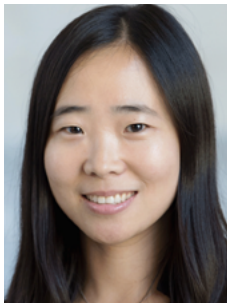
THE URBAN TURN IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS:
Cities as the Anchor of Cross-Nation, Cross-Regime Comparison

by Yue Zhang



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Cities have a special position in political science. Many classics in the field are city-based research (Hunter 1953; Banfield 1961; Dahl 1961). However, with its almost exclusive focus on U.S. cities and narrower selection of topics, the subfield of urban politics has been constrained by its own ethnocentrism and estranged from mainstream political science for decades. The situation has recently changed as a result of two concurrent trends. First, with the renewed interest in subnational research in comparative politics, more light has been shed on the city level (Snyder 2001; Sellers 2005, 2019; Gibson 2013; Eaton 2017; Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019). Second, there is an emerging scholarship that conducts urban politics research on a global scale, forging a connection between comparative politics and urban politics (McCarney and Stren 2003; Pasotti 2009, 2020; Read 2012; Zhang 2013; Donaghy 2018; Paller 2019). The two trends signal a vibrant urban turn in comparative politics.

What matters for urban governance is not only the effectiveness of governance but also the inclusiveness of governance.

Cities and urban politics deserve more attention from comparativists because massive and rapid urbanization is one of the most significant challenges facing the developing world. While cities have long been the focal points of pressing political and social issues, their importance and relative autonomy has substantially increased in the context of decentralization and globalization (Post 2018). Besides the compelling substantive reasons for studying cities and urban politics, I would argue that analyzing politics at the city level provides an exciting opportunity for scholars to pursue innovative comparisons across nations and across regime types, especially between substantially dissimilar political systems. This approach can contribute to comparative-historical analysis and development studies by showing that local conditions and multilevel governance are as important as national processes in shaping development outcomes within nations (Mahoney 2015; Duara and Perry 2018). The cross-system comparison, as Read (2018) argues, has the potential of facilitating new, thought-provoking theoretical and conceptual departures, echoing what Charles Tilly (1984) called "big structures, large processes, huge comparisons."

In the rest of the essay, I illustrate the possible theoretical and conceptual advances that may be made by cross-system comparison with examples from my forthcoming book on informal housing and urban governance in China, India, and Brazil. Specifically, I examine the production and governance of three types of informal

settlement in three megacities across the three large developing countries. The comparison reveals the differentiation within the informal sector. It also demonstrates that what matters for urban governance is not only the effectiveness of governance but also the inclusiveness of governance. A typology of urban governance regimes – integrated, progrowth, contested, and clientistic – is developed to describe the patterns of urban governance in the three countries and beyond.

Urbanization and the Politics of Informality in the Global South

We live in a century of urbanization. While more than half of the world's population are urbanites today, the number is expected to reach 68 percent by 2050, and most of this expansion has occurred in urban centers of the Global South (United Nations 2019: 12). A distinguishing feature of urbanization in the Global South is the prevalence of informal settlements that fall outside of government control or regulation. According to UN-Habitat (2003: v), one third of the world's urban population, or more than one billion people, lives in "slums" of southern metropolises. The issue of informal settlements is worth studying on its own merits given its enormous scale and huge impact on humanity. Further, these settlements represent a unique urban space where political and social tensions are especially intense, so that they provide an important lens to investigate state-society relations, governance, and citizenship in the Global South (Davis 2017).

To be sure, poverty, inequality, and precarious living conditions are not unique to the Global South. There is a rich literature on concentrated poverty in urban America, with a focus on inner-city neighborhoods, public housing projects, and race and ethnicity (Zorbaugh 1929; Hirsch 1983; Dewar and Thomas 2013). Nevertheless, we cannot simply apply the theories developed in North America or Europe to the Global South due to their distinct institutional and urban contexts. First, under a decentralized federal system, urban politics in the U.S. is generally studied at the local or regional level. In the Global South, by contrast, national political institutions play a more visible role in urban politics, and the relations between urbanization and national development are more salient. Second, social mobilization and political participation take different forms in new democracies and non-democratic regimes of the South than in well-established democracies of the North. Third, the definitions of urban are different between the North and South as well as between Southern countries. Given the major divergences, it is imperative to develop new theoretical and methodological approaches to study urban politics in the Global South.

The term "informal sector" was coined by British anthropologist Keith Hart in his 1973 study of the local economy in Ghana. Since then, scholars have explored the issue of informality from various disciplinary backgrounds, such as economics, sociology, and urban planning. Political scientists have paid keen attention to the relations between the state and informality. In his book on the relations between squatters and the oligarchs in Peru, Collier (1976) argues that the state encouraged the formation of squatter settlements in Lima to facilitate its agenda of rural and urban development. Chatterjee (2004) developed the term "political society" to describe how slum dwellers in India have to use their votes to negotiate with political authorities for access to land and services. A number of recent studies provide in-depth analysis of the clientelistic relations between the state and

the informal sector, including party networks in squatter settlements and informal welfare distribution for the urban poor (Holland 2017; Auerbach 2019). It is within this scholarly tradition that my research on the politics of informality is situated.

Large-scale Comparison: Challenges and Possibilities

Before elaborating my own research design, I would like to discuss the methodological challenges facing comparison across developing countries, especially those in different world regions and having dissimilar systems. The first and foremost challenge is to find comparability across cases. I argue that a viable strategy is to use cities as the anchor of comparison. Due to their more manageable sizes and shared socio-economic and spatial characteristics, cities are more comparable to one another than nations are, and it is easier to identify key variables at the city level than at the national level (Post 2018).

Using the city as the unit of analysis, however, raises the question of generalization: how do findings based on cities apply to nations as a whole? There are two possible solutions. First, as Sellers (2005, 2019) stresses, the national context as "infrastructure" needs to be taken into full consideration. This calls for a multilevel analysis to integrate the comparison between cities with a comparison between the nations within which they are located. Second, the scope of arguments needs to be effectively defined. According to Goertz and Mahoney (2009), researchers need to set limits on the scope of their arguments ensuring that both measurement and causal relations are stable across all observations. These insights help illuminate how city-based analysis can inform our understanding of nations.

Another challenge for large-scale comparison is to collect reliable and commensurable data in a cross-national context. While this is a common problem for comparativists conducting research in the developing world, data collection is especially difficult when studying informality, given data scarcity and social and institutional complexity in the informal settings. Scholars have developed novel approaches to address this challenge, including the use of informal archives, worksite-based sampling, ethnographic survey design, and crowd-sourced data (Auerbach 2018; Post et al 2018; Thachil 2018).

To develop a bigger picture on urban governance in the Global South, I compare the production and governance of informal settlements in China, India, and Brazil. Specifically, I choose one type of informal settlement in one megacity of each country to address the issue. While the three countries are drastically different in terms of history, culture, and national institutions and regimes, they have all experienced rapid urbanization alongside economic growth in recent decades *(Figure 1);* and they all have a high percentage of their urban population living in informal settlements. These conditions make their cities ideal sites for comparison despite national level differences. In all three cities, state intervention has taken place to regularize or redevelop the informal settlements; however, the processes and outcomes of state intervention vary significantly. These variations imply that different modes of development and governance are at play in the three countries.

A Typology of Urban Governance Regimes

The literature on state capacity provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the relations between the state and informal-

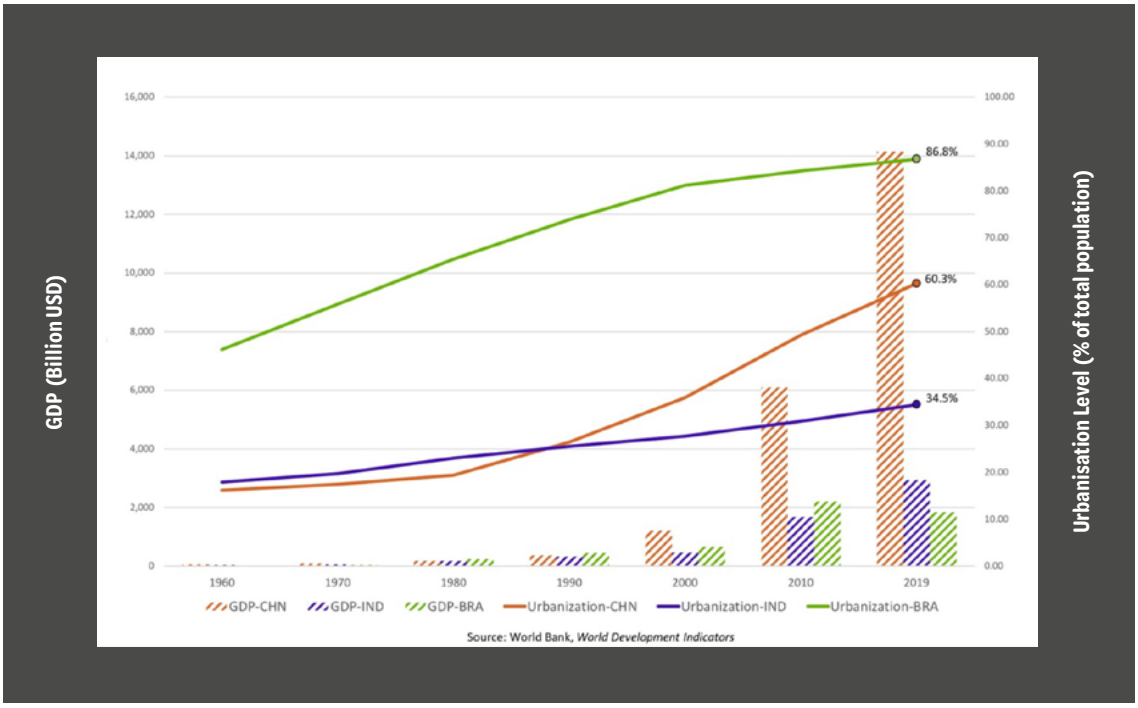

Figure 1:
GDP and Urbanization Level in China, India, and Brazil

ity (Boone 2012; Slater and Kim 2015; Centeno, Kohli, and Yashar 2017). Specifically, in his study of urban development in India, South Africa, and Brazil, Heller (2017) brings the focus from the national level down to the local level, and argues that economic growth and social inclusion are two critical dimensions for examining state capacity. Building on these insightful notions, I develop a typology of urban governance regimes to explain the varied processes and outcomes of state intervention in the informal housing sector. I define an urban governance regime as the interrelations between the state apparatus and the associated nonstate networks. It has two dimensions: effectiveness and inclusiveness. Effectiveness refers to the degree to which governing projects are successfully implemented, whereas inclusiveness is about the social base of governance, or the spectrum of social interests that are included in the governing process. The two dimensions are shaped by three variables: intergovernmental relations, party systems, and nonstate networks. The first two influence the effectiveness of urban governance and the third affects the inclusiveness of urban governance.

As *Figure 2* demonstrates, there are four types of urban governance regimes. An integrated regime is an ideal type defined by a high level of effectiveness and a high level of inclusiveness. Building on the integration and collaboration between different political and social interests, it is most likely to promote effective, inclusive, and sustainable development. A progrowth regime, characterized by a high level of effectiveness and a low level of inclusiveness, normally relies on a coalition of local state and business interests. While a progrowth regime may promote large-scale governing projects, it often results in unbalanced economic and social development. A contested regime, featuring a low level of effectiveness and a high level of inclusiveness, is defined by the competition between different stakeholders. This model is built on a broader spectrum of social interests, but the contestation may impede policy im-

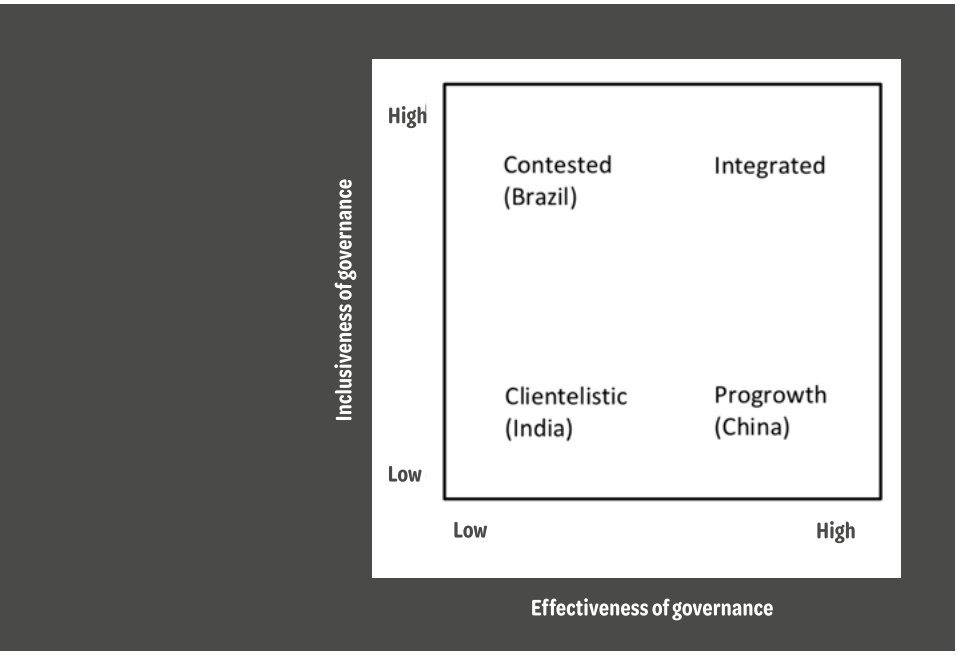

Figure 2: A Typology of Urban Governance Regimes

plementation. A clientelistic regime is formed around the state's rent-seeking activities and characterized by low effectiveness and low inclusiveness. It may lead to slow and exclusive development.

Of these four possible regime types, three types of urban governance regimes – progrowth, clientelistic, and contested – describe the patterns of urban governance in China, India, and Brazil, respectively. The following section explains how these urban governance regimes work in the three countries.

State Intervention in the Informal Space: A Tale of Three Cities

To explain how the urban governance regimes work in China, India, and Brazil, I select one type of informal settlement in a megacity of every country and examine state intervention in the selected settlements. Each type of settlement represents an important informal housing practice that the city is known for. A megacity is defined as a metropolitan area with a total population of over ten million people. There are currently thirty megacities in the world, and two-thirds of them are in the developing world. They are not only the magnets for much of the urban growth in developing countries but also epitomize the challenges facing the urban world (United Nations 2014: 13-14). The three cities are all rising global cities and major national economic, financial, and trade centers. They have all attracted large numbers of migrants and experienced a high level of inequality. There is a high percentage of each city's population living in informal settlements.

Urban Villages, Guangzhou

Guangzhou is in the forefront of China's economic reform and opening-up. Among its 14.5 million residents, 38% of them – primarily rural migrants – live in urban villages. This is a type of informal settlement produced by the government's selective land expropriation. After expropriating a large amount of agricultural land for new development, the government leaves alone villagers' homesteads to reduce the cost of land expropriation. Villagers build multi-story apartment buildings on their collectively owned homesteads and rent the units to migrant workers, who are otherwise ineligible for affordable housing in cities due to their lack of local household status.[1] The construction and management of rental housing in the villages is not subject to any government regulation. Every urban village has a complex set of self-governing institutions including the village committee, the party committee, the village shareholding company, and clan networks, with overlap between the various

1. China has implemented a household registration system since 1958 as an approach to control internal migration. Under the system, every citizen's household status, or *hukou*, is classified as either urban or rural. A person's welfare and housing benefits are strictly associated with their location of origin.

leaderships. These institutions are responsible for the provision of infrastructure and services in the villages.

Under the support of the central party authority, Guangzhou began the redevelopment of urban villages in 2009. This was part of the central government's agenda of economic restructuring, which aims to build high-tech and high value-added industries and replace labor-intensive processing industries. The Municipal Bureau of Urban Renewal was created to supervise the redevelopment. The redevelopment projects were monopolized by a few large development companies. State-owned enterprises had more advantages because of their close ties with the government.

While village committees represented villagers in choosing developers, developers needed to negotiate with villagers house by house to decide the compensation. The common model of redevelopment is to demolish the entire village and rebuild on the village land. Developers provide free housing to villagers as compensation, and every family can receive multiple condo units. The rest of the land is reserved for developers to build market-rate housing and commercial facilities in order to finance the projects. The density of development is usually extremely high and breaks the zoning and density regulations of the local government.

The progrowth coalition between the local state and developers has generated dramatic changes in urban China. Slum-like urban villages have been replaced by luxury condominiums, global hotel chains, and upscale retail spaces. The redevelopment projects have had a narrow social base and provide insufficient channels of participation. While the projects brought a substantial increase in income to villagers and village collectives, migrant tenants were simply expelled from the villages and their need for housing was never addressed. Despite the fact that the Chinese government prioritizes urbanization as a major strategy of development, what it has promoted is primarily an urbanization of land, not an urbanization of people. The urban-rural divide has been reproduced through the redevelopment of urban villages.

Squatter Settlements, Mumbai

Mumbai is the economic capital of India. It has a population of 12.4 million, and 42% live in squatter settlements, commonly known as slums. These are unauthorized and illegal structures built on public or private land where inhabitants do not have a legal title to the land. The areas lack basic infrastructure and services and are characterized by the prevalence of unsanitary, squalid, and overcrowded conditions. The proliferation of slums is closely related to a series of restrictive rent control and land use policies that Mumbai has implemented since the 1960s. These policies disincentivized the private sector from creating rental and affordable housing units. Meanwhile, due to the large number of inhabitants, slums have become political parties' "vote banks." To capture the votes of slum dwellers, politicians helped them register as voters and provided services during election seasons, thus institutionalizing the existence of slums.

Slum redevelopment was launched in Mumbai in 1995 under the leadership of the Slum Redevelopment Authority, a state-level agency chaired by the chief minister of the Maharashtra State. This model of redevelopment entails demolishing slums and providing free housing to slum dwellers who have arrived in the areas before January 1, 2000. The scheme of redevelopment resulted from party politics. Shiv Sena,

the long-time dominant party of Mumbai, made a campaign promise to provide free housing to slum dwellers during the state assembly election in 1990 as an effort to obtain their votes (Mukhija 2003).

The scheme of redevelopment provided in-situ allocation to slum dwellers, allowing them to stay on the same land after redevelopment, because politicians did not want to lose their "vote banks." The standard size of rehabilitation unit is rather small, only 269 square feet per household regardless of the size of the family. Many rehabilitation buildings are poorly designed and constructed and have become "vertical slums." Developers have used the rest of the slum land to construct market-rate housing. Some of Mumbai's most prominent real estate projects were built through this model on slum land. Owners of these multi-million-dollar homes live next to the shabby apartments of former slum dwellers. The two worlds are separated by a wall.

Under a clientelistic urban governance regime, slum redevelopment in Mumbai has been extremely slow and many projects have stagnated for years. While the redevelopment led to the formalization of property rights for former slum dwellers, it has not reduced their political dependency on political parties. They need to rely on party officials for building maintenance and service provision after redevelopment, leaving clientelistic relations intact. In an effort to eliminate informality, slum redevelopment has generated a polarized housing market and has reinforced spatial and social inequalities in India.

Movement Occupation, São Paulo

São Paulo concentrates a large share of the Brazilian GDP. The city has a population of 12.2 million, and a large proportion of its people lives in self-built informal settlements, known as *favelas*, or substandard tenements called *cortiços*. Meanwhile, in the historic city center of São Paulo, where seventy percent of jobs are concentrated, the rate of under-occupation and vacancy is around thirty percent. Radical housing movements started in São Paulo in the early 1990s, during which time working-class families who worked in the city, but could not afford a place to live, mobilized to occupy vacant buildings in the city center. From 1997 to 2012, a total of 120 buildings were occupied by housing movements. As of May 2018, 70 buildings remain occupied and have become home for more than four thousand families.

Different from other types of informal housing practice, housing movements in São Paulo have actively used legal and institutional devices to negotiate with the state. Thanks to the urban reform movements in the 1980s, Brazil has one of the most progressive legal systems in the world. The 1988 Constitution recognizes the "right to housing" and emphasizes that the city and urban property should fulfill social functions. Movement leaders have made frequent reference to law in meetings and interviews, emphasizing that housing is a constitutional right and that the lack of adequate housing is a violation of citizenship rights. Movement leaders are part of the constitutionally mandated municipal housing council created in 2002, and they have used the council as a platform to delay eviction (Donaghy 2018).

Despite the fact that movement occupations are a breach of property rights, the legitimacy of the housing movements has been acknowledged by officials at different levels of the state. Under the leadership of the Workers' Party Mayor Fernando Haddad, the city passed progressive property tax policies on unutilized

properties. It also expropriated a number of occupations in the city center and converted them into social housing and approved plans for more social housing construction. However, partisan politics has slowed down the implementation of these progressive policies and resulted in a stalemate between the movements and the state.

Housing movements in São Paulo have revealed a contested pattern of urban governance, through which different actors and interests competed with one another and the policy process was shaped by the contestation and negotiation between different stakeholders both inside and outside state institutions. Meanwhile, the housing movements have demonstrated a rights-based approach of social movements under the banner of the "right to the city." The rights-based approach opened up new space of collective mobilization and provided new discourse and tools for disadvantaged citizens to carry out their struggle.

Conclusion

China, India, and Brazil have different urban governance regimes, which play a major role in shaping the processes and outcomes of state intervention in their informal settlements. This comparison has a number of implications for understanding state, governance, and urbanization in the Global South. First, the informal housing sector is highly heterogenous, so that we need to move beyond the simplified notion of "slums" in order to better understand the politics of informality. Different forms of informal settlements are spatial manifestations of different state-society relations. Second, state capacity and urban governance need to be understood in terms of both effectiveness and inclusiveness. Unless the governing project is built upon a broader spectrum of social interests, the effort to formalize the informal may generate more informality and increase inequality. Third, urbanization is not a linear process. The definition of the "urban" is contested and contextualized in the state's broader agenda of development.

As the old saying goes, all politics is local. And, yet, analyzing politics at the local level yields insights into politics at higher levels. Since cities are more comparable to one another than nations are, city level analysis can facilitate cross-nation and cross-regime comparison, and thus contribute to theory development. Moving forward, there are two issues that scholars conducting comparative urban politics research should keep in mind. For one thing, after scaling down, it is critical to scale back up, so that city-based analysis can help us better understand national and global phenomena and address big questions. For another, political scientists need to have greater engagement with urbanists in other disciplines in order to be part of the broader debate on urban issues and to advance a more dynamic understanding of cities and urban politics. ●

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