

Dean's Roundup

Friday August 16th, 2013

Roundup: *Ceiling function*, the mathematical operation of rounding a number up to the next higher integer.

Roundup: a term in American English referring to the process of gathering animals into an area, known as a "Muster" in Australia.

Rounding up: when a helmsman cannot control a boat and it heads into the wind

Roundup: the plan for an invasion of northern France by Allied forces during World War II (Wikipedia)

Dean's Roundup: part blog, part bulletin; part honour roll

Dear All,

I have three items to share this week:

1. John Spinks, chairman of the University Admission Committee has sent out an email reporting on HKU's success in attracting HK's best students and congratulating all those who have had a part in this (see attachment). On behalf of us all, let me echo his thanks to our own departmental admissions teams, academic and support staff – we couldn't do without you. Thank you.

2. Continuing the Dean's Roundup summer theme of research, and balancing the emphasis on quantitative methodology in previous postings, I thought it would be useful to share from a conversation I had last week with Tris Kee. Tris and I were talking about research methods in urban research and got on to discussing the role of case studies. These are traditionally viewed as a lesser research design by virtue of their inability to test general hypotheses. However, consider the following. A single case study can refute the longest standing and most widely accepted theoretical proposition. Take Karl Popper's celebrated case of the black swan (Austrian Philosopher of Science writing in the 1930s-70s). Before European ships started sailing to New Zealand, people assumed that all swans were white. This assumption – call it a theory – was widely held, and had some 15th century European ornithologist wanted to conduct *confirmatory* research, he (it would have been a he) would have found indeed that all swans are white. Popper's point was that the most powerful mode of research to advance knowledge is to attempt to *refute* theories not *confirm* them. This is a tough call for academics, who build careers around particular theoretical perspectives and whose interests, in that respect, are not served well by trying to debunk their own and their colleagues' work. I was in Auckland last March and spotted a black swan. Two in fact. Had I been the first to make such a sighting and conducted a thorough enough case study to be sure that these were in fact members of a separate species and not some chance and short-lived mutation caused by New Zealand's sulfur-rich and high ozone environment, then this single case study would have overturned an entire paradigm in ornithology, biological science, literature, poetry, ballet and cooking.

2. On November 18-19th 2013, HKU's new Ronald Coase Centre for Property Rights Research will be co-hosting a symposium with the Global Asia Institute, NUS in Singapore. The symposium, **Institutions of Land Rights and Sustainable Asian Urbanization**, is a small meeting designed to probe issues, evidence and theory in depth and papers will be submitted as a special issue to a leading urban journal. Three of us from the faculty are presenting papers and I would like to use the opportunity to draw more colleagues into the Ronald Coase Centre by opening my own paper to co-authors who can help develop it into a journal paper. The abstract is below. Ideally, I would like (i) someone who can write a short data-oriented section global densification over the past 300 years (one table, a few citations and a couple of paragraphs of review/commentary); (ii) someone interested in working up the review section on 'extreme end'

densification: "Cairo's Cemeteries", "Beijing's Bombshelters", "Kowloon's Cages", "Mumbai's Medians", "Tokyo's Tubes", "Canton's Chenzhongcun". (Candidates to be selected on the basis of alliterative skills!): citations of papers investigating these cases and others in depth, possibly one table to illustrate comparative extreme density (<2 square meters pp implies the ultimate fragmentation of land rights down to bed-sharing of space sufficient for one person to sleep prone), and a paragraph or two of commentary.

Abstract:

'How low can you go?: infinite rural migrant labour supply and the competing-away of living-space rights.

In keeping with the idea of small specialised symposia, this is a speculative theory-building paper. It attempts to make sense of the observation in all rapidly urbanising countries that rural-urban migrants are willing to undergo extreme deprivation in living space standards. After a brief survey of urban population density trends globally and in China and reference to extreme-end maximum density situations such as Hong Kong's cage cities, Beijing's bomb-shelter cities, Guangdong's urban village subdivisions, Mumbai's median-cities, Cairo's cemetery cities and Manila's garbage cities, it explores a theoretical model that attributes this behaviour to an interaction between labour and land market conditions. The paper attempts to extend Lewis-Fei-Ranis' classical model of urban growth and capital accumulation (driven by an infinite surplus of agricultural labour and static urban wages) into a land market model. In the face of a constant supply of rural migrants, the terms of trade for a unit of human labour also remain static: in Sen's terms, the 'entitlement mapping' between labour and cash/all other goods remains constant. It may fall if labour supply outstrips demand but theoretically, not below the discounted present value of expected wages (following Todaro). But with a rising city population, the entitlement mapping between labour and land can never remain constant; if for no other reason than geometry - the supply of more accessible land at the city core (or cores) geometrically grows less rapidly than the supply of urban land as a whole. So even if urban land grows at the same rate as city population (unlikely for many reasons), the land that is sought after as a living location will always get scarcer with growth. So you have a multiplier effect with an infinite supply of fixed-price agricultural labourers attracted to the city by a static wage rate just above the rural wage rate; and this expanding labour force bidding a fixed wage rate for a supply of land accessible to jobs and services that can never keep up with demand. The result: rural-urban migrants progressively (or regressively) bid away their rights to living space, living at higher and higher densities. This line of reasoning mixes ideas from Sen, Lewis, Fei, Ranis, de Soto, Todaro, Ricardo, Coase and others. Questions it helps address include: 'How low will they go' - what is the minimum standard of living space a human worker will bear - in the short, medium and long term? (empirical question). What systems of property rights are likely to emerge to govern this most basic of resource allocation problems? (positive question). Should governments legislate for minimum space requirements as they do for minimum wages and with what perverse effects? (normative question).

No economics required, no maths involved, just chasing interesting intellectual ideas with very important real world implications – if anyone is interested please submit brief ideas to me. First come first served.

Congratulations to all those listed below. I am getting feedback that one good work inspires another and that generally colleagues are finding the achievements of others useful triggers for their own ideas.

Chris

Department of Real Estate and Construction

1. Dr. Wilson Lu

- published a paper "Lu, W.S., Liu, A.M.M., Wang, H.D., and Wu, Z.B. (2013). Procurement Innovation for Public Construction Projects: A Study of Agent-Construction System and Public-Private Partnership in China. *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*, 20(6)."
- published a paper "Lu, W.S. and Yuan, H.P. (2013). Investigating waste reduction potential in the upstream processes of offshore prefabrication construction. *Renewable & Sustainable Energy Reviews*. Forthcoming.

2. Professor Steve Rowlinson

- the Centre of Construction Innovation and Technology and the BIM Lab organized a BIM Workshop for Hong Kong Industry - "All you need to know about BIM" - in collaboration with Hong Kong Institute of BIM and the BIM Academy (UK) on 8-10 August 2013
- delivered a talk of topic "The Health and Well-being of Hong Kong Construction Workers" for IOSH (Hong Kong Branch) supported by QBE and MTRC at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on 8 August 2013

Department of Urban Planning and Design

1. Dr. Roger Chan

- co-hosted the seminar with Professor Anthony Yeh on "Impacts of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge to the Guanghai Bay area and cooperation within the Pearl River Delta region" (在港珠澳大桥通车后珠江西岸暨大广海湾地区粤港澳合作前景展望研讨会) with Guangdong City Development Research Centre and the Jiangmen municipal people's government on 7 August 2013. The seminar was attended by invited academic in Hong Kong and council members of professional institutes including the Associação Promotora da Economia de Macau, Hong Kong Institute of Planners and Hong Kong Institute of Transport and Logistics.
- published a paper with details as below:

Chen, H., **Chan, R.CK** and He, Q. (2013), "From Excluded Ghettos to Exclusionary Enclaves: A Private Sector Initiative in Guangzhou, China", *LHI Journal*, 4:3, pp. 211-223.

2. Professor Chris Webster

- The dean had a paper finally accepted by *Urban Studies* after 4 years of working on it and rejection by another top journal (on what he suspects were ideological grounds). The paper presents the first systematic evidence that a 'city of clubs' (private communities like gated communities, strata-title estates and condos) follow a different self-organising spatial logic than traditionally organized cities. This is because some, but not all, of the neighbourhood public goods provided internally act as substitutes for publicly provided civic goods. This makes private neighbourhoods more footloose (and potentially more dispersed) than traditional neighbourhoods of similar density/value and also means they are freer to locate in such a way as to capture those higher level publicly provided civic goods that are not substituted by their own privately provided infrastructure. The paper examines this empirically for the city of Seoul (a very mature 'residential club' market) using insights from ecological theories of co-evolution. Since the main substitution effect (private for public) is green space, landscape colleagues might be interested in the findings. Yoon Seuk Woo is a Public Administration Professor in S Korea.

Yoon SW and Webster CJ, *Co-evolution of Gated Communities and Local Public Goods*. *Urban Studies* (forthcoming).