



Towards collaborative approach? Investigating the regeneration of urban village in Guangzhou, China



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ABSTRACT

Along with the green-land shortage and the low use efficiency of urban land as a result of rapid urban sprawl in the past three decades, the issue of urban regeneration has been recently brought to the governance agenda by the new leadership in China. This paper examines the regeneration of the urban village sector in Guangzhou and finds that the institutional dichotomy of the rural and urban system is not only the root of the emergence and proliferation of urban villages, but also becomes the obstacle for their regenerations. The core of urban village regeneration is the redistribution of interest derived from land appreciation among main stakeholders, and their joint commitment via a collaborative partnership is the key to the successful project implementation. Though the collaborative approach for urban regeneration is acknowledged in the West and in the case study, the top-down hierarchical governance approach, the strong government-dominated ideology as a result of the legacy of socialism, and the economic-led developmental mode will fundamentally set the form of collaboration in China apart from other counties. Even within China there is no single universal and prescribed form of collaboration for urban regeneration due to the variations in terms of geographical, demographical and socio-economic conditions for urban development.

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Introduction

Many cities worldwide have introduced regeneration initiatives particularly after the Second World War to deal with the issues of economic restructure, social exclusion, physical obsolescence and environmental degradation. Though widely experienced, urban regeneration is little understood phenomenon and there is no single prescribed form of urban regeneration practice (Roberts & Skyes, 2000). The development of urban regeneration in China, which also suffered serious damages in the wartime, is still in its infancy. Along with the rapid economic growth and massive population migrations since the late 1980s, the urban areas increased by 3.4 times from 1990 to 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). This tremendous urban sprawl has led to the problems of green-land shortages and farmland abuses, coupled with the low use efficiency of urban land. In November 2013 the central government requested to shift the direction of land development from sprawl to regeneration; in January 2014 the Ministry of Land and Resources urged local authorities to restrict the approvals of green-land use in

large cities. Such policy strategies have inevitably brought about the issue of urban regeneration to the governance agenda.

In China the project targets of urban regeneration generally include the run-down urban areas, the dilapidated state-owned factory sites and the urban villages. As the variations of land tenures and ownership holders of such targets exist, this paper specifically focuses on the urban village sector, which is a transitional neighborhood located in the urban areas and characterized by a mixture of rural and urban society, and the state-owned and collective land ownerships.

There have been numerous studies from different perspectives to understand the emergence, proliferation and regenerations of urban villages in China. For example, Zhang, Zhao, and Tian (2003) emphasize the severe infrastructure deficiencies, intensified social disorder and deteriorated environment in the urban villages. Tian (2008) links the largely insecure property rights in urban villages to many negative externalities. He, Liu, Webster, and Wu (2009) use regression models to examine the influences of indicators of capital, skills, property rights and social entitlements on the social groups in urban villages in six cities. Lin, Meulder, and Wang, (2012) use three modes of economic integration (redistribution, market exchange and reciprocity) as a framework to examine the interrelationship of urban villages to understand the socio-spatial

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transformation of urban villages. Wu, Zhang, and Webster (2013) identify the variations of informality in three cities to better understand the dynamics and characteristics of urban village. While scholars have different perceptions about the role of urban villages in urban and economic growths, most of them condemn the intensified social disorder and deteriorated living environment in the urban villages, strongly claiming the redevelopments of urban village.

Upon the consensus of both government and scholars on the redevelopment of urban village, the focus then turns to the search for innovative regeneration approaches that could well serve the case of urban village. Some scholars have made efforts on this by applying various theories to explore the redevelopment of urban villages, including the stated-led approach by Chung (2009), urban regime theory by Li and Li (2011), and the strategic urban project approach by Lin and Meulder (2012). This paper will propose the collaborative approach to investigate the internal power structures, the conflicts and the negotiations of main stakeholders in the regeneration of urban village in the case city of Guangzhou, aiming to offer an insight into the occurrence and persistence of urban village (e.g. how it formulates and functions, why its regeneration is necessary and how it has been regenerated), and to provide good lessons for the infant development of urban regeneration in China.

Collaborative approach for urban regeneration

Towns and cities often face urban declines, described as social exclusion, physical decay and worse living conditions in deprived areas, a continuous reduction of employment and a net out-migration of population and firms (Medhurst & Lewis, 1969). Such urban declines could largely derive from resource constraints (e.g. the availability of land), or the difficulties in adapting to new demands of de-industrialization, globalization and economic concentration. For instance, with the globalization it becomes easier for companies to relocate labor-intensive parts of the production process to regions with cheaper labor cost. Regeneration could be a positive solution to deal with such urban decline, decay or transformation. It takes place when there is “the continued need for the physical replacement of many elements of the urban fabric; the importance of economic success as a foundation for urban prosperity and quality of life; the need to make the best possible use of urban land and to avoid unnecessary sprawl; sustainable environmental development” (Roberts, 2000: 17).

Roberts (2000) reviews the urban regeneration development from the 1950s to the 1990s in the western context. In the 1950s the emphasis was on repairing wartime damage and the eradication of the physical problems of buildings, and the extension of town areas based on master plans of suburban growth. The revitalization work attempting to restore the original appearance of the urban environment continued in the 1960s, with growing influence of private investment and the introduction of regional activities. With the problem of urban sprawl due to the rise of suburbs in the 1970s, attention turned to *in-situ* redevelopment and neighborhood planning. In the 1980s, flagship projects and major schemes of (re) developments were used to improve the economic competitiveness of cities. In the 1990s it was accepted that the traditional focus of finance, enterprise, housing and commercial development was not enough, and urban regeneration should be a framework of strategies including health, childcare, safety, education and training, environmental sustainability, arts and culture, and other quality of life issues. In other words, a shift from the focus of physical planning and land use to an integrated approach that concerned economic, social, environmental issues was needed (Commission of the European Communities, 1994). Politicians in the democratic regime also came to highlight urban regeneration, as it greatly

concerned about the majority citizens' lives and its results could determine the direction of their votes. “Planning practice is not an innocent, value-neutral activity. It is deeply political” (Healey, 1997: 84). In the 2000s urban regeneration went further to elaborate this multi-dimensional approach by addressing issues that were associated with employment, economic competitiveness, social exclusion, community participation, deteriorated physical sites, environmental quality and sustainable overall development (Turok, 2005). Roberts (2000: 17) summarizes urban regeneration today as “a comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change”. By containing sprawl and making the best possible use of the land that is already used for urban functions, urban regeneration aims to revitalize urban functions in a positive and balanced manner to achieve sustainable outcome of urban development.

Within this multi-dimensional approach, the balance of social effects and economic transformation should be addressed particularly in those economic-led developmental models (including China). In reality “purely growth-oriented development strategies have not only failed to induce social and environmental benefits as expected, but in some cases economic growth strategies have even deepened social and environmental problems” (Commission of the European Communities, 1992: 24). However, economy transformation correlates closely social structure as, first, the firm and economic activity and their inclusion in formal and informal institutional networks are products of human decisions, and are further affected by people's relations and social interactions. Second, economic transformation not only affect technical processes, profits or production, but also has social effects, such as changing demands for labor and its configuration. Economic activities are “not only investments in infrastructure and the supply of land, but also investments in people with increased and appropriate training and support for ideas” (Noon, Smith, & Eagland, 2000: 62). For instance, urban regeneration activities could improve the living conditions, and effectively support the economic sector and has potential to bring unemployed people back to work.

As a multi-dimensional issue integrated with economic, social, environmental and political circumstances, urban regeneration inevitably becomes an activity that straddles the public, private and community sectors. As regeneration projects normally could bring benefits from new demands and fresh opportunities for economic progress and civic improvement, politicians, developers, land-owners, planners and citizens alike are keen to find out how best they could benefit from the improvement of the urban environment. This could generate innovative partnerships of how public and private stakeholders engage in multiple activities to change the nature of a place (Turok, 2005). Such partnership is a coalition of interests drawn from actors in the public and private sectors to ensure the fullest possible participation and cooperation of stakeholders to deliver synergetic strategies for the regeneration of a defined area (Dabinett, 2005; Geddes, 1998).

The benefits of collaborative partnership in urban regeneration could be huge. It can help produce better policy coordination and innovation by using the knowledge, skills and resources of various actors. Positive and effective partnership could have significant impacts on easing problems of unemployment, poverty and exclusion; improving social services and facilities; and involving and empowering the local communities and excluded groups (Geddes, 1998). However, “resources required to sustain them (transaction costs) may outweigh potential benefits if partnerships produce inertia and conflict” (Davies, 2004: 579). Effective partnership will depend on strong and competent leadership, skilled staff, clear and manageable formal arrangements, a shared agenda

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