

Chinese Road Construction Society: the local practice of Introducing the Idea of Urban Planning, 1921-1937

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The understanding of Chinese cities' modernization has advanced substantially in recent years, with volumes of resources available on late imperial cities (Skinner 1977; Rowe 2002) and twentieth-century cities (Buck 1978; Hershatter 1997; Esherick 1999). These studies have demonstrated that despite their political chaos and military strife, the late Qing and Republican eras were a rather innovative period, during which modern planning methods were introduced into traditional cities through various routes. In order to enrich this understanding, a case study was carried out on Hangzhou city's morphological transformation and related early modern planning efforts between 1896 and 1927 (Fu 2015). During the case study, a civil society, the Chinese Road Construction Society, was found to have notable influence on the introduction of modern planning. Thus, in this paper, the society shall be the object of analysis, in order to clarify the society's role and influence in the introduction of modern planning in China.

The Chinese Road Construction Society (Zhong Hua Quan Guo Dao Lu Jian She Xie Hui) was founded in Shanghai in 1921 by several influential officials, led by Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Zhengting, to promote the construction of modern roads. It later gradually developed into a big association with branches all over the nation, and published its own monthly journal until the outbreak of World War II in 1937.

Although the society was founded in 1921, its actual operations began in 1922, when Wu Shan took over as the society's chief secretary and chief editor of the journal. Despite having no apparent background in civil engineering or any other related field, he was responsible for the first few key proposals for the society, including the idea of constructing a national road network and using the military to construct roads after war. Furthermore, he frequently travelled to give speeches in various big cities to advocate

for the establishment of new branches. Under his leadership, the society expanded from having no headquarters and only a few absentee sponsors to being a nationwide society with over one hundred thousand members (as of 1931). Its twenty-eight branches, not including the preparatory ones, covered the main cities of the nation, from Beijing in the north to Shantou in the south and Chongqing in the west, which ensured its influence at the national level.

Furthermore, in analyzing the society's journal, including its content structure, authors' educational background, and local cases singled out for praise, a trend of specialization and gradual differentiation of urban planning as an independent subject can be observed. In the three volumes of the journal's first publication year, the articles' main focus is on broadcasting the importance of modern road construction, reporting the latest news of road-building projects all over the nation, calling for new members, and setting up organization rules. Almost all the articles are written by influential political figures, except a few basic instructions on technology or methods relating to modern road construction. However, as the society developed and expanded, it attracted more and more experts, many of whom received their education abroad. Therefore, more and more articles were written or translated by expert members, which transformed the journal's role from a mere propaganda organ into a channel to convey the most advanced ideas and knowledge about urban modernization.

This transformation of the journal's role was a result not only of the society's expansion, but also of real, practical needs. The changing contents in the 'Diao Cha (survey)' column, which introduced the latest news from all over the nation, demonstrate this. At first only news and pilot cases about road construction were collected under the title of 'Road Construction Boom across the Nation,' but starting in Vol. 2.3 cases about municipal administration began to appear under another title, 'Observation of Municipal Administration in Various Provinces and Cities.' As cities started their urban modernization by constructing roads, other problems would arise, such as road network planning, organizing the necessary work divisions, and funding, all of which relate to a city's policy making or planning. By including this new content, the journal allowed for the sharing of experiences from pilot cases in planning or policy making. Later additions, with more experts' involvement, included articles introducing

methodologies and theories beyond road construction, such as those about policy making (Dong 1923), city health (Chen 1923), urban design (Dong 1924), etc. These articles, which were later collected in the first modern urban planning book – Shi Zheng Quan Shu (1928), established a brand new field, long before the first urban planning department was established in 1931 at Jiao Tong University.

The society also explored ways to provide professional services. At first, the society's public service was only organized in four departments, which dealt in Ce Liang (measuring), Yan Jiang (broadcasting), Sai Hui (exhibition), and Kuai Ji (accounting). However, as membership and experience increased, the society was able to establish and maintain more business in other areas. In 1933, it grew into a more comprehensive organization, divided into twelve departments. Aside from the Gan Shi Bu (secretariat), which was in charge of running the society, the other eleven departments were all involved in business related to urban renewal, such as the adding department of Gu Wen (general consulting), Hui Wu (open new branch), Jiao Ji (public relations), Gong Cheng (engineering projects), Diao Cha (survey), Bian Yi (translation), Shao Jie (career introduction), and Fu Wu (general public service).

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that urban planning was introduced gradually into local cities through modern road construction, and clarifies the important role played by the Chinese Road Construction Society in promoting the local practice of urban planning in the early modern era.

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