Urban Regimes, Sporting Events, and Community Development in Secondary Cities in China – A Case Study of Nanjing

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Recent years have witnessed the increasing use of sporting events in urban revitalization strategies by local governments in Chinese cities. Proponents have long argued that bidding for and staging sporting events can be an effective catalyst for economic regeneration in urban contexts (Gratton, Dobson, & Shibli, 2001). Another justification has been the positive impacts of hosting sporting events on attracting capital investment, promoting tourism and creating new images for local cities in the competitive global market (Chalkley & Essex, 1999; Essex & Chalkley, 2004).

Despite the proposed benefits, there are growing concerns about the sustainability of place promotion advantages and economic benefits brought about by sporting events (Hall, 2006). Indeed, several Chinese cities have faced issues related to the legacy of infrastructure, ongoing financial losses, and the reduction of tourism in post-events period. In addition, social conflicts, wealth inequity, and traffic and environmental problems have become concerns in the wake of rapid economic growth in China. Local governments in secondary Chinese cities – cities such as Dongguan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Suzhou and Wuxi, with populations of 5 to 10 million and above average per capita Gross Domestic Product and disposable income, but often overshadowed by mega cities such as Shanghai and Beijing in China – have sought to address the positive social impacts of hosting sporting events upon community development, such as improving public participation, social inclusion and cohesion. For example, the Nanjing government (Nanjing hosted 2013 Asian Youth Games and will host 2014 Summer Youth Olympics) has explicitly announced a focus on enhancing youth development through hosting sporting events strategies (Nanjing Government, 2011).

However, we do not know enough about how local actors in these secondary Chinese cities set up sport events strategy on urban policy agenda regarding community development. In particular, it is unclear how the secondary cities have done so in a context of shifting economic and social environments as well as political context in which priority has been given by the state to mega Chinese cities for staging large-scale sport events.

As sport events agenda is utilized for community development and urban regeneration, it is not surprising that formulating sport events strategies is a political-economic activity launched by a certain governing coalition involving politicians, business elites, civic leaders, and community groups (Black & van der Westhuizen, 2004; Misener & Mason, 2008). Scholars have described such coalitions as urban regimes when these groups acting and functioning together to make governing decisions over long-term period (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001; Stone, 1993). Despite originating from a liberal capitalist context, urban regime theory has already been applied to a broad range of political, social and cultural contexts including Chinese context (e.g. Henry & Paramio-Salcines, 1999; Misener & Mason, 2008; Yang & Chang, 2007; Zhang, 2002; Zhu, 2004). For example, Zhu (1999) has demonstrated the existence of urban regimes in Chinese cities and has identified those regimes as pro-growth coalitions. In addition, some scholars have employed urban regime theory to investigate sport event strategies in relation to civic and community development in a cross-national Western context (Misener & Mason, 2008, 2009).

In this study, we seek to explore the relationship between hosting sport events and community development in secondary Chinese cities through the perspective of urban regimes. More specifically, we intend to examine the dynamics and interplays of different participants constituting the regime toward community-oriented sport events initiatives and activities in secondary Chinese cities.
Methodology

We use a case of the city of Nanjing to facilitate the study. Nanjing, located in the Yangtze River Delta region in China, is approximately 250 kilometres from Shanghai. We chose this city for several reasons. First, Nanjing is a typical secondary Chinese city with a population of 8,161,800 (2012), and a relatively high GDP per capita (about USD14,772 in 2012, the Chinese average was about USD6,100) and per capita disposable income (about USD5,964 in 2012, the Chinese average was about USD4,029) (National Bureau Statistics of China, 2013). Second, the city has explicitly incorporated a sporting events strategy into local policy agenda since 2005. Third, the governing coalition in Nanjing shows certain features of consistent with an urban regime — informal cooperation and coordination of public and private interests engaging in policy making, including state government, Nanjing government and subordinate district governments, community groups, education institutions, and private business companies.

This study is in progress; archival and policy documents will be collected to examine the case background of the city including its history, politics, economy, social development and sport development as well as to investigate the characteristics of the urban regime in Nanjing. Based on the document analysis, a list of urban regime members will also be identified and in-depth interviews will then be conducted with these identified regime members. After data collection, we will then conduct a qualitative coding analysis to identify themes regarding the role of sporting strategy in local social and community development (Patton, 2002).

Implications

The study is still ongoing; thus the results are not discussed here. However, there are some significant implications the study will provide. Following Misener and Mason’s (2008, 2009) project of sporting events and community development in Western cities including Manchester, Melbourne, and Edmonton, this study has been extended to explore the issue of social impacts of sporting events strategy as well as the urban politics in peculiar Chinese urban cities. It is critical to study secondary Chinese cities because this category of cities has increasing economic significance and has accounted for large urban growth share in China and even in the global world, and in addition this empirical research can add diversity to theorize the wide variations in sport development related to social and community development within global urban processes.

References
