

## Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant Report

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With the help of Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, I conducted research in Shanghai, China, in the summer of 2007 for my doctoral degree in political science. My dissertation examines how commodification of welfare, specifically housing, changes pre-existing state-society relationship while creating conflicts among important stakeholders in a transitional socialist system. One important change in Chinese society with commodified housing is the emergence of a new middle-class of individuals who have purchasing power. Their awareness of property ownership and clear claim of rights suggest an important change in a traditional state-society relationship. Thus, I have tried to understand the interaction and tension among local government, business and urban middle-class.

I started my research in Shanghai, while affiliated with Modern Urban Society Research Center at East China Normal University. By participating in the seminars organized by the center over three months' period, I met with Chinese scholars doing research on relevant topics and exchanged ideas. To have a balanced view about the social conflicts coming from the transformation in ownership and control of housing from the state to private hands, I tried to meet members of all three important stakeholder groups. I contacted and conducted interviews with local government officials, private developers, and consumer activists. I especially focused on consumer activists who are eager to protect their interests against government as well as business.

By talking to many Chinese people, I could understand basic dynamics surrounding conflicts in the commodified housing sector. Property ownership of the land ultimately belongs to the state. With the central government's recognition, local government has the right to sell lands to developers. As the land transactions comprise a significant source of local revenue, local government has formed a close relationship with the housing business sector. Urban middle-class, who do not have to depend on state-allocated housing any more, have started to express their complaints and requests more freely than before. Thus, commodified housing in urban China shows intensely how the interests of the state and the interests of market players (not only entrepreneurs but also consumers) intersect and collide.

I also tried to think about what's happening in Shanghai from a comparative perspective. What has been puzzling to me is that Shanghai's consumer activism is not as active as in other big cities in China such as Beijing. Classical thesis in comparative politics is that economic transformation induces social change, yet it seemed to me that interest articulation in China's economic center (Shanghai) is not as intense and frequent as in other big cities. When I addressed this puzzle, many Chinese people responded by emphasizing different local culture: for instance, Northern Chinese people are perceived to be more apt to politicize things. It made me think more about what is located behind local political culture and how to explain different local political culture not in pure cultural terms.

During my stay in Shanghai, I started to pay attention to the channels through which people's opinion on social justice is delivered to the state authority, and how the process is controlled or facilitated at the local level. Supposing that it is not just because Shanghai people are less articulate by nature, I came to identify several issues concerning local political structure: for instance, the relative strength of local basic-level government organizations and their penetration into local society, the degree of independence of local government in its relationship with central government, and the degree to which the legacy of an old system of housing allocation is kept and affect current transition. When combined, I found, these factors

would decide “windows of opportunities” for consumer activists at each regional setting in a different way.

Research in Shanghai informed my thinking about political culture in a concrete and comparative way, understanding political culture as institutionalization of the way people think about and interact with the state. Interest articulation in commodified housing seemed to be controlled or facilitated by specific institutional settings. In the case of Shanghai, it seemed that relatively early dissolution of *danwei* (old system of housing allocation) and simultaneous reinforcement of basic-level government organizations gave leverage to local government to manage local society more effectively. While visiting sub-city level government institutions, I could identify the city’s inner change. This experience proved helpful when conducting extended research in Beijing in the months following my stay in Shanghai, making me always question specific institutional settings that politicize housing issues.

The summer I have spent in Shanghai with the support of Scott Kloeck-Jenson Travel Grant was catalytic in continuing my current research. Before starting research in Shanghai, I was not sure how to compare housing reform-induced social conflicts across major Chinese cities and if my research could make any significant theoretical contribution. Although I am still analyzing data and writing, my summer trip with Scott Kloeck-Jenson Travel Grant was extremely useful in that I could test feasibility of my dissertation research and move on to the next stage. Through trials and errors, I also learned how I should contact and conduct interviews with local people. The summer trip has laid a foundation for continuing the work on my dissertation, and I feel deeply indebted to the Scott Kloeck-Jensen family and Global Studies for granting me such an opportunity.