Planning Intercity Railways in China’s Mega-City Regions: Insights from the Pearl River Delta*

Jiang Xu and Yanyan Chen

Abstract

Chinese mega-city regions have become a new scale of capital accumulation and state regulation. In recent years these regions have attracted much scholarly attention; however, the growing research on regional spaces in China is marked by a lack of what we term “realpolitik” and an absence of rigorous case studies. This study uses the “politics of scale” to empirically investigate the realpolitik factors in the intercity railway planning process in the Pearl River Delta. To this end, we establish a two-dimensional approach to unravel the interscalar and intercity politics during this process. We argue that in an institutional vacuum, ad hoc measures have been frequently used to facilitate

---

Jiang Xu is Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Resource Management at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). She has published books and many articles in leading international journals. She is the recipient of the 2008 Research Output Prize of the University of Hong Kong and the 2012 Research Excellence Award of CUHK.

Yanyan Chen is a PhD candidate in the Department of Geography and Resource Management at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her major research interest focuses on multi-level state interaction in railway planning and the environmental treatment in urban planning system of in the Pearl River Delta.

* We would like to thank the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (project number CUHK455712) for funding this research. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and useful comments.
interscalar and intercity bargaining. This case study also establishes a new perspective for understanding China’s urban and regional transformation. Rather than treating the state as a passive agent, coping with the powerful forces of decentralization and market reform, we argue that the state has strategically redefined itself and has become even more sophisticated in its structures, functions, and tactics. The traditional one-sided and unidirectional approach to state-space analysis cannot adequately address these issues. A new perspective that considers the politics of various scales is needed to study the emerging state regime in China.

1. Introduction

Geographers have defined mega-city regions as conurbations; these are administratively separate but intensively interlinked contiguous cities or metropolitan areas clustered around one or more large cities. In China, the Pearl River Delta (PRD) and the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) regions are examples of conurbations. Very often, such regions develop at phenomenal rates and the populations may exceed 50 million people in a proportionately small land area. Their rapid but fragmented growth and the problems of managing infrastructure and development across administrative boundaries often lead to problems, which are relatively unstudied. Geographers mapping the growth of Chinese regions over the past decade have noted that these mega-city regions represent a new spatial scale for capital accumulation, state regulation, and political compromise. This represents not only a critical shift away from prereform state socialism, but also a significant alternation to postreform neoliberal urbanism. In this new perspective, regions represent emerging state spaces that are shaped by overlapping competencies among contending actors at multiple scales of governance.

The growing importance of regional space highlights two gaps in academic inquiry and political discourse. First, there is a tendency to apply a hegemonic interpretation of city regionalism at the expense of place-specific knowledge. Brenner, Jessop, Scotts, and other state-space theorists from Western countries consider regions an increasingly important scale of economic growth and political confrontation. Chinese scholars mainly discuss governance in mega-city regions. Both groups focus on theory building and normative rationality; these studies tend to be somewhat rhetorical and discursive without substantive understanding of what Flyvbjerg calls “realpolitik”—a German term used to denote