

INTERVIEW OF PROFESSOR DAVID LEVINSON OUTLINE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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Dr. Lei Zhang provided comments before the final set of questions was developed.

Professor Levinson, thank you for accepting my interview on behalf of “Urban Planning Overseas (UPO)”. UPO is the only journal in China focusing on planning practices and theories in the West. Also, UPO is one of the best-circulated Urban Planning journals in the country.

We know you are a very active expert on transportation field in the U.S., today we’d like to interview you on a few topics on transportation in the West, especially in the U.S. and their implications to China.

Q1. Could you talk briefly about your academic and professional background? Especially how did you get into the transportation field?

I have long been interested in transportation systems as well as urban planning. I grew up in the planned city of Columbia, Maryland (near Washington, DC), and so was aware of planning at an early age. In college I changed majors to Civil Engineering so that I could work on creating new places and new infrastructure.

Q2. I notice that you recently coauthored a book on The Transportation Experience in Europe and the U.S. and in the book you described different stages all infrastructure systems would experience. This is very interesting. However, as far as I know, there is no Chinese version of the book. Could you provide a concise summary of the book to Chinese readers and some of the specific policy or planning implications that you think might be applicable to China, a country that is experiencing rapid changes in its socioeconomic as well as transportation systems?

While much of the transportation systems in Europe and the United States are mature (if not senescent), the rest of the world is still planning, developing, and deploying new systems. The accomplishments and mistakes of places like the United Kingdom and the United States, then, can teach us lessons that may be applied to places where transportation remains nascent or adolescent. The Transportation Experience seeks to understand the genesis of transportation policy in America and the UK, along with the roles that this policy plays as systems are innovated, deployed, and reach maturity, and how policies might be improved. The work presents case studies of particular transport experiences in rail, road, water and air (with a special emphasis on railroads), and then

finds commonalities in all of these experiences with thematic analyses that are often bold and unconventional. The book is predicated on the idea that the story of transportation policy can tell us what transportation, is, does, and might do in the future, and at an even broader level, how society has learned to create, deliver, and operate large, complicated systems. It should appeal to students and researchers in a broad array of fields, including geography, civil and environmental engineering, and public policy.

Q3. There seems to be many issues associated with China's expansion of its transportation system, for example, spatial inequity in terms of accessibility and mobility between the east coast and the western provinces, fast increase of auto ownership in major cities, and transportation-related environmental concerns. Are these phenomena unique or ubiquitous? How do you see the respective roles of transportation policy-makers, researchers and planners in coping with the issues?

These problems are quite common. Ports have natural advantages with regards to trade, and trade brings wealth. There is always a struggle between urban and rural areas, especially on how you divide resources. We see it in the United States still, despite most transportation "problems" being in urban areas (congestion, etc.), rural areas still want their share of resources. Transportation planners and policy analysts can point out the relative efficiency and equity merits of spending money in one way or another, but ultimately it comes down to politics about how resources are distributed. Planners can help the process move forward by putting together win-win packages, that help make everyone better off.

Q4. There is a discussion going on in China regarding how to connect Beijing with Shanghai. Basically, the focus is on the transportation mode that will be used in the connection. I know you visited China in 2002. I wish the visit had provided you with an overall picture of China. How do you see the competition among high-speed railway, highway and airline in the discussion, if any?

All modes have their market. High density, high volume, short distance markets may be best served by rail, longer distances by trains. The distance between the cities is about 1300 km, which is longer than most high speed rail services. However, if there are lots of cities in between, the question is not only how to connect Beijing with Shanghai, it is also how to connect Beijing with Jinan and Jinan with Nanjing and Nanjing with Shanghai. Collectively, those markets, and hundreds of others may warrant construction of high-speed rail, even if the two end-points don't. It may turn out to be a good idea to build such a line even if those traveling all the way from Beijing to Shanghai find it more efficient to fly.

Q5. You are very productive in many aspects of transportation, for example, road pricing, transportation network growth, travel demand modeling and Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS). How do you think the respective role of the above research in transportation planning? In other words, how do you decompose the complicated transportation system and how do you see different subfields of transportation research and planning as parts of an integrated totality?

I think of myself as a “transportationist”. This means I am interested in understanding the transportation system holistically. While I have training as a transportation planner, transportation policy analyst, transportation engineer, and transportation economist, it is the subject of transportation (and in this book, its inter-relationship with location or land use) that is of main interest, not planning or engineering, or economics. Those fields provide useful tools, but do not focus on the relevant question.

Q6. Just now, you have talked something about role of different components and topics of transportation planning and research. Based on your many years’ experiences and professional intuition, do you have in mind some topics or components of transportation planning and research that may be of priority to China, who is working hard to improve its transportation system?

China is growing so fast and changing so much that most things that people are proposing as transportation projects are useful. But some may be more beneficial than others. Good economic analysis is important to prioritize, as resources are scarce. But China has advantages that developed countries don’t, it can avoid our mistakes. The United States built freeways into the heart of many cities, which encouraged the use of the automobile in places that were more appropriate for transit. Eventually there arose “freeway revolts” where citizens protested new freeway construction and were able to stop it. However, many people were forced to move needlessly and our cities have not fully recovered. On my visit to China it was disappointing to see how much traffic there was in the heart of Beijing, where there used to be bicycles. Cars and bicycles are involved in an “arms race” much like the US and Soviet Union were, but the cars will win, because cars are heavier than bikes. The automobile is certainly an important mode of transportation, but it needs to be reigned in. We don’t allow cars inside our living rooms or our shopping malls. In the heart of our cities, we should restrict where they can go and give advantages to the pedestrian, bicyclist, and transit user.

Q7. Toll roads are no longer new in China. Actually, many intercity highways are tolled to cover construction and operational costs of the roads. However, few China cities have used road pricing as a way to reduce increasing congestion within the city. I know your doctoral studies and some research happened to be on road financing and pricing. Could you tell a little more about your latest research results and -thoughts on the implications of road pricing to reduce inner city congestions?

There are two sets of examples that are helpful in explaining this issue. The London Congestion Charge was begun in 2004, and has imposed a toll of 5 British pounds on any car driving into the core of London. (Singapore has a similar, but more effective system). The result is that fewer cars are driving into downtown, and speeds are significantly faster for the remaining cars and buses. A second example is what is called “HOT Lanes” in the United States. These are toll lanes that are parallel to untolled (“free”) lanes. Everyone is in a hurry sometimes. These lanes allow anyone to pay a toll and bypass congestion, thereby increasing the travel time reliability of the system. If I have an important meeting, I may pay \$2.00 to avoid congestion that would make me late. Other days, it is not worth it to me. This opportunity to buy my way out of congestion gives me choices that I don’t have if all roads are “free”. We are opening a HOT Lane in Minnesota in May 2005, so we will see how effective it is in achieving its objective.

Q8. This question is about the travel survey archive project that you were involved in. Right now, there is no a uniform way of conducting travel survey, storing and distributing the data and results in China. It seems that most things have to be done from scratch. Based on your exposure to the corresponding travel survey practices in the U.S., which are relatively mature and systematically organized, how do you think China could learn from the successful and imperfect?

The planners who conduct travel surveys should get together and share their knowledge, and also adopt standards so that they code their surveys in a consistent way. They also need to be mindful to archive their data in a formal way. All too often surveyors don’t document their assumptions, and when they leave, their replacement does not fully understand what they did, leading to misinterpretation. These surveys are valuable not only for current decision-making, but for longer term analysis. They need to be seen as a process, not a one-time project.

Q9. You have many years’ of transportation planning and research in the U.S.. Each project might have provided you with some insight into or trigger your further interest in the transportation field. Do you have in mind any projects/cases (no matter on which aspect of transportation) that are worth recommending to your Chinese colleagues if they want to grasp ASAP partial pith of “best practices” in the transportation field?

China needs to learn to manage the automobile. The automobile is a wonderful machine designed to serve people, but all too often, people serve the automobile. Pricing is an excellent tool in that regard, only by charging people for the costs they impose on others can they make economically efficient decisions.

Q10. You have directed quite a few transportation students in recent years. How do you see your role in the students' academic and professional growth? Additionally, I know you happened to have a few Chinese students. What were their strengths and weakness when they originally came into your team when compared to your U.S. students? How do you think the education they received here would benefit their career in China?

I serve as an advisor and mentor, not only during their education, but afterwards. It isn't something I had thought about before I became a professor, but individuals who are considering new jobs not only need the advice of their former professors, they need references and recommendations.

The Chinese students I have had are among the best. I have two currently finishing up Ph.D.s who are doing very interesting work on identifying fundamental nature of people's route choice behavior and the microscopic implications of their driving behavior. The Chinese students have their strengths and weaknesses, in part arising from not being native English speakers. The classic "chenglish" mistakes are expected and not really a problem. What I am more concerned about is the structure of the papers they are writing, as that reflects the structure of their thinking. Most Chinese students I have had are better than many native speakers in that regard, as the underlying organization is there.

The education in the United States hopefully provides new perspectives, not only in seeing advanced technology, but new ways of thinking about problems. It is not simply about applying the right solution, but developing new solutions that no one has previously considered. In graduate school we emphasize research more than classwork (though both are important). The research perspective opens up the mind in many different ways, as you realize it is not just solving standard textbook problems, but identifying new problems and developing untried solutions.

Q11. If any of UPO readers has further questions for you, would you mind if he or she contacts you? If no, which is the best way to reach you?

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Lastly, thank you for accepting my interview and I wish you all the best.