

Regional Spatial Planning: Sino-British Approaches

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Following the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, the planning system in England was transformed from 'landuse' to 'spatial'. Spatial planning encapsulates a broader meaning than the pure landuse type of planning by emphasising critical thinking about space and places as the basis for intervention.

This move towards a more progressive form of planning had been influenced by the publication of the 2000 European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP).

It strives for balanced and sustainable development patterns through addressing the spatial impacts brought by functional interdependency between policy sectors, the development of a knowledge base to underpin policy decisions, and the development of a balanced and integrated spatial structure.

Strategic spatial planning, mainly undertaken at the regional level, has been used as a major policy instrument to coordinate conflicting demands and development interests in the west. During the Blair-Brown Labour Government, regional spatial planning was pushed to new heights in England with a tripartite structure: the Regional Planning Body (in charge of spatial and landuse planning), the Regional Development Agency (in charge of economic development strategies), and the Government Office for the Regions (the regional presence of central government).

This New Labour regional project can be argued as a continuation of the historic disjunction between economic development and strategic planning. The irony is that a single integrated regional strategy was eventually proposed towards the end of the Labour administration, but was stillborn. Within just a few weeks of coming to power in 2010, the Coalition government announced the wholesale revocation of Regional Strategies and has followed this up with formal announcements of the abolition of the tripartite institutional structure.

This is a fundamental shift from the previous top-down, and target-driven approach of spatial planning to an open source, local oriented style (use neighbourhood plans as a pro-growth mechanism).

While the prospects for strategic regional planning look bleak in England, China has undergone the so-called 'Third Spring' of Regional Spatial Planning.

The blossoming of different strategic forms of regional plan across China has come after the endorsement of prime ministerial statements in 2007 and, more importantly, the National Development and Reform Committee's deliberate effort to change the name of its Five Year 'Plan' from *ji hua* (economic planning) to *gui hua* (spatial planning).

The more well-known regional plans developed since then include the Pearl River Delta Strategic Plan, Yangtze Delta Regional Plan, Jing-Jin-Ji (Beijing and its surrounding region) Urban and Rural Spatial Plan, and Mid-Shaanxi (Xian and its surrounding region) Province Urban Agglomeration Construction Plan.

The consumption of land in China has been rapidly increasing following the major industrialisation and urbanisation that has taken place since the late 1980s. On the economic front, the government and major corporations have been actively acquiring land to construct industrial parks, key transport infrastructure and public utilities.

At the same time, rural-urban migration and the rapid growth of cities have led to rising demands on housing and hence commodity housing market booms. In order to cope with these development pressures, there has been major planned urban sprawl by local government. The expansion of urban and industrial use of land leads to a continued trend of rural and agricultural land reduction.

This has caused stress on the carrying capacity of the environment and has created many unexpected ecological consequences. These challenges prompt the need for a more strategic spatial approach for planning in China.

In response, President Hu Jintao has issued clear directions over the reconfiguration of spatial strategies to address key regional development issues of environmental

protection, infrastructural provision, landuse regulation and economic competitiveness.

During the Asian financial crisis in the 1990s, a significant sum of foreign direct investment was redirected from elsewhere in Asia to China. The triple helix of market reforms, globalisation and the extraordinary rate of urbanisation are seen as the driving forces that motivate key stakeholders to develop regional plans to express their visions of territorial development and to coordinate regional growth patterns. In spite of the significant efforts made to produce strategic urban plans, they failed to provide a strategic horizon to address the socio-economic and environmental pressures brought by globalisation. This has led to the current regional planning boom which focuses on deriving strategic guidance and governance structures to regulate and to coordinate, rather than dwelling on detailed arrangements and the location of landuse projects.

This suggests that China's transition to the 'socialist market economy' is very much following the capitalist trajectory of state regulation. Planning has long been regarded as a lubricant to oil the capitalist machinery by coordinating the use values in space and to enhance the circulation of capital, commodities and information.

The evidence of the latest regional planning trends in China largely confirms its strategic value as a means to ease resource constraints for economic growth, though it has been much less successful in achieving a genuine form of sustainable development that integrates environmental and social concerns with economic development.

However, one should not side step the positive developments associated with the preparation processes and innovative ideas emerging in these Chinese regional plans. In comparison, the UK Coalition Government seems to have lost its nerve in managing the economic downturn by simply dismantling the regional planning system in England. Maybe the Coalition Government should learn from its Chinese counterpart that a pro-growth agenda can still go hand in hand with regional spatial planning.