



Speculative urbanism and the making of university towns in China: A case of Guangzhou University Town



Zhigang Li ^{a,*}, Xun Li ^b, Lei Wang ^c

^a Guangdong Key Laboratory for Urbanization and Geo-simulation, School of Geography and Planning, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou 510275, China

^b School of Geography and Planning, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou 510275, China

^c Institute for the Development of Central China, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, over one hundred university towns have been constructed in China, housing and employing millions of students and teachers. However, very little is known about the reasons behind this phenomenon, or the impact of this massive wave of construction. Based on an ethnographic survey in Guangzhou University Town (GUT), one of the most representative cases, we find that the construction of a university town is driven by 'chameleon'-like land-centered speculative urbanism in post-reform China. Against the backdrop of China's recentralized land use regime, local governments utilize a variety of projects such as the 'new city,' 'eco-city' or 'university town' to generate land-related profits. Building a GUT requires the cooperation and collaboration of a variety of stakeholders, from local states and local banks to universities and the local communities, to create an efficient coalition. The construction of the GUT is a de facto state-led project. In sum, the rapid construction of university towns in China is indicative of the land-centered speculative urbanism at the heart of post-reform China.

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Introduction

China has achieved a remarkable economic success in the last three decades. Specifically, China's urbanization ratio has risen from just 18% in 1978 to above 50% in 2012 (Wu, Zhang, & Webster, 2013). The country is transforming from a traditional rural society to an urbanized and modern society (Logan, 2008). Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, together with Hong Kong and Taipei, are competing against each other to become 'Asia's world city' (Derudder et al., 2013). In order to interpret the rise of urban China, various theories such as the developmental state, entrepreneurialism and neo-liberalism have been identified as underlying the remarkable growth (Harvey, 2005). There is a tremendous spatial transformation across the country (Wu, 2007). Principally, after 2000, over 100 university towns have been built across China, not only in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, but also in small cities such as Kunshan, Langfang, etc. (Ye, Chen, Chen, & Guo, 2014). Very little, however, is known about the mechanisms and the impacts of these specific constructions. Why has China built so many universities towns and in such a short time? What is the role played by the

governments? What are the impacts of such constructions on local communities? To answer these questions, this study will use Guangzhou University Town (GUT), one of the most representative cases, to examine the modality of making university towns across Chinese cities. Through a series of ethnographic fieldwork and surveys conducted during 2006–2013, we sought to decipher the specific political-economic reasons underlying the GUT project, to examine the roles played by various stakeholders such as local governments, and to evaluate its resultant impacts upon local communities.

In the following sections we will proceed by outlining a theory of 'speculative urbanism' and highlight its relevance to recent urban transformations and the construction of university towns in China. The modality in construction of university towns differs to other contexts; rather, there are unique political-economic dynamics at play, as the speculative urbanism stimulates the entrepreneurial states at the local level to appropriate lands and thereby generate extra revenues. Then we interrogate the functions of various levels of governments and institutions such as provincial, city, district, sub-district, and villages in the process of building GUT, evaluating the impacts and outcomes. Discussions and conclusions upon the project will be further discussed in the final section.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lizhig@mail.sysu.edu.cn, z.li.2004@gmail.com (Z. Li), lixun23@126.com (X. Li), leiwang@whu.edu.cn (L. Wang).

University town and speculative urbanism in post-reform China

Along with the legendary cases of ‘university towns’ or college towns such as Oxford and Cambridge, the existence of university towns and the presence of educational institutions that pervade the economic and social life of cities has long been an inspiring topic covered by a plethora of literature. There are two types of university towns. One is the original or old type: in European cities, for instance, university towns are often hundreds of years old, having been founded before or around the Industrial Revolution. Such university towns as Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, Leuven, Ghent, Heidelberg, developed not only into the center of higher education, but also the core of political, cultural and social dynamics. The second type, referring to the new type of university towns, are mainly built in the United States around 1900, this saw the development of hundreds of university towns in peripheral areas far from large cities, acting as a conduit for new institutions to serve growing student populations (Gumprecht, 2003). The distinction between the two types of university towns lies in their relation to the city or towns: in Europe universities emerged organically in locations where scholars and students gathered over time; in the US, however, large-scale settlements came after the emergence of universities. Different to the European model, many colleges in the US were founded before significant urban development had taken place. Later, this model of university town has been adopted worldwide, whereby the university town has become a typical facet of urban models (Adendorff & Donaldson, 2012; Lafer, 2003; Weber, 2001). Along with the acceptance of the notion that modern education is key to the rise of economy and society, most developing countries have prioritized the development of a modern system of higher education. Countries such as China also take the construction of university town as an important tool to support high-level education and cultivate much needed high-level intellectuals.

In the first decade of 21st century, above 100 University towns have been built across China. These universities are largely built in populous provinces and their large cities, especially the developed coastal regions in the Eastern China such as Zhejiang, Guangdong and Fujian provinces (Table 1). Most of these university towns located a short distance from the central city. The size of university towns varies, ranging from the largest, Guangzhou University Town (4300 ha) to the smallest, South University Town of Shenyang City (180 ha). Furthermore, the scale of their student enrollments is diverse, ranging from 20,000 to 250,000 and the levels of investment involve ranges from RMB 800 million Yuan (about US\$170 million) to RMB 30 billion Yuan (about US\$4.8 billion) (Table 1).

Why then has China built so many university towns, and in such a short space of time? The answers are multi-faceted. On the one hand, the building of university towns is attributed to the increasing demand for a highly skilled labor force needed to satisfy China’s ascendant economy, this is particularly reflected by the sudden expansion in university enrollment after 2001 (Fig. 1), thus making clear the connection between the building of university towns to increases in student enrollment to Chinese universities post 2001. Due to the national policy set by the Education Ministry in 2000 to sustain and bolster China’s upgrading industries, almost all Chinese universities expanded their enrollment quotas (Fig. 1). The total enrollment of universities went from just 597,000 in 1989, to 1.59 million in 1999, 3.20 million in 2002, and 5.04 million in 2005 (Lin, 2013). Given that most campuses of Chinese universities are located within the old central areas of large cities, problems of overcrowding and space deficiency are severe. Constructing University towns therefore becomes an ideal choice.

Secondly, the building of university town also represents a strategy used by local states against the recentralized land use controls. On the one hand, differing to the leasing of land for commercial uses that requires the auctioning of land, the leasing of lands for educational use can utilize the method of negotiation, an approach more attractive to land users. Moreover, against the context of strengthened land use controls, it is relatively easier to obtain the agreement of the central governments for lands utilized for educational purposes. As such, the underlying reason of making university towns is attributed to the efforts of local governments to generate extra finances from lands. That is, the impact of university towns on surrounding communities engenders not only an increase in revenues for the city directly, but also serves to raise the value of land in surrounding areas.

Almost every Chinese city witnessed an expansion of its built-up areas during last decades. What is the theoretical implication of this mass production of urban space? A number of theoretical frames have been applied to interrogate the production of space in post-reform Chinese cities (Wu, 2007). Thomas J. Campanella, for instance, noted six features of urban development in China: speed, scale, spectacle, sprawl, class segregation, and sustainability, and links them to the rise of an unprecedented urban revolution (2008). It has been asserted that the formation of territorially based entrepreneurialism is a major force in post-socialist Chinese cities such as Shanghai, where entrepreneurial projects allow the state to tap into the market while maintaining its political legitimacy (Chien, 2013b; Wu, 2003). Zhang examined the case of Shanghai and identified a pro-growth coalition between local government and developers (Zhang, 2002). Zhu (2004) asserted that the new

Table 1
Selected university towns in China.

Name	Province/municipality	Areas (ha)	Students (10,000)	Investments (100 million yuan)	Year of planning/ construction
Xianlin University Town	Jiangsu/Nanjing	3400	10	50	2002
Changzhou University Town	Jiangsu/Changzhou	667	6	25	2002
Songjiang University Town	Shanghai	300	17	25	2000
Chongqing University Town	Chongqing	2000	20	100	2003
Beijing Jili University Town	Beijing	200	2	8	2000
South University Town	Liaolin/Shenyang	180	10	40	2000
Jiaonan University Town	Shandong/Qingdao	2500	5	57	2004
West University Town	Shanxi/Xi’an	4000	10	85	2001
Fuzhou University Town	Fujian/Fuzhou	2000	10	30	2001
Shenzhen University Town	Guangdong/Shenzhen	1200	25	14	2000
Guangzhou University Town	Guangdong/ Guangzhou	4300	15	300	2002

Sources: data obtained from Shangguan, 2005, A study of the present conditions and the models of college town development in our country (Chongqing University, thesis); and other news sources; compiled by the author.

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