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Opposition and resistance: Governance challenges around urban growth in China and the UK☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that, different though they are, the processes of urban development in China and the UK can be analytically compared by looking at the commonly occurring opposition and resistance to that development. Such opposition and resistance can delay and limit the development of land in and immediately surrounding cities. The paper firstly reviews literature on opposition and resistance to development in both the UK and China, before going on to suggest that this opposition and resistance can in part be explained by a common cause – resentment at opaque and top-down/centralised planning processes. Consequently, the paper concludes that a common solution may applicable in both contexts – increasing participation and building institutional/civic capital amongst communities – and considers the likelihood of implementing this solution, particularly in China.

1. Introduction

It was widely reported in 2012 that the proportion of the Chinese population living in urban areas surpassed 50%, a rapid increase since the 1970 s which shows no sign of slowing. In contrast, outside of London, urban populations in the UK are in general slowly declining through counterurbanisation. This is just one difference between China and the UK that may suggest that attempts to compare planning and development processes between the two are futile, and that any thoughts of mutual learning from that comparison are even more so. One thing which unites the two countries, however, is the process of urban growth, either continuing conversion of undeveloped, often agricultural, land into housing and other 'urban' uses or inner-city redevelopment, and consequent opposition and resistance to that development – this opposition and resistance is the focus of this paper.

The overall goal and the nature of debate around the topic of urban containment strategies and the compact city in the UK (and other western countries) and in China can also be considered, at least partially, different. While the former seeks to address the failure of the market in the allocation of land around the edge of cities, and aims at formulating policies to cope with the social and environmental costs of sprawl, especially in terms of loss of open space, traffic congestion, etc.; the latter tends to emphasize the government's role in fuelling sprawl and also, at the same time, the attempts in recent years to reverse the main trend in the direction of preserving cultivated land and guaranteeing food security (Zhang, 2000).

The literature in western counties is undoubtedly richer and has explored different methods and approaches for managing the non-urban space surrounding the city at different scales (Maruani & Amit-Cohen, 2007). It has also outlined the contradictions of

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those forms of land-use control applied by either central or local government (Pendall, 1999). In China, attention has focussed on the role played by decentralisation in local government finance. Whilst this decentralisation has been acknowledged as one of the main engines of economic development in China, it has also been identified as the cause of vertical and horizontal governance conflicts in relation to the current strongly land-consuming model. For example, the issue of local public finance mainly being generated by revenue from urbanization and not sufficiently supported by central government (Yanyun Man, 2011); and the related strong competition among local jurisdictions in complex metropolitan areas that can potentially thwart containment policies set at the upper level (Zhao, Lu, & De Roo, 2010).

However, returning to our opening argument, by focussing not on the systems or processes of planning, nor necessarily on the (desired) outcomes thereof, but rather on the unwanted negative consequences which emerge from those systems, processes and outcomes, we can find a common analytical lens with which to understand the complex and dynamic interrelationships which characterise urban development everywhere. Moreover, a comparative approach and consequent mutual learning can provide an analytical platform for better understanding about the optimum level of decision-making process in the two countries and under which conditions it is possible to minimize potential social conflicts.

As we will discuss below, in both the UK and China urban growth is a source of contention, leading to varyingly expressed levels of opposition and resistance. We follow the thread of writing (see for example Smith & Marquez 2000; Bell, Gray, & Haggett, 2005; Wolsink, 2000) which argues that at least some of this opposition and resistance stems from a sense of powerlessness on the part of those affected, due in no small part to decision making procedures perceived as being opaque, top-down and clientelist. These arguments are well established in Western contexts, but as we will discuss below, are increasingly occurring in China as well. For example, a recent paper by Zhao identified mayor 'institutional barriers to capacity-building in urban planning in the transformation era' (2015, 280), one of which was a problematic relationship between planning and public participation.

This suggests, therefore, that despite the radically different contexts within which planning and urban development takes place in the UK and China, there is a common problem with a lack of participation in planning leading to opposition to development, and thus it may be that common principles (if not their detailed operation) can be identified to help open up decision making to those who currently feel disenfranchised.

The rest of this paper comprises five sections – the next considers some explanatory theories in relation to governance, followed by two brief analyses of opposition and resistance to urban growth in the UK and China respectively, before a comparative discussion and some concluding thoughts. It is worthwhile at this point to include an explanatory notes.

It is necessary to clarify what we mean by opposition and resistance, and how the two terms differ. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that the terms oppose and resist, whilst not synonymous, have similar meanings:

> *Oppose:* To contend, fight, or argue against; to be antagonistic or hostile to; to resist or obstruct (a thing, person, action, etc.).
> *Resist*: To strive against, fight or act in opposition to, oppose; to contrive not to yield to; to withstand, be unaffected by the action or influence of.

For this paper we interpret *opposition* to be the less direct of the two, focusing on political/discursive avenues of expression – opposition to development might, for example, involve arguing against development proposals in various forums, from consultations carried out by local government to, ultimately, legal battles in court. *Resistance* to us suggests direct action of some kind, whether protests in relation to potential development sites or, in particularly newsworthy examples from China, refusing to leave one's home in the face of redevelopment of the surrounding neighbourhood. There is clearly no solid demarcation between the two terms and some of the cases we discuss in the rest of the paper feature both discursive opposition and active resistance to urban development – in others, though, opposition can be facilitated through a political process which appears to encourage open dialogue with a mature or incipient civil society, but which, in the final analysis, cannot necessarily limit urban development – resulting in physical resistance.

2. Definitions and theoretical approaches to governance

We follow Jones and Evans in defining 'governance' as it relates to 'government' – the latter, if defined as a verb, meaning 'what the state seeks to achieve', with its corresponding implication that 'the state is a singular, monolithic entity speaking with one voice' (2008, 30–31). Governance, conversely, is 'the process of delivering the aims of the state', with increasing involvement of 'non-state actors' to deliver those aims (ibid.). This proliferation of other actors and agencies in the process of delivering the aims of the state generates, perhaps inevitably, a great deal of complexity and creates new relationships and ways of conceptualising those relationships. Many books have been written on this subject, so we clearly cannot hope to present a comprehensive review, but we wish to highlight a small number of contributions which are particularly useful to us, and which we draw upon in the sections which follow.

A key concept in the context of our focus on top-down planning, and consequently a need for a potential alternative, is that of the capacity of communities and other groups to get involved in planning – something which is often referred to as *institutional capacity*. de Megalhaes, Claudio, Healey & Madanipour (2002, 53) define institutional capacity as 'the capacity of urban governance to make a difference in sustaining and transforming the qualities of cities' and they particularly focus on building this 'in ways which expand stakeholder involvement and have sufficient power to affect the driving forces affecting life chances, economic opportunities and environmental qualities'. Others refer to this as *institutional capital,* which itself can be conceptualised as comprising four forms of capital:

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