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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND MY LIFE

Some personal reflections

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“You have come a long way!” This is a remark made by my PhD supervisor, Professor John Friedmann, on finding out that my parents were factory workers without much education. And on reflection, this is a perceptive comment, especially considering I am a woman coming from an Asian (Chinese) culture.

I was a young Marxist!

A number of things had imprinted a leftist outlook in my young mind. When I was a child, our family of five lived in a very small room in a squatter area at the fringe of the infamous Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong. I still have vivid memories of my parents and many uncles and aunts standing and sitting on broken benches in a circle, discussing communal issues such as sorting out water metres or handling solid waste and sewage problems. That phase of my life as a “slum dog” has always directed my later research interests to the needs of the “underdogs” in the urbanization process. Also for some unknown reasons, my parents sent me to a kindergarten run by a left-wing trade union. Those two short years surprisingly have had lasting impacts on my life. Compared with my peers, I am not afraid of China and I do have a natural sense of indescribable love of the land and people in the vast country. One particular incident implanted a question in my mind that I have continued to ask today: How can she (the teacher at that time) be so sure that she is right? This question emerged in my little brain when my teacher told me that the newspaper my father used to read was not a good one (Hong Kong society was polarized politically into pro-left [Communists] and pro-right [Nationalists] camps in the 1960s and the newspaper that my father read was one that tried to be more neutral). These early education experiences help explain why I was fascinated by Marxian and Maoist thought when I was in secondary school. However, Hong Kong then was a colonial society and discussions on politics in schools were forbidden. My reading of Karl Marx’s Das Kapital and Mao’s thought was done “secretly.” And I was too young to consider the relationship of these extra-curricular readings with regular school work that focused on memorizing model answers for examinations.
It was the Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) tanks that drew me to urban planning!

About half of the population in Hong Kong lives in public housing. Our family was very lucky in the late 1970s to be able to leave the squatter area and move into a public housing flat with an expansive sea view. However, just across the road from our public housing estate, at a stone’s throw distance, were some LPG tanks or, in planning jargon, some hazardous installations. Opposite these tanks was a private housing estate. Hong Kong started to introduce district administration in the early 1980s, and a group of young social workers who aimed at running for the position of district councillor started to mobilize the local community to explore the potential risks of having these LPG tanks next to residential land uses. As a fresh university graduate, I joined them enthusiastically and had my first taste of community activism. Instead of trying to resolve problems within the community like my parents’ generation, we proactively visited different government departments, undertook questionnaire surveys, studied carefully the confidential consultancy reports, raised community awareness and held a press conference to share our knowledge about the potential danger of the LPG tanks to the nearby residents and question the wisdom of the urban planners. The activism work paid off eventually – the LPG tanks were removed many years later. The experience inspired my interest in urban planning and I decided to return to school to earn a master's degree in urban planning.

Three of the teaching faculty members in the Master of Science in Urban Planning programme at the University of Hong Kong then were neo-Marxists and took an anti-planning stance. Given my leftist imprint, I read extensively and was captivated by literature such as David Harvey’s *The limits to capital* (1982). However, the restriction to using one single approach to account for everything had produced a rather stifling and demoralizing result within the small class. Some classmates even gave up because of the difficult neo-Marxist jargon used in many of the readings. I was puzzled and felt rather helpless and debilitated in front of the structuralist arguments, such as whatever urban planners do, they will benefit only the capitalist class. At one point, I was so desperate that I went back to my undergraduate teachers and asked if I had entered the wrong programme.

Liberated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)!

I worked briefly in the government as an administrative officer after graduation and discovered that I could not be a good bureaucrat. With the award of a fellowship set up in memory of Sir Edward Youde, a governor much beloved by Hong Kongers, who died in Beijing during the Sino-British talks on Hong Kong’s future in 1986, I decided, on the advice of a professor at the University of Hong Kong, to pursue a PhD degree in urban planning at UCLA. As a student whose whole career had been memorizing model answers (including the neo-Marxist arguments) to obtain good grades, the UCLA experience was life changing. I still remember the day I left LA to return to Hong Kong after two years of residence and had to say goodbye to John Friedmann, when he remarked, “Your thoughts have turned upside down!” It is so true. I set off to UCLA dreaming of learning some readily applicable regional development theories to apply to Hong Kong and the then emerging Pearl River Delta. I soon discovered that such theories did not exist and, indeed, there was no model answer to the emerging regional development problems. For the first time in my life within a formal education system, I was encouraged to apply myself to thinking through issues – something that I had done all the time outside the...
formal education system but somehow strangely forgot to apply within the formal system. It was an absolutely liberating experience, and my joy and excitement multiplied each day during my two short years at UCLA.

To satisfy the curriculum requirement, we had to take a number of courses outside the planning school. Two courses on methods of sociological analysis made a huge impact on my intellectual life. While these two courses made my grade point average (GPA) less than perfect, the principles that I learned and synthesized are relevant up to this very day. To cite a few examples:

- Be a good craftsman and avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Be your own methodologist and theorist (Mills, 1959, p. 224).
- Ask a concrete, definite and specific question to “specify ignorance” of an existing phenomenon concerning “humanly important problems” (Merton, 1987, pp. 9, 1, 19) which can be answered and solved.
- Formulate the research question in terms of interrelated hypotheses into a unified analytical construct about “a cultural phenomenon which is historically significant” (Weber, 1949, p. 75) and always look for connections among questions about what, where, whence, why and when (Bunge, 1959, p. 281).
- Always remember that the research question is just a “one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view” (Weber, 1949, p. 90), which, together with the context (reality in totality) out of which the ‘isolate’ (the research object) is ripped, is space- and time-specific (Bendix, 1963, p. 533).
- The research question should not just allow us to “understand the characteristic uniqueness of the reality” (Weber, 1949, p. 72); it should also allow us to discover empirical regularities which can shed light on other similar situations.
- It is important to understand the ideas and intentions of historical actors (Roth, 1976, p. 316) who are embedded in different types of relations with other individuals within a multidimensionally described social structure (Przeworski, 1985, p. 393).
- When we compare, we need to measure things with the same meaning (Zelditch, 1971, p. 11). And the units to be compared should be of the same level (Zelditch, 1971, p. 280). Comparative studies should not only allow us to identify particularities but also help us formulate generalizations, test our explanations and detect the realm of possibilities in comparable historical instances. Hence comparisons could be intra-historical or inter-systemic, at the level of parts of sequences or the entire sequence of events.

The emphasis on identifying humanly important and historically significant research questions echoed the intellectual concerns deliberated in the planning school. Many of the professors in the planning school at UCLA then were interested in empowering the community and promoting radical planning. The planning school was the practice ground of such empowerment ethics. Hence, students were given a say in even the recruitment of faculty members.

I wish I had stayed at UCLA for a longer time but my family needed my financial contribution. I would never have completed my PhD studies in four years if not for Professor John Friedmann’s efficient, meticulous, critical and constructive comments – all sent promptly by airmail over the Pacific Ocean. His guidance and mentorship have been my role model throughout my academic life.

**From Mars back to Earth**

I was very lucky to be able to take up a part-time position at the University of Hong Kong as one of my undergraduate professors was on sabbatical. I was then offered a temporary, full-time
position in the planning programme where I had earned my master's degree. Hong Kong in the early 1990s was still a city with very strong top-down planning system. The vocabularies such as community empowerment and dialogue in planning practice that I had learned at UCLA became dangerous, alien language when spoken in the context of Hong Kong. It took me a long time to reorientate myself to reconcile the many prescriptive theories that I learned and believed in, the realities that I needed to understand and interpret, and the methodologies that would be appropriate to bridge the two. This was not an easy task for someone who used to memorize “knowledge” and had only two short years of training in critical and independent thinking at UCLA. Many, too many, have told me that Western theories would not apply in the unique context of Hong Kong and my views were too idealistic and out of touch with reality. Yet my life experiences as a “slum dog”, my nationalist education as a kindergarten student, my extracurricular reading of Marxist and Maoist thought – all these experiences have kept alive in my heart an interest in the prescriptive theories, even though they seldom square with the daily realities of Hong Kong, driven by a strong executive-led government. And I am particularly interested in identifying the critical moments and conditions when society in Hong Kong as a whole will be able to conceive of the possibilities of alternative development pathways. And these research efforts were done amidst heavy teaching and administrative duties in the university, raising two boys on the domestic front and advocating for more progressive planning practices in the community. And in the Chinese as well as the Christian culture, as a wife and mother, I am expected to prioritize my family before my career. And trying to at least put equal weight on all these life responsibilities is no slight challenge!

Triangulating research, teaching and community services

The most important lesson that I can so far gather in my twenty years of involvement in over twenty-five research projects is the need to triangulate research, teaching and community services (and for this matter, nurturing of our children) through a vigorous dialogue among theories, empirical findings and practices. A humanly important research question helps us leverage our limited resources to produce the maximum impacts. My life experiences, together with academic training at UCLA and the specific context of Hong Kong, have shaped my research interests towards understanding the politics of planning and development in an urban context, especially the power relationships between the government and the civil society.

The struggle to develop a theoretical framework (a set of interrelated tentative hypotheses) to guide field research and to allow research findings to judge the quality of the preliminary conceptual construct is necessary in all basic research work. For instance, in the search for theoretical insights on the practice of urban renewal in Hong Kong, we used the prescriptive, comprehensive and multi-sectoral model put forward by Roberts and Sykes (1999) as a starting point; borrowed Henri Lefebvre’s theories on the “production of space” (1991) to understand the discrepancies between the plans produced by the renewal authority and people’s lived experiences; adapted Flyvbjerg’s “phronetic approach” (2001) to capture minute details in case studies, ask value-driven questions in the research process and create ample opportunities for different stakeholders to scrutinize and verify the research findings; and referred to the works of Forester (1989), Friedmann and Douglass (1998), Healey (1997) and Sandercock (1998) for hope and strategic actions.

With these theoretical insights, we interviewed policymakers, talked to urban planners, shared ideas and findings with social workers, visited and surveyed different types of residents such as owners and tenants, and attended various advocacy fora organized for or by affected communities. Through the adoption of Flyvbjerg’s “phronetic research” approach, we discovered that the
renewal practice in Hong Kong is light years from the ideal model of Roberts and Sykes and verified Lefebvre’s argument that plans produced by the government have not respected people’s lived experiences. And recommendations have been provided to address the issue of unbalanced power relationships in the renewal process and highlight a need to institutionalize a more collaborative planning process that would produce a more inclusive and diversified society, treasuring use as well as exchange values in space and places. Such a journey also provides valuable teaching materials. To further verify our research findings, my colleague and I have successfully built a community planning workshop into the planning curriculum to encourage students to talk to different stakeholders on issues of urban renewal in a local district. And over the years, on the practice front, I have tried to provide my social worker friends and social activist comrades with empirically verified theoretical insights and have encouraged them to further test the theories in real-life situations. The inclusion of social impact assessment in the Urban Renewal Strategy and the experiment of collaborative planning in the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee (see my chapter in this book) are cases in point.

Searching for the right method: a lifelong pursuit

Urban planning research is different from general social science research because we are always interested in the implications of our research findings on actions. Very often, ours is action-oriented research work. For instance, in answering the question “Is Hong Kong a sustainable city?” we have to develop a set of sustainability indicators. Throughout the process of searching for the right indicators for Hong Kong, I had to rely on continuous local community inputs to frame and scope the meaning of sustainable development, select and prioritize the set of indicators and interpret the research findings. In a sense, the general public became my research partners and we achieved mutual learning throughout the process. It is experiences like this that have reinforced my recent interest and advocacy for community-based urban planning or asset-based community development (ABCD) (McKnight and Block, 2010), which tries to move urban planning beyond community engagement to become institutionalized at the local district level, building community competence through identifying community capacities, values and assets.

“Speaking truth to power” (Wildavsky, 1987) in a non-democratic society with a strong executive-led government requires a lot of courage. Besides being easily labelled as “radical”, one may lose many opportunities of being appointed to membership in high-level committees. And in an academic environment that recognizes publications only in top international refereed journals, advocacy work at the community level is seldom truly acknowledged. In an economically and socially polarized society such as Hong Kong today, attempts to view issues from different angles and persuade conflicting parties to communicate and collaborate are increasingly difficult. Yet my life as a “slum dog” reinforces my conviction of the importance of empowering the most disadvantaged and, when necessary, speaking out for their rights. My rigorous academic training at UCLA by Professor John Friedmann and many other great scholars confirms my understanding of a quality life – it is not fame or fortune that characterizes a good life. Instead a good life is all about healthy and nurturing human relationships. While I was attracted by neo-Marxists and Maoist thought when I was young, I have come to realize the importance of transcending conflicts and arguments in striving for a certain degree of consensus. My research proves that planners as well as other stakeholders all have a choice to take an action or make a decision that is not confined by the structural relationships they are in. The question is whether they have the courage to do so.
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Notes

1 The thoughts shared in this chapter were partially supported by grants from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project numbers CUHK749309 and CUHK750610).


4 Even during my master’s degree years, we were forced to adopt the neo-Marxist perspective to look at planning issues, which in retrospect is not particularly educational.

5 GPA measures how well one performs academically. At UCLA, the highest GPA one can get is 4.0, which is equivalent to an A or A+ grade.

6 In the development process of Hong Kong, priority often goes to the production of space that will facilitate the creation of high exchange value. On the contrary, spaces heavily patronized and used by the old communities (high use value) are seldom treasured or conserved.

7 The Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University in the US has promoted ABCD since the 1990s. They believe that even marginal communities are full of resources and advocate the use of capacity inventories as a starting point to mobilize communities to do things for themselves. See www.nwu.edu/IPR/abcd.html for more information.

References


