

Singapore as a role model? The China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park

Friederike Schröder

“Social order in Singapore can be reckoned good because they enforce very strict management. We should draw upon their experience and run our country even better.”

Deng Xiaoping during his famous Southern Tour in 1992.

In February 1994, China’s Vice Premier LI LANQING & Singapore’s Senior Minister LEE KUAN YEW signed an agreement for the two governments to jointly develop a special economic area in the city of Suzhou – the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park (CS-SIP). Serving as a model for economic development cooperation, the park with its comprehensive functional layout and transnational urban design is a showcase for the aspirations of China’s major metropolises to become “world class cities”.



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Established as a collaborative project between the governments of China and Singapore, the CS-SIP serves for both countries to mutually benefit from (foreign) direct investment. As China's transition process gained momentum in the late 1980s, more and more Chinese delegations visited other nations in the region, namely the four tiger economies Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. Their rapid economic progress, achieved mainly through the policy of export-led industrialization, was regarded as a role model. Also, the Chinese visitors were keen to attract investment capital and modern technology from these countries.

Singapore in particular perfectly understood how to promote its own development path as a model to other countries in the region (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam), mainly done via semi-state development corporations such as Keppel Corp. Ltd. or Sembcorp Ind. In this way, Singapore has been able to generate additional sources of income. Its strategy also fosters economic regionalization to sustain economic growth, which is naturally limited within the small city state. For China, Singapore's development path and strict pro-growth regime represents a role model due to its high living standards, continuous high growth rates, and last but not least its rather flexible and pragmatic economic policies which result into a high adaptability to global-economic change. At the same time, it can be safely assumed that Singapore's capacity to sustain authoritarian rule including the de facto

one-party system looks rather enticing to leading cadres of the Chinese Communist Party.

Hence, China and Singapore agreed to build CS-SIP as a platform for transferring economic development and management techniques and as a testing ground for the application and adaptation of Singaporean economic management tools in China. As the largest economic and technological cooperation project between the China and Singapore governments, the area of CS-SIP covers 8,000 hectares out of the Suzhou Industrial's Park total jurisdiction area of 28,000 hectares. After a rather slow start, the CS-SIP today contributes a substantial part to Suzhou's GDP. The companies located there focus on Information & Communication Technologies (ICT), TFT-LCD production, automotive and aeronautical parts, software, outsourcing services, biopharmaceutical, and nanotech industry.

The significance of CS-SIP was not just to be another industrial park in China. Rather, the CS-SIP represents much more than a mere economic entity. It has been built as a comprehensive urban environment in the eastern part of Suzhou city combining industrial, urban residential and commercial areas. It was aimed to develop into a new township and to serve as new Central Business District (CBD) of Suzhou. In this way, development pressure was taken from the ancient inner-city areas. The latter has been increasingly preserved as an outstanding cultural heritage attracting mainly domestic tourists.

Furthermore, CS-SIP stands for the actively promoted shift from labor-intensive manufacturing towards modern service and high-tech industries. Therefore, the park's layout is designed using a mixture of highly emblematic, architecture combined with a renewed emphasis on elements of traditional Chinese symbolism. This so-called transnational urban design contributes to place-making which has become a key feature of contemporary urban space production in China. It also serves to communicate modernity, to attract investments, highly skilled labor force as well as to satisfy the distinctive needs of the rapidly growing middle and upper class. However, despite the comprehensive urban development approach with its spacious layout, the area has not become very lively, yet. A lack of vibrancy can actually be observed in other similarly top-down planned urban environments, too, such as the Shanghai Zhangjiang High-tech Park or Guangzhou Science City.

Over and above, the CS-SIP has been the spearhead for economic and technological cooperation between both governments of China and Singapore. Besides significant financial benefits it has contributed to trust-building. The success can be seen in the recent establishment of further joint cooperation, now dedicatedly in the field of high-tech and science-based developments such as the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city (2007), Sino-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City (2009), and Hangzhou-Singapore Eco Park (2009).

Friederike Schröder [schroeder@geowiss.uni-hamburg.de] is a Research Associate and PhD student at the Department of Economic Geography, University of Hamburg. The APSA member has visited SIP as part of her involvement in the research project "Governance over Time", funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) in the context of the Priority Programme SPP1233.

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