

Development Stages, Planning Thoughts, and Practical Actions: Evolution of Modern Chinese Regional Planning Theories and Practices in an International Context

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Abstract: Regional planning in China constitutes an integral part of the global history of regional planning. The evolution of Chinese regional planning theories and practices should be understood, interpreted, and compared in a broader, international context. As an important tool for regional governance, the approach to regional planning will inevitably bear characteristics that are distinctive to a specific country and time; whereas the dynamics in the evolution of regional planning theories and practices also comes from adapting to specific development stages in certain countries and regions. Over the last seventy years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, while being exposed to the influence of global theories and practices, China has seen its regional planning in constant adjustments to seek better alignment between the development stage, planning thought, and practical actions. Along with the continuous advancing of China's modernization and urbanization, the understanding of development stage gets clearer, the competition among different interest groups becomes increasingly tough, and the practical actions get more diversified. With that, China's grasp of trends and patterns in regional planning has been gradually improved. This paper aims to figure out the correlations between urbanization in China and in the world, especially in Western developed countries, to relate different stages to one another. Therefore, Chinese planning thought and practical actions over the past seven decades can be reviewed with a frame of reference, with which China's response to international trends in various stages can be evaluated. As conclusions, this paper establishes the correlations between development stages, planning thoughts, and practical actions. Furthermore, based on the judgment on China's urbanization trends, this paper identifies the directions for innovation on China's regional planning.

Keywords: Regional Planning, Development Stage, Planning Thought, Practical Action, China

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Introduction

Regional thinking and regional planning practices have been around in China since the ancient dynasties. In recent centuries, remarkable pioneers such as Zhang Jian and Sun Yat-sen made new attempts in this field ^[1]. However, nationwide regional planning practices did not take shape until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Since then, regional planning as an integral aspect of state governance evolved constantly with the political and economic reforms as well as the urbanization course, developing into various practices in response to different administrative systems and development stages. In the planned economy period, these include joint selection of factory sites, deployment of industries, and development of "the Third Front"; during the institutional shift period, territorial planning and urban system planning, etc. were applied; whereas, once the socialist market economy was in place, practices were changed to overall city/county planning, functional zoning planning, metropolitan planning, city cluster planning, etc. Each period has its characteristics that are distinctive to the national conditions in a specific period. Over the decades, China's regional planning has made so profound an impact over so large an area that it without question constitutes an important part of the global history of regional planning. A systematic review on China's regional planning history over the last seven decades will enrich the global understanding of post-war planning history and facilitate comparative studies; more importantly, through crystallizing the planning practices in China and sharing the China knowledge globally, it provides another system of reference for other developing countries and countries in institutional transition ^[2].

As a late-comer in modernization and urbanization, China began with most of its regional planning and other planning theories borrowed from others, which gave China both advantages and disadvantages ^[3]. By definition, planning theories are born in practices and should be tested in practices. Their specificity and applicability are dictated by the locale and time at which they are practised. Nonetheless, when introducing theories, late-comers tend to be enchanted by the end results of theories but overlook their specificity and applicability, resulting in a transplantation-style borrowing, which is not rare at all in China's regional planning over the decades. Against such a backdrop, the study of the evolution of China's regional planning in the last seventy years should not be just about collecting data or characterizing processes. The more important matter is rather to "reconstruct", in a global context, the background in which theories and practices emerged, and to reveal the development patterns of regional planning thoughts in certain development stages, and how the thoughts interact with practical actions. This paper aims to pinpoint the

niche of China's urbanization in the past seventy years in the framework of global urbanization, and figure out the correlations between urbanization in China and in the world, especially in Western developed countries, to relate different stages to one another. Therefore, Chinese planning theories and practical actions can be reviewed with a frame of reference, with which the degree of alignment between development stages, planning thoughts, and practical actions can be evaluated. Such analysis will identify the rules and patterns in the evolution of planning theories and practices, as well as possible directions for innovation on China's regional planning.

1 Development stages, planning thoughts, and practical actions

1.1 An analytic model

“Development stages” refers to the specific state of population and industry concentration in urban and rural areas as indicated by the metric of urbanization rate. On a “S-curve of urbanization”, the following stages can be identified: “starting” (10%~25%-30%), “acceleration” (30%~60%-70%), and “stable” (>70%)^[4,5]. China's urbanization clearly lagged behind in its evolution stage in comparison with major developed countries such as the UK, the US, Germany, France, Japan, etc. It even failed to keep pace with the global trend (Figure 1). This is the factual basis for any discussion.

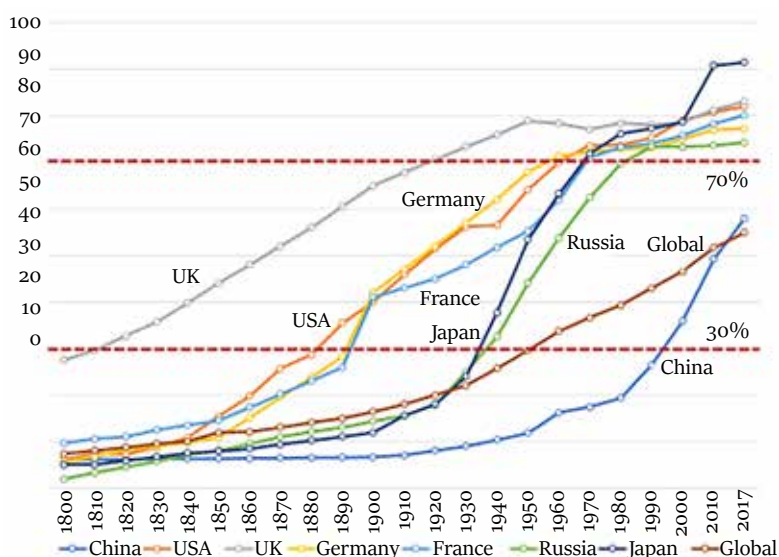


Figure 1. Urbanization rate of major countries in the world from 1800 to 2017

Source: Our world in data. <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization>, 2018-12-20. (Some pre-1990 statistics are from reference [5] and interpolation.)

“Planning thought”, or to put it in another way, the “trends of thoughts in planning”, are the materialization of prevalent regional planning theories and thoughts in forms of planning practices, social effects, and academic discussions ^[7]. Over the past seventy years, the planning thought evolved under the influence of governance system in specific political regimes, and drew from the experience and thoughts from developed countries or the “early starters”. “Practical actions” are the actions taken in line with certain regional planning thought and administrative power structure. Experience, especially that of developed countries, proves that the centripetal movement of the population towards cities, which is reflected in the increase of urbanization rate, represents the general trend of social and economic development in the world. Those “planning thoughts” and “practical actions” in alignment with the “development stage” can effectively push social economic development stage to higher rungs up the ladder.

Taking into account the background of the evolution of China’s regional planning, this paper reviews the correlations among “development stage”, “planning thought”, and “practical actions” and constructs an analytic model of “development stage—planning thought—practical actions” (Figure 2): (1) Specific development stages require specific governance systems, whereas the latter is to a large extent determined by the political institution; (2) Regional planning is an integral aspect of the state’s governance system; (3) Planning thought and practical actions are at the core of regional planning theories and practices, where the former is susceptible to influence of advanced planning thoughts in other countries, and the latter is dictated by the administrative structure in China; (4) The implementation of regional planning may lead to change in development stages, which will, in turn, be represented in the political institution. A bit logical deduction helps to map out the four possible correlations between the three factors: “development stage” (DS), “planning thoughts” (PT), and “practical actions” (ACT): (1) Both DS with PT and PT with ACT are well aligned; (2) DS is mismatched with PT while PT is aligned with ACT; (3) DS is aligned with PT while PT is mismatched with ACT; (4) Both DS

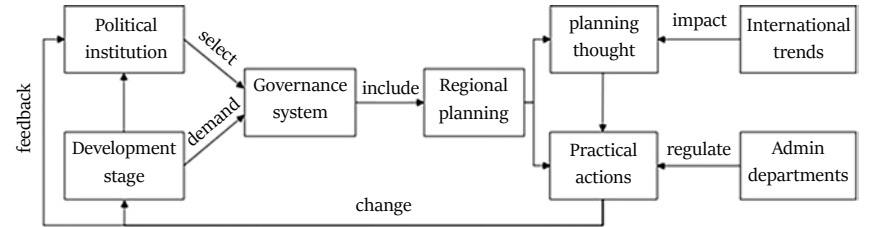


Figure 2. Analytic model of “development stage—planning thought—practical action”

with PT and PT with ACT are mismatched. In the following paragraphs, we shall review, from the perspective of those four correlations, the regional planning in China and in Western countries over the last seven decades.

1.2 The evolution of regional planning theories and practices in the West

A reflection on the evolution of regional planning in Western developed countries over the last century reveals their advantages as early starters and their effective feedback mechanism for social issues. The development stages of urbanization, regional planning thoughts, and planning actions were generally well aligned. Around the turn of the 20th century, as population and industrial activities concentrated toward cities and towns, the UK became the most urbanized major country at the time, with an urbanization rate as high as 65% by 1900 ^[5]. However, the absence of systematic urban planning had resulted in free urban sprawl, with which came along a host of issues: disorderly construction, polluted environment, poor sanitation, security, etc. Therefore, Ebenezer Howard proposed the solutions of “garden city” and “social city” as alternatives to crowded metropolis. His invention of combining cities and the countryside and connecting them by railway lines into a regional “social city” inspired many regional planners and institutions ^[6]. Western countries conducted many programmes to put Howard’s idea of “garden city” and “social city” into practice. During the 1920s to 1940s, Western countries started the practice of master planning on metropolitan areas with an aim to integrate central towns with the commuters’ suburbs. Regional planning in the US was born among forward-looking planners in New York City in the form of “New York Regional Planning 1929”. Progressivism and Howard’s theory inspired the regionalists who sought to come up with a fundamental response to the problems of congestion and inefficiency in industrial cities. They suggested urban activities should be regrouped and spread over a larger footprint in order to address social issues and rationalize the functions of a metropolis. The Tennessee Valley Authority founded as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal Programs is the most well-known and probably the largest experiment of regional planning in the era of regionalism. In Germany, the contemporary Ruhr Coalfield Settlement Association drafted the “Master Planning for Settlements in the Region”; while in the USSR, the “Russian SFSR Electrification Plan” was developed together with the plan for economic divisions. Regional planning practices like these greatly helped the development of regional resources and regional economy.

From the 1940s to 1960s, regional planning thrived to meet the urgent need of post-war reconstruction and urban development programmes. In England, Patrick Abercrombie led the planning of Greater London; while in Germany and Japan, nationwide territorial development planning was developed. All these planning served the need for national and regional development after the Second World War. In the 1970s and 1980s, with the Neo-liberalist reforms taking the central stage and the arrival of a globalized, information-dominated world, production factors such as capital, land, labor, technology, etc. were freer to flow. As a result, regional planning, which has its focus on macro-regulation started to lose its popularity and give way to new forms of planning that are “looser” and more “guidance like” ^[8]. From the 1990s onward, as the world has been facing increasingly challenging issues on demography, resource, environment, and socio-economic development, the concept of “sustainability” has gained a lot of spotlight in the planning community. Many countries started to switch from physical development planning to social development planning, giving more and more weight to social equality and environmental protection. A case in point is the Third Regional Plan done by the Regional Plan Association in New York, which set forth the famous “three E’s” goals, namely economy, environment, and equity ^[6,9].

2 Evolution stages of regional planning theories and practices in China

2.1 Initial period (1949-1978): Aggressive thought and plan-dictated practices

Underlying China’s regional planning in this period is the mismatching of the backward economy, the infancy of urbanization, and the regional planning thought dictated by aggressive government policies. When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, urbanization in China remained at a pre-industrial level, with an urbanization rate of only 10.64%. Given the international situation and the ideology it adopted, China opted to always side with and follow suit of the USSR in diplomacy. In development mode, China had a “heavy industry first + collective farming” approach and a Stalinist planned economy regime, which in effect hindered the growth of consumption-led sectors and urban development. Influenced by the urban planning thoughts and techniques in the USSR, China embarked on programmes of overall regional planning around major factories, which were deployed by decisions of joint China-USSR teams. These programmes, in a sense, have facilitated China’s modernization and urbanization. By 1960, urbanization rate had risen to 19.75%. But the political movements that

followed: Culture Revolution, “educated urban youth to the countryside”, “construction of the Third Front”, etc. took the regional planning thought and practices to the ultra-left. “Scattered, sheltered, by the mountains” became the norm in laying out factories and towns. Although in that way industries were distributed more evenly geography-wise, it ended up with elevated production costs and an enormous waste of resources, not least it also hindered urbanization, kept the urbanization rate lingering at around 17% ^① from 1962 all through to 1978. Admittedly, urbanization was still in its infancy thus could not take place at a fast rate. But the biggest hindrance was macro-policies of the state.

The highly centralized and planned economic system provided a solid basis for strict implementation of regional planning, which duly embodied the aggressive thought in planning. In a planned economy, governments at all levels have the absolute power in allocating production factors, including capital, technology, land, and raw materials ^[10], so local governments were dominant in urban and regional development. In terms of division of power, during the recovery period immediately after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (1958-1962), authority for economic planning and regional planning were two in one: the implementation of the national economic plan would cover a dimension of regional planning. It was in the “First Five-Years Plan” period that economic planning and regional planning diverged. However, regional planning still served as the extension of national economic planning, thus institutions including the State Construction Committee and local governments were still in place to guarantee its strict implementation. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), regional planning was disrupted even suspended. Despite such ideas as “no urban planning is needed within three years” at that time, large scale development projects were still carried out on the “Third Front” and the “Lesser Third Front”, which required planning by various authorities and local governments. Such administrative mechanism ensured the authoritativeness of the regional planning practices. Nevertheless, the laggard realities in urbanization did not match the aggressive planning thought; even less the rigorous planning practices based on the latter aggravated such mismatching further.

2.2 Shifting period (1979-1991): Advanced yet untimely thought with pilot programmes to a limited extent

As China switched from a planned economy to a market one, new

① Data source: National Bureau of Statistics. <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/>

thought on regional planning included planning theories introduced from developed countries and the hybridization of existing planning theories in China. On the outset of Reform and Opening-up, both the government and the academia were eager to lift China out of the backwaters as soon as possible. However, that eagerness affected their judgment on the suitability of imported planning theories to China. In addition, the lack of an agreed clear direction and governance approach also hampered urbanization, resulting in a mismatching between low urbanization rates, a development stage of shifting economy, and untimely regional planning thought. The third plenary session of the 11th CPC Congress made the resolution to redirect the Party's and the State's focus to economic development, adopted the "Reform and Opening-up" policy. In the field of regional planning thought and practices, experience in comprehensive territorial development of Germany, France, Japan, etc. was to be drawn from to explore an effective form of regional governance within a still largely planned economic regime. Starting from 1981, territorial planning was rolled out at national level, with natural resources development, industry deployment, and environment restoration as the key themes. In the meantime, pilot programmes of territorial planning were launched in about a dozen local regions. However, China in the 1980s was still far from an established market economy, and still a backward country as far as economic development and urbanization are concerned. The imported concept of territorial planning was apparently too advanced to fit the political and economic development status at the time. Take Japan for a comparison, it already hit the 50% mark of urbanization rate by the 1950s, and by late 1970s the rate had climbed to above 70%. Over that period, Japan completed three rounds of comprehensive national development planning, with the missions of "balance development among regions", "create a rich and diverse environment", and "improve the overall living conditions for the people" ^[11]. Those missions and tasks of the planning resonated with respective stages of Japan's rapid urbanization. Whereas in China, while territorial planning in the same period did help to take the stock and lay a foundation, its untimeliness and lack of overarching theories were inherent flaws that prevented it from paying off. By the early 1990s, territorial planning had faded out ^[12-13].

The absence of a sustained administrative authority caused by adjustments between whiles in the mission and functions of State Development Planning Commission and State Construction Commission made it impossible to conduct regional planning practices at large scale. The limited and local practical actions did not match the advanced yet untimely planning thought. Rise and fall of territorial planning can actually be a window to observe China in transition. Take the change

in administrative authority for instance, State Land Administration was moved from State Construction Commission to State Development Planning Commission in 1982^[8], thereafter territorial planning was rolled out all over China. However, territorial planning had not been conferred a legal status by legislation, or validated by the State Council, hence was neither authoritative in directing local development nor legally binding in regulating land use. By the 1990s, as market economy grew into full fledge, SDPC changed its mission, whereas territorial planning authorities were either closed or inactivated. As such, territorial planning was halted for many years. Upon the completion of the “Development Planning for Seven Major Regions” by SDPC, regional planning was essentially taken out of the governments’ agenda^[1]. Such changes in administration ended up with the marginalisation of regional planning, and not surprisingly, the suboptimal planning outcomes.

2.3 Acceleration period (1992-2002): The tag-along thought leads to partitioned prosperity

As China’s social-economic development and urbanization picked up speed, urban planning thought just managed to dance to its tune. However, the degree of alignment between the development stage and regional planning thought improved as compared to the previous two periods. On one hand, urban system planning led by State Construction Commission flourished in response to the needs for urban development and market growth. Being a local invention in theory and in practice that gave due consideration to the realities at the time, urban system planning was instrumental in the shaping of national and local urban planning systems and was established as a statutory part of urban planning system in “Urban Planning Law 1990”. Starting from the mid-1990s, this concept gained more contents and became comprehensive regional planning, which replaced the previous territorial planning^[1,12]. On the other hand, as the socialist market economy took its shape, the revenue-sharing taxation system was installed, and housing was commercialized, the performance-driven local governments rushed for “city-building campaigns”. Against the backdrop of globalization, decentralization, and marketization, Guangzhou set the first example in 2000 in developing strategic planning for urban and regional development. Before long, this new form of planning spread all over China. At the same time, regional planning that fits specific strategic moves made by the state, such as national new districts, poverty relief development zones, integrated restoration zones, etc. also gained momentum. Regional planning was again in a boom^[13]. In wake of China’s entry into the WTO, international players also took part in China’s planning projects as bidders or partners, making China a testing ground for prevalent new theories

in the West, such as Neo-urbanism, Smart Growth, Consultative Governance, Global City, etc.^[14] As a result, Chinese regional planning theories were further enriched and diversified, better suited to address the needs of accelerated urbanization.

In this period, the constantly maturing market economy and urbanization highlighted the importance of spatial planning. On one hand, land use for urban development expanded rapidly. In response, the state government tightened its regulation on the protection and management of farmland. That had made a scientific, reliable spatial planning an indispensable requirement in the application for land titles. On the other hand, the power of planning authorities in approving capital spending and construction projects was significantly weakened. Therefore, spatial planning became an important means for the governments to execute regulatory power, and not surprisingly, a key area that various departments contended for. Particularly in terms of regional planning, the Ministry of Construction^①, Ministry of Land and Resources, and National Development and Reform Commission all did similar planning severally^[14]. Ministry of Land and Resources kicked off a new territorial planning with a view on homeland security and resource census, aiming to coordinate the relations between socio-economic growth, natural resource use, and the environment; NDRC initiated the functional zoning planning in a bid to set out the spatial pattern for national or provincial development; while Ministry of Construction was busy with metropolitan planning, of which the goal is to coordinate the roles of urban and rural areas in development. But due to the partitioned and overlapping responsibilities of these ministries, conflicts in regional planning practices would be more or less inevitable. So the thought that tags along with the development stage could not really address the conflicting practical actions. In terms of their purposes, national economic and social development planning is a development-oriented guidance to improve the overall competitiveness of a region; urban-rural development planning offers a structural tool to adjust and optimize spatial patterns; while land use master planning serves as a guarantee to best meet the needs of regional development with land supply^[1]. By their nature the three are not contradictory, rather the underlying reason for any clash is the desire of the ministries for more power. Just like the “clash of the Titans” always takes its toll on the commoners, power struggle over planning authority by various departments had a twofold effect: for one thing, local-level planning, when put into practice, was often caught in a dilemma; for another, the

① On March 15, 2008, according to the state-structure reform plan adopted at the first session of the 11th CPC Congress, the previous Ministry of Construction was renamed as “Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Construction”, or “Ministry of Housing and Construction”.

authoritativeness of regional planning, and consequently its role in guiding urban and regional development, was compromised ^[12].

2.4 Transformation period (2013-present): Advanced thought ensures orderly practices

As China enters into a transformation stage of socio-economic development, new phrases such as “scientific outlook on development”, “the Five Coordination” (coordination of urban and rural development, of development in different regions, of social and economic growth, of human and nature interests, and of domestic development and opening-up to the world), “ecological civilisation”, “the five pillar concepts” (innovation, coordination, green, openness, and sharing), etc. have come to the spotlight, which pronounce the changed values of the central government. Planning theories such as sustainability and science of human settlement are widely adopted. Finally, the thought on regional planning in China completely fits into the global framework and matches with the country’s social and economic development stage as well as the urbanization situation in a transformation period. In this period, as the “demographic dividend” disappeared, cost of primary production factors including labour and land went up, causing the low value-added manufacturers to “leave for the south”, meaning relocate to cheaper places in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Challenges of environmental degradation, high local debts, and structural imbalance in urbanization that resulted from an extensive development approach have proven it impossible for China to continue with the previous mode of development. Only if China changes its development approach and pursue innovation-driven, green development can the people enjoy more “sense of gaining”, can the next stage of urbanization take place to a better quality. Responding to the needs of the new era, new practices such as sustainable planning and innovation-driven urban/regional planning are carried out, which give priority to social equality and environmental sustainability. This is embodied in many programmes being undertaken in this period: the national new urbanization planning, planning for the coordinated development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, as well as the master planning of Beijing and Shanghai, etc. In the meantime, China is also active in reaching out to offer planning services and assistance to other developing countries and countries along the “Belt and Road”.

The administrative reform of state government has laid a sound foundation for the alignment between planning thought and practical actions. In order to put an end to the phenomenon “nine dragons all govern one water course”, NDRC, MOHURD, MoLaR started a reform in 2014 with pilot projects on “integration of multiple planning mechanisms” and “provincial spatial planning” ^[16], with an aim to develop a system in which the power and

efforts of all ministries can be coordinated. In 2018, a timely resolution was adopted on the Third Session of the 19th CPC Congress to restructure the State Council. With respect to spatial planning, the former MoLaR was to be the main department responsible, on top of which relevant functions previously spread among NDRC, MOHURD, Ministry of Water Resources, Ministry of Agriculture, and State Oceanic Administration were all incorporated into one new ministry—Ministry of Natural Resources. The intention is to harmonise the power in planning administration, and to build a national spatial planning system that can be an institutional warranty for the authoritativeness of regional planning as well as its quality implementation. In the transformation stage of urbanization, alignment between the advanced planning thought and the optimised mechanisms, which China is striving to achieve, will greatly improve the performance of regional planning and serve as a solid basis for China to formalize its unique theories and methodology in regional planning.

3 Evolution features of China's regional planning theories and practices and directions for innovation

3.1 Evolution features of China's regional planning theories and practices

The last seven decades have seen a gradual process of adjustment from mismatching to alignment for the three factors: development stage, planning thought, and practical actions (Table 1). In the planned economy period, the backward urbanization and aggressive thought were far apart on the spectrum. During the dual-track period, the untimely planning thought and very limited practices did not suit the shifting economy and relaxed policies. While in the acceleration period, the “tag-along” thought failed apparently to fit with partitioned and even conflicted practices. Finally, as the state government changed its values, not least that the administrative structure was reformed, urbanization stage, advanced planning thought, and orderly practices may eventually get well aligned in the transformation period. With all the adjustments over the decades, the contents of regional planning changed from simply deployment of industries to a comprehensive and sustainable development policy; regulatory measures were no longer rigid top-down implementation of plans, but flexible mechanisms that respects local development needs; regulatory bodies changed from one to many, then back to one harmonized, more authoritative entity. Such changes boil down to one rule, i.e. only when the development stage, planning thought, and practical actions are all aligned can modern state governance and urbanization be promoted on a healthy track. Mismatching between any of the three will hinder holistic development and optimal urbanization.

Table 1. Review of modern Chinese regional planning theories and practices in the framework of “development stage—planning thought—practical actions”

Time	Development stage (DS)	Planning thought (PT)	Practical actions (ACT)	DS v. PT	PT v. ACT
1949-1978	Backward urbanization; Highly centralised planned economy	Aggressive thought: learn everything from the USSR; “counter-urbanization”	Plan-dictated actions: joint selection of factory sites, deployment of industries, regional overall development planning, development of “the Third Front”	Mismatched	Aligned
1979-1991	Underdeveloped urbanization; dual-track social and economic system	Advanced yet untimely thought: learn from Germany, France, Japan, etc. on territorial planning	Actions to a limited extent: territorial planning was piloted not long before being practically suspended; the development planning for seven major regions	Mismatched(↓)	Mismatched
1992-2012	Accelerated urbanization; socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics	Tag-along thought: domestic innovations on urban system planning; diversification of regional planning theories; scientific outlook on development; the “five coordination”	Partitioned prosperity of planning: new territorial planning, functional zoning planning, overall planning of city/county, metropolitan planning, strategic planning, city cluster planning	Aligned	Mismatched(↑)
2013-Present	Urbanization in transformation; State Council was restructured to harmonise the authority for planning	Advanced thought: ecological civilisation, the five pillar concepts, sustainability, science of human settlement	Orderly practices: integration of multiple planning mechanisms, new urbanization planning, territorial spatial planning	Aligned(↑)	Getting better aligned

Notes: “↓” denotes “to a lower degree”, and “↑” denotes “to a higher degree”.

3.2 Directions for innovation

Despite its mismatching with the realities then in China, the Russian regional planning theories introduced shortly after the founding of the P. R. China were instrumental in setting up a framework for China, laying a foundation for the future reforms and evolution of regional planning^[1]. The implementation of territorial planning, a concept borrowed from Western Europe and Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, was by and large following in the footsteps of Western planning theories. What proved to be innovative and successful are those domestic inventions that fit specific urbanization stages and give consideration to the realities in China, such as urban system planning, science of human settlement, etc. As urbanization is moving on to a more developed stage, Chinese regional planners should stress on the alignment between development stage, planning thought, and practical actions, so that new theories and best practices with Chinese characteristics can be promoted in a holistic framework of spatial planning. Many successful regional planning theories and practices in the history, e.g. territorial planning in Europe, the river valley planning in Tennessee, “Neo-regionalism”, etc. stem from a specific international landscape, socio-economic institutions, and traditions and history. China will also develop its own regional planning theories and practices that feature a strong spatial and temporal “embeddedness”. Therefore, any innovation on regional planning in China will have to start from a good grasp of China’s politics, economy, society, culture, and traditions, from a deep understanding of the complex correlations and interconnection between planning thought, practical actions and the development stage, political system, administrative structure, and international trends in planning. Only so that theories can rise above the simple, biased, and abstract words in generalization, and the role of regional planning can be evaluated in a comprehensive historical context.

Future innovation on regional planning theories and practices in China can be made from two angles: to crystallize past experience and theories in China, and to reinvent regional planning in the new era. First, on the crystallization of China’s experience, planners should draw from the lessons learnt during China’s urbanization course, reflect on the regional planning practices in China and do a comparative study with that of other developing countries and countries in institutional transition. It is worth noting that the purpose for such crystallization is not just so that it can be copied to other countries such as those along the “Belt and Road”; rather it is to enrich the international academia’s understanding of China’s regional planning, and to form a frame of reference for decision-making in China and the world’s urbanization in a more developed stage. Otherwise,

without regarding the socio-economic institution and the history, culture and traditions, we may risk copying mechanically from the Western theories and experience. Hardly can it be any innovation if we get rid of the old “Euro-centric” theories only to find ourselves in a new “Sino-centric” bias. On the other hand, in order to better serve the new urbanization and the regional planning needs in China and the world at large, urban planners should be quick and sensitive in observing trends in the new times and making theoretical inventions accordingly. This may cover such areas as research into the spatial characteristics and development patterns of China’s growing Internet economy and new economy, the research on the evolution of urban-rural space under the influence of new infrastructure (e.g. high-speed railway), the exploration of new methods for spatial analysis and urban planning in the context of mobile Internet, big data, and cloud service, etc.

4 Conclusions

Regional planning is an important form of governance in the course of modernization and urbanization. Over the past seven decades, while being exposed to the influence of global theories and practices, China has seen its regional planning in constant adjustments to seek better alignment between the mismatched development stage, planning thought, and practical actions. The process of adjustment away from mismatching demonstrates the nature of planning sciences as a discipline ^[17], i.e. its specificity to time, space, and practices. Only when development stage, planning thought, and practical actions are all aligned can modern state governance and urbanization be promoted on a healthy track. That, in retrospect, is the objective rule that must be observed. Facing the profound changes in international politics and economy as well as challenges in domestic development as we go forward, regional planning will be a strategic tool to address uncertainties and improve sustainability. Its importance cannot be emphasized too much. Therefore, establish a trans-departmental, interdisciplinary national spatial planning system, bearing in mind the objective rules, is a vital agenda for Chinese regional planners in the new era.

As urbanization in China is getting into concord with the rest of the world, and China is leading the world with its “Internet + high-speed railway network” infrastructure, the world’s second-largest economy is in a good position to make its voice heard and get its wisdom shared by the world. Especially when it comes to the theories and practices in regional planning, China should strike a strong note in the global symphony of urbanization, even lead the way for innovation in this

regard. Prosperity must come from opening-up, for globalization is an irreversible trend. In order to be a globally influential player in the field of regional planning community, Chinese planners must have a global vision and be conscientious of their responsibilities. They should adopt the strategy of “taking in and reaching out” with more open-mind, and embrace urbanization in its more developed form in China and in the world. That requires not just change of mind-set, but also a more inclusive environment for innovation, implementation of practical institutional reforms, and reflection on the real lessons learned in practice. There is indeed a long way to go for regional planners in China! **UPI**

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