

World Cities and National Urban System in China

Xiulian Ma

Sociology Department, University of Utah (Xiulian.ma@soc.utah.edu)

In world city research, one central issue is about the relation between world cities and nation states. The dominant theme in this area is deterritorialization, one expression of which is the disconnection of world cities from their national urban system. From world city perspective, the conflict between the world city and territorial state in essence is due to “contradictory relations between production in the era of global management and the political determination of territorial interests”(Friedmann, 1986: 69). The spatial reconstructing of global capitalism has generated a new spatial division of labor, from which a world urban system is emerging. This world urban system implies deterritorialization, that is, the state increasingly loses control over various flows happening within its territory. One form of this deterritorialization is that world cities, which are commanding nodes of various flows, will be gradually drawn away and disconnected from their national urban system into the world urban system. As Sassen highlights in her *Cities in a World Economy* (2000), although world cities are still deeply embedded in the economies of their region, their roles as strategic sites in the global economy become increasingly important, and they are increasingly disconnected from their national urban system:

“[...]these cities do not simply compete with each other for the same business. There is an economic system that rests on distinct types of locations and specializations each city represents. Furthermore, it seems likely that the strengthening of transnational ties between the leading financial and business centers is accompanied by a weakening of the linkages between each of these cities and its hinterland and national urban system (Sassen, 2000: 55).”

This view obviously contradicts the traditional one that cities are nested within their national urban system, the function of which, ideally, is to promote territory integration and national development. For example, from the perspective of ecological theory, the urban system is a territorial division of labor, in which large cities, through their control and coordination functions, mediate various differentiated and independent parts into an integrated urban system within the territory. Therefore, even Sassen herself agrees that this phenomenon, the disconnection, “conflicts with a key proposition in traditional scholarship about urban systems—namely, that these systems promote the territorial integration of regional and national economies (Sassen, 2000: 56).”

However, this argument has not been sufficiently tested empirically yet. The current research is going to perform such a test on China. Before the opening up, China had a relatively balanced urban system towards its national development goal. Since 1978, China has been increasingly incorporated into the global economy, and its urban system has also experienced significant change, and large cities have grown in several interlocking metropolitan regions in the open coastal areas. China becomes a good case to test whether world cities are really disconnected from their national urban system.

The research design involves a few steps. The first step is to identify China’s (potential) world cities, using attributive indicators developed from both Sassen and Friedmann’s arguments. We then perform network analysis on air traffic relational data among 41 Chinese major cities cross time (1992, 1995, 2000, 2003), to see if the disconnection argument is true, and if it is increasingly true across time. Our final step may involve getting data on the relation between multinational enterprises (MNEs) and their subsidiaries in China, and then performing a similar network analysis to see how it differs from the results based on air traffic data.