. The largest of these lakes, East Lake, covers an area of 33 square kilometers and is currently the largest lake in the city in China (Figure 1). After the rapid urban expan-

sion in the second half of the 20th century, the location of East Lake has changed from a distant suburb of the city to a central area. Thus, by the beginning of the 21st, East Lake and the open lakeshore space have become increasingly popular leisure spot for the public. Especially in the hot summer of Wuhan, many people go swimming in the lake to cool off. In short, East Lake is an important urban public space in the daily life of Wuhan’s people.

However, as a public space, East Lake was threatened with privatization. In March 2010, one of China’s leading real estate companies, Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), decided to invest in a “Happy Valley” theme park, a high-end residential area and a resort hotel on the shores of the lake (Figure 1). Since urban land in China is state-owned, the government plays a dominant role in land development. The Wuhan government, believing that the project would become a calling card for Wuhan and promote tourism (The People’s Government of Hubei Province, 2017), thus supported the developer’s plans and provided land for its construction. The project would occupy a total of about 13 km² of lakeside land and even fill in about 1.8 km² of the lake (Zheng, 2014). Thus, many of the lakefront spaces would require tickets to access or become private landscapes in gated communities.

Immediately after the project was made public, it sparked an uproar in society. Many social groups sought to emphasize the importance of natural resource preservation and to argue for equal access to lakeshore space for the general public. In response to public opinion, OCT secretly constructed the project while falsely claiming that “the lake’s shoreline will not be changed and the lake surface will not be occupied” (The Beijing News, 2010). At the same time, the government began to control public discussion. The media stopped speak-



Figure 1. East Lake and OCT's theme park and residential area. Source: <http://ldhwy.com/index.aspx>.

ing out as a result, and what's worse, many offline activities were also terminated due to harassment by the relevant authorities (Li, 2012a: 21). In this context, Local resistance was obviously faced with a double task: deal with top-down oppression on the one hand, and promote sustainable public participation and collective action on the other.

3. Collective Resistance to Enclosure Based on Digital Creative Commons

In June 2010, Wuhan architect Li Juchuan and his partner Li Yu initiated the EEL art project as a way to continue to promote public discussion. In this project, they began by inviting the public to visit the shores of East Lake to create works on site. There was no restriction on the form and theme of the works. Li Juchuan argued that:

This is a project that everyone can participate in. [...] Because this project aims not to create art, but to take common action in the form of art. In fact, it does not matter whether each person's specific action is a "work" or not. It can generate

power as long as it is an action (Li, interview by Chen, 2010). It is evident that from the beginning, Li positioned the goal of the project to stimulate public participation and collective action, rather than art creation itself. Meanwhile, Li and his team built a website for the art project. However, they were only responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the website, while all participants collectively produced the data and information on the website.¹ The creators put the locations, forms, and concepts of their works on public display on that online platform (Figure 2). Different creations could thus refer to and exchange with each other in the digital space, further inspiring new ideas and works. Li emphasized that:

We all share the same website platform, and all are on a completely equal footing. [...] This was partly due to the need for the project to run smoothly in China's particular context, and to avoid the suppression that would result from the formation of an "organization." On the other hand, it was also due to the belief that individual resistance was possible and more meaningful, and therefore did not want to create a pow-

¹ URL: <http://donghu2010.org/>

er system that would lead to the suppression of individual autonomy by forming an organization (Li, interview by Po, 2012).

In other words, the EEL project can be interpreted as a commons-based peer artistic production (Benkler 2008). The architect Li Juchuan is not the leader endowed with authority, but plays the role of what Schneider and Till (2009) call an “agent of progressive politics.” In this digital creative commons, people are not motivated by self-interest to contribute, but rather by the realization of collective values in the real world. Moreover, collective action based on non-hierarchical networks in the digital space helps to avoid forming “organizations” with unequal power relations, and the consequent official suppression of “organizations.”

The project was quite successful. In the two months since June 25, 2010, a total of 59 pieces of “artwork” were created along East Lake (Li, 2012a: 21). The works were diverse, including punk performances, graffiti, poetry readings, installations, and more (Figure 3). These spontaneous “artistic”

actions were assembled to form a collective intervention and occupation of East Lake as an urban commons before developers reclaimed the land.

4. A Social Practice of Communing: An Unending Struggle

Unfortunately, the EEL project failed to stop OCT’s real estate development. With the end of a wave of artistic actions, in 2011, a series of projects such as the “Happy Valley”, hotels and gated communities were also completed on schedule. However, many citizens and artists remained concerned about East Lake, and the EEL project continued. Li Juchuan believes that:

What is needed is a long-term and widespread resistance. [...] Many people have forgotten about the filling of the lake and only know what an advanced theme park is being built in Wuhan [...] Our project is also proposed in response to this situation, and our aim is to remind everyone once again of the fact that the lake is being filled (Li, interview by Po, 2012).

As a result, the second and third rounds of the “Everyone’s

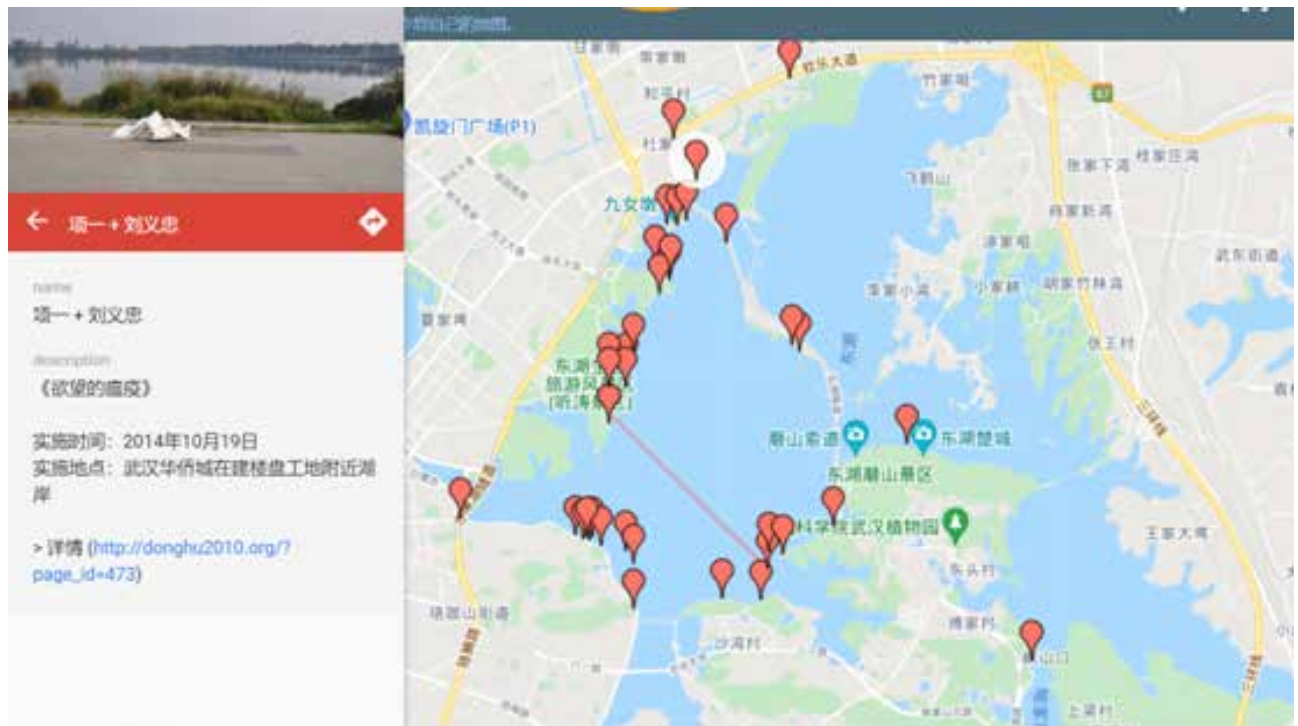


Figure 2. The creators mark the positioning and description of their work on the website. Source: <http://donghu2010.org/>.

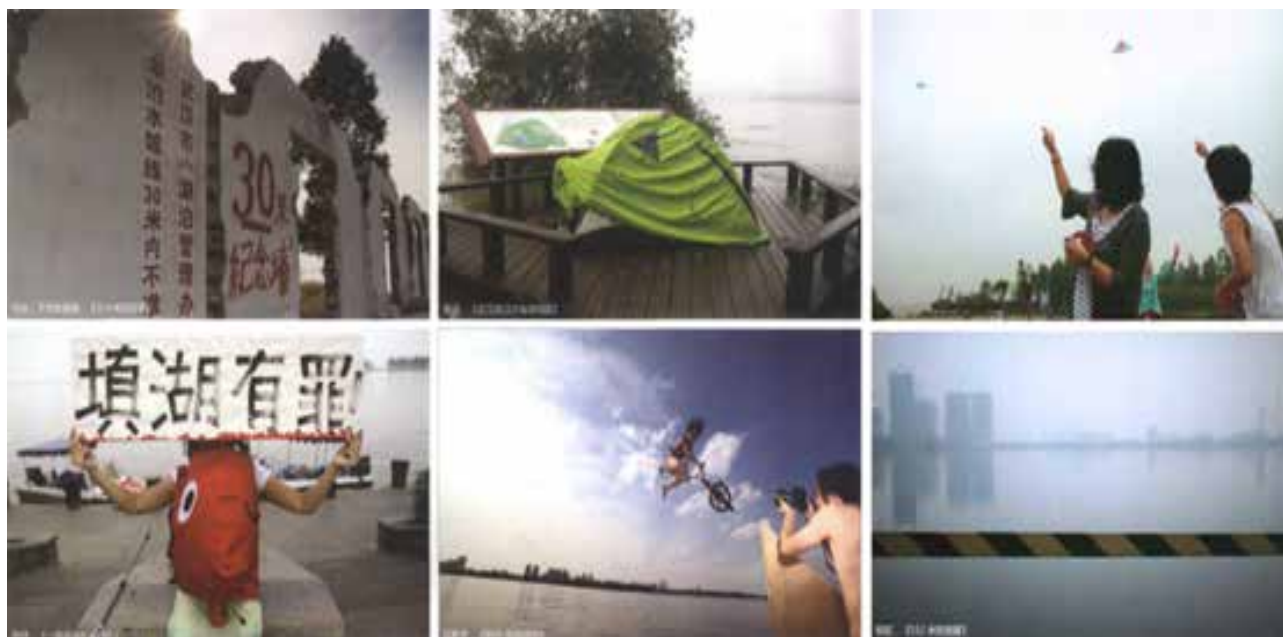


Figure 3. Some of the “artworks” in the “Everyone’s East Lake” project. Source: Li, 2012a; 2012b.

East Lake” project were launched in April 2012 and July 2014, respectively. At the same time, OCT, concerned about the brand image, once again attempted to suppress the new round of protests.

The second time it was launched, the tension and sensitivity actually remained. [...] So this time, after we launched the project, OCT reacted very quickly, finding someone to bring me a message, saying that they wanted to meet and talk and hoped that we would cancel or postpone the project, and also hinting that they would let the authorities intervene, and saying that working with them could make the art project bigger and better (Li, interview by Po, 2012).

Subsequently, OCT did contact the administrator of Douban.com², and removed the promotion page of the EEL project, which also caused inconvenience to the second round of the project. However, Li Juchuan and his team still did their best to get the word out through other alternative channels. In the second and third rounds of the art project that followed, 72 more works were created along the shores of East Lake (Li, 2012b: 32; Douban.com, 2014) (Figure 3).

In other words, the first wave of collective action and artistic resistance did not fundamentally shake the dominance of the political and business alliance, which is the main reason for the continuation and expansion of the EEL project. It is thus evident that the urban commons is a dynamic and unstable social relation, accompanied by continuous suppression and resistance. The struggle towards the commons is therefore not a one-off, but an ongoing social practice of commoning (Harvey, 2012).

In conclusion, The EEL art project illustrates three salient features of the practice of commons-making in urban China. First, in China's state-led urban development, the privatization of East Lake as an urban commons is not only attributed to developers but also is supported by the government. Thus, peer-to-peer cultural production based on the digital commons serves to circumvent the censorship and control of authorities while promoting collective action. Third, the struggle for urban commons is also an ongoing social practice. The realization of collective values in the real world stimulates the production and reproduction of culture in the digital commons, which in turn further facilitates the collec-

² A social platform in China, where information about the call for works for the EEL project will be posted.

tive resistance offline. However, it is worth noting that the “Everyone’s East Lake” art project has not fundamentally resolved the threat of enclosure and privatization of the urban commons. In the interview, Li Juchuan also admitted, “I think only direct social action can effectively intervene in specific social realities, and this project is clearly unable to undertake such a task.” (Li, interview by Po, 2012) Therefore, there is still a need to continue exploring the practice patterns of commoning in China, especially how the commons movement can contribute to structural transformation.

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