



# Booming provincial-led North–South City-to-city cooperation in China: A case study of Suzhou-Suqian Industrial Park of Jiangsu Province



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## ABSTRACT

China has undergone economic and political restructuring in the post-socialist era under the background of globalization. At the same time, its provincial governments have mobilized various forms of booming North–South City-to-city (C2C) cooperation within their respective jurisdictions during the last ten years. This paper investigates the dynamics behind such cooperation through a case study of the Suzhou-Suqian Industrial Park in Jiangsu, with the aim of enriching and diversifying debates about the changing roles and functions of China's provincial government and introduction of market in the North–South C2C cooperation. Several scholars argued that the roles and functions of the provincial government have weakened with China's neoliberal shifts, whereas others insist that they have maintained a strong role in local governance. The findings of this study do not support an absolute distinction between these two sides. A diverse trend is identified when look into this argument in terms of goals and approaches. It is found that the regulation power of provincial government continues to have strong goals, but its approaches are changing from a direct to a market-oriented one. The debate about the balance between market power and government intervention under China's context has been receiving attention as well. It is found that in discussing which driving force is more important in the local cooperation programme, the conclusion varies in different stages of the cooperation process. Results support the importance of introducing market in the North–South C2C development cooperation under China's context. Although the booming North–South City-to-city cooperation mobilized by China's provincial government is derived from the national slogan of reducing regional disparity, local governments are also seizing the opportunity and using the top-down scheme to solve local development bottlenecks and crises as well as to reposition the jurisdictions amidst the yardstick competition. Such cooperation prevents interprovincial industrial relocation to a certain extent; thus, it has considerable influence on China's industrial transfer paths and its economic restructuring pattern.

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## 1. Uneven development and North–South City-to-city (C2C) cooperation

In recent years, the North–South cooperation has earned the public's renewed interest since its application to an urban level (Bontenbal, 2009; Bontenbal & Van Lindert, 2009; Mukhija, 2006; Tjandradewi & Marcotullio, 2009). In increasing intercity cooperation, the role of governments has been paid much attention on (Heeg, Klagge, & Ossenbruggge, 2003; Luo & Shen, 2009).

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Consequently, the concept of City-to-city (C2C) cooperation—government-led intercity cooperation working in an official framework—has materialized (Bontenbal & Van Lindert, 2009; Chan & Xian, 2012). The world itself is not “neatly divided into a North–South dichotomy” (Betts, 2008); it is unevenly developed (Smith, 2008). Thus, regional disparity has been the subject of an increasing number of research and debates (Fan, 1997; Petrakos, 2001; Williamson, 1965). “North” and “South” are usually defined in terms of socio-economic development and the degree of an area's integration into the global economic system (Duffield, 2001, cited in Betts, 2008, p.158). North–South cooperation has existed between countries since the 1940s. “North” refers to developed countries, including richer countries of North America, Europe,

Japan, Australia and New Zealand, whereas “South” pertains to developing countries, such as the poorer majority of countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Later, the concept of “North–South partnership” has been applied to other levels, including North–South cooperation among cities. Emphasizing disequilibrium in socio-economic development between partner cities in C2C cooperation, “North–South City-to-city (C2C) cooperation” refers to: long-term intercity cooperation fostered for common goals between developed cities and developing cities working in an official framework.

Some studies have shown the importance of governments in specific cases of North–South cooperation (White and Wade, 1984, quoted in Jipma, 1988, p.177). Thus, a debate regarding the introduction of market principles in the cooperation has been raised, and such debate involves the balance between government intervention and market force in North–South C2C cooperation. This important context-related issue concerns the appropriate role of a government in an economy. Which driving force is more important for the success of North–South C2C cooperation? This question deserves further investigation, particularly in China, a transitional and market-oriented economy in the post-socialist era.

## 2. China’s national slogan of reducing regional disparity and booming North–South City-to-city cooperation mobilized by provincial government

After China’s reforms and opening up in 1978, the economic decentralization and uneven economic development strategy implemented by the Central State, which pursued efficiency rather than equality, have been witnessed and documented (Fan, 1995; Li & Wu, 2012; Oi, 1992, 1995; Prime, 1991). Up to now, specific areas are being prioritized under the preferential policy, and economic zones or development zones at multiple scales are usually adopted as tools for spatial selectivity development. By enlarging regional inequalities and social stratification, social stability may be undermined. Under these circumstances, reducing regional disparity has become a national slogan since 1999 (Fan, 1992; Long & Ng, 2001; Wei & Fan, 2000; Wei & Ma, 1996). At a national level, the Central State has released a number of policies that emphasized the reduction of disparity between coastal areas and inner land as well as that between urban and rural areas. In 2000, under the State Council, a leading group office was established to accelerate China’s western regional development (Li & Wu, 2012), and the “Developing the West (*Xi Bu Da Kai Fa*)” scheme became an important part of the country’s 10th and 11th Five-Year Plans. In 2002, “New Socialist Countryside” project was announced to reduce the entrenched disparity between urban and rural areas (Li & Wu, 2012). In 2003, the concept of “coordinated development” was highlighted during China’s Third Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee (Fan, 2006). The “Rejuvenate China’s Northeastern Industrial Base (*Zhen Xing Dong Bei*)” and “Rising the Mid-China (*Zhong Bu Jue Qi*)” schemes were proposed by the Central State in the late 2003 and 2004, respectively, and the corresponding leading group offices were established in 2006 and 2007. The former scheme is included in China’s 11th and 12th Five-Year Plans, and the latter is an important part of China’s 12th Five-Year Plan. In 2007, the concept of “Scientific Outlook on Development (*Ke Xue Fa Zhan Guan*)” was declared by Chairman Hu to reaffirm the coordinated development strategy on the 17th National Congress of Communist Party Committee.

Under China’s national slogan of reducing regional disparity, several North–South C2C cooperation schemes have been mobilized by China’s provincial governments during the last decade, such as the “East–West Cooperation” scheme in Shandong,

“Mountain–Seaside Cooperation” in Zhejiang, “South–North Cooperation” in Jiangsu and the recent “Across East, West and North” scheme in Guangdong. Among them, the “South–North Cooperation” scheme in Jiangsu is the most famous. To reduce intraprovincial regional disparity and seize opportunities for development, Jiangsu provincial government has initiated several projects since 2001. During the First Coordinate Conference on the Development of Northern Jiangsu held in 2001, the provincial government initiated the “North and South Cooperation (*Nan Bei Gua Gou*)” scheme to promote the development of northern Jiangsu and to reduce regional disparity in the province. Under this project, five pairs of partner cities were formed including Suzhou and Suqian, Nanjing and Huaian, Wuxi and Xuzhou, Changzhou and Yancheng, and Zhenjiang and Lian Yungang. The implementation of “North and South Cooperation (*Nan Bei Gua Gou*)” was initially in the form of exchange of visits, endorsement of cooperation agreements, anti-poverty projects, training, and export of labor service<sup>1</sup> between the partner cities. The “Development along the Yangtze River (*Yan Jiang Kai Fa*)”<sup>2</sup> project was revived in 2002 to promote development along the Yangtze River and to improve the competitiveness of Jiangsu Province. Against this background, Jiangyin Economic Development Zone in Jingjiang (JZJ) was mobilized mainly by municipal governments and later received supports from the Jiangsu Provincial Government. Later in 2004, the “Revitalization of Northern Jiangsu (*Zhen Xing Su Bei*)” project was proposed by the Jiangsu provincial government to speed up the development of its less-developed areas in the North. In 2006, five years after the announcement of the “North and South Cooperation” scheme, the Jiangsu Provincial Government formulated a strategy to encourage cooperation on joint development zones between southern and northern Jiangsu<sup>3</sup> to foster deeper regional partnership and incorporated it as an important part of the “North and South Cooperation (*Nan Bei Gua Gou*)” scheme. Until June 2012, 37 joint development zones had been established in Jiangsu Province, which are primarily mobilized by the provincial government as a top-down arrangement (see Fig. 1). The Suzhou–Suqian Industrial Park of Jiangsu Province (SSIP) is one of the first ones to be established.

Jiangyin Economic Development Zone in Jingjiang (JZJ) is the first joint development zone built by two cross-border cities in Jiangsu Province, which was also regarded as a development model to spread the entire province by Jiangsu Provincial Government. Luo and Shen (2007, 2009) have conducted pioneer works on studying joint development zones in relation to JZJ. Their research adds knowledge to debates on urban growth coalition by finding that processes above the urban scale can be involved in the formation of growth coalition between two cities; it also identifies a dominant local government–big business coalition in the construction process similar to the Western experience. In terms of driving force, JZJ is mainly mobilized by urban governments at the initial stage (Luo & Shen, 2007, p. 374). Different from JZJ, the SSIP under the “North and South Cooperation” scheme is mainly mobilized by top-down driving force by the Jiangsu Provincial Government at its initial stage as a typical pressurised case.

The changing role of provincial government in China’s regional governance in the post-reform periods has been the focus of many studies (Li & Wu, 2012; Li, Xu, & Yeh, 2014; Ma, 2005; Oi, 1992, 1995; Wu, 2002; Xu, 2008; Ye, 2014). However, many questions

<sup>1</sup> Interview with a senior officer from SSIPAC, 15 July, 2010, Suqian.

<sup>2</sup> The project was initially proposed in 2000 by Mr. Hui Liangyu, Party Secretary of the Jiangsu Provincial Government in the “*Strategy of Development along the Yangtze River (Yan Jiang Kai Fa Zhan Lue)*”; it is called “The First Development along the Yangtze River.” In 2002, Mr. Li Yuanchao, successive Party Secretary of the Jiangsu Provincial Government, revived this project, launching “The Second Development along the Yangtze River.”

<sup>3</sup> Source: Jiangsu Provincial People’s Government (2006), Jiangsu Provincial People’s Government Document, No. 2006 (119).

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