

Roundtable on the Introduction and Local Development of Concepts and Methods in Chinese Urban Planning

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Abstract: This roundtable reviews how concepts and methods developed abroad have been introduced, adapted, and reconstructed in Chinese urban planning. Nine scholars discuss sustainable development, global planning knowledge, modernization, urban-system planning, locally grounded theory, community planning, and spatial justice. Imported knowledge has supported China's planning modernization while revealing differences in institutions, territorial scale, development tempo, resources, and social values. The central task has therefore shifted from selective adaptation toward a Chinese planning discourse grounded in local history, governance, practice, and contemporary modernization.

Keywords: Chinese urban planning; theory localization; planning methods; Chinese modernization; academic roundtable

Editorial Introduction: Learning, Adaptation, and Innovation

The century-long reception of Western planning theory in China can be described through three broad attitudes: admiration and imitation, local adaptation accompanied by critical reflection, and categorical rejection based on claims of Chinese uniqueness. Individual theories and practitioners may occupy different positions at the same time. The contributions in this roundtable reveal a more complex process in which learning, modification, criticism, and invention coexist.

1 Structural Friction: Why Imported Theories Feel Uncomfortable

Mismatch arises from structural differences. Western morphological tools, including figure-ground analysis, cannot fully explain the gray spaces, courtyard relations, and layered order of traditional Chinese urban form. This does not imply a single or unchanging Chinese culture; internal differences, historical change, and local diversity must remain part of the analysis.

Institutional differences are equally important. Many imported theories presuppose civil society, private property, and decentralized governance, whereas Chinese planning developed as an instrument of public land management, government leadership, and strategic governance. Zoning was consequently transformed into regulatory detailed planning. Each instrument must be understood through its assumptions and institutional consequences.

China also experienced compressed urbanization, with industrialization, urbanization, and informatization overlapping within a few decades. Linear models derived from longer Western trajectories cannot directly account for this temporal density. Land finance further shaped planning into an instrument of growth and value realization, constraining the pursuit of spatial justice.

2 Chinese Agency: Adaptive Transformation and Creative Construction

China did not simply accept or discard imported thought. Sustainable development moved from an environmental concept to a national value and was embedded in territorial spatial planning. Fragmented sectoral plans prompted systematic institutional reconstruction. Community practices such as co-

building and co-governance, neighborhood councils, and participatory budgeting combine government guidance with resident participation.

3 Returning to Fundamentals: What Is "Western," and Who Defines It?

A theory may be called Western because of its author, empirical context, place of publication, or institutional assumptions. These criteria are not equivalent. Planning modernization concerns how to think modernly, not the mechanical use of concepts labeled Western. Future debate should clarify the boundaries of Western and Chinese planning traditions and examine how modern methods can be grounded in local realities.

Sustainable Development and Progress in Planning

ZHANG Bing, Chief Planner, Ministry of Natural Resources

Since reform and opening up, sustainable development has become one of the imported concepts with the most systemic influence on Chinese planning. It gained international prominence through Our Common Future and the 1992 Rio Summit. Its emphasis on intergenerational equity, environmental capacity, and the quality and quantity of development aligns with planning's responsibility for long-term land and spatial coordination.

1 From an Environmental Concept to an Integrative Guiding Principle

Early Chinese discussion treated sustainability mainly as environmental protection. Planning textbooks gradually expanded it to economic, social, cultural, and ecological continuity. The concept then became a guiding value for urban planning as a whole, coordinating development, public welfare, and long-term spatial use.

2 From Conceptual Advocacy to Systematic Planning Techniques

Planning translated sustainability into compact urban form, public transport, ecological networks, resource and environmental carrying-capacity analysis, major-function zoning, ecological redlines, and territorial-development suitability evaluation. The territorial spatial planning system integrated these techniques through one map, common standards, a unified framework, and an implementation platform.

3 From Policy Improvement to Institutional Reconstruction

Agenda 21 promoted coordination through existing administrative systems. Ecological-civilization reform later reorganized spatial planning responsibilities and established a unified territorial spatial planning system. This strengthened systemic, holistic, and coordinated governance. Future planning should connect sustainability with the full Sustainable Development Goals and avoid reducing it to environmental design or isolated techniques.

Absorption, Digestion, and Innovation in Chinese Planning

WANG Kai, China Academy of Urban Planning and Design

1 Four Decades of Learning from International Planning

China's planning community drew on systems planning, rational planning, zoning, global-city theory, growth poles, industrial clusters, ecological planning, low-carbon development, climate adaptation, age-friendly design, and smart-city methods. These ideas supported rapid urban expansion, new towns, regional infrastructure, industrial concentration, and environmental protection.

2 Contributions and Limits of Existing Exploration

Imported theories helped optimize urban form, promote industrial agglomeration, encourage compact development, and improve infrastructure efficiency. Their application also exposed limits because China's scale, resource constraints, institutions, and development stage differ from the contexts in which many theories originated.

3 Planning Theory for Chinese Modernization

Theory for Chinese modernization should be precise, adaptive, people-centered, and responsive to differentiated local conditions. It should coordinate orderly construction, efficient resource use, balanced economic geography, high-quality human settlements, and refined governance. International knowledge remains valuable when assessed against Chinese objectives and reconstructed through practice.

The Overall Approach to Urban Planning in the New Era

WANG Guangtao, former Minister of Construction

1 Basic Understanding

Chinese planning should be understood through harmony between humanity and nature and through four modern influences: systems thinking, urbanization, regionalization, and marketization. Systems thinking introduced integrated workflows; urbanization reshaped administrative and spatial relations; regionalization generated urban-system, metropolitan-area, and city-cluster planning; and marketization made land and resource allocation central to practice.

2 Reflections on Planning Work in the New Era

Chinese modernization requires people-centered urban development and coordinated rural revitalization. Planning should integrate population, industry, towns, and transport; improve public-service equality; coordinate development with protection; support innovation; reform mixed and compatible land use; identify metropolitan areas through commuting; and use digital technology to connect planning, construction, operation, and governance.

Learning from Advanced Civilizations Is a Long-term Mission

LI Xiaojiang, former President, China Academy of Urban Planning and Design

Four decades of research and practice demonstrate the value of learning from advanced ideas, methods, and standards. British development-policy planning drew attention to employment, social stratification, housing, and vulnerable groups. International transport studies established four criteria: economic feasibility, social acceptability, environmental sustainability, and fiscal affordability. They emphasized moving people and goods, pricing full social costs, and recognizing informal space.

Work in Dhaka, Zhuhai, rail standards, ecological urbanization, and climate mitigation and adaptation shows how international cooperation can be translated into Chinese standards and policy. Localization is continuously shaped by China's culture, political institutions, and development path. China has achieved extraordinary industrialization, urbanization, and poverty reduction while bearing substantial social, environmental, and cultural costs. Continued critical learning remains essential.

From the Localization of Imported Knowledge to a Chinese Planning Discourse

LI Baihao, Southeast University

Modern Chinese planning has continually absorbed and transformed foreign theory. Functional zoning, new towns, land-use controls, and growth management supported industrialization and urban expansion, while Camillo Sitte, Lewis Mumford, Kevin Lynch, and C. A. Doxiadis broadened attention to culture, urban image, and human settlements. These concepts helped move planning from physical design toward public policy and spatial governance.

Their use also exposed mismatches in municipal scale, institutions, cultural interpretation, and planning objectives. This awareness stimulated a transition from localization toward a Chinese discourse grounded in philosophy, culture, governance, and technology. Major national projects, regulatory detailed planning, urban-system planning, heritage protection, and the people's city illustrate this value orientation. A mature discourse should combine international experience with traditional wisdom and the conditions of the socialist market economy.

Urban-System Theory and Planning Practice in China

CAO Guangzhong, Peking University

1 Urban-System Planning as an Effective Chinese Practice

Reform and rapid urbanization transformed China's hierarchical settlement structure into a more open and complex urban system. Chinese scholars combined regional-science and central-place theories with research on China's urbanization, functions, and spatial patterns. Urban-system planning became a practical instrument and public policy for organizing regional development.

2 Continuous Development through Practice

Urban-system ideas appeared in regional and territorial planning before dedicated studies expanded after reform and opening up. Legislation and ministerial rules formalized their content and approval. Repeated provincial and municipal practice refined methods for scale, hierarchy, functions, spatial organization, infrastructure, and ecological networks.

3 New Theoretical and Practical Challenges

Territorial spatial planning now incorporates urban systems, land use, special plans, and cross-scale coordination. Declining population growth, changing settlement structures, digital mobility, and altered human-nature relations require renewed theory. Planning should respect the basic evolution of urban systems while explaining the network relations of mature urbanization.

Explaining Chinese-Western Differences and Building Locally Grounded Planning Theory

ZHANG Jingxiang, Nanjing University

Planning theory must recognize urban development laws, but these combine general mechanisms with national history and institutions. Western theories arose through a century of industrialization, whereas China experienced compressed urbanization combining industrial, post-industrial, informational, and global pressures. This temporal difference limits direct transfer.

Institutional environments also differ. Western planning often presumes private property, market allocation, and decentralized governance; Chinese planning operates with public land ownership and stronger governmental coordination. Municipal scale, population, resources, and social values further shape the applicability of master planning, ecological planning, transport planning, zoning, governance, and participation.

Chinese theory should draw on four sources: critical learning from developed countries; inheritance of Chinese historical and cultural traditions; close analysis of national resource and territorial conditions; and China's governance system. Locally grounded theory must explain practice and guide action under Chinese modernization.

Imported Concepts and Local Development: The Community as an Example

LI Zhigang, Wuhan University

Community is a representative imported concept. Its boundaries have remained debated, yet it developed rapidly through complete communities, community planning, child-friendly neighborhoods, neighborhood units, and 15-minute living circles. Collaborative planning, Arnstein's ladder of participation, community building, co-creation, micro-renewal, and in-situ reconstruction have all influenced Chinese practice.

Social-space theory shifted attention from land development and infrastructure toward social relations, residential differentiation, daily life, and spatial justice. Chinese responses include improved community facilities, pedestrian access, public space, affordable housing, renewal negotiation, neighborhood councils, participatory budgeting, and co-building, co-governance, and sharing. These innovations remain uneven and are often confined to pilots.

The people's city agenda and stock-based renewal create a stronger basis for localization. Planning should improve physical and social community infrastructure, institutionalize participation, and use residents' knowledge as a substantive basis for decisions.

Application and Challenges of Spatial Justice in Chinese Urban Planning

XIAO Yang, Tongji University

Spatial justice emerged from critiques of urban crisis and the work of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Edward Soja. It treats space as a product of power, capital, and social practice. Justice concerns the distribution of housing, green space, transport, and services, together with planning transparency, participation, and cultural recognition.

1 From Concept to Practice in Chinese Cities

Urban renewal, public-service allocation, and transport accessibility are major fields of practice. Renewal should balance development gains with resident rights, preserve social networks and cultural memory, and provide fair compensation. Service gaps between central and peripheral areas require fiscal and policy support. Public transport should connect disadvantaged groups. Urban-rural justice also requires more equal infrastructure, education, health care, and development opportunity.

2 Persistent Challenges

Implementation is constrained by growth-oriented incentives, fragmented governance, uneven fiscal capacity, and limited participation. Evaluation often emphasizes distributive outcomes while giving less attention to procedural and recognition justice. Demonstration projects can improve individual areas, yet institutional continuity and wider replication remain difficult.

3 A Plural and Systematic Path toward Spatial Justice

Spatial justice should be incorporated into statutory planning, fiscal allocation, public investment, renewal, transport, and social policy. Cross-departmental coordination, transparent decision making, stable participation, differentiated support, and context-sensitive evaluation can move the concept from academic debate to operational governance. Localization should respond to China's institutional conditions while protecting substantive rights and diverse cultural identities.

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