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Mutual Adaptation: A Perspective for Analyzing the Urban Transitions of Modern China

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Research highlights

- 1) The paper discusses a perspective for analyzing urban transitions of modern China.
- 2) The perspective focuses on the reconciliation process of bottom-up public needs and top-down politico-economic goals, and the process can be partially observed through the transformation of local economic organizations.
- 3) The perspective helps to understand how a particular city region has adapted to past transitions, which may help the city region in adapting to new development paradigms.

Keywords: Urban transition; Local adaptation trajectories; Economic organizations; Planning implementation.

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1. Introduction

If modernity is considered as a moving target, then it opens up the present for a future that is expected to be different and requires active shaping, molding, and preparation (Schmidt, 2014). Conceptual dichotomies provide anchors in defining and achieving targets, allowing the unfavorable pole to catch up with the favorable pole on the trajectories that identified by the favorable pole. Under such a consideration, conceptual dichotomies pervade the practice of urban planning and urban governance. However, the actual implementation of the plan may be constrained by the dichotomies that crafted it, because the dichotomies themselves are questionable, questionable in the distinction of two poles, questionable in the generalizability of the trajectory.

Skinner (1977) questioned the dominating dichotomies (rural/urban, industrial/pre-industrial, and Occidental/Oriental). He contested that such constructed-types approach “assumes a coincidence in covariation among key variable that seldom obtains in the real world.” (Skinner, 1977: p.5) Rowe (1989) questioned the dichotomy of Occidental/Oriental cities. By observing Hankow, Rowe pointed out that the “urban commune,” the key variable for the modernisation of Occidental cities, was also observed in a typical migrant city in the late Imperial China. Robinson (2002) questioned the dichotomy of world cities/other cities, she contested that such an approach is at best irrelevant and at worst harmful to the poor cities. Therefore, though conceptual dichotomies help planners and policymakers to craft visions to “conjure” development; however, dialogues are needed to adjust the visions, and to facilitate more suitable trajectories for implementation.

In facilitating the dialogues to identify implementation trajectories, this paper discusses a perspective for analysing the past transitional adaptations’ trajectories of particular cities. The perspective is termed as ‘mutual adaptation.’ The perspective focuses on the reconciliation processes of bottom-up public needs and top-down politico-economic goals. And such processes can be partially observed through the transformation of local economic organisations.

The paper first discusses the meaning of the perspective. Then the paper discusses the potentials of the perspective and gives a conclusion.

2. Meaning

"Mutual adaptation" was initially used to describe behaviors of compromising the interests of governance and the interests of private economic organisations in late Qing's Chinese cities (Willmott, 1972). Here, "interests of governance" and "interests of private economic organisations" include two sets of interests. One encompasses the scaling-down interests (from state to municipal government), while the other encompasses the scaling-up interests (from people to the organisation).

In the context of the Imperial China, the government's management on cities and villages heavily relied on local self-governance (Friedmann, 2005). In villages, the self-governance was mainly carried out by the clan heads and gentries through blood ties. In cities, the self-governance was mainly carried out by the private economic organisations that centered on subethnic ties (provincials associations or guilds). In this regard, "mutual adaptation" implies a process, of which the two sets of interests adjusting themselves to achieve reconciliation on operating and developing a city. The process resulted in flexible relationships between the administrative and economic activities, enabling city-region's daily operation and effective adaptation to emergencies (Metzger, 1972).

In the context of the Late Qing Dynasty and to the Republican China, the political authority was unstable. Cities, especially the treaty port cities were governed by multiple political powers, and the urban management relied more on the private economic organizations. Rowe (1984) studied on the transformation of guilds in Hankow in late Qing Dynasty. The Guilds were initially found based on the subethnic ties, absorbing individuals from common geographic origins, and were managed according to these subethnic ties. Because of the late development of Hankow and the decline of Qing's administrative power, there was a wide gap between *de jure* and *de facto* systems in Hankow. As a consequence, local government had to rely on guilds to manage economic activities, continuously devolving controls while retaining the prerogative of direct intervention. In such a situation, guilds continued to grow, merge, and extend functions to urban management. Commercial ties gradually rose as the primary management rules, while subethnic ties fell as secondary, but still essential. Similar transformation of guilds was observed in other treaty port cities with insufficient administrative capacity, such as Shanghai (Goodman, 1995). The transformation of guild in Hankow or Shanghai implies a reconciliation process to move the city forward, which supplemented the administrative capacity while helped people adapt to the urban life.

In the context of the early days of the founding of New China, the political authority was reestablished. And many private economic organisations were absorbed by the government as the government's intermediate organisation (work units). Work units were originally a top-down design for breaking subethnic ties and absorbing individuals into the urban administrative system (Liu, 2000). Such a design initially urged work unit to put top priority of fulfil politico-economic goals, thereby promoting the establishment of China's heavy industry. However, in the development process, work unit declined its efficiency in achieving goals while putting more attention in fulfilling its self-sufficiency. Such a tendency was driven by the hardship to achieve self-sufficiency with increasing number of employees and increasing needs of the members. Along the process, the work units stepped beyond the state redistribution system and formed black markets (Lu, 2005). And the work unit operation gradually evolved back towards the operation of a traditional family (Lü & Perry, 1997). Lu (2005) explained the process as struggles between obeying orders of government agencies and caring for members, which led the work unit to take the responsibility of working as a collective family. Lu's explanation reveals how the two sets of interests are reconciled through the transformation of work unit.

In short, "mutual adaptation" describes the behavior of constant reconciliation between scaling-down politico-economic goals and scaling-up public daily life's needs in the process of modern China's urbanisation, which can be partially observed through the transformation of local economic organisations.

3. Potentials

“Mutual adaptation” may continue to impact urbanisation in contemporary China, as what has been adapted may continue to impact the trajectories towards new adaptation. Based on Friedmann’s (2005) and Read’s (2012) observations in Beijing, Basic-level administrators (e.g., policeman and residents committee staff) served citizens in a paternalistic way, resolving minor disputes in citizens’ everyday lives. In Luigi’s (2014) observation in Shenyang, the laid-off staffs treated the Residents Committees as the only remaining institution protecting their entitlements to welfare, similar to their former work units.

Bray (2005) conducted a genealogical study on work units. Through the study, Bray linked the familism characteristics of work unit with that in republican guilds and corporations and pointed out that the origin of such characteristics come from the Confucian archetype family. Bray is certainly right on the connections of such familism characteristics; however, such characteristics might be practiced in distinct ways. The guilds were constantly recruiting external population to enlarge the “family” to obtain more resources. While the work units were constantly seeking self-sufficiency for the internal growing population of the “family.” As a result, guild-families moved towards more open while work-unit-families moved towards more closed (Rowe, 1984; Liu, 2000).

Furthermore, though guilds and work units may have existed in the majorities of city-regions in modern China; however, the time of appearance and the maturity of development differ, and the subsequent impacts on local urbanisation also differ. Such differences resonate the “unique rhythm” of China’s regional development cycle identified by Skinner (1977). As Skinner described:

“(Chinese) Regional social systems . . . developed first in smaller physiographic units, often the basins of short rivers or tributaries; such isolated systems were subsequently linked with others to form larger systems, again contained in and constrained by the hierarchical physiographic structure. The processes whereby subregional socio-economic systems were integrated to from the great regional economies that eventually developed within macroregions were gradual and, for most of agrarian China, still very much underway in the nineteenth century.” (Skinner, 1977: p.12)

Therefore, “mutual adaptation” helps to analyse a particular city’s past urban transitions, and may help the city to adapt new transition. And in facilitating such a purpose, the focus should be put on the history of the particular city-region itself.

4. Discussion and conclusions:

Planning is a moving technique. What should be planned and what could be planned is always in debate, and which part gives to “urban planning” to manage is always changing. The dynamic rationales of planning come from what has been practiced successful around the world. Due to these characteristics, the image crafted by planning is both based-on and isolated-from the locality. The realisation of such an image requires mobilization of local publics. If the image is crafted with understandings on local adaptation trajectories, then the reconciliation process between top-down and bottom-up will be smoothed out, and the public mobilisation will be more efficient. Understanding the local adaptation trajectories and setting up engines that can mobilise the local, both require a *meso* perspective that focuses on past local reconciliation process, which is more practical and helpful.

In conclusion, planning city-regions is not only to define targets, but also to set up engines to mobilise the local in adjusting and achieving the targets. And the “mutual adaptation” perspective may help in setting up these engines.

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