

**Sorting out the details: Structure, agency and interactions in China's local
political economy***

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Abstract

More recently there has been rejuvenation in the old debate on structure and agency, with burgeoning theoretical literature aiming at redefining the relationship with enhanced specificity. One criticism in the structure-agency debates has been, however, that very few of the various theoretical constructs and schemas have been given an empirical test, the result of which is a certain ‘hollowness’ in the claim over the importance of ‘historical details’ or ‘specificities’ in the delineation of the structure-agency relationship.

Through reporting the findings of a study on the relationship between local and central governments in local investment decisions in northern China, this paper demonstrates how theoretically structured empirical studies can help to advance the theoretical discussions and clarify the practical problem.

Keywords: structure and agency, duality and dualism, Chinese political economy, central-local interactions

Introduction

In the past two decades there has been a rejuvenation in the centuries-old debate on structure and agency, with burgeoning theoretical literature aiming at redefining the relationship with enhanced specificity (e.g., Giddens, 1979, 1984; DiMaggio, 1988; Grafstein, 1988; Jessop, 1990; Sayer, 1992; Layder 1994; Hay, 1995; Archer, 1988, 1995, 2000, 2003; McAnulla, 2002). A recent theme of discussion rests on the differentiation of structure-agency relationship as a dualism or duality. Duality, in Giddens' structuration theory, emphasizes the mutual constitution of structure and agency. As analytical concepts, structure and agency are said to 'coexist' in any given action, resembling the two sides of the same coin, and each cannot be fully conceived without reference to the other as well. Against this duality notion, Margaret Archer and other critical realists have argued for a return to a 'dualism' conception. The notion of duality was said to conflate the two concepts of structure and agency into essentially one, making it impossible, in practice, to specify what exactly structure, or agency, means, not to say how the two interact (Archer, 1995). Archer thus calls for a restatement of the 'dualism' conception whilst avoiding the previous mistakes of a sole focus on either structure or agency. By keeping structure and agency distant ontologically, the reinvigorated dualism rescues the possibility, and the need, to delineate the boundary of each of the pair, and to understand how they interact in different contexts.

The crux to resolving the duality-dualism debate lies beyond the ambit of the theoretical discourse: the role of empirical studies in theory building is well noted (Whetten, 1989: 492). At the end of the day, the question boils down to that which theoretical construct enhances better understanding of the complex interface between structure and agency in the full, empirical, context. Sorting out the historical specificities – knowing how different actors interact – has been said to be instrumental in delineating the structure-agency relationship, though in practice putting theories to empirical tests is largely infrequent (McAnulla, 2002: 291).

At the same time, researchers in China studies have called for the use of more theory, in face of the immense details made accessible by liberalization policies and, more recently, the arrival of internet age (Harding, 1982, 1984, 1993; Song, 2001; Zhang, 2002). There is a need for theory to interpret the findings of a growing literature, to consolidate ongoing research into comprehensible clusters of a manageable number, and to guide future research agenda. In the subfield of central-local relations, for instance, insufficient theory was said to weaken the

analytical vigor of the literature, and efforts was made to improve analysis through explicit engagement with theories of power and structure-agency (Li, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2005; Qiu 2004). Meanwhile, in a review essay, Pye (1992) criticized the ‘simplistic’ application in some China studies literature of theories and concepts embedded in the Western societies. Even so, Pye did not oppose the use of theory as tool to understand China, but the insensitive use of it and the subversion of practical understanding to theory building (Pye, 1992: 1164).¹

This paper reports the findings of a research on the economic policy of the major north China city of Tianjin (see map) to achieve dual purposes of enhancing practical explanation and testing – and developing - theories. The concepts of structure and agency will be employed explicitly in the interpretation of the empirical information, providing us the resources to engage in multiple explanatory ‘imaginations’.² At the same time, the rich case details allow us to assess the relative utility of the theoretical constructs in providing an enlightened understanding of the practical problem, to identify gaps and suggest improvements in the constructs.

The Practical Problem

The central practical problem is to explain two apparent anomalies in the economic policy in Tianjin during the post-1978 reform period. First there was the ‘unusual’ emphasis placed on improving city infrastructure and public goods provision for the average city residents, in contrast to nationwide neglect of livelihood issues and a narrow focus on GDP statistics. Secondly, the city achieved an outstanding record in the attraction of foreign direct investment, and was the national pace-setter in investment management innovations, in contrast to a lackluster performance in economic development more generally. These dual developments appeared to be in conflict because, when set against the national trend during the 1980s and 1990s, Tianjin’s focus on public goods provision and improvement of living environment would invite an apparent explanation that city leaders did not place priority on production targets and economic growth. This would lead one to expect lackluster implementation in foreign investment policies, which however did not turn out to be the case. If attending the public goods needs of city residents had distracted the city government from concentrating on economic growth, how and why should one

¹ Even non-theory-oriented empirical studies use theory if implicitly. In these ‘as we see it’ descriptive accounts employing ethnographic methodology, the ‘unconscious’ use of theory means that the assumptions are often at most vaguely articulated and examined.

² Karl Weick (1989, 1995) described theorizing as a process of ‘disciplined imagination’.

segment of the economy, namely foreign investment, stand out to excel?

Two bodies of literature, that of the developmental state and central-local relations, have dominated the discourse on the trajectories of the Chinese political economy. The key issue of contention in the developmental state literature was over the changing positions of the government in steering, conducting, and regulating economic development, embedded in a history of state omnipotence and dominating the most recent contemplations of government reforms (e.g. Oi, 1999; Li, 2004). At the core is a ‘what’ question: *what* the government should and should not do for the benefit of the economy? *What* is the appropriate boundary between state and society/economy, and *what* mechanisms of ‘intervention’ should the state employ? At the same time, China’s continental size and wide regional differences implied that the ‘China Miracle’ was largely an aggregate of miracles of many *chinas*. A local point of reference was mandatory to give meaning to accounts of national development.³ At the same time, given a tradition of centralized control, the role of state policies and especially those of the central government dominated the local political economy discourse. The key question in the central-local relations literature was a classic example of the structure-agency problem: To what extent was local economic development a result of central policy (structure), as against local actions (agency) and conditions (local structure)?

Guided by the structure-agency framework, the puzzle in Tianjin’s economic policy can be reformulated as follows. First, did the differential emphasis on substantive policy (ie. differences over *what* to do, improving city infrastructure rather than a focus on raising the GDP figures) suggest that Tianjin’s leaders embraced a different view from leaders elsewhere of *what* needed to be done? *What* exactly were the differences? Secondly, to what extent was Tianjin’s policy influenced by central policy and preferences, and how did this influence happen? In other words, to the extent that Tianjin’s leaders may have acted differently from the nationwide trend because of their different judgments or preference structures (local agency), did central policy and preferences play a part in the formulation of these *local* judgments and assessments of local conditions (central structure)? The structure-agency construct directs attention to the process: how differences arose, and *who* upheld these differences? The next section analyzes the policy anomalies to look for answers to these questions.

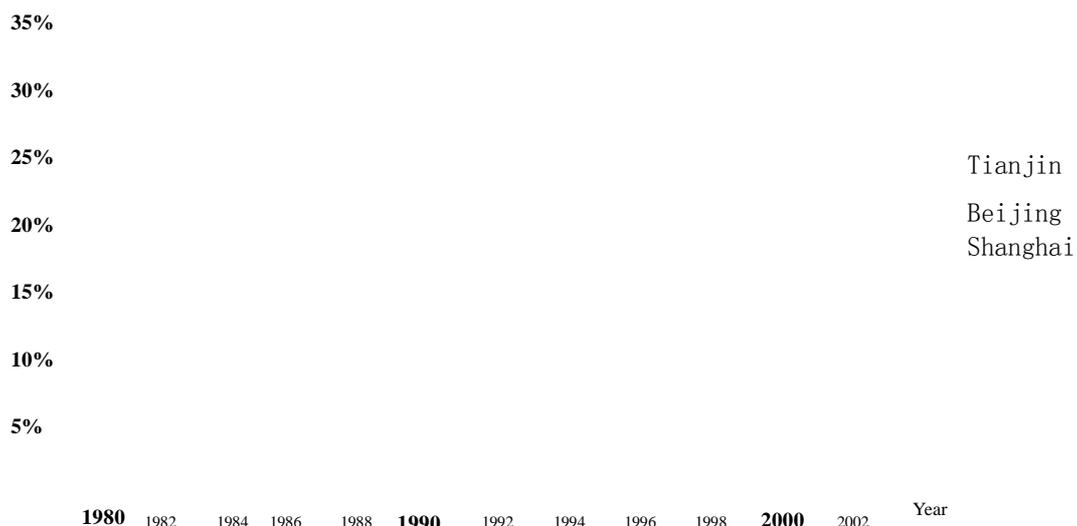
³ For a forceful argument of disaggregating China for a better understanding of the ‘whole’, see Goodman (1997, 1999). Fitzgerald (2002) contextualizes the contemporary relevance of province as a unit of analysis in history.

Explaining Local Development Anomalies

Delineating the Puzzle

Before we explain the differences we need to explicate *how* Tianjin was an anomaly. Figure 1 shows that Tianjin had, for most years in the 1980s and 1990s, a considerably larger share of investment in city infrastructure than two comparable province-level cities, Shanghai and Beijing. The city government consistently made infrastructural development a priority in its annual plans, and innovative means beyond the boundary of the government budget were adopted to garner resources for massive projects of reconstructing residential housing blocks, sewage systems, water supplies and city roads.⁴

Figure 1 *Share of Infrastructure investment in Total FAI*



An obvious context of such emphasis on city infrastructure was the 1976 earthquake at Tang Shan, a city 102 miles east of Tianjin.⁵ The earthquake had a devastating impact on Tianjin, causing damage to more than two-third of its housing stock. Local fiscal revenue dropped by 15% in 1976 over 1975, and by 1979, fiscal revenue was still 4% lower than the 1975 level.⁶ By 1980, over 100,000 residents were still housed in temporary structures erected at the immediate aftermath of the

⁴ This draws from Qiu (2004), chapters 3, 6, 7.

⁵ The 28 July 1976 earthquake at Tangshan reached a level (Richter scale) of 7.8, and direct and indirect economic loss caused to Tianjin was estimated at over 7 billion yuan. Dangdai Tianjin chengshi Jianshe editorial office (1987).

⁶ Local fiscal revenue (in-budget) in 1975 was 3.9 billion yuan. It was down to 3.3 billion yuan in 1976 and 3.7 billion yuan in 1979, only seeing a slow recovery to 4.1 billion in 1980 ([Editorial board of Economic yearbook of Tianjin](#), 1986: 333-34)

disaster (Gao and Ho, 1998: 259). Under these circumstances one might ‘naturally’ expect Tianjin to expend more effort and resources to improve city infrastructure and people’s livelihood, than in cities where day-to-day living had not seen disruption to such a scale. On the other hand, available information indicates that the linkage between external objective conditions (structure) and the level and quality of efforts (agency) was more complex. A direct linkage between external conditions and effort would lead us to expect most effort when the situations were most dire. Upon closer inspection, most innovative efforts to improve Tianjin’s city infrastructure were made a few years *after* the disaster, whilst measures taken in the immediate aftermath – when the situation would have required more unconventional handling – resembled more of the usual traits of bureaucratic inertia, inefficiency and weak coordination. For instance, there had been little coordination in the allocation of new housing units completed after the earthquake – a valuable public resource given the large number of people awaiting rehousing. In 1980, up to two-third of new residential flats were *not* distributed to those still living in temporary shelters, however, but to cadres and staffs of units and departments in accordance with the fragmentary ‘departmentalized’ system of housing provision (Li, 1996: 292).

The context was the Soviet-based developmental model privileging ‘production’ at the expense of ‘consumption’ needs. Under this model government leaders were to focus on production, which was narrowly confined to, mostly, industry and agriculture. City infrastructure, including roads, housing, education and medical welfare – all essential public goods of immediate relevance to individual well being – was assigned to the realm of ‘non-productive’ consumption. Fragmented among the various production units, public service provision had, until very recently, no independent status and occupied a largely peripheral existence in the Chinese Government.⁷ During the 1980s when the focus of the entire country turned to economic construction, leaders at all levels were interested in launching new plants to raise industrial output level and, hopefully, GDP figures. Neglect and under-funding was the norm in infrastructural investment during the 1980s. The situation was so serious by early 1990s that the shortage of electricity and unreliable transport system (e.g. railways) not only caused huge inconvenience to people’s day-to-day life but also posed a direct constraint to production.⁸ Tianjin’s lackluster performance in

⁷ This did not necessarily mean gross under-funding, since about 30% of total capital construction was spent on ‘non-productive’ items as of late 1980s and early 1990s, but rather mismatch and inefficiencies due to fragmented provision (State Statistics Bureau, 1993: 73). The problems of the Soviet model were increasingly recognized during the 1990s but the need for an integrative approach to public goods provision, and centring it to the core of government functions, was only registered in 1998 when the public finance policy was announced. See Li (2003).

⁸ This problem reached alarming level in the early 1990s, given the ‘bottleneck’ impact on production,

post-earthquake construction simply fell into this general pattern.

The high priority given to city infrastructure subsequent to 1981 in Tianjin was thus a departure from both the nationwide trend and local pathway. Box 1 summarizes the unconventional measures, and the substantive achievements behind Tianjin’s statistics in Figure 1.⁹

Box 1

Tianjin’s city infrastructure: Post-1980 strategies and major achievements

<u>Major achievements</u>	<u>Strategies/Measures</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Elimination of all post-earthquake temporary structures by end of 1981, after serious effort targeting this for only 5 months; all earthquake-arisen rehousing cases were settled by 1983, in line with the ‘3-year (1981-83). Post-Earthquake Reconstruction Plan’ approved by central government in June 1980. 2. Launching and swift completion of a major waterworks project in just over a year (1982-1983), alleviating greatly Tianjin’s longstanding shortage of water supply for consumption and production. 3. Completion of a network of inner- and outer- city ring roads within 3 years of the announcement of a plan in 1985, greatly improving the efficiency of city transport and logistics for both people and goods. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ‘People’ approach: put full agency in the average citizens; mobilize support from general public to garner resources (like free labour and money donations) and mitigate resistance (like cooperation with resettlement plans and compensation); gathering feedback 2. Management reform: adjust the government management structure on infrastructural investment planning and execution to minimize inefficiencies; to rationalize incentive structures to motivate support and neutralize resistance.

The anomaly over city infrastructure was compounded by a second observation:

that the central government became more receptive to unconventional strategies, as indicated in a study launched by the powerful State Planning Commission to explore new ways of funding infrastructural investment, published in Luo and Guo (1993).

⁹ Information here is mostly drawn from Qiu 2004.

that Tianjin excelled in attracting foreign investment whilst doing largely an ‘average’ job in terms of GDP growth and other indicators of economic development.¹⁰ Table 1 shows that Tianjin’s relative position nationally in three major indicators of economic growth dropped between 1980 and 2002. The exception was foreign investment: Tianjin’s share in the national total blossomed ten-fold during the period from 0.5% to 5.2%. Figures 2 and 3 compare Tianjin to Beijing and Shanghai, two other provincial-level cities. Figures 2a and 2b tell that Tianjin’s economy was much smaller than Beijing and Shanghai, so that its share in the national total in terms of Gross Domestic Product was also consistently smaller, at about 2%, against Beijing’s 3% and Shanghai’s range of 4-6%. The average annual growth rate of GDP was comparable for all three cities (14.9%, 15.5% and 14%), and on par with the national average (16.3%) during the period. On foreign investment, however, Tianjin maintained a healthy trend of steady growth over time. Figure 3a displays this fact vividly through the smooth and rising curve on Tianjin’s annual realized value of foreign direct investment, against the large fluctuations in the cases of Beijing and Shanghai. Most notably, as Table 2 shows, the city had generally managed to retain investors and even increase capital inflow during ‘crisis’ periods, when Beijing and Shanghai, as well as nationally, saw deep dips in their foreign investment annual growth rates to the negative.¹¹ The result was, notwithstanding the smaller size of its economy and total stock of foreign investment, Tianjin steadily expanded its share in total foreign direct investment nationally, surpassing Beijing since 1995 (Figure 3b).

¹⁰ ‘Foreign investment’ in this paper refers to realized foreign direct investment, unless stated otherwise.

¹¹ There was an exodus of foreign investors and resident expatriates in the aftermath of June 4th 1989, and many office/factory/hotel projects in big cities were suspended in the middle of the construction process, often leaving behind huge concrete eyesores at the central parts of the cities. Apart from Tianjin, Guangdong was another province that performed exceptionally well during the most difficult years.

Table 1

Tianjin's major economic indicators: share in national total (%)

Indicators	1980	1985	1990	1995	1999	2000	2001	2002
GDP	2.3	2.0	1.7	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.0
Gross Industrial Output Value	3.8	3.3	2.8	2.0	2.2	3.6	3.5	3.4
Total Fixed Assets Investment	2.6	2.6	2.0	2.0	1.9	1.8	1.9	1.9
Realized Foreign Direct Investment	0.5	1.6	3.3	4.4	5.2	6.9	7.0	7.3

Sources: modified from Table 3-2 in Qiu (2004:41), with information from *Tianjin Statistical Yearbooks*, various years.

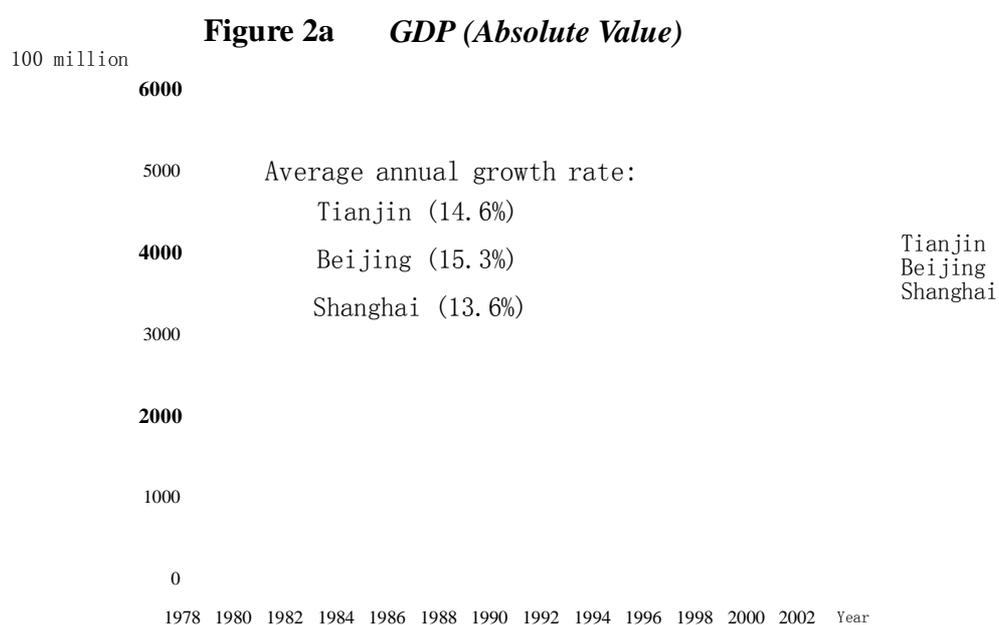


Figure 2b *Share of GDP in national Total*

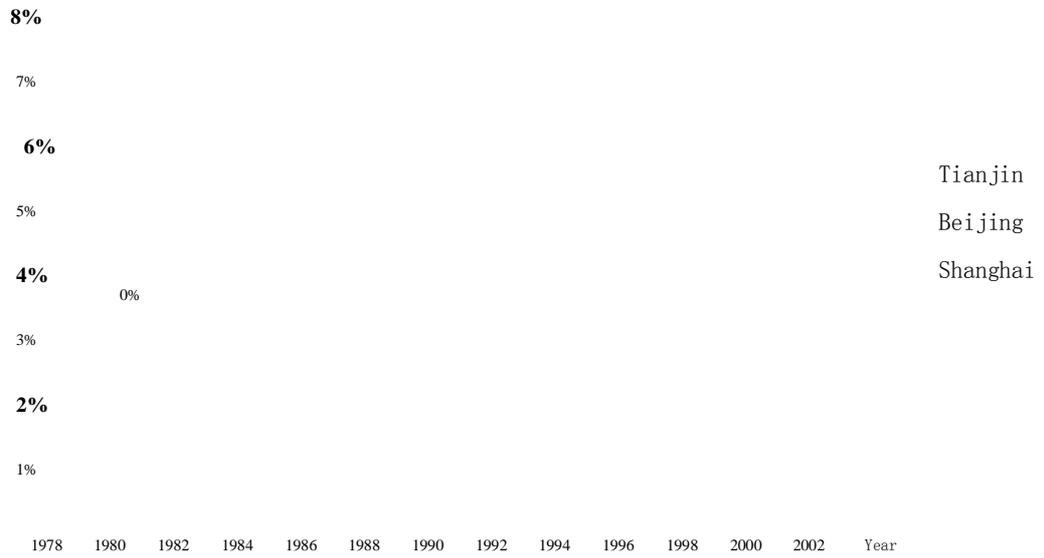


Figure 3a Realized FDI (Absolute value)(1980-2002)

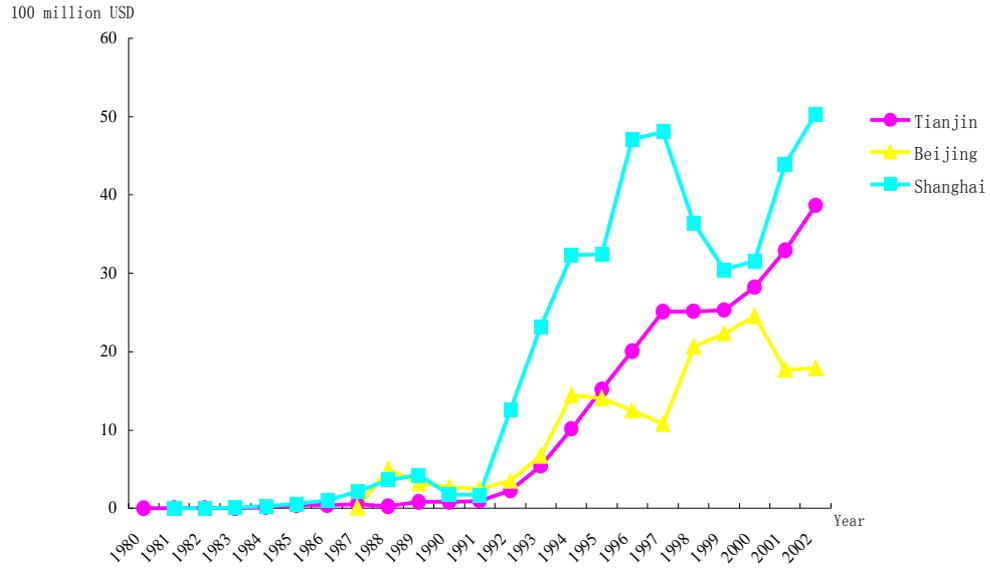


Figure 3b Share of FDI in National Total

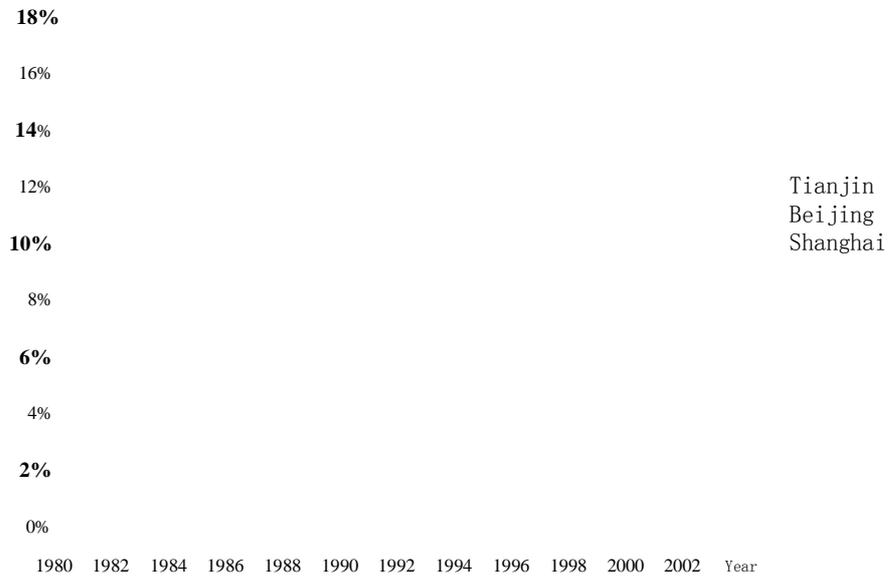


Table 2
Realized FDI : Annual growth rate

	Tianjin	Beijing	Shanghai	National	Guangdong	National (Excl. Guangdong)
1989	238.75%	-36.78%	15.92%	6.20%	25.79%	-1.71%
1990	2.34%	-12.89%	-58.02%	2.80%	26.30%	-9.35%
1991	12.86%	-11.55%	-1.08%	25.21%	24.79%	25.51%
1998	0.26%	91.11%	-24.33%	0.46%	2.64%	-0.31%
1999	0.56%	8.09%	-16.22%	-11.31%	1.52%	-15.93%
2000	11.57%	10.17%	3.67%	0.98%	0.28%	1.29%

To sum up, there was a departure in Tianjin after 1981 from the traditional neglect over city infrastructure investment. The puzzle was that the departure did not appear to have been pushed by the sheer scale of difficulties in local conditions after the 1976 earthquake, as the city leaders had not acted with equal enthusiasm in the most difficult years immediately after the disaster. In addition, given city infrastructure was considered to be of ‘non-productive’ nature, and the ‘average’ economic performance of Tianjin seemed to suggest that economic development had not been the priority of the city leadership, then how could Tianjin have achieved an outstanding record in foreign investment? What made Tianjin excel in this area of economic development and not others?

The Structure-Agency Explanatory Framework

The structure-agency framework directs explanation to the identification of structure and agency factors that constrain, facilitate, or directly contribute to the actions. The challenge, and the potential, as the theoretical debates remind us, is to delineate and differentiate the structural and agency factors, including their interaction, with some degree of clarity and specificity.

The structure: central government and local conditions

Earlier in the paper we suggested that local conditions did not directly prescribe actions. Despite the devastations of the 1976 earthquake Tianjin’s officials continued for a few years the ‘old’, accustomed way of distributing housing stock according to one’s rank and seniority in the work unit, rather than based on need to the homeless.

If local policy was not the product of local conditions, was it a result of central policy? Given China's tradition of centralized control, central influence has been the literature's obvious answer to explain local policy, a theme described as 'continued central predominance' (Li, 1997: 57). National laws and regulations, policies and directives of central leaders, it was contended, either ruled out options, channelled local actions towards centrally preferred objectives and directions, or directly prescribed the configurations of local action. What central influence was there behind the Tianjin anomalies? Was Tianjin's 'exceptional' performance in city infrastructure and foreign investment an implementation of national directives? In other words, can we find an explanation in a structural analysis centred on central policy?

It happened that a visit to Tianjin of Vice-Premier Wan Li in May 1981 was instrumental to Tianjin's subsequent activism in city infrastructure.¹² During the visit Wan severely criticized the lack of progress in post-earthquake reconstruction, and described Tianjin as 'the dirtiest and most dilapidated city he had ever seen'. Wan denounced local officials as 'dragging their feet in improving people's basic conditions of living', and rejected attributing difficulties to the 1976 earthquake. Wan reportedly told local officials, 'How could you still keep blaming the earthquake (for causing the bad conditions), now that five full years had passed?!' (Zheng, 1994: 61) Wan queried how Tianjin could develop its economy if its government could not even provide for basic conditions of living, and instructed Tianjin officials to 'rehouse the homeless and to clean up the city with no further delay' (Li, 1999).

There were indications that, prior to Wan's visit, the central government had noticed Tianjin's poor infrastructural conditions. In early 1980 the State Council sent an investigative team comprising officials from the State Construction Commission, State Planning Commission and Ministry of Finance to inspect Tianjin's post-earthquake construction. This led to a 3-year special grant of 2.5 billion yuan, and a centrally led reconstruction master plan for 1981-83, approved by the State Council in June 1980 (Qiu, 2004: 145). Why should central leaders be so concerned with city infrastructure, rather than Tianjin's GDP performance, given the accustomed neglect on matters of 'non-productive' nature? The answer was apparently a perception that bad living conditions, down to a certain standard, *could* snowball into a political problem. For decades the city population had endured over-crowded and badly designed housing, inadequate roads, acute shortage of fresh

¹² The discussion on Wan Li's visit was largely based on Qiu (2004).

water supply, and the associated problems of public hygiene and sanitation. The 1976 earthquake aggravated these pre-existing inadequacies and raised public discontent to a new, crisis, level.¹³ ‘Their primary concern was political stability’, remarked a Tianjin official. The grave housing and living conditions, it was worried, would not only affect economic development of the city, but also likely to threaten social stability, as people persistently frustrated with dire living conditions blamed the government for policy failures (Tianjin Interviews; Qiu, 2004: 143).

Arguably central leaders were more predisposed to threats to political stability than local officials, who tended to be more pedantically focused on assigned objectives, and, in this case, had largely followed the historical pathway of the Soviet developmental model in reacting to the post-earthquake emergencies. It was doubtful, however, whether central leaders would attach the same priority if not for Tianjin’s peculiar geopolitical position. As Beijing’s neighbour Tianjin had played the role of ‘door-step’ to the national capital. Social instability in Tianjin could, it was felt, easily spill over to the national capital, and then to other places nationwide (Tianjin Interviews). The matter thus stretched beyond having better housing and cleaner water for Tianjin residents, and the local governance of a city.

The discussion above suggests that two sets of local conditions, namely the dire post-earthquake conditions, and Tianjin’s traditional role to Beijing, were relevant to Tianjin’s post-1980 emphasis on city infrastructure, but their effects were mediated through the influence of central preference/predispositions. At work were the dual judgments that, firstly, unmet demands over ‘mundane’ consumption issues could generate political problems for the government to undercut, eventually, efforts on economic development, and that, secondly, social instability in Tianjin could spread to Beijing and thus have more than local impact. The formulation of these judgments in turn reflected the ‘agency’ of the central influence.

Agency: Interests, values and choices of actions

Agency in an explanatory framework directs attention to the interests, values of actors performing the task so as to highlight the detailed trajectories of choices of actions *within and despite* the influence of structural factors. In this case of explaining

¹³ These were best captured by popular idioms circulating in society at the time. This one was on the shortage of housing, ‘I started courting my partner when living in the temporary structures (erected after 1976 earthquake as an emergency measure). I got married in the temporary structures. Now my children have grown up and can run about on their own, I am still living in the temporary structures.’ People talked about making salty preserved vegetable at home out of tap water – because the ‘fresh water’ contained so much impurities that it tasted very salty! (Qiu, 2004: 139-140)

‘anomalies’ in Tianjin’s economic policy, agency refers to the role played by Tianjin officials as the key policy formulators and executors.

The People Approach

The city leadership underwent a major personnel change at about the same time when the central government expressed concern over Tianjin’s city infrastructure. Hu Qili, formerly the Second Party Secretary of the Communist Youth League (CYC) Central Committee, became mayor in June 1980, followed by Li Ruihuan, formerly Secretary to CYC secretariat, and Hu’s assistant, as vice-mayor in March 1981.¹⁴ Both Hu and Li had been close to Wan Li. In particular, Li’s promotion from a carpenter to a cadre in Beijing city government in 1965 was reportedly attributable to a close working relationship with Wan Li during the late 1950s.¹⁵ Li subsequently replaced Hu Qili as mayor in 1982 when Hu, a close aide of the then Party Secretary General Hu Yaobang, was transferred back to Beijing. Li remained in Tianjin and became Party Secretary in 1987 until his promotion to the central leadership in June 1989.¹⁶ Given the bonding between Li and Wan, a possibility was that Tianjin’s post-1981 city infrastructure policy was an implementation of central directives, as suggested by Wan Li’s explicit instruction in the May 1981 visit. In other words, there may simply be no room for any local agency to take place at all.

Here it is worth noting that Li’s populist approach to governance struck a tune similar to that of the central government over social stability. As exemplified in his much coded phrase of ‘everything (that the government does) is for the people; every item of work of the government requires the guidance from the people’,¹⁷ Li consistently emphasized the importance of placing the interests of the general public in the forefront of the government agenda. He argued that there was no inherent

¹⁴ “Li Ruihuan bibliography” assessed on 13 Dec 2004 at <http://big5.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/208098.htm> & “Hu Qili bibliography” assessed on 13 Dec 2004 at http://news.xinhuanet.com/misc/2002-01/24/content_252463.htm

¹⁵ Then Wan was vice-mayor of Beijing in charge of the construction of the meeting hall of the National People’s Congress, whilst Li was the team leader of the ‘special action’ team in the construction project. Li invented a new technique significantly reducing the design and construction time, thus attracting Wan’s attention. See Ding Wang’s article in <http://www.chinabiz.org.tw/maz/InvCina/200205-099/200205-070.htm>, assessed on 10 December 2004.

¹⁶ Li was made Tianjin Party Secretary in September 1987, joined Politburo of the Party in November 1987, and became member of Politburo Standing Committee and Secretary of the Party Central Committee Secretariat in June 1989, as part of the personnel change in central leadership after the June 4th crackdown. See Lau (1992: 115, 117, 128)

¹⁷ Such was the title of Li’s speech delivered at a city government meeting in March 1988, a recurrent theme in many of Li’s speeches made during his leadership in Tianjin during 1981-89. Li entered Politburo as Tianjin’s party secretary cum mayor in 1987, and was promoted to the Standing Committee of Politburo and secretary of the Central Committee Secretariat in late June 1989, in the revamp of central leadership post-June 4th.

contradiction between improving people's livelihood conditions and investing in production facilities,

'Production and livelihood (consumption) are united in a dialectical way. If we forget about people's livelihood and only focused single-mindedly on production, we shall fail in motivating people's enthusiasm, and production will ultimately suffer... Our experience in the past few years confirmed that the more pressed we are in the production front, the more attentive we should be to livelihood issues. When the government does so, people will be motivated to perform, and production will thereby increase.'¹⁸

Rather than following the traditional thinking putting consumption against production, Li saw the two go hand in hand. Key to this was the agency role of the people *qua producers* in the process of production. As Li put it, 'Amongst all the factors of production, labour is the most critical. A leader perishes if he does not recognize the central importance of the people in the production process.'¹⁹ Li thus repeatedly preached that when working for economic development cadres should look 'downwards' for innovations from the grassroots, rather than just look 'up' to the central government for resource and policy concessions. 'A good leader distinguishes himself not by his superior personal abilities, but by being able to help the majority of others to live out their fullest possible potentials.' 'We aim at enhancing productivity through reform. Thus it is simply natural that we should give the utmost respect to the views of the front-line producers. The key to reform and economic development lies in enhancing the agency role of the producers, and making the most out of it.'²⁰

What role did city infrastructure play in this emphasis on people's agency? If people's enthusiasm holds the key to getting things done, the task becomes one of channeling enthusiasm towards goals preferred by the government. The question is how this may be done. The answer Li offered was to give top priority to meeting the livelihood needs of the people. 'If we (the government) want the people to perform as we want them to do, we first need to deliver what they want from us.'²¹ Given the widespread discontent over living conditions in Tianjin, meeting the people's needs

¹⁸ Li made these remarks when meeting a group of Tianjin people's deputies in April 1984, as extracted in Li (1990: 36-37).

¹⁹ Extracts from Li's speech during a full city government meeting in March 1989, recorded in Li (1990: 55)

²⁰ Extracts from Li's speech during a seminar with Tianjin Trade Union representatives in August 1986, as reported in Lau (1992: 110-11)

²¹ Extracts from Li's speech at a city government meeting in March 1988, reported in Li (1990: 85)

thus firmly focused on improving city infrastructural facilities of housing, water, sanitation, and public transport.

The ‘people approach’ did not stop at the formulation of government agenda. Hundreds of thousands of residents participated in the projects through free labour and donations of savings (Lau, 1992: 93-129). Tianjin became an anomaly to have popular mobilization of this kind at a time when, nationally, material incentives were increasingly regarded as the only reliable means of enticing performance. The following extracts captured how the people approach worked,

‘Caring for livelihood issues is part and parcel of political work. In a sense giving care works more effectively than just giving people money. Relying on material incentives often generates, unintendedly, negative repercussions, and in time makes things more difficult. Alternatively, if we show our care through some concrete actions, we will be better placed to encourage people’s enthusiasm, and thereby win their cooperation. Our work on other fronts will then become much easier.’²²

‘If we take care to focus our work on issues of genuine public concern, where people of the greatest number derive the greatest benefit, and where the people have explicitly demanded action, in other words, those things regarded as ‘for the people’, then people would, gradually, be willing to take part and contribute their share. This is because the public will then see that this is done for their own good, and contributing today will lead to harvest tomorrow. At that point they will willingly volunteer to do their fair share, and even to sacrifice for others.’²³

Permeating the ‘people approach’ to governance was the recognition, and centring, of the agency role of the people. The people were the key to the success or failure of government: no capable government could possibly perform without the cooperation of the people. The challenge of effective governance for the government was thus to understand, serve, and channel public agency. Specifically, the leading cadres needed to formulate government priorities based on a good understanding of what the majority of people wanted. In this light city infrastructure became a major focus of government during Li’s leadership in Tianjin in the 1980s. The ‘people approach’ did not mean material incentives were unnecessary, but these were used

²² Extracts from Li’s speech in December 1983, reported in Li (1990: 13).

²³ Extracts from Li’s speech in March 1988, reported in Li (1990: 85).

in a context where people's sense of ownership in the task was encouraged, rather than in a 'principal-agent' context where people were expected to comply for fear of penalty or for reward. Most importantly, with the agency role of the people invigorated and properly channeled, the government had extended the resource base of the projects and reduced resistance to them, and consequently enabled Tianjin to achieve more with less.

Both the political sensitivity shown in the 'people approach' and Li's personal relationship with Wan Li pointed to that Li *could* be the 'centre's man' in Tianjin, embracing values of central leaders and implementing their priorities. Indeed, right after Wan left Tianjin in May 1981, Li spoke strongly on the need to revamp Tianjin's infrastructural construction in an emergency meeting, and strove to demolish all temporary housing by end of the year (Qiu, 2004: 144). It seemed that Li's activism as local leader was in fact an extension of the central agency.

On closer inspection, however, there are indications that the picture could be more complex. First, as noted above, the central government had shown concern over the poor progress in Tianjin's post-earthquake reconstruction for some time, but for a few years the usual inertia and poor coordination persisted. This suggested that the mere expression of central preference, and the possession of carrots and sticks at central disposal, did not automatically produce local compliance. Secondly, reportedly Li Ruihuan had paid a visit to Wan Li in Beijing prior to Wan's May 1981 visit, during which Li requested Wan to visit Tianjin and lend him support (Zheng, 1994: 61-2). The alternative picture was thus an active local agency courting central resources to advance his agenda strategically.

What emerged was a situation wherein central and local *agents* interacted. Both Wan and Li, as central and local leaders respectively, shared the values of the 'people approach'. Given their common values and cooperative relations they appeared to work as one team. It would be misleading, however, to interpret their respective roles in the team solely in terms of the hierarchical framework of the government system, which leads to a conclusion of central predominance and local subordination. If such were the case the central preference should have been implemented before Li's arrival in 1981. The fact that this had not happened testified that local agency existed, and that local officials mattered not only in explaining the lack of 'compliance', but in compliance as well.²⁴

²⁴ Here 'compliance' simply refers to the similarity in the direction of actions, as a matter of 'objective' phenomenon, out of central policy/preferences and local actions, without the principal-agent theory of the processes of decision-making which is often associated with the term.

Foreign Investment Innovations

Foreign investment is another arena allowing us to discern the interaction of central and local agency in a context of ‘compliance’. As noted previously, Tianjin presented an anomaly in that it excelled in the attraction of foreign investment but this success was not matched by a similar performance in terms of other major economic indicators. A close-up examination indicated that the city leadership had been very proactive in encouraging management innovations to better ‘serve’ its foreign investors. At the same time, it was very prudent if not cautious in handling the interface between the foreign sector and the pre-existing state sector, and between the new, expatriate community and city residents (Qiu, 2004).

To start with, the influence of central policy as a facilitating structure was quite obvious here. It would have been inconceivable to have foreign investment of such a scale if not for the adoption of the national policy of ‘open door’ in 1979 and its extension to Tianjin in 1984. Tianjin was included as one of the fourteen ‘open coastal cities’ as the central government extended the ‘open door policy’ from the first batch of localities in south Guangdong and Fujian to major cities along the coast. As part of this development, preferential policies, mainly tax concessions and delegation of approval authorities, were extended to Tianjin. Qiu (2004: 66-68) compares the national preferential policy as applied to Tianjin to the local concessions the city government subsequently promulgated in its local regulations, and finds minimal difference between the two. This suggests that, in terms of the broad parameters of foreign investment policy, Tianjin had, at least initially, primarily followed the footsteps of national directives.

At the same time, inclusion in the national opening-up plan could not automatically bring success, as the subsequent differential performance of the open cities and areas in attracting foreign investment had confirmed. More importantly, central policy could not explain the emergence of pace-setting management innovations which were instrumental to Tianjin’s outstanding record in foreign investment. The facilitating influence of national policy notwithstanding, therefore, there is a need to look for influences within Tianjin – in other words, to identify local agency and where it lay.

In this regard, one asks *what* considerations endogenous in Tianjin, other than a ‘duty’ to implement national policy, were behind the priority given to foreign

investment in local policy. The backdrop was a run-down city economy dilapidated by a recent earthquake and excesses of political radicalism during the Cultural Revolution decade, when industrial output value grew at half the average rate of the pre-Cultural Revolution years.²⁵ In 1980, with Hu Qili as the new mayor, the city leaders discussed strategies to speed up economic development, now that economic growth had become the most important job of national and local governments. From this discussion foreign investment emerged as one major priority. In the words of a local official, ‘The thinking then was to use foreign investment to get Tianjin out of its difficult situations, both in the arenas of city infrastructure and economic development generally, so that Tianjin could attain a level of development more commensurate to its status of a province-level municipality.’ But why was foreign investment? ‘Well, we didn’t have much other choice’ (Tianjin Interviews). Indeed, given the stringent fiscal capacity at that time, and the limits to popular mobilization, turning to foreign investment was an obvious local *choice* of action to garner new resources for economic development. After all, it was *also* the nationally ordained choice. Going along it would earn Tianjin additional benefits as loyal executor of central policy (Qiu, 2004: 92).

Local agency in the choice of foreign investment as priority focus could be discerned from the quick pace of local implementation of central decisions. An example was the construction of the specially designated development zone in the city suburb, which started two months *before* the site location was formally approved by the central government (Qiu, 2004: 92). No time was to be lost in waiting.

The key to Tianjin’s success in foreign investment was the pacesetting innovations in management and institution-building. As captured in surveys on foreign firms investing in Tianjin, the overwhelming success factor was the ability to cut red tape (Qiu, 2004: 99). In 1994, Tianjin won a Danish project amidst stiff competition – at a time when the limelight was on Shanghai in the aftermath of the opening up of Pudong in East Shanghai. In explaining the choice, the investor reportedly said, ‘in Tianjin, we can complete all the approval procedures in one single department, rather than going through 50-60 different units elsewhere’ (Qiu, 2004: 76). In the official website of Tianjin Economic and Technological Development Area (TEDA), the hub of foreign investment in Tianjin, foreign investors praised Tianjin, and the TEDA management in particular, for its minimal red tape, efficient service to investors, and good infrastructural support.²⁶ Box 2 below lists the major pacesetting

²⁵ Industrial output value during 1966-76 grew by an average annual rate of 6.7%, against an average of 14.8% during 1949-1965 (Qiu, 2004: 91).

²⁶ <http://www.investteda.org/tzcg/mingren.asp>, assessed on 15 December 2004.

management initiatives (Qiu, 2004: 71-80).

Box 2

Foreign Investment Management Innovations

1. Minimal government intervention in enterprise management: In contrast to a tradition of direct supervision and micro-management under the planned economy, enterprises in TEDA were to decide its own operational systems, within the ambit of law, including labour management and the establishment of labour unions and party organizations.
2. One stop unit and proactive service: In 1987 Tianjin established the first Foreign Investment Service Centre nationwide. The centre merged the powers on foreign investment of various related departments so that all necessary approvals in relation to a foreign investment project could be done in one unit. The centre also assisted foreign investors in its dealing with government departments or units outside of Tianjin, e.g. with central ministries.
3. Government as public service: The motto of the TEDA management office was: ‘do our utmosts to facilitate investors; try our best to enhance their profitability’. The role of the government was to serve, and the purpose of regulation was to facilitate.
4. Enhanced transparency and minimal processing time: The application requirements and approval procedures were clearly specified in local regulations and closely followed. Processing time for a new project was reduced to 8 days for foreign investment and 4 days for domestic investment.
5. Cancellation of most administrative fees and low utility and land use costs: Electricity and land use fees were noticeably lower in TEDA than in other major cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou. Administrative fees were drastically reduced to a minimal number when most other places adopted a wait and see attitude in 1995/1996.

Permeating the various measures was an attempt to realign government-enterprise relations. Early in 1986 Tianjin’s investment officials announced their motto: ‘the investor is the king; (investment) projects are the life-line’ (Pei, 1988: 300; Qiu, 2004: 98). Through helping enterprises to earn more profit the government would create job opportunities, attract more investors, and thus expand the economy. The function of the government was to serve; ‘through service the government performs its management of the society’, so wrote a local official (Qiu, 2004: 75).

The adjustment of government role in society and the realignment of government-enterprise relations had come to the forefront of the national agenda of reform towards the late 1990s. In the mid 1980s, however, it was a politically sensitive subject. Indeed the motto of treating investor as king was controversial even to this date, not to say in those days when foreign investment was still a novel phenomenon in many parts of, even, coastal China. A researcher in Tianjin recalled those early days when Tianjin went against the tide,

‘Nowadays it might be natural for us to talk about the government serving the economy, but in those early years such discourse was quite unusual – especially when the emphasis was placed on serving foreign investors. In those early days of opening and reform, raising this concept (of investors as king) required a great deal of courage, and a strong sense of vision.’ (Tianjin Interviews)

Why should Tianjin want to risk criticism and go against the tide? There was the imperative to perform, and to attain success in attracting foreign investment. As noted above, given the dire situations in the city in the early 1980s, attracting foreign investment appeared to be *the* way to lift Tianjin out of its difficulties and thereby allowing its officials to claim credit in excelling in their job. Local officials understood that the key complaint of investors was the difficulty of getting approvals in the bureaucratic wedlock. To successfully win over investors they thus worked at the ‘software’ as much as the ‘hardware’ (Qiu, 2004: 74). The objective was to create in China ‘an investment environment commensurate to, or be the near-equivalence of, an international one’.²⁷

The presence of a number of bright officials in charge of foreign investment was thus instrumental. After all, it was *their* ideas, after turning into action, which eventually brought about the outstanding success in Tianjin’s foreign investment. What then accounted for this local agency? What made Tianjin’s officials more competent, more courageous, more innovative and, above all, more willing to serve?

Here the role of agency at the city level was relevant. The city leadership delegated most of its foreign investment powers to the management office of the development area. The director of the management office commanded high status in the city administration, and was often filled by a vice-mayor. In other words, the city leadership buttressed its policy priority on foreign investment with corresponding

²⁷ This was raised by the then director of the Development Area Management Office, Zhang Wei, in 1986 (Qiu, 2004: 74)

personnel and organizational arrangements. Officials working on the front-line of foreign investment were given ample powers and encouraged to innovate, and rewarded with status and promotion. Mayor Li Ruihuan once reportedly told the leaders in the development area, ‘your job is the equivalence of the ‘Self-Strengthening Movement’ (under the Qing Dynasty in mid-late 19th Century) conducted under the leadership of the CCP. You have all the powers I have.’ (Tianjin Interviews; Qiu, 2004: 95) Acting with a clear vision and objective, the city leadership’s decisions constituted a facilitating structure for the play of local agency on foreign investment.

Conclusion

It is common sense to say we are both free and constrained to some extent. The challenge is to improve the specificity of the above statement, namely to replace the phrase, ‘to some extent’, with descriptions carrying more information. Hopefully, by so doing we end up knowing a bit more *how* free we are, and how, when and by whom/what we are constrained in what context, and thereby *learn* how to enhance our freedom in the future.

The debates over structure-agency in the theoretical literature exhibit efforts to delineate such specificity, but so far insufficient attempts have been made to empirically test the theoretical efforts. The consequence is that we often felt rather unsure as to how to assess the relative utility of the competing theories. This paper starts from the premise that empirical testing would be essential not only to test the theories but, through identifying gaps in the theories, also contribute to improvements of theories.

The discussion on Tianjin’s city infrastructure and foreign investment policy in this paper tells a complex story involving central preferences and policy, local conditions, and local officials: *how* these various agents of influence interacted to produce Tianjin’s interesting records in city infrastructure and foreign investment. A major message arisen from the detailed trajectories is that despite the obvious influence of central policy and local conditions, both posing as structure to local actions, local agency was visible still in the formation of local actions. Moreover, this local agency was not only found in the influence of local actions on central actions, as would be in the case of structure-agency as duality. In duality, central actions are seen as the structure to local actions (local agency), which in turn constitute the structure of the next wave of central actions (central agency). Thus central and local actions are

said to be mutually constitutive of one another: one is structure to the other and vice versa. Moreover, under duality, for the same group of action, say, local action, it is simultaneously *local agency* within the constraints posed by central actions, as well as *structure* to the next wave of central actions. The same applies to central actions. The case of Tianjin went beyond this logic, however, to find that local agency did not *only* have an impact on central actions, as structure to central agency. Local agency also played a major role in the constitution of *future waves of local* actions, despite and together with the co-influence of central actions as structure. In other words, central and local actions do have their independent boundaries, as argued in the dualism notion of structure-agency. Whilst these boundaries criss-cross they are nevertheless there.

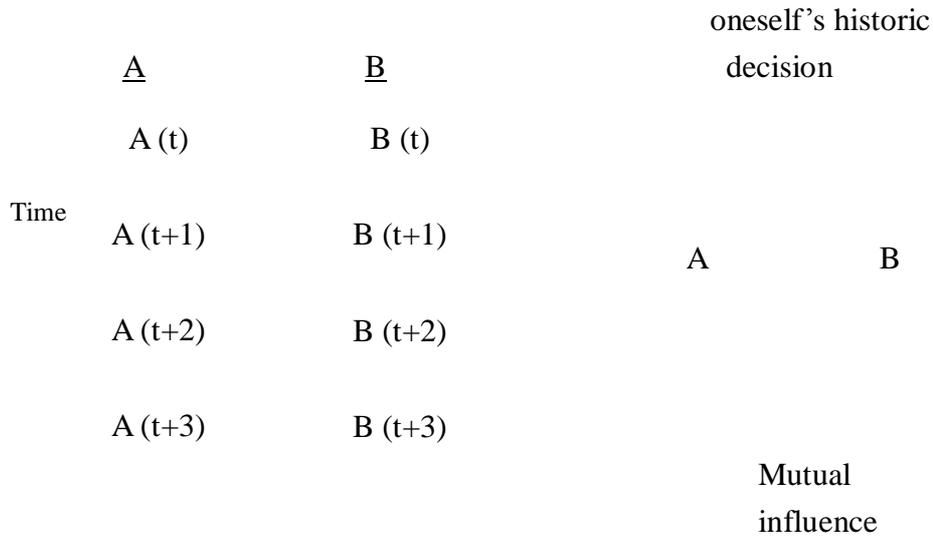
Figure 4 shows the duality and dualism situations graphically:

Figure 4: Duality and Dualism

Duality

	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>
	A (t)	B (t)
Time	A (t+1)	B (t+1)
	A (t+2)	B (t+2)
	A (t+3)	B (t+3)

Dualism



Key

A and B stand for two groups of action by two different actors.

A & B actions mutually constitutive over time

Influence of one-self's action made at an earlier time on one's action

The arrows in Figure 4 denote the flow of influence between two groups of action (A and B) over time ($t, t+1, t+2\dots$). The blue arrows in both situations signify the influence of A actions on B over time, and B on A likewise. As the discussion on Tianjin reveals, there is a second set of arrows, in red, signaling the influence *within* each group of action over time, ie. $A(t)$ on $A(t+1)$, $A(t+1)$ on $A(t+2)$, and on. This second set of influences is included in the dualism conception, whilst the duality conception of structure-agency perceives only the first set (the blue arrows) of influence. The oval figures to the right depict the cumulative impact of the interactions of the two groups of actions over time. In duality, A and B in time become essentially non-distinguishable, whilst A and B still retain distinct if also overlapping boundaries over time in the dualism case.

Through illuminating the rich details of interactions, the Tianjin story thus confirms the relevance of the dualism notion: structure and agency need not be defined only in terms of the other. The stalemate in the theoretical discourse boils down to a conflation, in the duality conception, between 'structure' and 'agency' as analytical constructs, and actions and actors as ontological entities. It may be

possible to have two groups of actions being so extensively constitutive of each other that they essentially collapse into one. Whether this situation happens is largely an empirical question – though unlikely but still possible. The important thing is that this situation does not imply that ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, as analytical concepts used to analyze the interaction of the actions, and to assess the degree of their ‘collapse’, could be similarly collapsed into one concept. To claim this is the case denotes a failure to distinguish analytical constructs from the practical phenomena that they are meant to describe and explain. It is the contention of this paper that such failure is, at least partly, attributable to the shortage of reference to ‘the practical phenomena’ in debates between alternative theoretical constructs.

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