

Land of Chopsticks, Jeans and Contradictions

German geography students explore the Pearl River Delta, China

Theresa Münch



Urban fabric within the City Centre of Guangzhou

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„Made in China“ - that's what it says on jeans and shirts, on mobiles and watches. Made in China mostly means made in the Pearl River Delta. But the former factory of the world is in transition. Students from four German universities went on a two-week-field trip to explore this mega-urban region and its structural changes and challenges.

Chopsticks, Beijing, Shanghai, the Great Wall and Mao Zedong first come to mind when thinking about China. Next are highly populated metropolises and under-developed rural areas. This large country is associated with contradictions like no other state in the world. Just last year, it displaced Germany as the world's leading export-nation of industrial goods. China sold commodities amounting to more than 1.07 trillion dollar - a large percentage of which came from the Pearl River Delta (PRD).

The PRD, including the cities of Shenzhen, Dongguan, Guangzhou, Foshan, Jiangmen, Zhongshan and Zhuhai as well as the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao, is a highly dynamic and still growing mega-urban region. It used to have a longstanding reputation as the factory of the world but now faces fierce competition with ambitious metropolitan areas such as the Yangtze

Delta (Shanghai) or the Beijing-Tianjin metropolitan region.

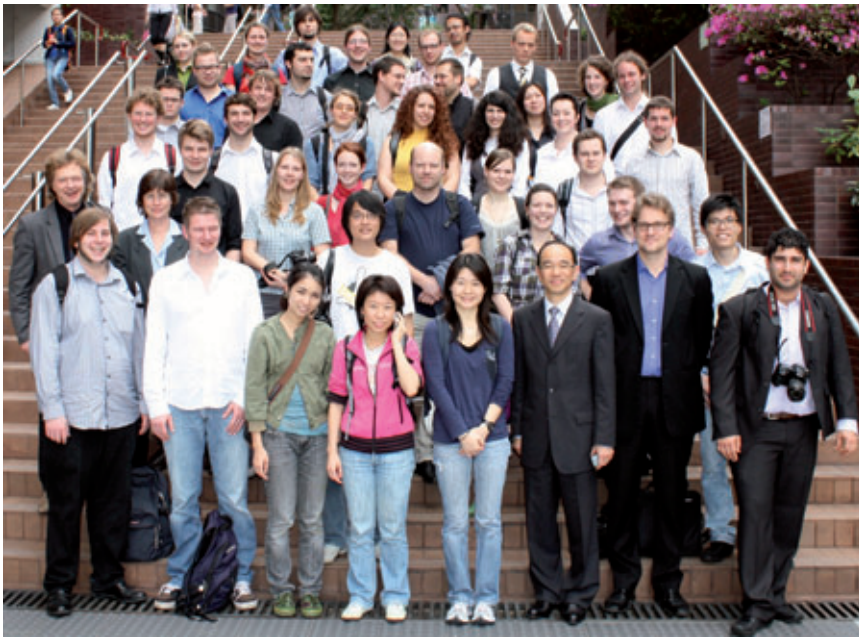
Between 1 and 15 March 2010, 33 students from the four German universities of Hamburg, Osnabrück, Kassel and Leipzig travelled to the PRD to observe urban development and economic restructuring processes within this mega-urban region. They were accompanied and instructed by Prof. Dr. Jürgen Oßenbrügge & Dr. Michael Waibel from Hamburg, Prof. Dr. Britta Klagge & Christian Wuttke from Osnabrück as well as by Urban Planning Prof. Dr. Uwe Altrock from the University of Kassel. Longstanding contacts between the German scientists and their Chinese colleagues, resulting from participation in the DFG-funded Priority Program 1233 “Megacities – Megachallenge: Informal Dynamics of Global Change”, allowed for joint fieldwork and bi-national workshops in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. The

German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) financially supported the technical tour.

Bi-national workshops

In Hong Kong, the students experienced a high-rise dominated mega-city with its large CBD on Hong Kong Island and shopping districts in Kowloon. In cooperation with the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the Hong Kong University (Prof. Anthony G.O. Yeh and Assoc. Prof. Roger Chan) and the Department of Building and Real Estate at the Polytechnic University (Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bo-sin Tang), student working groups went into the field and explored social housing policies, redevelopment strategies, retailing structures and the local tourism-related infrastructure.

Urban restructuring was at the centre of interest of both lectures and fieldwork. Particularly, the shared experiences with the Chinese students



Guests and hosts at a joint workshop at Hong Kong University, 2 March 2010

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highlighted the fascinating impression of the thrilling metropolis of Hong Kong. As one of the participants summarized, "the Chinese students gave us a very warm welcome".

Green City – Chinese style

A visit to Shenzhen, China's first and most successful Special Economic Zone and a pioneering metropolis in many respects provided insights into transitions in urban development strategies. Here, a comparably sophisticated change process from an industrial to a (in a Chinese understanding) sustainable city was observed. Urban Planner Michael Gallagher (Shenzhen Planning Bureau) introduced the modern Futian New City Center.

During a workshop with Assoc. Prof. Liu Xiao of the College of Management of Shenzhen University, Chinese and German students comparatively discussed specific aspects of planning and urban governance in both countries. It became apparent that China as a huge, centrally governed nation faces many challenges. The friendly conversations between Chinese and German students helped to get a better understanding of both similarities and differences in culture, education, sciences and peoples' ways of thinking. Many of the German students are likely to stay in contact with their Chinese friends and have invited them to spend their vacation and even study-years in Germany.

Textiles & Creativity

Gentrification and industrial restructuring have been the main topic at a workshop at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. After an introduction on „Old Warehouse-Redevelopment“ by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Shenjing He, students engaged in fieldwork in an economic cluster of an established industry, Guangzhou's textile district. They qualitatively observed labor conditions in factories as well as small-scale manufacturing in little shops and in the streets. Despite the photo showing laughing labor migrants of a small textile workshop, many interviewees mentioned about their long working hours and poor salaries.

Given the overall increasing standards of living in the PRD, it is becoming difficult for companies to attract laborers that are willing to work under these conditions. Although PRD's industry structure is still mainly characterized by labor-intensive manufacturing, it became evident that economic restructuring towards more knowledge-intensive and service-oriented industries is underway. This was also emphasized during a field trip to Guangzhou's Science City and a visit at Business Incubators a day later.

The student group was also invited to visit the Guangdong Planning Bureau and the German Consulate General where they learned about the current planning and economic challenges of the thriving mega-urban re-

gion. They further explored one of the biggest gated communities in Guangzhou (Phoenix) as well as Xintang town, an industrial town that specializes on the production of jeans. About 40 percent of the world market's jeans are manufactured there. Another fascinating economic cluster was paid attention to at Dafen village in Shenzhen which is China's most important oil painting production centre. The students have been able to enjoy hundreds of Van Gogh and Picasso paintings at that site.

In Macao, the last stop of the round trip, the focus lay on the emergence of a creative class. The establishment of creative industry districts in the former Portuguese colony was compared to similar developments in the German cities of Hamburg or Berlin. Natalie Hon from the Macau Urban Planning Institute (MUPI) warmly welcomed the students; she had organized a visit to the San Lazaro Creative Industry District where local artists showed their work.

Remembered will also be nights of karaoke and Tsingtao-beer, tea-ceremonies, casino-gambling or chicken heads on chopsticks. And what about Chinas Great Wall, Tibet or Beijings Forbidden City? - Well, this country is huge – and it gives the students reason to come back.



Laughing labour migrants at a workshop within Guangzhou's Textile District.

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