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## UNDERSTANDING SCALAR POLITICS THROUGH THE FRAMEWORK OF RELATIONAL ARCHIPELAGOS

The Case of Shenzhen Fair, China

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# – UNDERSTANDING SCALAR POLITICS THROUGH THE FRAMEWORK OF RELATIONAL ARCHIPELAGOS: The Case of Shenzhen Fair, China

JUNE WANG

## Abstract

*In this article I aim to tackle two binary readings of scale: the networked/hierarchical and the political/economic. By revisiting and reframing the concept of the archipelago, I develop a framework of relational hierarchical networks that foregrounds the mutual constitution of networks and hierarchies through a processual examination of scale production, taking the Shenzhen Fair as a case study. The fair is a valuable site for interrogating the issue of scale politics—that is, how to catapult a city into China's trading circuit, while simultaneously allowing a new epistemological construction of nationhood. I present two arguments in this study: first, territorial logic and capitalist logic are entangled in constructing networks for flows of discursive and material things, and these networks form new hierarchies of place. Second, various political and economic interests might gravitate towards different geographies through the same process of networking. I also assess how the newly produced state space is a relational archipelago that unifies formerly disparate places and sectors and enables the mobility of discursive and material things, and how the redistribution of these discourses and materials reconfigures the state space.*

## Introduction

The (Shenzhen) International Cultural Industries Fair ... manifests a deliberate plan towards epochal cultural sovereignty [of the nation] ... The objective not only requires exporting Chinese cultural products massively, but also demands initiatives to form a concrete 'nodal point' globally ... the Shenzhen International Cultural Industrial Fair, in its 10 years' existence, functions as this nodal point ... Only when we tie the cultural development of a city to the destiny of Chinese civilization will be able to develop the cultural sovereignty of our nation (Wang, 2014).

The above extract is from a speech on the significance of the Shenzhen International Cultural Industries Fair (also simply known as the Shenzhen Fair) given by Wang Jingshen, member of the advisory board to the State Council of China, on China Central TV (CCTV). The Shenzhen Fair represents a new experiment in economic and territorial governance. It foregrounds the question of adaptive re-annexation of power and space that has become imperative for rulers in an age of increasingly networked economies. The official CCTV narrative quoted here raises a number of questions concerning the Shenzhen Fair. These questions—from the discursive construction of national civilization to the material reconfiguration of China's economic landscape towards a nodes-and-flow morphology and thence to the always-intertwined impetus for economic and political considerations—are central to the issue of scale.

This article was presented during a seminar series at the Gran Sasso Science Institute, Italy. I am grateful to the participants of this seminar for their constructive and insightful discussions, and to Yi Li, the handling IJURR editor and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful advice. I take responsibility for any remaining errors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

The issue of scale has been intensely debated along materialist-idealist lines by the political-economy and post-structuralist schools (Brenner, 2004; Moore, 2008; MacKinnon, 2011). Post-structuralists treat scale as an epistemological conception, such that it redirects scholarly attention from defining ‘what scale is’ to ‘what is’ (Elden, 2005: 16): understanding the processual laborious inputs that shape a particular scale and its acceptance. Both schools of thought have acknowledged the insights of relational thinking and used these to make continuous conceptual shifts from issues of scale and rescaling to the politics of scale, and recently to scalar politics (Swyngedouw, 2000; Jessop *et al.*, 2008; MacKinnon, 2011). Scale has been commonly accepted as a constructed concept—and thus an inevitably mutable and historical one that is continually in the process of (re-)production.

More recent concerns are being raised regarding the privileging of any single approach to scaling (Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Leitner *et al.*, 2008), given that the juxtaposition of several concepts has led to a number of binary readings of scale. Some of these binaries in the literature include ontological or epistemological readings of scale, fluid or reified readings of scale, networked or hierarchical readings of scale, and political or economic readings of scale (Brenner, 2004; Marston *et al.*, 2005; Moore, 2008). The pressing issue is whether the emphasis on a changing and dynamic understanding of scale as an epistemology of power denotes a complete rejection of the various ontological components that are involved, mobilized or reconfigured during this process of power reconfiguration per se (Sneddon, 2003; Moore, 2008; MacKinnon, 2011). These persistent contestations only hint at the complexity of spatial power relations, which explains why scholars call for the acknowledgement of the coexistence and entanglement of spatial parameters (Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Leitner *et al.*, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2017).

The Chinese experiment with Shenzhen Fair provides a suitable laboratory for examining two plausible binary readings of scale: the networked/hierarchical and the political/economic. Smith (1996; 2005) has stressed that research is still at the preliminary stage of understanding networked hierarchies—that is, we are only beginning to understand the unevenness of networking. Smith’s insight foregrounds another related issue: the relatively asymmetrical attention to economic development and (geo)politics in the literature (Macleod and Goodwin, 1999; Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Jonas and Moiso, 2016). In this article I call on scholars to revisit the concept of the archipelago—a metaphoric morphology of hierarchical networks deployed by Giovanni Arrighi (2010)—and modify this concept through MacKinnon’s (2011) lens of structuration. I follow MacKinnon’s lead in exploring scale as a common ground for understanding the political-economy and post-structuralist approaches, and assess the strengths of each approach.

My aim with this article is also to establish a concept of relational archipelagos through three points. Arrighi’s (2010) concept of archipelago emphasizes the morphological hierarchy that exists between islands and areas or entities ‘below sea level’—the output of the flow of raw materials, capital and technology in particular directions. First, by drawing on the concept of the archipelago, I further explore the dynamic and mutual constitution of network and hierarchy, which both limit and enable one another. Second, I call attention to the complexity of flows of multiple things on the move, and their variegated, dynamic trajectories, which allow for the differentiated redistribution of political and economic interests in hierarchical networks. This second point shows how the concept of the relational archipelago is open to the emergence of multiple scales and multiple spatial forms of political and economic organization.

Third, this article pays special attention to China’s administrative power system, which includes both the vertical branches of ministries and the territorial clusters of subnational governments. This system has been reconfigured several times since it was established in the 1950s, and is relatively open to new networks, new scales and new nexuses of power and space (Schurmann, 1968; Lieberthal, 2003; Wu, 2016). This

article thus represents another attempt to address Laurence Ma's (2005: 408) call to study 'the enabling and limiting powers of the administrative system' by identifying the laborious process of formal and informal networking on which Shenzhen Fair is built. This process enables trans-cluster and trans-branch flows of discourse, products, people and capital, and facilitates the corresponding spatial reconfiguration of political and economic interests. The Shenzhen Fair is not an isolated case: it kickstarted a number of fair-oriented reconfigurations of geopolitical economic landscapes, including various cultural industrial fairs held in other cities and regions, such as the Silk Road Expo in Xi'an, and the recent China International Import Expo in Shanghai. In this regard, the Shenzhen Fair is a valuable site for exploring the new alchemy of entangled logics of political orientation and economic development aimed at catapulting a city into the global trading circuit and shaping the scale of nationhood.

The empirical approach of this study included on-site observations and semi-structured interviews, examining the official documents of propaganda bureaus and the China Council for Promoting International Trade (the Trade Council) at the state and municipal level, and analysing documents released by the Shenzhen Press Group. I participated in the Shenzhen Fair every year from 2012 to 2018, and interviewed Trade Council officials (in the council's Shenzhen branch and its Beijing headquarters), officials of the City Bureau of Culture, staff from the Shenzhen Press Group, and scholars at local universities and research institutions.

The article is structured as follows: In the literature review in the first section, I present the research framework of the relational archipelago and its application to the administrative system in China. In the second part, I examine the case of Shenzhen Fair in three parts: first, the pre-existing structure for the fair, which was shaped by the state propaganda system and the territorial cluster of Shenzhen City; second, the agency of the ensemble of actors, including networking and lobbying behaviours of individual cadres to form a new discourse on cultural fairs, and the exercises of discretionary power by various administrative units to mobilize products and capital across sectoral and territorial boundaries; and third, the emergence of new scales after the redistribution of political and economic interests. In the conclusion, I discuss the concept of the relational archipelago and its empirical findings to shed light on scalar politics through a relational archipelago.

### **Hierarchical networks and relational archipelagos**

Against the backdrop of binary readings of scale in the literature, scholars have increased their efforts to describe the coexistence and entanglements of different spatial parameters (Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Leitner *et al.*, 2008). Some are concerned that a network/scale binary reading implies two exclusive processes that evolve along either a horizontal or a vertical axis—among which a network or horizontal narrative might forge a 'fantasy of spacelessness' that imagines equal opportunities in all places (Smith, 1996: 72; 2005). In his seminal work on the networked society, Castells (2000) insightfully pointed out that networks reconfigure a new morphology of uneven development that, in contrast to the hierarchies patterned on national boundaries, is patterned on networks that split the world into those entities that are based on the network and those that are based otherwise. Further, Sheppard (2002: 317) forcefully states his concern regarding the unevenness of places within networks: 'much attention is paid to the networks a place participates in, much less to how it is positioned within the spaces of those networks'. Similarly, Neil Smith in his writings on the flow analogy, argues that putting a place in flow restructures 'the relationship between the fluidity and the fixity of space' (Smith, 1996: 71) and hence involves the 'reinvention of place at a different scale' (*ibid.*: 72). Networks create emergent (but contingent) hierarchies and inequalities, which foreground the issues of internal spatial structures and power hierarchies within networks.

Other scholars have cautioned against the asymmetrical treatment of political and economic logics. These include Arrighi (2003; 2010) in his work on the territorial

and capitalistic logic of power, Jessop (2002; 2008), in his writings on state projects and state strategies, and Brenner (2004), whose work illustrates their spatiality. Political considerations might prompt regulatory changes to fulfil political agendas, which may sometimes lead the state to compromise the interests of capital (Macleod and Goodwin, 1999; Flint and Zhang, 2019). Scales and territories are reproduced through the interplay of political considerations and economic strategies. Although the literature has addressed the logic of capital—which, in its constant search for new spatial fixes, unravels its trans-territorial mobility in a fluid and networked relation, and its fixity in physical, social and regulatory infrastructures for its (re-)territorialization (Brenner, 2004)—political actors are frequently reduced to forces that seize capital, ideas and other material things from the flow to place them in particular places where the political forces are anchored (Agnew, 2005). A relational understanding of the geographies of political forces in the process of scale structuration relies on the careful handling of ‘the mix of distanced and proximate actions’ (Allen and Cochrane, 2007: 1163). Thus, debates against the backdrop of binary readings of scale compel us to consider the uneven developments arising from networked power plays and the political and economic logics entangled throughout the process of structuration in greater depth.

– A relational archipelago

The concept of archipelago can help us conceptualize and explore hierarchical networks. Cummings (1993) deployed the metaphor of the archipelago to highlight two coexisting features of the Pacific Rim region: the network of exchange that connects ports with massive inland areas, and the hierarchical relationships between them. Arrighi further developed this idea of the archipelago to describe contemporary capitalism:

This archipelago consists of several islands of capitalism, which rise above a sea of horizontal exchange among local and world markets, through the centralisation within their domain of large-scale products and high value-added activities. Below the sea lie the huge low-cost, and highly industrious labouring masses of the entire East and Southeast Asian regions, in which the capitalist islands thrust their roots but without providing them with the means needed to rise to or above sea level (Arrighi, 2010: 23).

Arrighi fleshes out the relationship between networks and hierarchies of an archipelago: first, their networks, in the form of roots thrusting from the nodes to the interiors for the flow of things; and second, the new morphology of archipelagos, namely their status above or below the sea as an output of the flow of things. By revisiting the notion of the archipelago in this article I do not suggest a return to the core–periphery morphology of the world system, but aim instead to frame a relational archipelago through the lens of structuration.

MacKinnon (2011) sought to understand scale through a process of structuration. This dynamic process can be conceived in three stages of power: first ‘the strategic deployment of scale by various actors, organizations and movements’; second, ‘the influence and effects of pre-existing scalar structures created by past processes of social construction’; and third, ‘the closely related question of the creation of new scalar arrangements and configurations that occur at the point of interaction between the inherited and emergent projects and scales’ (MacKinnon, 2011: 29–30).

The structuration of scale thus allows for the exploration of an epistemological understanding of the world and of the world as an ontology itself. Although we might value the epistemological reading of scale (that is, scale as a category of analysis to describe, measure and compare relational power of spatial units) very highly, the power of

spatial objects cannot be reduced merely to the effects of discursive constructions alone: their power also draws on ontological components to sustain itself. The conception of pre-existing scalar structures acknowledges the validity of conventional understandings of scale, which measure power by the possession of territorial resources and/or institutional settings as a condition of agency. Herod (2010) argued that scale is deployed as a measure to capture various forms of power relations. This measure of scale, operating through the parameters of size or level (or both), is based on a material constitution of the world in which power is premised upon the possession of material territorial resources that are rooted in or implemented through the discretionary power of an administrative system. These systems are usually institutionalized, reified and structured hierarchically. Based on this account, power can be an input for continuous rounds of construction and produce new scales with new power relations (Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Cox, 2013). Thus, new scales can be created by statistically producing 'territorial understandings of economic practices and processes' (Painter, 2010: 1103), which may reconstruct the capability of deploying and/or mobilizing resources by either reconfiguring territories to reconstruct the possession of area-specific resources or readjusting scalar relations to redefine the discretion of decision making or multiply them (Allen, 2016).

– The mutual constitution of network and hierarchy

If we expand the static snapshot of the archipelago to a dynamic process of structuration, pre-existing scales refer to the 'islands of capitalism on the sea of horizontal exchange between the local and world markets' (Arrighi, 2010: 23). This configuration entails a hierarchical relationship between the islands and the areas below sea level, and more importantly, the existing infrastructure of exchange, or what Arrighi (2010) calls the roots, which the capitalist islands thrust towards the region below sea level. In this world of increasingly networked economies, 'agency' refers to 'the work of the net' (Allen, 2016: 52), such that resources can be mobilized and new collaborations among institutional units channelled towards a new power relationship.

It is important to note that archipelagic thinking rejects the static possession of material components and instead emphasizes their flows. Things on the move matter, both in terms of what they are and the directions in which they move (Peck, 2011; Prince, 2011). The mobility of knowledge usually features a flow from an Anglo-American core to cities in the South (Borén and Young, 2016) to justify and widen the unequal relationship between these two places. The flow of ideas creates a mental map of cities of different ranks, which then enables the flow of other things, such as capital, population and material, in different directions. Through networks, places are constituted by virtue of the symbolic power that has been disseminated in the first place because of such networks (Sheppard, 2002). As a result, nodes and hubs are 'hierarchically organized according to their relative weight within the network' (Castells, 2000: 413). In this sense, scale or other epistemological measures of 'above the sea' are an effect of material mobility. In the words of Swyngedouw (2007: 11), 'these relational scalar networks articulate with produced territorial or geographical configurations that also exhibit scalar dimensions'.

– Archipelagos in the Chinese branch-cluster administrative structure

Statist players in China have created their own concepts to illustrate the territorial and scalar forms of power that is unfolding in China's political and administrative system. The terms *tiao* and *kuai* (Schurmann, 1968; Lieberthal, 2003) were first deployed as metaphors by Mao Zedong to describe his governing technique of adjusting China's administrative structure (Spence, 1991). These terms may explicitly unveil two types of material power—one operating through infrastructural networks, and the other premised upon territorial resources. *Tiao* (tree branch) refers to the infrastructure of ministries through which rules are disseminated vertically from

superiors at the top of the state apparatus to lower-level units. It indicates order—a tidy and neatly categorized pattern of things that is provided through continuous gardening (Barmé, 2008). *Kuai* (cluster) represents a chunk of earth, which is loose in structure and must be contained to sustain its temporal shape. It refers to subnational territorial governments. The metaphorical deployment of *tiao* and *kuai* illustrates how power is reconstituted when a ministerial branch (*tiao*) stretches into a territorial cluster (*kuai*), dividing them into subnational territorial governments while maintaining their shapes and ranks. This is a dynamic process, as exemplified by the multiple reconstitutions of the branch–cluster administrative system throughout the history of socialist and late-socialist China (Spence, 1991; Wu, 2016). China’s one-party state does not assume that its authority to rule is pre-given (Holbig and Gilley, 2010), and is always experimenting with different nexuses of power and space (Agnew, 2012).

First, situated in the fragmented pattern of the branch–cluster system, actors create networks to facilitate trans-branch and/or trans-jurisdictional collaborations. In China’s socialist administrative system, such horizontal linkages were at the discretion of small, centralized decision-making circles. Thus, fragmentation of this infrastructure/territorial system largely resulted in deficient and sporadic trans-branch and trans-jurisdictional partnerships (Oi, 1995; Landry, 2008). Nevertheless, a wide variety of networking practices have been observed in the wake of this fragmentation. These include networking between territorial leaders and overseas entrepreneurs to facilitate the exchange of undervalued land and transitional capital in the local state corporatism model (Smart and Lin, 2007), or to facilitate exchange among two or more territorial governments for an enlarged city-region area (Ma, 2005; Li and Wu, 2012; 2017; Wu, 2016), or facilitate exchange between two or more ministries placed in the semi-centralization mechanism (Mertha, 2005). Networking in complex forms involves multiple territorial governments, ministries and non-state actors (Shen, 2007; Su, 2013; Wu, 2016; Hoffman and Thatcher, 2017; He *et al.*, 2018). Networking was also practised by the revanchist party under the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao regime, whose call to establish a ‘harmonious society’ repositioned the party as a hub-style coordinator bridging ‘jurisdictional and sectoral gaps’ to form an ‘integrated, cohesive, and harmonious’ society (Thornton, 2013: 3). There is a striking resemblance between this framework’s emphasis on the interdependence of actors and corresponding partnerships and the state’s strategic and relational reading of the situation. In short, ‘structural coupling and co-evolution occurs through continuing dialog and resource sharing to redevelop mutually beneficial joint projects and to manage the contradictions and dilemmas inevitably involved in the process’ (Jessop, (2002: 34).

Second, an exploration of the processual production of scale requires researchers to avoid stereotyping assumptions that associate decentralization with economic logic and centralization with political logic, respectively and exclusively. A national state space with authoritarian governance can be achieved through decentralized economic development (Wu, 2003). Conversely, event-led development may help regional cities pursue their development goals without undermining centralized state power (Shin, 2014). As China constantly seeks to balance political stability and economic liberalization, questioning only the capitalist logics of power might lead scholars to a deficient and partial understanding of China’s one-party state, and vice versa (Peck and Zhang, 2013; Shin, 2014; Kan, 2020). In many East Asian countries, state spatial policies boost the economic competitiveness of selected strategic urban and regional centres to create a national state space (Park, 2013; Doucette and Park, 2018). The output of asymmetrical development by no means implies the withdrawal of the national state (Park, 2013); instead, researchers should focus on how political and economic interests gravitate towards different geographical and/or scalar clusters by differentiating the geography of actual power play and the geography of an imagined, meaningful territorial entity (Allen and Cochrane, 2007).

### The pre-existing structure of the Shenzhen Fair

The pre-existing structure of the Shenzhen Fair has been shaped by the state propaganda system and the territorial cluster of Shenzhen City.

- Ministry infrastructure: the Propaganda and Culture Branch  
The Propaganda and Culture Branch is the vertical branch of the Chinese government that is most heavily involved in the Shenzhen Fair project. Perhaps no other branch of government has more actively explored the reciprocal relationships between China's economic liberalization and the survival of its political regime (Brady, 2012). Since Deng's 'open door' policy, the concept of Three Represents has been shaping the doctrine of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on China's socialist market economy. This concept builds on the CCP's desire to maintain political stability (Jia, 2004; Holbig and Gilley, 2010). By describing China as in the preliminary stages of a socialist market economy, the CCP justifies the expansion of its social base from the former proletarian class to the newly affluent classes. The Three Represents campaign is not a simple extension of the party's membership to elite entrepreneurs, but instead an attempt to 'indoctrinate capitalists with the Party orthodoxy' (Jia, 2004: 261).

Under the umbrella of the Three Represents campaign, Chinese culture is conceived as an 'advanced culture' that represents an advanced economy and the advanced social groups that work within it (*ibid.*, 2004). A number of regulatory reforms were launched to open the former Party-dominated propaganda regime to what are called 'professional interest groups'. The incorporation of interest groups opens the policy-making process to academia, domestic and overseas think tanks and authorities, and relevant private sectors, allowing them to negotiate rules in their respective interests. The new doctrine actively promotes consumerism, marketization and privatization (Brady, 2012). After formally positioning China's economy as a 'market economy' at the 14th National Congress of the CCP, the country's Central Propaganda Department (CPD) began to improve the efficiency of its once rigid bureaucratic clusters by privatizing former cultural organizations, cutting government subsidies, reducing staff numbers, informalizing labour contracts and executing performance-oriented evaluations and payments.

The Three Represents concept also reiterates Mao's idea of 'letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend' (Pang, 2013: 900) to convey the intention of power decentralization. In other words, the central state deploys a discourse on diversity to transfer the burden of designing a detailed programme of commodifying culture to regional governments while retaining its position as adviser who drafts general instructions. The decentralization of discretionary power and opening of the former Party-dominated propaganda system to the private sector does not imply a relaxation of political control; rather, it legitimizes the importance of information exchange among heterogeneous actors amid the opening up of the propaganda system. These institutional reforms were launched to create a new and enhanced infrastructure for the flow of ideas. In particular, through the reforms, the state has sought to enhance its communication infrastructure by establishing a new supervising committee comprised of top CCP leaders (known as the Spiritual Civilization Committee) and the publication of a magazine to facilitate the exchange of ideas within the branch, called *Neibu Tongxun* (Internal Report). The committee's directors are all members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, and the head of the CPD is the committee's deputy director. This new committee nurtures the discovery of new ideas based on domestic and overseas practices and 'advanced concepts' developed by think tanks and knowledge producers, and selects and promotes best practices through communication and negotiation (from interviews with scholars at local universities and staff of the Shenzhen Press Group, May, 2014).

– The territorial cluster of Shenzhen City

In a proposal submitted to the UNESCO Network of Creative Cities, Shenzhen is described as a ‘city of design—a city designed by Deng Xiaoping’ because it is among the first batch of special economic zones in which ‘innovative’ measures are being tested to explore potential paths towards the efficient transformation of China’s economy into a true market economy (from interview with staff of the Shenzhen Press Group, November 2013). Shenzhen has been dubbed an ‘experimental city’ since the late 1970s (O’Donnell *et al.*, 2017). This designation cannot be separated from the city’s ever-changing position within the wider national administrative system. Shenzhen was established as a province-directed city in 1979 and was soon placed in three exceptional categories (Landry, 2008): it was simultaneously categorized as a special economic zone, a line-item city<sup>1</sup> and a vice-provincial municipality. These three special categories strategically distinguish Shenzhen from other, ‘ordinary’ cities because they afford the city’s own networks more direct communication channels with China’s central government.

Shenzhen lacks many territorial resources. For instance, it lacks strong cultural industries, with the exception of the graphic design and publishing industries, which moved to the city from Hong Kong (Wang, 2007). In 2006, the city government brainstormed an ‘Outline for Cultural Industry Development (2007–2020) in Shenzhen’ (SMG, 2006), which states that:

the strength of Shenzhen dwells in its more completely reformed market system, richness of privatization types, after years of exposure to the market ... [Its] proximity to Hong Kong must be appreciated again, not as a role model, but as a collaborator whose intensive connections to the global market are to be fully appropriate ... Last, but not least, Shenzhen is one of two locations hosting securities markets, which implies that Shenzhen is a leading financial hub in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The city government envisions its territorial resources to include the creation of markets, business networks with Hong Kong and beyond, and financial sectors. All these elements, if upgraded, might collectively help the city realize its ambition of becoming another Hong Kong. We can glimpse some practices in pursuit of this goal at the Canton Fair and the Shenzhen High-Tech Fair. These fairs display the ‘global buzz’ of temporal markets and temporal clusters (Bathelt *et al.*, 2016). The Shenzhen International Cultural Industrial Fair was designed as a platform to facilitate market exchanges between exhibitors, buyers and service sectors, such as bonds and securities, marketing and branding, logistics, and insurance products.

**The ‘work of the networks’ through administrative infrastructure**

As Allen (2016: 52) has pointed out, scholarly attention has increasingly shifted from ‘the net to the work of the networks ... from pre-existing ties to the construction of the net itself’.

– Ideational flow for constructing an epistemological scale of nationhood

The Shenzhen Fair proposal largely departed from what is commonly regarded as cultural development, in that the event is essentially a trading ‘fair’ and a celebratory event for image branding. The evident economic logic of the proposal necessitated that it seek recognition from China’s top cultural authorities within the state’s propaganda branch, in part because as a provincialized city Shenzhen could not draw in resources

1 Line-item cities are a special category of cities that submit their annual budget plan directly to the State Council, despite being positioned below the provincial governments administratively.

2 All extracts from Chinese sources in this article were translated by the author.

from across China on its own. A series of discourses circulated through the existing structures of the propaganda branch, wherein the strengthened infrastructure for communication channelled instant dialogues.

Studies of policy mobility have demonstrated how particular ideas are exchanged between actors. In this case, negotiation and mutation of ideas occurred through intra-branch knowledge exchange trips, field site inspections, conferences and internal journals that transcended scalar levels (Wang, 2007). In November 2002, Bai Tian—then head of the Guangdong Provincial Propaganda Department—took part in novel cross-rank communication during a knowledge exchange trip to the Shenzhen Cultural Bureau. Bai stated that the Shenzhen Fair ‘can use the reference of Canton Fair as a functional platform with national influence’ (*ibid.*). One month later, this idea was endorsed by the mayor of Shenzhen at the time, Yu Lijun, who urged the bureau to ‘act quickly and seize the opportunity to go first’ (interview with scholars at the local university, March 2015). This eagerness helped Yu reassign this work from the city government to the Shenzhen Cultural Bureau of the Party-supervised propaganda branch. The agency submitted the Bill of Shenzhen Fair as an intra-branch proposal for discussion at the 103rd Municipal Party Committee Meeting in 2003. The Bill was then submitted to and approved by the State Ministry of Culture. The approved project was reported on in the Internal Report and caught the attention of Li Changchun, then director of the Central Spiritual Civilization’s Steering Committee. He sensed the project’s potential to promote nationalism, and instructed that the fair function as a national frontline between domestic cultural products and foreign buyers (Wang, 2007).

A discourse on China’s nationwide geocultural event emerged as a result of idea exchanges among officials. Such discourses foreground the issue of national identity through Chinese culture. National leaders have been proactive to ensure that this process functions effectively. Since 2003, promotions at Shenzhen Fair have been handled almost exclusively by top-level individuals and organizations. Li has attended all annual events, accompanied by senior officials from the CPD. The nationwide promotion of the first Shenzhen Fair as a national event saw high-profile press conferences conducted in Beijing, Hong Kong and Shanghai, followed by the fair being awarded several national titles and accolades. The fair was also the pilot project of the CCP’s Going Abroad programme to the National Project of International Cultural Fairs. Meanwhile, there have been deliberate endeavours to dilute Shenzhen’s image. The Shenzhen City Government has been named the host of the fair by the central government, and the event’s new official title includes the city name in brackets only, as ‘(Shenzhen) International Cultural Industries Fair’—indicating that the city is only one of the host cities chosen by the central state.

- Materializing Shenzhen Fair: networking of the trans-cluster flow of resources  
As scholars have discovered, performing ‘Chinese-ness’ always necessitates the demonstration of cultural diversity—for example, by providing or engaging in a cross-territorial collection of vernacular cultures and context-specific cultural goods (Barmé, 2000). Two networking powers became crucial in the early stages of materializing Shenzhen Fair: trans-cluster networking to ‘harvest’ China’s territorial cultural resources, and trans-branch collaboration between the two propaganda and commerce branches.

#### THE TRANS-CLUSTER NETWORK FOR MOBILIZING TERRITORIAL RESOURCES

Vernacular cultures and local cultural development are territorial resources drawn from their indigenous terrains and governed by the respective jurisdictional governments beyond the Shenzhen City Government’s control. The duty of mobilizing these area-specific cultural resources was assigned to three groups: the Shenzhen Press Group; the Shenzhen Radio, Film, and Television Group; and the Shenzhen

Publication Group. These three privatized state-owned enterprises (SOEs) fall under the CPD. Each group deployed its internal communication infrastructure to request the intervention of its superiors. Thus, the CPD issued and disseminated official notices to its territorial offices to recruit exhibitors and participants for the Shenzhen Fair from various provinces, municipalities and autonomous administrative divisions across China. These administrative orders required all regional offices of the CPD to attend the Shenzhen Fair. This is typical of how the top authorities of branches assign orders to its regional offices and privatized SOEs, although these are geographically located in different regional clusters. Unsurprisingly, Shenzhen Fair featured a variety of cultural products that are normally distributed across sectoral or territorial entities in one place. These included minority cultures and traditions with a strong territory-specific nature, including *maqam* performances from Xinjiang, shadow plays from Shanxi, *cuotaiji* (ethnic operas) from Guizhou, and movies produced by several giant state-owned film studios positioned in the top tier of the CPD. Statistically, the Shenzhen Fair has hosted attendees from each of the country's provinces and regions from its earliest days; in 2006, 30 of China's 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous administrative divisions sent cutting-edge cultural products to the fair.

#### THE TRANS-BRANCH NETWORK FOR MOBILIZING TRANSNATIONAL CAPITAL

Over its first six years, the Shenzhen Fair operated like a public event for image branding. It was slow to demonstrate its economic viability—especially its ability to mobilize the influx of transnational capital. For this reason the Standing Committee of the Politburo established trans-branch networking between the CCP's propaganda and commerce branches, forging new alliances between the top actors in these two branches. These alliances reinforced collaboration with a new actor: the Trade Council. The Trade Council was created by the CCP to address the global market crisis during the early stages of the socialist era, and is often seen as a secondary Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Officially operating as the Chinese Chamber of International Commerce, the Trade Council/Commerce Chamber monopolized the international trade fair and exhibition industry in China by hosting major events, including the 2010 Expo and the China Expo Forum for International Cooperation.

In 2010, the Trade Council became the major decision-making body of the Shenzhen Fair. By leveraging its membership in overseas organizations, it quickly converted the former public event into a professional, export-oriented trade fair that targeted overseas procurement divisions. Between 2004 and 2009, the Shenzhen Fair was open to the public. However, the Trade Council deemed the fair unprofessional because it encouraged the participation of visitors who had no intention to purchase anything. By contrast, the 2010 Shenzhen Fair attempted to attract potential buyers by inviting international commercial associations and sister cities' business groups.

One of the supranational organizations approached by the Trade Council for the 2010 Shenzhen Fair was the Arab–China Commercial Associated and Cultural Exchange Council. The Trade Council invited over one hundred purchasing officers from approximately 30 Arab countries to the 2010 fair (interviews with officials in the Trade Council, May 2016). In short, the Trade Council's takeover of the fair resulted in a surge in international visitors. Altogether 56 countries were represented at the fair in 2009, and 86 in 2010. Similarly, the total number of visitors jumped from 3,012 in 2006 to 10,680 in 2010 and up to 16,082 in 2011 (*ibid.*). Most of these later attendees were professionals who had attended the fair at the invitation of the Trade Council's network. The Trade Council's annual reports for 2011 recorded the opening of the Shenzhen branch of the Arab–China Commercial Association and recorded an increase in turnover figures for procurement contracts and business-exchange trips offered to local enterprises. Lasting market relations seemed to be emerging in the form of classic deal making, long-term stable customer relations and follow-up negotiations.

– The reach of the state

The reconstitution of *tiao/kuai* authorities in China did not stop at the stage of temporal alliance. In 2010, the developmental plan for the China (Shenzhen) International Cultural Industry Fair (SCIO, 2010) ratified a governing mechanism called the Three-Tier Hierarchical Network to specify different actors' discretionary power. This mechanism reified the networked power between the propaganda and commerce branches of the CCP and took on a policy design role. Meanwhile, local authorities appeared to be supporting actors on their own terrain, assuming the duty of implementing strategic orientations made by the former.

**A relational archipelago: the mutual constitution of networks and hierarchies**

The Shenzhen Fair, as an experiment in economic and territorial governance, is a relational archipelagic development. An interrogation of the project through structuration—that is, through the inherited structure or actual geographies of actors, agency of networking, and imagined geographies of new power relations (MacKinnon, 2011)—allows us a glimpse of the dynamic and mutual constitution of networks and hierarchies.

– Networking in an enabling and limiting scalar structure

The actual geography of power plays reveals a relatively fragmented collection of institutions and agencies, whose members are distributed in disparate sectoral and territorial units. These include members of the government's propaganda and commerce branches, state and non-state sectors, the two major cities of Beijing and Shenzhen, and all other subnational areas, with their context-specific cultural resources. The emerging scale of power relations highlights a process of convergence that developed through a series of networked relationships, from the network of the flow of ideas and executive orders to the network of the outflux of Chinese cultural products and influx of transnational capital. The agency rests on the hard labour of networks that transcend trans-jurisdictional and trans-branch gaps.

This gap-bridging infrastructure was largely constructed through the state's reconfigured administrative system, which facilitated communication between actors with discretionary power. The ideal mobility network for the Shenzhen Fair was elastic—it involved field visits and site inspections, magazine publications and press conferences, personal communications and public forums on television, and was mentioned in the annual meetings of the CCP Congress. Ideas about the Shenzhen Fair were identified, encouraged, selectively endorsed, reshaped and publicized through this process. Individuals were able to exercise their agency to move ideas between disparate sectors, branches and places through private conversations and formal meetings. Even in China, it is plausible to consider these exercises of agency as well-rehearsed actions within the tightly interlocked sectors of the governing bloc. This measure of individual agency makes it possible to flexibly move disparate parts and draw together verbal communications, discourses, policies and infrastructures to reconstitute the field of power.

This network is also deliberate in its involvement of particular resources or members with discretionary power who are imperative for the project's success. The CPD plays a crucial role in the network for communicating ideas and executive orders, thus enabling formal and informal communications between actors in Beijing and Shenzhen. This network is autocratic and therefore capable of mobilizing material resources rooted in subnational territories and subject to jurisdictional authorities (Li *et al.*, 2014; Wang and Li, 2019). Organizational networking for capital flow between the propaganda and commerce branches of government takes place at the epicentre of the party-state, and benefits from the dual membership of leading officials in both the Party's Spiritual

Civilization Committee and the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Moreover, the Trade Council's extensive connections with a variety of supranational, national and regional trade organizations is inseparable from the CCP's support.

Therefore, there is an asymmetrical unfolding of autonomy in the agency of networking, through which actors draw together disparate ideas (Escobar, 2007; Hoffman and Thatcher, 2017). Meanwhile, their actions are enabled and limited by their own positions in the pre-existing scalar structure (MacKinnon, 2011).

– Relational archipelagos in the making

In this study I identified two emergent relational archipelagos. The first comprises networks for the global trade of Chinese cultural products, with Shenzhen rising as an island above the sea. The second comprises networks for the collective nation-building project, with Beijing as the epicentre of the decision-making processes. Ideas and material things are channelled through these networks to develop a mutually constitutive relationship (Borén and Young, 2016; Wang and Zhang, 2020). The directions of these flows matter because they reconstitute the mental map of places with relational symbolic power, redistribute area-specific resources, and subsequently reconstitute the material map of places (Prince, 2011).

THE RISE OF A TRADING NODE FROM ENTANGLED FLOWS OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LOGICS

Shenzhen's rise as one node in a sea of globally networked economies demonstrates the results of entangled flows of political and economic interests. This process is characterized by flows of various competing ideas in both directions and flows of material in designated directions, both of which are enabled by symbolic and discretionary power.

Throughout this process, the Shenzhen Fair has been continuously (re-) constituted by these ideas flowing in different directions. The idea of a competitive city was initiated in Shenzhen and then mobilized towards Beijing for symbolic recognition. The idea of nation-building was mobilized from Beijing towards Shenzhen. Ideas about a professional buzz economy were mobilized between the CCP's propaganda and commerce branches in Beijing through the participation of the Trade Council. The uneven ranks of different places, based on their discretionary power in the pre-existing administrative networks, render the flow of raw ideas from Shenzhen to Beijing reasonable in terms of Beijing's authoritative power (Xu, 2015; Wang, 2019). Meanwhile, national-level authorities appropriate these same communication networks to address their concerns and reshape the experimental practices of the Shenzhen Fair. The multidirectional flow of ideas unfolds as a process shaped by multiple negotiations in which political and economic interests are reciprocally constituted.

The design of an export-oriented Chinese culture apparently has a geopolitical agenda. Instead of deploying conventional strategies of boundary demarcation, this new experiment is an attempt at an epistemological construction through an outflow of collective Chinese culture. Although these efforts emphasize Shenzhen's functionality as a host city that channels the outflux of goods and influx of foreign capital, when we reinterpret the economic logic of building a trading zone as a nodal point that spreads Chinese culture, the Shenzhen Fair seems to take up the political mission of nation-building. Seen in this light, the economic strategy of an entrepreneurial city government becomes a crucial springboard for the emergence of China on the global geopolitical landscape.

Nevertheless, it takes more than symbolic power to command trans-cluster material flow in service of this new vision. Organizational networking between the propaganda and the commerce branches of the state apparatus is crucial, for both reap the benefits of the node-network style of landscape reconfiguration. As the very

machinery for developing and publicizing the doctrines of the Party, the CPD has hardly relaxed its political surveillance activities or reined in the pace of marketization; however, it has constantly experimented with different means to make the two mutually beneficial and eventually increase the authority and legitimacy of the party-state (Jia, 2004). Its open and high-profile collaboration with the commerce branch marks a daring organizational reform to build up infrastructure for a new area of capital accumulation. This market-political rationality as a business model of the state is evident, particularly in light of what Jessop calls the reflexive self-organization of the state through strategic coupling (Jessop, 2002). The trans-branch collaboration of the CPD and the Trade Council, buttressed by their discretionary powers and their respective resources, makes it an active and unparalleled market builder (Hsing, 2006; Wu, 2017).

#### COLLECTIVE NATIONHOOD, AND HOW POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS GRAVITATE TOWARDS DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHIES

In comparison to the material flows that have lifted the city of Shenzhen above the metaphorical sea level, the city does not seem to be proportionately visible on the mental map of Chinese culture. The flow of ideas has sparked a new understanding of nationhood, one that constitutes a diversity of vernacular cultures and context-specific cultural developments. Accordingly, the emphasis on collective Chinese-ness has led to the channelling of area-based cultural resources from all of China's subnational territorial clusters to the frontline to attract overseas capital. The imagined geography of Shenzhen as a national frontline neither indicates an elevation of the local government's political power nor the devolution or weakening of the central state's power (Shin, 2004). Instead, the surge of Shenzhen in the imaginary geography of China leads to a greater degree of centralized political control over the city (Holbig and Gilley, 2010). Thus, political leverage functions in Shenzhen to sustain the city's role as a safe experimental field under the close supervision of the central government. The city of Shenzhen was chosen as a pilot project, and similar fairs have since been promoted across the country by the National Culture Bureau.

Beijing stood out as a hub-style coordinator of this collective nationhood construction process in China (Thornton, 2013). This is exemplified by the involvement of high-profile figures and institutions, their decision-making powers and the promulgation of the official model of 'hierarchical networks'. These new hierarchical networks facilitate communication and interaction between Beijing and Shenzhen, and between the CPD and the Trade Council, and reify the scalar dimension of the relevant actors.

#### Conclusion

The aim of this article is to tackle two binary readings of scale. I call for scholars to revisit the concept of the archipelago—a metaphoric morphology of hierarchical networks—and extend it to capture a dynamic process of structuration rather than a static snapshot of a power landscape. In this article I endeavour to build a framework of relational archipelagos that foregrounds the mutual constitution of networks and hierarchy. This framework incorporates the inherited structure or actual geographies of actors, the agency of networking and the imagined geographies of new power relations (MacKinnon, 2011). Based on this framework, this process entails a spatial reconstitution of power through the redistribution of virtual power and material resources through flows, enabled by the asymmetrically unfolding agency of networking that is both limited and facilitated by pre-existing structures (Escobar, 2007; MacKinnon, 2011). The complexity of flows allows for the differentiated redistribution of political and economic interests and the subsequent emergence of multiple spatial forms of political and economic organization.

In this study, I examined the case of Shenzhen Fair to test the article's proposed relational archipelago. Chinese governing techniques—represented here by constant reconfigurations—offer valuable insights into the limiting and enabling powers of administrative networks, the trans-cluster mobility of resources and new spatial forms of power. A processual reading of this reconfiguration reveals that the Chinese administrative structure has considerable flexibility via networked forces to manage the overwhelming imperative of capital accumulation in the post-reform era. The case of Shenzhen Fair reveals three features of China's nexus of space and power.

First, this dynamic process entails the logics of both the networked economy and state territorialization. Both logics appropriate the spatial reconfiguration of networks and nodes. Through the networked economy, the selected city is scaled up as the national node, while through the networking of regulatory units, the state attempts to reposition itself as a hub-style coordinator that bridges jurisdictional and sectoral gaps (Thornton, 2013). Thus, the Shenzhen Fair case demonstrates that the central topic in cultural reform is not culture per se, but a constellation of trading zones that extract political capital from the marketization of culture.

Second, in this article I identified how two new scales—a new material trading node and a new epistemologically constructed nationhood—are in the process of becoming. This might only be captured partially if examined through either networked or hierarchical readings of scale (Jessop *et al.*, 2008), isolated treatments of ontological or epistemological definitions of scale (Moore, 2008; MacKinnon, 2011), or snapshot-style examinations that ignore the periodization of state spatiality (Wu, 2016). In a similar vein, the entanglement of municipal entrepreneurial practices and state space in reterritorializing measures makes it plausible to depict China's governance as either a withdrawing national state that decentralized power to the locals or a dictating ruler with absolutist control on all fronts.

Third, while newly formed networks break down trans-branch and trans-cluster boundaries, I argue that political and economic interests might gravitate towards different geographies. Notably, these networks serve not only discursive and material flows but also the dispersion of state power and the reterritorialization of state space (Agnew, 2005; Wang, 2019; Wang and Tan, 2020). Here, the newly produced state space is a relational archipelago that unifies formerly disparate places and sectors through networks to mobilize discursive and material things, the redistribution of which, nevertheless, reconfigures the power relations of the state space.

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