

# China's Pan-Pearl River Delta

**Regional  
Cooperation  
and Development**

**Edited by  
Anthony G. O. Yeh  
and Jiang Xu**



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# 1

## **Regional Cooperation in China's Transitional Economy**

*Anthony G. O. Yeh and Jiang Xu*

This book has its origins in the Conference on Regional Cooperation and Infrastructure Construction held at the University of Hong Kong in June 2008. In a time of increasing global competition and rising urban entrepreneurialism, regional cooperation provides opportunities to overcome the negative effects of political fragmentation in regional and mega-city development. 'Region fever' is generating considerable excitement, as witnessed by the increased research interest in the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding regional cooperation and governance. Although regional cooperation has also become an important development issue in China, with increased discussion focusing on such regions as the Greater Pearl River Delta (PRD), Pan-PRD and Yangtze River Delta, the issue is complicated, as all of these regions have contextually specific governance problems and socio-political conflicts. This book discusses the issues surrounding the development of and prospects for regional cooperation in China, as well as how and to what extent infrastructure and real estate policies can promote such cooperation.

### **Regional Cooperation in the Era of Globalization**

The accelerated pace of globalization in the past few decades has generated a new regime of accumulation and regulation, which has led to a process of 'restructuring, rescaling and reordering' in advanced capitalist societies (Jessop 2002). An important consequence of global restructuring has been the emergence of neo-liberal practice, which favours 'strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade' (Harvey 2005, 64). As neo-liberalism rationalizes and promotes a 'growth-first' approach in which cities represent key regulatory arenas, broad political transitions have occurred, including

a shift from municipal managerialism to urban entrepreneurialism and from the 'managerial city' to the 'entrepreneurial city' (Harvey 1989; Hall and Hubbard 1996). Capitalist cities and regions are being run in a more businesslike manner, mobilizing diverse political strategies to enhance their attractiveness to footloose global capital. This entrepreneurial stance of promoting local economic development by adopting risk-taking and profit-motivated approaches has given rise to intense inter-urban competition (Xu and Yeh 2005). Although the neo-liberal approach holds that individuality and the multiplicity of regional development is the most desirable way of achieving better regulation (Zhao 2002), it becomes powerless in the face of inherent territorial problems rooted in competition and local protectionism (e.g., internal trade barriers, environmental degradation). Since the 1960s, there has been a proliferation of regional cooperation projects around the world to overcome the negative aspects of urban entrepreneurialism. Each project has its own rationale, developmental pattern, institutional capacity and managerial ability to manage territorial growth, and each reflects contextually specific governance problems and socio-political conflicts.

A large body of literature has attempted to theorize regional economic cooperation and explain the mechanisms of regionalization. For example, Balassa (1961) conceptualizes five levels of economic cooperation that range from free trade to full economic integration. Formal and informal patterns of inter-governmental cooperation at both the national and regional levels have also been identified (Florestano 1994; Akao 1995). Regional cooperation, which is intended to remove the barriers of local protectionism and deepen intra-region interdependence, has the capability to 'build capacity by employing specialist expertise, provide higher quality services, ensure that resources are distributed more equitably, foster economic development, and enhance regional planning and coordination' (Marshall et al. 2006, 240). Moreover, regionalization is 'cost effective' because it can 'deliver economies of scale and scope, and reduce duplication' (Marshall et al. 2006). Given the potential benefits of cooperation, McCarthy (2003, 141) claims that 'the extent to which localities can cooperate and invest their resources more productively has implications not only for the prosperity of cities and regions but also for their national and supranational economies'. The degree of regional cooperation, according to Berry et al. (1993) and Sampson and Woolcock (2003), is influenced by several attributes of its member jurisdictions, including complementary economic structures, geographic propinquity, equal stages of development, the distinctiveness of regional identities and existing economic relations. Regionalization has become an 'institutional fix' for cities and regions looking to solve regional issues and enhance competitiveness in the era of globalization.



### ***New regionalization and the emergence of the Pan-Pearl River Delta***

The process of neo-liberal restructuring has not only prevailed in developed capitalist economies, but is increasingly affecting urban policies and practices in developing countries. Since the late 1980s, when China introduced the market mechanism and opened its door to the outside world, the country has become increasingly integrated into the global market. The implementation of a series of institutional reforms has significantly changed its economic and political structure, decentralizing power from the central government to local governments and from the state to the market (Boisot and Child 1996). Fiscal and land and housing reforms have taken on the greatest importance in this process. The former has redefined the financial responsibility of the central and local governments (Zhang 1999), whereas the latter have meant greater freedom for local initiatives, as local governments are able to freely dispose of the land within their jurisdictions (Wang 2001). As a consequence, empowered local governments now have substantial discretion in collecting funds and in developing the local economy. Neo-liberal practices in China have also created new incentives at the sub-national level to increase efficiency and production, and have transferred development pressure from the central state to the lower levels of the state apparatus (Wu 2002). At the same time, however, the rise of 'local entrepreneurialism' and intense inter-urban competition have also led to serious territorial problems, including the duplication of infrastructure projects, market separation and the ineffective utilization of limited land resources to lure investment (Liu 2001; Zhang and Zhao 2007). The negative effects of political fragmentation are more apparent in China than in the West, as local governments in the former are 'unique' market players that are still 'subject to soft budget constraints' (Xu and Yeh 2005, 287). Another unfavourable outcome of entrepreneurial governance is the increasing gap in the level of economic development between cities and regions. Locales with an advantageous geographical location and policy support from the central government have tended to be more competitive in the increasingly globalized economy. In the context of unbalanced regional development and undue inter-urban competition, and the proliferation of regional cooperation throughout the world, there has been an increased tendency since the 1990s for different jurisdictions in China to engage in cooperation, even though competition is seen as the remedy for regional diseconomies (Zhao 2002; Xu 2008). Regionalization is perceived as a strategic solution to minimizing resource constraints and alleviating the problems that result from the administrative division of the economy.

Regional cooperation is not a new phenomenon in China. Yeh and Xu (see Chapter 6 of this book) contextualize the historical geographies of regional cooperation in China since the establishment of seven economic coordination regions in 1954. Such pre-reform regional cooperation, however, was considered

‘a means to serve consolidated power or fulfil central planning targets within a centrally and hierarchically configured socio-economic institution’. The new wave of regional cooperation that has emerged since the economic reforms of 1978 has been much more market-oriented, but it was not until the mid-1990s that the ‘third wave’ of regionalization started to aim for competitive urban and regional growth (Zhang and Wu 2006). As the competition for external capital among local governments has intensified, the problems caused by administrative fragmentation have seriously hindered the further development of urban and regional economies. New regional organizations have been established, and strategic planning efforts have been devoted to removing the ‘invisible wall’ between different jurisdictions. Under these conditions, Pan-Pearl River Delta (Pan-PRD) cooperation was proposed for two reasons. First, the PRD has recently shown signs of a development bottleneck resulting from increased land and labour costs and a lack of developable land (Yeung 2005). Moreover, its position has been somewhat overshadowed by the rise of the Yangtze River Delta and the Bohai Sea Rim. Second, it is believed that the formation of an economic bloc with a common market would ‘generate the effects of competitiveness enhancement and economic complementarities’ (Zhang and Zhao 2007, 192). Pan-PRD cooperation thus offers an institutional solution to overcoming the hurdles of capital accumulation by expanding the hinterland and upgrading the market potential of Guangdong province.

Pan-PRD regional cooperation was initially suggested in July 2003 by Zhang Dejiang, the Party Secretary of Guangdong and a member of the Politburo. He proposed it as a means of establishing an integral regional economy in southern China. The Pan-PRD is now an economic and political organization with 11 provincial-level jurisdictions, including nine provinces in the Mainland (Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Hunan, Jiangxi, Fujian and Hainan) and the two Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao (Figure 1.1). It is the largest regional organization in China in terms of land area, population, economic output and foreign direct investment (FDI), accounting for one-fifth of China’s territory, one-third of its population, about 40 per cent of its GDP and 58 per cent of its FDI. However, the identity of the largest regional bloc in China, with a total population of about 400 million inhabitants, is still in question and a number of issues concerning cooperation among the member jurisdictions require in-depth investigation. To date, relatively little research has focused on the process of cooperation in a region with major economic disparities and differences in economic systems. A study of how the transitional economy has contributed to the formation of the Pan-PRD project, as well as how the interplay between the central and local governments and among the different provinces has complicated the process of regional cooperation, is thus of significant theoretical and practical value in both the social and political contexts.



**Figure 1.1** Location and boundary of the Pan-Pearl River Delta

The jurisdictional setting of the Pan-PRD region is quite complex relative to its Western counterparts in two major ways. First, there are significant differences in economic performance among the provinces involved. The per capita GDP of Guangdong, the wealthiest province, is twice that of Guizhou, the poorest. Lei et al. (2006) categorize the Pan-PRD's nine provinces and two regions into four different development levels. The institution of 'one country, two systems' for Hong Kong and Macao has further complicated the situation. Second, regional cooperation in the PRD has been subject to multifaceted political influences. Different from the neo-liberal process in the West, the Chinese state continues to play a significant role in resource allocation and economic development (Zhang 2000). Although local governments have gained a great deal of power in terms of urban development, they are still subject to the direct intervention of the provincial and central governments (Ma 2002; Xu and Yeh 2009). The complex economic and political environment of the Pan-PRD raises several important questions for regionalization. (1) How was the Pan-PRD formed? Is the establishment of such a common market capable of solving the problems that result from growing inter-jurisdiction competition? (2) What are the economic and political characteristics of the Pan-PRD region? Is the regionalization experience of developed capitalist countries applicable to the Pan-

PRD case? (3) What role do different levels of the state play in regional cooperation? Which projects and strategies promote economic integration? (4) What major problems has the Pan-PRD faced during the regional cooperation process? How can these problems be solved to achieve more successful cooperation? These questions will be investigated in this book.

## Overview of the Book

This book explores the experiences of and broad questions related to governance and planning, infrastructure construction, and real estate development in the Pan-PRD region. Its aim is to discover major concerns and emerging trends, and identify what can be learned from current practice. Such thorough analysis and examination of this important, flourishing and multi-dimensional regional project will provide insights both for the further development of the Pan-PRD itself and that of similar regions in other parts of the world. The book's chapters are grouped into four major, inter-related sections, as follows.

### *Overseas experience and the Chinese context*

Immediately following this introductory chapter, Louis Albrechts provides an overview of the processes and recent trends of strategic planning in Europe (Chapter 1). He re-examines traditional land-use planning and argues that it has become increasingly inadequate for tackling or managing the problems and challenges that Europe faces. A 'more strategic, implementation-led and development-led' approach, which calls for transformative practices, is needed, he says. Strategic planning should involve creative forces that can imagine structurally different solutions and formulate outside-the-box ideas and strategies to reach preferred outcomes and take action. The author not only offers a conceptualization of new strategic spatial planning, but also proposes a four-track operationalized framework and looks for a type of governance suitable for such a transformative approach. Finally, Albrechts introduces four types of strategic projects that he believes 'provide a key to an action-oriented approach'.

In Chapter 3, Robert Yaro turns his attention to another overseas planning experience, that of the United States. The country's development in the new century is facing a host of challenges that require strategies to 'maximize the nation's continued prosperity, opportunity and quality of life'. The Regional Plan Association's *America 2050* project is dedicated to responding to these challenges through investment in national infrastructure. Yaro emphasizes that the plan for such investment should encourage economic growth in an equitable and sustainable

manner. Governments at different levels can play an important role in directing the plan to meet the 'triple bottom line'. Serving as a preliminary report intended to prompt further debate and research, this chapter also includes a discussion of the existing problems and planning foci of the three major components of the national infrastructure investment plan, i.e., water, energy and transport.

Given their different economic and political contexts, the application of the Western experience to China requires careful re-examination. A systematic exploration of the distinctive characteristics of China's regional development would provide a valuable foundation for such a re-examination, an attempt that Junde Liu makes in Chapter 4. He reveals an important contextual feature of regional cooperation in China's transitional economy, and one that represents a significant departure from the European and North American experiences—the Administrative Region Economy (ARE). Given the 'invisible wall' between administrative regions, which has apparently become a barrier to regional cooperation and development in China, Liu argues for an investigation of a 'Greater Region' cooperative framework within the ARE context. He concludes with the Pan-PRD case, suggesting that ten key relationships lie at the heart of cooperation and development in the Pan-PRD.

### ***Economic development and regional cooperation***

Baojun Yang and Dongxiao Jin open this section with an elaboration on the plan and regulations for the coordinated development of the city cluster within the PRD (Chapter 5). The authors focus on how this plan evolved out of the joint efforts of the Guangdong Provincial Government and Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development to strengthen Pan-PRD coordination and enhance the competitiveness of the PRD city cluster. They examine the background, methodology, objectives, significance and implementation process of the plan to further understanding of the theory and practice of mega-city regional governance and planning in contemporary China.

In Chapter 6, Jiang Xu and Anthony Yeh turn to an exploration of how the idea of Pan-PRD regionalization first came about and how it has since developed. They argue that regional cooperation constitutes a new policy option for jurisdictions wishing to overcome the negative effects of political fragmentation. The economic reforms carried out in China since 1978 have led to the rise of urban entrepreneurialism and political fragmentation, which has resulted in serious inter-jurisdictional competition for capital and government resources. Building on the debate surrounding the problematic nature and fragmented consequences of the entrepreneurial strategy, this chapter first reviews regional cooperation in China in general to provide the background to the contextual changes and policy responses that have taken place since 1949, before turning to the rationale behind

the current proliferation of regional cooperation projects. Xu and Yeh then offer a theoretical interpretation of the factors underpinning the increased interest in regional cooperation and discuss the impact of state politics on such cooperation in a transitional economy. They argue that most current regional cooperation projects are non-formulaic in nature, and thus subject to contextually specific circumstances and the political agendas of key officials. Rather than serving as an institutional platform for inter-jurisdictional networking, regional cooperation may become an 'institutional fix' or a means of opening up new avenues for the accumulation of capital. The recent Pan-PRD Forum is used to illustrate the formation and growth of a controversial regional cooperation project in the context of the aforementioned development background.

Although China is undergoing rapid economic growth, its unbalanced regional development is becoming a significant economic and social concern, and thus the promotion of balanced regional economic growth is prominent on the Chinese development agenda. In Chapter 7, Guanghan Chen suggests a way to achieve balanced development through regional cooperation in the Pan-PRD. He believes that a comprehensive cooperation framework, with formal agreements and the establishment of corresponding organizations/institutions, is crucial to ensuring that regional cooperation can meet its objectives. Through critical analysis of the status quo and the issues surrounding the existing Pan-PRD cooperation framework, Chen argues that the effects of this framework are reduced by several constraints. He proposes three constructive steps to producing a better cooperative system.

### ***Regional infrastructure development and cooperation***

One of the fundamentals of effective regional cooperation is an efficient regional transport network. Given the close relationship between transport and regional socio-economic development, the Pan-PRD has commissioned a regional transport development strategy to facilitate cooperation among its constituent jurisdictions. Xiaohong Chen, Tanfeng Li and Ye Li critically evaluate this strategy in Chapter 8. Their close scrutiny of the location characteristics and spatial structure of the Pan-PRD confirms the growing demand for a well-developed transport network and identifies the problems that exist in the current transport system. Based on this analysis, the authors then examine the objectives of and methodology adopted in the Pan-PRD's strategy. Given the involvement of multiple actors and the unique features of transport development in the region, they recommend a four-step analytical framework for regional transport research. As an integrated and efficient infrastructure network is the basis of regional cooperation, the authors further analyze the implementation of such a network in the Pan-PRD.

Yue-man Yeung and Gordon Kee also emphasize the importance of infrastructure development for the regional economy. In Chapter 9, they address the specific challenges of and opportunities for such development in the Pan-PRD. Here, infrastructure is viewed as a vehicle for accelerating economic development and minimizing regional disparity. It is at the top of the list of the ten official domains selected for fostering regional cooperation within the Pan-PRD. Among the infrastructure developments the authors trace and evaluate are the aforementioned regional transport plan and highway, rail, port, waterway, and airport projects. They also address the challenges inherent in implementing infrastructure development proposals, arguing that a timely regional cooperation framework—which has proved elusive until recently—is essential for the advancement of cross-boundary infrastructure works.

The final contributors to this section of the book are De Hu and Hailong Ma, who, in Chapter 10, examine governmental power and its impact on Pan-PRD regional cooperation. China's transition from a planned to a market-oriented economy has led to the emergence of 'local economic dukedoms'. As local governments are responsible for their own development, the regional economy has suffered from intense intercity competition. Hu and Ma argue that the development of a coordinated network is essential for the stable regional governance of the Pan-PRD region.

### ***Regional real estate development and cooperation***

One of the major problems resulting from China's political fragmentation is the excessive use of scarce resources (e.g., land). In Chapter 11, Chang-chun Feng and Jiajie Zhu adopt a regional perspective to discuss how to optimize the relationship between land-use structures and urban development. During periods of rapid economic transformation, the optimization of land-use structures can help to achieve sustainable development, as it enhances land-use efficiency, maintains land production and strikes a balance for the ecosystem. Feng and Zhu use the PRD as a case study to analyze current land-use structures and efficiency, as well as changes in the spatial distribution of different land uses since the 1990s. They identify the key problems in the PRD's current land-use patterns and conclude with policy recommendations for optimizing land-use structures.

In addition to infrastructure construction, cooperation in industrial development is another important aspect of regional economic development. As an effective means of capital accumulation that brings about visible physical improvements and rapid economic growth, real estate development in the regional context has provoked increased scholarly interest. The study conducted by Yousong Wang, Pin Hou, Yihong Lin and Yan Zhang, and presented in Chapter 12, analyzes the



development of the construction industry in the Pan-PRD. These authors employ an assessment system, covering resources, processes, efficiency and environmental factors, to evaluate and rank the competitiveness of the construction industry in the nine mainland provinces of the Pan-PRD. Their model adopts the mean-squared deviation weighted decision approach and the Euclidean geometric distance method. The results presented in this chapter show that the overall competitiveness of the construction industry is relatively higher in Guangdong, Hainan, and Hunan provinces and relatively lower in Guangxi, Sichuan, Jiangxi, and Guizhou provinces. Based on their detailed evaluation of the industry's competitiveness in terms of resources, process, efficiency and the environment, Wang and his colleagues provide suggestions for enhancing that competitiveness at the regional level.

As regional cooperation is becoming increasingly prevalent worldwide, most notably in developing countries, the emergence of Pan-PRD regional cooperation provides scholars with an excellent opportunity to investigate the performance of large-scale such cooperation in the context of globalization. The findings and discussion presented in this book will also add another dimension to the ongoing debate on and inquiry into regionalization in the Chinese context.

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