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Protecting and Scaffolding: How Parents Facilitate Children's Activities in Public Space in Urban China

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Abstract

Purpose: During the past decades, China has seen a rapid urbanization that has (re)shaped not only its city landscape but also (re)created public space where children live, play, and learn. However, little research has focused on how urban public space influences young children's learning and development and how parents navigate children's development in the public space. Therefore, this research aims to study how public space influences parents' engagement with their young children.

Design/Approach/Methods: This study is informed of Bronfenbrenner's Processes, Person, Context, and Time (PPCT) model that sees children's learning as complex and multilateral interactions among various stakeholders including schools, families, and environment. It employed ethnographic approach to study the interactions between children and their parents in a public playground in a Western Chinese city.

Findings: It found that parents realized public space had been reshaped by urbanization. While they accompanied their children to play, they actively monitored children's safety and cultivated children's physical and social development. In this process, male parents tended to contribute more than they would do in other settings.

Originality/Value: This study fills the gap by providing a nuanced study exploring how parents fulfill their responsibilities in an integral space of children's development, which has rarely been explored.

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Introduction

Globally, early years are seen as a crucial period for children's lifelong development. Investing in early years education can break the cycle of poverty, close the inequality gap, and improve citizens' standards of living and productivity (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017; Sylva et al., 2004; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017). Early years educational institutions and communities have to work together and build connections in order to produce quality early years education (Ang & Sims, 2016). China has undergone rapid urbanization process during the past decades. During this process, the notion, format, and functions of public space have been continuously reshaped. Increasingly, there has been public space designated specifically for young children. In China's newly built residential complex, it is also common to find pocket gardens or children's playgrounds with swings, slides, seesaws, and sandpit installed. Children and their family members have become the frequent users of the space.

Public space, therefore, has become a window that presents how children in contemporary China play, learn, and live their life. It is also where families in urban China spend leisure time and play with their children. The Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) was launched in 1996 by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), together with other global agencies, to tackle the challenges and uncertainties brought by the urbanization and children's encroached play space. It is dedicated to fulfilling children's rights and providing safe, clean, and stimulating spaces in cities for children to learn and develop. During the past decades, by promoting and recognizing child-friendly cities around the globe, the scheme has significantly boosted the importance of urban space in children's well-being and learning. *The Child Friendly Cities and Communities Handbook* (UNICEF, 2018) puts one of the goals of CFCI as to ensure that "every child and young person has opportunities to enjoy family life, play and leisure" (p. 12). Integrating the child-friendly public space into the designing and planning in the urbanization process reflects the respects and recognition of its value in children's life. However, as important stakeholders of education, parents' roles and their interactions with children are seldom considered in the design and the use of urban public space. Little literature touches on how public space enables parents to scaffold their children's learning in an informal, out-of-(pre)school setting.

This research dwells on a public playground in a Western Chinese city with a focus on the implication of parents' views and interactions with children in it. It aims to discover the affordances of

the design and functions of public space on children's learning and the role parents play in facilitating children's development in it. Below, I will first introduce the **PPCT model** to situate this study in the larger theoretical framework. Then, I will focus on the importance of and way of parental involvement in public space. Afterward, I will present the relevant data to discuss how public space in Chinese urban area mediates parents' parenting practice.

Literature review

Public space, PPCT model, and children's learning

Space is not merely the context and background, but, similar as other social categories like objects and human beings, space can actively interact with others (Appadurai, 1988; Mead, 1934). Space embodies characters and personalities that make them "socially alive" (Knappett, 2002). Public space is where different individuals and groups come together and connect with each other in one way or another (Cabanas, 2020). Public space is not only the platform and stage that facilitates people's interaction; rather, it itself has the capacity to interact with people, and it has the structural agency via its human agents to exert its influence (Blumer, 1969; Cohen, 1989; Gieryn, 2002). Therefore, public space in this study is meaningfully appropriated by children and their guardians that use it, and it, in turn, produces the symbolic, material, and pedagogic values that influence children's learning and development.

In Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, human development takes place during the interactions among Processes, Person, Context, and Time (PPCT). Even though the four elements of PPCT simultaneously influence human beings' developmental outcomes, proximal processes, among other factors, are the center of PPCT model and are viewed as the driving forces of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999, 2000, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). Also, proximal processes occur not only among people but also between people and objects and symbols people interact with. Person characteristics are comprised of resource characteristics and demand characteristics with the former representing "genetic defects, low birthweight, physical handicaps, severe and persistent illness, or damage to brain function" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 812) and the latter the qualities that either encourage or disrupt reactions from the social environment. Context includes the classic systems that Bronfenbrenner discussed in his early careers, including microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. For Bronfenbrenner, human development can be achieved through improved ecological environment (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Time is integrated into the bioecological model as "the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups … over the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 793).

By providing a specific structure of learning environment and interacting with children in it, parents create a context for children to learn and develop (Erdreich & Golden, 2020).

Parenting and parental involvement

Parents are seen as important players in their children's education: They are the active participants in (pre)schooling and can bring home, schools, and the community together (Epstein, 2010). Parental involvement has been widely held to be beneficial to children's development (Hornby, 2011). For children, it improves their attitudes, skills, dispositions, and overall performance in preschools and schools alike (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hornby, 2011; Griffith, 1996; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). It can enhance children's school readiness and improve their literacy, numeracy, and reading abilities.

The work of transferring the out-of-school educational provisions into a tangible educational benefit is, however, not gender-neutral. Rather, it has been largely shouldered by mothers. In fact, the cultivation of children's interests is also coined as "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996). By judging the proper "taste" (like taste in arts), picking up the right services, and attending and monitoring children's learning, mothers converted economic capital into the cultural and symbolic capital that is used as the marker of social stratification (Erdreich & Golden, 2017; Golden & Erdreich, 2014; Leyton & Rojas, 2017).

Parents in China today are influenced by a mixed set of values from both China's traditional Confucianism and Western influences. During the past decades, Chinese parents' parenting practices and beliefs and views on early childhood education have undergone dramatic shifts due to the unprecedented socioeconomic changes that have taken place in Chinese society (Kuan, 2015). These changes have occurred within the context of the nation-wide urbanization, an emerging market economy, Confucian traditions, and increasing globalization (Fong, 2004). Current studies on parenting have predominantly focused on parental involvement in either educational settings or home settings. Public space, which used to be children's natural habitat, has rarely attracted attention to parenting studies. Little is known about how parents engage with children in public space and how parents' practice influences children's learning in it.

One way to conceptualize parents' roles in education is through parental involvement, which is a notion that broadly refers to the participation of parents in their children's education, development, and growth (Hornby, 2011). For children, it improves their attitudes, skills, dispositions, and overall performance in preschools and schools alike (Griffith, 1996; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hornby, 2011; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). It can enhance children's school readiness and improve their literacy, numeracy, and reading abilities. In current literature, parental involvement mainly deals with the relationship between parents and professionals in (pre)schools. Another area of parental involvement focuses on the activities parents conduct with their children in home settings, such as

shared reading activities. However, few study explores how parents engage with their children in the public space under the current urbanization process in China.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic study exploring the learning affordances of public space in China's urban area. Ethnography studies a group of people, race, or community. As its name suggests, ethnography writes and presents (-graphy) the cultures, rituals, and life of a human group (ethno-). Using ethnography allows me to look at the unique features of public space through the lens of both an outsider and insider. It also permits a certain level of flexibility for researchers with the consideration of the uniqueness of the research context. This means that while ethnography traditionally depends on participant observation, interviews, and field notes to collect data in one field over an extended period of time (Hartas, 2010), it can also use other available methods and tools, have a shorter duration, and be partially immersed, as long as it can produce data and facilitate the analysis process, shed light into the culture of the group, and answer the research questions (DeDominicis, 2016; Hammersley, 2007). This echoes some researchers' claims that ethnography is more a way of thinking, a system of epistemology, and a dedication to the study of the culture of a group of people in their own terms, rather than a collection of fixed methods (Boellstorff, 2008; DeDominicis, 2016; Hammersley, 2007).

This research used ethnography to study how parents facilitated young children's learning and play in the urban public space of a community named River Beau, which covers an area of three square kilometers in a Western Chinese city center. It is a natural habitat for children, who, together with their family members, are present when they are off their preschools. This study focuses on an open-air playground, which is situated in a community garden. It consists of a sandpit, a set of interconnected slides, two swings, one seesaw, one climbing net, and various rides in between. There is also a circular bench around the playground where parents can sit and relax.

Following the ethnographic traditions, participant observation was conducted in the playground for ten months. During the course of the data collection, I visited the site once to twice a week. Each time I would spend at least four hours there. I would take field notes of children and parents' activities, interviewed parents, took pictures of the playground and parents' interaction with children in it. In the data analysis, I adopted an interpretative and hermeneutic view of the data. This approach considers that different people have different interpretations of the meanings of data, depending on their backgrounds and contexts. Therefore, the text has many possible interpretations (Patton, 2002). From a hermeneutic perspective, a researcher is constructing a "reality"

with his or her interpretations of the text provided by the research (Check & Schutt, 2012). Therefore, the focus on the analysis of the research was how the meanings were being negotiated in the community and how I, as a researcher, should interpret and construct the "reality" from the texts (Check & Schutt, 2012). In order to meet the ethical standard, I asked the parents to sign the consent forms before interviewing them, and when I took photos, I would make sure people's faces and other identifiable information would not be included and I would delete any upon requests from children or their parents.

Findings

Diminishing or flourishing? Impacts of urbanization on the public space and children's life

During the interview of the parents in the public space, many parents mentioned that taking children to the public space had become a family routine for them. Most parents expressed the idea that they would take their children to the parks, street gardens, or other public space for fun whenever it was possible for them. In the current ethnographic study, I invent the phrase "leisurization of public space" to denote the phenomenon that going to public space has been increasingly deployed as a family strategy to spend their leisure time. And the quality and structure of public space and the way parents use it have significance on the quality of the families' leisure time and what children can get out of it.

In the following sections, I will first demonstrate how parents view the physical differences of public place between the past and now and then discuss how the current landscape of public integrates and isolates children at the same time. In the interview and the informal chat with the parents, I asked the parents to compare the public space between the contemporary one and the one in their childhood. I invited them to reflect on the different ways and frequency of using public space. Parents' comparison disclosed their understanding of the changing nature of public space and how the ways of learning and growing up were reshaped accordingly.

In the study, it becomes increasingly evident that parents tend to contrast the current public space with the one in their generation, possibly due to the rapid urbanization taking place in China during the past decades. It is manifested in a comment made by Dudu, "when you talk about parks and so many different places where people can share, you will definitely feel how Chinese people's life has improved during the years. There was only one city park in my hometown when I was a kid and we had to climb over the fence to skip the entrance fee. Now we had plenty of pocket gardens in the neighborhood and free parks around the city. Of course, it completely changed the way families use the space. It is no long a special family event to go to a park; it is just a normal routine now" (from the interview with Dudu on 30/05/2019).[1]

There are also parents who see public place as a less structured arena. For example, Tim said during an informal chat that public space in the past denoted to a larger range of places than it is now. He said, "children in my generation spent our time in public space the whole time as we played outside. We didn't have any commercial playground and our parents wouldn't pay to find a place for us to play. We improvised and made every bit of place into our playground. Instead, today a lot of playgrounds would charge a fee if children want to use it. It becomes very commercial. I don't like it as I think children can naturally play and we should not make it a business. So we take our child to this free garden. You really don't have to pay to enjoy yourself" (from the interview with Tim on 02/06/2019).

Children's access to the public space is very different today compared with their parents' generation. In the parents' generations, children could define and create public space themselves. They improvised and assigned the space with various functions to play. For example, the side of street could be used as a playground and even a football field. Children might improvise a mineral water bottle as football. This was in stark contrast with public space today. In this study, the public space occupies a designated area of land and is specifically designed for children (see Figure 1). Every part of the space is purposefully decorated and is assigned a specific function.

Figure 1. Children's playground in the garden.

The surface of the playground is floored with soft and slip-resistant rubber. Resting areas are installed around the playground with chairs and circled steps where parents and children alike can take a break. Toilet facilities are located nearby, which, according to the interviewees, are particularly useful for families with young children. Sports facilities include the popular wings, slides, climbing net, sandpit, and some rides for small children. The size and color of the equipment in the playground are calibrated for the use of children.

Many of the public space today has clearly marked boundaries. The playground of the study is located at a fixed place and consists of entrances and exits while the previous public space was more open-ended. The layout and the purposefully installed facilities in the public space today all make it easier for parents to monitor and oversee children's activities. In the interview, parents recalled that in their generation, adults were usually not present during children's play outside in the public space, and children were entitled to enjoy more freedom to explore the public space themselves. Today, children are subject to more control, and the design of the public space facilitates parents' surveillance. The circled sitting areas around the playground help parents to meet, chat, and relax; in the meanwhile, it enables parents to patrol around. The chairs in front of the climbing net not only provide a place for parents to sit and relax but also, more importantly, enable them to monitor their children's performance and safety. The layout and structure of the playground made it easier for parents to engage with and monitor their children during the activities. In the meantime, children today have fewer opportunities to improvise their use of space. As Jilei, a father, said of the public space during the interview, "now it is more like a stage where children are following a fixed script while when we were kids, we were both directors and actors and we mainly improvised on the stage" (from the interview with Jilei on 30/05/2019).

Asked about the impacts of urbanization on children's life and childhood, in general, parents expressed conflicting views of integration and isolation. Some parents said that as there are more purposefully designed public space for children now, especially in the parks, street gardens, and other cultural and commercial facilities, children are enabled to play and mingle with others, who otherwise have to stay at home. These parents tend to emphasize the improvement of the hardware facilities brought by urbanization. For other parents, urbanization means "lonely children watching TV in high-rise apartment buildings, without knowledge of the existence of other children" (from the interview with Liwei on 15/06/2019). These parents kept a nostalgic view toward their own childhood, regarding the contemporary urban life for children as isolated, lonely, and boring. For these parents, the space for children has diminished, rather than flourished, with the increasing level of urbanization. The two conflicting views show that urbanization is a double-edged sword, and the space it creates, or eradicates, has complex implications on parents' views of contemporary children's well-being.

Parents' comments of public space in both their childhood and the current one are in line with the PPCT model where people's development has to take place in a specific context. Public space forms the microsystem where children directly dwell in; in the meanwhile, the exosystem and macrosystem, including relations among families, children's playground, and even the national urbanization process, all influence children's life and learning.

"*A male way of parenting*"

This ethnography finds that male family members tend to involve more in the playground outside in accompanying their children than they do at home. Males accounted for 40%–50% of the entire adults in the place during the participant observation. This is in sharp contrast with the relatively low level of involvement of fathers mentioned in other studies (Klein, 2008; Santos & Harrell, 2016). In the interview, Luli, a mother of a five-year-old boy, talked about her understanding of male adults' roles in public space. She said, "children love to play with fathers outside because their bravery, assertiveness, strength and other natural characters are really attractive for children" (from the interview with Luli on 20/06/2019). For other parents in the study, public space is also a rare venue where males are willing to shoulder more parenting responsibilities.

Meimei and Liwei are parents of three-year-old Candy. The family visited the playground frequently during the course of the study, and Liwei, as the father, was frequently seen to follow Candy's steps, encouraging the little girl to use the slides and guarding her beside the swings. I thought Liwei must be an active father in her daughter's education. During the informal chat with the couple, however, Liwei admitted that the public space outside is probably the only place where he takes up the main role of caring and entertaining the children. Also, Meimei, Liwei's wife, complained that the father seldom plays with the girl at home, nor does he take the girl to preschool often. For the young mother, she said the visit to the public space during the weekend is like a break from the enormous task of bringing up a child. During the weekdays, the father is very busy, travels a lot, and can only involve in the parenting practice at a limited level. "Coming up to the playground at weekend," Meimei said, "also gives my husband a chance to play and relax, not just for the kids. Maybe for him, taking care of and accompanying the kid here is a kind of entertainment as well" (from the interview with Meimei on 27/06/2019). Liwei agreed that he should have involved in raising the girl more often, "I am too busy. I had to make a living for the family but spending time with the family, especially with the kid, is also important. I try to involve in caring for Candy as much as possible when I am available during the weekend," he added, "taking Candy to the playground is the way for me to fulfill my parenting responsibility. When Candy is with her mother, she is sensitive, a bit weak and shy. But here in the playground, I encourage her to run, to be wild, and to behave like a real child. It is more a male way of parenting and accompanying the child" (from the interview with Liwei on 27/06/2019).

Like Liwei, many families in the study expressed the idea that fathers are more active in fulfilling their parenting responsibilities in the public space outside. Besides Liwei's company and encouragement to the child, during the observation, male adults in the public space also helped keep the order of the space. On one Saturday afternoon, a girl was playing in the sandpit beside the slide, and she played with the sand and tried to throw some sand onto the surface of the slide while other children were getting down through the slide. The girl found it interesting to see other children bump into the sand, and she kept throwing the sand. Soon some other children came and followed her. When four or five children competed to throw the sand onto the slide, it soon turned violent. They no longer threw the sand down onto the slide's surface but in the air, and the sand started to hit the children who were using the slide. A mother then stepped in and asked the children to stop throwing sand onto the slide. The children stopped a while before they went on again. Other children had to stop using the slide until a male adult came to the group, "what are you doing? You cannot hit others with sand!" He came up and stood beside the children and they all stopped and left.

For male adults in the study, their active participation in parenting, regardless of its accompanying children to play or helping keep the order of public space, is not in line with the previous study on Chinese parenting, which largely saw fathers as absent and passive in the parenting process (Santos & Harrell, 2016). The urbanization process in China reshaped family life routine and leisure. While males still seem to contribute less than their female counterparts, as Meimei complained, by spending time with their children and exercising the guardianship in public space outside, fathers find their own way of contributing in the parenting process. For those fathers, they may not intend to challenge the unequal gender relationship but are offered an alternative way in the public space to fulfill their parenting responsibilities.

According to the PPCT model, people's behavior is subject to the influences of the specific context. The way fathers fulfill their parenting responsibilities also interacts with the contexts, the cultural norms, and the specific time being. As children's immediate family members, fathers' continuous involvement in children's learning and growth is not only a matter of gender equality but also a component of children's well-being. Public space, therefore, provides an ideal environment for the males to participate in bringing up young children in a sustained and encouraging way.

Concerted surveillance by parents in the public space

Traditionally, Chinese culture is marked by collectivism, and people are organized by interrelated social orders and interconnected interests (Hamilton & Wang, 1992). The rapid urbanization in China has resettled people's way of life. In the previous section, parents recalled the public space in their generation, which was open, improvised, and fluid. Indeed, before the urbanization

process in the past decades, it was hard to imagine the scale of the people's movement that is seen today. Parents in the study mentioned that when they grew up, there were more chances that the adults who showed up in public space were known to most of the children, and adults were ready to help, if needed. However, this is no longer the case today. According to the parents in the study, nuclear family has become the most common unit among the families in the playground. Children rarely know other adults or children out of their immediate families. Some parents complained that the sense of community was lost in the public space today, as a mother named Zhusha commented in the interview, "in my childhood, when we played outside, the adults, regardless whose parents they were, would take good care of the children when necessary, because basically, all of us were from the same community. The adults and children all knew each. In fact, most of the adults in that community were working in a same factory. This was so different from today. Who do I know here in the playground, apart from my son?" (from the interview with Zhusha on 07/05/2019).

The transformation of people's relationship in the urbanized China has implications on parents' mindset and practice in the public space. If previously parents were mostly absent and children were given the freedom of playing out of parents' radar, parents in this study are unanimously present with their children in the public space for various concerns. From the interviews, distance and security are two main reasons that compel the parents to come with their children in the public space. First, public space today may not necessarily be a natural part of children's community. In this study, for many families, this playground is sometimes separated from children's own community. In fact, many parents have to drive to the playground. Second, most adults and children in the playground do not know each other before they come to the playground. Thus, for security concerns, parents need to be present with their children. For these parents, the current playground is only a temporary place with a clear focus on children whereas the streets in their childhood was not only their playground but also their home and habitat.

Even though parents in the public space today are no longer the familiar neighbors or colleagues as in the previous generations, they are still seen to voluntarily take up the unofficial guardianship role for other children in the place, as discussed in the previous section that a father intervened when a group of children threw sand onto the slide. More commonly, parents in the study are seen to provide support for children nearby, help keep the order, and manage the risk involved in the public space. During one observation, a mother named Xuexue was standing beside the entrance of the slide watching her toddler daughter to play in the sandpit. Then, a group of children flooded in, climbed up the stairs, and crowded at the entrance of the slide. The boys pushed each other and competed to get to the top end of the slide. "No push, please. No push, please. Stand in the queue." Her own daughter was not in the group, but when she saw the potential danger brought by the chaos, she stepped in and helped keep the order. During the interview with her

later, she downplayed her role as the protector, "it is not like I want to be the police to monitor all the children. My focus is of course on my own child. But when you see the need for an adult to intervene, I will do it. I'm sure most parents here will do the same. If everyone protects the children as possible as she or he can. In the end, we are all protecting our own child." These parents, who even never speak to each other, seem to form an informal consent to look after the children nearby. By doing so, they have actively waved a security net for all the children who play in the public space.

Scaffolding children's development in public space

The previous section discussed parents' tacit protection of children in the playground. Their vigilance of the potential danger makes sure children in the playground are looked after, although not by children's immediate family members or familiar adults. In the observation of the study, parents' roles were not limited to guardianship, they also actively scaffolded children's activities, enabling children to grow and develop. In the interview, parents talked about how they purposefully cultivated children's social and physical learning in public space.

Many parents mentioned their concerns of the wide use of electronic devices at home settings. They were worried about children's increasing screen time and its implications on children's health. Meimei said, "children today can sit in front of TV for as long as cartoons last. Their exercise is quite limited at a time when they need to exercise the most" (from the interview with Meimei on 12/04/2019). Xiaoyi, mother of five-year-girl Nana, admitted that at home settings, TVs and portable computers were used as electronic babysitters. She said, "my husband and I are both busy during the weekdays. When we are off from the work, we do need some break. My daughter has endless questions, unless she is in front of the TV or watching cartoon series on iPad. That would be the only time when we could have a break. In the meantime, I know it's unhealthy for her if she watches the screen for a long time, so we take her to the playground as much as possible" (from the interview with Xiaoyi on 24/03/2019). When the couple first took Nana to the playground, Nana was shy and held back from the facilities. She did not want to try any instrument and would even cry on the slide. Xiaoyi and her husband then supported Nana to experience the various rides, slide, and swings. At the slide, in order to comfort her, they would hold Nana's hand while she sat on the slide. The little girl gradually learned to enjoy the magic of the gravity and used the slide for a whole afternoon.

In one observation, the cone-shaped climbing net was popular among some elder children in the playground. However, the top space of the net is so limited that it can only hold two children at the same time. Therefore, traffic jam was common when some children were descending while others were rising. Many parents were seen standing beside the climbing net and helping the children to navigate. Parents' presence and guidance provided confidence, comfort, and security for children to play.

Public space is also a place where parents facilitate children to learn social rules. Many parents in the study reported the lack of playmates for their young children. According to the parents, unlike

the previous generations who had either siblings or neighbors to play with, many children today are mostly playing by themselves at home settings. The lack of opportunities to interact with peers may hinder their social learning process (Murphy & Eisenberg, 2010). In the public space of the current study, children are seen to interact with others, make friends, and solve problems with other children. In this process, parents sometimes stepped in to help children learn social rules.

In the playground, the swings are popular among children of different ages. In one episode of observation, a little girl named Guoguo was placed on the seat of the swing by her mother. She seemed to enjoy the swing so much that she refused her mother's suggestion to try another instrument. While she was on the swing, two other girls came and waited beside the swing, "how about we take turns?" an elder girl gently asked. Guoguo ignored her and continued playing on the slide. After another three minutes, Guoguo's mother said to her, "OK. The other children are waiting for quite a long time. We have to get off and let them play, too." "No!" Guoguo replied angrily and nearly cried. Her grandma comforted her while trying to get her off the swing, "we will leave for a while and you can come back to the queue to play later. Is that OK?" Guoguo then replied, "all right, mom, let us wait right here and I can play later." In the episode, the adult was scaffolding the girl to learn the rules of taking turns, sharing, and waiting. In public space, many parents are using the opportunities to help them learn social rules.

According to the PPCT theories, children can only develop when they engage in various activities and interact with the interrelated systems of the context that both directly and indirectly influence them. Here in the playground, children have the chance to interact with their parents, peers, and other adults where they develop their understanding of the place and learn the local rules. Parents mediate the various systems of children's development. They not only make up the microsystem where children interact with but also bridge the exo- and macrosystem, bringing in the norms and culture of the society for children to learn.

Conclusion

With the process of urbanization, the traditional neighborhood and communities have been replaced by modern building blocks. Urbanization in China has not only changed the landscape of community and neighborhood but also restructured children's life and the way parents engage in children's learning and growth. In China today, public space has become an important arena for families to spend their leisure time. According to PPCT theory, public space enables interactions among children, parents, community members as well as social norms and symbols. It makes the proximal processes of children's learning happen. With its design and layout, public space encourages parents' active involvement in children's learning and growth. In this study, parents reflected that they exercise their responsibilities of parenting and educating their children in a way that is different from the

previous generations. Rather than being absent in the public space, parents today will accompany children most of the time. On the one hand, public space enables parents to stay back and provides space for children to explore and experiment. Parents seem to demonstrate a greater degree of tolerance of free play and its associated risks in return for children's joy and development. On the other hand, parents are not passive. They observe children and intervene when it is necessary. In this process, males are willing to bear more parenting responsibilities than they would do in home settings. In public space, parents and children alike are inclined to respect the public nature of the place, and children are enabled to learn the social rules. For example, parents encourage children to take turns, to share, and to get along with others. Public space supports parents' scaffolding and makes the informal learning happen.

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Note

1. The words of the participants, whose names are anonymized to protect their privacy, in the interviews are reproduced verbatim. Following strict ethical guidelines, no attempt was made at correcting the participants' English that would transform the data, and thus have an influence on the results. All the following excerpts remain unchanged to comply with this consideration.

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