Rescaling as a Leading National Transformation Project: Decoding State Rescaling in China’s Changing Central State–Led Regional Planning*

Hao Chen, Jingxiang Zhang, Xiangyu Li, and Zhao Zhang

Abstract

It is worthwhile to empirically probe the prominent value of the transformation process by employing the state rescaling perspective. However, the state rescaling, as an important theoretical discourse, has

Hao CHEN is a doctoral candidate in the Research Center of Human Geography and School of Geographic and Oceanographic Sciences, Nanjing University, Nanjing. His research mainly focuses on urban and regional spatial transformation, from a political economic perspective.

Jingxiang ZHANG is a professor in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Nanjing University, Nanjing. His research focuses on governance, production of urban space, and urban and regional development and its planning theory.

Xiangyu LI is a doctoral candidate in public administration, University of North Texas, USA. His research interests include mass evacuation and transportation management, geographic information system, and intergovernmental relationships.

Zhao ZHANG is a doctoral candidate in the School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy, University College Dublin, Ireland. His research interests primarily center on urban studies–associated themes, with a specific concern on urban re-development process and urban resistance in the Chinese context and beyond.

* This article was sponsored by the Natural Science Foundation of China (no. 41171134, no. 41071107). We are grateful to Prof. Jianfa Shen, Prof. Xiaolong Luo, and two anonymous referees for their feedback and suggestions, which helped us revise the article.
not been systemically scrutinized in Chinese context. In this article, the empirical framework based on the central state–led regional planning and its changes is established and implemented to unfold the evolution trajectory of China’s six state scaling stages since 1953. In the meantime, it is argued that China’s state rescaling is not resulted from overall socioeconomic transformation, but plays a role as the leading project. Therefore, it could be concluded that state rescaling in China is neither the product of internal ‘natural economic process’ nor the consequence triggered by the globalization, but the outcome of the state’s positive political selection.

Challenged by the capital accumulation crisis and by increased globalization since the 1970s, Western states have restructured the roles and functions of their governments. With policy shifting, including decentralization, deregulation, privatization, and globalization, they have transformed themselves socioeconomically from Keynesianism to neoliberalism,¹ or to a Schumpeterian workfare postnational regime (SWPR).² Concurrent with this has come the rescaling of states.

With the neoliberalism/SWPR movement, more and more authority and responsibility in economic growth and social welfare has devolved to the localities (e.g., the city and the community). And when globalization intensified in the 1990s, another overarching goal of state rescaling became the strategic positioning of major cities and city-regions within international (e.g., Europe and global) circuits of capital accumulation.³ This repositioning included the transfer of authority from the state and national levels to forms of supranational governance (e.g., the European Union, the World Trade Organization [WTO], and thousands of transnational corporations). In other words, the nation-states relinquished their authority over social welfare and economic regulation to both the localities and the international institutions.

The intertwined scalar shifts were called “glocalization.”⁴ Under the former Fordist-Keynesian regime, the nation-state lay in the center of demand management and was the most important level at which political and economic powers were coordinated.⁵ But as supranational and subnational entities gained increasingly more power, academic scholars turned their attentions to issues that were associated with state rescaling.⁶ Studies on the state rescaling process among Western states (e.g., Western Europe and Northern America), which began appearing in the middle of the 1990s, constitute the first wave in the development of state rescaling