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**A Multiscalar Approach to Investigating the Chinese City Using
Terminological Urbanism as a Tool**

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates how linguistic transfer shapes what the “Chinese city” can become as an object of knowledge in global urban studies. When English functions as the dominant academic lingua franca, Chinese urban terms are often rendered through seemingly fluent equivalents—“community,” “street,” “district,” “renewal”—that appear neutral but quietly reconfigure institutional logics, historical sedimentations, and everyday meanings. I define this recurrent slippage as conceptual distortion: a patterned mismatch produced when imported categories stand in for local semantic fields. I further argue that conceptual distortion is not merely a technical problem of mistranslation, but a form of epistemic injustice, because the shared interpretive resources of Anglophone theory are frequently insufficient to host Chinese urban concepts “on their own terms.” The research objective is therefore twofold: first, to diagnose how conceptual distortion is generated across translation, policy, and scholarship; second, to construct an alternative interpretive infrastructure that enables more rigorous, auditable, and ethically aware multilingual comparison.

To achieve this objective, the dissertation proposes Terminological Urbanism as a framework that treats urban terminology simultaneously as an empirical object, a methodological tool, and a normative concern. Conceptually, the framework links four domains that are usually handled separately: semantic analysis and lexicography; translation theory and hermeneutics; institutional and planning rationalities; and vernacular urban experience. Within this approach, terms are not treated as secondary labels applied to stable entities. Instead, they are treated as operators that help produce the city’s intelligibility: they sort phenomena, set boundaries, and mediate between lived environments and administrative categories. This allows the dissertation to identify “false transparency” in translation—cases where a smooth English rendering obscures key differences in governance function, scalar organization, or social meaning—and to specify conditions under which borrowing (pinyin), glossing, or explanatory translation is analytically preferable to domesticated equivalence.

Methodologically, the research design follows a centrifugal, micro-to-macro logic grounded in an anthropological stance. Rather than beginning with an abstract definition of “the Chinese city”—a contested and historically unstable category shaped by administrative designation, policy, and the urban–rural bifurcation—the study begins from lived practice and expands outward across scales. It operationalizes an ethnographically tractable triad of urban activity—staying, moving, relating—and maps this triad onto three semantic fields: house (dwelling), street (mobility and encounter), and neighborhood (relation and governance). This design allows macro formations to be reconstructed inductively from terms-in-use, reducing the risk of imposing external typologies in advance. Empirically, the dissertation triangulates multiple registers of language: (1) official terminology in planning documents, standards, signage, and administrative classifications; (2) academic terminology in scholarship, dictionaries, and translated research; and (3) vernacular terminology in everyday speech, media discourse, and field observation. In addition, the study treats language as urban data by implementing a visual-elicitation lexical survey: respondents provide spontaneous descriptors prompted by stylized images corresponding to the three semantic fields, generating a corpus of 1,077 unique lexical items. The corpus is analyzed through inductive semantic clustering and close “micro-readings” to identify salient dimensions that are routinely minimized by institutional nomenclature and its English proxies (for example, atmospheres, moral evaluations, relational density, and fine-grained accessibility cues).

The findings show that Chinese urban terms often carry strong institutional embeddedness and historical layering that are not preserved by standard English equivalents. In the dwelling field, core lexemes and their compounds encode not only material form but also social imaginaries, moral expectations, and property/household arrangements, making straightforward mappings onto “house,” “housing,” or “residence” systematically partial. In the mobility field, terms such as road/street/lane/alley families index functional hierarchy, responsibility, and cultural memory in ways that a single English category tends to flatten. In the relating field, neighborhood terms operate as performative governance devices—producing boundaries, allocating resources, and structuring belonging—yet are frequently translated as if they referred to naturally self-organized “communities.” Across fields, divergences between official and vernacular usage are not random noise but structured mismatches that expose the limits of top-down categories and the conceptual costs of domestication.

The dissertation’s contributions are threefold. First, it advances a conceptual intervention by framing translation-induced slippage as epistemic injustice and by theorizing terminology as interpretive infrastructure in urban research. Second, it provides a methodological contribution: a replicable multiscalar approach that keeps translation decisions explicit and contestable, supported by principles for responsible translation (including a “translational gradient” that specifies when to

translate directly, gloss, borrow in pinyin, or annotate). Third, it offers an empirical contribution: a structured vernacular lexical corpus and an associated analytic workflow that expand what counts as evidence in urban studies and enable systematic comparison between institutional nomenclature and lived semantic practice. Overall, the dissertation argues that Chinese urban lexicons are not merely local particularities to be accommodated for accuracy; they are sites of conceptual innovation that can challenge, supplement, and reshape the categories through which contemporary urbanization is interpreted globally.

Keywords: Terminological Urbanism; conceptual distortion; multiscalar research; semantic fields; visual-elicitation lexical corpus.