

INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING URBAN GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Governance has been a popular term in the social sciences to describe the role of network involving both state and non-state sectors. The triple processes in western countries, denationalisation, destatization and internationalisation, have resulted in a shift from government to governance (Brenner, 1999; Macleod and Goodwin, 1999). Governance is growing in importance in contrast to conventional government. The governance theory is developed mainly in the context of global capitalism, paying little attention to the transformation in socialist countries such as China.

The transition process from state socialism to market economy in China involves three processes: decentralization, marketization and globalisation (Wei, 2001). Six key trends are important in urban China. First, the autonomy of urban and local governments has been increased dramatically, resulting in increasing inter-city and inter-region competition. Second, the importance of private sector in the economy has been rising as its legal status and property rights are being gradually clarified in China. Third, spatial and social polarization has been accelerated. Fourth, large-scale urban development and urban economic restructuring has resulted in mass relocation of residents and increasing unemployment and poverty in Chinese cities. Fifth, grass-roots organizations and their activities have increased. Sixth, information flow has been facilitated by mobile communications and Internet although the mass media is still largely under the control of the state.

In the above context, urban governance is changing rapidly with complicated relationships between the government, the economy and the emerging civil society in China. As increasing number of studies began to show, the role of urban government is being changed while the solutions to many problems of urban planning, management and development require a governance perspective in China (Wang, 1996; Zhu, 1999; Zhang, 2002; Hu and Chan, 2002; Wong and Shen, 2002; Gu et al., 2003; Shen, 2005).

The main objective of this special issue is to explore the issues of urban governance in contemporary China. Most papers in this special issue are selected from over 40 papers presented in a series of international workshops on urban governance in China during 2000-2002 funded by the State Natural Sciences Foundation of China. These papers explore either theoretical issues of urban governance or empirical cases of urban governance and urban competitiveness in China. These papers try to address the

following questions. What is urban governance? Are urban governance theories developed in the western context relevant to China? Is there any convergence in the modes of urban governance in China and western countries? How globalisation and urban competition affect urban governance? How to measure urban competitiveness in China? Can a change in urban administrative system solve the problem of urban governance?

The first paper by Chan and Hu introduces the economic, political and social background of the governance rehabilitation, as well as the theoretical roots and its explanations. They point out that prevailing discourses on governance are mainly concentrated in the Anglo-American democratic countries. Although many studies have been conducted on urban governance in the English literature, most governance theories are developed in the context of western capitalism (Jessop, 1995). The study on urban governance in China is a new research theme. Thus, it is critical to review the western governance theories before they are applied in the Chinese context. In their paper, Chan and Hu examine the value and the limitations of the governance theory. They argue that governance theories provide a new thinking in the whole social science. Theories of the urban governance tend to distinguish a wider range of policy regimes, which seems appropriate to explain the changes in the articulation of government and governance. Their paper looks at the case of the Guangdong Luoxi Bridge in Panyu with particular reference to the collection of toll charge, and the role and dynamics of the concerned stakeholders, ranging from the provincial and local governments, the individual members of the public to the mass media. This empirical review takes them to the conclusion about the limitations of the governance theories. First, the governance theory tends to remain at the pre-theoretical stage of critique. Second, governance theories tend to be meso-political or generically inter-organisational in scope. In the case of China, they argue that the key issue is not whether there is “governance” process in China but the difference between Chinese governance and the governance in other countries. Their question is echoed by subsequent papers in the special issue.

The paper by Shen considers the issues of urban competitiveness and urban governance in the age of globalisation. He argues that there are independent spheres of competitiveness at firm, city and national levels. Urban competitiveness and urban governance are interrelated and the pursuit of urban competitiveness necessitates changes in urban governance. The new entrepreneurial regime is gaining currency as urban competition has been intensified in the age of globalisation.

Hong Kong is used as a case study to highlight the changing governance in HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region). Shen points out that, under the situation of economic hardship after 1997, HKSAR government is expected to play a major role to pull the city out of recession and to consolidate its world city status. Shen’s paper reviews the major initiatives taken by the HKSAR government with different degrees of government intervention and participation of business sector and the public. It is argued that the role of government should not be overestimated. It is also important that government policies should be consistent and based on the consensus of the business sector and the public. Hong Kong’s experience provides a useful reference for other cities especially in mainland China where government plays a dominant role in the society and economy.

Gu and Jiang's paper is an empirical study on the restructuring of administrative divisions in Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu province from perspective of urban governance. In the transitional economy of China, the urban government often takes advantage of the heritage of a planned economy to acquire development resources through the upgrading of administrative status or through the expansion of the administrative area under its jurisdiction. This is illustrated in the case of Nanjing in the paper. But it is found that such strategy cannot solve all problems successfully. Gu and Jiang argue in their paper that the organization of urban government and restructuring of administrative area should emphasize the construction of the market for production factors so that cities acquire urban development resources through market competition. Improvement in urban governance and system innovation are also important to increase the overall competitiveness.

The paper by Luo and Zhang examines the urban governance restructuring in the context of urban competition of various cities in the Suzhou-Wuxi-Changzhou region. They show that urban competition has caused many problems, such as competing for foreign investment, farmland reduction and infrastructure duplication. The urban competition is seen as a major driving force of urban governance restructuring in the region. Three major strategies of governance restructuring have been adopted as responses to urban competition, including adjusting administrative boundaries, shifting from control to influence and partnership formation. One interesting conclusion of their study is that although there are some differences between socialist China and western countries, urban governance restructuring has some similar trends, such as partnership formation and shifting from control to influence.

Following up the linkages between urban governance and urban competition identified in above papers, So and Shen make an attempt to measure the competitiveness of 215 Chinese cities at prefecture-level in 1999 by using an integrated index, which is based on a three-tier indicator systems consisting of 55 economic, social and environmental indicators. There have been increasing number of studies on the competitiveness of Chinese cities in the Chinese literature (Ni, 2001; Bianweihui, 2003). But there are problems of selecting appropriate indicators and weighting methods that affect the evaluation results seriously. For example, many city-size related indicators are often used so that the ranking of a city depends very much on the city-size instead of urban competitiveness. This paper attempts to overcome these problems and adopts a better weighting method. The relationship among the three competitiveness components is revealed by correlation analyses. There was less consistency between environmental competitiveness and economic or social competitiveness. This means that, in some cities, economic or social competitiveness does not necessarily ensure environmental competitiveness.

In conclusion, the papers in this special issue make the first collective efforts in the study of urban governance in China. They contribute to the research field by situating the Chinese cases in the wide literature of governance studies through theoretical review and empirical research. The overall conclusion is that urban governance studies are highly relevant to China that is undergoing rapid urban and institutional transformation. Hopefully, the publication of this special issue will stimulate more and more studies on Chinese urban governance by scholars in and out of China.

Finally, the special issue could not have been completed without the work by all the authors and co-authors. They have made great efforts in preparing and revising their papers. We would like to thank all referees who have kindly helped to review various papers for this special issue. Their insightful comments have helped to improve the quality of this special issue. We would also like to thank the State Natural Sciences Foundation of China for funding support of a series of international workshops on urban governance in China where most of the papers in this special issue are presented. Last but not the least, we are grateful to Prof. Chi-Yung Jim, the Chief-Editor of *Asian Geographer*, and members of the Editorial Board for their encouragement and support in the publication of this special issue.

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