



Chinese strategies of experimental governance. The underlying forces influencing urban restructuring in the Pearl River Delta



Sonia Schoon*

University of Kassel, Department of Urban Regeneration and Renewal, Gottschalkstr. 22, D-34127 Kassel, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Pragmatic Chinese ideological slogans like “groping for stones crossing the river”, “no matter if it’s a black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches mice it’s a good cat” became guiding principles for a multitude of experimental approaches to new developments in the realms of Chinese economic, political, socio-cultural, and physical urban transformation since the beginning of reform and opening up in the late 1970s. Today, these concepts find their daily expression in so-called conceded informality. This paper illuminates the characteristics of nowadays typical, Chinese decision- and policy-making processes in the field of urban restructuring, with a focus on the informal and experimental aspects of flexible conceptual frameworks.

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Introduction

Guangdong Province is a pioneer in land use experimentation. Therefore, the Pearl River Delta, as its developmental core region, is a model par excellence to elaborate on the pros and cons of experimental urban restructuring approaches. The recently established policies of “three olds redevelopment” (*san jiu gaizao*) and its urbanized village redevelopment will be introduced as significant examples for typical Chinese experimental urban governance.¹ I begin, however, with a brief overview of China’s socialist system.

“[The socialism of Chinese characteristics] is an open system that keeps developing,” Hu Jintao said on the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2007. His successor, Xi Jinping, also repeatedly emphasized this political notion. For some time now, the academic world has been trying to figure out the notion of what exactly these “Chinese characteristics” explicitly are. But, it is asserted here that the system was consciously formulated as a nebulous concept, and Hu’s statement that it is an “open system” complicates the attempts to find

explanations. Generally speaking, these seemingly unseizable conceptions help the Chinese government pragmatically cope with today’s challenges in all spheres of politics, economy, and society. China, as a highly fragmented authoritarian party-state, is dependent on cautiously balancing highly diverse and contradicting interests in all these spheres in order not to jeopardize its paramount legitimacy (Heberer & Schubert, 2008; Heberer & Schubert, 2009; Lieberthal, 1992). Even though only one ruling party is shaping the political system in China, it is not a monolithic unit, but rather a conglomerate of – even contesting – interest groups and factions (Kirchberger, 2004; Köllner, 2005) under the overarching umbrella of the communist party regime. Though the CCP is also transforming together with social and economic changes, the structure of party authority over the state and society barely changed (see Zheng, 2010). For a party-led socialist country like China, it is of existential necessity to dispose of a tremendous adaptive capacity to keep up with the constantly changing circumstances and requirements in a globalizing world. Therefore, it is necessary to consequently undergo policy “updates” to safeguard the political and ideological pillars of the communist party-leadership as incontestably legitimate (Gries & Rosen, 2004; Schubert, 2006).

Another huge challenge for the Chinese government is to build up a strong legal pillar to rely on. Accordingly, Wu Bangguo, former chairman of the 10th and 11th NPC Standing Committee from 2003 to 2013, said at a NPC Standing Committee seminar in Beijing in early 2011: “The establishment of the socialist legal system with

* Address: Reutweg 3, 83627 Warnau, Germany. Tel.: +49 1749970702.

E-mail address: soniaschoon@hotmail.com

¹ In this article, no differentiation between the terms urban “redevelopment”, “upgrading”, “regeneration”, “restructuring” and “renewal” is made, because all kinds of measures are used to upgrade the urban fabric, may it be full demolition, partial regeneration or e.g. only a facelift of buildings.

Chinese characteristics is of great importance, since the system is the legal basis for the nature of socialism of Chinese characteristics”.

This article illuminates the process of how the legal bases are being formed. Since it is impossible to fully explore the scopes of the blurry “Chinese characteristics”, this paper will look at the question of how the general political approach of cautiously adapting to changing circumstances finds expression in urban governance matters on the local level concerning urban regeneration and renewal in Guangzhou City. The logical implication of the central governments’ proceedings leads to the typical Chinese feature of “experimental urban governance”, trying to find appropriate ways for redeveloping and thereby upgrading urban core areas, especially taking into account the “three olds redevelopment” (*sanjiu gaizao*), consisting of old town areas, old villages (urbanized villages), and old industry areas. Another, closely related factor supporting the success of experimental urban governance, is what is called “conceded informality”, which basically means a creative freedom for trying out new measures during stages of experimentation, but always within an authoritative framework and under constant supervision.

The main objective is to provide a comprehensive explanation of key elements of today’s Chinese policy- and decision-making processes in the course of urban regeneration and governance, taking into consideration indigenous approaches mostly unknown to the West. I will elaborate on experimental governance and the new three olds redevelopment project, drawing attention to only urbanized village² redevelopment.

China has a dualistic land use structure generally consisting of state-owned land and collective-owned land. Usually, rural land belongs to the respective village collectives while urban land belongs to the state. With the mega-urban cities expanding vertically and incorporating natural villages, the problems of collective-owned land surrounded by state-owned land occur. Urbanized villages are mainly densely built-up urban areas which generally lack substantial urban planning, because the village collectives did not have any planning standards. The municipal governments cannot include the urbanized villages’ territory into their comprehensive planning, and since the urbanized villages’ planning is usually deemed chaotic and informal, the fundamental problem of transferring land ownership has to be dealt with before being able to redevelop the village enclaves (for a deeper understanding, refer to Li & Meng, 2004; Liu, 2008; Yan, Wei, & Zhou, 2004).

Methodology

From early 2007 onwards, six years of extensive field research in the realms of urban restructuring of old town areas, urbanized villages, and old factory areas in the megacities of the Pearl River Delta contribute to the findings of this paper. More than 250 stakeholder interviews and several quantitative surveys have been conducted; hundreds of documents analyzed; typologies of more than 60 urbanized villages, 20 old industries, 2 old town areas, and one economic cluster have been generated; and decision- and policy-making processes observed and categorized. This field of research is up-to-date, directly accompanying the processes onsite mainly

² I use the term urbanized village because “the Chinese process of rapid urbanization especially emanating from the cities not only leads to enormous vertical expansion but also to a huge horizontal expansion inevitably affecting the villages surrounding the cities. The impacts on these villages are already well known and many studies have been carried out on them. What is still missing is a more precise term taking the ongoing procedural characteristics into account. I suggest to adopt the term “urbanized village” implying the manifold changes going on during the process of urbanization, and also to consider the Chinese characteristics of these developments at the same time. The urbanized villages themselves feature multifaceted characteristics.” (Altrock & Schoon, 2011).

considering and analyzing primary data, because not much has been written so far on urban restructuring and regeneration in general and even less in regard to related urban governance aspects in the Pearl River Delta.

The history of Chinese political experimentation and theoretical approaches

The common ground most scholars and journalists find when talking about the last thirty years of Chinese opening up and reform is the assumption that when Deng Xiaoping took over power after Mao Zedong’s death, a totally new decade of change ensued. However, his economic development achievements and policy-making approaches were neither fundamental changes nor the ingenious innovations of a liberal pathfinder. On the contrary, according to Sebastian Heilmann, who traced back the history of political experimentation in China (Heilmann & Perry, 2011), the roots of these approaches could already be found in the early communist movements in the 1920s.

An American pragmatic philosopher named John Dewey, who travelled around Asia from 1919 to 1920, held several lectures in China that,

“influenced the thinking of a generation of political intellectuals and activists, including the founders of the Communist Party and Mao Zedong. One core theme in Dewey’s lectures was the experimental method that he presented as the central innovative feature of modern science and the most important method for obtaining scientific knowledge” (Heilmann & Perry, 2011: 77)

The Communists around that time started experimenting with land reforms in certain areas and established so called “model villages” and “model experiences” and they progressively refined policies in the course of expansion (Heilmann & Perry, 2011: 65; Jiang, 2004). A so called “from point to surface” approach (*you dian ji mian*) emerged, although this terminology is not of Chinese derivation, but very obviously from soviet origin (cf. *ibid*: 70–72). This approach will later be introduced in its own sub-section.

Dewey’s concept was reduced or sinicized to a “methodology of social engineering” (*ibid*: 78) that built on learning through practice. Anyway, according to Heilmann, the experimental proceedings in the very early times of Chinese communism, and also during the first decade after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, “were inspired more by Deweyan thinking than by traditional Chinese or Soviet governance practices” (*ibid*: 79).

Even though Mao Zedong was convinced of the usefulness of experimental approaches as stated in some of his selected works, he soon abandoned the cautious way of testing and experimenting on a small scale before emulating successful “models”. Starting in the late 1950s, Mao’s extreme rule of man style policy-making and the total political alignment accordingly led to streamlined campaigns that were coerced nationwide without taking into account the diverse spatial, social, cultural, and economic peculiarities. Quite soon after Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping unofficially took over the leadership and started implementing the well-known reform and opening up process. His catchphrase “no matter if it’s a black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches mice it’s a good cat” (*wulun hei mao bai mao zhuazhu laoshu jiu shi hao mao*) which he already first articulated in 1962 became world famous after 1978. This metaphor today continues to reveal the tremendous pragmatism of which the Chinese socialist system is capable.

Chen Yun’s slogan: “groping for stones crossing the river” (*mozhe shitou guo he*) which usually is falsely attributed to Deng Xiaoping, is as much perceived as a guiding theme throughout the reform and opening up era concerning economic development.

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