C 2 Branches in China

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Almost all the world’s most distinguished architects are now also represented in China and take part in competitions there, or are already working on projects. Despite the fact that the building projects tend to be very large, not all the internationally active practices in China have a local branch, with the status of a so-called representative office. In fact, the principal advantage of such a branch is that constant presence in China expands horizons and also means that competitions, reports and possible building projects can be spotted and assessed more quickly through proximity to current events. Chinese clients now increasingly see a branch of the architecture practice as a key precondition for possible work together.

For this reason, shortly before gmp started working in China we decided to set up a representative office of this kind in Beijing. We opened our first branch in October 2000, and there are now eleven Chinese and six German employees of our practice there. A branch in Shanghai followed in April 2004. This now has 20 employees, of which 14 are Chinese.

If a Chinese branch is to succeed it is essential that there is a balanced ratio of Chinese to German employees. A Chinese client expects to have qualified and experienced German architects working for him on the spot, just as it is indispensable for our German employees to be supported by their Chinese colleagues.

The employees in the gmp branches in China represent our practice in the first place, but they also secure participation in new competitions that are then processed in one of our German offices. They then present these designs to the client, along with the plans drawn up in Germany for current projects. Both our Shanghai office and the Beijing branch are looked after entirely by our Chinese partner Mr Wu, in consultation with the German board, which includes seven partners other than Meinhard von Gerkan and Volkwin Marg. Each of the Chinese offices also has a German office manager. Staff are assigned to particular projects to be realized in China.

Our German colleagues in China work exclusively as architects, while the Chinese staff are involved in the planning teams and also in office administration, such as bookkeeping or secretarial duties, for example, as it is essential to speak Chinese for these activities, and to
have perfect knowledge of Chinese practices like taxation and labour legislation.

Some of the architects from Germany are very experienced, long-standing gmp employees and have already realized outstanding building projects in our German offices. They are supported by young, dynamic architects who see a stay in Shanghai or Beijing as a particular challenge to their careers. The German architects spend an average of two to three years in China before coming back to our offices in Germany.

As with the German employees, there is a balanced ratio of experienced architects to recent architecture graduates among the Chinese staff.

In order to promote good working relationships between the German and Chinese offices, we also offer Chinese colleagues of proven ability the chance to work for a longer period in one of the gmp offices in Germany. Our experience has shown that precisely this professional but also cultural exchange guarantees continuous quality in the handling of our many foreign projects.

gmp chose Beijing and Shanghai as its two locations, as these two large centres are developing into prosperous cosmopolitan cities at breakneck speed, and offer ideal conditions for branches of foreign architecture practices because of their international nature. Alongside the major events, the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and Expo 2010 in Shanghai, competition between practices provides the necessary spur. A branch based in Shanghai will find it difficult to acquire projects in Beijing, just as a Beijing branch is unlikely to meet with any success in competitions announced in Shanghai. Also the two major cities and their populous environs offer a large potential for exciting building work in future years.

As well as this we must not forget that the airports in these two cities are ideal starting points for projects in southern China, in the case of Shanghai, and projects in the north of the country from Beijing.

It is not necessary to set up project-related, temporary branches in other Chinese cities, except for very large building projects. For example, this made sense for us when we were building the Shenzhen Conference & Exhibition Center: we won the first prize in the competition in 2001, and were then commissioned to do the planning work. We set up an office in Shenzhen in the building phase, used mainly by our German site superintendent while supervising the enormous project, for which about 255,000 square metres of built volume were completed in just under two years.