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# From blueprint to action: The transformation of the planning paradigm for desakota in China

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 22 October 2015

Received in revised form 25 April 2016

Accepted 26 April 2016

Available online xxxxx

### Keywords:

Desakota

Planning paradigm

Master plan

China

## ABSTRACT

With a case study of Chaonan in Guangdong Province, this study examines China's desakota and its planning paradigm. After three decades of high-speed growth, the marginal areas of Guangdong Province – the lab of China's market-oriented reform and open door policy, are still fraught with desakotas, semi-urbanized areas of mixed landscape, economic and administrative systems. Chaonan faces a number of challenges, such as economic slow-down, poor infrastructure, environmental pollution, and so on. We found that China's desakota is driven by decades of rural industrialization, and this is now becoming a major challenge to master planning, the paradigm of which mainly comes from the rational theories of early western countries. As the traditional paradigm emphasizes the overall blueprint, there is a mismatch between planning orientation and spontaneous investment demand. Planning implementation thus is almost impossible. As such, we take the master plan of Chaonan as a case to integrate both blueprints and actions. To turn traditional blueprint-led planning into action-led planning, we highlight both recent and long-term actions, to make practical improvements to various facets, socio-economic upgrading, socio-spatial transformation, and environmental sustainability. Above all, we argue that action-led planning is the key to the transformation of desakotas in China.

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## 1. Introduction

Against the emergence of planetary urbanization (Brenner, 2014), the endless expansion of capitalism, and the faster mobility of people, goods and information, recent urban studies further highlight the complexity of contemporary urban spaces (Brenner & Schmid, 2014), as captured by such terms as scaling (Savitch, 2010), assemblage (McFarlane, 2011), informality (Roy, 2005), and so on. Among them, the ideas of neo-colonialism, comparative urbanism (McFarlane & Robinson, 2012), or 'worlding' cities (Roy & Ong, 2011) indicate the significance of producing or revising sitting urban theories, mainly based on the experiences of Western developed countries, through in-depth examinations of cities in the global South (Robinson, 2002, 2005), the major sites of existent urbanization (Criqui, 2015; Shatkin, 2011). In this vein, this study contributes to the literature by examining planning and its dilemma in Chaonan, a marginal city in Guangdong Province – China's market-oriented reform and open door experiments (Lin, 2001). We argue that, differing from 'formal' space of urban China, Desakota such as Chaonan are mainly driven by the mechanism of rural industrialization (Shen, 2006), which subsequently poses as a major challenge for master planning, the paradigm that mainly comes

from the rational theories of early western countries (Wu, 2015). We will interrogate the transformation of the planning paradigm of Chaonan from blueprint to action, and take it as a case to show the reasons why the traditional planning paradigm cannot work against the context of desakota. We will propose possible resolutions for the implementation of planning.

The contents will be organized as follows. First we review the study of desakota and highlight the difficulties for traditional planning to serve its developments. We will also examine the changing planning paradigms of post-reform urban China and link them to discussions on desakota transformation and planning. After that, we will examine Chaonan and interrogate the failure of the traditional planning paradigm – the blueprint plan applied to the area, i.e. the Master Plan 2003. Moreover, we apply a new paradigm of action planning in Master Plan 2013, and take it as a way to fight against the challenges of planning, so to transform desakota areas in China or other developing countries.

## 2. Desakota and its challenges to the planning paradigms of post-reform China

The term Desakota, first proposed by McGee (1991, 1998), indicates a special urbanization phenomenon in developing countries and regions such as Indonesia, Thailand, India, and China. Following the notions of

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urban fringe, edge city, extended metropolitan region and so on, *desakota* presents a large number of features differing from those of traditional cities. In details, the main features of *desakota* include dense population, farmers, rice cultivation, and decentralized management style; the original center of the city's outward diffusion of industrial development into rural areas; the formation of non-agricultural industries; a variety of land uses for agriculture and non-agriculture with staggered layout; persons and goods within the region having strong fluidity and mobility; and the informal sector being widely spread. In recent decades, *desakota* has been applied worldwide to examine areas of mixed urban and rural features, especially in developing countries (Xie, Batty, & Zhao, 2007). Against different contexts, the modalities or development dynamics of *Desakota* may be diverse, yet the challenges to further development have been noted.

The spread of *Desakota* in developing contexts such as China, thus composes a challenge to the theory or applications of urban planning (Watson, 2013), as the cities of the global 'South' or 'East' have different characteristics to the 'North', where most of the planning theories originated from. Criqui (2015) proposed an idea of 'infrastructure urbanism' by examining the deficiencies of planning in developing contexts such as Delhi and Lima. The lack of planning is not an obstacle to serving *desakotas*; rather, social, commercial and technical innovations have helped to extend the coverage of infrastructures, together with institutional creativity and bricolage, compensating for the inadequacy of planning.

Watson (2009) argued that the study of the global South can be useful in unsettling 'taken-for-granted' assumptions in planning theory. There is a 'clash of rationalities' between techno-managerial and marketized systems of government administration, service provision and planning, i.e. the North, and those urban populations surviving largely under conditions of informality, i.e. the South. Such post-colonialism ideas indicate that the studies of planning in global South may contribute to the renovation of existed planning theories.

### 2.1. *Desakota: the space of informality in post-reform China*

Some regions in China are typical *desakotas* (Zhu & Guo, 2014; Zhou & Ma, 2000). Ginsburg (1998) argued that Guangzhou and Shenzhen, as the center of the Pearl River Delta, are the Chinese version of a *desakota*. He summarized the *desakota* model as a mixed spatial system (Fig. 1). Sometimes it is regarded as a 'bottom-up' type of urbanization (Shen, Feng, & Wong, 2006) or the urban–rural fringe. In this particular

space, economic activity, social activity, and life service show both urban and rural features. For example, Zhu and Guo (2014) examined a typical *desakota* region in Nanhai, Guangdong, where they found that the urban and rural integration strategy hindered the improvement of urbanization. Sit and Yang (1997), however, argued that though the characteristics of PRD were consistent with McGee's *desakota* model (Table 1) in many ways, there were still significant differences, such as rural migrants, state power and other aspects. Nevertheless, scholars agreed that the urbanization process in *desakota* is much more special and challenging than in other areas, and the governance of *desakota* is far more complicated.

The development of *Desakota* in China dated back to the late 1970s. After the implementation of market reform and open-door policies, the central government curbed the development of large cities, while the development of small towns was encouraged (Walder, 1995), thereby enabling small towns to play major roles in the urbanization process of China (Ma & Cui, 2002). However, new changes appeared in the 1990s. The construction of development zones started across China and industrial zones became the main power of industrialization (Yang & Wang, 2008). Some zones grew to be satellite towns and eventually new cities, with real estate taking the place of industry. In PRD, a transition of urbanization from bottom-up to top-down happened (Shen, 2006). However, *Desakota* areas retained the old urbanization model and missed the opportunity of upgrading, so that they are still characterized by informality.

Firstly, when small industries upgraded to industrial parks and larger-scale manufacturing, *desakota* areas retained private, small or even family-based manufactory. Small private industry owners play a dominant role in economic activities. In Shantou, a large city at the peripheral of Guangdong Province, for example, a special type of house, the so-called 'three-in-one' (industry + business + living) flourished. Local people who started up in business used the first floor as their small workshop and office, and the upper floor as their living area. This economy helped local people become rich and turned the rural economy into basic manufacturing; it also fragmented the form of the local economy, directly impacting the economy and social structure of Shantou (Fig. 2).

Secondly, the social form of *desakota* appears with a self-organized character. Informal organization is responsible for local affairs in *desakotas* (Choy, Lai, & Lok, 2013). Family-based economic and social networks are interwoven together. The lasting traditional culture made social networks even tense. In villages or communities, there are special organizations called 'senior people committees' which

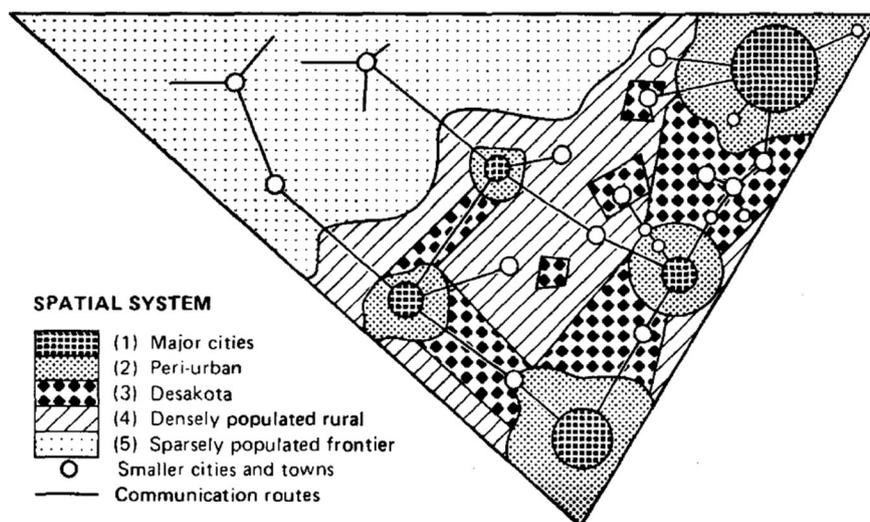


Fig. 1. *Desakota* spatial system.

Sources: Ginsburg, N., *The Extended Metropolis*, University of Hawaii Press, 1991:6.

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