Pseudo-urbanization or Real Urbanization? Urban China’s Mergence of Administrative Regions and Its Effects: A Case Study of Zhongshan City, Guangdong Province

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Abstract

After the market reforms and opening up of China in the late 1970s, local governments played a central role in the country’s rapid urbanization, particularly through the mergence of administrative regions (MAR). However, the effect of these MARs is still debatable. On the one hand,
an MAR can accelerate the pace of economic growth, reshape the power structure, and establish necessary coordination among different regions. On the other hand, a MAR can have negative effects which have led to “pseudo-urbanization” in other developing countries. What is the effect of the local, state-led MAR in China? This study examines the MAR implemented by the local government of Zhongshan city, Guangdong province. The MAR is found to be associated with the robust growth of the downtown area and of the urban population; it has gradually reshaped the socioeconomic structure of the city, the urban landscape, and the identity of its residents. MARs in China are arguably characterized by a transition from pseudo-urbanization to “real” urbanization. This transition cannot be explained by existing urban theories, such as the “growth machine,” “urban regime,” or “entrepreneurial city.” Therefore, we use the term “government-led merging urbanization” (GMU) to define the process. We further suggest that the GMU concept can be used as a model of urbanization or urban growth. This model provides an important perspective for examining the role played by local governments in the process of urbanization.

1. Introduction
For the first time in China’s long history, the country’s urbanization rate reached 50 percent in 2011. According to statistics, the urban population of China increased from 299 million in 1996 to 690 million in 2011; its urban areas also expanded from 13,000 km² to 57,000 km², an increase of 338 percent.¹ How does China achieve this tremendous rate of urban population growth? How does this tremendous process occur in so short a period of time? To understand the process or mechanism of urban making and urbanization in China, we need to examine the role played by local states. Urbanization in China is largely led by local governments.² Local governments actively intervene in the process of urbanization, not only through specific urban policies but also through migration control via the *hukou* 户口 system,³ the development of state- or collective-owned enterprises as economic engines of cities,⁴ and the expansion of urban space with urban or land-use planning.⁵ Accordingly, over two decades, the urban population of China grew by 200 million; 50 million was due to a natural increase, 60 million to 70 million was due to the conversion of peasants into urbanites, and about 80 million (40 percent of the total growth) was due to the adjustment or reorganization of administrative divisions.⁶ In contrast to Western cities, such as those in