Logistical power

Biao Xiang[1]

Abstract

"Logistical power" is a government's exertion of dominance over private actors by coordinating the circulation of people, goods, and information. Its immediate sources include states' logistical provision and logistical intervention. Logistical power extends both the "infrastructural power" (Michael Mann 1984) and political-juridical power of modern states.

Theme

Linked and Distributed Mobilities

Keywords

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[1] Biao Xiang, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany. xiang@eth.mpg.de

"Logistical power" in social life is a government's exertion of dominance over private actors by coordinating the circulation of people, goods, and information. Private actors, in turn, became dependent on the government as they rely on increasingly complex connectivities and mobilities in daily life. While state power is immediately recognizable when it hinders mobility, particularly in the case of cross-border movements, "logistical power" suggests that enhancing mobility can also be a source of power.

China's development since 1980 is a prime example of logistical power. Between the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the start of market-oriented economic reforms in 1978, spontaneous mobility barely existed in China. Population immobility afforded the state tremendous power, as the government single-handedly allocated scarce resources and directly influenced individuals' life chances. From 1978 onwards, the movement of people and goods increased, and has been encouraged by government polities. The emergence of these "freely mobile resources" and "free space for activities" were, for Chinese sociologist Sun Liping (1993), the defining factors in China's post-1980 transformation. With increasing mobility, "the state has lost its position as the only source of resources and [life] opportunities"[2]. At the time, it was widely predicted that state power would be further weakened and a more independent society would emerge. Yet while Chinese society has become ever more mobile, Chinese state power has strengthened.

These two trends are not contradictory. The increase in mobility in the 1980s and 1990s was primarily due to the removal of institutional barriers, such as the dismantling of the communes and the abolishment of the grain ration system. In this process, the state reliquished some of its power and increasingly distanced itself from the individual. The rapid growth of mobility after 2000, and especially after 2010, has been driven by active state intervention, particularly through investment in infrastructure—transportation, communication, and logistics. The state has made itself indispensible to the efficient and orderly flow of ever more intensified circulation. It is now impossible to live, let alone run a business or organize collective actions, outside of the logistical system led by the state. The state is again becoming closer to the individual citizen. This is "logistical power" in action.

The "safe migration" programmes promoted by the United Nations since the early 2000s is another example of logistical power. "Safe migration" programmes recognize migrants' desire and need to migration, and aim to prevent migrants from harms as well as prevent them to harm others in the process of migration. The programmes target migrants on the move rather than reducing mobility through border control measures. As Sverre Molland puts it, the method is "tracing" rather than "anchoring".[3] In other words, these governments aim to influence mobility logistically rather than territorially.

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[2] Sun Liping. 1993. "Ziyou liudong ziyuan" yu "ziyou huodong kongjian": Lun gegai guocheng zhong zhongguo shehui jiangou de bianqian ["freely mobile resources" and "free space for activities": Changes in the structure of the Chinese society during the reform.] *Tansuo* [*Exploration*]. Issue 1: 64-68.

[3] Molland, Sverre. 2022. *Safe migration and the politics of brokered safety in Southeast Asia*. Taylor & Francis; Molland, Sverre. 2021. Anchoring and tracing during COVID: two modalities of mobility governance. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

The importance of logistical power in contemporary governance has also become clear through the COVID-19 pandemic. In the process of learning how to reorganize and effectively restrict mobility —and sometimes increase for certain groups such as key workers — as a means of disease control, many states have developed increasing logistical power. Deciding to lockdown the population without reorganizing mobility on the ground can be counterproductive. When the Indian government called a national lockdown in March 2020, the country was thrown into chaos, with several hundred thousand migrant workers walking from the cities back to the countryside as the government was unable to facilitate the movement of who needed to move, or to channel goods to those in need. It is not the lockdown policy itself, but rather the inability of providing alternative means of mobility that triggered panic flight and "shock mobilities"[4]. In the process of learning to how to coordinate mobility, states are developing technologies and an apparatus (e.g. contact tracing apps) which enable them to penetrate into people's social life to an unprecedented level.

Features of logistical power

"Logistical power" government's dominance over society by coordinating circulations has the following features:

- **It is a type of public power** (i.e. state power in modern times or the dominance of political elite in pre-state societies). A shipping company or taxi fleet, even though they facilitate mobility cannot be said to have logistical power.
- **Logistical power stems from coordinating private actors' mobility, not from the movement of one's own people or resources.** Thanks to its webs of military bases and a large number of aircraft carriers, the US military has developed the capacity to deploy its armed forces globally. The ability to move its forces reflects the US' existing military power, but this movement does not constitute a source of additional power. In other words, this shows the power of logistics, but not logistical power. For the same reason, elites in the Trobriand Islands who accumulated power based on their mobility and resultant long-distance connections—as successful traders and seafarers—did not have logistical power either.[5] But the "big men" (ambitious individuals who had no established authority but accumulated prestige by developing reciprocal relations with a large number of people), for instance those based on the moka system (rituals of competitive gift exchange in New Guinea), can be seen as incipient forms of logistical power. This is because the big men cultivated

[4] Xiang, Biao. 2021. Shock mobility: convulsions in human migration are having large impacts. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology; Naik, Mutka and Biao Xiang. 2021. "Hospital run" during the pandemic. MoLab conversation. Available online at: https://www.eth.mpg.de/5809390/hospital_run. Last accessed 7 February 2022; Samaddar, Ranabir. 2020. Borders of an Epidemic: COVID–19 and Migrant Workers. Kolkata, India: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group.

[5] Brunton argues that success in long-distance trade and travel was the origin of the elite in the islands. See: Brunton, Ron. 1975. Why do the Trobriands have chiefs? *Man* 10 (4): 544–58; Munn suggested that the temporal-spatial scope of the reach of reputation is a basis of local elites in Papua New Guinea. These works draw attention to important connections between mobility and power. See: Munn, Nancy D. 1986. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Cambridge University Press.

relations with followers and exchange partners, through elaborated chains of moka and so on, to shape the flow of goods.[6]

- **The holder of logistical powerful is typically immobile.** Genghis Khan swung over Eurasia on a horse, but despite the fact he was powerful and deeply feared, he had no logistical power. In contrast, the moka big men coordinate the circulation of others' goods, but do not move themselves.

- **Logistical power enables mobility.** It does not seek rents by threatening to interrupt mobility. Tolls collectors on highways are leveraging their strategic positions in routes of mobility, but they are not exercising logistical power.

- **Finally, logistical power is predicated on the state's ability to selectively intervene in mobility** (see "logistical intervention" below). This is what some governments have managed to do during the COVID pandemic. Shutting down mobility is a crude exertion of power rather than logistical power. Laissez faire policies allowing for uncontrolled movement do not generate logistical power either.

Sources of logistical power

There are two immediate sources of logistical power: logistical provision and logistical intervention. These can be defined as follows:

- "Logistical provision": state investment in developing technological, economic and social systems that facilitate mobility.
- "Logistical intervention": state shaping and monitoring of circulation.

Logistical provision

State logistical power requires public investment in logistical infrastructure. Some patterns of logistical development yield more logistical power than others. This can be illustrated by a comparison between the US and the Chinese experiences with logistical development. Modern logistical development started with large corporations in the US in the 1960s. Faced with declining rates of profit and the oil shock in the early 1970s, large companies invested in logistics to increase economic efficiency. This, in turn, ushered in the supply chains that have underpinned the global economy since the 1990s.[7] However, these logistical developments have not significantly contributed to the United States' logistical power.

Logistical development in China, in comparison, has followed a different trajectory. First, it is state-driven. Between 2017 and 2020, the Chinese central government issued four consecutive, annual strategy documents which prioritized logistical development. Each of these was a so-called "No. 1 Document", classifying them as a top priority in the government's strategic goals for that year. Across the country, concrete logistical developments have been implemented, especially since

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[6] For the discussion of the role of big men, see: Sahlins, Marshall. 1963. Poor man, rich man, big-man, chief: political types in Melanesia and Polynesia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (3): 285–303. For the moka ritual exchange, see: Strathern, Andrew. 1971. *The Rope of Moka: Big-Men and Ceremonial Exchange in Mount Hagen, New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Martin Danyluk. 2018. Capital's logistical fix: Accumulation, globalization, and the survival of capitalism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 36(4) 630–647. Page 631.

around 2010. In Yiwu, a trading city in southeast China, the local government invested at least RMB 8.7 billion (USD 1.36 billion) in eight logistics parks between 2009 and 2020.[8] Logistics parks bring together multiple functions for global logistics: goods collection and distribution, order settlement, re-export, shipping, bonded warehousing, cold storage, as well as vehicle repair, office space rental, and various financial services. The Chinese government invests in logistics not only to expand the economy, but also to secure its *overall* dominance over a social life that is purportedly based on a free market economy.

Second, logistical development in China follows a particularly strong trend of downward penetration. Logistics rapidly "sinks down", as the Chinese public media put it, to small towns, rural areas, and the "last 500 meters" (referring to the distance between the end of a delivery system and final destination of delivery, for instance from the bus stop to a household, or from the end dispatch centre and an office) in residential communities. Logistics as a system of knowledge originated in modern industrial war (especially WWII), and logistical development in the West is characterized by large-scale, long-distance, standardized production and distribution.[9] In China, however, logistical development is more like guerrilla warfare: many small players moving quickly along multiple routes on the ground. In comparison with vertically integrated logistics (i.e. supply chains), horizontally expanding logistics curtail capital centralization, allow more economic space for small players, and foster relatively close relations between the state and grassroots actors.

Logistical intervention

Most states in the world monopolize the key means of mobility—national currency, passport, customs control, ID documents, and various permits such as driving licenses[10]— and can in theory stop any citizen's movement. This monopoly is a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for logistical power. States must monitor, and affect, mobility in a precise and timely manner in order to exercise logistical power. How exactly states achieve that is context-specific. Here I use the Yiwu Market (officially the "International Trade City") in China as an example to illustrate two methods of logistical intervention, namely the management of trading space, and of information flow.

The Yiwu Market is a global hub in the household commodities trade. Occupying over 6.4 million square metres, the Market had 75,000 shops in 2021[11], received 500,000 foreign traders annually in the mid-2010s (Yiwu Customs Office, Bureau of Commerce, January 2019, personal communication), and exported RMB 286.79 billion (USD 44.97 billion) worth of goods to more than 210 countries in 2019.[12] At the same time, Yiwu is held by the central government as a model

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[8] Yiwu government documents, various sources.

[9] In developing logistics, large corporations drew heavily on military know-how. Bernes, Jasper. 2013. Logistics, counterlogistics and the communist prospect. *Endnotes*. Available online at: endnotes.org.uk/issues/3/en/jasper-bernes-logistics-counterlogistics-and-the-communist-prospect. Last accessed 3 January 2020. Hepworth, Kate. 2014. Enacting logistical geographies. *Environment and Planning D*: *Society and Space*, Vol. 32, pages 1120 – 1134 doi:10.1068/d13044p.

[10] Torpey, John C. 2018. *The invention of the passport: Surveillance, citizenship and the state*. Cambridge University Press.

[11] Yiwu government. 2021. International trade city. 21 January. Available online at: http://www.yw.gov.cn/art/2021/1/21/art_1229137473_50623531.html. Last accessed 12 October 2021.

[12] Yiwu government. 2020. Data Yiwu: Overview of domestic economic and social development for 2019. 26 April 2020. Available online at: http://www.yw.gov.cn/art/2020/4/26/art_1229137466_57659545.html. Last accessed 12 October 2021.

of social governance for its low crime, high revenue incomes, and large public investment. During the field research I have conducted at the market since 2008, I have also observed that the local government controls religious activities not only by imposing restrictions (such as banning unregistered prayer sites), but also by leveraging traders' fear that they could be excluded from the purportedly free market if they do not follow rules in domains far beyond trade.

How does the government intervene in a mobility that is supposed to be free? While it exempts transactions in the Market from the usual regulations over international trade (e.g. traders are not required to open foreign currency accounts, to produce tax records, or even to apply for licenses), the government, via the Market's management, regulates the Market as a social—rather than a commercial—space. The government organizes the Market into "grids", each made up of 30 shops, and into "blocks" of eight to ten grids. Shop tenants elect "grid heads" and "block heads". These heads are tasked to maintain social order in their trading area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, grid heads were made responsible for recording the body temperature of each shop worker in their grid twice a day, ensuring that workers wore masks, and preventing gatherings.[13] Shopkeepers were also turned into part of the regulation team. They were obliged to verify their clients' Health QR code whenever they came to the Market. The code traces one's travel history in the last 14 days and records one's body temperature on a daily basis.[14] Traders commonly believed that the "Market management knows everything". In turn, their trust in public order in the Market explains why traders who hardly know each other can strike deals quickly, escalating the circulation of goods and information.

In addition to the grid system that makes every shopkeeper locatable, in 2019, the government sought to make each product traceable by introducing a QR code system. The director of the trade branch of the Bureau of Commerce, Mr Yan, told me: "We want to make everything traceable. We then can go back to the origin of every single thing that is sold here. If there are disputes [between traders about a good], we can go back the producer to know who should be responsible." Quality control or tax collection are less immediate concerns. The government's priority is to put more goods into circulation more smoothly. By making everything traceable, the government can control the total condition of circulation from a distance.

These methods are more about "tracing" than about "surveilling". The overall purpose is to maintain the general order of mobility as a basis of the government's dominance over society. Identifying and punishing individual rule breakers serves this purpose, but it is not the goal in itself. Punishment and exclusion are reflections of power, but are not the lasting basis of dominance.

Comparing logistical, despotic, and infrastructural power

Michael Mann defines "infrastructural power" as "the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm." (1984: 113) Mann posits infrastructural power in contradistinction with "despotic power", or the power to punish, exclude, and directly control individual freedom. Logistical power is an extension of both

[13] China News. 2020. Zhejiang Yiwu International Trade City fully resumed business, "buy buy buy" in a safe way during the epidemic. 24 February 2020. Available online at: http://www.chinanews.com/shipin/spfts/20200223/2575.shtml. Last accessed 11 October 2021.
[14] Jinhua News. 2020. Districts One and Two of Yiwu International Trade City opened today! Logistics, e-commerce and other supplementary industries have resumed work one after another. 18 February 2020. Available online at: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/vae3skvldXfe5SwO9ayqFQ. Last accessed 11 October 2021.

infrastructural power and despotic power. A state enhances infrastructural power by building roads; and a state acquires logistical power by collecting each vehicle's identity and real-time traffic data. Logistical power is predicated on, and in turn enhances, state juridical-sovereign (despotic) power. While modern infrastructural power derives from particular institutional setups—e.g. welfare provision, education, medical care—logistical power renders actors as transparent, locatable and traceable individuals in circulation who are dis-embedded from stable institutions. If infrastructural power is associated with Foucauldian discipline (influencing individuals by altering their perceptions), logistical power is related to Deleuzian "control society" (controlling social life through technical apparatus without changing individual subjectivity). Infrastructural power is exercised through society instead of over society; logistical power operates at once *through* society, *over* society, and by *fragmenting* the society itself.

Logistical power is hard to confront and resist. This power emerges from highly complex operational processes, and has no clear or stable shapes. It evades ethical critiques. It is all encompassing and difficult to evade. Any yet, it can be fragile too. Logistical power lacks inherent legitimacy, and can be undermined if the circulation of particular goods and/or people becomes less economically important. The positions of big men and moka chiefs are known to be unstable. State logistical power also faces the danger of being hijacked by business interests, for instance platform tech giants who have tremendous capacity of coordinating connectivity and mobility.