
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Opportunities and Challenges in the Process of Integrated Regional Economic and Social Development in the Yangtze River Delta

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| ABSTRACT

With the historical changes and the development of international relations situation, regional economic and social integration is an important trend to establish the deep development of economic globalisation. The Yangtze River Delta region is one of the regions with the most dynamic economic development, the highest degree of openness and the strongest innovation capacity in China and plays an important strategic position in the modernisation of the country. The purpose of this paper is to explore the problems faced in the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta regional economy, the ways to solve the difficulties and the prospects for future development. The approach taken is to compare the Yangtze River Delta region with the Northeast region in the North and the Pearl River Delta region in the South and to analyse the similarities and differences in the development trends of different geographical regions and their impact on regional development. This is then combined with historical contextual change factors as well as international experience and inspiration to further identify the opportunities and challenges faced by the Yangtze River Delta region in its development through comparative analysis. The conclusions show that China is actively involved in the process of regional economic integration, with the Yangtze River Delta region playing an important leading role. It has actively integrated international and domestic double-cycle development, utilised resources in an integrated manner, and drawn on international experience to seek better development opportunities. However, due to other constraints, such as historical changes, the Yangtze River Delta regional economic integration development process faces many challenges.

| KEYWORDS

Regional economic integration, Yangtze River Delta region, Pearl River Delta region, Northeast region, Challenge, Opportunity

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 January 2023

PUBLISHED: 19 January 2023

DOI: 10.32996/jefas.2023.5.1.7

1. Introduction

Regional economic integration is one of the most striking trends in international relations and is a process of market integration between partner countries. From product markets, factor markets are gradually moving towards a deeper unification of economic policies. The Yangtze River Delta, as the core region of China's development, is at the forefront of the country in promoting regional economic integration and leading high-quality development (State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2019). The Belt and Road construction and the Yangtze River Economic Belt development strategy have brought opportunities for the development of the Yangtze River Delta region. The system for deepening reform across the board is not yet sound, a unified market has not yet been formed, and a system that dovetails with internationally adopted rules has not yet been established (State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2019). All these bring challenges to the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta region.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internal Research

2.1.1 Research on Sport and Public Services

For the integration and high-quality development of the Yangtze River Delta, sports and public services are naturally a topic that cannot be ignored. In particular, the public service resources for sport in China are divided by administrative districts, and there are differences in the level of public services for sport arising from the financial imbalance of local governments. In a study by Doctor Liu (2021) of Soochow University, it was found that the integration of public services in the Yangtze River Delta region adheres to the development concept of common construction, sharing and governance, with the government leading all sectors of society to participate. The integration of sport and public services is in a transitional period, with the economy playing a decisive role in its development. The stronger economy of the Yangtze River Delta region can drive the coordinated development of sport and public services while also providing the environmental conditions and various comprehensive elements for their development. The tripartite linkage between the government, the market and social organisations should be fully utilised to promote sports and public services to meet the diversified and personalised development of the population. Secondly, we must also explore the practical path of digital support to build a high-quality public service system for national fitness.

2.1.2 Research on Development Trends

Cheng (2008) argues that the conditions for regional economic integration in the Yangtze River Delta lie in the integration of resource allocation as a foundation, geographical location as an advantage and the possession of strong economic power. The forces and dynamics that drive the economic integration of the Yangtze River Delta have given rise to different views in academia; on the one hand, that development requires the power of the government, and on the other hand, development requires the power of the market. However, the state of development of the Yangtze River Delta and practical experience shows that the two are mutually integrated, and cooperation is win-win. The comprehensive trend of the future development of the Yangtze River Delta can be described as one city as the centre, uniting individual cities in the vicinity to drive the coordinated development of other cities. We will promote a rational division of industries, create an excellent ecological environment and perfect service facilities for people's well-being, and actively participate in the creation of systems and policies to promote the joint development of each region.

2.1.3 Research on Rules and System

Although the Yangtze River Delta has made some achievements in the development of regional economic integration in recent years, there are still many resistance factors. In the study of Chai (2008), it was found that the government, as the subject of market interest and competition, has led to high costs in the allocation and use of resources in pursuit of its own interests. It is, therefore, very important to promote an integrated system in the Yangtze River Delta region. It also draws on the experience of EU economic integration to gradually improve the Yangtze River Delta integration system. The system focuses on the importance of law and the gradual elimination of administrative barriers through the signing of pacts and regulations that limit government participation and market competition. Regional coordination policies will be developed to improve the integration of industries, markets, and transport.

2.1.4 Research on Education Development

'The integration of education in the Yangtze River Delta region is a phenomenon that has arisen in response to the integration of economic development' (Lei & Xiao, 2008). The rapid development of the market economy in the Yangtze River Delta region has led to an increasing demand for senior personnel, prompting the rapid development of higher education. The Yangtze River Delta region has first-class teaching resources and an extremely high proportion of higher education institutions in the country. The Yangtze River Delta region is leading the rapid development of China's economy, laying a strong foundation for education. The coordinated development of higher education schools, such as the sharing of library information resources, the complementary strengths of disciplines and the cooperation between universities and research institutes, has achieved the optimum allocation of higher education resources and maximised benefits, thus cultivating more talents for the future development of the Yangtze River Delta region.

2.2 External Research

2.2.1 Research on the Development of the Tokyo Urban Economic Area

The headquarters of Japanese companies and financial institutions were relocated to Tokyo after the war, contributing to the city's rapid economic development (Research Group, International Department, Shanghai Headquarters, People's Bank of China, 2008). Japan has proposed a polycentric city development plan, and the core of coordinated inter-city development is coordinated inter-regional industrial development. The division of labour and the complementary advantages of cooperation have led to the formation of industrial clusters with comprehensive advantages. Measures to build the Tokyo metropolitan area are mainly divided into proposing appropriate laws and regulations to support the development of the economic area, using the tax function to guide industrial development, strengthening land planning, traffic control and a series of other proposals in line with the current

development of Tokyo. To prevent the government from maximising its own interests, the planning of facilities in Tokyo, such as land and transport, is the responsibility of various departments (Research Group, International Department, Shanghai Headquarters, People's Bank of China, 2008). This has attracted many companies and has led to the development of public institutions, such as research and education, and has strengthened Japan's overall competitiveness through the power of technological innovation. The structure of the decentralised network of polycentric cities has been established, enabling the construction of Tokyo to proceed in an orderly manner in accordance with the law and strengthening the institutional safeguards for development.

2.2.2 Research on the Innovation of International Regional Economic Integration Systems

The integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta regional economy cannot be achieved without the experience and reference of international and regional economic integration. A coordination mechanism for the development of the Yangtze River Delta region has been established, but there are still certain problems, such as market barriers and market segmentation, duplication of infrastructure and identical industrial structures. The study of Zheng (2009) shows that the EU competitive economic integration is mainly used as a reference study to help the Yangtze River Delta region to develop effective regional rules and competition regimes, improve the safeguard mechanism and establish a policy and institutional network system. In the research of Cao (2008), which also draws on the EU's experience, the system of institutional innovation is proposed using a combination of market mechanisms and government intervention, and attention should be paid to the overall construction of the institutional system.

3. Methodology

3.1 Analysis of the Yangtze River Delta Region

The integrated regional economic development of the Yangtze River Delta has been elevated to a national strategy since 2018. In terms of economic and social aspects, the Yangtze River Delta has a strong economy, with the total economic volume accounting for about 1/4 of the country's total and labour productivity ranking among the top in the country. Moreover, social undertakings and social construction in the Yangtze River Delta region are developing faster, and public services are more balanced. A pattern of co-construction of social governance has initially taken shape, and people's sense of well-being and security is higher.

In terms of education and technology, the Yangtze River Delta region has two comprehensive national science centres. The country's top higher education schools account for about 1/4 of the country's total, and more talents bring young vitality to the cities' development. Moreover, the region has a strong innovation capacity, with cities such as Shanghai, Nanjing and Hangzhou all having R&D intensity of over 33%. The science and innovation industry and the information and software service industry are large in scale, and several internationally competitive industrial clusters have been formed.

In terms of environmental health and transportation, the Yangtze River Delta region has been adhering to the concept that green water and green mountains are the silver mountain of gold. The joint prevention and control of pollution have been gradually improved, with 77% of the water quality of some 333 national examination sections of surface water of category 3 and above, and the concentration of fine particulate matter in some 41 cities has dropped by 19% compared to previous years (State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2019). The Yangtze River Delta region is densely populated with transportation arteries, and a shipping system has also taken initial shape. The geographical location and convenient port transportation facilitate economic and trade exchanges with other countries and regions. The Yangtze River Delta region has 46 open ports, with a 37% share of total imports and exports (State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2019).

In terms of public services and urban-rural integration, urban hospitals in the Yangtze River Delta region have developed in synergy to create an efficient and convenient environment for access to medical care. The initial establishment of an elderly care service system has been achieved, and various public resources have been shared. Large, medium and small cities developed in a coordinated manner, narrowing the income gap among residents and giving play to the role of the central cities as radiation leaders.

3.2 Analysis of the Pearl River Delta Region

The regional economic integration of the Pearl River Delta is also developing very rapidly. In terms of the integration of industrial layout development, 530 industries have been constructed to form an A-shaped overall spatial layout of industries. Priority is given to developing modern service industries with productive services as the mainstay, accelerating the development of manufacturing industries, improving traditional industries, and actively developing modern agriculture. The industrial layout focuses on regional coordination with the help of double transfer and gives play to the radiation-driven role of the central city (Guangdong Provincial People's Government, 2009).

In terms of environmental protection and institutional integration, we will establish a system for trading emission rights and land use indicators and an ecological compensation mechanism so that by 2020 the area of green space will account for more than 35% of the total area (Guangdong Provincial People's Government, 2009). In terms of basic services and urban-rural integration, the PRD region will be integrated in terms of public transport, access to health care and elderly care services (Guangdong Provincial People's Government, 2009). A one-hour regional leisure and living circle is to be built, and the metropolitan area is to be diversified, with an expected urbanisation level of up to 85% of the population (Guangdong Provincial People's Government, 2009). The proportion of public transport between towns and cities is to be increased, with a public transport trip-sharing rate of over 60% in major cities.

In terms of public transport and education, the PRD has completed a one-hour intercity rail network and built a safe and efficient, low-pollution and low-energy green transport system. The PRD is vigorously developing vocational and technical education and actively carrying out skills development training and skills accreditation (Guangdong Provincial People's Government, 2009). Emphasis is placed on training high quality, application-oriented technical personnel and actively promoting the integration of PRD education services with international standards.

In tourism and cultural creativity, the PRD builds a national demonstration zone for comprehensive tourism reform, builds an information platform to integrate tourism resources, and strives to develop into an internationally important urban tourism and international visitor distribution centre. Ecological agricultural tourism and healthcare tourism are encouraged. It will also accelerate the development of cultural and creative industries, focusing on industrial design, fashion design, animation, game design, and so on, to jointly build the brand of Asia's creative hub.

3.3 Analysis of the Northeast Region

To co-ordinate the development and security of the Northeast region, the Northeast responds positively to regional economic integration. In terms of adjusting the spatial layout of industries, the Northeast should form a stable regional industrial chain and supply chain, thereby enhancing competitiveness (People's Information, 2022). The layout of the defence and security industry will be increased, and the layout of the agricultural industry in the Northeast will be optimised. In terms of resources and environment around the double carbon goal, co-ordinate the protection and development of ecological and cultural tourism resources (People's Information, 2022). In terms of the economy, optimising the layout of the state-owned economy is key; with an uneven distribution of economic resources, close to 70% of state-owned assets are concentrated in the steel, coal, and equipment manufacturing sectors. In 2021 the top 500 national private enterprises in the Northeast region, only eight companies entered the list.

As an old industrial base, the Northeast region has a strong industrial base with a wide range of manufacturing industries and advanced technology to create advantageous industrial clusters. And in education also has several higher education schools and scientific research institutes. The Northeast region was originally not very open, with the total import and export of the Northeast accounting for 2.9% of the country by 2020. Through regional economic integration, governmental cooperation, and humanistic exchanges with Northeast Asia by taking advantage of its geographical location, accelerating the integration of port resources in coastal cities, jointly building cross-border economic cooperation, and using the network advantages of the Northeast to provide technical support for cooperation. The RCEP agreement promotes the development of economic integration in the Northeast and provides opportunities for the construction of the China-Japan-ROK FTA (People's Information, 2022). The main thing to develop economic integration in the Northeast region is to liberate the mind and reform and innovate.

3.4 Analysis of the Yangtze River Delta Region Through Regional Comparisons

A comparative analysis of the integrated regional economic development of the Yangtze River Delta, the Pearl River Delta and the Northeast Region reveals the following opportunities and challenges for the development of the Yangtze River Delta.

Economic strength and educational innovation capacity are opportunities for the development of regional economic integration in the Yangtze River Delta. The Yangtze River Delta region has a stronger economic development and is more advanced than the other two regions in terms of technological innovation and educational resources. As a result, it can attract more domestic and international talent, providing talent and productivity opportunities for the future development of the Yangtze River Delta. However, it should also learn from the experience of the Pearl River Delta in aligning its education services with international standards. Cultivating scientific and innovative talents while focusing on the cultivation of application-oriented skills will develop the educational resources of the Yangtze River Delta into a stronger one and lay the foundation for the construction of regional economic integration.

Excellent geographical location and transportation are the opportunities facing the development of regional economic integration in the Yangtze River Delta. The geographical location of the Yangtze River Delta region is at the heart of the coastal zone, allowing for a greater concentration of resources than the other two regions to the north and south. A better transport system has been

developed to enhance trade and cultural exchanges with home and other countries. The formation of a stable industrial chain and supply chain, as in the north-east, provides opportunities for products to be brought in and taken out more easily.

Ecological and environmental issues are a challenge in development. The Yangtze River Delta is developing very rapidly, playing the role of a central city to take the lead in radiation. Industrial industries, as well as population density, are increasing significantly, but ecological and environmental issues will also be a challenge for the Yangtze River Delta, along with the development situation. The Yangtze River Delta has implemented a joint prevention and control mechanism for pollution, but it can also learn from the Pearl River Delta by establishing a system for trading emission rights, land use indicators, an ecological compensation mechanism and an expansion of green areas.

The establishment of a sound public infrastructure and the sharing of resources on all fronts is a challenge in development. The Yangtze River Delta region is growing faster and living at a faster pace, attracting more young people, and it is easy to neglect the establishment of a retirement system. With more cities connected by regional integration, the difficulty of achieving synergistic development and resource sharing is higher compared to the Pearl River Delta region and the Northeast region.

3.5 Historical Changes and International Experiences and Insights

With the recovery and development of the world economy after the Second World War, the development of information technology laid the material and technical foundation for economic globalisation. From the GATT to China's accession to the World Trade Organisation, it heralded the development of China's regional economic integration process. China has adopted a development strategy of a dual international and domestic cycle, deepening supply-side reforms and deepening market factor reforms. Challenges to our current development include a virtually non-existent cost advantage in manufacturing and a shortage in high-technology areas, a major change in the global production chain and supply chain as globalisation enters a new phase, and export curbs on China by countries such as the United States. The overall root problem lies in our current administrative system, government evaluation and leadership assessment mechanisms and regionally coordinated fiscal and taxation mechanisms.

In the face of international experience and inspiration, first, the Yangtze River Delta regional economic integration development can learn from Japan's wide area administrative mixed governance model. The construction of the economic circle in Tokyo breaks down the boundaries of the administrative regions in the region, strengthens regional coordination and promotes the free flow of production factors. Financial regulatory mechanisms are strengthened, and fiscal and taxation functions are used to guide the development of regional economic industries. For example, national projects invest directly in local infrastructure development or through fiscal transfers, subsidise urban development projects, and strengthen special loans as well as financial subsidies. Strengthen legal and regulatory support to avoid arbitrariness in policy and planning.

In addition, we can learn from the special governance model of New York in the USA. The total GDP of the US is higher than that of China, but China has also developed very fast in recent years. The dedicated governance model reflects the fact that different functional departments have their own responsibilities, which is a good way to prevent resource allocation problems arising from the government's efforts to maximise its own interests in development. The Yangtze River Delta region should set up some planning and co-ordination agencies under the integrated regional governance model, combining the co-ordinated development of the regions with the dedicated governance model to save resources and reduce costs, and promote faster and more stable GDP development.

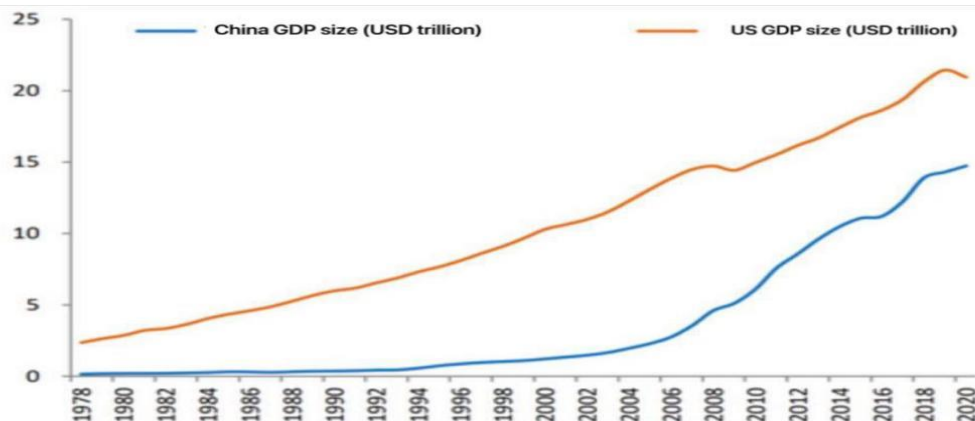


Figure1: China and US GDP Size
Source: Ren (2021).

The development of the Yangtze River Delta could also draw on the two-tier governance model of London, UK. This model is a decentralised governance model formed by various governments and authoritative regional governance bodies in the region. The advantages are streamlined institutions, cost savings and the ability to avoid duplication and improve efficiency.

4. Findings

Through a comparative analysis of the development of the three regions in China from different perspectives, as well as considering the historical process and drawing on international experience and inspiration, it is found that the development of the Yangtze River Delta regional economic integration faces many opportunities as well as many challenges. The Yangtze River Delta region must implement the new development concept, build a modern economic system, and promote a higher starting point for deepening reform and a higher level of opening to the outside world. The interplay between the construction of the Belt and Road, the coordinated development of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt and the construction of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area will be strengthened to improve the spatial layout of China's reform and opening-up (State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2019).

The Yangtze River Delta region is strategically located, driving economic and trade development and strong economic strength, promoting the process of regional economic integration. The in-depth implementation of the "Belt and Road" construction and the Yangtze River Economic Belt development strategy has injected new momentum into the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta. We insist on the concept of building, sharing, and winning together, accelerating the development of regional metropolitan areas, sharing resources, complementing each other's advantages, and jointly boosting the economy of the Yangtze River Delta region. Strong education and technology resources to create a digital Yangtze River Delta region. Ability to nurture talent, attract and retain talent, and inject young vitality into the city. Learning from the lessons of history, improving the administrative system, strengthening joint prevention and control, and implementing a development model with a dual domestic and foreign cycle.

Today's world is facing the trend of globalisation and the acceleration of changes in the global governance system and international order. The new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial changes in the world are converging with the optimisation and upgrading of China's economy, providing a favourable external environment for the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta. Drawing on international experience and inspiration, we will combine our own development model with other suitable models to jointly promote the regional integration process. The adoption of a dedicated governance model, with each having its own role, can prevent government dictatorship, unbalanced resource allocation and high production costs and waste of resources to maximise its own interests. A two-tier governance model can improve efficiency, reduce costs and, most importantly, avoid duplication. Limited resources can be invested in more new industries, leading to innovative development.

However, while there are opportunities, there are also challenges. With international trade protectionism, slow development of the trend of economic globalisation and greater uncertainty in world economic growth, the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta faces a more complex and volatile international environment. The development within the region is unbalanced and insufficient, and the sharing of resource information is imperfect (State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2019). The cross-regional governance mechanism is not yet sound, and the level of integrated development of public service facilities and the ecological environment needs to be improved. The integration of science and technology innovation and industry is not deep enough, and the synergy of industrial development needs to be improved. Administrative barriers that hinder high-quality economic and social development still exist, and a unified and open market system has yet to be formed.

The development plan outline of the State Council indicates that promoting the integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta is conducive to raising the level of the Yangtze River Delta in the world economic landscape, leading China's participation in global cooperation and competition, deepening the implementation of the coordinated regional development strategy, exploring the institutional system and path model for integrated regional development, and leading the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt. It will give full play to the comparative advantages of the regions in the region, enhance the overall comprehensive strength of the Yangtze River Delta and play a leading role in the new journey of building a modern socialist country in a comprehensive manner.

The Yangtze River triangle region should complement its disadvantages with its strengths and play a leading role in radiation to promote coordinated development between cities and regions.

5. Discussion

The Yangtze River Delta region has the most dynamic economic development, the highest degree of openness and the strongest innovation capacity. Leading the country in education and science and technology innovation for coordinated regional development.

Focus on historical changes and international experience inspiration to achieve a more open and inclusive two-way development.

Excellent geographical location and a transportation network to achieve coordinated development of towns and villages with each other. Take one city as the centre to drive the common development of the surrounding areas. Realising shared resources and complementary advantages.

Strengthen joint prevention and control, implement laws and regulations, and promote normative development.

6. Conclusion

The Yangtze River Delta region faces many opportunities to promote development in the process of regional economic integration, both in terms of its own development advantages and inspiration from international experience, which are driving the Yangtze River Delta region towards higher quality development. The Yangtze River Delta region also needs to deal with challenges in the development process, including regional development issues, the legacy of historical changes, international pressures and the challenges posed by COVID-19. In the future, the Yangtze River Delta region's manufacturing sector will be an important pillar of economic growth and will have long been integrated with global supply chains. After COVID-19, the Yangtze River Delta region has seen a rebound in imports and exports, but there is still much uncertainty, and oriented manufacturing companies are advised to focus more on domestic market opportunities. Depending on market demand, the Yangtze River Delta region may accelerate the transformation of its industrial structure, strengthen the development of the digital economy, and create a pioneering zone for digital transformation and development. Harnessing the booming new economy holds promise for the Yangtze River Delta region. Implementing initiatives to promote double-circulation within the internal and external double-circulation model will give new impetus to the Yangtze River Delta region to lead the national economic development.

Acknowledgement: This paper was written after I completed a desk research course on new mechanisms for coordinated economic and social development in the Yangtze River Delta region by Research Fellow Liao Ming. Professor Liao's profound professional knowledge background, rigorous academic attitude, excellent working style, high moral integrity and down-to-earth personality made me interested in this project. Every aspect of the project, from the selection of the topic to the final completion of the thesis, could not have been done without the professional knowledge taught by Professor Liao in class and the interactive thought-provoking questions with the students. I would like to express my high respect and sincere gratitude to Professor Liao. I also encountered many problems in the process of writing my dissertation, which were constantly solved in the process of consulting materials and asking my teacher for advice to enable me to complete my dissertation successfully. I hope to deepen my understanding of regional economic integration and improve my competence in the academic field of economics through the courses and thesis of this project. At the same time, it is important to build up a sense of urgency and mission in our generation of young people, as the professor said, to think diligently and innovatively and to contribute to the construction of regional economic integration.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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