Talent Introduce Policies in Guangzhou and Shenzhen: A Comparative Study of the Peacock Plan and Guangzhou Talent Plan

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Abstract: China has made significant efforts to recruit and retain talented individuals to support the development of the country's economy and society. This study focuses on talent introduction policies in two major Chinese cities: Guangzhou and Shenzhen. By comparing two similar policies through discourse analysis, the research finds that the Guangzhou Gathering Talent Plan places greater emphasis on cultivating high-end talent, whereas the Shenzhen Peacock Plan focuses more on talent recruitment. In addition, Guangzhou demonstrates a more decentralized, multi-level government power structure, in contrast with Shenzhen's more vertical and centralized approach to talent management. These differences are attributed to the distinct geographical positions, historical backgrounds, and policy coverage of these two regions. This study recommends that further efforts be made to retain talent effectively following initial recruitment.

Keywords: Talent introduction policies; Talent management; Comparative study; Discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Talented people are regarded as essential to a country's development in terms of its economic, social, and political progress. In order to attract and retain such talent, China has implemented a variety of talent introduction policies aimed at promoting innovation and new technologies to drive economic development. From impoverished rural areas to major metropolitan centers, local governments have introduced differentiated policies to meet their specific development needs. For instance, some local governments in underdeveloped regions seek high-level talent capable of devising new strategies to stimulate industrial growth, often leveraging tools such as live-streaming e-commerce using social media to boost local economies. In contrast, large cities may require highly skilled technical professionals to drive innovation in cutting-edge industries such as artificial intelligence and new energy vehicles.

This research focuses on two representative first-tier cities in Guangdong province — Shenzhen and

Guangzhou — with the aim of identifying the key strategies underpinning their respective talent policies. By comparing the similarities and differences in the approaches of these geographically and historically linked cities, this study seeks to uncover the core principles of contemporary Chinese talent policies and the distinctive measures adopted by different cities. Based on the findings, the research will offer recommendations for improving talent retention and management in urban development.

2. A review of talent policies and economic development in China

Countries compete globally by developing a highly skilled workforce to maintain and enhance their positions in an increasingly competitive international landscape. In this context, governments define and identify "talent" based on national needs, designing policies to attract and recruit individuals accordingly. From a national perspective, talent policies are crafted to support the attraction, recruitment, migration, and resettlement of individuals who possess the skills and expertise deemed valuable by the state. Recognizing the pivotal role of talent in national development, China has implemented a range of talent policies aimed at attracting skilled individuals to support its economic and technological advancement [1].

According to a study on the "talent war" in China, the author argued that talent policies have multiple impacts on urban innovation. The policies can enhance regional economic growth, address the urgent need for economic upgrading in cities, incentivize innovation, target various categories of talent, facilitate talent cultivation and retention, and strengthen long-term urban competitiveness [2]. As China shifts its economic focus from a pro-GDP growth agenda to one centered on economic upgrading, attracting highly skilled and well-educated individuals has become increasingly important for urban development. This strategic shift has also intensified coordination between the Chinese central government and local authorities. Although these policies generally aim to promote long-term economic development, the short-term benefits often differ across regions.

Local governments adapt central guidelines to suit their specific economic needs, and policy adjustments have further facilitated this localization process. In this context, a number of measures have been implemented to address the escalating challenges brought about by rapid urbanization. These talent policy initiatives have significantly influenced contemporary economic upgrading, as shown in a comparative study of four Chinese cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Chongqing [3]. Furthermore, talent policies have undergone both changes and continuities. One survey examined dimensions such as policy instruments, policy targets, and policy strength to assess policy sustainability in China. Focusing on Sichuan Province, the study analyzed 30 policies and found that gaps still exist between policy design and practical implementation. While many policies rely heavily on "capital investment" approaches, the importance of "talent information support" is frequently overlooked. Moreover, beyond simply expanding the talent pool, enhancing the quality of talent and talent mobility are both crucial for future development. Governments are therefore advised to prioritize the cultivation of high-quality talent alongside increasing the number of skilled individuals, in order to strengthen overall competitiveness [4].

Although China has made significant efforts in recruiting and retaining talent through its policy frameworks, several issues have emerged in the implementation of these policies. For instance, talent management mechanisms often fall short of expectations. For example, in Sichuan, the government has been criticized for not making full use of the available talent due to a lack of proper training and development opportunities. Additionally, policies should encourage talent mobility and stimulate innovation, which depends on the flow and integration of knowledge. However, current policies often provide broad, macro-level guidance but lack clarity and specific

measures that would enhance flexibility and responsiveness. It is the government's responsibility to supply both material support and institutional mechanisms to incentivize innovation and to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of human resource utilization [4].

Despite progress, several significant challenges remain in China's talent policies as the country competes in the global "talent war" to support its development goals. Historically, talent migration has been overly focused on economic incentives, often neglecting other critical factors such as career fulfilment, a sense of personal accomplishment, and citizenship considerations. Scholars have argued that effective talent policy should adopt a more comprehensive, multi-level, and long-term strategy that addresses these diverse motivations [5]. Further research suggests that three key elements must be addressed for successful talent policy implementation in China: clarity and specificity of policies, a balanced relationship between government intervention and market forces, and tailored policy approaches for different regions. It is also recommended to enhance the monitoring and evaluation of talent initiatives to inform future policy adjustments [6].

Although all researchers agree that talent policies have a significant effect on China's economic development, only a few studies have adopted a micro-perspective to examine the specific content of such policies. While the strategies of policy adjustment and implementation are considered, they are often limited to advocacy-level discussions. Furthermore, even the case studies of specific regions are taken into account, there is rarely a comparative analysis that explores differences in policies across various locations, despite the fact that cities may have divergent needs.

This study aims to fill this gap in the existing literature on China's talent policies and propose potential improvements based on the analysis of its findings. Using the analytical framework of discourse analysis, inspired by Foucault's ideas on discourse and power, this research seeks to uncover the underlying power dynamics embedded in China's talent policy landscape [7].

3. A comparative analysis of the Peacock Plan vs. the Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan

Guangzhou and Shenzhen are both first-tier cities located in Guangdong, one of the most economically developed provinces in China, and they share many important characteristics. Firstly, both cities have experienced rapid growth, resulting in increased job opportunities and improved infrastructure. They have strong manufacturing industries, excel in attracting foreign investment, and implement programs to bring in skilled workers. Both cities actively support new businesses and innovation. Additionally, their diverse populations, shaped by migration, contribute to vibrant social life and cultural activities. Finally, as key components of the Greater Bay Area, both cities play essential roles in regional cooperation and benefit from strategic trade locations.

This research seeks to explore the differences in talent policies between these two closely linked cities. Two representative talent policies were selected for comparative analysis using a discourse analysis approach, which investigates how language constructs social realities and power dynamics. The talent policy in Shenzhen is known as the Peacock Plan, while Guangzhou's corresponding policy is the Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan, aimed at attracting skilled individuals to the city.

Using AI tools such as KIMI, relevant policy documents were sourced from official government and media websites. A total of 237 Chinese-language webpages were reviewed and filtered for relevant information. The resulting findings were translated and presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The comparison of the Peacock Plan vs. the Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan

Comparison item	Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan	Peacock Plan
Goal orientation	Build a globally competitive, influential, and leading strategic hub for innovative talent	Develop Shenzhen into an ideal city for gathering international talent, particularly overseas high-level talent, in the Asia-Pacific region
Beneficiaries	Outstanding students, enrolled full-time students, and excellent employees from municipal enterprises and institutions	Overseas high-level talent teams and individuals
Funding content	Provides living expenses, international travel fees, housing subsidies, or talent apartments	Offers reward subsidies, residence, and entry-exit convenience, household registration, and enrolment for children
Service duration	For study abroad funding, a service period of no less than 3 years for those with less than 3 years of study, and no less than 5 years for those with more than 3 years	Not explicitly mentioned
Liability for breach	If the service period is not fulfilled, repay the training funds proportionally and pay a penalty	Not explicitly mentioned
Policy characteristics	Innovative talent evaluation mechanisms, provision of talent green cards, and optimization of talent services	Focus on attracting overseas high-level talent teams and providing substantial reward subsidies
Implementing agencies	Guangzhou Municipal Organization Department, Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, etc.	Shenzhen Talent Work Leadership Group, Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, etc.

3.1. Diverse goal orientation

Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan: In terms of goal orientation, the language employed in the Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan describes its primary objective as creating a "globally competitive and leading strategic hub", reflecting the city's ambition in the international talent marketplace. This framing employs a militaristic metaphor of competition, suggesting a sense of urgency and positioning Guangzhou not merely as a participant but as a leader in the global economy. This metaphor also underscores Guangzhou's aspirational leadership within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. The language conveys a drive for dominance and a proactive approach, which reinforces the city's authority and legitimizes its role in regional and global development.

Peacock Plan: In contrast, Shenzhen is characterized as an "ideal city of gathering international talent", employing a more idealistic and inclusive tone. This reflects Shenzhen's identity as a young and dynamic city, full of vitality. However, the language also implies a more passive governmental role, suggesting that the city focuses more on attracting rather than cultivating talent. Additionally, the term "gathering" introduces a potential bias, creating a welcoming atmosphere for "overseas high-level talent" while implicitly creating a hierarchy that may prioritize foreign talent over local talent. The imbalance could potentially lead to the marginalization of domestically nurtured talent, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of local talent development.

3.2. Different beneficiaries

Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan: The talent targets various groups, including outstanding students, full-time enrolled students, and excellent employees. This narrative emphasizes the inclusiveness of the talent admission policy, constructing the government as a benevolent authority dedicated to fostering local talent and enhancing its legitimacy. However, the criterion of "outstanding" is defined by the state, which may lead to the marginalization of certain individuals who do not meet the official standards. The beneficiaries are essentially shaped by the

Guangzhou government's authority and its role in local economic development, reflecting a top-down approach to talent identification.

Peacock Plan: The plan's exclusive focus on "overseas high-level talent teams and individuals" reflects an elite-oriented perspective. This discourse implies a governmental valuation of foreign talent over local expertise, reinforcing existing social hierarchies and contributing to the neglect of domestic talent. Such criteria suggest a systemic undervaluation of locally skilled and potentially innovative professionals, which may hinder self-driven innovation and sustainable development within the city.

3.3. Funding types

Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan: The funding structure is comprehensive, including support for living expenses, international travel fees, and housing subsidies, which contributes to the holistic support for talent development. The discourse presents the government as the primary driver of talent policies, aiming to help talented individuals settle down, achieve career goals, and enjoy a high quality of life through effective subsidy measures. The government is positioned as both the leader and principal agent in providing these subsidies. Furthermore, the diverse funding mechanisms reflect an awareness of the multi-level needs of different categories of talent.

Peacock Plan: In contrast to its Guangzhou counterpart, this plan emphasizes "reward subsidies, residence and entry-exit convenience, household registration, and enrolment for children", which are more directly linked to personal and familial living conditions. This discourse reflects a grassroots perspective that frames the government's role in a transactional relationship with talent, giving more attention to individual well-being and lifestyle quality rather than purely economic gains. From a neoliberal perspective, this policy represents a more comprehensive and humane approach, which may foster a stronger sense of ownership and belonging among recipients.

3.4. Service duration, accountability, and penalties

Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan: The service duration and accountability serve as indicators of performance and highlight the control exerted by the local government. This structure reinforces the leadership role of state authority in managing talent mobility and retention. While these measures undoubtedly assist in evaluating the outcomes of talent introduction policies, they may also foster a sense of insecurity and pressure among talents, potentially hindering their willingness to innovate.

Peacock Plan: The absence of specified service terms or penalties may enhance the attractiveness of the plan by reducing day-to-day burdens on talents. However, this flexibility may also result in ambiguity regarding the obligations of both the talent and the government. Such a lack of clarity can create power imbalances and may fail to incentivize talents to pursue long-term goals, leading to weaker alignment with state objectives and less commitment to innovation within a structured framework.

3.5. Different policy characteristics

Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan: Various measures, such as talent green cards and enhanced evaluation systems, focus more on innovative mechanisms and position the government as a progressive authority. This discourse maintains a balanced image of the government as a model in talent management. The narrative suggests that the government is not merely a passive follower of trends, but is an active leader shaping the future landscape of talent acquisition.

Peacock Plan: This plan places greater emphasis on the self-driven efforts of "high-level talent teams", while the roles of society and government are largely absent. The government merely provides "substantial reward subsidies", with limited attention paid to talent retention or cultivation. Furthermore, this discourse reinforces existing power structures and may exacerbate social inequalities. The policy strategically prioritizes a selected elite group, thereby establishing a hierarchy within the labor market.

3.6. Various implementing agencies

Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan: The agencies involved include multiple government bodies, such as the Municipal Organization Department and Human Resources Bureau, which suggests a collaborative governance model. These bodies promote an image of coordinated effort with a strong emphasis on talent-related work. The government's actions enhance its legitimacy in talent management through tightly connected power structures. This networked approach conveys a sense of shared responsibility among various agencies and ensures more comprehensive and operational talent strategies.

Peacock Plan: The governing agencies in Shenzhen reflect a more centralized control structure under specific leadership groups, indicating a top-down governance approach. This interconnected hierarchy between agencies may limit policy effectiveness and create a disconnect between policy intentions and local needs. The lack of checks and balances in power can result in less responsiveness to on-the-ground realities in the implementation of policies.

4. Findings: Discourse dynamics in China's talent introduction policies

After comparing of Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan and the Peacock Plan, the study identified five key differences between the two policies.

Power construction: Both plans utilize discourse to construct governmental authority and stable legitimacy. However, Guangzhou adopts an inclusive and responsible narrative, while the Peacock Plan focuses on a selective, elite-driven approach. These differences reflect contrasting power dynamics and public perceptions of talent.

Talent hierarchies: The discourse reinforces hierarchies of talent. Guangzhou has a broader perspective, providing access to a wide range of opportunities. In contrast, Shenzhen prioritizes high-level international talent, which may marginalize local professionals and create disparities in the labor market.

Talent subjectivity: The Guangzhou Gathering Plan offers comprehensive support for talent, positioning the government as a facilitator of innovation and talent growth. In contrast, the Peacock Plan lacks humanistic care, viewing talent primarily as economic assets for development.

Accountability measures: Guangzhou's plan includes more comprehensive measures, highlighting different approaches to governance and their implications for talent retention and development, while the Peacock Plan lacks the same level of accountability.

Centralized power: The Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan balances centralized control with local adaptation, whereas the Peacock Plan employs a top-down strategy, which may limit effectiveness and equity in talent policies.

The discourse analysis of these two policies reveals the intricate power dynamics and the shaping construction of government authority. By examining the definition of talent, government positions, and implications of these policies, researchers can gain a critical perspective on evaluating the role of talent policies in economic

development. Although the talent introduction policies illustrate the dynamics in talent management, they also expose inequities in China's economic structure. This calls for a more inclusive and dynamic talent ecosystem that supports the country's long-term development.

5. Discussion

5.1. Several reasons for differences

Guangzhou is located in the central part of Guangdong province, with its economic influence extending across the entire Pearl River Delta region. Notably, it has strong ties with the other parallel government entities. In contrast, Shenzhen, as a special economic zone, has more autonomy and benefits from its proximity to the Hong Kong SAR, China, enabling more vertical and centralized governance. Additionally, as an ancient trade city, Guangzhou has a strong foundation in various industries, and its role as the capital of Guangdong province helps to cultivate and attract a diverse pool of talented individuals. On the other hand, Shenzhen, a newly emerging city under the guidance of policy since 1978, is primarily focused on high-tech industries. While it has a growing need for high-end talent to drive innovation, its talent cultivation system seems deficient. Shenzhen's position as a special economic zone strengthens the link between the local and central government, contributing to its vertical authority structure.

5.2. What can be done to retain talented people?

There is no doubt that recruiting or introducing talent is important; however, retaining talent may be even more important for governments that seek to focus on long-term innovation. Policies should not only focus on recruiting local and international professionals but also provide more avenues for cultivating and educating talent. Subsidies for specific projects or individuals, such as housing, child education, and healthcare, are essential in improving career development opportunities. The role of governance should be that of an advocate rather than an authority, offering greater flexibility for innovation. These measures are designed to foster a sense of belonging for talent, encouraging them to stay, work, and innovate in specific cities.

6. Conclusion

Talent introduction policies have become increasingly important in China's development. Through a comparative analysis of the Guangzhou Talent Gathering Plan and the Peacock Plan, the study finds that these two cities focus on different aspects of talent strategies. Guangzhou aims to recruit and cultivate its own talent from various fields over the long term, while Shenzhen focuses more on attracting high-end talent to drive technology innovation, but lacks further supporting measures. The roles of government in talent introduction policies differ in these two cities: Guangzhou has a more multi-level and counterbalanced approach, while Shenzhen's system is more vertical and simplified.

This research highlights the discourse and relevance of talent introduction policies. To increase the understanding of such policies, future research should focus on two areas: first, whether this kind of interaction exists in other cities or villages — is this power structure and governance model suitable for other areas, or is it an isolated case within Guangdong? The second area for future research is an exploration of talent policies based on this study, focusing on what measures China can adopt to further develop talent introduction policies. The future of talent policies and the effective utilization of high-end talent will likely continue to be important for China in the long term.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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