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Chen Zhao, Zurich

Pearl River Delta

Thoughts about Rem Koolhaas' Harvard Project on the City – together with the China Group – shown at the documenta X in Hannover in summer 1997.¹

The following comment on Rem Koolhaas' work in the south of China - named Pearl River Delta (PRD) - is to be understood more as a personal response than a professional critic.

Being a Chinese architect, the work is very impressive to read for me. The Pearl River Delta, the area in the very south of China, directly connected to Hong Kong and Macau, has been firstly developed by the «Market Economic Policy» after 1979. Things that are happening there are all fascinating - however difficult to understand, especially for a foreign expert. Whenever people want to plan something in the area, they first have to try to learn about Chinese economy, politics and culture.

First of all, Koolhaas' and the Chinese Group's work is based upon a strong information system related to the spatial construction and the urbanization situation in the south of China. Some important figures really give us, the readers, an overview picture of the local situation, and some differences in comparison to the West do occur in a clear light, e.g. the efficiency of a Chinese architect:

«The CHINESE ARCHITECT[©] designs the largest volume in the shortest time for the lowest fee. There are 1/10 the number of architects in China than in the US, each of whom designs 5 times the project volume in 1/5 the time, while earning 1/10 the design fee. This implies an efficiency of 2,500 times that of an American architect.»

It is more important to me, however, that the work reached a high level of understanding concerning the new urbanization trends in the Pearl River Delta. It was and still is quite difficult for Western architects to understand the local culture, especially as the country is always considered as one nation with just one culture over the whole territory. At the same time we must know that China is as big as the United States of America, but local cultural differentiation in fact is as complicated as in Europe, even though politicians in general speak of *one* Chinese culture.

To understand the role that the Pearl River Delta has been playing for China,

Rem Koolhaas introduces the concept of «Concession», I do consider it characteristic for the area. The concept actually is related to the traditional Chinese culture, and the best explanation for today's relationship between two economic systems after the 80's.

«CONCESSION[©] Yielding as tactic. Traditionally China has used the PRD to make CONCESSIONS[©]: Hong Kong and Macau were ceded to Britain and Portugal as receptacles for controlled importation of Westernness, allowing the rest of China to remain 'pure'. In a similar way, Special Economic Zones are CONCESSIONS[©]; land sacrificed for free-market experiments.»

At the end of his text, Rem Koolhaas - without a especially Western influenced view but a sensitivity of human beings - concludes some prominent theoretical opinions based upon domain phenomena. They are declared as a new concept of today's urbanism, which should be valuable not only for the Pearl River Delta but also for other developing regions in China or in the world.

«In fact, an entire discipline does not possess an adequate terminology to discuss the most pertinent, most crucial phenomena that occur within its domain, no conceptual framework to describe, interpret and understand exactly those forces that could help to redefine and revitalize it. The field is abandoned to 'events' that are considered indescribable, or the creation of a synthetic idyll in memory of the city. There is nothing left between Chaos and Celebration.»

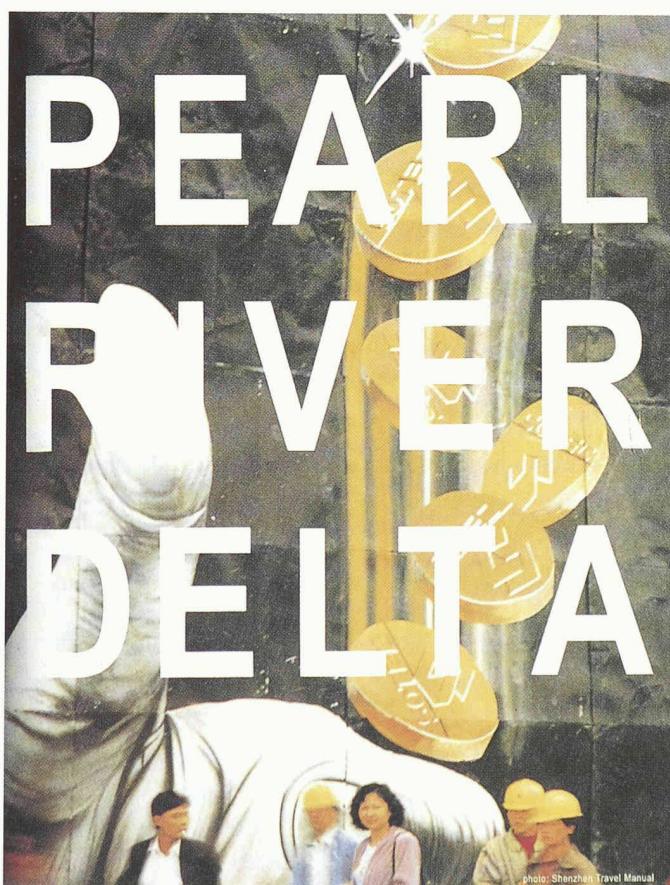
About Koolhaas' and Bruce Mau's very special presentation - which at the beginning cost problems to understand - I have to say that the way they present the study is successful; it stresses a vivid picture of quick, massy, chaotic development in the Pearl River Delta region, which is named and «copyrighted» as «CITY OF EXACERBATED DIFFERENCE[©]». It also demonstrates us that one has to pass through the «cloud of unknowing» to touch the truth - really wanting to learn about it.

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Annotation

¹Pearl River Delta, in: Politics-Poetics. Das Buch zur Dokumenta X, Ostfildern-Ruit 1997



Pearl River Delta
(Bild: aus: Politics-Poetics, 1997)