

Some thoughts for a sustainable tourism development strategy for Sanshui District of Foshan City

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"City of Water" as the key theme for Sanshui

The first task when proposing a tourism development and marketing strategy should be the identification of outstanding features and place identity. A central problem with tourism strategies in China is that one place often copies the other and destinations become so interchangeable. This leads to tourist dissatisfaction and neutralises marketing efforts. It is therefore essential to study the place identity, and especially to identify the unique selling points (USP). What is it that Sanshui has and other places don't? Sometimes, the top attraction of a place cannot compete with those of neighbouring cities, because they all are better in this regard, but a secondary attraction stands out because it is unique and only available in one place.

In the case of Sanshui, I consider the confluence of the three rivers and the surrounding water landscape as the unique selling point. The mountainous regions in the north are attractive, but would have to compete against Qingyuen and Zhaoqing. Xinan has a potential for urban tourism, but cannot outshine Shunde, Zhongshan or even Guangzhou. However, if we look at the topography of the Pearl River Delta, Sanshui clearly stands out as a crucial location, where major rivers meet and form a water landscape representative for the Delta as a whole, but characteristic for the particular place as well.

The distinctive form of the river courses should become the "name card" of the city. This would not only harmonise with the name, but incidentally, the rivers' shape strikingly resembles the Chinese character of "shui". Both can nicely be used for image campaigns and enhance place recognition significantly. Name, shape and character are in harmony and will easily be remembered. Sanshui shall be promoted as a place of water and as the core of the Pearl River Delta landscape. This refers to natural features, the rich water-related culture and to some extent also to economic activities such as the beverage industry.

A strong connection of place identity and marketing strategy can be seen as a crucial element of sustainability. A sustainable strategy addresses not only the interests of the tourists, but also of the sentiment of the local people, and it is not based on artificially installed tourist attractions but on deeply-rooted and therefore lasting features.

The Sanshui water landscape and its appreciation

I have often been asked by European visitors, where they can go to appreciate the typical landscape of the Pearl River Delta. Because of the speed of industrialisation and urbanisation in this region, it is increasingly hard to recommend a place. Sanshui should strive to fill this gap and promote its water landscape to foreign and domestic tourists as well as to the young people in the cities of the Pearl River Delta, who are also losing the connection to the natural and cultural heritage of their home region.

The typical landscape of the Pearl River Delta is formed by rivers and watercourses with wooden boats floating on the water surface, green hills, alluvium, farm land, dikes and fish ponds. Characteristic plants are ficus microcarpa, bamboo and banana trees. The villages, field and hills are connected by water transport, often more than by roads, many major temples and ancestor halls are facing the water and local farmers and fishermen used to celebrate festivals and family ceremonies at or on the water. The traditional way of using land and water in this area reflects the wisdom the local people and presents the identity and unique characters of this area with its harmony, authenticity, productivity and beauty.

If we want to preserve the heritage and develop Sanshui in a sustainable way, we have to look at landscape in a holistic way - as natural landscape with ecological value, as cultural landscape with heritage value and as scenery with aesthetic value. In terms of cultural heritage, Sanshui keeps an official catalogue of 28 authorised relics of different age and preservation levels, which are scattered in its towns, suburbs, villages and fields. Preservation of this historical heritage is of course important, but the local identity of places is not only presented in some outstanding spots, but by the local life and the relationship of people and nature. The tourism industry can infuse some material value into a basic requirement of all sustainable development - the protection of landscape and place identity.

For tourists, three main approaches to the appreciation of the Sanshui water landscape appear feasible. The first is a basically sightseeing-oriented approach at certain viewpoints, the most important being in my view Kundu Hill, because it allows the best view of the merging rivers. Those viewpoints should be reachable by tourist busses, cars and public transport. The locations as such should be freely accessible, but revenue can be derived from charges for view-towers, sale of tourism products and restaurants. View-towers could be imagined at other places as well, but at the moment, no such location is developed for tourism.

Economically and ecologically more sustainable is the second approach, which is to use the waterways for boat tours. There would be a wide range of concrete products to be offered - starting from small individual canoes to tourist cruise boats with catering facilities. The former would be more suitable for smaller watercourses, whereas the latter could cruise the main rivers and connect key points such as Hekou Pier, Kundu Hill and Qinsha Island in Xinan as well as link them to places further upstream such as Lubao. In fact, the cruise route on the North River (Beijiang) would be an important means to channel some of the tourism development from the core area at the confluence of the three rivers to the northern parts of Sanshui District. Apart from this crucial axis, ways should be explored to create loops for circular boat tours, probably on smaller boats. At the moment, boat tours are basically impossible.

Another innovative and highly sustainable approach is cycling tourism. This tourism segment has recently experienced a boom in Europe. In Germany, for example, more than 40 % of all holiday-makers use the bicycle at some point and more than 10 % use it much or very much during their holidays. Cycling tourism has become a recognised economic factor, especially in rural areas. A major advantage is that tourism revenue does not concentrate in the urban areas. Cycling tourism in China is also becoming more popular. This refers to tour operators for international tourism as well as for bicycle travelling clubs of mainly students and young people in Guangzhou and other Chinese cities.

Cycling routes in Sanshui should include the dikes along the major rivers and small rural roads. The former allows panoramic views, a smooth road surface and easy navigation. The latter emerges the tourist more in the landscape, allows contact to locals and facilitates consumption along the way. At the moment, there are attractive routes for cyclists, but neither is there any bicycle rental service nor suitable signage. The route along the Beijiang is not usable uninterruptedly.

Some recommended tourism spots for landscape appreciation

Given that the confluence of the three rivers, Xijiang, Beijiang, Suijiang, would be the focal point of tourism development, **Kundu Hill** will be a crucial location. It offers a good view over the rivers and the surrounding landscape. The merging of Xijiang and Beijiang is marked by their two different colours of water mixing, which is quite an interesting phenomenon to watch. Furthermore the hill in itself is also a nice place. There is a small historical village at the front of the mountain, and towards the back at the river, a temple. The hill itself is not very high, but on top there is a water tower, which provides a good view if one manages to get on top. Neither the hill nor the water tower is formally accessible for tourists, but it would need only marginal measures to change this. Alternatively, the water tower could be replaced by a purpose-made view-tower. The foot of the hill is directly at the short waterway connecting Xijiang and Beijiang. This would be a suitable point to build a modest pier for pleasure boats and water taxis to stop. So far, Kundu Hill is difficult to reach - especially with public transport. For several reasons as much as possible of the visitor traffic should be handled over the river rather than by road.

Another major spot nearby should be **Hekou Pier** with its remarkable semi-bridge including a slightly run-down seafood restaurant. The bridge itself needs some renovation, but it is still a landmark. The pier should develop into a major starting point for river cruises and water taxis to go to places such as Kundu Hill, Lu Bao or Qinsha Island as well as to the centre of Xinan town. Hekou as a whole could be developed into a place for tourists to visit. There are historical buildings and potentially attractive streets and much space for shops, waterfront promenades and outside dining. Especially intriguing is a former customs house, which stands out for its architecture and size. It features open galleries on the side towards the river and balconies that offer a good view of the waterfront. The customs house would make a wonderful restaurant with inside and outside dining. Hekou could become a Sanshui "Stanley" (after the place with this name in the South of Hong Kong Island), and the customs house could follow the example of the Murray House in Stanley.

A third point of interest near the confluence of the rivers is **Qinsha Island**. The elongated sandy island within Xijiang features two villages, agricultural land, bamboo plantations and rather unused flat wetland, which is occasionally flooded and should provide good shelter for birds. Its north-western side with the villages can be reached from the mainland by ferry. The pier should become a landing point of water taxis and pleasure boat, and the village could provide a restaurant and simple accommodation. The south-eastern side should not be accessible, but remain under protection as a "bird paradise". Measures to enhance the biodiversity should be taken and facilities for bird watching can be installed on the higher part of the island. It is crucial for this concept that no flood-protection measures are taken. The villages are not normally flooded (as stated by the villagers), and the lowland towards the river would lose its ecological

value if floodings would cease. This is an example that "development" should not be mistaken as construction. Often too much construction destroys the character and touristic value of a place rather than enhancing it.

Just opposite of Qinsha Island near the ferry pier is an extremely impressive **cement factory**. The plant can be seen from afar (and from about everywhere on the island). With its multiple chimneys and towers it looks spectacularly like a castle and clearly should be seen as a landmark worth preserving even after cement production may have come to an end. There are many examples of decommissioned industrial monuments in Europe, which are reused for example as museums or hostels or simply used as a backdrop for other activities such as concerts and performances. Examples include former steel mills and coal mining equipment in Germany. The cement plant at the Xijiang could for example stage rock or classical concerts and light shows. The concerts could be near the factory or on Qinsha Island. Especially the colourful illumination of the plant could draw tourists to the island from where they would enjoy a wonderful view.

All the sites mentioned so far are quite close to each other around the confluence of the rivers. They shall be connected by regular water taxis, probably also branching out downstream to the city centre. Apart from these connections, the route northward to **Lubao** and beyond should be served by passenger boats of different sizes. These cruise boats could stop at a few villages such as Mumian before reaching Lubao, and some could go further up to the north of Sanshui District or to Qingyuan or may be in a circular route back to Xinan. Lubao will be a major landing point. It features an impressive temple complex, two floating restaurants, a big dam and last but not least the town itself near the pier. This cluster clearly has development potential. Lubao would also be an ideal starting point for cycling tours to the northern part of Sanshui and to picturesque places such as the nearby Daqitou Old Village. It is recommended to designate several specific cycling routes (with good signage and some restaurants on the way) starting from Lubao Pier, where bicycles should be rented out and suitable maps for orientation sold. There could also be packages including a boat trip and bicycle rental.

Sustainable tourism development in the "City of Water"

Cycling and boat tourism and the focus on the local natural and cultural heritage are all aspects of sustainability in this tourism development concept. The theme of water refers to a ubiquitous, natural and local resource not only with regard to the distinctive landscape of the region. When I asked around for unique characteristics of Sanshui, the confluence of the rivers, the Lotus World and the beverage industry (especially the Jian Li Bao soft drinks) were mentioned. Not surprisingly, all relate to the water theme.

Both the Lotus World and the beverage industry can play a role in Sanshui's tourism strategy, if they overcome their current image problems and decline in attractiveness. For the Lotus World, I suggest a strategy of broadening the scope from the lotus theme to wetland park, for Jian Li Bao I don't know. I am not an expert in beverage business, but I currently see in Germany a strong renaissance of domestic soft drink brands over Coca Cola and the like. This might happen in China as well, but this depends on more than the image of the production place. In any case, an image of "City of Water" will benefit the local beverage industry, in particular if it is backed by a real improvement in water quality, which would certainly be necessary.

To elaborate a bit more on suggestions for the **Lotus World**, this themed park used to draw quite some crowds, but it lost its distinction and visitor numbers keep declining. One problem is probably the limited scope of attractions. Few people are so specifically interested in lotus flowers - especially outside of their blooming period. It would therefore be a good idea to broaden the scope of the park without blurring its image. My recommendation would be to turn the Lotus World into a wetland park (compare Hong Kong's successful new Wetland Park!) with a wide range of purposes, from recreation and education to conservation. The theme of this park should evolve around the theme of water landscape - including lotus, but also other aspects of the local natural and cultural landscape. It could also include a visitor centre with interactive character and educative orientation.

This proposal would be in line with the overall theme of water ("shui") for Sanshui and with the concept of eco tourism or at least sustainability-oriented concepts. The wetland park could be introduced to the public by an annual event with suitable performances, flower shows and information booths. A possible theme of such an event, as well as for parts of the visitor centre, could be bionics, the application of processes found in nature for engineering and technology development. This is a much-discussed issue with relevance for everyday life as well as for technology research and education. The Lotus World would be a suitable place to introduce these ideas since the so-called lotus effect is one of the best-known examples of bionic developments.

Bionics, by the way, shows clearly that there is no contradiction between conservation and environmental quality on the one hand and development on the other hand. Sanshui should not follow highly industrialised cities to go through a period of environmental destruction before turning to modern industries such as education, culture, technology and tourism. It should use the chances offered by a relatively low level of destruction, with yet close proximity to developed markets such as Guangzhou and the Pearl River Delta with their highly mobile and educated people. Tourism is a good way to connect Sanshui's development to these more sophisticated markets.