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Publication date
2013
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
China City Planning Review

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Dai, G., Salet, W., & de Vries, J. (2013). Why High-Speed Railway stations continue China's leapfrog urbanization: institutional parameters of urban development. *China City Planning Review*, *22*(1), 49-59.

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Download date:10 Oct 2026

Why High-Speed Railway Stations Continue China's Leapfrog Urbanization: Institutional Parameters of Urban Development

Guowen DAI, Willem Salet, Jochem de Vries

Abstract An ambitious program of High-Speed Railway (HSR) is under construction in China and already soon the network will overtake its counterparts in Europe. Reflecting on experiences in Europe, the authors explore the conditions for place making qualities of six new HSR station areas in China. The superb inter-city connectivity of the new infrastructure nodes raises a lot of expectations about the economic and social potential of the station areas, but the experiences in Europe thus far are very differentiated. With regards to the attraction of economic activities usually the existing differences between different economic regions are reproduced rather than shaping completely new conditions. Also the expectations of developing completely new integrated urban centers around stations in the urban periphery are rather ambitious. The paper questions the planning responses to HSR development in Chinese cities and investigates the institutional conditions that frame these responses. The authors explore how the plans for Chinese HSR station development account for their objectives and reflect on the potential of the station area planning by investigating the institutional parameters of urban development.

Keywords High-Speed Railway (HSR); urban mega project; institutional parameters; spatial re-configuration; urbanization in China

1. Introduction

It is not exaggerated to use the label 'HSR heat' to characterize the nation-wide wave of China's High-Speed Railway (HSR) network construction. International observers are impressed by the program of 16 thousands kilometers new railway construction until 2020 which overtakes the complete efforts of the European and Japanese pioneers over the last fifty years. One of the driving forces behind this ambitious program is the national government's top-down intervention to stimulate domestic production and consumption after the financial crisis in 2008. Above all, there is a macro-economic agenda behind the expansion of HSR infrastructure. In addition, to these policy rationales associated with HSR development the program raises concerns about the spatial contextualization of infrastructure in processes of urbanization. The interrelationships between infrastructure and spatial structure are a critical factor in the development of cities. This certainly is the case in Chinese cities, where spatial configurations rapidly change.

Therefore, in this paper, we are particularly interested in the interrelationships of the station area in China. The experiences in Europe show that a good match between infrastructure and spatial organization is not self-evident (Hall and Hass-Klau, 1985; Van den Berg and Pol, 1998; Bertolini, 1998). The outcomes often turn out to be disappointing compared with the expectations at forehand. In Europe, the construction of HSR and the development of station areas is a complicated matter, in particular when these lines cross urbanized areas. Usually, it is the changing social and political context that makes the establishing an infrastructure project so complex. Typically, large projects start as single purposed macro-economic infrastructure projects but gradually grow into multi-purposed ones because of the emerging tensions between economic, environmental and spatial urbanization claims (Salet, Bertolini, and Giezen, 2012). This complication certainly is observed when the construction of 'major routes' enters the urbanized parts in European countries, such as the new construction of the Train de Grande Vitesse (TGV) in France (Hall, 2009), the recent extension between Brussels and Amsterdam in the Randstad of the Netherlands (Priemus, 2007; De Vries, 2008), and the recent eastern route of London towards the European continent (Hall, 2009).

While the infrastructure planners initially were thinking of straight connections, those concerned with urban environment brought in a wider range of objectives responding both to the negative effects of the routes (raising alternatives to protect the environment, or specific qualities of landscapes or patterns of the built environment) and to the alternative positive effects of the routes (cities lobbying to get connected to the new networks or getting their major economic concentrations directly connected). Obviously, the policy games of enriching the matching potential of infrastructure and spatial organization are even more intricate in the development of the station areas. If more interests are at stake, negotiation and exchange of different interests will be needed in order to enable a recombination of options.