

# A study of mega project from a perspective of social conflict theory

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## Abstract

Extensive studies show that mega project has close connections with globalization and civilization, but little articles make social logical analyses of mega project. Traditional conflict management lays stress on projects leading to conflicts while neglecting the fact that conflict can also result in mega project in a social context. This paper studies the relationship between mega project and social conflict by exploring mega project from the perspective of the social conflict theory, and develops a conceptual model of mega project, which includes three propositions: (1) mega project is the outcome of social conflict; (2) it functions as a safety valve in society; and (3) it has close relationships with the level of political centralization and economic development. At the end, this paper puts forward some suggestions about the construction of mega project. © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. and IPMA. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Mega project; Social logical analyses; Social conflict theory; Conceptual model

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the research of mega projects or civil mega projects has become the central issue in the international project circle. People have never paid so much attention to mega projects as in the contemporary era, and the construction density of mega project also hit the highest point in history, which owned firstly to the flowing of multinational organizations and global financial capital (Zhao, 2006), secondly to the improvement and spread of engineering technology, and thirdly to the globalization of culture and intellectual elites (Olds, 2001). Especially after the 1990s, with the increasing fierce competition in the tide of globalization, many countries take mega project as an important tool to lift the status in global political and economic systems. Not only are the rising industrialized countries like China and India fond of mega project, but also the traditional industrialized countries like Britain and French are willing to construct mega projects to realize the revival of cities' industry, function and image. So as it can be seen, the research of mega project has reached a new stage in the context of globalization (Zhang et al., 2009).

However, the study of mega project can't catch up with its pace of development. Although many experts produced fruitful literatures about mega projects, there are still a lot of puzzles on front of people: many countries know that the costs of mega projects are always over the budget and that the construction times are often delayed, but they are still keen to work on it even with deficit, which seems to contradict with the principle of profit maximization. Why do some mega projects appear very reasonable and operable in the stage of feasibility study, while in practice it faces a lot of difficulties, and even the decision makers may change its original plan under pressures, just like the construction of Narita Airport in Japan? Why can a mega project cause a lot of disputes, although it has been finished for a long time like the Three Gorges Dam in China? To answer these questions, people should not only consider single factors just like economic effect, political effect or cultural effect, instead, a comprehensive point of view is needed to study a mega project, so that they can fully understand the essential attributes of a mega project and thus to effectively guide the construction of a mega project.

In fact, besides its inherent project property, mega projects also bear social attributes, which is the dominant feature in social context. Mega projects and social conflicts positively interact with each other, a mega project may cause social conflict while it is also regarded to be an effective way to solve

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social conflict. The interaction between a mega project and social conflict influences politics, economics, environment, regulate and other aspects of society, eventually pushing the society to move on. With these considerations, this article tries to research mega projects with perspective of sociology by picking the social conflict theory as the method to reveal some properties of mega projects which are not noticed before.

This paper begins by introducing the research status quo of a mega project and sociology, especially mentioning the social conflict theory. Next, it gives mega project an interpretation in sociological sense to explain the relationship between a mega project and the social conflict theory. Based on above analyses, this article puts forward three sociological propositions about mega projects, and each of the propositions will be clearly illustrated or explained with empirical method. Combining the three propositions, this article develops a conceptual model of mega project in the perspective of social conflict theory. At last, this paper gives some suggestions about the constructions of mega projects.

## 2. Literature review

Since 2000, studies about mega projects have become more and more prevalent, among which the publishing of three important books helps people better understand the mega projects, and they are: *Globalization and Urban Change: Capital, Culture, and Pacific Rim Mega-projects*; *Mega-projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment*; *Mega-Projects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition*. A large amount of papers about mega projects has also been issued, and they talked about mega projects from different perspectives. After studying the books and papers, we can divide the opinions into three categories:

Considering the project properties. In the final analysis, a mega project is a construction project, but it is also different from ordinary projects regarding the investment, scale, function and so on. So how to elevate the output–input ratio and maximize the economic benefits should be the major concern for decision maker. Merrow (1984) studied 52 mega projects with an average investment of 2 billion dollars (at 1984 exchange rate), using the method of correlation analysis and regression analysis, concluded the factors that effected the overrun of cost and time, and developed a relative conceptual model. Hugo et al. (2008) took the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge as an example, and revealed that in the construction of a mega project, a blind pursuit to the technology innovation can always lead to cost soaring.

Paying attention to the relationships with globalization and civilization. Olds (1995) revealed a mega project's important role in the changes of globalization and civilization through introducing the mega projects in the pacific rim. Pacione (2005) introduced mega projects at the background of globalization.

Learning mega projects from the perspective of politics and economics. Altshuler and Luberoff (2003) introduced temporary mega projects from the perspective of political change in civil public investment. Harvey (1999) believed that the investment of mega projects can help the capitalist system develop a mechanism to effectively avoid economic crisis. Wang and Zhang (2008) used the method of political-economic

analysis to reveal the production mechanism of civil mega projects, and appraised the political effects, economic and social effects, and spatial effects.

From the above statement, it can be learned that a mega project involves politics, economics, regulates and so on, almost every side of society, and that people are beginning to have a better understanding of mega projects. However, there are still shortages or problems in previous studies, the biggest one of which is that the knowledge of mega projects is too partial instead of all-around, and many people can't give a clear statement of a mega project. Although Turner and Müller (2003) offer many instructions of project management to people, it is wise to know that a mega project is a project but not merely a project, and that the fundamental problem is that there lacks a new perspective, new tools or new theory to better understand the mega project.

## 3. Research method

The research objective of sociology is a human's whole life, so the research method of sociology, just as Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology, pointed out, must focus on the entirety of society, and the authentic general spirit and the overall basic method should be a comprehensive way: an advanced history method to implement the various subjects' methods-observing, experimenting, comparing and historical viewing (Yang, 2009). Sociological theory is the crystallization of the ideas of sociologists. From Comte's positivism to Giddens' social structure theory, sociology has experience a development of 200 years, leaving various schools of sociological ideas. Perceiving a mega project with different sociological theories can help people gain a different angle, among which the conflict theory is the most powerful and insightful tool.

### 3.1. The history of social conflict theory

To limit paper length, this article doesn't strictly follow the traditional sociological method, but tries to use a comprehensive method to explore the core of a mega project in a social context and give some propositions, because the understanding of the society is one of the functions and purposes of sociology, just as Max Weber defined sociology: sociology is a subject of science, the aim of which is to have an interpretive understanding of social actions, and give an reasonable explanation of social actions' processes and outcomes (Ma, 2008). The social conflict theory is a branch of sociology, and it occupies an important position in social science. As early as 1907, the First Annual Meeting of American Sociological Association fixed "social conflict" as its main topic. Then in the American Sociological Association's 26th Annual Conference in 1930, "social conflict" again became the main topic. In the 60s and 70s of the 20th century, social conflict also attracted the interest of some people, but then the social conflict theory developed very slowly and even staggered. While in recent years, social conflicts arouse people's concern once again. In the proceedings of globalization, more and more social conflicts are exposed. The growing serious situation of racial problems,

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