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# Contemporary large-scale international design competitions<sup>1</sup> in China

A case study of Baietan, Guangzhou

## **Abstract**

*The importance of contemporary design competitions has been increasingly recognized in fast-growing China in the course of World Trade Organization (WTO) integration and globalization. However, scientific and systematic analysis is rare on how international design competitions are introduced, and how they interact and transplant in the Chinese context. The well-known Chinese-Western culture gap and complicated social and political background make this topic more challenging. Herein, the authors focus on how the international design competitions were “translated” into both international and local perspectives with a comparative analysis on development of international design competitions between the Chinese and the Finnish model. To fully exemplify the design-completion procedure and the different roles of Chinese stakeholders and their perspectives on design competitions, the authors study the Baietan case, which was chosen due to its specific relationship with the city’s strategic plan, its representativeness in using international design competitions in connection to large-scale urban projects in China and its public access to the relevant documentation. The preliminary findings suggest that Chinese-style design competitions, acting as ‘designed trading zones’, with less-defined competition rules compared to the Finnish model, may foster the settings of local transformation in adopting international urban planning and design knowledge. However, an integrated approach is required to address subsequent implementation.*

**Keywords:** design competition, trading zone, procedural analysis, case study, Guangzhou, strategic urban planning

## **Introduction**

Up to now, design competitions have yielded many quality design buildings and urban neighbourhoods all over the world (Nasar, 1999; Strong, 1976, 1996). They have been considered as the routine method in discovering new talents, stimulating public debate and publicity, encouraging young architects and ensuring design quality in connection with large-scale urban development projects<sup>2</sup>. Nowadays, this concept has been recognized and kept developing in China in the age of the country’s rapid urbanization, as major Chinese cities with large development programmes have been confronted with the pressure of inter-city competition in the last couple of decades.

Design competitions were introduced to the Chinese construction market in 1984 to stimulate competitive design solutions for urban development tasks, which were internally assigned by the government (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1999). In the late 1990s, design competitions in an international framework were under consideration along with large-scale projects, and foreign design agencies and their work were utilized more often than they had been previously (Wu, 2007; Ren, 2006; Xue, 2009). Later on, the importance of design competitions in China kept increasing as a consequence of their connections to changing regulations on public procurement in the context of World Trade Organization (WTO) integration. Particularly, in the past decade, the hosting of several international events has set certain milestones and further stimulated the need to apply international-standard design quality to future large-scale development projects. In current legal terms, a design competition is defined as compulsory for large-scale construction projects apart from under some

circumstances, as specified by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the P. R. of China<sup>3</sup> (2008). In this respect, international design competitions have emerged as the platform for accumulating ideas to integrate international design quality into prominent construction projects in China. From November 7, 2011 to November 2, 2012, there were over 200 urban planning and design competitions held in China<sup>4</sup>. However, some of them have often been criticized for either their rigidity or vagueness, and relevant national regulations have been issued to avoid such blindly held international design competitions as “image projects”. As it stands, the in-depth and systematic analyses of design competitions and their evolution in China have been rare. Particularly, the adaptation of the design competition system in China under the various influences of socio-economic contextual considerations needs to be scrutinized. The substantial Chinese-Western culture gap and complicated social and political background render a different trajectory for international design competitions when compared to the Western model. Efforts are required to study systematically how design competitions have been transplanted and correlated with urban development and how design competitions could become feasible as key components of the bidding and tendering system for large-scale urban projects in China. It is of utmost importance to unwind the interrelations of the various stakeholders involved: What are the factors that affect the result of a competition project and what are their degrees of importance? What are the practical implications of promoting urban development as a whole?

Herein, we will present a case study of an international design competition in Guangzhou, representing an attempt to utilize international design competitions in guiding local urban development. Until 2010, there were 18 international design competitions calling for ideas on and solutions to Guangzhou’s strategic urban development issues (Lv, 2011). We will concentrate on one particular high-profile competition for the Baietan region.

We will start with a discussion on how the concept of the ‘trading zone’ can be used in analysing urban design and planning competitions. Then we will elaborate on the Baietan case, emphasizing how international design competitions are transplanted, and how they interact and develop in China. A comparative perspective will then be introduced on the historic development of design competitions in Finland, which represents a specific model of interaction with professionals, governments and the public. In the final part, the preliminary findings will be discussed and relevant implications will be drawn.

## **Research methods**

Alexander and Witzling (1990) state that most studies on design competitions - even those that are more systematic - are ‘prescriptive’ or ‘normative’: they tend to draw on anecdotal knowledge and intuitive experience and seem to aim primarily at the promotion and improvement of competitions. Malmberg (2006, 3) holds that there is a “confusion over the role of the competition itself and how it translates into the built piece of work”. This unsatisfactory situation may stem from the complex nature of design competitions: there are various levels of multidisciplinary communication among the stakeholders, there is heterogeneity in terms of jury members and their preferences, and there are different technologies of representation (such as images, texts, models and spoken discourses) and different cultural approaches and understandings among the entries.

To better deal with the dynamic and evolutionary processes of design competitions, we will utilize the concept of the trading zone, as introduced by Peter Galison (1997). The trading-zone concept was coined for the analysis of the coordinated interaction between scientists and professionals under certain local conditions where the structure of their interaction evolves towards a mutual hybrid language. Galison (1997) firstly employed the trading-zone concept to explain such phenomena as the development of radar during WW II - how theoretical physicists collaborated with radio engineers to exchange information and

services without a deeper comprehension of each other's respective disciplines. He argued that interdisciplinary 'inter-languages', analogous to semi-specific pidgins, or even full-fledged creoles, can be generated for the *local* coordination of different systems of discourse despite their *global* difference (Galison 1997, 783; Gorman, 2010, 8). It is the "local infrastructures of shared concepts and instruments that had enabled such exchange" (Galison, 1997, 803). Such local infrastructures Galison called trading zones (Galison, 1997, 803). He stressed the importance of conceiving "how these scientific subcultures connect to each other, to the surrounding world, and to change" (Galison, 2010, 30). Hence, it is interesting to study the feasibility of the concept of the trading zone in elaborating dilemmas and the complexity involved in contemporary design competitions in China, which are similarly confronted with manifold stakeholders with different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds in need of gaining cooperative capacity.

The aforementioned concepts have indeed been applied in a few planning studies already. Mäntysalo, Balducci and Kangasoja (2011) discuss the theoretical potentiality of the trading zone concept in re-examining the merits of the 'communicative thinness' of Charles E. Lindblom's partisan mutual adjustment, in the context of multi-cultural and multi-professional planning. In these challenging contexts, the communicative planning theory's stress on mutual understanding and consensus may be unfeasible, and the idea of deliberately aiming for 'thin descriptions' or inter-language and locally focused mutual coordination, instead of broad consensus, makes the trading zone perspective intriguing. Recently, in the book entitled *Urban Planning as a Trading Zone*, Balducci and Mäntysalo collected numerous case studies from Italian and Finnish researchers, applying the trading zone and boundary object concepts in urban planning (Balducci & Mäntysalo, 2013). According to Fedeli, ideas competitions can serve as a "device designed and promoted in order to produce new 'zones for trading' around 'problems of the public' in conditions in which traditional planning tools and devices have shown their limits and aporia" (Fedeli, 2013, 41). Furthermore, Mäntysalo, Balducci and Kangasoja (2011, 262) have stressed the importance of "practico-linguistical challenges involved in attempting to create local conditions for meaningful bargaining and compromising between the subcultures of interest groups - a trading zone of planning, where each party involved would have the capacity to sufficiently grasp the meaning of issues and solution proposals to be traded with".

In this article, we follow this line of research, taking design competitions as devices designed to produce new trading zones in the urban planning field. The aim is to scrutinize the relevance of generating trading zones in the context of international design competitions and to study the explanatory capacity of the concept in our particular case study in China. We will analyse how the inter-language is constituted, and how it evolves and is employed during the competition process to clarify the vague nature of the competition. Moreover, we will study what the crucial factors are in promoting better communication and interaction. The following questions will be answered:

1. How is the international design competition introduced, and how is it transplanted and used in interaction in China?
2. Is the international design competition of the case study meaningfully analysable using the trading-zone concept?
3. What are the implications brought about by the analysis for promoting better coordination between stakeholders in planning and design?

The research is based on document analysis and the interpretation of different levels of media and archives spanning government laws, the official design competition announcement, the competition evaluation public review and news in the local newspaper, on professional

forums and in official announcements. It is difficult to proceed with an interview study due to the complexity of competition procedure. Additionally, the technical documents for the design competition are not publicly accessible. On the other hand, there are fruitful publications recording the international design competition from the governmental, professional and public levels. Translations are strictly related to the original resources. The reliance on document interpretation from various levels of media could be criticized for the lack of first-hand information. In addition, translations by the authors may cause deviance. As this is the first stage of the research, the authors focused on the trajectory of international design competitions to gain more general insights into improving the competition system and its procedures.

### **The development of design competitions in Finland, Europe**

Design competitions have a long history in Europe, and nowadays, they play an increasingly important role in our built environment, particularly due to the changing regulations on public procurement in the course of European Union integration<sup>5</sup>. Especially in the Nordic countries, design competitions are considered as tools for guaranteeing design quality and stimulating innovations not only at the governmental, but also at the professional level. The design competition was adopted as a tool in the design and architectural policies of local and regional, even national, governments; a newly established policy field in the 1990s (Andersson, Kazemian & Rönn, 2009, 3).

As a country with a firm tradition regarding design competitions, Finland is chosen in our study as the country representing the development of the use of design competitions. In the early 20th century, Finland was an agricultural society<sup>6</sup>, and design competitions played an important role in the early industrialization of the country. At the professional level, architectural competitions in Finland have been administered by the Finnish Association of Architects (SAFA), and the competitions have been accepted as a common method to evolve innovative and qualitative proposals (Kazemian & Rönn, 2009). The development of the design competition policy in Finland is heavily rooted in the foundation of SAFA and it has been influenced by the Swedish rules (Huotelin & Kaipainen, 2006; Solla, 1992). Over the past few years, there have been over 2000 design competitions held in Finland. Almost all open competitions in Finland are well documented and publicly accessible; the results of invited competitions are published on the SAFA website, in the Museum of Finnish Architecture and in the appendix of the *Finnish Architectural Review* that is periodically published by SAFA (Huotelin & Kaipainen, 2006). The open sources provide information for researchers and make the competition procedures more transparent for the public. The Finnish competition rules are considered as the result of 130 years of continuous improvement and they have steered the development of the architectural system (Huotelin & Kaipainen, 2006, 1). Therefore, it is necessary and valuable to introduce the Finnish design competition as a comparative background to understand the trajectory of international design competitions in China better, along with China's reform of its planned economy to a market economy since 1979.

### **International design competitions in China**

Since the late 1990s, international design competitions have been widely held in connection with consultancies for prominent projects. Along with this development, the involvement of international design firms has become the norm, such as the international consultation on the Lujiazui financial and trade zone in Shanghai, with British, Italian, French and Japanese design firms involved (Wu, 2007; Olds, 2001). Up to 2007, there were up to 222 projects that had been designed by foreign professionals (Xue, 2008).

Driven by the tremendous need for urban development and the shortage of qualified professionals, a large number of foreign design firms opened branches in China. Foreign design firms were initially allowed to provide only consulting services for development projects, also meaning that they had to cooperate with a qualified local design institution on the design proposal implementation<sup>7</sup>. In December 2002, an amendment to this regulation was issued; and in September 2009, the first foreign company, KH Architects, became qualified to proceed with and implement design work in China on its own. This path of development reveals the unique adaptation of international design competitions in the context of Chinese policies and culture.

In China, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development under the State Council is responsible for uniformly supervising and administrating the design bidding of construction project schemes across the country. Due to the lack of professional competition rules, design competitions in China relied initially on the “Bidding Law of the People's Republic of China” issued in 1999. The law was mainly used for the business-tendering field. In 2003, the “Measures for Survey and Design Bidding of Construction Projects” was issued. It has problems that need to be further addressed, such as no guarantee on design-knowledge property rights, the ill-focused pursuit of international design formats and a lack of transparency during the competition process and subsequent project assignments. In 2008, the issued “Administrative Measures for Design Bidding of Construction Project Schemes”<sup>8</sup> clearly defined the issue of compensation, knowledge property rights, jury panels, evaluation criteria, types and forms, qualifications of tenderers, and content of the bidding plans etc. In particular, it aimed to clarify the position of the international design competition in the Chinese construction market, such as to what degree a foreign design could proceed to a national/large-scale project, and thereby standardize the design activities of the foreign design firm. However, the professionals are still critical, as the evaluation of the design bidding process is not transparent and accessible. Moreover, opening international design competitions without rules on the assignment of the project vis-à-vis the winning entry is specific. As yet, no concise form of professional competition rules concerning the interrelations between the organizer, competitor and jury panels on international competitions have been set (Dai, 2011).

### **Interactions of stakeholders in international design competitions**

As previously described, competition procedures are established by the professional organizations in the Finnish design competition scheme. On the other hand, Chinese professionals have adapted themselves to the development of international design competitions. The domestic professionals have been mainly trained within a physical design perspective, and urban planning practice has followed a much narrower guideline compared with that in the West (Abramson, 2002; Wu, 2007); they are capable of dealing with the new component of the market economy in a limited sense, such as with the development of the central business district (Wu, 2007). The reform of domestic planning and design knowledge and practice is inevitable. Dai (2011) pointed out that the competitive atmosphere also stimulates the internal structural adjustment of the domestic design institution and promotes communication and exchange regarding design knowledge. To professionals, both international and local, international design competitions now offer, more than ever, tremendous opportunities as well as risks. On the one hand, international design competitions have offered great learning opportunities for local professionals. Through the competition mechanism, willingly or reluctantly, they have been pushed to improve their design skills to reach an international standard, instead of passively accepting assigned projects from the government - while the international professionals have been able to test their abilities under multi-cultural circumstances. On the other hand, fierce disputes have also arisen with respect

to cultural, social and interest conflicts on different design quality values. Rem Koolhaas' controversial winning entry in the international design competition of the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) building was spotlighted due to the openness of the design issue, leaving space for a strenuous lobbying campaign (Sudjic, 2005). This led to a fierce dispute involving both the public and the professionals. Peigen Peng, a well-known architect, has criticized how China is now served as "the new weapon testing zone for some foreign architects via international design competitions, and they are aimlessly pursuing for visual stimulation and designing monster-like buildings which they have no chance to realize in their own country"<sup>9</sup>. Last but not least, the implementation work of winning design proposals from international design competitions is normally carried out by local professionals, since most foreign design firms have been qualified to provide design consulting services only. Therefore, Xue (2008) criticized the unfairly low number of commissions and heavy workloads for local professionals compared to the significant number of commissions for the foreign designers.

As for the decision makers, the international design competition could offer them the chance of accumulating international design ideas and thus it can be used to enable the reconsideration of their decisions. However, the design solutions brought about by the competitions are often in serious conflict with the project context. Some large-scale public-building image projects have been constructed without quality control to brag about the urban development of the city at an international standard. One document<sup>10</sup> striving to avoid blindly held international design competitions on a large-scale public building, jointly issued by five ministries in 2007, made recommendations on academic and transparent decision-making for design initiatives, evaluation and control of design quality and project budget, having concern for the type and form of design competitions and devising competition document records and feasibility studies on project implementation. Domestic design competitions are promoted instead of the aimless pursuit of international competitions. For the developers, along with the increasing internationalization of China, the aim is to promote the local project at the international level, to obtain more profit and recognition. For the public, it is rather new to be informed about the decision-making process. An online exhibition, with public votes for the favourite, is normally chosen. Even though it is not clear how public opinion is evaluated during the final decision-making process, the online exhibition of the design proposals surely promotes public awareness of the ongoing projects in the major urban areas.

In the field of urban planning, which is closely related to local social, economic and political conditions, an international design competition has normally been adopted as a consulting service. For example, the results of the international conceptual urban planning design competition of Shanghai World Expo 2010 partly made the government rethink the initially defined Expo project site, and they finally changed the project site from the mainland to the riverfront site (Yang, 2003). The organizer of the international design competition has relatively more freedom to define how to use the winning entry and advance the concept compared to tendering. International design competitions have been accepted as tools for accumulating design knowledge in the major cities of China (Xu & Cai, 1999; Wu, 2007; Peng & Jiang, 2005; Dai, 2011).

Even though the international competitions in China could serve as vehicles for coordinating and facilitating multi-cultural interaction, they are adapted to the corresponding social and political background and they vary greatly depending on how the organizer operates the design competition. We will conduct a study on a case with a relatively well-developed organizational and operational system in terms of using the international design competition as a consulting service (Peng & Jiang, 2005) to better scrutinize the impact of an international design competition in the rapid urbanization of China. In the case study, the analytical potential of the concept of the trading zone is examined by analysing how the inter-language of the design competition was constituted, how it evolved and how it was applied.

### Case study: The international design competition as a consulting service to advance strategic planning in Guangzhou

Guangzhou is the third largest city in China and it is one of the five national central cities<sup>11</sup>. Xu and Yeh (2003) note that the declining role of Guangzhou City and its unregulated growth have pressured the city to devise new planning initiatives for new urban development in order to enhance the city's future competitiveness. Arranging international design competitions was seen as an essential tool to accumulate design excellence for promoting urban development in Guangzhou. The core of the international design competition of Baietan, in 2008, was a simplified conception of the urban redevelopment scheme, which aimed to redefine the city boundary. From June to September of 2000, the Guangzhou City Planning Bureau invited five national top planning institutes<sup>12</sup> to consult on the city's strategic development plan, which aims to develop Guangzhou as an international regional centre and as a shanshui<sup>13</sup> eco city, with a spatial strategy of expanding the south, optimizing the north, advancing the east and coupling the west. After years of effort, five new centres<sup>14</sup> with different functions as motors of spatial development were proposed and are scheduled to be built in the next few decades, as illustrated in Figure 1. There have been 18 international design competitions held to call for ideas and solutions on developing these five new proposed centres.

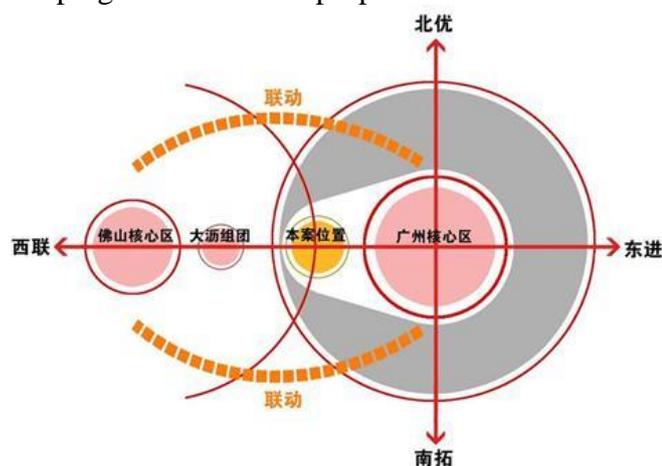


Figure 1. The systematic illustration of the strategic position of the case study area: Baietan. Source: Design proposal of the School of Architecture and Urban Planning of Tongji University, Shanghai.

*Note:*

*The orange ring in the middle of the image indicates Baietan area.*

*The pink ring on the left side of the image indicates Foshan area, and the smallest pink ring indicates the Dali area.*

*The largest pink ring at the right side indicates the Guangzhou core area.*

*The red arrows indicate the spatial development policy of expanding the south, optimizing the north, advancing the east and integrating the west.*

The Baietan area is a strategically important western gateway, functioning as a new symbolic area and a new commercial centre. To better promote the future of the Baietan area, a two-stage design competition was held. According to the official announcement, in the first stage, ten qualified teams (based on their draft design proposals, professional experiences, design team members, previously accomplished projects and service credibility) were selected to send in their official design proposals. It was mandatory that the participating teams had to have nationally specified qualifications or constitute a qualified team with a domestic design partner. From March 11 to June 27 of 2008, in the second stage, they were to get 800,000 RMB (tax included) as compensation if their proposals were approved after the technical evaluation. Two winning proposals would be selected and the runner-up was to be comp-

ensated with 200,000 RMB as award money. On July 9 and 10, 2008, proposals No. 2 and 5 were announced as the winning entries (Figures 2 and 3) from six qualified design institutions<sup>15</sup>. Shortly after the competition, important local officials, including the mayor, the first deputy mayor, the vice mayor and the secretary of the municipal party committee, visited the exhibition of competition proposals and made their comments on the further development of the master plan. They suggested the commissioning of an international first-class consulting company to make an independent evaluation of the design proposals and suggest the next steps. In February 2009, the international design firm SOM (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) from the USA was appointed by the government as the contractor to synthesize the competition results and further refine the urban design on a more detailed level.



Figures 2 and 3. Winning design proposals 2 and 5 of the Baietan design competition. Source: The Urban Planning Bureau of Guangzhou.

### 广州市白鹅潭地区控制性详细规划



Figure 4. Final regulatory plan of the Baietan area, Guangzhou.  
Source: The Urban Planning Bureau of Guangzhou.

The Baietan area was approved as the “heart of Guangzhou and Foshan”, as an “international business center” and as the “Shanshui liveable city” within the final regulatory plan (see Figure 4). In February 2010, the plenary meeting of the governmental standing committee was held to review and approve the final master plan. On November 5, 2010, the results of the regulatory plan were reviewed by the urban planning committee. On June 8, 2011, another plenary meeting of the governmental standing committee was held, and the final regulatory plan of Baietan was approved. Especially, a 600-metre-high building was proposed as the highest landmark for Guangzhou. However, in April 2012, after the succession of the district government leadership, the approved planning and design of Baietan were put under another round of modification. On June 26, 2013, the name of the Baietan urban planning and design project was officially coined as the “Huadi (Flower Village) eco city plan”, and the planning content was modified by the planning committee of Guangzhou. A three-kilometre-long waterfront area and 500-metre-high landmark will be constructed (Figure 5; Baietan Administrative Committee)<sup>16</sup>. The approved “heart of Guangzhou and Foshan”, the “international business center” and the “Shanshui liveable city” were further modified to the “international water-fronted business centre” and the “western hub of a metropolitan area”. The Baietan international business centre was regarded as the start-up zone of the Huadi (Flower Village) eco city.



Figure 5. The rendered graphic of Baietan business centre as a start-up zone of the Huadi (Flower Village) eco city, Guangzhou, 2013.  
Source: The official site of the LW government, Guangzhou.

### **The evolution of inter-language on procedures, design issues and regulations**

In the case study, the technical document (see Diagram 1) served as the main document to instruct the competition process including the technical and standard articles: The technical article presents the design guidelines with a focus on design principles, which are carefully examined by studying the project context, related urban planning policy, project feasibility study, design regulation and related documents. The standard articles specify the responsibilities and obligations of stakeholders involved with a connection to national and international legislation; they aim to create a fair competition environment. The technical documents serve as both the competition brief and rules, referring to the Finnish model. The competition consulting committee constitutes the core of coordination and communication during the competition process. It integrates the language of legislation, design, technical feasibility and management to instruct the design competition. The procedure can be understood as a framework or as an example for the local translation of international urban planning and design knowledge.

By reviewing the project context and flow at the design competition specification phase of the Baietan case, the design and planning issues were specified mainly as follows:

The initial function of Baietan area is the central area of “Guangzhou and Foshan metropolitan circle”, the motor of “coupling the west”, the new landmark area of the western city and new central business area. The focuses are the headquarters economy, modern service such as logistics, creative industries, business & trade and historical tourism and certain residential functions. The participating units should highlight the layout of “shanshui eco city” and “historical culture city” based on the in-depth analysis of the future role of Baietan in the context of urban social-economic development; conserve the original river environment of “clean water & fragrant flowers” and highlight the concept of liveable city, following the planning standard of the modern city business and trade area; develop the geographical advantage, integrate the city with bridge and tunnel construction crossing the Zhujiang River; the design should have high profile,

express new thinking, following zoning instruction, represent an integrated design concept to ensure the integration of landscape and control.

*From the design competition announcement (not including the detailed requirements for urban design)*

From the official documentation of the competition results (Lv, 2011), the winning proposal No. 2 was singled out due to its structural idea of “one region, one axis, two cores and ten sections”, which responded to the design requirement of “following zoning instructions, represent an integrated design concept to ensure the integration of landscape and control”, in its design strategy of setting up “a central office service area, highlighting cultural assets and creations, shaping a liveable residential area and fostering eco leisure” and focusing on “headquarters economy, high-end service, cultural and creative industries and leisure tourism”, which was also closely related to the focus of “headquarters economy, modern service such as logistics, creative industries, business & trade and historical tourism and consider certain residential function” from the design announcement. Moreover, proposal 2 was regarded to correspond closely with the overall strategic planning of “coupling the west” and “central area adaption”. On the other hand, proposal 5 is highlighted as an “eco and central intelligent city”. Based on its thorough analysis of the context and geographical design, the planning concept of “organic integration” was introduced as a response to the design requirement to “develop the geographic advantage and future function of Baietan”. The functional idea of proposal 5 was defined as a “central intelligence district of the metropolitan area of Guangzhou and Foshan with international impact”, which also follows the initial function of Baietan area as a “central area of Guangzhou and Foshan metropolitan circle”.

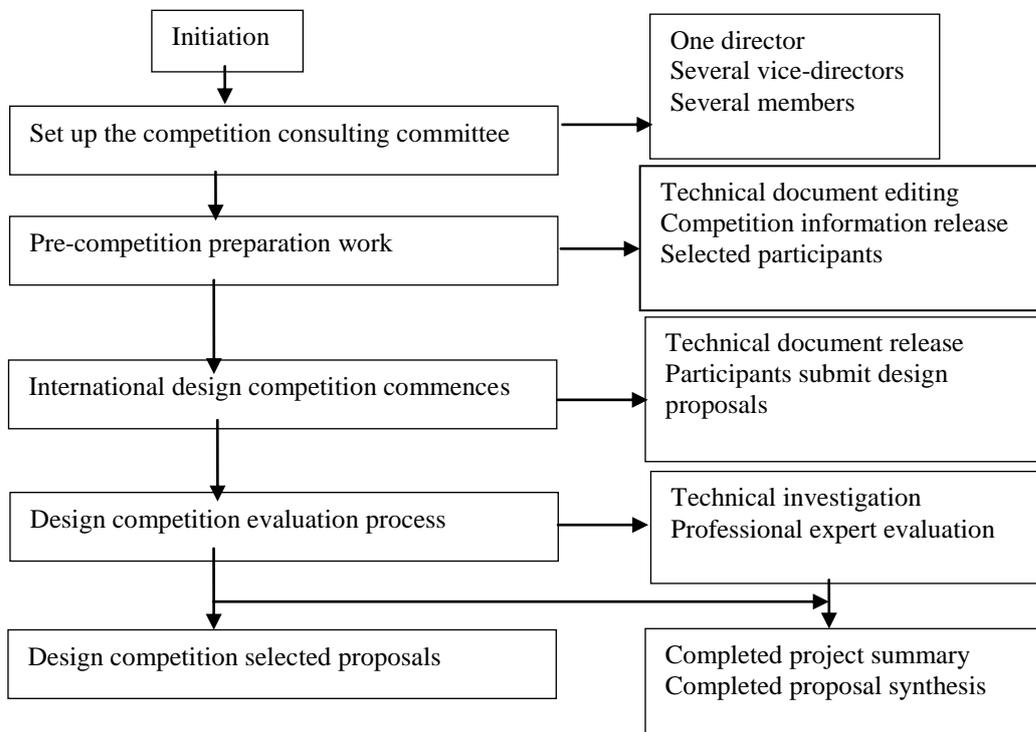


Diagram 1. The project workflow of the international design competition in Guangzhou.  
Source: Peng & Jiang (2005, 2).

As can be concluded, the evolution of inter-languages from both proposal 2 and 5 is closely integrated into the design initiatives of the organizer, which were set in the framework of the

spatial function of the Baietan area. The inter-language of the regulatory plan in 2011 of the “heart of Guangzhou and Foshan”, an “international business center” and a “clean water & fragrant flowers liveable city” can be considered as an integrated outcome of consultations from a series of design competitions. The generated inter-language enriched the urban planning and design language in the field towards sustainable development and constituted a trading zone towards better communication. The invitation to the international design firm SOM from the USA as an independent consultant to synthesize the competition results shows the willingness of the government to make a power shift. However, through the substantial change towards an “international water-fronted business centre” and a “western hub of metropolitan area” along with the governmental succession in 2013, it shows the strong role of the governmental initiatives on the use of inter-languages. Under the new definition of the “western hub of metropolitan area”, the spatial function of Baietan area has been substantially altered. In the network platform<sup>17</sup> for consulting governance, it was argued that the new plan has lowered the strategic importance of Baietan, and it was further pointed out that the concept of the “eco city” is similar to other project concepts: “the local planning professional seems poor in vocabulary now”. However, at least new design and planning concepts towards sustainable development have been published and discussed.

As is shown in Diagram 2, with a review of the general contemporary design competition process in Finland, it is revealed that the inter-languages of design competitions are well regulated and documented in the competition system. With the assistance of professional or technical advisers, the competition sponsor defines the brief scheme and the ultimate objectives of the competition, generating the initial vocabulary of the design competition. The professional or technical adviser is also responsible for assisting in the selection of the jury board and setting up the procedural rules (competition conditions), which are to be obeyed during the competition process. Design issues, visions, hypotheses and their related resources are produced and tested during the process. In addition, the inter-language is generated and specified, such as the agreed design issue in the competition announcement. During the competition phase, the jury determines the qualities in the competitors’ entries and selects winners according to the selection criteria specified in the project program document/competition brief, aiming at consensus at the professional level. Up to the post-competition phase, the competition report is published and evaluated by the public or other stakeholders, leading to a new hybrid vocabulary. In particular, it is required that the jury panel shall write a report including: “a description of the competition task, a general evaluation of the competition, entry-specific evaluations of all competition entries, a decision on the distribution of prizes and reasons for the decision, a recommendation for further action, possible dissenting opinions, possible expert opinions, and essential pictorial and textual material relating to the entries” (SAFA competition rules, 2008, 4). Most of the jury report is publicly accessible, contributing to a forum for further debate and communication. From Finland’s Architectural Policy (Finlands Arkitekturpolitik, 24), 1998: “Competitions are a complementary form of education and open up possibilities for new planners. The large number of solutions presented for competitions make it easier for people to discuss alternative possibilities for developing the environment”. The transparency and openness of design competition resources offer a platform for the evolution of inter-language interaction with the public. In particular, it opens up the chance for young professionals for learning and practicing.

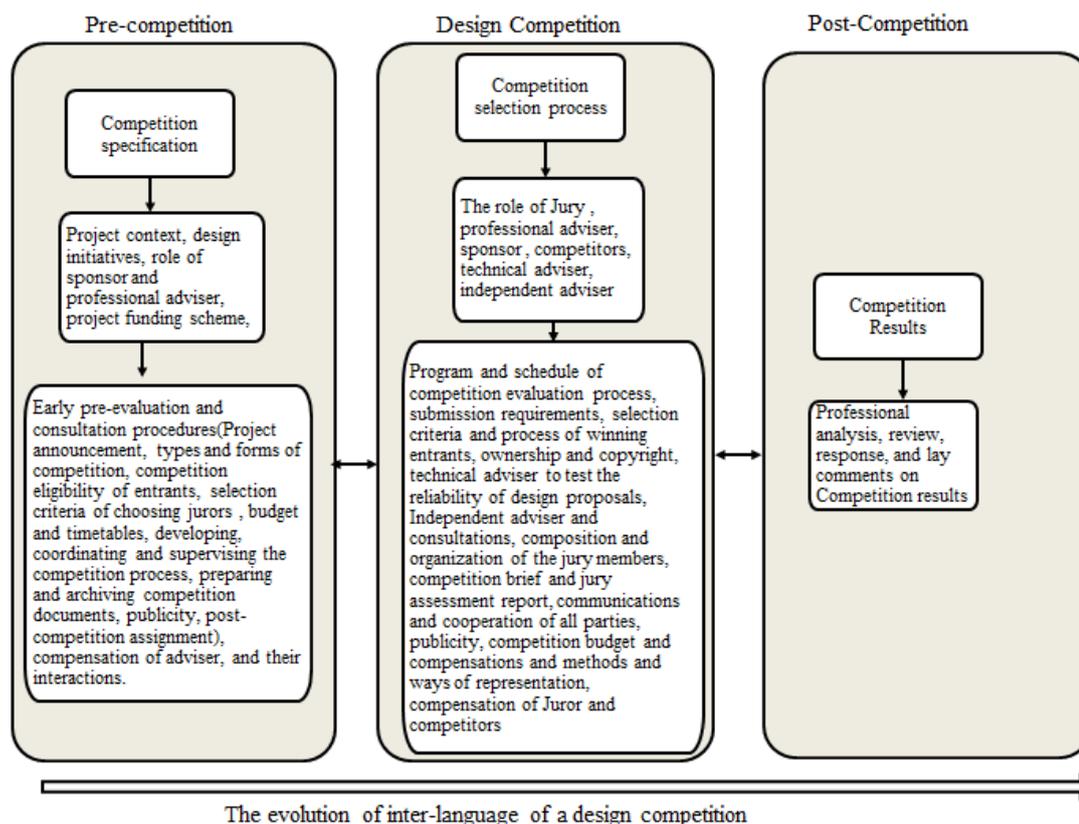


Diagram 2. The general competition process in Finland.

In the Guangzhou case study, the competition process (see Diagram 3) is generally similar to the general competition process in Finland. During the pre-competition phase, design issues are produced and tested mainly with the national design competition in 2000, with the aim of improving the competitiveness of the city as a national central city. During the competition phase, the inter-language that is generated is closely responded to with the design requirements with the consensus of the jury and technical experts at the professional level. Up to the post-competition phase, an online public exhibition is organized. However, the participating bodies are required to have national first-class qualifications in urban planning and design. The chance for young professionals to participate is still limited. Stakeholders involved in the competition are still confined to the elite class. Competition proposals and results are exhibited and are open to public evaluation, but the jury report is still not publicly accessible.

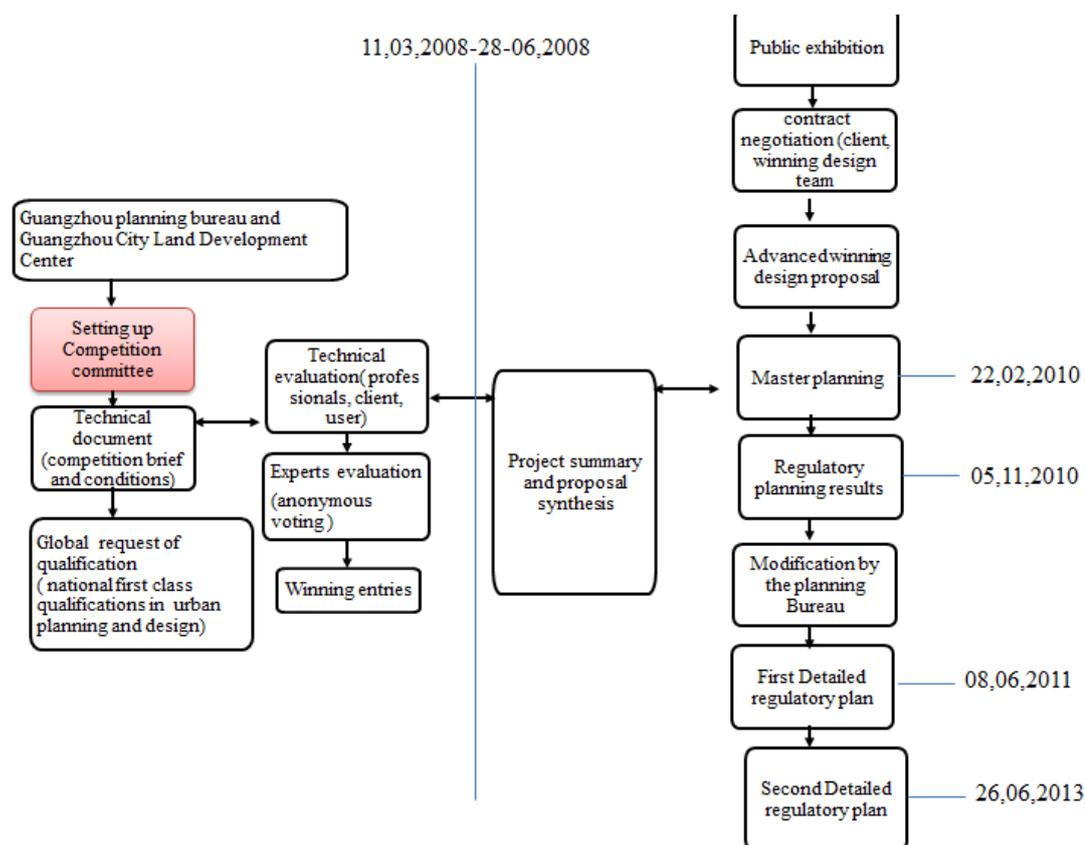


Diagram 3. The procedural analysis of the international design competition of Baietan.

As Galison (2010, 44) states: “Images, symbol systems, calculational and diagrammatic schemes - even complex objects - could be part of a generalized notion of language that is far from ‘just words’ in the trading zone”. Through our analysis of the procedures, design forms and regulations, we found that the Baietan case in Guangzhou not only served as a platform for promoting multi-cultural communication among the stakeholders mainly in the elite class, but was also deemed as a ‘design trading zone’ with an evolving inter-language, which is closely related to the social, political and economic settings in China.

### Preliminary conclusions

This article focuses on the recent transplantation, application and development of international design competitions in China by scrutinizing an illustrative case. Due to the less-defined competition rules and the unique Chinese context, practical competition procedures differed from the Finnish model. Moreover, the competitive market gave the stakeholders different initiatives to hold design competitions. Other than generating inter-language on design knowledge at an international level, the publicity from advertising the urban development is of greater interest for the local government, the developer and the professionals. In other words, in most cases, the topic of the competition is not only focused on a design solution, but refers to wider social, political and economic interests along with the economic transition and rapid urbanization. It suggests that the governmental influence on the final proposal at the end stage of the competition cannot be ignored; potentially inducing major changes to the final master plan. We further argue that the transposition of the international design competition system in Guangzhou served as a ‘designed trading zone’ with an evolving inter-language, which actually fostered local settings to improve communication and cooperation on design knowledge. Design issues, competition procedures

and regulations were changed along with the international design competition in the case study. Based on the analytical concept of trading zone, it was shown that the evolution of an 'inter-language' on design forms, procedures and regulations of the 'designed trading zone' has been rendering the competition for producing design knowledge, although the implementation of design knowledge could be closely related to the local settings and limited to an elite class. It is crucial to foster systematic local settings to leverage the knowledge input of international design competition systems.

To better use the design knowledge while avoiding unnecessary costs, we argue for the development of competition rules and systems to facilitate the flow of inter-languages generated by competitions. First, international design competitions in Guangzhou are, in a way, adapted to redistribute more power to the professionals, the organizer, the developers and the public, and this is consistent with Sagalyn (2006). Note that this coincidental agreement may not stem from the original idea of considering competitions as tools to redistribute power intentionally (Sagalyn, 2006); instead, it is more likely to originate from the inherently complicated governmental role in the Chinese design competition business. In addition, young professionals are still not fully engaged in the process. International design competitions offer learning chances for young professionals, who will be confronted with increasingly competitive markets. A well-organized archival system on the inter-language generated will constitute a space for the evolution of inter-language for the public and for young talent. Second, integrative approaches for the pre-competition and post-competition phases need to be addressed. As previously described, the implementation of foreign design is mainly carried out by local professionals, who might possess considerable cultural and professional educational discrepancies when compared to their Western counterparts. Moreover, the contextual requirements and the users' design and planning needs are important, and should be involved and reflected in the pre-competition integration to enrich the inter-language of the trading zone. Third, in the case of Baietan, it became a hot topic not only in the public media but also in the professional forum. In this regard, it would be beneficial to involve the public in a specific project through serious investigation ahead of the competition, such as by integrating user opinions into the competition program. This approach could effectively introduce more integrated design criteria as an enriched and effective inter-language to the designer and planner and foster more appropriate design proposals. Sudjic (2006) argues that a successful competition system would allow the competitions to become a norm and for them to be used in different ways to reduce the costs associated with unnecessary rework, to identify new talent and to nurture it. Other than focusing on place or name promotion through the usage of large-scale competitions, the balance of the interests of all stakeholders involved needs to be addressed before the competition to enable the generation of an inclusive and effective inter-language for the design competition. With an inclusive and effective enough design competition trading zone, we are able to not only re-image the city but also put ideas into practice to promote urban development as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Design competitions in this article refer only to contemporary large-scale architectural design, urban design and planning competitions, which are issued in public.

<sup>2</sup> Large-scale projects in this article refer to projects that are commonly used as strategic planning and development instruments for urban development in both Europe and China. They are usually exceptional in size and scale having substantial impacts on our built environment. They are often combined with flagship developments, such as the development of a new city centre or the regeneration of brownfield areas. They often trigger new infrastructure construction and spatial changes with political and socio-economic implications.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted from the competition regulation, “Administrative Measures for Design Bidding of Construction Project Schemes”, if any of the following circumstances apply, then the design of that project may be exempted from bidding upon approval of the related department:

-The project involves national security or state secrets;

-The project is for emergency treatment and disaster relief;

-The major techniques and technology employ certain patents or knowhow, or there are special requirements for the architectural modeling;

-The technology is so complicated or professional that there are fewer than three design institutions that can satisfy the conditions and no effective competition can be formed;

-A completed project needs to be reconstructed, expanded, or needs technical reform, and design by other institutions will affect the support functions of the project;

- Any other circumstances provided by any laws or regulations under which the design bidding may be exempted.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted from the official bidding information platform for the construction industry in China

(<http://www.jszhaobiao.com/search.html?keyword=%B3%C7%CA%D0%C9%E8%BC%C6&keywordand=&keywordnot=&scope=2&area=&dt=365&advflag=&btms=1%2C2%2C5%2C6%2C8%2C9>).

<sup>5</sup> It is connected with the EU Directive on Project Competitions (Directive 2004/18/EC), which provides common procurement regulations and laws for the Member States.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to statistics Finland 1917-2007. Retrieved from [http://www.stat.fi/tup/suomi90/helmikuu\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/tup/suomi90/helmikuu_en.html).

<sup>7</sup> According to the regulation announced in 2000 by the Ministry of Construction of the P. R. of China., “Relevant Questions Concerning the Submission of Special Project Design Qualifications by Wholly Foreign-owned Project Design Consultancy Enterprises or Organizations.” May 2000. Retrieved from

[http://www.mohurd.gov.cn/zcfg/jsbwj\\_0/jsbwjqt/200611/t20061101\\_153189.html](http://www.mohurd.gov.cn/zcfg/jsbwj_0/jsbwjqt/200611/t20061101_153189.html)

<sup>8</sup> As reported by the official *China Construction News* from an interview with Mr Wang ZaoSheng, the Vice Director of the Administrative Department of the Construction Market of the Ministry of Construction. Retrieved from

[http://www.chinajsb.cn/gb/content/2008-04/05/content\\_239918.htm](http://www.chinajsb.cn/gb/content/2008-04/05/content_239918.htm)

<sup>9</sup> As reported from Lei Cheng, “China Cannot Be the Testing Zone of Buildings of Evil.” *China Youth Daily*, published on March 16, 2009. Retrieved from [http://zqb.cvol.com/content/2009-03/16/content\\_2582196.htm](http://zqb.cvol.com/content/2009-03/16/content_2582196.htm)

<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Construction, State Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Supervision, the Audit Commission of China. In order to deal with such situations, on January 11, 2007, they jointly issued “Several Opinions on Enhancing the Administration of Large-scale Public Building Projects” to avoid blindly held international design competitions, which might undermine the sustainability of resources and energy, conservation, land use, the landscape, functionality and security. Retrieved from [http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2007-01/11/content\\_492868.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2007-01/11/content_492868.htm)

<sup>11</sup> The national central city is a concept proposed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China in 2005 as a first step in reforming urbanization in China. National central cities are described as a group of cities responsible for leading, developing and performing tasks of a political, economic, and cultural nature. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Central\\_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Central_City)

<sup>12</sup> The Chinese Academy of Urban Planning and Design, the Institute of Urban Planning and Design of Tsinghua University, the School of Architecture and Urban Planning of Tongji University, the Centre of Urban and Regional Research of Zhongshan University, and the Guangzhou Academy of Urban Planning, Survey and Design.

<sup>13</sup> Shanshui is a Chinese concept that represents maintaining the geographic mountain and water characteristics of the landscape.

<sup>14</sup> Zhujiang New City: central financial service zone; Pazhou area: international exhibitional zone; Baiyun new city area: residential cultural zone; Baietan area: Guangzhou and Foshan integrated example zone; the new city central southern area: the regional administrative centre.

<sup>15</sup> The Shanghai Urban Planning & Design Research Institute; Guangdong Urban & Rural Planning and Design Institute and KD Architects Singapore; Shanghai Tongji Urban Planning Design Institute and Guangzhou Urban Planning & Design Studio; Architecture Design & Research Institute of SCUT and Guangxi Hualan Design & Consulting Group; China Academy of Urban Planning and Design; Guangzhou Urban Planning & Design Survey Research Institute and EDAA Shanghai.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted from online official news:

[http://www.lw.gov.cn/zwgk/13114/13115/mryw/ldxx/201306/t20130628\\_232042.htm](http://www.lw.gov.cn/zwgk/13114/13115/mryw/ldxx/201306/t20130628_232042.htm)

<sup>17</sup> As quoted from the online platform: <http://wz.nfdaily.cn/Content/138412.htm>