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Guangdong's Policies in the Face of Economic Crisis and Jobs for Young Graduates: Crisis Within a Crisis

Pierre Nordmann and Camille Bondois

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Economic crisis hit Guangdong, the southern province bordering Hong Kong and Macao, just as its growth rate was slowing after many years of acceleration. Current economic policies seek to reverse that trend more than to tackle the crisis. The Pearl River Delta (PRD) in Guangdong Province pioneered China’s economic reforms in the 1980s and remains a symbol of their success. The region’s exports account for nearly 30 percent of China’s total exports. The region owes its success in part to its proximity to Hong Kong: drawn by the low cost of labour and the Chinese government’s fiscal incentives, businesses from the former British colony moved their low-value-added, labour intensive industries to the region, setting up tens of thousands of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Thirty years later, this growth model has reached its limits: increasing land and labour costs have reduced the region’s competitiveness, and the delta’s energy- and resource-hungry industries are exacerbating environmental degradation. Aware of these limits, the provincial authorities wish to usher the delta towards advanced and high technology activities. The authorities are taking a dual approach: moving low-value-added units to the province’s less developed areas, and integrating more closely with Hong Kong and Macao. Since November 2008, however, the economic crisis has hit Guangdong’s economic model hard, and the authorities have had to revise their agenda. The new priority is to safeguard jobs and the province’s SMEs. After months of hesitation, the provincial authorities made an official declaration of support to SMEs on 1 December 2008.

Only a few months earlier, in May, they had announced the adoption of a new policy incompatible with propping up SMEs. The so-called “double transfer” policy had sought to change the province’s economic development model. It was based on the simple fact that the PRD, which accounts for 30 percent of Guangdong’s area and 50 percent of its population, has had extremely rapid economic growth for 30 years, while the northern, western, and eastern areas of the province are lagging behind: according to a Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences researcher interviewed by Caijing magazine, per capita GDP in the PRD is four times that of the province’s outlying areas. Moreover, the concentration of industries in the delta has added to pressure on resources and the environment: water pollution and energy bottlenecks are among numerous problems. The solution the authorities envisaged was to relocate labour-intensive, low-value-added industries to less developed regions and to attract advanced industries and high-value services to the delta. This policy included provisions for labour retraining. People in less developed regions of Guangdong were to be trained to meet the needs of newly relocated secondary and tertiary enterprises. At the same time, the better qualified workers from these regions were to be encouraged to move to the PRD.

Some 50 billion yuan (5.24 billion euros) was allocated for the 2008-2012 period for infrastructure construction in the Pearl River Delta region. The plan involved investment in water supply, road networks, and power generation. Only a few months earlier, in May, they had announced the adoption of a new policy incompatible with propping up SMEs. The so-called “double transfer” policy had sought to change the province’s economic development model. It was based on the simple fact that the PRD, which accounts for 30 percent of Guangdong’s area and 50 percent of its population, has had extremely rapid economic growth for 30 years, while the northern, western, and eastern areas of the province are lagging behind: according to a Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences researcher interviewed by Caijing magazine, per capita GDP in the PRD is four times that of the province’s outlying areas. Moreover, the concentration of industries in the delta has added to pressure on resources and the environment: water pollution and energy bottlenecks are among numerous problems. The solution the authorities envisaged was to relocate labour-intensive, low-value-added industries to less developed regions and to attract advanced industries and high-value services to the delta. This policy included provisions for labour retraining. People in less developed regions of Guangdong were to be trained to meet the needs of newly relocated secondary and tertiary enterprises. At the same time, the better qualified workers from these regions were to be encouraged to move to the PRD. Some 50 billion yuan (5.24 billion euros) was allocated for the 2008-2012 period for infrastructure construction in the region.
less developed areas, relocation of industries, and retraining, and 2.5 billion yuan (26 millions euros) as incentives for enterprises. Furthermore, the success of the industry relocation policy was to be added to the criteria for evaluating local cadres.

However, since the “double transfer” policy was announced in May 2008, the PRD’s economic scenario has changed greatly. Falling external demand, the yuan’s appreciation, rising labour costs following a new labour contract law, and the tightening of credit have squeezed firms in the region.

According to Caijing, Guangdong’s industrial, political, and academic circles questioned the rationale of the double transfer policy in the prevailing economic situation: many people felt the priority should be the survival rather than the transfer of enterprises. This was echoed by officials in Dongguan, one of the PRD’s nine prefectures: while a few continued to back the province’s announced policy, most wanted enterprises to be modernised right where they were. Many officials also doubted the PRD’s ability to attract high technology firms, advanced industry, and high-value services, citing the region’s lack of qualified personnel.

Central authorities were also sceptical of the double transfer policy. On 12 November 2008, Wang Yang, who has been provincial Communist Party secretary since December 2007 and a Politburo member since October 2007, announced during a visit to Zhangjiang, in the west of Guangdong, that local authorities would no longer try to prop up firms in difficulty. In fact, Wang said, “Failed enterprises belong to a backward production method,” and “their elimination is part of market mechanism.” Two days later, however, Premier Wen Jiabao, while visiting Guangdong, publicly called for strong measures to support SMEs facing difficulty. A week later, Wang reiterated his position. (3) Finally, on 1 December 2008, the province announced steps to support SMEs, mothballing the double transfer policy.

Wang has also been behind the initiative for integrating the PRD, covering nine prefectures in Guangdong as well as Hong Kong and Macao. (4) A little while after he took up his party post in Guangdong, Wang launched a consultation with several authorities and research institutes in the province. According to Caijing, Wang twice consulted Hong Kong chief executive Donald Tsang during the report preparation process. In March 2008, during the annual session of the National People’s Congress, Wang hawked its conclusion to different ministries. The unpublished report recommended facilitating trade and investment exchanges among Hong Kong, Macao, and the Chinese mainland through simplification of customs and of procedures linked to the free trade and investment accord under the CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) signed in 2003 by the mainland, Hong Kong, and Macao.

The report included an ambitious roadmap for integrating the three sides’ financial sectors: it envisaged the creation of a pilot zone for financial cooperation between Hong Kong and Shenzhen “before 2010.” This pilot was to subsequently include Macao and eight other mainland prefectures by 2015: the financial institutions of Hong Kong, Macao, and the PRD prefectures were to receive the same treatment in each others’ territories, and foreign exchange control for investments was to be suspended. Finally, with a 20-year horizon, the report also proposed that central authorities delegate part of their legislative responsibility in order to enable the pilot zone to acquire necessary competences for harmonising the three sides’ financial sectors.

According to Caijing, the report drew the central authorities’ attention to the issue of integrating the PRD, and a series of measures were announced for strengthening cooperation among the delta’s three partners. Thus, an amendment to CEPA was signed on 29 July 2008 by Hong Kong and the mainland, granting Hong Kong firms greater access to the mainland, especially to Guangdong, from 2009. A week later, the governments of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao announced the financing of a major infrastructure project – the construction of a bridge linking Hong Kong, Macao, and the mainland starting from 2010.

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Special feature

Jobs for Young Graduates: Crisis Within a Crisis

Analysis by Camille Bondois based on:
• “6.1 million students apply for public service posts,” Zhongguo Xinwen Zhoukan (China Newsweek), 8 January 2009.

While at first it seemed that China was relatively sheltered from the global financial crisis, to the point of being seen as a possible saviour, it rapidly began to show multiple signs of weakness: 20 million migrant workers lost their jobs, and thousands of firms closed down. Disquiet in the country’s interior is growing. The unemployment rate in December 2008 was 4.2 percent, the highest in five years. Among young graduates it was 12 percent.

Employment for graduates is one of the more nerve-wracking issues in the crisis, and Chinese authorities have accorded it priority: in June 2009, as many as 6.1 million young graduates will enter the job market, joining one million graduates from 2008 who are still looking for work.

China Newsweek looks at the employment problem for young graduates, the consequences of joblessness, and the factors behind the phenomenon, profiling a Beijing law student, Chen Zao, and interviewing Zheng Gongcheng, an NPC standing committee member and professor at People’s University, who is also an expert on social issues.

The weekly does focus on the effects of the 2008 financial crash, but only to the extent that it has exacerbated a much older and deeper problem linked to the evolution in the growth model China adopted years ago.

In education, alongside the exponential rise in the number of students entering university faculties, the government’s attitude swung from strong interventionism – to the extent that it took charge of assigning graduates to different sectors – to complete disengagement, obliging students to compete in the open market. China Newsweek blames an ill-adapted higher education system in which a third of the students fail to get jobs in the sectors they trained for. According to

7. Figures from the SME office in Guangdong show that between January and September 2008, some 60,000 firms closed down.
8. China Newsweek notes that more than 50 percent of students are recruited by SMEs.
9. The number of students has risen from 200,000 in the 1980s to 6 million in 2008 due to the policy of expanding higher education.
Zheng Gongchong, it is also a non-egalitarian, discriminatory system in which an impressive CV and personal connections play a disproportionately large part, leading to wasted potential.

More seriously, the difficulties facing young job-seekers are linked to weaknesses in post-reform China's socio-economic system. China Newsweek notes that the number of graduates has been rising faster than the number of available jobs suited to their qualifications. The job-creating power of economic growth has mostly shrunk: too much industrial concentration; major state firms' monopoly over key sectors, limiting the expansion prospects of private enterprises while public sector jobs have been declining; a "down market" industrial sector and difficulty creating jobs for qualified people; a major regional imbalance in the country's development — all of these factors impose pressure on the job market. Moreover, the priority given to exports has for too long been at the expense of the internal market. To conclude, in the 1980s a one-point rise in the GDP led to two million jobs, as against a mere 800,000 in 2008. Added to this, the social protection system remains incomplete and unequal, leading to a climate of insecurity.

The government announced a series of urgent short-term measures in response to public unease over the crisis. Notably, it once again raised recruitment quotas in public service and state firms. But, says China Newsweek, the quotas have already been filled in many departments, and in state firms weakened by the crisis, the additional burden to the salaried ranks would be difficult to bear, all of which limits the effectiveness of such measures. Moreover, the state is encouraging students to perform community service in rural and backward areas that severely lack qualified personnel. However, this is not something students like Chen Zao aspire to.

In the long term, Zheng says, the state ought to set right the five major weaknesses of the system. These include the territorial balance and the need to invest in major infrastructure works to reduce geographic inequalities and to extend employment zones. More crucially, the state needs to adopt an adequate universal social protection system covering retirement, health, unemployment, and disability. This implies greater state engagement to avoid adding to the costs of firms and individuals. This reform is crucial not only for increasing worker confidence through a more fair, stable, and competitive job market, but also for boosting internal consumption that can generate further job creation.

It would thus seem that the international financial crisis and its immediate effects on jobs in China affords an opportunity to take a fresh look at an economic model found wanting, and already rocked by scandal and social unrest in recent years. It is also an opportunity to speed up social reforms that have been sorely held back since the launch of economic reforms and the cracking of the “iron rice bowl.” The issue is not merely to survive the crisis and stem social unrest in 2009, but above all to clean up the system and usher in sustainable development.

Translated by N. Jayaram