Researching state rescaling in China: methodological reflections

Kean Fan Lim

School of Geography
University of Nottingham
Sir Clive Granger Building,
University Park, NG7 2RD
UK
Tel: +44(0)115 9515428
Fax: +44(0)115 9515249
keanfan.lim@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper foregrounds and evaluates the research design associated with the study of Chinese state rescaling. It first synthesizes the existing gaps in the original, western-based state rescaling framework. The paper then explores how different methodological channels are integrated to support a revised analytical framework. Specifically, it presents the value of multi-sited comparisons through (a) the 'extended case method' and (b) the role of the 'concurrent nested approach' to data collection. In so doing, the paper offers a systematic assessment of the methodological contributions and constraints in ascertaining and explaining how regulatory reconfigurations unfold across space and time in China.

Key words: state rescaling; research design; extended case method; policy experimentation fieldwork; China

1. Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, advanced economies in western Europe and North America have been experiencing a transition from a nationally-configured, Fordist-Keynesian developmental approach towards a 'flexible' mode of production based in and around city-regions. This scalar shift took place through the reconfiguration of regulatory relations between national, subnational and supranational governments, a process broadly conceptualized as state rescaling (Peck, 2002, 2003; Brenner, 2004; Jessop and Sum, 2006). A similar reconfiguration was occurring in previously-insulated China following the re-implementation of market-like rule in 1978: special economic zones (SEZs) became designated in strategic cities to engage the global system of capitalism, while production within the vast rural hinterland was downsized from massive communes to the individual household. Over the last decade, a series of intra-urban territories termed officially as "nationally strategic new areas" (*guojia zhanlüe xinqu*) have been designated to experiment with policies that ease the pressures confronting national regulation. Unsurprisingly, the state rescaling framework has attracted the attention of researchers seeking to evaluate and explain the emergence of city-regionalism across China (see, e.g. Li and Wu, 2012; Li *et al*, 2014; Wu, 2017).

This paper presents and critically reflects on the research design for a multi-sited study of these "new areas". Beginning from 2011, the study primarily aimed to ascertain why these territories were designated and how they affected national-level regulation. Fieldwork was undertaken in three different areas at different moments between 2012 and 2013, namely Beijing (to access major universities, archives, decision-makers); Chongqing (to understand the emergence of Liangjiang New Area) and the city-region of the Pearl River Delta (hereafter PRD, to understand the emergence of Hengqin and Qianhai New Areas, the key nationally strategic areas in the region before the official designation of Nansha New Area as "nationally strategic"). Follow-up fieldwork was conducted in the PRD in 2015 and a new round of data collection is underway in Chongqing at the time of writing.

The research design was based on an analytical framework that foregrounds the relationship between state rescaling, policy experimentation and path-dependency (see Lim, 2017a). This framework plugs a gap in the existing literature by focusing on the tensions between place-specific experimentation with national-level change (an outcome of state rescaling) and the constraining effects of path-dependency at both local and national levels (a determinant of future rescaling). This focus on institutional continuity and change across different regulatory scales distinguishes the state rescaling focus in this study from other regional and urban issues across China: while changing regulatory relations could directly impact urban regeneration, transportation planning, and industrial policies, these issues were not directly integrated into the research design. Rather, the study *complements* existing urban and regional studies of China by highlighting how policy changes within city-regions co-exist with and at times contradict institutional continuity at the national scale.

Specifically, data collection was organized along five interrelated dimensions, namely, to identify 1) the primary scale of socioeconomic regulation of the time (i.e. was it the national, subnational or supranational?); 2) the rescaling tendencies (i.e. are more institutionally-distinct territories emerging?); 3) the institutions and/or actors that drive and coordinate the primary scale of socioeconomic regulation (i.e. was it the central government, local governments, SOEs or TNCs?); 4) the degree to which experimental reforms (e.g. financial sector reforms in Qianhai New Area) change or keep intact inherited institutions established as far back as the formative years of Chinese statehood (e.g. the insulated and self-reinforcing national financial system); and, last but not least, 5) the rationale of state rescaling. These dimensions collectively addressed the following two research objectives:

- To foreground the process of designating specific locations into "nationally strategic" reform frontiers, with emphases on the agendas of different interest groups and the politics of the designation process.

- To evaluate the effects of these experimental policies across different scales (urban, cross-provincial and national) and over time (extending back into the Mao era).

The merits and challenges of the research design will be presented in the following three parts of this paper. Section 2 provides an overview of the research context, paying attention to the constitutive roles of the extended case method and the 'concurrent nested strategy'. Section 3 then evaluates how the chosen methods enabled the fulfillment of the research objectives. The implications of this research design for future research on Chinese state rescaling is considered in the conclusion.

2. The research context

The project on Chinese state rescaling and policy experimentation follows Heilmann's (2008: 2) approach to understand the extent to which "existing, and initially deficient, institutions can be put to work, transformed, or replaced for economic and social development in an open-ended process of institutional innovation that is based on locally generated solutions rather than on imported policy recipes." For Heilmann (2008; also Heilmann and Perry, 2011), the reason why the Chinese state effected large-scale politico-economic change without experiencing systemic collapse was due to its ability to implement "adaptive governance". This refers to the Chinese central government's ability and willingness to respond strategically to initiatives proposed by local governments. Building on this approach, the project aims to show how the central government developed this specific capacity to govern *through* state rescaling, and makes explicit how "nationally strategic" experimentation are not only solutions to local problems – the intention of geographically-differentiated experimentation is to *simultaneously* improve central regulatory capacities. In so doing, the project problematizes the traditional '*tiao tiao*' (vertical lines of authority leading to/from the central government) and '*kuai kuai*' (horizontal lines of authority extending at/from the provincial or local levels) modes of governance by demonstrating the *entwinement* and *co-*

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dependence of *tiao-kuai* relations.

To achieve these objectives, the study deployed the 'extended case study' method developed by Burawoy (2009). Broadly, this method privileges the refinement of theories through their application to different cases, and is largely similar to O'Brien's (2006) flexible approach to research (re)design while conducting research in China. For O'Brien (2006: 31) and his collaborators, arriving in the field with a preconceived theoretical framework was a useful first step, but the process then gave way to "reveling" in the "particular and concrete", such that theory, concepts and evidence became aligned at the end of the project. Burawoy (2009: 68) terms this prioritization of theoretical refinement reflexive science:

> Here we have a craft mode of knowledge production in which the product governs the process. The goal of research is not directed at establishing a "definitive" truth about an external world but at the continual improvement of existing theory. Theory and research are inextricable.

Where this project differed from O'Brien's (2006) approach was its *multi-sited* focus. It is in this regard that the inherently comparative aspect of Burawoy's approach stands out. Rather than assess the cases in isolation or against one another based on a pre-determined template, the comparative aspect of the extended case method is to trace

> the source of small differences to external forces. This might be called the integrative or vertical approach. Here the purpose of the comparison is to causally connect the cases. Instead of reducing cases to instances of a general law, we make each case work through its connection to other cases.(Burawoy, 2009: 49-50)

Pertaining to the two chosen study sites of policy experimentation, the aim was to ascertain how each case could be considered "nationally strategic" when its experimental policies differed vastly from the other. For this reason, no preconceived parameters for comparisons between each 'new area' were derived. Neither were the developments in each area benchmarked against a stylized model (e.g. that of a 'variety of capitalism'). The goal, rather, was to explain how and why subnational actors lobbied the central government for the power to tentatively reform national-level institutions.

This comparative approach offered greater flexibility to tease out the connections

between state rescaling, policy experimentation and institutional path-dependency. It stands distinctly apart from prevailing narratives in the Chinese media and academic circles that compare one 'nationally strategic new area' to another based on some 'objective' parameters (e.g. income, geographical extent, population etc.; see, for instance, Xue and Wang, 2011; *Vanke Weekly*, 2 July 2013). The latter approach appeared to be missing a crucial point: each new area contains experimental reforms that are set within its immediate geographical-historical context but *simultaneously* addresses specific national-level structural constraints. And it is through assessing these reforms *in tandem* that contradictions pertaining to national-scale restructuring became apparent.

For instance, while the designation of Liangjiang New Area overlapped preexisting reforms of the 1958 *hukou* institution that offered rural migrant workers equal access to social benefits as urban residents in Chongqing, the national designation of Hengqin and Qianhai New Areas took place against a backdrop of a "double relocation" restructuring agenda aimed at removing targeted industries and labor power. The *hukou* institution lubricated the relocation of migrant workers in key manufacturing cities in Guangdong, with some cities cutting down the population by at least half through sending migrant workers 'back where they belong' (Interview, Shenzhen, January 2013). To sharpen the contradiction, it was the same political actor – Wang Yang – who kickstarted both the "nationally strategic" reforms in Chongqing and Guangdong. When "integrated" in this way, to re-borrow Burawoy's term, the emergence of each new area simultaneously expressed the *contrasting* effects of some inherited institutions on national-scale economic restructuring. Tracing the source of differences between each new area to the foundational institutions of the CPC thus offered an incisive insight into the tensions underpinning China's transition to a 'socialist market economy'.

There was an inherent difficulty to this comparative approach to empirical collection, however. While the broader focus is to understand how the Chinese state reconfigures

space to attain its politico-economic objectives, there were moments when it was hard to conceptually buttonhole general observations of reforms in each 'new area' without a stylized model or fixed set of variables. Perhaps this is an inevitable aspect of following experimentation in 'real time': theorizing the 'how' and 'why' instead of the 'what' as things change quickly is fundamentally an open-ended process in which links between raw data must be built up in small parts. The task was further complicated by the fact that the inherited institutional landscape in China is a *combination* of spatially-selective experimentation (cf. Rawski, 1995, Naughton, 1995, Ong, 2004). This means there were multiple overlapping developmental paths to be identified, not one based solely on an internally coherent 'national agenda'.

With an analytical scope that encompasses this expansive space-time horizon, it was determined from the outset that there would be no best method of data collection. What appeared initially to be a broad research area was subsequently narrowed as the project's objectives took shape. A framework was subsequently developed that focused principally on how geography constitutes politico-economic evolution, followed by the notion that geographically-targeted experimental strategies generate new logics of socioeconomic regulation in part because of problems associated with earlier regulatory logics (see Lim, 2017a). The research target thus became more and more visible: what were these experimental strategies, what kinds of problems did they trigger, and did the successive series of spatial strategies adequately resolve these problems? Once these empirical questions emerged, new conceptually-significant questions followed: why, despite these problems, did some inherited policies from previous regimes continue to impact the present? Vis-à-vis the path-dependent effects of these policies, (how) could it be argued that political-economic development in China is currently in a new epoch?

The emergence and crystallization of these research questions soon illustrated the importance and benefit of constructing a primary database on policy *formation* (ref. objective

1, introduction section). "Understanding why policy both ends up as it does and fails to achieve its goals", writes Glasmeier (2007: 219), "requires understanding of the political context in which policy is both constructed and implemented." For this reason, it would not suffice to just describe policy shifts; how these shifts were justified and contested by Chinese policymakers positioned at different levels of the political hierarchy was the main area in which the *internal logics* of institutional change could be understood and evaluated. The goal of data collection was thereby to collate a series of arguments and (counter-)justifications that could explain why certain policies succeeded and how they generated challenges that required new rounds of geographically-targeted experimentation.

Specifically, the database was constructed to describe and explain 1) the socioeconomic relations that constituted and are affected by the production of "nationally strategic new areas"; and 2) the impacts of interactions between the experimental policies and the inherited institutions in the two chosen research sites (i.e. Chongqing and the Pearl River Delta). These two case studies helped to sidestep an important 'methodological trap', i.e. the notion that a totalizing reconstruction of the past is possible. Through the identification of theoretically-significant empirical phenomena in the case studies (e.g. which institutions are resistant to change today, which policies the state strives to reform, etc.), new questions were generated. These questions, such as why the *hukou* institution remains so resistant to change in spite of the reforms in Chongqing, opened up new avenues to re-interpret events that have had specific and seemingly-taken-for-granted meanings attached to them.

For instance, the literature on China's 'Third Front' construction program (*sanxian jianshe*) in the mid-1960s over-emphasized its geopolitical motivations, but the materials collected for this project strongly suggests it was also an attempt at crisis-diversion that reflected Mao's obdurate stance against more 'market-friendly' reforms proposed by key cadres such as Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping and Deng Zihui. Through this push, Mao retained

two crises-generating policies – the large-scale collectivization of rural production through the People's Communes and the mandatory geographical segregation and quasi-permanent confinement of the population – running almost on auto-pilot until his death in 1976. And the economic-geographical outcome was entrenched uneven development: not only did inter-provincial income and output inequality did not narrow, urban-rural inequality *worsened* after the campaign to locate industrial resources to inland provinces designated as the 'Third Front' (see discussion in Lim, 2017b)

The questions then became even more specific: since these two policies were emblematic of governance logics of the Mao administration, why did Deng Xiaoping and his successors choose to retain key aspects of their institutional characteristics up to the present? What does this retention say about path-dependency in post-Mao regimes' approach to economic development? More to the point, what does it say about the contemporary relevance of Mao-styled regulation? With new interpretations came new meanings, and new meanings in turn generated new questions. In a way, then, the juxtaposition of different and at times contrasting interpretations in this project was as much about generating new questions about the China 'growth miracle' as it was about producing new explanations. And as the next section will discuss, addressing these new questions entailed a flexible and multi-dimensional set of methods.

3. The methods: critical reflections

Detailed collection of empirical materials was conducted prior to, during and after the embarkation of three field visits to China, namely between January and February 2012 (to Beijing, with a stopover in Shanghai); in March and April 2012 (to Chongqing); and in January 2013 (to Hengqin, Qianhai and Macau, with a stopover in Hong Kong). As Table 1 shows, three methods were adopted in this project, namely policy and secondary literature analysis, interviews with key actors involved in or with the experience in planning and consulting for

the government, and statistical collation. These approaches are not novel, to be sure, when assessed individually vis-à-vis those adopted in other studies on Chinese state rescaling. For instance, Li and Wu's (2012) extensive analysis of Chinese state rescaling drew on historical analysis, policy analysis and mapping of Mao-era spatial projects. In a subsequent project, they conducted 50 in-depth interviews to determine the politics of regional cooperation in the Yangtze River Delta (Li and Wu, 2017). Sun and Chan (2016: 5-6), on the other hand, primarily analyzed planning discourses in their study of state rescaling in the Pearl River Delta. While these approaches overlapped the set of three methods, the latter was distinct in the way it was organized based on what Creswell (2003: 218) terms the "concurrent nested strategy".

This strategy focuses attention on the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, but one approach would be primary and the other (hence the 'nesting'). After a preliminary round of data evaluation, it became apparent that the qualitative data would be prioritized, while quantitative materials would complement rather than form the core analytical basis. To follow McDowell (2010: 158), the aim of qualitative research is to "probe an issue in depth: the purpose is to explore and understand actions within specific settings, to examine human relationships and discover as much as possible about why people feel or act in the ways they do." The primary reason for this preference was due to the study's emphasis on 'why'. To ascertain and explain the tendencies and rationale of active spatial configuration in the contemporary juncture and ascertain the extent of path dependency, it was necessary to identify data that could assist in forming a coherent narrative of change. In this regard, speeches and/or interviews given by key causal actors and policy documents could more incisively reveal why specific actors like Wang Yang and Bo Xilai drove state rescaling than analyses of statistical significance or software-based modeling (see, for instance, Lim, 2016; cf. Lim and Horesh, 2017; Gao *et al*, 2017).

Table 1. Contributions and constraints of chosen methods through the concurrent nested strategy

Methods	Contributions	Constraints
Qualitative source I: Policy & secondary literature analysis (especially Chinese-language sources)	• Establish clearer directions for interviews, statistical collation and geo-historical analyses • Policy documents offer concrete bases for conceptualization & evaluation • Chinese-language articles, books, news reports offer access to otherwise inaccessible views of key political actors	• Policy documents may contain jargon & be vague about specific details • Lack of control over questions to key actors • Some Chinese-language sources are not easily available outside China
Qualitative source II: Interviews with key actors involved in or with experience in planning/consulting for the government	• Offers first -hand information that may not have been published previously • Provides suggestions on further secondary sources to consult	• Difficult to access actors with direct involvement in state rescaling, especially cases that were more contentious • Tendency to refer to publicly available information
Supporting quantitative sources: Statistical collation, compilation & cross-referencing	• Reveals major trends such as urban-rural income ratio, fixed capital investments, employment rates, etc. • Once completed, trends lead to further cross-referencing with published reports, which led at times to additional information	• Many trends may not be revealed by published statistics & require further sourcing of secondary & primary data, e.g. degree of central government SOE investments in the "nationally strategic new areas" • Officially published statistics may not be fully accurate, which underscores the importance of cross-referencing & research through other methods

Source: Author's formulation.

Two vignettes on the analysis of quantitative data from the Pearl River Delta explain why a qualitative approach was preferred to address the five dimensions of state rescaling delineated in section 1. First, while state published statistics would reveal increased fixed capital investments in Hengqin New Area, they do not reveal the financiers of the investment. By extension, it would not be possible to explain, based on these statistics, why specific financiers and not others funded the investments. The interviews with the

academics/consultants in Shenzhen led to information on the financiers (predominantly state-owned enterprises and national banks controlled by the central government). Further checks were then conducted, and this shaped the conclusion reached at the end of the case analysis: state rescaling benefits provincial governments in the short term because they augment GDP figures, yet this GDP embellishment is only possible through central governmental support (via the centrally-controlled SOEs and financial institutions). At the macro level, this offers a new explanation why so many provincial governments are lobbying the central government to reconfigure their administrative territories into "nationally strategic new areas".

Second, the official employment figures in Guangdong province were found to be positive even after the global financial crisis struck in 2008. Nationally, the published unemployment rate was under 10%. Yet the-then Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, acknowledged in 2010 that 200 million people were unemployed, which translated to a 14.5% unemployment rate relative to the total population and 20% relative to the working population. Relative to official accounts from Guangdong, Wen's speech opened up new questions on 1) the veracity of the national unemployment rate; 2) why employment continued to grow in Guangdong while the rest of the country was experiencing a staggering unemployment rate exceeding 20%; and 3) why other provinces fared so much worse than Guangdong in unemployment rates given that the majority of migrant workers were (and remain) based in Guangdong (or, more specifically, the PRD where the majority of industrial activities take place). These new questions facilitated the formation of a tentative conclusion: as the most attractive destination for migrant workers across the country, Guangdong successfully 'relocated' unwanted migrant workers after the 2008 crisis. As such, unemployment that should be concentrated in situ was 'exported' to the other provinces, which in turn created new opportunities for 'scaling up' territories in the PRD in the name of the "national strategy". This 'exportation' strongly suggests why 200 million people (a

substantial number who would have been working in Guangdong) were unemployed across China while the official employment rates remained positive in Guangdong during the same period. Without Wen's speech, it would have been impossible to arrive at this conclusion (which, to be sure, invites future scholars to make more substantive verifications).

Given that the three field visits involved interactions with as many as 80 individuals on various occasions (e.g. lunches and dinner hosted by local governments, chats with guides at visitor centres of the New Areas), it was difficult to define the total number of 'interviews'. Strictly speaking, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 academics and policymakers during the three field visits, while interactions with other individuals that yielded insights into developmental processes in the new areas were written into field notes. Where possible, attempts were made on-site to follow up on suggestions given by interviewees or from informal interactions (e.g. sourcing for statistics, old maps and policy documents). Back in [home city], renewed efforts were made to contact the individuals for subsequent information and suggestions. In this respect, 'fieldwork' continued beyond the 'field'.

The active engagement with interviewees within and beyond the field corresponds with Barnes' (2001: 557) observation that theorizing is "a social activity like any other". The opportunity to be hosted at the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) in Beijing offered a tremendous platform from which enrolment into domestic academic networks became possible. This enrolment in turn offered many stimulating ideas, which was then followed by an extensive on-site search for secondary materials. The Beijing visit was followed up with CAS-arranged visits to many locations that reflect the ongoing reforms in Chongqing, such as the new tax-free logistics zone, factories in Liangjiang New Area, public housing construction sites, the land transfers office, etc. Accessing this network offered invaluable opportunities for establishing contacts.

The data collection process in Zhuhai and Shenzhen (where the new areas of

Hengqin and Qianhai are located, respectively) involved more spontaneity: an encounter with a local construction employee led to a motorcycle tour of the island and a lunch meeting with many of his friends in the construction industry. This tour opened access to the exhibition hall, where conversations with three employees were established, and the main village on Hengqin. Inside the village, more historical accounts of the development of the area became clearer. The community centre representative offered a broad overview of developmental changes, and how further development could affect the area. Over in Macau, separated from Hengqin by a narrow waterway, two interviews were conducted with legal consultants and another with an academic specializing in public policy. While in Shenzhen, the opportunity to interview four academics proved especially helpful, but in an indirect manner: they offered recommendations to relevant documents and what they knew about the context of the policy changes rather than put on record their personal insights on the policymaking process.

However, one reason why fieldwork never ends in the field site is due to the lack of adequate information from the informants. At one level, this reflected a practical constraint: visa restrictions and a small financial budget limited the length of time in the field site (and hence the number of potential interviewees). At another level, this was attributable to a general tendency of interviewees – state officials in particular – to avoid answering questions directly or offer in-depth personal views. The general refrain from actors representing the state would be 'all information on our work can be seen online, you can visit our webpage to find out more'. This refrain was discouraging at times, as government websites normally lists policy documents without discussing in detail why these were launched. How could the study's objective of establishing rationale be attained if it was not possible to hear from the 'horse's mouth'? Glasmeier's (2007: 218-219) account on policy analysis offered a particularly helpful reminder:

Confirming intent is done using open-ended interviews with key informants who were policy analysts, agency personnel and politicians themselves. Newspaper articles can corroborate findings from the administrative record. The bottom line is that historical understanding requires archival research coupled with personal interviews with individuals engaged in the policy debates of specific times…Such analysis highlights the intended, and by implication allows for the interpretation of unintended, consequences of public policy.

Establishing "intent" is a multi-dimensional process, as Glasmeier's experience indicates. On reflection, this is not only true in the context of this study on Chinese state rescaling; it underscores the need to be flexible in dealing with different dimensions as conditions develop 'on the ground'. The closure of one potential source of information – information from actors that represent the state – only made it imperative to open other doors. Vis-à-vis the tight-lipped state-linked actors, it became clear that scholars or business consultants were keen to talk and offer assistance. For one respondent, "discussing these issues with you is interesting because my days in the office are often very boring" (Interview, Shenzhen, January 2013). Because of their experience in and/or knowledge of the circuits of policy deliberation, insights from these respondents proved very helpful in identifying causal relations (see discussion on the field experience in Hengqin and Qianhai above). Often, these insights offered new opportunities to deepen the contextualization of published state discourses; question the feasibility of some experimental policies, and identify patterns and logics pertaining to state rescaling in China.

To enable this re-contextualization, the collection of published materials became a very important moment of the research process. Major policy documents (e.g. the 12th 5-Year Plan; Plan for Guangdong-Macau-Hong Kong; Great Western Development plan; etc.) and published interviews by state actors were collected, translated and analyzed. Many of these documents, mostly published in Chinese and which have not been discussed by scholars outside China, offered rich background knowledge of the historical contexts of the 'new areas' and the reasons why these areas were given national designations. Policy analysis was complemented by an analysis of statistical and qualitative information

published in the media. Close to 800 articles published in various media in China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan were collated. These articles provided a significant source of information, including statistical information on updated capital flows into the 'new areas' as well as major firms that have moved into the areas. A substantial amount of this information was not reported in the statistical publications of the Chinese government, but nonetheless helped to highlight both the causes and effects of place-specific policy experimentation.

The personal conversations were especially beneficial when it came to the analysis of historically sensitive policies (particularly those pertaining to life in the People's Communes, the logics of the Great Leap Forward, etc.): the intention was to gain perspectives from within China that complement research already conducted on these historical events, and many interviewees offered tremendous help in pointing out local articles, books and archival sources. As mentioned earlier, the opportunity to conduct multiple field visits also made it easier to collect materials on site: it was often during the intermittent periods of fieldwork, when the collected data was collated, that 'missing' information was identified. The possibility of a subsequent visit thus offered fresh opportunities to plug the 'data gap'. To be sure, there are no clear boundaries – if there are boundaries at all – to this research field. This means there are always new data to explore and analyze; the challenge is to determine how much information would suffice to render a cogent narrative. In itself this was a major lesson of the research process.

A key source of published information was interpretations of policies given by senior policymakers (e.g. leaders of major state-owned enterprises, city mayors, and senior academics who have participated in policymaking as consultants). Given the practical challenges involved in directly accessing these senior figures, their views from published sources were taken to be those *of* the state. These sources were especially worth analyzing given the CPC's extreme caution with the public use of words. In fact, Mao Zedong was

acutely aware of the significance of language that he advised Wang Hongwen, a close aide

and, in a private 1974 conversation to choose his words carefully:

> From now on, you must pay a lot of attention when you speak, do not express a stance easily. The most important ingredient of political leadership is not to let others know what you intend to do or say in your next move. If others can predict all your actions, where would there be the art of political leadership? Regarding words that we have yet to utter, we are their masters; regarding those words already uttered, we are their slaves. (Documented by Shi, 1998, Chapter 30; author's translation)[1].

By Mao's logic, which should be well-known to senior CPC cadres, words "already uttered"

represent a "stance", and it was this stance regarding regulatory reconfigurations that the

research aimed to identify and compare with actual outcomes (ref. second research

objective delineated in section 1). The reason is straightforward: these words not only offer

insights into reasons for rescaling, they also function as concrete benchmarks against which

"unintended consequences", to re-borrow Glasmeier's (2007) terms, could be assessed.

Senior political actors had given numerous interviews on state rescaling and policy

experimentations to local magazines and newspapers, and some have even published

articles in Chinese-language academic journals. These sources constituted the primary base

from which to examine the intentions of their respective projects. Given that they were major

'causal agents' (i.e. actors with the power to effect change and/or implement policies)

involved in the development of policies, it was assumed their views comprise a discourse

against which alternative interpretations could be juxtaposed.

However, a surprising outcome of this juxtaposition was the identification of different

viewpoints amongst what is often perceived to be a homogeneous group of state-linked

actors. These differences are important findings in themselves for two reasons. First, they

foreground the difficulties of effecting institutional change in a broader structure still officially

devoted to the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism. Once placed in specific institutional positions,

actors have to defend their own interests in order to be recognized for promotion rise in the

administrative hierarchy (cf. Chien and Gordon, 2008; Chien, 2010; Xu, 2011). How these

interests complement or contradict interests of other political actors thus become in itself an important point of empirical focus. Second, these different viewpoints indicate how top-level decision-making in the Chinese party-state apparatus is an open-ended process. This open-endedness indicates the intrinsic malleability of political authoritarianism: actors positioned in different parts of the institutional hierarchy, or even external to the hierarchy itself, could shape developmental agendas. In this respect, state rescaling reflects and reproduces this malleability; its occurrence was never pre-ordained, its outcome never predetermined.

It would be useful, at this point, to explain why statistical data did not underpin the primary analytical focus. To be sure, there were moments where quantitative data was important and was presented to support arguments. These data was used to demonstrate the 'price scissors effect'; to describe changes in migration flows in the post-Mao era, urban-rural income disparities, etc.; to show changes in fixed capital investment in Guangdong and Chongqing; and to show trends of monetary flows between Hong Kong/Macau and mainland China. Yet this information was used and evaluated 'as is' rather than re-presented through a new round of software-based analysis. This is because the study's research objective of delineating the assumptions and rationale of spatial projects and strategies could be better achieved by examining changes in policy content and how new changes were interpreted by decision-makers. Textual data is thus just as important as quantitative data in informing the analysis of China's politico-economic 'transition' in the post-Mao era.

Furthermore, the available quantitative data would have to be evaluated in their own right rather than be taken as inherently accurate: in as much as they reveal, quantitative data obscure. This point was made explicitly by Li Keqiang in 2007, the-then governor of Liaoning province and now Chinese Premier, in a conversation with then US Ambassador to China, Clark Randt Jr.:

> GDP figures are 'man-made' and therefore unreliable, Li said. When evaluating Liaoning's economy, he focuses on three figures: 1) electricity consumption, which was up 10 percent in Liaoning last year; 2) volume of rail cargo, which is fairly accurate because fees are charged

for each unit of weight; and 3) amount of loans disbursed, which also tends to be accurate given the interest fees charged. By looking at these three figures, Li said he can measure with relative accuracy the speed of economic growth. All other figures, especially GDP statistics, are 'for reference only,' he said smiling. (Randt, Jr., 15 March 2007, n.p.)

In an interesting development, the Chinese government did not issue any denial of Randt's statement. More importantly, Li's point is subsequently supported by claims made elsewhere. In May 2012, Junheng Li, the founder of New York-based venture capital firm JL Warren, went public with a personal reflection on the use of quantitative data in China:

I learned the most important lesson about doing business in China: Numbers don't mean much. Most companies have three books: a real one for internal use, one for the tax bureau and one for the CEO's wife (and, in some cases, a fourth for his mistress). China's hybrid economy depends more heavily on government policy than most, and can count on the cushion of intervention from on high. Once a growth target is set by the top, the central government then allocates GDP growth from the top down. The state gives provinces a target, each province mandates to the regions, regions to departments, and departments to corporations, including state-owned enterprises and private companies. Despite the admirable economic growth that China has delivered, at its core the reward and punishment system hasn't changed in stride. Those who comply are rewarded and those who raise uncomfortable subjects are punished; a cut in pay or a cork in one's career advancement are to be expected if one can't provide the euphoria package. (*Bloomberg*, 23 May 2012)

This inherent numerical inaccuracy, Li adds, is fundamental to structural stability:

There is a Chinese saying usually applied to the legal system: While the top has its policies, the bottom has its counterpolicies [i.e. *shangyou zhengce, xiayou duice*]. In economics, if the bottom can't meet the mandate, they cook the books and send the data back up the ranks. Everyone's happy – for a while. It's as if Mao's proposed farming methods could actually produce the amount of crops that were being reported – if the powers that be must be pleased, so be it. As long as the upper levels of governance maintain their authority and lower levels of governance don't take any heat for a missed target, then everyone can be happy. (Ibid.)

These observations further reinforce the necessity for qualitative data to complement (if not contradict) quantitative analyses. If fudging numbers can ensure structural stability, the study presumes something else must have been done to ensure the tensions associated with growth are eased or erased. Given that speech is not intrinsically more believable than numbers, the study adopted the approach mentioned earlier to build on and verify information given by interviewees. Content derived from published interviews was also cross-checked (where possible) or used with clear qualifications. Overall, the juxtaposition of discourses from key state actors and the detailed textual analysis of policy changes since 1949 has offered a useful avenue through which to theorize the shifting spatial logics of

socioeconomic regulation in China.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this study on Chinese state rescaling, the biggest methodological challenge was to assemble a range of seemingly unrelated empirical materials into a coherent and theoretically-informed narrative. This paper has demonstrated how the logics of state rescaling could be ascertained from a fluid approach to fieldwork, the prioritization of qualitative data and a critical approach to data evaluation. On reflection, one key aspect of the research design was that research questions change over time (cf. O'Brien, 2006). For this reason, it was difficult to define 'stages' on the data collection process. This ties in to the broader notion that 'fieldwork' is in itself a dynamic process that is not simply defined by and delimited to 'flying in, flying out'. As Crang and Cook (2007) put it eloquently, data gathered on a subject matter always undergoes interpretation, even when the researcher is still 'in' the field. 'Doing' fieldwork is thus a reflexive, spiral-like process of gathering and responding to data, which then generates new questions. How the 'field' has been re-imagined and re-constructed during this process is the central focus of this paper.

Having arrived at a clearer understanding of the state rescaling process through fieldwork, it would be useful and important to state what the chosen research approach is not. First, the goal of the historical analysis is not to attempt the (impossible) task of cataloguing and explaining the totality of relations extending from the Mao-era to the post-Mao present. Historical exploration can enrapture and entrap at the same time: there is just so much to explore, so many materials in the archives or libraries in China that are of potential theoretical significance. The challenge is to derive the right conceptual lenses to launch into a *targeted* historical exploration, otherwise the massive pool of historical information could easily encumber the research process. How, indeed, does one start and stop looking?

This answer to this question crystallized once the research design was established. The past can be most fruitfully interpreted and re-interrogated from the experimental policies of the present. And because what constitutes the 'present' always changes as time progresses, the scope for further re-interrogation and conceptual revision remains. This generates at once a contribution and a constraint – a constraint emerges insofar as the analytical framework adopted for this project will inevitably be subject to revision as more empirical cases (e.g. further studies of other "nationally strategic new areas" such as Binhai, Lanzhou and Zhoushan) are brought into the mix, and yet it is a contribution because specific developments in the present (e.g. the drives to reform the *hukou* institution and the financial structure) has allowed the past to be interpreted in a different light (ref. research agenda presented in Lim, 2017a).

Second, the paper does not claim to define the full rationale of state rescaling from the two chosen case studies. As discussed earlier, an important caveat in research on state spatial strategies reside in the fact that access to primary policymakers (i.e. causal actors) is largely off-limit. For this reason, it is difficult to understand directly what went on inside the CPC boardrooms where recent decisions were made. As elaborated in Table 1, the closest one could attain a deeper understanding of the rationale of state rescaling would be through a) policy discourse analysis; b) analysis of interviews given by the primary policymakers; and c) interviews of people who encountered these policy actors. Because of the intimate connections between academic institutions and state organs (academics routinely consult for the CPC), many potential interviewees were in academic institutions. From personal experience, access to these interviewees was not only more straightforward, these interviewees were generally keen to engage and offered excellent follow-on leads (either through recommendations to other interviewees or referrals to print materials in local libraries). Yet the inability of this research to access all key actors mean the rationale presented in this project is always partial.

The issue of access notwithstanding, the geographical extent of "nationally strategic" policy experimentation also encumbered the development of more generalizable conclusions. At the time of research, six "nationally strategic new areas" had been designated, each of which have experienced transformations in relations with the preexisting spatial hierarchy in China as well as with transnational economic actors. At the time of writing, this figure has expanded to seventeen. As the selected cases were just two out of several alternatives, they are more fruitfully viewed as *specific* launchpads for evaluating the impact of inherited institutions. Vis-à-vis these variegated 'empirical windows', the ultimate decision to focus on state rescaling in/through the Pearl River Delta and Chongqing boiled down to whether these cases could provide nuanced insights into the geographical and historical rationale of policy experimentation. The process involved collating and re-constructing a narrative that connects the post-Mao experimental present to the policies instituted in the Maoist past, while bearing in mind it is never possible to cover every track and trace of political-economic transition in China. Then again, it is this very openness to refinement through additional case studies that further research on Chinese state rescaling will continue to engage and excite.

Notes

[1] From the author's review of published Mao sources in Mandarin, this note was not selected as part of the CPC's voluminous collections of Mao's speeches. Drawing from Shi's (1998) research into former Premier Zhou Enlai's interactions with Mao, it could be the first time this perspective on language is translated into English.

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