

A Conversation with Professor Lingqian (Ivy) Hu

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It was on Friday noon, 24th May 2019, I was whisper-rehearsing my interview questions while waiting in the lobby outside of Professor Lingqian (Ivy) Hu's office. "Chair, Urban Planning" read the label outside of her door. Dr. Lingqian (Ivy) Hu who is an affiliate of the Urban Studies Program is also a Professor and the chair of the Urban Planning Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). A few months back Professor Hu had accepted to be in the *e.polis* Scholar Profile, and I was anxious, yet excited to interview her. It was not my first time meeting her. In fact, she was one of my instructors in the Urban Development Theory and Planning course. Perhaps my enriched classroom experiences with Professor Hu which had given me opportunities to learn about theories on urban economics, development and planning from her, meant I am shouldered the responsibility to conduct a more meaningful and illuminating interview.

Following is the interview transcription with Professor Hu. In the interview she shares about her current research, her inspiration to focus on urban transportation and land use planning, her research since her Ph.D. in Policy, Planning and Development from University of Southern California, her opinions on feasible forms of transportation for U.S. cities, her passion for research and teaching, and her message to the prospective as well as to new graduate students in the Urban Studies Program.

Bj: Thank you, Professor Hu for accepting this interview and providing your valuable time.

Ivy: I am honored.

¹ Vijaya Tamla Rai conducted and transcribed this interview with Professor Lingqian (Ivy) Hu for *e.polis* Volume XI, Scholar Profile. Vijaya here referred as "Bj" is one of the editorial board members of *e.polis* and Ph.D. student in the Urban Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Bj: Please share about your current research works.

Ivy: You know my research is region-wide transportation and land use planning, and related transportation policies and planning practices. When we talk about transportation and land use connection, we look at where your jobs are, your houses are, and where all those activity spaces are. So, my research is related to transportation and land use planning, and also with a heavy focus on equity: I look at minority populations. For example, my works focus on low income population, their commuting patterns, their access to jobs, and their access to different opportunities. I also look at immigrants. Now, I have begun focusing on women in transportation.

Bj: Would you illustrate more about your recent works on women in transportation?

Ivy: I look at commuting trips for women across different racial/ethnic groups and across different family types. We know that the gender gaps in travel vary by race/ethnicity. For example, the gender gaps in whites are large. In other words, white women travel a lot less than white men. But gender gaps in minority population are much smaller. For example, Asian women travel to the similar extent as Asian men.

Also, another complexity is the family type. Does the family have children, or have another worker at home? That also affects gender gaps in travel. Some of my interesting findings are that family types affect the gender gaps in Hispanics the most and in Blacks the least.

So, it is complex. There are two different angles to look at gender gaps or gender differences, one is race and ethnicity, and another is family types.

Bj: For your PhD dissertation you focused on how the changing urban structure impacted the job accessibility of low-income job seekers and consequently their labor market outcomes, thereafter you did some research on immigrants, now your focus is women in transportation. Are you shifting your research focus from low income population and immigrants towards gender inequity in transportation?

Ivy: Oh, PhD dissertation was a long time ago! Well, it's not shifting. I would rather call it expanding. You know, at that time I looked at job accessibility of low income workers. I still focus on this issue. For instance, Sai (one of the Urban Studies PhD students) is working with me on a paper about accessibility for manufacturing workers in Wisconsin. I still continue my research in that direction, at the same time I am expanding the horizon of my research.

Now, I look at different population groups, a part of it is women and a part of it is immigrants. I also expand my research to look at not just job accessibility—which is my dissertation topic and which I continue to work on—I also look at access, or where people conduct activities. It is not just jobs; your activities could be where you go to school, where you go to shopping, and all these different destinations. I look at whether lower income people would have larger or smaller activity spaces. These are my new expansions in addition to looking at different population groups and looking at different destination.

In brief, you could summarize my research focus as transportation and land use planning with the end goal of equity; looking at if travel or access differs across different population groups. That is the umbrella of my research field.

Bj: Thank you for sharing about your current research works. Now, I would like to take you back to your initial days of your studies and career. How were you able to streamline urban planning right from your undergraduate years to doctoral studies and beyond? What triggered you towards urban planning?

Ivy: I was seventeen when I enrolled in college for bachelor's in urban planning degree. Then I knew very little about urban planning. I chose urban planning because it was a big word, it sounded interesting. In China, urban planning was and still is a popular profession, and I knew I could get a good job after graduating. But I did not know exactly how it worked. Fortunately, we had a lot of opportunities to gain practical experiences. For instance, we could get internship very early on, in China. In the Summer of my second year of college, I began my internship where I worked with my professor to develop a master plan for a small town in China. While we were drawing all those land uses; residential here, commercial there, I realized that we were changing the lives of those people who lived there, for forever. That struck me. That was the point when I understood how important and how significant urban planning was. I did not know what urban planning was about until that summer when I decided – that was the profession I really loved, I saw its significance and I wanted to continue.

Bj: Wow! Somehow you were initially attracted by the glamour of urban planning and eventually you discovered meaning in it, it was interesting. Since that moment of realization, how has your journey been?

Ivy: Back then it was still in the 90s, I knew that I wanted to earn advanced degree in the United States. Back then in China we thought that urban planning concepts and practices were new,

and they were advanced in developed countries like the United States. So, I was determined to get a master's degree in the U.S. Eventually that was what I did. I came first as a master's student at the University of Southern California (USC).

I always liked practice. That is the reason I decided to stay in urban planning because through practice we could change people's lives. My original plan was to get a master's degree and return to China. However, in my first semester at the USC, my advisor wanted me to be a PhD student. My advisor saw some potential, which I had not seen myself, in terms of academic research capacities. I considered the alternative, if it worked it would be awesome, if it did not work out, I would still graduate with a master's degree and continue with my original plan. So, I enrolled in the PhD program the first year I was in the United States.

I do not think that my career goal or direction has ever changed. After my qualifying exam, I worked in a metropolitan planning organization in Los Angeles. I wanted the practice side of urban planning. The reason I came to UWM and the reason that UWM chose me was because I had the academic knowledge and at the same time the professional experience. I am still continuing today the attempts to integrate practice elements in research; we always want to influence policies or actual planning.

Bj: As an urban practitioner, how do you address the complex urban issues so that everyday urban lives could be improved?

Ivy: We understand the complexity in real life, and policies should consider those complexities. The foundation of urban planning is place; we change place, we change the built environment, and we change the urban structure. So, policies should consider those location-based, place-based strategies. But now, at least in my research, I bring in another angle, i.e., we have to be people sensitive. A lot of other disciplines like sociology talk about people, but they do not look at place. Therefore, we need to have interdisciplinary understanding; a realization that both people and place need consideration.

For example, while providing transit services, from the pure place perspective, you need transit services to connect where trips originate and where trips end; you look at origins and destinations. Now with the people-sensitive angle, you understand equity, you understand population groups. For instance, if you realize that probably Hispanics need relatively more transit services because of their low automobile ownership, because of the lack of driving

licenses, and because of the financial constraints, then you would probably want to provide transit services to connect Hispanic people's housing locations with their job locations and other locations where they want to go. Therefore, this is what I often say "place-based strategies combined with people-sensitive understanding."

Bj: You have done numerous research works in American (e.g. Los Angeles, Chicago) and Asian cities (Beijing, Macau), how similar or different are the urban problems related to housing locations, job accessibility and commuting patterns in those cities?

Ivy: Very different, very different! I would like to talk about two main facets of the answer. First is that our planning theory and our understanding of urban issues are mainly based on western literature. In our class, we talked about location decision theories that were developed in the United States and European countries. They have very limited applicability in China and other developing countries. So, this is one side of the answer, they are very different. Another side of the answer is that, in China, travel behavior and location choices began to converge into the direction of the U.S. and European countries. Although there was originally a big gap in terms of the phenomena we saw in China and the theories developed in western countries, now we see that in China individual behavior are converging to what's predicted by the western literature.

Bj: What could be the major reason behind the changing urban spatial forms? Is it an effect of globalization? Or are there any other reasons?

Ivy: There are different reasons behind it. I can only speak of the evolution in China. China's market economy has only been developed for last thirty years. So, the urban structure and all those location decisions were originally government led. That is the reason why those urban phenomena in China did not comply with the theories developed in western countries, in which the market economy dominates. In China, the market economy is getting stronger and becoming more dominating. That is the reason we can start to see that theories developed in market economy be applicable in Chinese cities. But this is again just one side of the answer.

Another side is that the population size and the spatial forms in China are so different from those in the U.S. In a sense, the U.S. is an outlier. Chinese urban structure, population density and employment density are more like those in European countries. In other words, if we are looking at some specific phenomena such as the urban structure, Chinese cities are more

inline with European cities than U.S. cities. Here we talk about polycentric development, but most cities in China, Europe, and other developing countries, are still heavily mono-centric. The centers of Paris and London are so significant. Therefore, in empirical sense the cities in the U.S. are outliers in terms of their urban spatial forms. Chinese cities have greater similarity to European cities and probably to other cities in developing countries. However, to compare cities we have different angles and lenses to look at cities in all different countries, such as cultures, race/ethnicity, segregation, and regulations.

Bj: You reframed Kain's Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis into the changing contexts of urban spatial transformation and demographic changes as your theoretical framework for doctoral dissertation, how strongly do you still hold to it, or have you developed an alternative theoretical framework?

Ivy: My observation has been constant since my dissertation. I continue the line of research after my dissertation. It is true that Urban Spatial Mismatch is different nowadays than before. The original spatial mismatch assumes that African-Americans are segregated in inner cities whereas jobs are suburbanized. That is the reason those inner-city African Americans have lower access to suburbanized jobs, and that is the part of the reason they have lower employment rates and longer commutes. Since the U.S. societies are becoming more diversified, i.e., around 20% of the low-income people are African-Americans, meaning almost 80% of low-income people belong to other race and ethnic groups, I expanded the research field to look at low-income people. I look at different economic classes. In addition, spatial structures of the U.S. cities are diversified as well. The original spatial mismatch only looked at inner cities versus suburbs, but now we know U.S. cities are polycentric. There are a lot of employment opportunities in the suburbs.

Based on the new transformation, I revisited spatial mismatch in both Chicago and Los Angeles, but the findings are consistent. Lower income people who live in the central cities still have higher accessibility to the jobs that are appropriate for their skills and education. In other words, lower income people still have higher job access to low skill, low education, and low wage jobs in the central cities. Living in central cities still have advantage for them. But, over time, that advantage has been declining. I did some longitudinal analysis in both Chicago and Los Angeles, and again the findings are consistent.

Another part of my findings is that spatial access does not really explain the employment probability. In other words, for low-income people living in central cities, although they have higher access to jobs, but that does not help them to gain employment. There are other reasons such as labor market discrimination, a lack of social networks and a lack of information of jobs.

However, living in places of high accessibility can reduce commutes. Although access does not help low income people to get jobs, but once they get jobs, they could reduce commute burdens. In that sense, spatial access is still relevant but not crucial to explain their employment status.

Bj: “Increase affordability of car” or “invest in public transit,” which one do you consider to be a more efficient, affordable and sustainable means to make commuting patterns inclusive, especially accessible for low income city dwellers more equitable?

Ivy: (Smiles) When you ask a professor, we never give you a straight answer! If we want to be realistic, neither is feasible. Increasing affordability of car is politically infeasible; it is not easy to get funding to subsidize low income people to get cars. Investing in public transit is financially infeasible. We do not have enough funding, and we know that transit funding is declining. To provide access to everybody who needs that access is very expensive.

From a pure academic perspective, a theoretical solution is to give transportation voucher, which is like food stamps. In the United States, if we acknowledge that transportation is an essential utility that low-income people need, just like food and housing, then we should provide transportation vouchers so that low-income people could use it for all transportation options, such as buy cars, rent cars, use public transit, or use Uber/Lyft. But again, this might be politically infeasible.

So, the most feasible solution I see right now is the connection between the new shared mobility, like Uber/Lyft, and public transit: use Uber/Lyft as supplement for public transit. That needs a lot of initiatives and innovation to connect all those mobility options.

Bj: “Teaching in classroom” or “leading research projects”, which one do you enjoy the most?

Ivy: I cannot choose. I do not see them as separate. I like research because you always have new questions that you want to answer. But at the same time, I am learning so much from teaching. As I was telling you in class, every year you guys prepare reports for different metro

areas, and every year we learn new trends that research cannot catch up with as research takes time. But in class you guys give me the most updated information, and I am learning the new trends happening in the United States. For me, my research contributes to teaching and teaching contributes to research. And again, both helps me to answer the questions that I am interested in.

Bj: Despite teaching graduate courses, chairing the department and attending many conferences and meetings, you have substantial number of publications every year, how do you balance your departmental responsibilities and your research publications?

Ivy: I am still learning to manage time. I am struggling for time management as well. (Few seconds of silence) Loose some sleep (Laughs)!

Bj: Lastly, do you have any message for prospective or new graduate students in Urban Studies who might be considering taking urban planning courses?

Ivy: I feel very privileged to work as a professor. This is one of the few professions that give you true freedom, true autonomy. You can choose the research you want to do. You can choose the content of the course. Similarly, you can choose how to manage your time but that means you have to make some tradeoffs, which I am still learning.

I like urban planning, but for urban studies students I think it is the same answer; find the questions, find the topics that you are really interested in. Urban planning is more practice oriented, so we deal a little bit more with specific planning projects or policies. Urban Studies is more theoretically oriented. You can choose topics in Urban Planning, or if you are interested in other disciplines like Sociology or History, choose the topics you like and commit to that. This is the freedom you have.

I am affiliated with Urban Studies because Urban Studies recognizes the importance of the urban planning profession. Again, it is your choice. If you want to be exposed to urban planning, it is very valuable. You know that your research or the outcome of your research can potentially have real-world implications!

Bj: Thank you once again Professor Hu for your valuable time.

Ivy: It is my pleasure.