



Conceded informality. Scopes of informal urban restructuring in the Pearl River Delta

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the variety of informal urban development and restructuring in the Chinese Pearl River Delta (PRD) in the field of urbanized village (UV) redevelopment and how the Chinese party-state takes up a stance over them. By introducing the notion of “conceded informality”, which describes the situation in this respect in a fragmented authoritarian party-state, the scholarly debate on informality in urban planning shall be widened. After an introduction of the political environment in which conceded informality can be found, an emphasis will be put on restructuring processes of the two megacities of the Pearl River Delta – Guangzhou and Shenzhen – and the scopes of conceded informality will be illustrated by case study examples. The redevelopment and integration of urbanized villages into the urban fabric poses one of the most difficult challenges urban planners are facing today. Conceding informality can be seen as a coping strategy the Chinese governments are using as an experimental mode of governance in order to deal with new phenomena of urbanization and critical situations in times of permanent change and legal uncertainty.

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Introduction: towards an analysis of informality in the Chinese context of urban planning

This paper aims at clarifying the relation between the state and informality in society looking at the field of spatial practices by an urban population. Determining what is “formal” and what is “informal” always depends on the way a state tries to regulate social practices. However, not only does the identification of informal practices depend on the self-conception of the state, but the way the state copes with them also varies significantly. Especially China strategically selects ways to cope with informality. The paper claims that there is a need to analyze the interactions between the state and informal practices systematically beyond categorizing the types of informality on the one hand and normatively or empirically describing strategies to deal with them such as the upgrading of informal settlements on the other. To develop our thoughts, we focus particularly on the systematic relationship between the state and informal practices in the context of the “fragmented authoritarian state” of China (Heberer, 2006, 2009; Heilmann, 2004, 2008; Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988; Lieberthal &

Lampton, 1992). This focus differs to a certain extent from much of the informality literature, but also tries to incorporate the existing knowledge about informality and to look at it from a different angle. By introducing the concept of “conceded informality”, we offer an approach to theorize the intentional selection of coping strategies by the state. With the help of the concept, it is possible to explain why and when the Chinese state selects particular coping strategies and why there is much more to observe than just a simple dichotomy of temporary tolerance vs. demolition and eviction of informal settlements that one might assume at first notice.

For this purpose, we draw the attention to the policies of upgrading *chengzhongcun*,⁵ i.e. urbanized villages (UV) which can

⁵ The Chinese term *chengzhongcun* is accepted in Chinese academic articles, media reporting, and government documents since around 2000 referring to the phenomenon of urbanized villages. Many different translations for *chengzhongcun* can be found like “village in the city” (Liu & Huang, 2005), “village within the city” (Wang & Gao, 2005), “village amid city” (e.g. Feng, 2006), “village amidst the city” (e.g. Zhao, 2006), but the term “urban village” became the most popular one. It can be traced back to Herbert J. Gans’ book “The Urban Villager” (1962) and is therefore a concept of Western origin. The phenomenon of emerging “urban villages” in China is different from the Boston case and other kinds of “urban villages” related to Western phenomena. The Chinese process of rapid urbanization leads to a huge horizontal expansion inevitably affecting the villages surrounding the cities. The impacts on these villages are already well known and many studies have been carried out on them. What is still missing is a more precise term taking the ongoing procedural characteristics into account. We suggest to also make use of the English term “urbanized village” implying the manifold changes going on during the process of urbanization, and also to consider the Chinese characteristics of these developments at the same time. *Chengzhongcun* themselves feature multifaceted characteristics.

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³ <http://www.megacities-megachallenge.org/prd1.php>.

⁴ <http://www.megacities-megachallenge.org/prd1a.php#sub>.

be defined as socio-spatial enclaves of formerly natural villages having been surrounded by the horizontally expanding megacities. Here, they serve as case studies in introducing the notion of “conceded informality”. The *chengzhongcun* now serve as cheap residential areas for floating and low-income population. In China, a dual land structure can be found that assigns land use rights, though all land is state-owned, to either village collectives or the state. Land use rights belonging to village collectives cannot just be taken away by party-state authorities, they have to be financially compensated. Due to this dual land structure these enclaves traditionally have not been included into municipal urban planning, therefore, they usually do not fit into the surrounding urban fabric. Today, the Chinese government seeks to integrate them into the city landscape by upgrading and restructuring them (Altrock, 2009, 2011; Altrock & Schoon, 2011; Schoon & Altrock, 2014). *Chengzhongcun* share a lot of features that are often found in so-called informal settlements that have been widely discussed in the literature on developing countries, especially when it comes to the analysis of shanty towns, squatter settlements and the like.

The debate on informal settlements has built on the classic ILO definition (Hart, 1973) of informality that is concerned with the economic features of informal practices and groups. Starting from that point, the debate made clear that there is no simple definition of informality that grasps the great variety of practices found in different parts of the world and in different spheres of society. It is impossible to comprehensively summarize the debate on informality here. Thus, we have to limit ourselves to sketching some major departures from the original definition with a particular focus on attempts to explain the relation between the state and informal practices. Despite the rather positive re-interpretation of informality and the focus on the potential self-empowering elements of informality, de Soto (1989) was also mainly interested in the economic aspects of informality. The neglect by, or deregulation of state control was seen as a framework condition for unfolding informality, without major concern about the reactions of the state towards it. Even the work by Portes (1983) looked at economic entities and their reactions towards certain forms of state regulation. The work by Roy and AlSayyad (2004) made clear that more affluent people, whose everyday life seems to be formalized especially when looking at the economic sphere, also use informality. The understanding of informality as a mode rather than a sector (Roy, 2005) has specified that there is no pre-defined boundary that separates the formal from the informal sphere of society. Starting from this point, the newer literature on informality overcame the older distinctions between “legal” and “illegal” and between “regulated” and “unregulated” and has claimed that informality unfolds in a “deregulated” system (Roy, 2009a, 2009b; Altrock, 2012). Here, the relationship between informality and the state gradually seems to attribute a greater significance in search for an adequate understanding of informality. Whereas much of the earlier literature tries to explain the existence and variety of informal practices, the interactions between the state and these gradually become the focus of scholarly research and theorizing about the very nature of the state and its regulatory power. This paper wants to build on this understanding and to take the discussion one step further by looking at the mutual relationships between the state and informal practices and by asking the question when and why states intentionally develop strategic approaches to deal with informal practices.

The findings are the result of six years of research on urban governance in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) in the framework of a research program called “Megacities – Megachallenge. Informal Dynamics of Global Change” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Extensive continuous field surveys, more than 200 qualitative stakeholder interviews, several quantitative surveys, a comprehensive literature review, up-to-date policy analyses as

well as long-term on-site observations allow for in-depth empirical insights into urban development and upgrading processes and strategies in the two mega-cities Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Our research puts a special focus on the current policy framework for inner-city upgrading and restructuring called “three olds restructuring” (*sanjiu gaizao*) covering old town areas, old industrial areas, and old villages – as *chengzhongcun* are called in this context.

Contrary to some weaker third world countries where informality is often related to the absence of effective state regulation, conceded informality unfolds under relative control by the Chinese party-state. Informal development is, in this understanding, a coping strategy used by the party-state to deal with changes and challenges in the course of comprehensive transformations in all spheres of society, economics and politics. It is considered informal in the sense that this involvement lacks codification, but it does not imply an absence of state involvement.

Informality in the political environment of Chinese fragmented authoritarianism

To understand today's political environment in China, it is important to know that there is “no rule of law tradition” (Liu, 2000: 373) that the Chinese government can refer to throughout reform and opening up.⁶ In the course of globalization, in order to enhance the permeability of formerly rigidly controlled state boundaries, to support the emergence and convergence of global economic networks and to cope with the acceleration of socio-economic changes and shrinking spatial, cultural and economic “distances”, the Chinese party-state is interested in integrating into the world community and is therefore forced to fulfill international expectations and to create legal certainty. The extremely difficult process of its realization and implementation is an enormous challenge for a country. In the Chinese case it is accompanied and complicated by the dynamics and the continuity of a transformation at all levels of politics, economy, society and culture. Thus, the creation of a binding legal system in some fields necessarily takes place in a reactive rather than pro-active way. The transformation from a state-led system towards an economy based on private initiative and its associated reforms create inconsistencies, institutional gaps and room for experimentation limited in space and time. This is the basis for a dynamic coexistence of very authoritarian and formalized practices on the one hand and various forms of self-organization, autonomy, and informal practices on the other (cf. Fewsmith, 2000; Wuttke, 2011; Zheng, 2010).

The forms of informality we are nowadays dealing with in the field of urban restructuring in the PRD are those that we call “conceded informality”. The concept is intended to grasp a systematically applied repertoire of practices of urban informality in relatively strong transforming states and was first introduced by the authors of this article (Schoon & Altrock, 2009a, 2009b). We want to shed more light on how conceded informality can be understood and how it differs from other practices of urban informality. Therefore, this article offers the first systematic approach to discussing the notion comprehensively by embedding and explaining it in the context of the Chinese political system in times of transformation.

Conceded informality in the restructuring megacity

In the PRD distinct modes of governance in urban planning co-exist simultaneously differing between diverse spatial entities, and

⁶ This is meant in respect of the necessity of overcoming the “rule of man” (*renzhi*) era of Mao Zedong and building up a reliable “rule of law” (*fazhi*) era to support a stable political system after 1978.

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