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Habitat International 30 (2006) 690–705

HABITAT
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Dual-track urbanization in a transitional economy: The case of Pearl River Delta in South China

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Abstract

There has been a significant transformation in the model of urbanization in post-reform China, a society dominated by a large rural population but with accelerated industrialization and development. This paper argues that a comprehensive dual-track urbanization approach is more realistic for the study of urbanization in the transitional economy of post-reform China with mixed characters of an old planned economy and an emerging market economy. The dual-track model of urbanization is a significant departure from the Maoist model of Chinese urbanization. This paper discusses the emerging political economy of dual-track urbanization in post-reform China. This is followed by an examination of the development and urbanization in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region. The trend of dual-track urbanization and its implications on spatial development in the PRD are analyzed by making use of the population data from 2000 census. A dispersed urbanization process with selective concentration in new growing SEZ cities in the 1980s and 1990s is revealed. But a new trend of concentrated state sponsored urbanization towards major urban centres has emerged in the PRD since the late 1990s. The complicated realities revealed in this analysis challenge the existing theories of city-based or town-based urbanization.

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Keywords: Dual-track urbanization; Rural urbanization; Economic transition; Pearl River Delta

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Introduction

The Pearl River Delta (PRD) region in south China has been a leader in the economic reform, economic development and urbanization in Guangdong and China since 1978 (Shen, 2002a; Weng, 1998; Wong & Shen, 2002; Yeung, Shen, & Zhang, 2005). The PRD region has become one of the most developed and urbanized regions in China. According to the recent census in 2000, PRDs population reached 40.78 million. The urban population was 29.20 million with a level of urbanization of 71.6% in 2000. The total population of Hong Kong–PRD region, the Great PRD, already surpassed that of Tokyo Greater Metro (32 million), New York Greater Metro (18.7 million) and Los Angeles Metro (10.5 million) (Rohlen, 2000). This paper focuses on the PRD region in the mainland where dramatic transformation and urbanization are taking place.

There have been a considerable number of studies on economic development and urbanization in the delta. Three significant advancements have been made. First, the positive link between the economic transformation and urbanization has been identified. The impact of the agricultural reform and open door policy on economic and urban transformations in the PRD in the 1980s has been revealed (Lo, 1989). However, the level of urbanization has never been estimated satisfactorily until recently due to particular problems of defining urban population in China (Shen, 1995, 2005a; Zhang & Zhao, 1998). Second, a new form of urbanization, “urbanization from below”, “deagriculturization” or simply “rural urbanization”, has been identified (Guldin, 1997; Ma & Fan, 1994; Yan, 1998). The arbitrary distinction of urban and rural areas has also been questioned. The Asian model of urbanization, conceptualized as *desakota* by McGee, was considered as more appropriate to describe the urbanization process in the PRD region (Lin, 1997; McGee, 1991). Third, it has been argued recently that dual-track urbanization has been going on in the post-reform China and that both the state sponsored urbanization (the growth of non-agricultural population) and spontaneous urbanization (TVE-based rural urbanization and the migration of temporary population) have been significant (Shen, 2000). Earlier studies have focused overwhelmingly on rural urbanization while the state sponsored urbanization is largely ignored with a few exceptions (Wu & Treiman, 2004). A comprehensive dual-track urbanization approach is more realistic for the study of urbanization in the transitional economy of post-reform China with mixed characters of an old planned economy and an emerging market economy.

Based on previous theoretical and empirical studies, this paper provides a concise discussion of the concept of dual-track urbanization and updated empirical evidences of such urbanization in the PRD. The paper is organized as follows. The next section will discuss the political economy of dual-track urbanization in post-reform China. This will be followed by an examination of the development and urbanization in the PRD. The trend of dual-track urbanization and its implications on spatial development in the PRD will then be analyzed. Some conclusions are reached in the final section.

The political economy of dual-track urbanization in the transitional economy of China

The term, political economy, refers to the political/economic relationships among the economy, the state, the employers, and the urban and rural residents in China. The path of Chinese

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