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Report on the Fifth Urban China Forum

On October 6, 2018, the 5th Urban China Forum, themed "Chinese Cities: Emergence in a Globalizing Era", was held successfully at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP), Columbia University, New York. The Executive Committee of the Forum was Urban China Network, with Professor Weiping Wu, Director of the Urban Planning Department at Columbia University, serving as the consultant to the forum. Ten experts and scholars of urban planning and other related fields were invited to the conference from Columbia University, University of North Carolina, University of Michigan, University of Connecticut, University of Texas, Vassar College, the New School, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and University of Bologna in Italy. In this one-day forum, the guests presented academic reports, exchanged views, and discussed topics related to the forum's theme through keynote speeches and round-table discussions.



Professor Weiping Wu

Weiping Wu, Professor and Director of Department of Urban Planning at Columbia GSAPP

In her opening remarks for the 5th Urban China Forum, Professor Weiping Wu noted that the promises and challenges posed by a rapidly urbanizing China will constitute an important field for scholars of various disciplines to explore new theories of urban planning, which may challenge the existing Western-dominated status quo. Throughout the topics highlighted by the speakers in the forum, from housing market, state welfare system, land acquisition policy, to green housing, urban agglomeration, and cultural heritage, we can perceive an extremely dynamic urbanization process in today's China that yields complex social, cultural, and economic phenomena as well as peculiar venues for examining the statecraft of the world's largest developing country in its post-reform era.

Lan Deng, Associate Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, University of Michigan

Professor Lan Deng's speech, titled "Market Development, State Intervention and the Dynamics of New Housing Investment in China", elaborated her research exploring how state intervention, particularly the stimulus initiatives since the 2008 global financial crisis, has shaped the Chinese housing market. Her research demonstrates that the state measures have prevented housing investment from responding to price changes in a natural manner. In eastern regions where housing has been in high demand, the effect is much stronger compared to other regions, indicating the presence of heavier government control on housing production in the former. The dual challenges of affordability and oversupply of housing in China are not only tied to the well-being of the economy but also the life prospects of millions of households. Professor Deng's findings help one understand the formidability of housing market policymaking in China and the uncertain risk of suppressing market forces. In terms of policy suggestion, the research hints at the importance of gearing towards demand-side stimulus initiatives. In a sense, a bottom-up perspective may facilitate the making of better housing market policies.

Professor Qin Gao, Professor Fubing Su and Professor Meina Cai unanimously addressed the challenges of implementing policies in China, that is, a theoretically sound policy or law may not necessarily operate as well as intended.



Professor Lan Deng

Qin Gao, Professor of Social Policy and Social Work, Columbia University; Director of China Center for Social Policy, Columbia University

Professor Qin Gao's comprehensive study on the minimum livelihood guarantee (*dibao*) in China, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data, reveals various barriers for the current state welfare policies to achieve their goals, including mistargeting, corruption, and the lack of a more well-rounded welfare system. The large portion of poverty caused by health-related issues reminds one that poverty reduction is a long, grinding process, both at the level of society and individuals, which makes China's 2020 poverty elimination goal all the more daunting, hence more susceptible to counterproductive operations on the ground. Furthermore, the fact that migration workers are hardly eligible for *dibao* suggests another layer of vulnerability of the free-floating population and that the burden of China's economic miracle is disproportionately imposed upon those without urban household status.

Subsequently, Professor Fubing Su and Meina Cai looked at the land acquisition process through the lens of rural governance. Despite working with different data and methods, both of

them pointed out ways in which local bureaucratic control determines the success of transforming lands.



Professor Qin Gao



Professor Fubing Su

Fubing Su, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science, Vassar College

In Professor Fubing's keynote speech *Urbanization, Land Taking, and Democratic Regression in China: Evidence from Village Elections*, he and his team looked into the dynamics of rights of different stakeholders in land acquisition and successfully provided statistics from various dimensions on stakeholders with realistic, divergent motivation and conflict of interests. Professor Su believes that no matter how fast a social policy or system changes, there is a huge cultural inertia to dominate people's cognition and their behaviors.



Professor Meina Cai



Meina Cai, Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Connecticut

In her lecture titled *Governance of Land Acquisition in China*, Professor Meina Cai noted that there is a positive correlation between the degree of village participation and satisfaction with land acquisition. Given the influence of various background factors, such as local politics, people often question the feasibility of increasing public participation in real-life situations.

Professor Gao, Professor Su, and Professor Cai's speeches unanimously analyzed the challenges of implementing policies in China, that is, theoretically sound laws and policies

may not achieve the desired results in practice. Among them, Professor Su and Professor Cai analyzed the process of land acquisition from the perspective of rural governance. Although the two teams used different data and methods in their research, the conclusions pointed out that local bureaucrats are important factors in controlling the success of land reform.

Ming Zhang, Professor of Community and Regional Planning, University of Texas at Austin

In his keynote speech *Territorial Urbanism: China's Spatial Approach to Propel Socio-Economic Development*, Professor Zhang pointed out that China's super-city cluster aims to promote economic development through deeper inter-regional linkages. In this development, the acceleration and scale expansion of the high-speed railway have played a very important role in promoting the process. In recent years, the Chinese government has firmly adhered to the belief of developing infrastructure by building and developing the world's leading railway network. In addition, due to its relatively recent development, China can refer to the experience of other countries in the construction of the transportation systems. Professor Zhang's speech once again shed light on a famous theory about China's current development: Does land urbanization exceed population urbanization? What is the danger of this gap?



Professor Ming Zhang



Professor Yu Zhou

Zhou Yu, Professor of Geography, Vassar College

In her speech *Paths of Green Building in China: State, Housing Market and Globalization*, Professor Zhou echoes Professor Zhang's proposition and shifts the theme to another latest trend in China's urbanization – green architecture. Professor Zhou discussed the regional gaps and imbalances in the development and construction of green buildings in China today. She stressed that the lack of professional knowledge structure and public awareness is an obstacle to the implementation of green buildings in China.

Luca ZAN, Professor of Management, University of Bologna

Professor Luca ZAN's speech, *Heritage Site in Contemporary China: Cultural Policies and Management Practice*, is based on his research team's project, an effort led by the government that had carried out cooperation projects at Chinese cultural heritage sites, highlighting the imbalance between China's recognition of cultural heritage and economic investment. Professor ZAN based in Italy criticized the decision of Chinese investors and the government,

and expressed his confusion about this issue: for example, why the Xi'an Daming Palace was transformed into a theme park. His speech came to the audience as a great revelation that the transformation of China's urban landscape will ultimately be measured by economic standards, fully reflecting the political priorities of local governments. Like many Chinese historians and protectors, Professor ZAN deplored the loss of cultural identity during the restoration of Chinese historical sites, and asked: In the rapidly changing environment of China, is this universal problem a way out?



Professor Luca Zan



Professor Yan Song

Yan Song, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill / China Research Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Professor Song Yan's keynote speech, *Exploring the Association between Urban Form and Environment Quality in China*, presented his team's research results on the development pattern and environmental quality of China's cities. In the research, he used breakthrough research methods, such as big data analysis and urban morphology analysis, to examine 158 Chinese cities. The results of the study once again confirmed the negative correlation between high-density, high-centrality and strong-connectivity streets and pollution. Professor Song also noted that the highly mixed use of urban land may increase pollution. Later, he discussed the specific influences of different pollutants, and made many suggestions for future urban development based on the research results, focusing on the three governance principles, urban development stage, financial source stability, and population support.

Round Table Discussion

In the round table discussion at the end of the forum, professors and guests discussed the themes and views from the keynote speeches, with Professor Weiping Wu serving as the moderator. Some of the topics discussed include "From the theoretical perspective, how to think about China's urbanization issues in the context of globalization", "How do each stakeholder in China's urbanization process plays a role in shaping urban space" and "In the context of globalization, whether policy advice from planners and practitioners in related fields has intrinsic motivational and rational mechanisms".



In this session, the guests offer their valuable views on the topics covered in the keynote speeches. The discussion not only summarized the speeches but also offered unique and sincere perspectives on the different topics covered in the speeches. The guests based their discussion with the knowledge and expertise they garnered from their different academic backgrounds and helped the students and future planners in the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the future of urban planning in China.

Overall, the 5th Urban China Forum was successfully concluded with the joint efforts of various parties. On behalf of the the 6th Urban China Network, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have provided help and guidance to the Forum! At the same time, all members of this year's Urban China Network warmly invites everyone to pay attention to the new China Urban Forum next year and the follow-up activities of the Urban China Network.



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