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Why city-region planning does not work well in China: The case of Suzhou–Wuxi–Changzhou

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In the age of globalization, the city-region is a form of spatial organization that promises to promote inter-city cooperation and so enhance the competitiveness of the whole city-region. The notion was well accepted in China recently and many local governments attempted to formulate city-region plans for coordinated development. City-region planning thus becomes a new form of Chinese spatial planning, led often by a higher-level government. This study attempts to analyze the processes of city-region planning and implementation, and the behavior of provincial and city governments, by a case study of Suzhou–Wuxi–Changzhou city-region planning. Despite a strong hierarchical administrative system, it is found that the city-region planning did not work well. Lack of actor interaction and information exchange during the top-down planning process, the difficulties in specifying detailed planning contents, and a lack of good planning mechanisms are major factors in unsuccessful planning implementation, making powerful city governments prone to inter-city competition even within the same region. The findings echo the recent experiences in Western countries that emphasize the needs of interaction, negotiation and consensus building in the planning process. A more powerful regional institution in charge of city-region planning and implementation is needed for sustainable development of city-regions in China.

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Introduction

City-regions have become the motors of the global economy in the age of globalization. Facing cross-border competitive pressure, city-regions are engaged actively in institution-building and policy making in an effort to turn globalization as far as possible to their benefit (Scott et al., 2001). But economic coordination in such regions remains a great challenge. Urban networking and regional plan-

ning are often conceived as wise policy choices for cities to build competitiveness in the UK and other Western European countries (for example, Cooke et al., 2004; Heeg et al., 2003; Wannop, 1995).

Recent developments show that cities in China have seen similar changes. The term city-region (*Dushi Quan*) has also become a catchword in academics and government documents. Many cities are making their city-region plans in order to enhance their competitiveness and facilitate regionalization. However, such planning often cannot achieve its expected goals. This study attempts to unveil the reasons that can cause the failure of such planning, using the case of Suzhou–Wuxi–Changzhou City-region Planning (SWC planning). This paper is a

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preliminary enquiry on the practice of city-region planning and development in China.

This paper is organized as follows. The following section considers inter-city competition and city-region planning in post-reform China to provide a background for this study. The third section introduces the SWC planning as a background. The process of SWC planning is analyzed in the fourth section. In the fifth section, the implementation of SWC planning is assessed. Redefinition of city-regions by cities in SWC region is addressed in the sixth section to illustrate inter-city competition. Some conclusions are reached in the final section.

Inter-city competition and city-region planning in post-reform China

The transition from state socialism to market economy has posed great challenges to cities in China. A local developmental state has emerged. Cities are keen on inter-city competition instead of cooperation (Shen, 2007; Wu, 2000; Zhang, 2002). In the competition to attract foreign investors to their own cities, the local states are keen to embark on place promotion, prestige projects and mega events (Wu, 2000). They also offer tax concessions and cheap land for investors (Xu and Yeh, 2005; Zhu, 1999, p. 541). Some forms of intervention, regulation and coordination are thus essential as leaders of Chinese cities lack financial discipline and public accountability (Xu and Yeh, 2005). Indeed, regional coordination has been promoted by the Chinese government for a long time, aiming for balanced spatial development and poverty alleviation. Urban system planning was a coordinative instrument designed to organize cities into hierarchies within metropolitan areas, with different functions to overcome excessive competition and duplication of infrastructure.

In recent years, many city governments have attempted to build city-regions to enhance competitiveness (Gao, 2004; Qian and Xie, 2004; Zhang, 2003). City-region planning is becoming a new initiative in Chinese spatial planning. Over 15 cities have formulated city-region plans in the whole country.² City-region planning aims to coordinate several political entities, i.e., administrative areas, within the same region (Wang, 2003). This coordinative feature makes it different from the traditional urban and regional planning in China that emphasizes both control and development within the hierarchical administrative system, such as urban master planning and urban system planning (Ng and Tang, 2004a; Yeh and Wu, 1998). Indeed, urban master planning is made generally for the core urban area of a single city while urban system planning and regional planning have been rare and ineffective in the past. Thus, the new city-region planning is considered as a new mode of urban and regional governance by some Chinese researchers (Li, 2004).

To understand city-region planning in China, it is also necessary to examine the role of provincial governments in the formulation and implementation of city-region planning, as provincial governments are the key player

of city-region planning in practice. Generally speaking, in China, a city-region is part of a province and consists of several prefecture-level cities that may administer some counties/county-level cities. In the reform period, city governments acquired great administrative and economic power due to decentralization from central and provincial governments (Shen, 2007). Prefecture-level cities are relatively independent administrative units. There is more competition than cooperation among these prefecture-level cities, especially those more open and developed cities along the coast. To coordinate the development of prefecture-level cities, most provincial governments, as the highest level of local governments, often function as coordinators to facilitate city-region development, by making and implementing city-region plans. A city-region plan is formulated by a provincial government and approved by itself, instead of a higher-level government. As a new initiative of Chinese spatial planning, the mechanism for city-region planning is not well established. The provincial government only has limited influence on city governments, due to the rising power of local governments in China. Without thorough consultation and horizontal exchange and negotiation, the city-region planning is bound to face problems in the stages of formulation and implementation, as will be shown by the SWC case in this paper. In some cases, city-region plans are driven by prefecture-level cities such as Harbin and Nanchang, as provincial capitals. In these cases, the city-region plan may be implemented more smoothly. But there may be conflicts between prefecture-level cities and their surrounding areas.

A fewer studies have focused on the transformation of urban and regional planning (Leaf, 1998; Ng and Tang, 1999, 2004a, 2004b; Ng and Xu, 2000; Xu and Ng, 1998; Yeh and Wu, 1998; Zhang, 2002). Many scholars argued that the government plays a dominant role in urban and regional planning and the planning is not effective in development control in China (Ng and Xu, 2000; Xu and Ng, 1998; Zhang, 2000). According to Ng and Xu (2000), ineffective planning is caused by the absence of well-established planning institutions, the arbitrary intervention of higher-ranking government officials, and widespread illegal land transactions and land use (Wei and Li, 2002; Zhang, 2000; Zhu, 2004). Worse still, local officials often have a short term of office but have the absolute power to commit to large projects without a well-articulated decision-making mechanism. Cities often have no urban planning committee or advisory committee. Urban development strategies and construction plans may be changed suddenly due to a change in the top leadership of a city (Zhu, 1999). There is one exception. Abramson et al. (2002) argued that Quanzhou's planning is relatively successful due to the absence of state investment, the unusual high degree of participation by local communities and the need for historical preservation (the government acting as preserver).

Previous studies reviewed above provide useful insights for understanding urban and regional planning in China. However, there are still some problems in the existing literature. First, the analysis of the processes of planning formulation and implementation is inadequate. We are still unsure if planning formulation and implementation will affect the effectiveness of planning. Second, local

² <http://www.sina.com.cn>, 8 July, 2004.

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