



Critical Review

Port geography at the crossroads with human geography: between flows and spaces



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ABSTRACT

Port research is not a new field of interest for human geographers, evidenced by numerous conceptual models and empirical cases of port evolution and development in the literature. However, several critical questions remain unanswered, notably the exact position of port geography as a subdiscipline within human geography in the past, present and future. Based on a pluralistic approach, the paper analyzes the changing waves and development of port geography as a sub-discipline of human geography, with a special focus on whether port geography has experienced a paradigm shift and, if so, when, why, and how. Also, through analyzing the major terrains of port geography research from the macro perspective, it brings a new lease of life to port geography in this rapidly changing world.

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1. Introduction

As the intersection points between land and water, ports have played important roles in the socio-economic development of cities, countries and regions throughout the history of human civilization (Hoyle and Pinder, 1992; Ng and Tam, 2012; Wang and Ducruet, 2013). In recent years, they have become even more significant thanks to the rapid development in transportation, communication technologies and international trade. Nowadays, ports, especially the major ones, have transformed to crucial components in facilitating transactions around the world (Ng and Liu, 2014). New demands, together with the rising influence of the neoliberal ideology in the construction of economic policies (see Harvey, 2005), have prompted port actors to reassess their operational and governance structures, while further integrating

themselves into global supply chains. Hence, the port community has become more complex (Martin and Thomas, 2001), in which it facilitates the interactions between stakeholders (both global and local), and add value to products and other economic activities which require port services (Nam and Song, 2011). With maritime transport moving at least 80% of internationally traded cargoes, ports are lively communities, embedded within particular geographical settings while sustaining the global economy.

Unsurprisingly, considerable research opportunities exist for human and transport geographers (Keeling, 2007). In fact, the interest in ports by human geography researchers is not new, as exemplified by the conceptual models and empirical cases on port evolution and development especially during the three decades since the Second World War (WWII), together with the publication of some influential books during the same period. More recently, some geographers have conducted critical review studies on port geography, including its research trends, the community's 'network' and its influence as a sub-discipline within human and transport geography (e.g., Ng, 2013; Ng and Ducruet, forthcoming). Despite such efforts, hitherto, critical questions remain unanswered. First, port research has attracted not only human geographers, but also those from other academic

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disciplines, such as business and management, economics and engineering. The question is thus, what was the focus of research for human geographers, and how is it distinct from work in other established scholarly disciplines? Second, how did the transformation of the global transport system affect the research direction, and study approaches, of human geographers when conducting research in port geography, especially in view of its own identity? Third, with the perceived changing research direction and focus in recent decades, how has port geography, as a sub-discipline within human geography, evolved and developed, and has a changing tide already taken place? Finally, what exactly is port geography in the past, present and future, and what is its position within human geography? The above queries have been partially addressed by some of the aforementioned studies, together with journal special issues touching upon port and transport geography, planning and regional development (e.g., Hall et al., 2006; Ng and Wilmsmeier, 2012; Ng et al., forthcoming). Nevertheless, the breadth of research on port geography still requires further collective inputs from researchers so as to address such queries comprehensively.

Recognizing such a salient need, the paper investigates port geography as a sub-discipline within human geography. It offers insight on the extent of port geography research, aiming to complement the fundamental objectives of the study of human geography (i.e., to study the Earth's surface, its people, communities and cultures, with an emphasis on the relations between and across space and place (Johnston, 2000)) and transport geography (i.e., to enhance understanding of the underlying economic, environmental and social processes that contribute towards continually changing transport patterns (Keeling, 2008)). If the study of an academic discipline is 'the study of a society within a society' where its life does not (and cannot) proceed independently in its own closed system (Johnston, 1997), then this paper is studying 'a society within a society within a society', and its evolution and research direction would certainly be affected by external forces (both academic and non-academic). In a nutshell, the research question is: how, why and to what extent does port geography evolve, and as a sub-discipline of human geography, what are its impacts on human geography in the past, present and the future? We attempt to re-invent port geography as a lively and dynamic sub-discipline, so that it can offer a distinctive contribution to advance the future practice of human geography.

When writing the paper, we have undertaken a pluralist approach which comprised unity in diversity; each section was prepared by different authors (while all the authors have read, and provided necessary feedback on, the other sections). Authors for different sections were carefully selected based on respective backgrounds and expertise within port geography research. Inevitably, this led to some diversified views between sections. However, given the wide range of topics and stakeholders (both academic and non-academic) with which the research community has (and continues to be) engaged, diversity in ontological, epistemological and political commitments within port geography research inevitably exists (and will persist). It would be inappropriate, if not naïve, to overlook this fact and try to adopt a unified, relativist view. We strongly believe that the pluralistic approach has greatly strengthened the merit and credibility of the paper. By re-inventing port geography and its research, we hope that our efforts will attract young and capable geographers to this extremely interesting sub-discipline.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. An overview of port geography research will be found in Section 2. Sections 3–6 address four major (although by no means comprehensive) themes of port geography and port geography research, including hinterlands and the port's role in intermodal transportation and supply chains, the operation of ports, the port's location and port-city/territory relationship and port management, policy

and governance. Although by no means comprehensive, these themes are schematic expositions reflecting:

- The traditional heavyweight topics in port geography research (port-city/territory relationship).
- The emerging topics in recent decades (the port's role in inter-modal transportation and supply chains; management, policy and governance).
- The role of port geography in spatial analysis (the operation of ports).

Finally, Section 7 re-visits the epistemology of port geography, including its major challenges and future prospects.

2. An overview of port geography research since 1950 (César Ducruet and Adolf K.Y. Ng)

This section analyzes the evolution of port geography research since 1950. The analysis in this section is an extension of Ng and Ducruet (forthcoming) about collaboration and citation patterns in port geography research. In addition, however, this section focuses more strongly on the contents of the same corpus. The major terrains of port geography are based on Ng's (2013) previous classifications (Table 1).¹ The period was divided into two main periods, with 1990 as the cutting point, chosen due to important changes taking place in port and maritime industries at the time.² Also, given the increasing ability of port geographers to convey their ideas to practitioners and specialists in other academic disciplines, it was recognized that papers on port geography were not published only in geography journals, and so we have categorized port geography papers during the aforementioned period into two branches, namely 'core port geography' (CPG) (port papers published in the 'core' geography journals) and 'extended port geography' (EPG) (papers which addressed topics closely related to port geography but not published in geography journals).³ The research themes of port geography papers published in geography and non-geography journals in 1950–2012 can be found in Table 2.

There was a substantial increase in port geography papers in the past two decades. During the early period (1950–1990), 309 such papers were published, compared to 419 in the contemporary period (1991–2012). However, in the latter period, a substantial shift occurred by which many papers were published outside core geography journals, while during the contemporary period the number of EPG papers even tripled since the early period (251) compared with CPG (168), which suffered more than 20% decrease (see Table 2).

Despite such structural changes, common trends can be identified between CPG and EPG papers. First, the highest numbers were published on port-city relationships (80 and 62), which meant 19.5% of all port geography papers. The joint growth of 'management, policy and governance' papers illustrated an increasing concern for actors, governance, and port operations. This became much more rapid and voluminous for EPG due to the increasing availability of specialized transport and maritime journals, although CPG papers falling under this category also experienced steady increases in recent decades.

A comparable trend can be found in 'port's place in shipping strategies and networks', albeit the takeoff occurs earlier for EPG. Finally, a parallel increase for 'port, intermodal transportation and supply chain' implies that CPG/port geographers manage to

¹ See Ng (2013) for a detailed explanation on how the themes in Table 1 (and later Table 2) have been identified.

² See Ng and Ducruet (forthcoming) and Pallis et al. (2010) for detailed justification of this division.

³ For a detailed explanation of CPG and EPG, see Ng and Ducruet (forthcoming).

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