

State spatial restructuring and edge-city formation in China: hierarchical reorganisation, interjurisdictional coordination and capital accumulation

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1 **State spatial restructuring and edge-city formation in China:**

2 **hierarchical reorganisation, interjurisdictional coordination and**

3 **capital accumulation**

4 **Abstract:** China's edge cities have emerged as pivotal arenas of state spatial restructuring, departing
5 markedly from the market-driven suburbanisation typical of Western contexts. Drawing on rescaling
6 theory, this study unpacks the making of Kunshan, an edge city in the Shanghai Metropolitan Region,
7 to interrogate how multi-level governments strategically reorganise scalar authority and
8 interjurisdictional relations amid relentless capital accumulation pressures. The analysis identifies
9 two interrelated mechanisms: hierarchical reorganisation and interjurisdictional coordination.
10 Hierarchical reorganisation, operationalised via pilot zone construction, selective authorisation and
11 territorial-administrative restructuring, supplies the authorising conditions for peripheral actors to
12 pursue place-based strategies; whereas interjurisdictional coordination, manifested in infrastructural
13 integration and policy alignment, enables peripheral governments to progressively embed edge
14 cities within regional production networks whilst consolidating their own territorial capacities.
15 This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it moves beyond decentralisation and
16 entrepreneurialism scripts to theorise a mode of state scalar selectivity, wherein the calibrated
17 delegation of authority creates institutional space for peripheral governments to actively construct
18 metropolitan relations rather than passively accommodating market forces. Second, it foregrounds
19 the scalar agency of county-level state actors, demonstrating how Kunshan's local government
20 purposefully mobilised delegated powers to negotiate centre-periphery relations and reshape
21 development trajectories. Third, it conceptualises China's edge cities not as mere outcomes of
22 suburban expansion, but as multi-scalar political projects for organising capital accumulation and
23 territorial governance, extending rescaling debates by foregrounding the city-region as a key
24 organisational scale of state-led developmental governance. In doing so, the paper offers a non-
25 Western pathway of edge-city formation and speaks directly to ongoing debates on metropolitan
26 governance and state transformation across the Global South.
27 **Keywords:** Edge city; state spatial restructuring; rescaling; peripheral region; metropolitan
28 governance; China

29
30 Since Garreau (1991) coined the term, *edge cities* have become a key concept for
31 understanding how metropolitan regions reorganise economic activity, labour, and
32 governance beyond the traditional urban core (Phelps et al. 2002). However, rather than
33 being a well-defined urban form, edge cities increasingly appear as contested outcomes
34 of uneven metropolitan restructuring. Initially referring to suburban concentrations of
35 employment and consumption in the United States (Garreau 1991; Ding 2000), the
36 concept has since evolved into a broader framework for analysing metropolitan
37 restructuring under late capitalism. Yet, this conceptual expansion has not resolved a
38 persistent tension between market-led and institutionally mediated explanations of
39 edge-city formation. As spaces that simultaneously decentralise economic activities and
40 reinforce metropolitan integration (Bereitschaft 2024), edge cities reveal how suburban

expansion and functional reintegration jointly reshape metropolitan development trajectories (Day et al. 2022).

Edge-city formation varies across political economies, reflecting different relationships among capital accumulation, governance arrangements, and metropolitan restructuring. In North America, edge cities largely emerged through market-driven suburbanisation, as capital and employment decentralised toward accessible suburban locations (Phelps and Ohashi 2020). Metropolitan expansion was primarily driven by capital mobility and inter-suburban competition, while state intervention remained comparatively limited (Lang et al. 2009). By contrast, edge cities in Europe and East Asia have been shaped more directly by planning regimes and metropolitan governance arrangements (Bontje and Burdack 2005; Zhang et al. 2023). Through spatial planning, infrastructure investment, and regional coordination, states have played a more visible role in shaping suburban expansion and metropolitan integration. These contrasting trajectories suggest that edge-city formation depends not only on capital mobility, but also on how states organise metropolitan governance and territorial integration (Kim et al. 2018; Phelps and Ohashi 2020).

China's edge cities challenge the conventional understanding of edge-city formation as a predominantly market-driven process (Cheng et al. 2017). In contrast to emerging through decentralised suburbanisation alone, they are embedded within hierarchical state structures and developmental governance strategies (Li et al. 2017; Wang et al. 2023). Peripheral governments mobilise land policies, infrastructure investment, and administrative authority to capture metropolitan spillovers and enhance territorial competitiveness (Zheng et al. 2017; Miao and Phelps 2022; Tang et al. 2022). Meanwhile, national initiatives such as Free Trade Zones and National New Areas institutionalise scalar experimentation and regional integration (Huang et al. 2017; Chao and Lin 2020). These dynamics suggest that China's edge cities are not simply sites of suburban expansion, but may be better understood as institutionally produced spaces through which state spatial restructuring is actively enacted within metropolitan regions. Despite their rapid proliferation, the mechanisms driving China's edge cities remain underexplored. Existing studies have primarily focused on industrial agglomeration, functional upgrading and land-based accumulation, treating edge cities as spatial outcomes of capital accumulation rather than as governance strategies of state spatial restructuring (Li et al. 2025). Less attention has been paid to the political production of metropolitan space through processes of state rescaling.

To address this gap, this paper moves beyond industrial upgrading or land finance to interrogate the scalar politics underlying edge-city formation. It conceptualises edge cities as spatial expressions of state spatial restructuring under multi-level governance, driven by a coupled scalar machine: hierarchical reorganisation supplies the authorising conditions, while interjurisdictional coordination supplies the connectivity conditions. Against this backdrop, this paper addresses three central questions: (1) How do multi-level governments initiate and sustain edge-city development through hierarchical rescaling? (2) How are governance relations and capital flows reorganised through interjurisdictional coordination? (3) How does this process reconceptualise state spatial restructuring as a mode of state selectivity in China?

This paper contributes to debates on edge cities and rescaling in three ways. First, it reconceptualises China's edge cities as institutionally engineered spaces of metropolitan restructuring rather than passive outcomes of suburbanisation. Second, it centres on the scalar agency of peripheral governments in orchestrating edge-city formation and reshaping metropolitan integration. Third, it extends rescaling theory by showing how city-regional restructuring in China is produced through hierarchical and interjurisdictional governance arrangements. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The first section develops the theoretical framework linking rescaling to state spatial restructuring; Section 2 introduces the study area and methodology. Section 3 traces the evolution of Kunshan as an edge city. Section 4 analyses how hierarchical rescaling and interjurisdictional coordination operate as a coupled scalar machine to drive state spatial restructuring. Section 5 concludes with implications for metropolitan governance and regional development in China.

1. Theoretical framework: State spatial restructuring and edge-city development in China

Rescaling theory emerged in Western scholarship to explain how neoliberal restructuring redistributes state authority, resources, and regulatory capacities across spatial scales. At its core, it reveals how states selectively reconfigure institutional power in response to capital pressures. China, however, presents a different picture. Here, scalar transformations are not reactive adjustments to market imperatives but instruments of a deliberate developmental state project, producing new territorial arrangements to drive accumulation and regional integration. Analysing rescaling in China therefore calls for a broader framework, one that attends to how hierarchical and interjurisdictional arrangements are recalibrated to steer growth, manage uneven development and sustain state authority.

1.1 Rescaling as state spatial politics

Rescaling provides a critical analytical lens for understanding the political and institutional processes underlying the rise of China's edge cities. It reveals how multi-scalar power, regulatory capacities, and capital flows are reorganised in the spatial production of capitalist transformation (Jessop 2016; Song et al. 2020). Rather than conceiving scale as a fixed geographical hierarchy or administrative layer, rescaling theory conceptualises scale as relational and dynamic, produced through ongoing interactions among state, market, and territorial interests over authority, capital, and resources (Delaney and Leitner 1997; Brenner 2001). Scalar politics refers to the strategic practices through which state actors reorganise scalar arrangements to reinforce authority, extend institutional capacities, and shape developmental trajectories.

Within this framework, rescaling neither simply denotes a redistribution of administrative responsibilities nor regulatory competencies. Instead, it constitutes a profoundly political process closely tied to broader projects of accumulation and governance (Swyngedouw 2000; Wu et al. 2025). Through cross-scalar authorisation,

institutional innovation, and governance experimentation, state actors selectively reorganise authority and resources across hierarchical levels, enabling institutional and spatial configurations to be recalibrated under specific political-economic conditions (Jessop 2016).

Rescaling also provides a useful framework for interpreting interjurisdictional governance. Through metropolitan governance reforms, urban corridors, and regional innovation platforms, it not only extends the productive capacities of urban cores (McKee and McKee 2004; Sun et al. 2024), but also creates institutional arenas in which multi-scalar actors negotiate, compete, and collaborate. These scalar manoeuvres enable governments and other actors to redefine responsibilities, secure resources, and influence territorial restructuring (Jessop 2016; Davoudi and Brooks 2021).

Although rescaling theory emerged largely from analyses of neoliberal restructuring (Jessop 2016), city-regional development in Western contexts has also depended deeply on state intervention (Wachsmuth 2017). Initiatives such as the Greater Manchester and Sheffield City Region illustrate how national governments strategically restructure governance to enhance regional competitiveness and manage uneven development (Ward and Jonas 2004; Haughton and Allmendinger 2016). These soft spaces (Allmendinger and Haughton 2019), formed across administrative boundaries, demonstrate that the production of scale is shaped through interactions among state, market, and social actors, rather than by market dynamics alone.

1.2 State-led rescaling of capital accumulation in China

Whereas rescaling has been conceptualised as a capital-driven rearticulation of state regulatory power in Western scholarship, it assumes a more proactive, state-led, and institutionally embedded form in China (Chao and Lin 2020; Tang et al. 2025). Rather than merely reacting to market imperatives, the state draws on its hierarchical administrative structure and institutional capacities to fuse economic rationality with political priorities. Through selective decentralisation and recentralisation, the construction of regional platforms, and institutionalised policy experimentation, the state produces new scalar hierarchies and territorial configurations that facilitate capital accumulation, restructure governance systems, and support the simultaneous goals of growth, regulation and control (Wu 2017; Wu et al. 2025). In response to fiscal pressures, intergovernmental competition, and evolving developmental priorities, multi-level governments mobilise scalar strategies that both generate new institutional arrangements and disrupt existing ones, producing institutional fluidity and spatial reorganisation (Tang et al. 2022). Rescaling in China should therefore be understood not as a simple extension of Western neoliberal restructuring, but as a core governing instrument of the developmental state and a manifestation of state-engineered spatial production.

A defining feature of Chinese rescaling is the state's dual roles as both a regulator of capital and an entrepreneurial actor directly engaged in capital circulation and spatial production (Wu 2017; Feng et al. 2025; Yang et al. 2025). In practice, rescaling proceeds through alternating processes of decentralisation and recentralisation. Higher-level governments grant subordinate jurisdictions greater autonomy over market

reforms while retaining strategic control over key fiscal and spatial mechanisms (Wang and Liu 2015; Zhang et al. 2023). This produces an institutional arrangement that blends decentralised experimentation with centralised control. National new areas, special economic zones, and pilot free trade zones exemplify this dynamic by functioning both as instruments of spatial restructuring and as institutional platforms for experimentation, innovation, and policy diffusion (Chao and Lin 2020; Li et al. 2022; Yang et al. 2025).

From a structural perspective, rescaling reshapes the relationship between political power and capital accumulation. The interaction between political and economic objectives reconfigures both institutional arrangements and spatial structures. Local governments seeking to attract and retain capital recalibrate their scalar positions by constructing cross-regional networks of capital circulation and new hierarchical relations. Driven by hierarchical restructuring and interjurisdictional competition, new territorial configurations are continuously produced, contested, and reorganised (Tang et al. 2022). These scalar manoeuvres take shape not only within city-regions, peripheral regions and inter-city cooperation zones (Zhang et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2025; Li et al. 2026), but also across global scales through initiatives such as cross-border industrial parks under the Belt and Road Initiative (Song et al. 2023).

From an actor-centred perspective, rescaling illuminates the strategic practices of state actors operating within a multi-level governance system (Wang and Liu 2017). Through redefining jurisdictions, constructing regional imaginaries, and forging governance alliances, state actors mobilise scalar strategies to strengthen resource mobilisation, facilitate accumulation, and consolidate political legitimacy (Harrison 2014; Yin 2018; Davoudi and Brooks 2021). In peripheral regions, these dynamics are intensified by disparate institutional capacities for interjurisdictional coordination, frequently resulting in governance fragmentation and the exacerbation of uneven development (Li et al. 2026).

Rescaling in China reflects a paradigmatic departure from reactive, market-oriented adjustments toward state entrepreneurialism (Wu 2017). In this context, state power is not ‘hollowed out’ but strategically reconfigured through state-led spatial governance (Su 2022). It operates through two interrelated mechanisms: hierarchical recalibration, through which authority is selectively reorganised within the administrative system; and interjurisdictional coordination, through which cross-boundary governance platforms are constructed via both state-led collaboration and inter-local competition. These mechanisms facilitate a mode of metropolitan restructuring that diverges from neoliberal paradigms, positioning edge cities as both institutional laboratories and constitutive nodes of accumulation within Chinese city-regions (Li and Chiu 2020).

1.3 Coupled mechanisms of edge-city formation: Hierarchical reorganisation and interjurisdictional coordination

In China, edge cities are shaped by the distinctive dynamics of state-led rescaling in spatial governance. Positioned at the intersection of administrative boundaries and interjurisdictional competition, they have emerged as strategic sites through which state spatial restructuring is actively pursued. Yet understanding their development requires

more than mapping their economic functions; it demands attention to the relationship between state authority and capital accumulation that shapes them. Economically, edge cities absorb and reorganise industrial and labour spillovers from metropolitan cores, functioning as nodes of productive integration. Politically, however, they remain embedded within peripheral administrative hierarchies, only partially incorporated into metropolitan governance. It is this tension between functional integration and territorial fragmentation that this study takes as its analytical point of departure.

This paper conceptualises edge-city development through two interrelated mechanisms of state spatial restructuring: hierarchical reorganisation and interjurisdictional coordination. The first encompasses the strategic reconfiguration of authority and institutional capacity, generating new scalar platforms for accumulation. The second concerns the reorganisation of spatial relations through inter-city infrastructure, regional cooperation, and metropolitan governance, drawing edge cities into broader networks of production and administration (Zhang et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2013; Li et al. 2023). Hierarchical reorganisation reshapes vertical authority, while interjurisdictional coordination reorders the horizontal geometry of metropolitan space. These mechanisms position edge cities as constitutive sites of experimentation, accumulation, and metropolitan integration within China's evolving spatial order.

1.3.1 Hierarchical reorganisation: Recalibrating scalar authority

Hierarchical reorganisation refers to the strategic modulation of scalar authority within China's multi-level administrative system. Instead of following a linear trajectory of decentralisation or recentralisation (Wang et al. 2024), authority is selectively delegated, supervised, or reclaimed in response to shifting developmental priorities (Su 2022). Through this process, the state preserves institutional coherence while generating differentiated scalar configurations that support both policy experimentation and capital accumulation (Li and Jonas 2023; Wang et al. 2025).

This recalibration operates through a set of interrelated institutional instruments: pilot zones, selective authorisation, and territorial-administrative division reform (Chien 2013; Zhang et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2025). These instruments expand and reorganise local discretionary space in areas such as land allocation, spatial planning, and development financing, while remaining subject to overarching state supervision (Wang et al. 2024). They function, in this sense, as institutionalised mechanisms of bounded experimentation within a hierarchical governance system (Sheng and Han 2022).

Pilot zones provide an explicit spatial expression of hierarchical reorganisation (Yang et al. 2025). As territorially bounded sites of institutional experimentation, they concentrate regulatory flexibility within designated areas, materialising selective scalar restructuring in concrete spatial form. Within these zones, institutional innovation and hierarchical control operate simultaneously (Wang et al. 2024), illustrating how new scalar arrangements are produced, tested, and progressively stabilised.

Selective authorisation extends discretionary capacity at the subnational level through the targeted delegation of authority in areas such as land administration, spatial planning, and investment facilitation (Zou and Zhao 2018; Li et al. 2026). By widening

the negotiable policy space within a bounded hierarchical framework, it enables local governments to mobilise institutional and spatial resources in support of territorially grounded development strategies (Zhang et al. 2023). Delegated authority and local initiative are thus co-constituted, producing differentiated scalar capacities that can be activated within China's broader governance architecture.

Selective authorisation also generates governance tensions, however, particularly where growth-oriented priorities weaken welfare provision and redistributive objectives (Gu et al. 2022; Feng et al. 2025). Territorial-administrative restructuring functions as a corrective in this context. County-to-city upgrading, for instance, stabilises scalar differentiation by formalising hierarchical distinctions within newly constituted territorial units, institutionalising graded territorial hierarchies, and providing a more durable framework for uneven but coordinated development. Furthermore, administrative consolidation, including the integration of development zones into municipal governance structures (*qu zheng he yi*), further strengthens coherence between territorial governance and bureaucratic authority (Kuang 2020). These adjustments do not dissolve earlier forms of scalar differentiation but stabilise them through institutional integration.

These instruments above produce a hybrid scalar configuration in which authority is continuously reworked through institutionalised combinations of control and discretion. The state defines the boundaries of permissible experimentation, whilst local governments activate delegated authority to pursue place-based development agendas. Peripheral regions consequently emerge not merely as recipients of policy transfer, but as active nodes within broader circuits of regional accumulation.

1.3.2 Interjurisdictional coordination: Reconfiguring territorial relations

Interjurisdictional coordination serves as a pivotal mechanism for edge-city formation, through which territorial relations between core and peripheral jurisdictions are systematically reorganised within the city-region (Wu 2017; Wang et al. 2024). It proceeds through the dialectical interplay of cross-boundary infrastructural connectivity and institutional coordination, reshaping edge-core relations from asymmetrical spillover dynamics into highly integrated scalar configurations (Li and Chiu 2020).

Infrastructural connectivity extends the spatial reach of core regions and restructures territorial relations within the city-region (Xu and Yeh 2013; Hodson et al. 2020). Cross-boundary transport networks, including inter-city metro lines, motorways, and logistics corridors, facilitate the stretching of state territoriality from the core, embedding edge cities within broader circuits of production, labour, and consumption (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Wang et al. 2020). These infrastructures embed peripheral territories within circuits of production and consumption centred on core regions, thereby reconfiguring patterns of spatial dependence across the city-region. Edge cities are incorporated into wider accumulation networks in which their territorial role and functional status are redefined in tandem through infrastructural integration.

Institutional coordination stabilises and formalises the relations arising from infrastructural integration (Brenner 2004; Li and Chiu 2020). Policy frameworks, such

as city-region plans and coordinated development zones, establish formal mechanisms for aligning development priorities, managing cross-boundary investment, and organising governance across jurisdictional boundaries (Zhang et al. 2023). These arrangements translate strategic state objectives into territorially differentiated governance structures (Tang et al. 2022; Wu et al. 2025). Metropolitan governance thus shifts from fragmented, project-based cooperation toward more durable cross-boundary arrangements, in which jurisdictional boundaries are selectively reconfigured through routine institutional practice (Brenner 2003; Shen et al. 2020).

Together, infrastructural and institutional mechanisms reorganise the spatial distribution of power within the city-region. Metropolitan integration draws peripheral regions more deeply into core-centred accumulation systems, whilst participation in cross-boundary governance also enables peripheral governments to strengthen their position within regional development processes (Li et al. 2026). Operating as a core-led, state-mediated process of spatial reorganisation, interjurisdictional coordination thus consolidates edge cities as sites of selective incorporation, differentiated nodes through which territorial integration and strategic repositioning are enacted within China's broader project of state spatial restructuring (Figure 1).

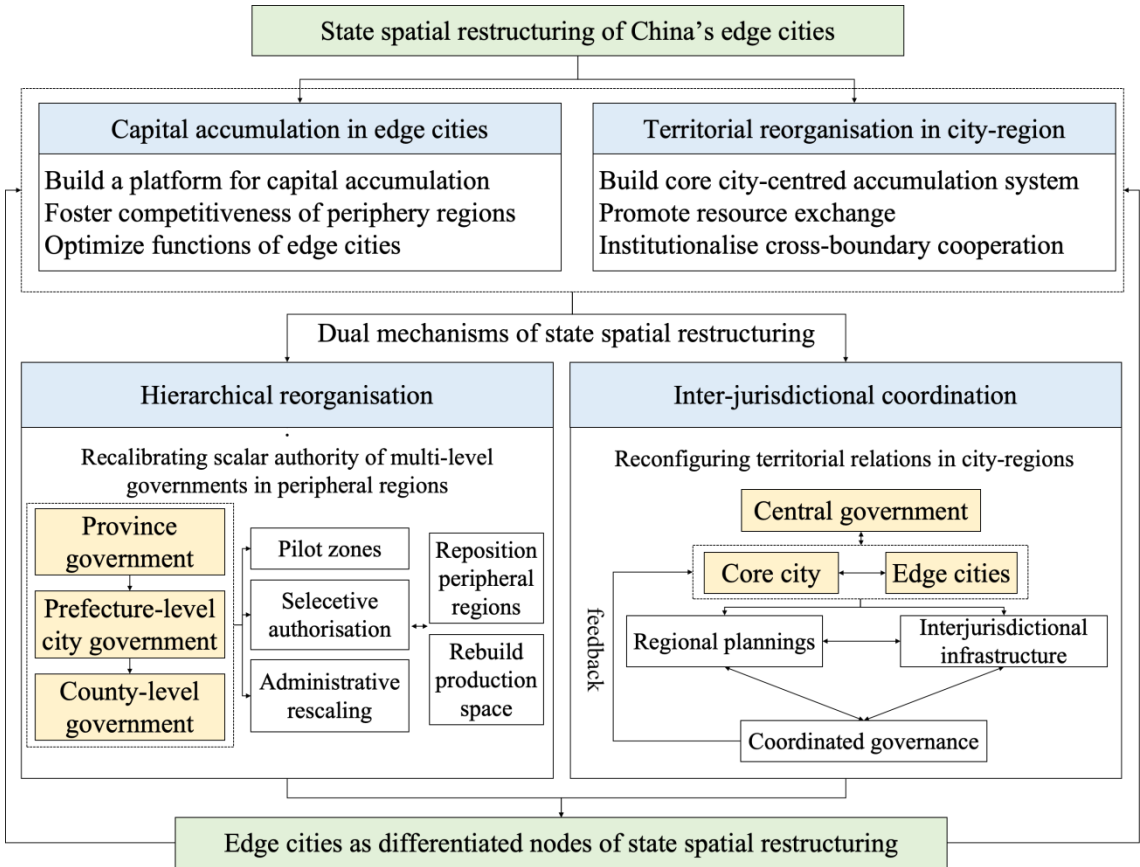


Figure 1. Mechanisms of edge-city formation under state spatial restructuring

2. Study area and methodology

Building on the conceptual framework outlined above, this section examines Kunshan as a case through which edge-city formation can be understood as a process

of state spatial restructuring. As a paradigmatic site where inter-scalar power reconfigurations and cross-jurisdictional collaborations converge, Kunshan offers a useful lens for examining how rescaling takes shape through hierarchical reorganisation, interjurisdictional coordination, and cross-boundary governance. The study traces how multi-level state actors, and especially the local state, used scalar positioning and territorial development strategies to reshape the relationship between accumulation and governance.

2.1 Study area: Kunshan as a prototypical edge city

Placed within China's urbanisation trajectory, the rise of edge cities reflects the entrepreneurial strategies of state actors operating across multiple scales, including metropolitan cores, peripheral jurisdictions, and governments at different administrative levels. These actors do not simply act within fixed administrative boundaries. They work through and around administrative fragmentation by building strategic links with metropolitan centres and higher-level authorities, seeking to secure resources, attract investment, and enhance regional competitiveness (Li et al. 2026). Within this broader landscape, Kunshan is a particularly instructive case. As a county-level city located on the boundary between Jiangsu Province and Shanghai Municipality, it shows how state-led rescaling is pursued through the local state and embedded in cross-boundary governance arrangements.

Kunshan is analytically useful for three reasons. First, its location next to Shanghai places it within the interjurisdictional politics through which core-periphery relations are negotiated in the Shanghai city-region (Figure 2). Second, its shift from an agricultural periphery to a globally integrated industrial hub makes visible the reworking that has shaped peripheral urban transformation in China. Third, its long history of policy experimentation, together with substantial planning documentation and statistical records, provides a robust empirical basis for tracing how multi-level governments have reshaped urban space. These features make Kunshan an instructive case for analysing how edge cities emerge, evolve, and become embedded within metropolitan governance systems.

As one of the most prominent edge cities around Shanghai, Kunshan shows how state spatial restructuring unfolded through distinct phases. Before the 1980s, it remained largely an agrarian county subordinate to the Suzhou Prefecture-level City, with limited industrial capacity and a weak position within the regional economy. The launch of the Development and Opening Up of Pudong (Shanghai) in 1992 marked an important turning point. Leveraging its proximity to Shanghai, Kunshan actively attracted industrial spillovers, especially in electronics manufacturing, together with labour and ancillary services. These inflows catalysed rapid capital accumulation and institutional experimentation, gradually transforming Kunshan from a peripheral county into an edge city with more integrated economic and social functions. Its population increased from 0.59 million to 2.16 million, while its GDP rose from USD 0.33 billion to USD 75.56 billion over the period from 1991 to 2024, exceeding that of several provincial-level jurisdictions, including Ningxia, Qinghai, and Tibet. What had once been marginality became an asset: peripheral location was reframed as strategic

leverage for accumulation and governance innovation. Kunshan thus illustrates both the making of an edge city and the wider restructuring of metropolitan peripheries in post-reform China.

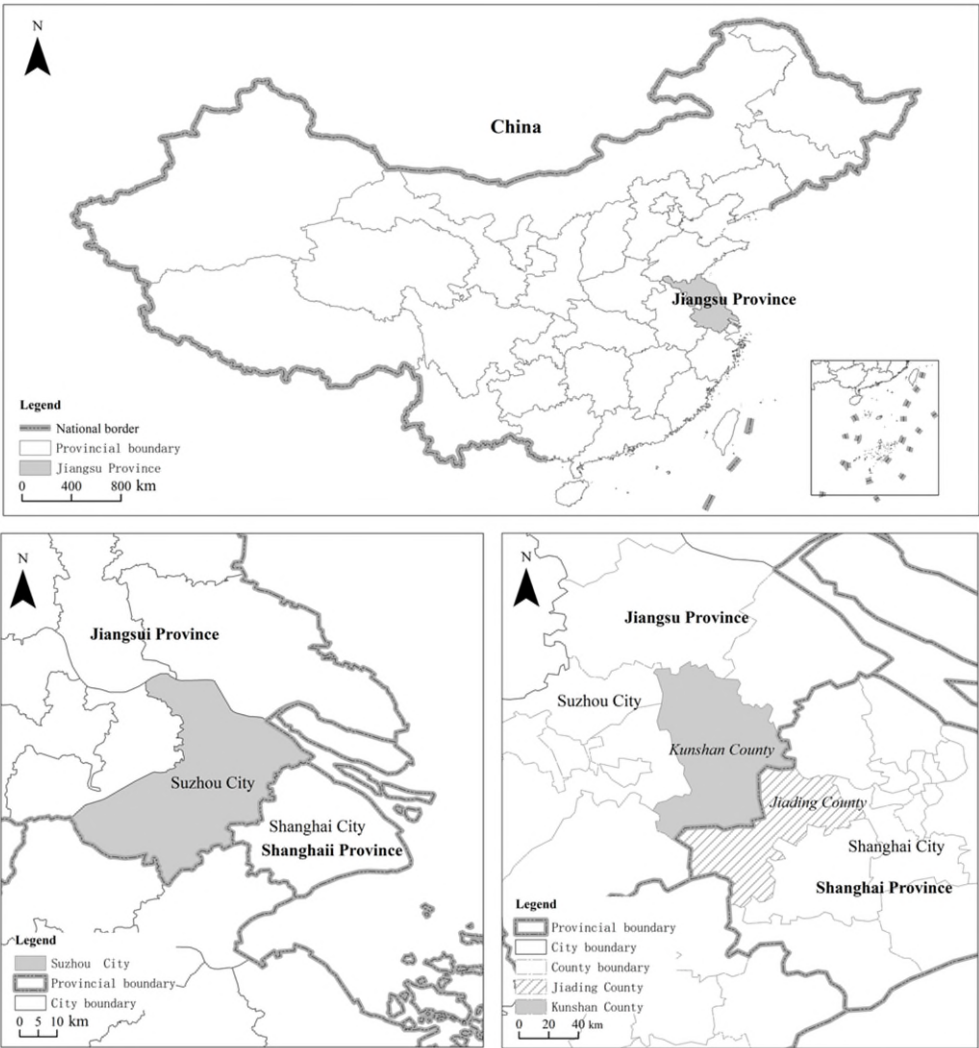


Figure 2. Location of Kunshan, Shanghai Municipal City and Jiangsu Province

2.2 Methodology

To unpack the mechanisms of edge-city formation, this study adopts a mixed-methods design combining longitudinal documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews. Through the review of academic literature, statistical yearbooks, urban master plans and regional policies, this study traces Kunshan’s development trajectories since the 1980s. The longitudinal analysis identifies paradigm shifts in strategic orientations and governance logics across developmental stages and maps the evolving intergovernmental relations within the Shanghai-Kunshan administrative nexus.

Complementing the archival analysis, five rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted from 2018 to 2025, covering 35 participants across three intersecting actor groups: (1) state actors (officials from Shanghai, Jiangsu, Suzhou and Kunshan), elucidating scalar authority redistribution and interjurisdictional decision-making; (2)

expert actors (urban planners from Shanghai and Jiangsu), delineating the interface between regional strategy and local implementation; and (3) market and social actors (enterprise representatives and residents), offering situated accounts of capital flows and accumulation dynamics. Recruitment combined purposive snowballing with institutionally arranged, project-based access, thereby enabling cross-jurisdictional comparison while ensuring ethical safeguards. All participants were anonymised, and transcripts are stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

While all 35 interviews constitute primary empirical data informing the study's overall interpretation, direct citations and quoted excerpts are drawn from 11 strategically selected cases. This subset provides the clearest analytical traction on the two core mechanisms: hierarchical reorganisation and interjurisdictional coordination, and minimises re-identification risks inherent in sensitive intergovernmental processes; the remaining interviews operate background-structurally to support triangulation and contextual validation. Retrospective bias is addressed through multi-source triangulation against published statistics, archival records, and secondary scholarship. Although the sample privileges state narratives, this alignment is analytically generative. Table 1 provides an overview of the 11 interviewees cited in this study, categorised by actor type and administrative level. The full set of 35 interviews informs the study's overall interpretation without overclaiming representativeness.

Table 1. Overview of Interview Participants

Code	Actor Type	Administrative Level	Year	Role Description
I-01	State Actor	County-level (Kunshan)	2018	Official in development
I-02	State Actor	County-level (Kunshan)	2022	Official in development
I-03	State Actor	County-level (Kunshan)	2022	Official in development
I-04	State Actor	Town-level (Huaqiao)	2018	Official in urban planning
I-05	State Actor	Town-level (Huaqiao)	2022	Official in urban planning
I-06	Market Actor	Provincial-level (Jiangsu)	2022	Staff of state-owned investment platform
I-07	Expert Actor	Municipal-level (Shanghai)	2018	Urban planner
I-08	Expert Actor	Municipal-level (Shanghai)	2019	Urban planner
I-09	State Actor	Town-level (Baihe)	2025	Official in development
I-10	State Actor	Provincial-level (Shanghai)	2025	Official in urban planning
I-11	State Actor	County-level (Kunshan)	2022	Official in development

3. The development trajectory of edge cities

Within China's traditional administrative hierarchy, local governments have long prioritised resource allocation toward urban cores, leaving peripheral regions institutionally marginalised and fiscally constrained. Nevertheless, globalisation and metropolitan expansion have reshaped peripheral development conditions, as core cities generate industrial relocation, capital inflows, and knowledge spillovers that create new developmental opportunities for suburban and cross-boundary peripheries. Such opportunities cannot be realised through market mechanisms alone. Instead, they rely

on institutional adjustments to mitigate administrative fragmentation and resolve multi-scalar governance mismatches. In this sense, edge-city formation in China arises from a dual process of hierarchical rescaling and interjurisdictional coordination.

Hierarchical rescaling involves institutional reorganisation across provincial, municipal, and county tiers, whereby upper-level governments empower peripheral regions through targeted policy authorisation, pilot zone designation, and institutional reform. Complementarily, interjurisdictional coordination enables peripheral localities to functionally integrate into metropolitan production and governance networks through cross-boundary institutional and spatial arrangements (Zhang et al. 2023). The dynamic interplay between these two dimensions underpins Kunshan's evolutionary transformation from an agriculturally dependent periphery to a mature edge city embedded within the Shanghai Metropolitan Region.

3.1 Emergence of edge cities(1984-2002): Industrial infusion and initial capital accumulation

China's early edge-city formation originated from market-oriented industrialisation and capital accumulation during the initial phase of globalisation. At the metropolitan scale, industrial decentralisation from urban cores offered peripheral regions opportunities to host relocated manufacturing activities, supported by low-cost land, abundant labour, and preferential local policies. Kunshan's early industrial take-off was fundamentally driven by state-led hierarchical rescaling, through which local governments acquired institutional autonomy and policy endorsement from higher authorities to facilitate industrial landing and capital growth.

In 1984, the Kunshan county government self-established the Kunshan Economic and Technological Development Zone (KSETDZ), aiming to capture industrial spillovers from adjacent Shanghai. As Shanghai's industries expanded but lacked sufficient industrial land, Kunshan independently invested approximately USD 3.2 million to convert 3.75 km² of farmland into an industrial zone aimed at absorbing Shanghai-based enterprises (Lin 2019). The zone introduced preferential institutional arrangements, including tax relief, flexible land-use mechanisms, and streamlined project approval authority, attracting Shanghai-based joint ventures and initiating Kunshan's structural transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial hub. By 1987, the KSETDZ achieved robust growth, with industrial output reaching USD 74.7 million and export earnings reaching USD 8.34 million. By 1989, Kunshan had hosted over 500 joint ventures, approximately 70 per cent of which were partnered with Shanghai enterprises (Huang 2018). The initial success consolidated Kunshan's developmental strategy of orienting itself toward Shanghai.

The success of KSETDZ garnered institutional recognition from higher-level authorities. Following the launch of *Shanghai's Pudong development strategy*, the Kunshan government formulated an "aligning with Shanghai" strategy. As a local official recalled, "*In 1991, the Kunshan County Government resolved to proactively align with Shanghai's Pudong opening-up and development (jiegui Pudong) , so as to promote an export-oriented economy.*" (Interview, I-01, 2018). Guided by this strategic orientation, KSETDZ was upgraded to a national-level development zone in 1992 with

the support of the Suzhou Municipal and Jiangsu Provincial governments, which coordinated the devolution of expanded FDI approval power and dedicated land-use quotas. This up-scaling substantially lowered administrative barriers for Shanghai's industrial relocation and strengthened Kunshan's capacity to absorb metropolitan industrial spillovers, positioning Kunshan as a key manufacturing hinterland undertaking Shanghai's industrial and technological spillovers.

The decade-long hierarchical restructuring yielded rapid economic expansion. Between 1992 and 2002, Kunshan's GDP rose from USD 0.76 billion to USD 3.80 billion, while utilised foreign direct investment (FDI) increased sharply from USD 126 million to USD 1,018 million. Over the same period, Kunshan recorded an average annual GDP growth rate of 21.8 per cent, compared with 17.8 per cent in Shanghai. Apparently, hierarchical rescaling strengthened Kunshan's capacity to absorb metropolitan spillovers, supporting faster capital accumulation and preliminary industrial diversification.

This uneven developmental capacity triggered growing interjurisdictional frictions within the Shanghai Metropolitan Region. As Kunshan emerged as a highly competitive hub for industrial investment, neighbouring Jiading District of Shanghai rolled out tailored industrial and fiscal incentives to sustain local industrial vitality and counterbalance Kunshan's rising competitiveness. Nevertheless, constrained by stringent regulatory constraints and limited institutional autonomy, Jiading failed to compete on an equal footing, with its GDP falling approximately USD 1.2 billion behind Kunshan by 2002. To mitigate industrial capital leakage and preserve high-value manufacturing within municipal boundaries, the Shanghai Municipal Government launched systematic investment retention policies after 2000 (Guo and Wu 2019), representing metropolitan efforts to reinforce administrative control over increasingly sprawling regional production networks.

This competitive disparity unveiled an inherent structural tension embedded within the metropolitan hierarchical governance. While the metropolitan core seeks to consolidate its dominance through standardised regulatory governance, peripheral jurisdictions such as Kunshan leverage delegated administrative powers and greater spatial flexibility to attract and anchor mobile industrial capital (Li et al. 2008). This tension between metropolitan containment and peripheral expansion has institutionalised interjurisdictional competition as a pivotal mechanism of state spatial restructuring in the Yangtze River Delta, compelling both core and peripheral governments to continuously recalibrate their accumulation and coordination strategies.

3.2 Expansion of edge cities (2003-2018): Pilot-zone experimentation and functional transformation

Since 2003, Kunshan has transcended its earlier reliance on manufacturing-led growth and embarked on a transition toward a more diversified urban economy. Within China's state-led urbanisation, pilot zones have long served as instruments of intercity competition and spatial platforms for hierarchical restructuring and institutional experimentation (Yang et al. 2025). Meanwhile, interjurisdictional infrastructure has constituted a critical institutional and spatial mechanism for integrating peripheral

regions into metropolitan governance systems (Wang and Liu, 2019). Against this backdrop, Kunshan's post-2003 transformation toward a multifunctional urban complex has been advanced through two mutually reinforcing strategies: pilot experimentation and interjurisdictional infrastructure integration.

Kunshan's pilot experimentation is epitomised by the establishment of the Huaqiao International Business Hub (HQIBH), a flagship project that has profoundly reshaped Kunshan's developmental trajectory. In 2003, Jiangsu Province and Suzhou Prefecture-level City jointly launched targeted policies to foster producer service industries within HQIBH, formally designating the hub as a functional suburban extension of Shanghai (Li et al. 2026). In 2005, the Jiangsu Provincial Government further institutionalised HQIBH as an official pilot zone for Suzhou-Shanghai integration, endowing it with dual positioning as a high-standard metropolitan satellite business hub. This institutional experiment enabled Kunshan to gradually transcend its manufacturing-dominated industrialisation and pursue a service-oriented accumulation pathway, which actively captured spillovers of financial, real estate, and logistical resources from central Shanghai. In this regard, HQIBH serves as a critical site of state spatial experimentation, where rigid administrative boundaries were selectively loosened to facilitate interjurisdictional flows of capital and labour between Shanghai and Kunshan.

Complementing pilot experimentation, interjurisdictional infrastructure has materially reshaped the core-periphery relation of Kunshan within the Shanghai Metropolitan Region since 2013. The 2013 extension of Shanghai Metro Line 11 to Kunshan, China's first cross-provincial metro route (Li et al. 2026), marked a pivotal milestone in the rescaling process. Jointly delivered by the Shanghai and Kunshan authorities, this infrastructural project established an innovative metropolitan connectivity that integrates the two jurisdictions through both physical accessibility and symbolic spatial linkage. For Kunshan, Metro Line 11 enabled seamless connections to Shanghai's mass transit network, supporting real-estate development and the clustering of service activities in its core districts. For Shanghai, the expansion expanded the reach of its commuting sphere and economic hinterland, reinforcing its regional influence through infrastructure-led integration.

Accordingly, Kunshan has evolved beyond a passive peripheral recipient of Shanghai's industrial spillovers, emerging instead as an active metropolitan node sustained by reciprocal flows of labour, daily commuting, and institutional interaction (Tang et al. 2022). By 2018, interjurisdictional commuting between Huaqiao (of Kunshan) and central Shanghai had already exceeded the volume of commutes linking central Shanghai with its own suburban peripheries, including Jinshan and Chongming (Niu et al. 2018). This disparity demonstrates a growing decoupling between functional metropolitan integration and rigid administrative boundaries.

This transformation signals a shift from unidirectional industrial spillover to multidimensional, reciprocal functional integration across labour markets, infrastructural networks, and interjurisdictional governance systems. Through these multi-scalar connections, Kunshan has transcended mere spatial adjacency to achieve profound positional reconfiguration within the metropolitan accumulation system.

From a politically marginal administrative periphery, it has evolved into an institutionally embedded nodal actor integrated into the ongoing state spatial restructuring of the Shanghai Metropolitan Region.

3.3 Integration into the metropolitan core (2019-present): Institutional incorporation and coordinated development

The rapid growth of edge cities has expanded the spatial and functional reach of China's metropolitan regions, generating new dynamics for the production reorganisation and governance restructuring. Nevertheless, peripheral growth has also intensified inter-jurisdictional competition for population, industry, and fiscal resources between edge cities and metropolitan suburbs. After 2018, contracting capital flows and industrial re-localisation under de-globalisation further exacerbated such competitive pressures. Fragmented local coordination mechanisms between Shanghai and Suzhou became insufficient to address emerging challenges, including unequal public service accessibility and converging industrial structures. These governance bottlenecks exposed the limitations of spontaneous local cooperation, prompting top-down hierarchical reorganisation to embed metropolitan integration within a unified, multi-scalar institutional framework. In this process, rescaling operates as both a driver and an outcome of edge-city maturation, as state authority and resource allocation are continuously recalibrated to manage intensifying interjurisdictional dynamics.

Since 2019, the national strategy for integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta (the YRD) has inaugurated a new phase of institutional and territorial rescaling. The *Outline of the YRD Regional Integration Development Plan* elevated Kunshan-Shanghai collaboration from sporadic local cooperation to a state-endorsed metropolitan restructuring project. Under this national framework, interjurisdictional cooperation has become increasingly formalised, systematic, and strategically guided. Unified policy coordination, cross-boundary planning, and synergised investment have strengthened functional coupling between the metropolitan core and edge cities, while empowering higher-level governments to mediate administrative fragmentation and mitigate city-regional governance mismatches.

Multi-scale institutional initiatives have further solidified these integrated governance arrangements. The *Shanghai Master Plan (2017-2035)* proposed the Anting-Huaqiao-Baihe Interjurisdictional Collaborative Cluster (AHBICC), jointly formulated by Shanghai and Jiangsu authorities. The cluster establishes a cross-provincial governance model to unify infrastructure construction, public service provision, and environmental governance across administrative boundaries. Complementarily, the Jiading-Kunshan-Taicang Collaborative Innovation Circle (JKTCIC) operated a rotating intergovernmental coordination mechanism between 2018 and 2021, institutionalising a multi-level governance structure with provincial and municipal strategic guidance and county-level implementation. This framework facilitated sustained collaboration in strategic emerging industries, for instance, semiconductors and the new energy vehicle (NEV) industry, and connected previously fragmented industrial chains into a cohesive regional innovation system. By the end of 2023, the JKTCIC had recorded a GDP of about USD 137.7 billion and attracted more

than 6,700 high-tech enterprises, making it one of the most competitive innovation agglomerations in the YRD.

This demonstrates how rescaling led by upper-level governments underpins metropolitan-scale interjurisdictional coordination, generating new institutional geometries for organised regional accumulation. Such state-led edge-city development cannot eliminate structural spatial inequalities, yet its institutionalised metropolitan integration and industrial complementarity effectively mitigate the fragmented disparities generated by market-driven suburbanisation. Nonetheless, although this hierarchical administrative model facilitates resource aggregation and industrial-technological progress, it embeds capital accumulation within state governance systems, restricting public participation in spatial development and triggering latent risks, including excessive governmental investment and rising local debt. The Kunshan case demonstrates that China's edge-city development is not a spontaneous market outcome but an institutionally mediated process, through which the state mobilises multi-scalar resources and redistributes governing authority to construct and stabilise regional spatial fixes.

4. Mechanisms of state spatial restructuring: A coupled scalar machine

The evolution of China's edge cities embodies a trajectory of state spatial restructuring, wherein multi-level governance actors strategically reorganise scalar relations to steer capital flows and reshape regional development pathways. Distinct from the market-led diffusion dynamics emphasised in core-periphery theories, China's edge-city formation has unfolded through sustained institutional intervention (Cheng et al. 2017). Multi-scalar authorities selectively redistribute administrative power, expand institutional spaces for governance experimentation, and recalibrate interjurisdictional relations (Yang 2005; Shen et al. 2020), aligning capital accumulation with broader objectives of territorial governance. Within this process, metropolitan core governments and their peripheral counterparts engage in mutually constitutive rescaling. Through hierarchical reorganisation and interjurisdictional coordination, they embed new spatial strategies within regional governance frameworks, channelling capital, labour, and technological resources into edge-city territories while reconfiguring their economic functions and institutional status.

Edge cities should therefore be understood not as passive recipients of metropolitan spillovers, but as active sites of state-led spatial restructuring. Their development reflects a broader political project aimed at reorganising regional economic geographies and governance structures. Administrative innovation, policy experimentation, and territorial restructuring together create the conditions for both capital accumulation and metropolitan integration. In this sense, China's edge cities differ fundamentally from the market-driven suburban forms characteristic of Western urbanisation, emerging instead as politically mediated spaces of accumulation shaped through state-led rescaling and strategic territorial reorganisation.

4.1 Hierarchical reorganisation supplying the authorising conditions

The scalar restructuring described above is operationalised through three interrelated institutional mechanisms: pilot-zone construction, selective authorisation, and territorial-administrative restructuring. These instruments reconfigure administrative authority and redefine territorial capacities across scales. Pilot zones establish bounded spaces for governance experimentation; selective authorisation extends discretionary capacity to subnational actors; and territorial-administrative restructuring stabilises the emergent scalar configurations. Operating as a coupled scalar machine, these mechanisms transform edge cities into strategic platforms for experimentation, accumulation and metropolitan integration.

4.1.1 Pilot-zone construction: Institutional experiments for initial capital fix

Pilot zones operate as institutional vessels that translate state rescaling intentions into concrete territorial assets. Beyond serving as containers for industrial relocation, pilot zones are granted experimental space, where regulatory norms are selectively suspended or relaxed to attract capital (Yang et al. 2025), hence triggering edge cities' development. Through coordinated interventions in spatial production, fiscal allocation, and regulatory flexibility, pilot zones form critical interfaces linking metropolitan capital flows with peripheral territorial transformation.

Like many emerging edge cities, Kunshan confronted what officials described as a “resource desert” in its formative stage: constrained administrative authority, fiscal austerity and limited access to preferential policies. As one local official recalled, the county “*ranked last among six jurisdictions in Suzhou, rarely securing provincial projects or subsidies*” (Interview, I-02, 2022). To escape this structural disadvantage, Kunshan adopted a strategy of micro-scale institutional experimentation. Two key pilot zones, the KSETDZ (1984) and the HQIBH (2003), acted sequentially: the former anchored industrial capital, while the latter catalysed multifunctional urban transformation. Through these instruments, Kunshan leveraged policy flexibilities granted by upper-level governments to become a major site of capital fix.

A defining feature of this process is the transition from local initiative to state sanctioning. The early, bottom-up establishment of KSETDZ without prior formal approval (Chien 2013; Wu and Phelps 2008), represented a gamble on local entrepreneurialism, aiming to attract industrial spillovers and skilled labour from Shanghai. As a local official recounted: “*Underdeveloped regions must follow the special-zone mode, to open up and rely on Shanghai to find pathways to prosperity*” (Interview, I-03, 2022). Through this micro-scale institutional experimentation, the Kunshan government established the foundations for the edge city as a new frontier of state-mediated accumulation.

Following its initial success, the Jiangsu Provincial and Suzhou Municipal governments acted as strategic enablers, conferring political legitimacy and policy authority upon the zone. This entailed upgrading KSETDZ to a national-level development zone in 1992 and designating Kunshan as “*the eastern gateway to Shanghai*” (Interview, I-01, 2018), thereby formalising its metropolitan alignment with Shanghai. This hierarchical endorsement transformed the pilot zone from a local

experiment into a state-sanctioned platform, embedding Kunshan within the regional hierarchy of accumulation and creating a favourable arena for large-scale capital accumulation.

Through this nested governance structure, pilot zones represent the spatial crystallisation of state spatial restructuring: provincial governments provide strategic legitimacy; municipal and county governments operationalise the production of space through resource mobilisation; and the iterative success of capital fixation necessitates further up-scaling. This dynamic redefines territorial competences, consolidating enlarged governance capacities and institutional spaces for long-term accumulation.

4.1.2 Selective authorisation: Capacity expansion within hierarchical constraints

While pilot-zone construction provides an immediate institutional platform for capital accumulation, the persistence of hierarchical asymmetries, particularly the misalignment between local responsibilities and administrative authority, has long constrained sustained development in peripheral jurisdictions. Within China's bureaucratic hierarchy, strategic planning and regulatory authority are concentrated at the provincial and central levels, whereas county governments, responsible for the bulk of the production of space, possess limited autonomy over project approval, development-zone authorisation or fiscal allocation (Wu and Phelps 2011). This bureaucratic system leaves grassroots governments overburdened and under-coordinated, restricting their capacity to attract and retain capital flows.

Selective authorisation emerges as a crucial mechanism to resolve this structural tension. Defined as the strategic enhancement of local governance capacity through targeted delegation, it entails a calibrated redistribution of administrative competences rather than a simple devolution of authority. Through delegating decision-making powers, launching policy pilots, and adjusting bureaucratic boundaries, higher-level governments reconfigure the scalar architecture of the state. This aligns institutional capabilities with developmental imperatives, enabling local governments to conduct institutional experimentation and exhibit inter-scalar responsiveness.

The evolution of the KSETDZ vividly illustrates this mechanism. Between 1992 and 2010, KSETDZ benefited from over forty preferential policy measures across provincial, municipal, and county governments, spanning foreign-investment approval, land administration and taxation. The most consequential intervention occurred during the 1999-2001 administrative reforms, when the Jiangsu Provincial Government upgraded the KSETDZ Administrative Committee's authority from county to deputy-prefectural level. This granted the zone decision-making authority equivalent to that of a prefecture-level city, establishing direct administrative linkages with provincial departments and bypassing intermediate bureaucratic layers.

The effects of hierarchical reconstruction were tangible. As a local official recalled: *"After the Provincial Secretary affirmed Kunshan's development, the provincial and municipal governments provided sufficient policy support, enabling Kunshan to create a far more competitive circumstance and drive regional growth (Interview, I-04, 2018)."* Backed by delegated authority, utilised FDI in the KSETDZ registered a compound annual growth rate of 9.1% from 2001 to 2010, standing at USD 316.1 million in 2001

and USD 689.2 million in 2010. The zone attracted seven mega-projects with total investment exceeding USD 1 billion, consolidating its position as a core hub for Taiwan-invested manufacturing in the Yangtze River Delta. These transformations demonstrate how state-mediated decentralisation, rather than market spontaneity, recalibrates the institutional field of accumulation.

Conceptually, delegated authority embodies a selective reorganisation of state power: higher-level governments retain strategic oversight while reallocating administrative and regulatory capacities to local authorities. Through authority redistribution, institutional experimentation, and spatial development, selective authorisation constructs the institutional field for capital accumulation, revealing the adaptive and experimental nature of China's state spatial restructuring.

4.1.3 Territorial-administrative restructuring: Institutional consolidation for functional integration

Despite the expanded autonomy afforded by selective authorisation, sustained capital inflows exposed structural contradictions within the governance architecture of edge cities. Development zones, primarily tasked with economic growth, and township governments, responsible for social administration, often operated as parallel bureaucracies, resulting in a disjunction between industrial expansion and the provision of social services. In the early years of the HQIBH, for instance, deficits in education, healthcare, and housing constrained labour stability and impeded long-term capital retention.

To reconcile these contradictions and secure a long-term capital fix, multi-level governments, at the provincial, municipal, and county levels, progressively introduced a more integrated governance arrangement: zone-town integration reform (*qu zheng he yi*). This approach consolidated the economic management and social governance authorities of the development zone, by merging the leadership of the development-zone administrative committee with that of the town government. Through this institutional merger, administrative authority and economic management were unified within a single organisational framework. Although less rigid than administrative boundary adjustments, this reform restructured functional competences in a way that endowed development-zone authorities with full governmental responsibility, including land-use approval, fiscal allocation, and public service management. In essence, zone-town integration reform represents a systemic transformation that grants development zones statutory administrative authority, enabling them to act not merely as specialised economic enclaves but as comprehensive governing entities.

This reform played a critical role in the evolution of the HQIBH. Following the zone-town integration between the HQIBH Administrative Committee and Huaqiao Town Government in 2005, the Kunshan Government unified previously parallel administrative systems, enabling a single institutional actor to oversee investment promotion, spatial planning, land-use management, and public service provision. Collective land transfers were incorporated into unified planning frameworks, allowing industrial land development to proceed in tandem with the construction of affordable housing and municipal infrastructure.

The spatial consolidation that followed was extensive. According to the *Huaqiao Town Chronicle*, roughly 222 natural villages were merged within HQIBH from 2000 to 2006. Between 2003 and 2006, HQIBH allocated 11.3 km² of land for industrial development, laying a spatial foundation to undertake industrial transfer from the metropolis. As one local official recalled, “*Municipal leaders turned Huaqiao into a blank slate to attract major enterprises from Shanghai. They worked on-site every day in temporary offices at the construction site, pushing forward the development zone at an unimaginable speed*”(Interview, I-05, 2022).

This institutional delegation transformed edge cities from specialised production enclaves into integrated new towns with comprehensive urban functions. By embedding industry, housing, services, and social infrastructure within a cohesive spatial framework, the reform supported sustained capital retention. In HQIBH, the reform, by granting formal administrative authority to previously quasi-economic entities, reconstituted the local state as both a governance authority and a developmental entrepreneur. This enabled the unified deployment of planning, land regulation, investment promotion, and public service provision, which in turn reorganised urban space and anchored long-term capital accumulation. As the staff from a SOE in Jiangsu recalled, “*After the zone-town integration reform (of HQIBH and Huaqiao Town), their key task was to implement land transfer and new-town construction in accordance with high-standard urban planning. Once enterprises saw long-term potential here, they willingly chose to take root.*” (Interview, I-06, 2022)

The region experienced remarkable economic growth between 2002 and 2010, with GDP increasing from approximately USD 130.9 million to USD 1,347.3 million, and utilised FDI rising from USD 28.6 million to USD 112.4 million. Thus, administrative integration constitutes the institutional consolidation of rescaling. It embeds selective authorisation into durable territorial arrangements, facilitating Kunshan’s transition toward a functionally integrated edge city.

4.2 Interjurisdictional coordination supplying the connectivity conditions

As edge cities are institutionally produced through hierarchical reorganisation of peripheral regions, they necessarily extend beyond established administrative boundaries and become functionally intertwined with neighbouring core cities. This spatial and functional expansion generates a structural misalignment between the mobility of capital and the territorial fixity of jurisdictional boundaries. To reconcile these contradictions, core and peripheral governments reconfigure territorial relations through interjurisdictional coordination, ensuring that the circuits of capital flow are matched by coherent governance logics.

Interjurisdictional coordination thus operates as a second mechanism of edge-city formation. Rather than pursuing administrative amalgamation, higher-level governments mobilise hierarchical policy steering and infrastructural interconnection to attenuate boundary effects and construct institutional arrangements that transcend conventional territorial divisions. Through these mechanisms, the local governments of edge cities are progressively embedded within higher-order regional governance configurations. Kunshan exemplifies this process: through suburban rail extensions,

regional planning, and interjurisdictional collaborative governance, it realised the cross-boundary circulation of labour, capital and services, while retaining its formal administrative boundaries, and became incorporated into the governance structure of the Shanghai Metropolitan Region. In effect, such coordination expands the territorial reach of the core cities and facilitates the strategic integration of peripheral jurisdictions into metropolitan circuits of accumulation.

4.2.1 Regional infrastructure connectivity: Spatial instruments for capital circulation

In the absence of formal coordination mechanisms, interjurisdictional interactions often lack institutional coherence or legitimacy (Xu and Yeh 2013), resulting in fragmented connectivity. Regional infrastructure has therefore emerged as pivotal state instruments for reorganising interjurisdictional connectivity and integrating peripheral spaces into metropolitan circuits of accumulation. Infrastructure, in this sense, functions not only as a conduit for flows but as a material medium of state spatial restructuring that reorganises the scalar distribution of authority.

The cross-boundary extension of Shanghai Metro Line 11 into Kunshan offers a paradigmatic illustration. Historically, metro construction in China was confined within municipal jurisdictions, reflecting the administrative compartmentalisation of fiscal authority and planning control. Due to these administrative constraints, the original Line 11 plan terminated at Anting Station within Shanghai's boundary, leaving Huaqiao, the emerging economic hub of Kunshan, located "*just 400 metres beyond institutional reach excluded from the metro project*" (Interview, I-07, 2018). Although Kunshan promoted an eastward extension, its county-level status offered insufficient administrative leverage to overcome the inter-provincial divide. This required a radical institutional innovation to transcend the rigid demarcation between Shanghai and Jiangsu.

By the late 2000s, however, as Kunshan's strategic position within the Shanghai metropolitan economy strengthened, Jiangsu and Shanghai jointly elevated the extension proposal to the National Development and Reform Commission as a pilot of interjurisdictional cooperation. This constituted a clear instance of hierarchical restructuring through institutionalised coordination. The approved plan extended Line 11 six kilometres westward into Jiangsu, adding three subway stations within HQIBH (Figure 3). Implementation involved a co-constructed governance arrangement: construction and operation were unified under Shanghai Metro Group, while Kunshan's investment of USD 263.2 million in construction and rolling stock procurement enabled the integration of HQIBH into Shanghai's transit and cross-regional workforce mobility system (Guo and Wu 2019). Construction began in 2010 and was completed within merely three years.

The spatial effects were immediate and transformative. Daily commuting between HQIBH and central Shanghai soon exceeded that between Shanghai's suburban districts and central Shanghai itself. Simultaneously, according to the *Kunshan Yearbook*, real estate investment in HQIBH increased from USD 930.8 million in 2013 to USD 1,046.7 billion in 2019, consolidating capital fixes and elevating peripheral land values.

From the perspective of state spatial restructuring, the co-construction of Line 11 exemplifies how infrastructure operates as an institutional technology of territorial reorganisation. By embedding interjurisdictional coordination within a hierarchically authorised framework, the project institutionalised a new mode of regional governance in which connectivity becomes a mechanism for the production of space. In this process, edge cities such as Kunshan are actively constituted as infrastructural nodes through which the state mediates capital circulation, spatial integration and the rescaling of governance.

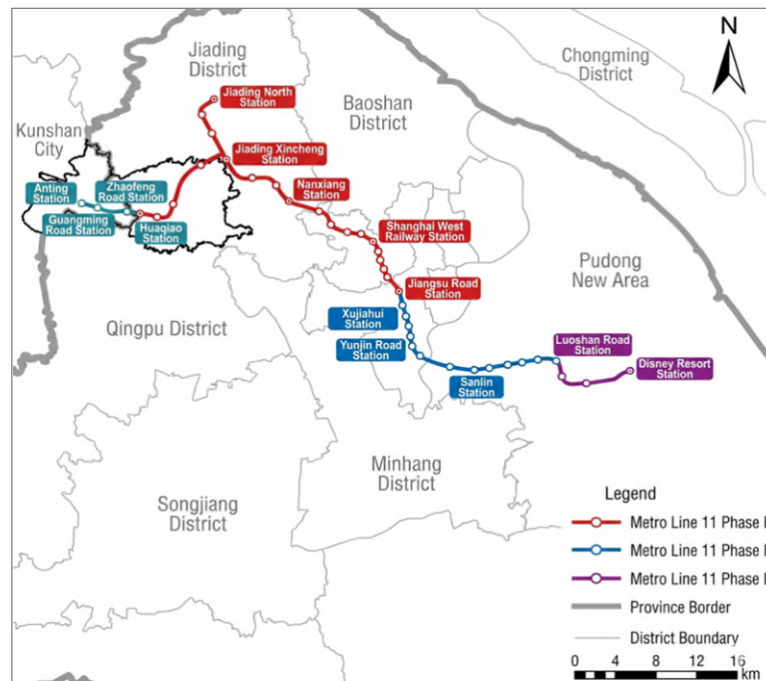


Figure 3. The route map of Shanghai Metro Line 11

4.2.2 Regional policy coordination: Extending metropolitan authority

Regional policy coordination has operated as a strategic instrument through which core cities extend their spatial authority across administrative boundaries and embed metropolitan developmental logics within adjacent jurisdictions (Day 2022; Zhang et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2025). Under China's territorial-administrative system, core cities were institutionally constrained from intervening directly in neighbouring planning domains, resulting in competitive behaviour and fragmented urbanisation. Regional policies therefore emerge as political instruments of territorial extension, enabling core cities to project influence extraterritorially.

This territorial logic is illustrated in the Shanghai-Kunshan case. During Kunshan's early formation, the Shanghai Municipal Government adopted an almost laissez-faire posture, treating industrial spillovers as spontaneous market-driven processes. However, Kunshan's aggressive fiscal and land-based incentives soon intensified cross-jurisdictional competition. As an expert in urban planning recalled:

861 “Kunshan offered better investment conditions than Shanghai’s suburbs. A Taiwanese
862 enterprise that had been negotiating with Shanghai ultimately chose Kunshan, this
863 immediately drew Shanghai’s attention” (Interview, I-08, 2019). Responding swiftly,
864 the then-mayor of Shanghai introduced competitive policies by establishing industrial
865 parks within Shanghai that matched Kunshan’s preferential conditions, mirroring the
866 centre-periphery competition observed in Western metropolitan regions.

867 By 2017, however, national directives promoting regional integration prompted a
868 fundamental shift from competition to coordination. Rather than competing, Shanghai
869 strategically incorporated the AHBICC into its metropolitan development framework.
870 *The Shanghai Master Plan (2017-2035)* formalised this configuration by designating
871 the AHBICC as a strategic spatial node, thereby embedding Kunshan, which is formally
872 under Jiangsu Province, within Shanghai’s policy discourse and governance vision.
873 Through the mediating authority of national and provincial governments, Shanghai
874 thereby acquired institutionalised influence beyond its administrative boundaries.

875 Within this strategic framework, Kunshan and Shanghai’s Jiading District
876 advanced cooperation in intelligent manufacturing and big-data industries. This
877 collaboration was later extended to public services, such as security, healthcare, tourism
878 and environmental protection, through regular joint meetings and coordination
879 platforms. These institutionalised arrangements transformed previously fragmented
880 intergovernmental relations into an integrated governance structure.

881 Subsequent consolidation occurred with the establishment of the Jiading-
882 Kunshan-Taicang Industrial Collaboration Committee in 2018, jointly promoted by
883 Shanghai and Jiangsu authorities. Operating through a rotating mechanism, the
884 committee ensured policy continuity and industrial synergy, embedding hierarchical
885 coordination across provincial, municipal, and county levels. These initiatives
886 effectively reaffirmed Shanghai’s metropolitan authority through rescaling, as regional
887 policies became instruments for cross-boundary regulatory extension.

888 These developments reveal a profound reconfiguration of core-periphery relations.
889 Regional policy coordination is far from a neutral framework for interjurisdictional
890 cooperation; rather, it constitutes a state-led territorialisation project through which core
891 cities penetrate administrative boundaries, reconfigure governance hierarchies, and
892 structure new institutional spaces for capital accumulation. Edge cities such as Kunshan
893 thus become proto-spaces of metropolitan governance: peripheral experimental zones
894 embedded within metropolitan political and economic hierarchies. Their development
895 trajectories are progressively aligned with core-city strategic agendas, rendering the
896 boundary between the city and the region increasingly porous and producing an
897 institutionalised mechanism of state-mediated metropolitan integration.

898 4.3 Governance spatialisation: Reshaping state-space relations

899 Under the institutionalised intertwining of capital accumulation and state-led
900 spatial restructuring, China’s edge cities have been assigned new functional roles and
901 operative rationalities within broader state spatial projects. Kunshan’s transformation
902 demonstrates that capital accumulation and institutional arrangements are not parallel
903 trajectories; rather, they are tightly recombined under multi-scalar state orchestration.

This turns edge cities into pivotal nodes for policy translation, institutional experimentation and spatial reordering. Through capital, spatial restructuring and increasing institutional flexibility, governments in city-regions reorganise territorial relations without altering formal administrative boundaries, enabling edge cities to operate as institutionalised platforms grounded in functional networks rather than administrative boundaries.

4.3.1 Institutionalising capital fix: From spillover recipient to strategic platform

From the perspective of the spatial logic of capital accumulation, Kunshan's industrial clusters have become deeply embedded within the functional networks of the Shanghai Metropolitan Region. This shift is most evident in the elevation of cross-boundary industrial-chain cooperation from localised experimentation to formalised strategic planning. The *Shanghai Metropolitan Region Master Plan (2025-2035)* (hereafter as the "*Shanghai Metropolitan Plan*") designated the JKTCIC as a key functional zone of the Shanghai Metropolitan Region. The plan not only requires Kunshan's emerging industries to align with Shanghai's priority sectors, such as new-energy vehicles, intelligent equipment and the low-altitude economy sector, but also emphasises the construction of a core collaborative innovation circle between Shanghai and Kunshan, aiming to achieve deeply integrated innovation and supply chains. Consequently, the previous top-down, segmented division of labour between Shanghai's innovation capacity and Kunshan's manufacturing base is being recomposed into a unified cross-boundary value-chain. Capital accumulation has thus evolved from being driven primarily by factor spillovers to being steered by institutional arrangements that enable value chain collaboration and cross-boundary value co-creation. Edge cities no longer function merely as receptacles of overspill. Instead, they become strategic nodes reshaping metropolitan capital circulation itself.

Furthermore, the *Shanghai Metropolitan Plan* identifies the JKTCIC as a model zone for advancing innovation-oriented cooperation across the Yangtze River Delta. It institutionalises a governance configuration that privileges functional regions over administrative regions, constructing a cross-boundary governance space marked by flexible territorial boundaries yet governed through metropolitan-level oversight. This stabilises cooperation, enabling the core city to extend its planning and governance authority beyond its own administrative boundaries. Through this function-first governance logic, Shanghai positions Kunshan as a crucial platform supporting metropolitan expansion and industrial upgrading. As a result, Kunshan is no longer framed as a peripheral hinterland or competitive counterpart, but is re-embedded as a strategically shaped node within a metropolitan capital accumulation regime led by the core city.

4.3.2 Institutional flexibilisation: Experimental sites for state rescaling

Institutional flexibilisation expands local governing capacities while enabling multi-level governments to restructure metropolitan territoriality without altering formal boundaries. The critical shift lies not in administrative reconfiguration but in networked coordination and functional integration. Through these processes, edge cities

function as policy laboratories and institutional amplifiers within metropolitan restructuring. Rigid jurisdictional divides become increasingly porous, while policy instruments are more adjustable and replicable.

Since 2023, Shanghai and Kunshan have established multi-department coordination bodies, most notably the Anting-Huaqiao-Baihe Integrated Governance Office (AHBIGO). The office comprises nine staff members, with three representatives seconded from Kunshan, Jiading and Qingpu, operating under a unified framework. Through joint operations, the office promotes unified action in transportation, ecological protection and public security administration. In public security, the three jurisdictions have piloted cross-boundary patrols, transforming boundary-fragmented management into routinised, networked governance practices. This institutionalisation of these cross-border arrangements embeds edge cities into the operational circuits of metropolitan governance, enabling the state to recompose territorial relations through everyday administrative coordination rather than through formal territorial restructuring. As an AHBIGO official recalled: *“Co-location has forged a strong alignment on collaborative governance. Leveraging our distinct conditions, we refined a joint roadmap, established cross-regional oversight in law enforcement and mounted a coordinated response to transboundary crime”* (Interview, I-09, 2025). Thus, the transformation of edge cities into new functional spatial formations derives not from jurisdictional redrawing, but from institutional flexibilisation and cross-scalar policy coupling, thereby producing new scalar geographies for both edge cities and metropolitan regions.

Kunshan’s experience further illustrates that capital accumulation and institutional arrangements are co-produced within state spatial strategies. Deepening cross-boundary governance positions edge cities simultaneously as platforms for capital circulation and laboratories for institutional adaptation, thereby acting as strategic anchors in the development of metropolitan spatial formations. Edge cities are therefore not by-products of suburbanisation but key experimental sites through which the state generates new configurations of authority, spatial order and governance practices that radiate across larger territorial scales.

4.3.3 Core-periphery divergence: Asymmetric relations in metropolitan governance

Despite the mutual interest of both Shanghai and Kunshan in promoting edge-city upgrading, their relationship remains characterised by asymmetric coordination. This asymmetry is shaped by the core city’s dominant institutional stance and the edge city’s strategic repositioning. For Shanghai, cross-boundary cooperation is not conceived as a partnership among equals; rather, it is a governance technology for strengthening the competitiveness and restoring spatial order of the core city. As one official from Shanghai explained: *“Our priority is to restore order in the core, not merely to enhance the competitiveness of peripheral cities”* (Interview, I-10, 2025). This exemplifies the underlying logic of regional coordination in China: cross-border governance functions primarily as a mechanism of metropolitan consolidation, rather than as a tool for spatial equalisation or horizontal parity between jurisdictions.

For edge cities, incorporation into the metropolitan core does not necessarily entail the erosion of local autonomy. Kunshan has demonstrated increasing selectivity and agency. While Shanghai tends to view Kunshan as an extension of its productive space and labour market, Kunshan no longer positions itself solely as a receptor of spillovers; instead, it actively pursues targeted integration with Shanghai's most advanced innovation resources. As one official from Kunshan noted: *"Although we are close to Shanghai's suburbs, we cannot simply follow them. We now connect only with the top innovation resources in the core city. With other areas, competition outweighs cooperation."* (Interview, I-11, 2022)

Within this multi-scalar landscape of capital accumulation and innovation flows, Kunshan is shifting from a passive periphery to a competitive collaborator oriented toward the metropolitan core. Its cross-boundary strategy has evolved from receiving spillovers to parallel positioning and selective integration, transforming the city from a functional periphery into a strategic node capable of negotiating its position within the hierarchical state system.

5. Discussion

In post-suburbanisation contexts, edge-city development has often been understood as a capital-driven process in which the state adjusts its territorial apparatus to support capital expansion. In this reading, edge cities function as spatial fixes to the crisis tendencies of Fordist-Keynesian urbanisation, allowing capital and population to decentralise beyond established urban cores. Existing rescaling literature, particularly in Western Europe and North America, interprets state spatial restructuring as a response to capital mobility, interurban competition, and neoliberal urbanisation, through which glocalising competition-state regimes are constructed (Brenner 2003). States strategically reconcentrate resources in globally competitive urban regions in order to sustain accumulation and competitiveness (Hudson et al. 2020). In this context, the state mainly acts as an entrepreneurial enabler and regulatory coordinator, rather than as a constitutive agent of accumulation itself (Li et al. 2020).

By contrast, the Kunshan case points to a power-led mode of metropolitan restructuring, in which governmental coordination does not more than adjust to the spatial demands of capital. It actively creates the institutional and territorial conditions through which capital can circulate. Kunshan's trajectory can be read as a layered process, with new experiments built upon institutional foundations inherited from the Mao era (Su et al. 2020). This finding challenges a central assumption in much of the rescaling literature, namely, that state spatial restructuring primarily responds to the locational needs of capital. The Chinese case instead shows how metropolitan restructuring can produce new spaces of accumulation through administrative reorganisation and selective territorial empowerment. Edge cities therefore emerge not only as decentralised economic nodes, but also as sites of state spatial restructuring in which metropolitan coordination and capital accumulation are jointly organised.

The development of Chinese edge cities shows how metropolitan restructuring is operationalised through hierarchical reorganisation and interjurisdictional coordination

within metropolitan governance. Administrative reranking is one important mechanism of hierarchical rescaling. For instance, Kunshan's upgrading from a county to a county-level city changed its institutional position and became a regulatory lever through which interjurisdictional competition could be modulated and local interests aligned with broader metropolitan strategies (Su 2022). This has produced a configuration of metropolitan governance that differs from the market-oriented trajectories commonly associated with Western edge-city development.

Beyond administrative reranking, metropolitan coordination was also advanced through selective spatial experimentation, including pilot-zone authorisations, planning privileges, and infrastructure integration (Tang et al. 2022; Yang et al. 2025). These instruments enable higher-level governments to delegate authority selectively to chosen jurisdictions, rather than decentralising power evenly across the region. Despite the rhetoric of regional integration, core cities retained strategic dominance through their higher administrative rank and stronger capacity to allocate resources. This points to the instrumental logic underpinning China's model of coordinated development. Metropolitan collaboration operated less as an egalitarian partnership than as a hierarchical process shaped by uneven administrative power between core cities and surrounding jurisdictions. In this sense, China's edge-city development reflects a form of hierarchical rescaling in which peripheral regions receive delegated authority in selective and uneven ways, while being incorporated into metropolitan frameworks dominated by core cities. This dynamic differs from the competitive regionalism widely discussed in Western urban studies, where rescaling is often associated with decentralisation, entrepreneurialism, and interurban rivalry.

These mechanisms constitute a form of metropolitan restructuring in which capital mobility is channelled through, rather than freed from, the territorial logic of state power. This dynamic extends the notion of state spatial selectivity (Su 2022) by showing how uneven geographical development is actively organised through planned asymmetry and selective territorial authorisation, rather than through neoliberal deregulation alone. Rescaling in this context therefore operates not through the hollowing out of state authority, but through its strategic redistribution across scales.

China's edge-city development also differs from the Western dilemma of loose collaboration or zero-sum competition between core and peripheral regions (Phelps 2012). Kunshan's trajectory, from a recipient of metropolitan spillovers to an institutionalised metropolitan partner, shows how interjurisdictional relations were gradually reorganised through hierarchical coordination and selective authorisation. Metropolitan integration did not remove core-periphery asymmetries. Instead, it reworked them into a more coordinated but still uneven structure, in which core cities retained strategic dominance (Yang et al. 2025). Edge-city development therefore reflects not the erosion of scalar hierarchy, but its reorganisation through metropolitan governance.

Seen comparatively, the Kunshan case suggests that edge-city development in the Global South can move beyond the binary of state versus market, and instead focus on how administrative hierarchy is mobilised to orchestrate capital circulation. Much urban theory derived from Euro-American experiences associates metropolitan

restructuring with market liberalisation, entrepreneurial governance, and interurban competition. The Chinese experience points to a different trajectory. In this sense, China's edge cities are not deviations from a Western norm, but manifestations of a state spatial selectivity that aligns capital accumulation with hierarchical territorial control. Here, edge cities are produced through hierarchical rescaling and interjurisdictional coordination, supported by administrative reranking, pilot-zone experimentation, and selective regional integration. Governmental coordination therefore plays a constitutive role in organising capital circulation and metropolitan integration under uneven global capitalism. The Chinese case highlights an alternative pathway of metropolitan transformation, shaped by the interaction of administrative hierarchy, territorial governance, and capital accumulation.

6. Conclusions

This study conceptualises the formation of China's edge cities as institutionally engineered outcomes of state spatial restructuring, instead of a by-product of market-oriented suburbanisation. Drawing on Kunshan's transformation within the Shanghai Metropolitan Region since the 1980s, it demonstrates that edge-city development is driven by the coupled dynamics of hierarchical reorganisation, interjurisdictional coordination and capital accumulation. Across multi-level governments, the continuous reorganisation of scalar authority and territorial relations aligns territorial competitiveness with global capital circuits.

Kunshan's evolution from a peripheral industrial base to an integrated metropolitan node reflects the layered mechanics of state spatial restructuring. Early-stage industrialisation was enabled by pilot-zone construction and selective authorisation, creating institutional spaces for capital fix. Subsequent administrative recalibration and infrastructural integration deepened Kunshan's functional linkages with Shanghai's economic and social development. As regional integration consolidated, interjurisdictional coordination transformed zero-sum competition into institutionalised metropolitan collaboration. China's edge cities are therefore not peripheral outcomes of market diffusion, but spatial products of state spatial selectivity, wherein core-periphery relations are continuously reconfigured to organise accumulation and development.

Theoretically, this study advances rescaling theory by proposing a coupled scalar machine: hierarchical reorganisation supplies the authorising conditions for capital fix, while interjurisdictional coordination supplies the connectivity conditions for regional embedment. This moves beyond decentralisation or entrepreneurialism scripts to show how metropolitan restructuring in China is steered by state spatial restructuring alongside market-driven competition. It refines core-periphery perspectives by demonstrating that metropolitan integration reworks, rather than erases, uneven relations between core cities and peripheral jurisdictions. Furthermore, it contributes to Global South urban studies by illustrating an alternative pathway of edge-city development shaped through governmental coordination, selective authorisation, and territorial integration under uneven global capitalism.

Future research could productively extend this work in two directions. First, beyond the mechanics of rescaling, more attention should be paid to the uneven social outcomes of edge-city formation. Specifically, how state-led spatial restructuring reproduces housing inequality, labour precarity, and uneven welfare provision at the metropolitan fringe. Second, comparative research is needed to examine whether similar modes of state spatial selectivity operate in other Global South contexts, or whether China's administrative hierarchy constitutes a distinctive pathway of regionalisation under glocal capitalism. Such work would deepen understanding of how power, capital, and space combine to produce new urban forms beyond the neoliberal West.

Notes

Kunshan was originally a county under the jurisdiction of Suzhou Prefecture-level City. In 1989, an administrative division adjustment implemented by Jiangsu Province reestablished Kunshan as a county-level city administered by Suzhou. In 2011, under *the Opinions on Launching the Pilot Work of the Province-Directly-Governed County System Reform* issued by the Jiangsu Provincial Government, Kunshan was designated as a pilot county-level city under the province-directly-administered (fiscal) reform, hereafter referred to as "Kunshan City" or "Kunshan" for consistency.

Ethics Approval

This study was approved by the Academic Ethics Committee of the authors' affiliated institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. All interviewee identifiers have been fully anonymised.

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