



State-led metropolitan governance in China: Making integrated city regions



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ABSTRACT

Scholars have widely discussed the issue of how to govern rapidly growing metropolitan regions under the economic, social and political pressures of globalization. Many have argued for a metropolitan governance approach that involves less government regulation and more flexible arrangements between public and civic sectors. However, in countries like China, where a traditionally centralized state controls most resources and seeks to impose its vision for metropolitan development, a strong state-led approach is widely adopted. This article analyzes such a state-led model in China and identifies the economic and political factors that contribute to such development. It is suggested that metropolitan governance in China has formed a strong top-down, “dirigiste type” model to achieve state objectives. Findings are drawn from field observation, archival research and socio-economic data analysis in the Guangzhou–Foshan metropolitan region of the Pearl River Delta region in China.

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Introduction

The rise of city regions has been witnessed around the world as a response to the social, economic, political and cultural challenges of globalization (Brenner, 2002; Florida, Gulden, & Mellander, 2007; Scott & Storper, 2003; Vogel, 2010). Scott and Storper (2003) argue that intensifying globalization is making the synergy-laden systems of regional economies more important to the development process, in both the more advanced countries and less-developed parts of the world. Economic concentration produces a new spatial and political organization where economic interaction and integration occurs in previously separated local jurisdictions. Localities became linked by movements of people, goods and services. Metropolitan development is redesigning city regions to meet the needs of global capital and enhance economic competitiveness through infrastructure development and public policies (Vogel, 2010). Territory and politics are being rescaled, with evidence of a shift from national to regional and metropolitan levels (Brenner, 1999, 2001).

The important issue of coordinating growth and development in rapidly changing and politically rescaling metropolitan regions has received worldwide attention. This article uses the concept of “metropolitan governance” to describe governance actions beyond a single city’s jurisdictional boundary and related to

metropolitan-wide issues. In many cases metropolitan governance is dealing with the emergence of city regions in response to global economic and political changes. City regions are forming city-states that are drawing down authority and territorial control from sovereign nation-states and are more functional than local municipalities (Jonas & Ward, 2007; Scott & Storper, 2003; Vogel, 2010).

Governance of these regions transcends the traditional (local) urban governance because it involved multiple jurisdictions, including urban and suburban communities and neighboring cities. Metropolitan governance “encompasses a broad range of institutional forms, regulatory strategies and governance projects” (Brenner, 2002, p. 5). Some fundamental dimensions of urban governance are particularly relevant, such as the interplay between public and private sectors, the capabilities of local government organizations and the interaction between different levels of government (Pierre, 1999, 2011). In fact, the agglomeration of city regions has to deal with issues of horizontal and vertical collaboration at once. The multilevel nature of metropolitan governance under the neoliberal ideology denotes the corporatist and pro-growth models of urban governance (Pierre, 1999; Savitch & Kantor, 2004).

Western countries have called for a new “metropolitan governance” model (Brenner, 2002; Savitch & Vogel, 2000), which involves less governmental structural change and a polycentric governance network to address metropolitan-wide issues. Compared to the traditional government restructure approach, which entails “formal institutions and elections and established decision-making processes and administrative structures,” the

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governance approach suggests that public functions can be delivered on a voluntary basis by a network of horizontally linked agencies and organizations (Savitch & Vogel, 2000, p. 161). Local governments may partner with nonprofit organizations and private providers to carry out public policies and to offer public services. Agreements among adjacent cities for metropolitan policies such as land use, development planning and service provision are encouraged (Brenner, 2002; Parks & Oakerson, 2000). This approach reflects the collaborative governance model in public sectors with active engagement of civic societies and grassroots organizations (Bouckaert, Peters, & Verhoest, 2010).

However, the notion of metropolitan governance tends to take a substantially different form in many Asian countries, where state authorities at both central and local levels have been very strong and whose governing policies are highly influential. Thus, governance in these countries incorporates a vertical dimension imposing on horizontal interactions between governments and non-state actors and should be carefully investigated against classic western style governance schools (Pierre, 1999; Rhodes, 1997). For example, in studying regional service industry development, Hutton (2004) observes that central governments in Japan and Singapore assigned leading roles to advanced service industries in support of urban and regional economic transformation. In these countries, extensive economic restructuring and urban development policies are heavily administered by the state to promote regional transformation (Ho, 1994; Shapira, Masser, & Edgington, 1994, quoted in Hutton (2004)). In Tokyo, “the provincial governments themselves directly plan and administer the regional scale” to create viable city regions (Vogel, 2010, p. 65).

Such policy arrangements, to a great extent, reflect the state-led, “dirigiste” model where the state exerts a strong influence on development policies and decisions. Under a dirigiste (directed) system, governments at different levels play a directive policy making and implementation role as opposed to a regulatory one. In this regard, urban development is largely orchestrated by political elites at the top of the bureaucratic pyramid and the government uses fiscal and political pressure to implement its policy objectives. Here the meaning of “state” may encompass not only the national authorities but also the interplays among central, provincial and local governments. Local government “used its extensive power and the city’s economic prowess to launch aggressive social agenda” under the significant influence of national policies (Savitch & Kantor, 2004, p. 161). Although a dirigiste system was used to describe a capitalist political economy system like that in France after World War II it has been borrowed to analyze heavily government-directed marketization and urbanization in Asian countries (for example, Lal, 1995; Liu, Yin, & Ma, 2012; Pratt & Hutton, 2012). Increasing attention is paid to how the state leads the way of urban policy making and implementation, how different levels of government interact and how this process shapes the spatial, political and socio-economic urban transformation underway in China and other Asian countries (Gross, Ye, & LeGates, 2014). In this regard, China offers an important example of state-directed metropolitan governance that will be substantively explored in this article.

This article adopts the state-led, dirigiste approach to analyze China’s urban and metropolitan development, arguing that the formulation and implementation of such policies is largely the outcome of strong inter-governmental interaction, where senior governments exercise influence through political control and administrative pressure. A case study of the Guangzhou–Foshan metropolitan area in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region in south China is used to examine this approach.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. The development of regional and metropolitan governance in China will first be reviewed. The PRD region will then be introduced to present the

development and governance of the Guangzhou–Foshan city region. Evidence is collected from fieldwork in both cities; including government document analysis and personal communication with government officials. Discussion and conclusions will follow, with future research proposed to further explore this subject.

Development of regional and metropolitan governance in China

In China, the development of metropolitan regions has been an important part of its burgeoning urban development (Wu & Zhang, 2007; Xu, 2008; Xu & Yeh, 2010; Ye, 2009; Zhang, 2006). These metropolitan regions are clusters of contiguous cities, connected by small swathes of land that have been developed to house millions of people working in and around the urban areas (Ye, 2009). In the past two decades, these regions underwent significant transformation due to market reform, globalization and rapid urbanization (Cheung, 2012; Liu et al., 2012; Xu & Yeh, 2010; Ye, 2013; Ye & Wu, 2014).

The literature in the field has described urban development in China’s post-reform era as following a neoliberal approach, particularly after the budget reform in the mid-1990s put more pressure on local governments to pursue economic growth (for example, Lin, 2001; Xu & Yeh, 2005; Ye & Wu, 2014; Zhang, 2006). However, a *laissez-faire* approach to inter-city competition and regional development is difficult to implement in China (Wu & Zhang, 2007). Senior governments never totally loosened oversight and control over inter-governmental matters and regional development policies. Regional governance and planning have always been used as “a strategy that either serves consolidated power at the center or fulfills the planning targets of its accumulation region” (Xu, 2008, p. 161–162). A brief review of China’s regional strategies will help trace the development and interaction between national and local states.

Before the reform and opening-up, China established economic coordination regions (*jinjixiezuoqu*) in the early 1950s and regional administrative offices (*diqu xingshu*) in the 1960s and 1970s to implement the nation’s regional policies (Zhang & Wu, 2006). In the post-reform period, China planned for the coastal region and the inland region in the sixth 5-year plan (1981–1985). The seventh 5-year plan put forward the demarcation of three zones (the eastern zone, the central zone and the western zone). These zones were further divided into seven trans-provincial economic regions in the eighth 5-year plan. The ninth 5-year plan strengthened the support to the central and western regions for a balanced national development. The tenth 5-year plan raised a master strategy for regional development which can be summarized as “the development of western China, the rejuvenation of old industrial bases in north-eastern China, the rise of central China and the leading development of coastal areas” (EU–China Cooperative Research Program on Regional Policy, 2010, p. 138).

After the 1990s, economic decentralization and political fragmentation resulted in the proliferation of local discretion and inter-city development plans (Xu, 2008). Echoing national strategies, Chinese local states joined in city region development. Confronted with intense domestic and global competition, inter-city cooperation was adopted as a popular tool to enhance regional economic competitiveness although some city regions were more successfully developed than others (Luo & Shen, 2008, 2009; Wu & Zhang, 2007; Zhang, 2006). In order to maintain central control in regional planning, the national government established or reorganized several key national ministries, such as the Ministry of Land and Resources (MLR) in 1998 and National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in 2003. These ministries strengthened the central state’s leadership in regulating land-use

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