

The production of extended local territory: Topology and the spatial politics of city-region making in China

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Abstract

A new trend has been emerging in China's urban and regional politics, as it is becoming prevalent to extend one municipal authority to another, transcending boundaries, often through the establishment of joint development zones. These newly produced subnational territories are worth further attention to clarify the underlying political dynamics of China's changing state space. This paper examines the Shenzhen–Shanwei Special Cooperation Zone in Guangdong and analyses the political–spatial processes through which a certain area of Shanwei has been transformed into the 'Eastern frontier of Shenzhen'. Looking into the relational power nexus that has also been inflected by trans-scalar and cross-boundary dynamics, as well as its manifestations in urban landscapes, we propose *extended local territory* as a key analytical concept to explore how and how far the rise of extensive territoriality has been articulated with intensive localities. Empirically, we elaborate on the ways in which the territorial ambition and authority of Shenzhen have been managing to traverse boundaries, while also recognising that Shenzhen's aspiration of materialising its extensive territoriality is challenged by both scalar constraints and the grassroots politics rooted in local history and geography. Addressing the dialectics between the extensive territoriality and intensive locality, we attend to the inter-topological effects and trace the patterns of correlation that are involved in this process, which also turns out to be a critical approach to better understanding changing state spaces in and beyond China.

Keywords

territory, state, spatial politics, topology, city-region, China

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摘要

中国的城市和区域政治中出现了一种新趋势，即一个市政当局通常凭借建立联合开发区的方式，使其管辖范围超越边界，延伸至另一个市政当局的管辖范围。这些新产生的地方领地值得进一步关注，以阐明中国不断变化的国家空间背后的政治动态。本文以广东深汕特别合作区为研究对象，分析汕尾某地区转变为“深圳东部前沿”的政治空间过程。通过研究跨层级和跨边界动态所影响的关系性权力网络及其在城市景观中的表现，我们提出将扩展的当地领地作为一个关键的分析概念，以探索广延领地的兴起如何以及在多大程度上与集约地区相联系。从实证角度，我们详细阐述了深圳的领地野心和权力如何跨越边界，同时也认识到深圳实现其广延领地的愿望受到了层级约束和植根于当地历史和地理的基层政治的挑战。在探讨广延领地和集约地区之间的辩证关系的同时，我们关注拓扑间效应，并追踪这一过程中涉及的关联模式，这也是更好地理解中国乃至世界不断变化的国家空间的关键方法。

关键词

地区、国家、空间政治、拓扑结构、城市区域、中国

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Introduction

Walking in a place where the ‘Shenzhen logo’ is often seen, we may easily get a feeling that we are in Shenzhen, one of the most prosperous cities in China. There are branches of Shenzhen hospitals, Shenzhen schools, and Shenzhen urban utility systems, such as gas, water and electricity; even the road signs and bus stops are very similar to those in Shenzhen. These representations of space, which act to pin down inseparable connections between places, people, actions and things (Simone, 2004: 409), have also induced a new reputation of this place as the “Eastern frontier of Shenzhen” – despite it being more than 100 km away. For residents here, ‘these all look and feel familiar ... Though it is not at the center of Shenzhen, there are shadows of Shenzhen everywhere’ (Nanfang Daily, 2018).

This is the Shenzhen–Shanwei Special Cooperation Zone (SSCZ) in Guangdong, co-configured by Shenzhen and Shanwei municipal governments, and developed as a model of institutional innovations for city-regional governance in China (Chan, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). Previously an agricultural area in Shanwei, the SSCZ includes four towns of Haifeng County: Ebu, Xiaomo, Houmen and

Chishi (Figure 1). Designated as an experimental site of regionally coordinated development by Guangdong provincial government, this place was turned into a joint development zone between Shenzhen and Shanwei in February 2011. In September 2017, a revised plan of the SSCZ was approved to promote a new mode with and through Shenzhen’s direct administration. Shenzhen-style urban landscapes have since been emerging and strengthening Shenzhen’s territorial authority in SSCZ. This extra-territorial pattern of city-regional governance not only embodies the national and regional concerns of economic cooperation, but also shows the work of territorial strategies to control resources and population beyond boundaries.

China’s city-regions have long been discussed in both policy discourses and the literature on urban-regional geographies and political economy (Li and Wu, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). Apart from the general accounts of city-regions from the perspective of capitalist territorial development (Brenner, 2004), it is often reported that city-region making in China follows alternative logics (Jonas, 2020). With the co-existence of authoritarian and neoliberal mechanisms (Ma, 2009), the rise of city-regions is seen as a state orchestration, underlined by national development agendas

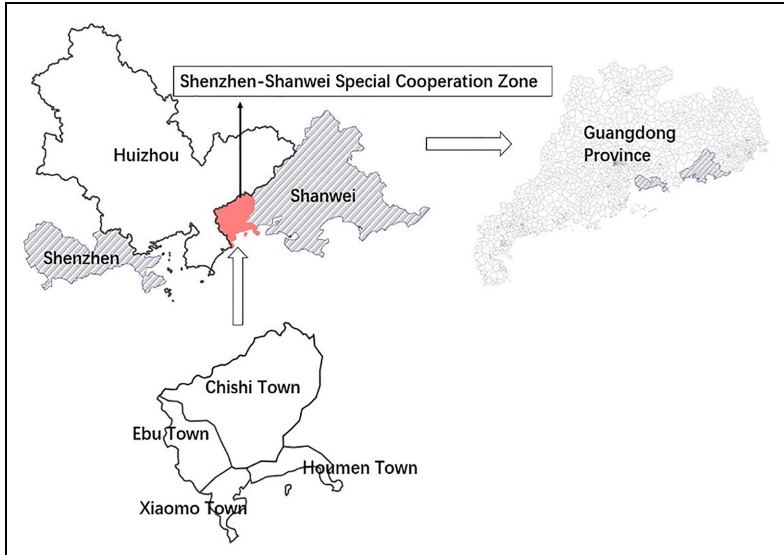


Figure 1. The location of Shenzhen–Shanwei Special Cooperation Zone.

Source: Produced by authors.

to reterritorialise state power and internationalise sub-national territories (Ye, 2014). The former goal marks a response to power imbalance induced by fiscal and administrative restructuring since the 1980s (Ngo et al., 2017; Wu, 2016), while the latter is inflected by geo-political and geo-economic aspirations of reordering the urban-regional space (Li and Jonas, 2019; Sum, 2018). These discussions recognise the role of the central state in deploying the city-region as a strategic instrument, yet they pay relatively less attention to the conduct of urban authorities in shaping city-regions. More studies are needed to uncover the spatial politics manifested at the urban level, so as to better understand the subnational territorial relations that are interwoven with inter-urban competition and cooperation (Chien, 2013).

Indeed, territorial competition has been a key characteristic of local authorities in China since the 1980s (Xu and Yeh, 2009). To tackle regional inequalities, the central government has proposed various initiatives

to coordinate regional development and foster cooperation between those well-off cities and regions and their surrounding areas. However, the effects of these initiatives often carry question marks, partly due to the impasse of the subject of implementing coordination: beyond the hierarchical settings and administrative boundaries, there are no corresponding state agents to monitor related issues for the city-region (Li and Wu, 2018). This impasse enables urban authorities' manoeuvres that materialise in and with their own respective and locally oriented agendas. Further investigation into such issues will not only decode the scalar-territorial mechanisms of city-region making in China, but also contribute to reflections on the state space, where the spatial, social, institutional and strategical frontiers are often articulated with each other, signalled by, while also transcending, borders and boundaries of various kinds (Brenner et al., 2003).

Our main concern here is to interrogate the subjects, spatialities and power that are

involved in city-region making and figure out the patterns of correlation between these different elements in the collision and collusion among variegated concerns and goals. With the case of SSCZ, we elaborate on how and how far the territorial ambition and authority of Shenzhen have been turned into an ‘immutable mobile’ (Latour, 1986; Law and Mol, 2001) that aims to traverse boundaries and gaps between Shenzhen and other places. However, this project of reaching from afar intensifies the spatiality–power correlation in SSCZ, shaping while also being shaped by the local discursive and material conditions. Together with the unfolding of what local authorities label ‘special cooperation’, we see the rise of an *extended local territory* that involves both extensive territoriality and intensive locality in pursuing reach, proximity and regional evenness. To illustrate this point, we start from a critical reflection on territory in and from China. Drawing on critical engagement with recent discussion on the topology of space and power, we propose the *extended local territory* to elaborate on the dialectics between the rise of extensive territoriality and the limit set by intensive locality in making reach and proximity. We then analyse the SSCZ case empirically, attending to the extensive territoriality and the intensive locality respectively. The paper concludes that we should attend to the inter-topological effects to trace the patterns of correlation involved in the territorial dynamics of city-region making, which also turns out to be a critical approach to better understanding changing state spaces both in and beyond China.

Rethinking territory inter-topologically

In light of the relational turn in human geography since the 1980s, territory, a concept formerly taken for granted as a *regulated-bounded* space, has been reconceptualised to

make it relevant for our understanding of the changing political geography of the state (and beyond) in a globalising era (Delaney, 2008; Novak, 2011; Schwarz and Streule, 2016). In his now classic intervention, Elden (2007, 2010, 2013) invites us to revisit territory as a predominantly political technology practised to control a certain place rather than a solid geographical container. From this perspective, Elden argues that there has been a long-standing tension between the territorial aspirations of maintaining particular spatial orders and the actual treatment of territory as a contingent (and violable) spatial process contested by related subjects. Also, along this line Painter (2010: 1116) reminds us that the territory is not a timeless or fixed container of state power, but rather a provisional and porous product of the networked socio-technical practices. Likewise, Paasi (2012) and Halvorsen (2019) move beyond the bounded view and argue for a relatively open understanding of territory as sites of complex relational juxtapositions. Seen in this way, cities and regions that used to be conceived as self-contained territorial settings are indeed rearticulated as variegated spaces of circulation and connectivity, made through increasing economic flows and interchanges (Amin, 2004; Jones and MacLeod, 2004).

These reflections not only allow a relational conceptualisation of territory in terms of spatially unbounded processes and networked practices, but also promote a shift of analytical focus to the dynamic interactions among multiple scales (Fernandes, 2013). In this respect, urban research on China, particularly that on the intensified inter-city interaction at the regional scale, has also made a similar move to integrate a relational view into reflections on the local territorial dynamics (Li and Jonas, 2019; Xu and Yeh, 2013). In addition, the relational turn in understanding China’s local territory is also reshaping regional development strategies in

practice, with both cross-sectoral and cross-jurisdictional cooperation and integration increasingly foregrounded (Li et al., 2014; Ye, 2014). In line with these strategies, the local states' conduct is less subject to the enclosed urban territories, as they are encouraged to transcend fixed boundaries and make relational contacts and reach at the regional scale. Recognising this new pattern, China urban researchers have explored its various manifestations, such as enclaves of economic collaboration and co-built zones with connective infrastructure (Feng and Zhao, 2004; Huang et al., 2016; Li et al., 2023). These discussions have attended well to the spatiality–power nexus and provided critical evidence to rethink local territory in China as effects of relational networks at work (Ngo et al., 2017; Oakes, 2023; Xu, 2008). Together they figure out a timely and much-needed empirical approach to understand new and increasingly elastic characteristics of local territorial dynamics, involving supra-urban extension and intensified inter-city interactions at the same time.

Nevertheless, the relational perspective has its limits, especially when analysing a regime that also has fundamentally authoritarian settings. As mentioned above, Chinese cities have long been woven in a clearly demarcated hierarchical structure with a complicated system of administrative and spatial divisions (Chan, 2010a). Local territorial dynamics are hence first and foremost shaped hierarchically, with five levels (central, provincial, prefectural, county and township) constituting a pre-defined power hierarchy (Ma, 2005). This power hierarchy is often represented via the 'rank-based power', which establishes rigorous and corresponding relations between each level and their territorial and spatial power in dealing with local and trans-local issues (Cartier, 2016; Landry, 2008). Hence, when looking into inter-city interactions, we have to figure out first what ranks of power are at work,

and how they are hierarchically arranged, so as to understand the asymmetrical power relations and avoid the simplified assumption of homogenous authorities (Chung and Lam, 2009; He et al., 2018). In this regard, how and how far, we may wonder, are local territories (re-)shaped simultaneously by various authorities with different ranks and uneven power relations? In other words, how is the relational and the hierarchical articulated and reconciled in practices? To better decode the relational making of local territory in China's emerging city regions, we should attend to the uneven power hierarchy, together with its impacts on the issue of relationality. And for this, we suggest further engaging with and reflecting on recent debates on the topological view of space, power and the state.

Topology and the extended local territory

In the endeavour to bring a topological view into discussions on the geographies of power, Allen and his collaborators (Allen, 2011, 2016; Allen and Cochrane, 2007, 2010) mainly focus on the making of *reach* through and beyond physical distances. From this perspective, the most important lesson we can learn topologically is to see how and how far certain power dynamics cut across proximity and distance, so as to renew nearby from afar or bring distant others within close reach. 'Reach' is redefined here as 'the ability of the state to permeate everyday life or to make itself present ... at a distance' (Allen and Cochrane, 2010: 1074), which then pre-conditions the intensified and mediated relations of power and transforms the power geometries (located and fixed space–power nexus) into power topologies (mundane and fluid geographies of power, see Allen, 2011: 290–291). Ghertner (2017), on the other hand, develops an alternative framework with what he coins 'the topological state'. Shifting the focus from

the conduct of the state to that of the local people, he recognises the vernacular ways in which ‘provisional access to a state apparatus’ is enabled (Ghertner, 2017: 737), eventually rendering the state functioning ‘as a more porous form prone to manipulation and rule bending’ (p. 745). On top of the difference between the two accounts – on the state’s making of reach and the grassroots and conjunctural agency of shaping proximate connections – we suggest that together they mark two key moments that demonstrate the validity of the topological perspective in interrogating the prosaic geographies of power and stateness (see Painter, 2006). This validity can also be clearly recognised in some recent discussions on the reassembling of governmental techniques (Collier, 2009; Harvey, 2012) and the politics of urban densities (McFarlane, 2016; Zhao, 2020), among other related topics.

The popularity of this topological approach, however, requires further reflection. Instead of taking the topology as ‘a satisfactory synonym for relationality’, Martin and Secor (2014: 435) aptly remind us to attend more to the processes through which ‘those relations are repetitively reproduced, and yet continually changed’. A topological view, in other words, is to focus on the rules of connection, disconnection and transformation, rather than simply claiming that certain things or forces are related to each other, as if this has been turned into another kind of ‘spatial truth’. The attention to the patterns of correlation also marks Collier’s (2009) key concern in his Foucauldian account of the topologies of power. He recognises the break in Foucault’s writing on biopolitics and the state, and foregrounds the changing arrangements of governmental elements and their connective properties to reflect on the biopolitics of the population. The topological approach, in this view, would require us to ‘trace certain techniques and technical

mechanisms from one context to the other’ (Collier, 2009: 100), so as to make the new topologies of power intelligible. This approach is not something set a priori or that has by default been a panacea to better investigate the spatiality–power nexus. Instead of essentialising the topological approach, our task is to look into the grounded and actually existing spatial and power dynamics in making certain reaches possible or distances being cut across – often also with their own limits. In this process, it is crucial to interrogate together – rather than isolate between – the topology and the topography, the connection and the rupture, the reproduction and the transformation and the arrangement and the rearrangement (see, for instance, Abdullah et al., 2023).

This reflection has an echo from the past, when researchers on the Actor Network Theory worked hard to explore the spatialities of heterogeneous manners of ‘the social’ (see particularly Law and Mol, 2001; Mol and Law, 1994). Instead of making a dualism between the topography and the topology, as was premised in Allen’s works, they take a radical view and see different spatialities as diverse manifestations of the social topologies: the *regions* are with ‘old and secure’ solidity, the *networks* are newer with formality yet still bounded, and the *fluid* is without boundaries and allows leakage, for instance (Mol and Law, 1994: 644). On top of this, and more relevant to our discussions here, they bring to the fore ‘the inter-topological effects’ as the primary issue to attend to when dealing with more than one spatiality. When the networks are generating new regions ‘by crossing boundaries and spreading themselves’ (Mol and Law, 1994: 649), for instance, a certain type of inter-topological effect is at work and induces what Latour (1986) would call the ‘immutable mobile’. Similarly, the flows of elements could sometimes lead to ‘variation without boundaries and transformation

without discontinuity', which in turn paves the way for the rise of a fluid space (Mol and Law, 1994: 658), characterised not by breaks or disruptions but rather by gradual adaptation (Law and Mol, 2001: 614). This pattern marks another kind of inter-topological effect where the object is turned into a 'mutable mobile', one that changes its shape gradually as it flows, cutting across regions and/or networks, yet at the same time maintaining a shape constancy.

When the 'Eastern frontier of Shenzhen' is being configured, how can we account for the roles of Shenzhen and Shanwei authorities respectively in the complicated scalar and territorial pattern? Shall we take Shenzhen as an 'immutable mobile' that has been replicating and spreading its own socio-spatiality simply by crossing boundaries and cutting across distances? Or is it more appropriate to examine whether and how the authorities, images and landscapes of both Shenzhen and Shanwei have been transformed in this process, more akin to 'mutable mobiles'? In this paper, we want to draw on the above discussion on the inter-topological effect and propose the *extended local territory* as our analytical concept. Recognising and reconciling both the extensive (topography) and the intensive (topology), this concept aims to illustrate how and how far SSCZ is co-configured with both extensive territoriality and intensive locality. On the one hand, Shenzhen has indeed turned into a model 'place-object' in the state's territorial agenda, embodying a more advanced urban economy, society and landscape in the view of both the central and the provincial authorities, which *should* be spread elsewhere to tackle regional unevenness as an 'immutable mobile'. But on the other hand, the local remaking of this Shenzhen socio-spatiality in SSCZ does not manage to dissolve the gap between two places at all. While Shanwei concurs with the view on Shenzhen's advanced-ness and

would capture this opportunity to pursue economic growth and achieve their own aspirations, the long-lasting local conditions are not ready for a complete or smooth replication of Shenzhen.

The integrity of Shenzhen as a 'place-object' is hence challenged and disrupted, in particular by existing institutional arrangements and boundaries (hierarchical) and local concerns and demands in SSCZ (regional). Here, two different types of localities have to encounter and play with each other in configuring SSCZ – the locality of Shenzhen as a 'place-object' and that of SSCZ, rooted in the local history and geography and preconditioning what the zone is and could be. Also, these intensified localities have to come across the solid and 'old' state space (together with all the institutions that are involved), which is also in the way of making the 'immutable mobile'. Because of these tensions and interactions, the gap and distance between Shenzhen and Shanwei are only partly traversed and hardly dissolved (cf. Allen, 2011), with Shenzhen's reach as a 'place-object' made and felt in SSCZ to a certain extent while also being limited. The meaning of seeing through the inter-topological effects hence emerges vividly: it is at boundaries between the extensive and the intensive, the immutable and the mutable, the mobile and the immobile and the local and the trans-local that we can best illustrate the ways in which spatiality and power are imbued with each other in SSCZ. Our task, to summarise, is to draw on this inter-topological view and trace the patterns of correlation in the mundane geographies of power that are configuring the *extended local territory* – in terms of replication, rupture, connection and gradual adaptation for example.

The following sections will examine the Shenzhen–Shanwei Special Cooperation Zone empirically to scrutinise the scalar-territorial dynamics and inter-topological effects in making the 'Eastern frontier of Shenzhen'. Our

investigation focuses on the multi-faceted state territorial strategies and manoeuvres of various actors in this case. Semi-structured interviews and participant observations were conducted during five spells of fieldwork in Shenzhen and SSCZ between July 2018 and April 2021. We conducted 35 interviews with various key figures in the place-making process, including the officials in Shenzhen and Shanwei municipal governments and the SSCZ management committee. We had another 11 interviews with those who witnessed or experienced the development of SSCZ, including urban planners, academics as well as local residents living or working in the zone. On average, each interview was around one hour in duration. We also collected and compiled secondary data to triangulate our findings with other sources, including statistical yearbooks, government reports and local news reports between 2011 and 2022.

Extensive territoriality and multi-scalar power relations

Despite its reputation as the ‘World Factory’ and being one of the most productive economic regions in China, Guangdong Province has been grappling with regional disparities in recent decades. Building up joint development zones, as inter-urban cooperation between developed and less developed cities, is often regarded as a significant strategy to tackle regional unevenness. In 2008, Guangdong provincial government pledged a 50-billion yuan (about \$7480 million) financial package to build regional facilities, half of which was invested in the joint development zones. The Shenzhen–Shanwei Industrial Transfer Zone, the predecessor of SSCZ, was established under the provincial agenda of the ‘Special Economic Zone in partnership with the underdeveloped Revolutionary Zone’ (*tequ dai laoqu*). Such a political-strategic agenda, implicitly

laden with the daunting task of ‘paired assistance’ (*duikou bangfu*), was quickly reoriented into a more appealing narrative and embodied in the new name of this zone – Shenzhen–Shanwei Special Cooperation Zone (see also Wang and Zheng, 2024). With the narrative of ‘special cooperation’, SSCZ has been developed through two stages: the Shenzhen–Shanwei joint management model from 2011 to 2017, followed by Shenzhen’s overall management since September 2017. This evolution also delineates clearly the process of making extensive territoriality, that is, enabling territorial practices of the extra-territorial authority from elsewhere.

This section examines the making of extensive territoriality intertwined with multi-scalar power relations. We first explore how the ‘special cooperation’ narrative initially deployed by the provincial government binds two significantly different areas together and paves the way for the extensive territoriality of Shenzhen. We will then look at the ways in which Shenzhen and Shanwei have been utilising this narrative to fulfil their own territorial aspirations. The extensiveness at issue also has its limits, and we will turn to this point in the next section.

The scalar-making of ‘special cooperation’

The ‘special cooperation’ narrative was first and foremost manifested in a public speech by Wang Yang, then top leader of Guangdong province, when he paid a visit to Shanwei in 2011 and elaborated on his vision of further developing SSCZ:

The mode of cooperation should surpass paired support with friendship and lead instead to coordinated and mutually beneficial development. For this purpose, we must move from one-way transfer to *special cooperation*

between both sides, (Yangcheng Evening News, 2011; emphasis added).

Along with this vision, SSCZ was turned into a joint development zone between Shenzhen and Shanwei, which marks an alternative approach of ‘special cooperation’ and paves the way for the spreading of Shenzhen’s socio-economic and material elements, into SSCZ. Being empowered to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with Shanwei, Shenzhen was expected to ‘play a more critical role than a provider of economic aid’, as instructed by Wang Yang (interview with a Shenzhen official, 11 July 2018). Accordingly, Shenzhen municipal government has been striving for greater control in SSCZ, so as to offer a ‘Guangdong Model’ and address the national concerns of tackling regional unevenness (interview with an SSCZ official, 25 December 2019). This aspiration had also been recognised by Hu Chunhua, the succeeding top leader of Guangdong. During his visit to SSCZ in 2017, Hu declared that

the existing mode of Shenzhen–Shanwei joint management can no longer meet the needs of SSCZ’s rapid development. It is imperative to change the collaboration from a temporary, assistance-based mode to one that is appropriate for long-term production, operation, and management. (Shenshan Yearbook Editorial Committee, 2018)

As such, SSCZ embarked on a new administrative mode with Shenzhen’s overall management in September 2017.

Concurring with the ‘special cooperation’ narrative, Shanwei has been embracing this new mode by emphasising its comparative advantage of territory, part of which is ready for further development in SSCZ. We can illustrate this issue more clearly with some numbers. While Shenzhen has been generating almost the highest GDP per capita

among Chinese cities, it has been constrained by its limited territory, with only 1997 km² in total, which is at more than 50% land development intensity (First Finance, 2021). Shanwei, on the other hand, is much bigger, with 5271 km² of territory, while it is ranked last in terms of economic growth rate in Guangdong. The two cities’ respective aspirations of spatial expansion and economic development could hence be articulated together to ‘hook up’ the provincial agenda of regional development. This is also evidenced by our interview with a SSCZ official:

The complementarity between Shenzhen and Shanwei is much stronger than that between any other cities. From a political-strategic view, such cooperation is in line with the trend of coordinated development. If Shenzhen cooperates with Dongguan or Huizhou (another two developed cities in PRD), it might be joked as a ‘club of the rich’ and will lose much of its strategic significance. (Interview with SSCZ official, 7 January 2020)

Indeed, the multi-scalar making of ‘special cooperation’ had its strategic significance recognised before long. In 2019, SSCZ gained recognition from the central government and was designated as a national demonstration zone of regional coordination (The State Council, 2019). In other words, the legitimacy of Shenzhen’s extra-territorial authority has been endorsed by the central and provincial governments’ concern with tackling regional unevenness through spreading Shenzhen’s advanced-ness. This explains why and how Shenzhen is turned into a model ‘place-object’ in the state’s territorial agenda, referring to a more advanced economy, society and landscape to be replicated and expanded. We now turn to the conducts of both Shanwei and Shenzhen in enabling and conditioning such a vision, which eventually paved the way for the rise of extensive territoriality in SSCZ.

The rise of extensive territoriality

In line with the territorial arrangement of promoting coordinated regional development in the form of replicating Shenzhen's advanced-ness in SSCZ, a series of administrative reforms have been carried out, involving both Shanwei's concessions on jurisdictional management and Shenzhen's increasing authority on local issues. In the first stage (before 2017), to better cooperate with Shenzhen in driving economic development, Shanwei delegated a total of 188 economic management functions to SSCZ and only kept its role of social management in the zone. Meanwhile, staff members of the SSCZ authority were co-dispatched by Shenzhen and Shanwei. For example, the Party Secretary of SSCZ was from Shanwei while the Director was from Shenzhen; Shenzhen officials were in general appointed to manage economic affairs while Shanwei officials were responsible for social affairs. With the transfer of local management responsibilities, the subjects involved in SSCZ started to produce a more topological space with institutional continuity that links Shenzhen to SSCZ in a closer way, where according to a top leader of Shanwei, the 'Shenzhen Special Economic Zone now comes to Shanwei's doorstep' (Shenshan Yearbook Editorial Committee, 2016). Furthermore, the idea of the 'Eastern frontier' was promoted to further showcase the extensive territoriality of Shenzhen. The retreat of Shanwei from managing SSCZ made an institutional void to be filled with Shenzhen's jurisdictional power, which in turn made the reach of Shenzhen increasingly palpable.

The extensive territoriality was further intensified in the second stage (after 2017), when SSCZ came under Shenzhen's overall management, with leadership positions all taken up by Shenzhen officials. Illustrating the direct presence and intense impacts of

Shenzhen authorities, our interviewees often address a key transition from personnel 'dispatch' to 'appointment'. Dispatch, as a method of personnel transfer conducted in the first stage, was a form of cross-border administrative aid: officials from Shenzhen would only have a term of three years, the renewal of which was subject to approval from both Shenzhen and Shanwei. Appointment, on the other hand, implies that Shenzhen municipal government can appoint officials directly for SSCZ, with no restrictions on the length of the term or its renewal. This depicts vividly Shenzhen's consolidation of its political-territorial authorities in places beyond its border, gradually promoting 'the production of the continuity necessary for the existence of legitimate territory' (Lussault, 2016: 114) in and through its extensive territoriality.

Topological continuities as such have not only reconfigured the local state power, but also elicited strong responses from local residents and enterprises keen to invest in the zone, both of whom aspire to benefit from the spreading of Shenzhen's advanced-ness. Being informed that Shenzhen had been granted power of overall management, 'some villagers started to engage in unauthorised land and housing development, aiming to capture the expected increase of land values, which might be induced by the possible incorporation of SSCZ into Shenzhen' (Interview with an SSCZ official, 13 September 2018). In addition, local residents in SSCZ were eager to transfer their *hukou* to Shenzhen and turn themselves into 'Shenzhen people' (see further discussion in the next section). According to a local report:

The local residents fully support Shenzhen's overall management, and even take the *hukou* transfer for granted. Some villagers believe that if their *hukou* could not be transferred to Shenzhen, then the term 'special cooperation'

is an exaggeration, and they will visit government offices or write letters to lodge complaints. (SSCZ Management Committee, 2018)

The market actors are also optimistic about this extensive territoriality. We were told by an enterprise manager that ‘as long as Shenzhen enables its authority to be exercised, SSCZ would be half the success’ (Interview with manager, 18 December 2018). With the rise of topological connections in SSCZ, the number of enterprises that are interested in making investment has been increasing dramatically. For example, in the first half of 2018, more than 300 enterprises visited SSCZ (mostly from Shenzhen), which exceeded the figure for the whole year in 2017. By the end of 2018, 87% of enterprises that settled down in SSCZ were from Shenzhen (Shenshan Yearbook Editorial Committee, 2019), which further evidences the economic effects of Shenzhen’s extensive authority and territoriality in SSCZ.

The material replication of place-object

Following the institutional changes towards extensive territoriality, we also witnessed the transplanting of Shenzhen-based facilities and Shenzhen-style landscapes in SSCZ, which marks a further step towards replicating Shenzhen as a model ‘place-object’. This spatial transformation first unfolded with the reorientation of SSCZ’s urban function in its new master plan, formulated by the Shenzhen municipal government and incorporated into the Shenzhen City Master Plan (2017–2035). SSCZ was recognised as the ‘Eastern Gateway of Greater Bay Area, New Centre of Guangdong Eastern Coastal Economic Belt, and the Extended Zone of Shenzhen Self-dependent Innovation’. In this way, national and regional strategies were incorporated into Shenzhen’s ambition and vision of remaking SSCZ, rendering the

image of ‘Eastern frontier’ palpable, accessible and operational.

This aspiration of territorial extension is further supported by a new and high-standard transport system. Historically, Shanwei had long been marginalised with poor transport connections, which has been ‘sitting on 455-kilometer coastline yet with no port, and adjacent to Special Economic Zones yet with no access to railway’ (21st Century Business Herald, 2012). In the SSCZ Master Plan, a new transport system was set up, with three ports, four stations, four railways and five highways, aiming to integrate the zone into the ‘30-minute circle’ of Shenzhen. This is a key step of promoting the ‘Eastern frontier’, where topological manoeuvres were consolidated in and through topographical transformation of the zone, particularly in terms of transport connections and time–space compression for more investments.

Furthermore, the transplant of Shenzhen-based facilities and Shenzhen-style urban landscapes marks another strategy of local place-making to reshape SSCZ (see Figure 2). Taking education infrastructures as an example, there has been neither a middle nor a high school in this zone for decades, and local students have had to leave their hometowns to get education opportunities elsewhere. On the other hand, the rapid expansion of urban population in Shenzhen induced a severe shortage in land provision for building up new schools. The two dilemmas were well resolved together in and through SSCZ. Nanshan district government in Shenzhen signed an agreement with SSCZ in 2018 to introduce high-quality educational resources ranging from kindergarten to high school. This was soon put into practice: a 12-acre school campus was built in just two years, aiming to teach with the same standard as Shenzhen Nanshan Foreign Language School, one of the most



Figure 2. Shenzhen facilities and landscapes in SSCZ (top: Peking University Shenzhen Hospital; bottom: Shenzhen Nanshan Foreign Language School).

Source: Photos by interviewees, April 2024.

prestigious schools in Shenzhen. Shenzhen also issued a High School Construction Plan (2020–2025) in 2020 and proposed constructing four education parks for new high schools, including one in SSCZ that would involve a total investment of 3.3 billion yuan (about \$ 450 million, see SSCZ Management Committee, 2021).

In terms of medical care, as the first Shenzhen medical institution that settled down in SSCZ, the SSCZ Branch of Peking University Shenzhen Hospital also indicates that the medical operation at SSCZ has been incorporated into Shenzhen's medical system. As for other urban utility systems, such as gas, water and public transport, most of them have also been taken over by public or private sectors from Shenzhen. These changes in both urban landscapes and social services not only visualise the territorial authority of Shenzhen, but also produce a socio-spatial pattern underlined by the lure of Shenzhen's advanced-ness, which plays a

crucial role in legitimatising the new political–territorial conjuncture in SSCZ.

To conclude, the operation and integration of various territorial ideas, technologies and practices together enable the development of SSCZ, and this in turn shows alternative approaches to the (re-)imagination and production of extended territory in city-region making. This zone hence illustrates well how and how far the local territory, as a politically contested arena, has been (re-)made topologically by the multi-scalar power relations that are involved. In this sense, we should attend to the relatedness and extendedness of power topology in spatial politics and seek to locate their material configurations in variegated forms. Instead of foregrounding the administrative levels or pre-given boundaries per se, it would be more helpful to capture the porous and flexible nature of boundaries and explore the territorial modalities that are getting increasingly elastic and extensive. This marks a

promising approach to better decode the process of territorial differentiation, circulation and calculation in terms of city-region making, both in and beyond China. There are still gaps, nevertheless, in the local replication of this Shenzhen ‘place-object’, since the tensions among localities and the institutional underpinnings of scalar politics are at best partly resolved. In this regard, there are always limits to the capacity of Shenzhen as an *immutable mobile* in reshaping SSCZ. We will now turn to such tensions and local conditions that are at work.

Intensive localities and the limits of the *immutable mobile*

While Shenzhen gains greater control in managing SSCZ, it is not able to make SSCZ its own territory through the adjustment of administrative division, which in turn sets a limit to the production of extended territory. In contrast to Shenzhen’s sometimes aggressive territorial manoeuvres, other actors involved tend to maintain the institutional setting of temporary –although ‘special’ – cooperation. For both the central and provincial governments, the practice of coordinated regional development is the primary concern. In this vein, Shenzhen’s experiences, resources and achievements could be helpful to foster Shanwei’s economic growth by producing the ‘Eastern frontier of Shenzhen’. And as long as SSCZ is ‘located’ in Shanwei and subordinated jurisdictionally to the latter, it can still be depicted as a model of regional cooperation, which refers only implicitly to Shenzhen’s authority and control in the zone. Otherwise, as an official indicates,

if Shenzhen incorporates SSCZ, then it would be questioned as a new kind of ‘hegemonic localism’, and other cities are likely to follow similar manoeuvres to acquire land beyond their border. This is what the higher-level

authorities may worry about. (Interview with an SSCZ official, 2 November 2020)

As to Shanwei, although it waives most of its jurisdictional power, this is better seen as a temporary strategy that is also in line with the expectations from above: Shenzhen will have to step back from SSCZ by the end of the cooperation period. Interestingly, Shenzhen has been avoiding mentioning the expiration date of their agreement with Shanwei, while Shanwei officials keep talking about it in public. The counterbalance in an assemblage of central, regional and local actors keeps working, and thus the integrity of Shenzhen as an *immutable mobile* – in terms of economic leverage, political authority and social engineering – has consistently been challenged. The intensiveness of the extended territory has been further amplified by the tensions between various localities and scalar-oriented institutional underpinnings, inviting us to attend more to the dialectics between the extensive and the intensive, the immutable and the mutable and the local and the trans-local in making the ‘Eastern frontier’.

The challenged economic leverage

Since the establishment of SSCZ, Shenzhen has been working hard to render sensible its economic influence in the zone by implementing a series of industrial policies. They signed industrial transfer agreements with Shanwei in 2011, designated SSCZ as a key area for industrial transformation and upgrading in 2012 and provided equal treatments with preferential policies and efficient services in 2015. The Shenzhen authorities were very confident in their capabilities, through such policy schemes, to develop SSCZ. However, the reality in the zone did not echo this grand vision, especially in its early years. For example, in contrast to the commitment that Shenzhen would transfer

4000 industrial projects to SSCZ by 2015, the reality is that only 244 projects were contracted and 13 were put into full operation from 2011 to 2016. Moreover, SSCZ's share of the total GDP in Shanwei was only 4.9% in 2016, contributing little to the latter's economic take-off (Shenshan Yearbook Editorial Committee, 2016).

The slow progress reflects the limit of Shenzhen's economic leverage in SSCZ, and our interviewees offered some clues to better understand this. The reason was straightforward in the first stage of SSCZ (before 2017): 'those enterprises would hesitate to invest here as long as Shenzhen does not really come into SSCZ' (Interview with SSCZ official, 25 December 2019). In other words, Shenzhen was expected to play a dominant role, much the same way as how Allen talked about the arm's-length reach and relational proximity: 'the mutable geometry involved is less concerned with ... their inscribed position, and more interested in what works, say, to hold authority in place' (Allen, 2011: 292). Yet, with no adjustment of administrative division, Shenzhen failed to make its spatial leverage and presence sensible or visible. In another interview, we were informed that even when Shenzhen started its overall management of SSCZ in the second stage, the structural constraints still prevented it from promoting the local business environment.

While Shenzhen has made substantial efforts in attracting investment, it is we town governments who are in charge of enterprise service and management, including land expropriation, business qualification review and safety production supervision. However, we are understaffed and lack the power of administrative enforcement. Previously, the Haifeng county government often sent personnel to assist us in routine management; now, with the retreat of Shanwei, Haifeng is also reluctant to continue its involvement, which results in much lower efficiency of

administration and hence diminishes the enthusiasm for investment. (Interview with town official, 19 April 2021)

This is a moment when the tension between the 'immutable mobile' and the local conditions is vividly presented. Even though Shenzhen manages to spread its economic influences and 'advanced-ness', this mobility is constrained by the regions that have with 'old and secure' solidity (Mol and Law, 1994), showcasing the dialectics between the extensive and the intensive while also highlighting the significance of locality and power hierarchy in better understanding the inter-topological effects at work.

Troubling political authority

Not only the economic leverage, but also the political authority of Shenzhen has been situated in tensions, if not struggles. This situation could be illustrated through a case of local mobilisation we learned about in our fieldwork, which happened at the beginning of making SSCZ in the early 2010s. At that time, the management committee of SSCZ planned to build a road to connect the four towns in the zone, which required town governments and local villagers' support for land expropriation. One of the town mayors convened a meeting with villagers - not to persuade them, but instead to mobilise them to boycott this plan. The tension between the management committee and town governments was first and foremost induced by the vague connotation of the term 'joint management', which lacked legal instructions and bureaucratic clarification. These towns were under Shanwei's jurisdiction and the SSCZ management committee did not get administrative endorsements for its political technologies and conducts. Unmatched authorities and non-affiliated bureaucrats hence led to an impasse of city-region making.

While direct confrontations as such gradually disappeared afterwards, especially in the second stage of SSCZ, nonconfrontational yet disobedient local responses continued setting the limit of transplanting the ‘immutable mobile’. For instance, the SSCZ management committee initiated a project on rural environmental beautification. This effort, however, met with indifference from local villagers and was eventually stopped ‘as they argue this is an encroachment on their territory’ (Interview with an SSCZ official, 18 April 2021). Similar cases are so common that the officials we interviewed often complained to us: ‘what we have been striving to do progressed very slowly since people here remain suspicious of this cooperation’ (Interview with an SSCZ official, 13 July 2018).

Moments like this reveal the power dynamics involved in the encounter between the ‘immutable mobile’ and local conditions in SSCZ, where Shenzhen’s aspiration of materialising its extensive territoriality is undermined by the grassroots politics rooted in local history and geography. These tensions in and between localities also invite us to attend more carefully to the ‘local’ dimension in the production of ‘extended local territory’, where the intensive locality has always been challenging, interrupting and setting the limit of boundary crossing and distance traversing.

The suspended social transformation

The tension between the extensive territoriality and the intensive locality has been further evidenced by the undelivered commitment to *hukou* transfer, which was an important tactic of Shenzhen to consolidate its authority in SSCZ. The *hukou* system in China is a key institutional arrangement of social welfare provision for different social groups. Since the quantity and quality of welfare

depend on each place’s economic strength (Chan, 2010b), the prosperity of Shenzhen is hence translated into much better social welfare provision than that of Shanwei. In this context, getting Shenzhen *hukou* became extremely attractive for SSCZ residents. This expectation was in turn deployed tactically by Shenzhen officials. In August 2018, for instance, a deputy mayor of Shenzhen declared that ‘local residents’ *hukou* in SSCZ will be transferred to Shenzhen’ (Nanfang Daily, 2018). Enterprise employees working in SSCZ would also expect to be granted Shenzhen *hukou*, which marks another way to attract more ‘talented’ people.

This *hukou* commitment was arguably the most exciting news for residents and workers in SSCZ, as mentioned earlier. However, whether Shenzhen can really deliver on its commitment remains uncertain as there has been no precedent of transferring local people’s *hukou* without the adjustment of administrative division. Indeed, more than five years have passed since the deputy mayor announced the above plan, but SSCZ residents are still waiting while enterprise employees are not assured of getting Shenzhen *hukou* either. This suspension can be partly explained by concerns of the central and provincial governments about the risk of ‘hegemonic localism’. To avoid Shenzhen being regionally ‘hegemonic’, administrative restructuring has not been put on the agenda, which therefore prevents the transfer of *hukou* for SSCZ residents. Indeed, an interviewee reminded us that the media coverage of the deputy mayor’s *hukou* commitment had already been withdrawn from the Internet (Interview with an SSCZ official, 2 November 2020).

Once again, this scenario shows us another limit of the extensive territoriality in making the ‘Eastern frontier’. Even though this project embodies a new political framing of territorial (re-)making towards city-region

development, it is by no means a singular political–spatial action to territorialise social and material transformation once and for all. The role of the central and provincial governments, as well as Shanwei authorities, still looms large, often casting intensive shadows over the extensiveness of Shenzhen and challenging and disrupting its otherwise significant social, political and economic effects.

Conclusion

This paper analyses the subjects, spatialities and power dynamics involved in China's city-region making through the case of Shenzhen–Shanwei Special Cooperation Zone. Critically engaging with the relational lens in addressing spatio-political dynamics of city-region making, we also attend to the authoritarian setting of power hierarchy and explore how the relational and the hierarchical have been articulated in the grounded political dynamics. Inspired by works of the actor–network theorists, we foreground the inter-topological effects (in terms of the *immutable mobile*, for instance) to trace the spatial, political and lived mechanisms of correlation that are involved in the production of SSCZ, which turn out to be critical to register more clearly the prosaic geographies of power in making certain reaches possible or distances being cut across – often also with their own limits. This approach to state, space and power is promising for us to better understand subnational territorial relations that are interwoven with inter-urban competition and cooperation.

With the case of SSCZ, we elaborate on how and how far the territorial ambition and authority of Shenzhen have been wrapped up into an *immutable mobile* to traverse boundaries and bridge gaps. In the rise of extensive territoriality in SSCZ, we can see clearly how the operation and integration of territorial ideas, technologies and

practices have enabled SSCZ's development. It is hence helpful to foreground the porous and flexible nature of boundaries and explore the territorial modalities that are getting increasingly elastic and extensive, which marks a promising approach to better decode the processes of territorial differentiation, circulation and calculation in city-region making. On the other hand, the intensiveness of extended territory has been amplified by tensions among various localities and scalar-oriented institutional underpinnings, inviting us to attend more to the dialectics between the extensive and the intensive, the immutable and the mutable and the local and the trans-local in shaping the 'Eastern frontier of Shenzhen'. In such moments as the challenged aspirations of economic leverage, the troubling of local authorities by grassroots politics, and the suspension of promised social transformation due to scalar constraints and fears of 'hegemonic localism', we are reminded how and how far those long-lasting local conditions and trans-scalar settings of power hierarchy are not yet ready for a complete transplant of Shenzhen in SSCZ. Shenzhen's aspiration of materialising its extensive territoriality has consistently been challenged by both the scalar constraints and the grassroots politics rooted in local history and geography.

The *mobility* of this 'immutable mobile', in other words, has been constrained by the regions that are with 'old and secure' *solidity* (see Mol and Law, 1994), reminding us of the efficacy of the inter-topological framework in interrogating such cases. This is also the reason why we advocate for the *extended local territory* as a keyword to investigate the replication, rupture, connection and adaptation in the spatial politics of city-region making. The institutional underpinnings of the extensive territoriality and the intensive localities are further illustrated in Figure 3, where the solid arrow indicates the

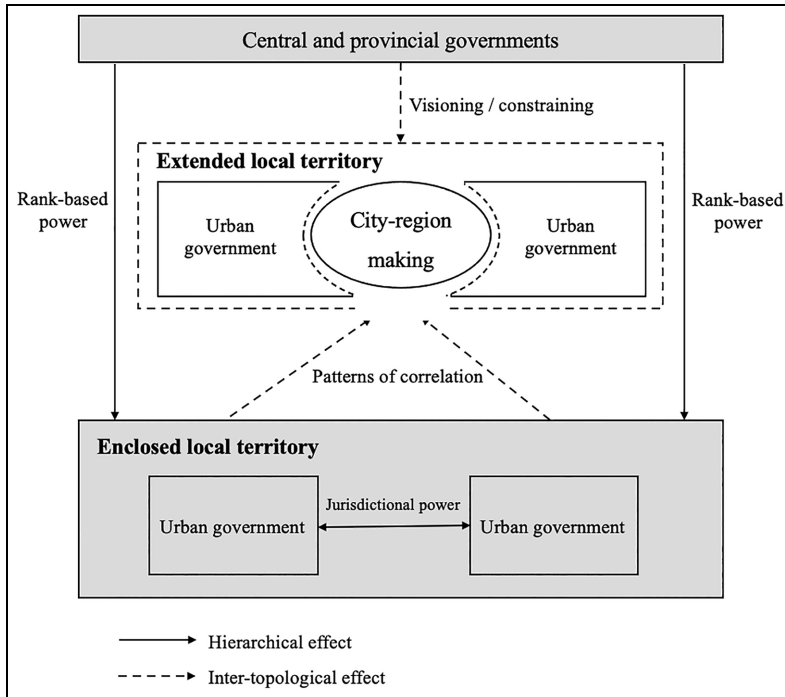


Figure 3. The institutional dynamics of the extended local territory.
 Source: Produced by the authors.

scalar-hierarchical effects in consolidating ‘old and secure’ local territories (rank and locality), while the dotted arrow highlights the emergence of ‘immutable mobile’ that struggles to transcend the scalar setting and remake places topologically. By showcasing the dialectics between the extensive and the intensive and the immutable and the mutable, this figure is also helpful to further reflect on city-region making: it is not, and will not be, a singular political-spatial action to territorialise social and material transformation once and for all.

Instead of simply claiming that certain things or forces are related to each other, we focus here on the rules of connection, disconnection and transformation and the patterns of correlation at work. This also marks our further concern about reflecting on the long-lasting discussions regarding the

spatiality of state power (see Brenner et al., 2003). While we concur with previous critiques of the ‘territorial trap’, we want to suggest that the jump from territory to scale (and later upgraded to the TPSN framework, see Jessop et al., 2008) still has its weaknesses, which might fall short of the goal of depicting the actually existing spatial-political dynamics more vividly. We hope the inter-topological lens facilitated here could be of help to extend these debates and critiques. Further works are needed to examine the validity of this analytical lens elsewhere and to interrogate the lived experiences and effects of spatial transformation in city-region making. Is it more likely, for instance, to recognise with this lens tactical and tacit arrangements of spatial politics that lead to intensified regional *unevenness* – instead of *coordinated* development? The

answers to questions like this, it seems, are still blowing in the wind.

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