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Chinese Urbanization Through the Lens of Da Lang

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Shenzhen is a city that has been raising eyebrows for years, because of its fast development and exceptional position. However, everyday reality in Shenzhen can be unruly. As a city, Shenzhen mainly thinks in top-down strategies and simply adds new hardware – the sum of infrastructure, buildings and industries – in order to encourage urban and therefore economic growth. It is less interested in the question of which existing social dynamics need to be accepted or improved in order to strengthen the city's potential, let alone the socio-economic conditions that are necessary to successfully regenerate an existing neighborhood or to sustainably extend the city. Still, Shenzhen is a city where bottom-up activities flourish and where many changes happen overnight. This means that many policies are not in line with reality: there is a gap between government and society. Or at least, this seems to be the case at first glance. When we look beyond the general characteristics of a top-down regulated city, relations between the Shenzhen government and society are much more closely intertwined.

Social construction

China has lately seen enormous growth among NGOs, volunteering, and grassroots organizations that address social issues. It is clear that the central and local governments are withdrawing from many areas or are unable to cover social issues sufficiently by themselves, leaving room for other organizations to step in and provide services to vulnerable groups. In 2011, the United Nations Volunteers Program published a report on the state of volunteerism in China.¹ According to this report, the first volunteer-based community projects started at the end of the 1980s. However, the amount of organizations and volunteers only started to grow around 2001, due to increased support from the national government and more enabling legislation. Public awareness also changed distinctively, particularly in 2008, after people saw the valuable role of volunteers during the Beijing Olympics and after the Wenchuan Earthquake. By 2011, 50 million Chinese people were registered in different volunteer organizations all over the country; most of these volunteers were young students, recent graduates, and low-income migrant workers. Volunteerism has become indispensable in Chinese society and is currently quite diversified, with a growing number of non-governmental organizations, including big corporations deploying volunteer activities through their own NGOs. NGOs do collaborate with local governments, but are

¹ United Nations Volunteers, *State of Volunteerism in China 2011 – Engaging People through Ideas, Innovation and Inspiration* (Bonn: United Nations Volunteers, 2011).

more independent than volunteer organizations that operate directly under the government.²

Volunteerism as an instrument

The central government is increasingly deploying volunteerism as an instrument to achieve a more 'harmonious' urban society, with less inequality and more stability. It stated in its *National New-type Urbanization Plan (2014-2020)* that urbanization remains an important tool for economic growth in China, but also emphasized the need for a more 'human-centered urbanization'. By 2030, as much as 70 percent of the Chinese population will live in cities. The current rate is 53.7 percent—indicating that at least another 100 million rural inhabitants will move to cities between now and 2020. The central government acknowledges that reforms and alternative models for urbanization are necessary to ensure and increase the livability of Chinese cities. One of these reforms should be the reorganization of the *hukou* household-registration system in order to provide more equal access to quality services for all citizens and to ease labor mobility from rural to urban areas, as well as between cities.³ China introduced this household-registration system in the 1950s; it divides and demarcates the population into urban and rural residents. People who are registered on the countryside, but live and work in the city, do not enjoy the same healthcare, pensions and other social welfare benefits as urban residents.

The shift in focus towards Chinese citizens' well-being (instead of concentrating only on the pursuit of economic growth), is an important sign of the times. When talking about the current social constraints in Shenzhen, researcher Li Jinkui from the China Development Institute (CDI) doesn't see any other alternative: '[The] Chinese economy is slowing down from high-speed growth to medium speed growth, and urbanization is still not completed. If China is to stay in today's half-done urbanized situation, China will likely fall into the middle income trap. The core task of urbanization is to provide public goods and services needed by the new-coming urban population from the previous rural population. This requires social and institutional change, and "social construction". This is the most important issue in Shenzhen today.'⁴

To understand Da Lang is to understand Chinese urbanization

Da Lang Neighborhood is home to approximately 500,000 people, a majority of them migrants. Only 8,200 citizens are officially registered in Da Lang, which means that

² Since 2008 it has become easier to register an NGO, especially in Shenzhen, due to the simplification of the registration procedure. See: He Dan, 'NGOs Get Boost from Shenzhen Register Reforms', *China Daily*, 21 August 2012. Online: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-08/21/content_15690983.htm. See also: Alice Lau, 'More NGOs Gain Status in Shenzhen', *contextChina*, 21 August 2012. Online: <http://contextchina.com/2012/08/more-ngos-gain-status-in-shenzhen>

³ See: 'Urban China: Toward Efficient, Inclusive, and Sustainable Urbanization', The World Bank, 2015. Online: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/publication/urban-china-toward-efficient-inclusive-sustainable-urbanization>

⁴ Li Jinkui, interview by the author, 24 February 2015.

everybody else belongs to the so-called 'floating population'.⁵ The neighborhood is located in Longhua New District, just outside the border of the former Special Economic Zone.⁶ Over the past few years, it has become an interesting site for several research projects initiated by the China Development Institute and the International New Town Institute. This research is conducted in order to understand the blossoming of bottom-up activities in this part of Shenzhen, but also to understand the role of the local government and its relationship with a variety of stakeholders in providing social welfare. The Da Lang government wants to create a more sustainable society by facilitating educational programs and leisure activities.

To accomplish this, the Department of Cultural Affairs has been expanding cultural infrastructure since 2010, allowing volunteer organizations, NGOs, companies and entrepreneurs to play a role. So far, these developments are in line with the national trend described above. However, Da Lang is exceptional because of another reason: it represents the core of Chinese urbanization. Da Lang is a rapidly transforming rural-urban society with severe social issues and hardly any urban planning in place. Primarily a collection of urban villages and factories, it is a hard-to-reach district with few public facilities and limited green and public spaces. Furthermore, Da Lang is subject to issues related to its very young 'floating' migrant society. Li Jinkui has been supporting the aims of the Department of Cultural Affairs for several years through lectures and research: 'If we can successfully do something here, we will deepen our understanding of problems that occur in the process of Chinese urbanization.'⁷ More than 50 percent of the migrants in Da Lang are between 20 - 29 years old and arrive unaccompanied; the duration of their stay varies from just a few months to four or five years, and a very small number stay even longer. Born after 1980, they belong to the second generation of migrants in China. These young migrant workers come from all over the country and are full of drive, but they also face problems in adjusting to city life and workplace pressures. They encounter long working hours, low incomes, unstable jobs, poor living conditions, and discrimination. Moreover, they often find it difficult to make friends or start families.⁸

Emancipating attitude establishes new values

The Da Lang Government is rather open and progressive in trying to help migrant workers become acclimated to city life. Their encouraging and therefore emancipating attitude towards migrants establishes new values that move beyond economic benefit alone. The government has invested 300 million RMB over the last couple of years in public infrastructure 'hardware' such as Labor Square (built in 2007 as an entertainment area for the local inhabitants), along with bicycle lanes, eighteen community service centers, fourteen

⁵ See also: Linda Vlassenrood, 'Da Lang Fever', *Volume 39: Urban Border* (April 2014), 58-62. *Da Lang Fever* was an event and small exhibition on the potential of the self-organizing migrant society in Da Lang Neighborhood presented at the UABB/Shenzhen Urbanism & Architecture Biennale 2013.

⁶ Da Lang became an official sub district of Longhua in 2011. In Bao'an and Longgang, the outer districts of Shenzhen, random and chaotic developments had taken place since the late 1980s due to industrial pressure inside the Special Economic Zone, lower land prices, speculation and loose development control outside the boundary.

⁷ Li Jinkui, op. cit. (note 4).

⁸ Brochure Da Lang Government, '8 Hours Project', (2014).

community parks, eight private schools, five libraries and four stations for volunteers in public spaces.⁹ It has initiated various public activities, including the highly successful 'Da Lang Star' singing competition, which started in 2010 and was one of the first initiatives developed by the Da Lang government. The competition provides a stage for talented young people and music fans. In the past five years, nearly 4,000 migrants have participated in the competition. The event is hugely popular in the district and many people gather for the 39 qualifying rounds and the yearly finale with 12 participants. In the meantime, the Da Lang Government has helped NGOs and grassroots organizations in Da Lang improve their management and is building up a platform with national and international resources. Nonetheless, the Da Lang Government has limited financial means due to its low administrative level in Shenzhen. Even though the city is giving attention to the areas that once fell outside its borders, and although it is stimulating alternative ways to outsource social services to NGOs and volunteering groups, Shenzhen's investments in 'social construction' are still minimal compared to the attention that has been given to economic growth.

Consequently, the Da Lang Government is able to financially support some organizations, but can generally only provide legitimacy and space to NGOs, volunteer organizations, and entrepreneurs.¹⁰ Lin Fangxi and Zheng Baojie, two young entrepreneurs, receive that legitimacy, which enables them to provide cultural activities in addition to their entrepreneurship. Both provide lessons to migrant workers in their music and roller-skating store, and they enable access to a large social network through the organization of events, cultural performances, and competitions. They play a fundamental role in programming leisure activities at Labor Square. The social impact of these events and Zheng Baojie's roller-skating team, Excellent, which has over 1,000 members, should not be underestimated. The Da Lang Government also recently started to support KIDO – an NGO registered in Da Lang in July 2014 and located in a dormitory – by paying its rent and the salaries of its four staff members. KIDO's major aims are to help migrant workers in becoming accustomed to city life and to help them find their way when they face unforeseen circumstances, such as a factory closure and their subsequent loss of employment. 'Vulnerability' is a term used frequently when talking about the migrant workers because of their young age and low level of education. However, the demands of second-generation migrants are markedly different from those of the previous generation, most of whom have returned to their hometowns: they come to the city to make money, but also to develop themselves by learning new skills that will help them find better jobs. Programs are therefore offered to young migrant workers to meet new people, extend their limited social networks, broaden their work opportunities, improve their communication skills, gain self-confidence and have fun.

⁹ In 2008, six districts of Shenzhen signed letters of intent to outsource social services to nine NGOs, making Shenzhen the second Chinese city, after Shanghai, to experiment with setting up such a system. See: 'Shenzhen NGOs to Provide Social Services', *China Daily*, 11 January 2008. Online: <http://china.org.cn/english/China/238958.htm>

¹⁰ The Da Lang Government subsidizes the Little Grass Volunteer Association, which currently has 1,200 registered social workers and 4,400 volunteer workers.

Building bridges between public and private interests

KIDO communicates between government and society, and it recently joined forces with the government to collaboratively talk to factories about their social responsibilities. The Da Lang Government is trying to encourage young migrant workers to stay longer in Da Lang by educating them and by providing amenities like libraries, schools, parks and squares, and social programs. It is believed that factories share the same objective. If they have better working conditions and activities, migrant workers might choose to be loyal to their employers and keep working there longer. Many factories provide small libraries, cinemas and basketball courts inside the factory compound, where most migrant workers also live; these facilities are primarily installed for relaxation and not for educational purposes. KIDO helps companies to improve their facilities and to set up or further develop their activity programs; KIDO also provides advice on how to recruit and manage volunteers. It is a relatively new approach and an interesting attempt to share responsibility for providing social services and education with enterprises, required in part because of the financial limitations of the local government.

However, this brings up questions about how sustainable the interest of corporations in social aims is and whether they can be called upon to fulfill public needs outside the borders of the factory compounds. Many migrant workers live in the urban villages, and Da Lang still faces a serious lack of public facilities in these areas. The Da Lang government is seeking support from companies, but struggles at the same time with the question of what kind of activities and services the volunteer organizations could provide to address needs that neither the government nor the market currently meet. CDI argues that it should be a collaborative effort in order to stimulate the migrants' integration in Da Lang society. This means that the local government should empower and build strong alliances between entrepreneurs, volunteer organizations, NGOs and factories more extensively than it already does.¹¹ Thinking in terms of top-down versus bottom-up strategies is clearly no longer applicable for Da Lang.

New parameters for urban design

In order to achieve a more sustainable society, it is also necessary to rethink Da Lang's scattered urban context. Da Lang has an open and dynamic culture due to its diverse, youthful, and continually changing mix of people – it is a magnet for the floating population – and a distant but facilitating local government. These extreme circumstances and conditions, which are just as commonplace as they are considered undesirable by the city government, should be understood and nurtured in future urban planning. Simultaneously, the role of volunteer organizations in the broadest sense has become a powerful movement that can no longer be ignored when aiming for sustainable Chinese cities. While this social support system is part of the national agenda, it barely plays a role in local developers' or urban planners' minds. Paying more attention to social welfare is considered important in Shenzhen, but developers and planners are satisfied to fulfill this ambition with nothing more than public squares and parks. New parameters need to be put in place in order to aid

¹¹ Sjoerd Segijn, *A Home Away from Home: The Emergence and Meaning of Third Places in Shenzhen* (Master's thesis, University of Amsterdam/International New Town Institute, 2014), 53.

the further urban development of vibrant migrant neighborhoods like Da Lang. Design proposals should accept – and embrace – Da Lang’s status as an urban area in an intermediate stage, and future plans should take temporality and flexibility as starting points. This could be one of the alternative models for urbanization to ensure and increase the livability of Chinese cities.