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Cross-Provincial City-Regionalism in China: Evidence from Smart Planning and Integrated Governance of the Yangtze River Delta

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Abstract: Taking the Demonstration Zone of Green and Integrated Ecological Development of the Yangtze River Delta as a case study, we find that city-regional development of the Yangtze River Delta has advanced to the fifth stage, so-called cross-provincial city-regional integrated development. The ongoing reform experiment in China presents a new model of city-regional development, which distinguishes itself from previous approaches used in both China and Europe/America. We propose a theoretical framework of cross-provincial city-regionalism from the two dimensions of smart planning and integrated governance. Based on the new framework, this article reveals how the top-down intervention of the central government has helped local governments break down the administrative barriers at the provincial level and stimulated them to participate in the cross-provincial coordinated development from the bottom up. The new framework alters the assumption and institutional logic of the traditional city-regionalism theory and extends its explanatory scope.



Academic Editors: Xufeng Cui, Walter T. de Vries, Fei Li and Basanta Paudel

Received: 28 November 2024

Revised: 2 January 2025

Accepted: 3 January 2025

Published: 14 January 2025

Citation: Ge, T.; Yu, Y.; Zhong, X.; Jiao, Y. Cross-Provincial City-Regionalism in China: Evidence from Smart Planning and Integrated Governance of the Yangtze River Delta. *Land* **2025**, *14*, 156. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14010156>

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Keywords: cross-provincial city-regionalism; smart planning; integrated governance; Yangtze River Delta

1. Introduction

Global capital is intensifying regional competition worldwide, leading to increased attention to the city-regionalism theory. This theory emphasizes that neoliberal globalization and its relaxation of regulations have led to intense competition between entrepreneurial governments, further triggering the restructuring of city-regional governance: from urban growth machines at the city level to regional governance alliances at the city-regional level [1]. However, the theory has the shortcoming of relatively neglecting the willingness of local governments to cooperate from the bottom up and the differences in city-regional restructuring methods under different national institutional backgrounds [2]. The traditional city-regionalism theory overemphasizing the economic perspective cannot fully explain the new changes in city-regional development in China.

Taking the Demonstration Zone of Green and Integrated Ecological Development of the Yangtze River Delta as a research case, we find that a new model of cross-provincial city-regional development supported by the central government has gradually emerged in the

last decade. The traditional city-regionalism theory focuses too much on the economic logic of China's city-regional governance restructuring [3,4]. However, with the intensification of global regional competition, the roles and goals of the state have undergone transformation, leading to significant differences in the new city-regional restructuring process compared to before. As the regional economy develops into a new stage, the bottom-up cooperation motivation of local governments has been growing, and the new stage of cross-provincial city-regional governance practices is showing a new institutional logic.

Therefore, this article aims to construct a new theoretical explanation for the new phenomenon of cross-provincial city-regional development in the Yangtze River Delta since 2018. Specifically, the two research questions are as follows: (1) How can the cross-provincial city-regional integrated development become possible? (2) Compared with the traditional regional development models, what are the characteristics of the new city-regional development model? To answer the research questions, we attempt to propose a new theoretical framework of cross-provincial city-regionalism different from the traditional city-regionalism theory.

The article consists of six parts: aside from the introduction in the first part, the second part reviews the traditional city-regionalism theory and its new changes; the third part constructs a theoretical framework of cross-provincial city-regionalism; the fourth part reviews the history of the research case and analyses its new institutional logic; the fifth part explores the technological and institutional innovations; and the sixth part is the conclusion and discussion, proposing prospects for future research.

2. Literature Review

City-regionalism studies have evolved over several decades, integrating theories from urban studies, political economy, planning, and sociology. Research on city-regionalism theory and its transformation in the context of economic globalization mainly originates from the political economic geography in the West based on the experience in Europe and North America. With China's deep involvement in the globalization process and the rise of Chinese city-regions since the 21st century, research on Chinese city-regionalism theory has attracted much attention, gradually becoming a hot topic in academia. Therefore, we will first review the Western city-regionalism theory, and then examine the research on Chinese city-regionalism theory.

2.1. Western City-Regionalism Theory

From the perspective of the political economic geography in the West, modern cities are shaped by capitalism. Cities are seen as a material manifestation of capital territorialization, the result of capital impacting on space [5]. However, from the second industrial revolution in the 19th century to the third industrial revolution in the 1950s and 1960s, as the territorially organized nation-states began to intervene in urban development and governance, they gradually built up a Fordist mode of production centered on cities, known as "organized capitalism" [6]. However, entering the 1970s, the breakthrough growth of productivity generated by technological revolution and the deepening contradictions between capitalist production relations led to the emergence of neoliberal globalization and the spatial restructuring of city-regional areas. With the de-territorialization and reterritorialization of global capital, the governance model based on the scale of cities faced challenges [7]. Brenner explains this phenomenon as "the denationalization of territoriality". He points out that the essence of this phenomenon is that the increasingly powerful global capital no longer conforms to the existing national governance spatial framework, but reconstructs "territoriality" in line with the logic of global capital expansion [8].

In response to the expansion of urban economy to regional scale, political economic geography has sparked a wave of “regional turn” research, initiating a theoretical transition from city to city-region [9]. According to the new political economic geography, city-regional governance is gradually seen by the state as a new governance strategy to resolve excessive competition between cities, involving the restructuring of state governance models at different geographical scales [10]. In other words, it is the relaxation of regulatory policies advocated by neoliberalism and the new crisis of governance generated by urban competition driven by entrepreneurial governments at the traditional city scale that has led to the expansion of state governance space to the regional scale. Thus, compared to the spatial production represented by urban renewal, “city-region” has become a new form of territorial organization. Multi-city-regional governance alliances have replaced the urban growth machine as the dominant governance structure driving city-regional economic growth [11]. Since the late 1990s, city-regionalism has gradually become a research hotspot in the new political economic geography in the West, focusing on the rescaling of territoriality in the globalization era and the measurement of economic networks, transportation networks, and governance structures in city-regional areas [12–17]. Contemporary research, such as Scott and Storper’s re-examination of 21st century urban theory, Peter Hall and Kathy Pain’s analysis of polycentric metropolitan areas, Allen Scott’s and Michael Storper’s studies on innovation systems, enriches the theoretical framework of city-regionalism. This research prioritizes sustainable development, smart cities, inclusive urbanization, and urbanization in the Global North, providing new perspectives and methods for understanding complex city-regional dynamics [18–21].

Although the Western academic community generally acknowledges the explanatory power of the city-regionalism theory for the transformation of state governance structures in the post-Keynesian era, there have been increasing criticisms of the theory after 2010 [22]. These criticisms mainly focus on the theory’s excessive emphasis on the decisive role of global capital in determining state governance structures, while neglecting the potential impact of bottom-up local factors, especially the differences between different national institutional backgrounds [23]. As Wu Fulong points out, although the rescaling is common, the forms of rescaling under different institutional backgrounds are significantly different [3]. In addition, some scholars criticize that the previous literature often focused too much on the theoretical study of changes in state governance structures at the global scale, lacking solid empirical research and insufficient exploration of the driving mechanisms leading to changes in state governance structures at the local scale [1].

2.2. Chinese City-Regionalism Theory

In the early 1980s, China joined the process of economic globalization through reform and opening up and embarked on large-scale rapid urbanization. The reterritorialization of global capital has reshaped the basic pattern of Chinese cities. As China’s economic system transitioned from centrally planned to market-oriented, Chinese cities followed a path similar to that of Western cities. However, unlike Western countries, the socialist state has maintained a strong influence on spatial restructuring during the market transition. Thus, different from the rescaling, horizontal coordinated governance of European and American counterparts, Chinese city-regions have experienced a process of continuous scaling-up, vertical administrative integration.

Early research on Chinese city-regional governance started with the analysis of governance failures due to vicious competition among local governments. The market-oriented reforms in China have led to the decentralization of economic management power from the central government to local authorities, giving rise to the emergence of entrepreneurial government and the formation of local interest groups based on administrative bound-

aries [24–26]. This phenomenon has been summarized as “local corporatism” by Jean Oi, referring to the cooperation between local governments and businesses within their jurisdictions, forming diverse commercial common interests [27]. The political promotion tournament of local economic growth has strengthened the vertical “central–local” relationship while the horizontal intergovernmental relations have been divided by the interests of administrative jurisdictions, leading to further economic competition between local governments [28].

To address the excessive economic competition between local governments, China initiated the reform process of city-regional integration governance. Some scholars have divided this process into four stages of development: the regional office stage, the city-managing county stage, the abolishment of counties and establishment of districts stage, and the strengthening of core cities within provinces stage [29]. In the early 1980s, the regional office system, as an alternative to the regional revolutionary committee in Mao’s era, first appeared in history. This institution, as an agency dispatched by the provincial government, was mainly responsible for coordinating affairs and assignments between cities and counties. However, for developing core cities, the regional office system was gradually replaced by the city-managing county system after the mid-1980s. Despite the shift of financial resources towards cities, the competitive landscape between cities and counties did not fundamentally change. In the late 1990s, the vigorous development of township enterprises drove the economic growth of counties. In developed coastal provinces such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Guangdong, the competition between strong industrial counties and their affiliated prefecture-level cities became increasingly intense. As a result, some strong industrial counties were successfully upgraded to county-level cities, and even prefecture-level cities, such as Zhoushan City in Zhejiang Province and Dongguan City in Guangdong Province. Therefore, in the late 1990s, the abolishment of counties and establishment of districts became a new governance tool to solve the problem of negative competition between cities and counties. Some county-level cities were directly reclassified as districts under the jurisdiction of cities, such as Wujin District under the jurisdiction of Changzhou City in Jiangsu Province. While enhancing the overall planning capabilities of prefecture-level cities, the abolishment of counties and establishment of districts also intensified the competition for capital between prefecture-level cities. After 2000, the competition between prefecture-level cities resulted in the continuous accumulation of market resources towards the core cities within provinces, highlighting the polarization of city-regions within provinces. According to Shen’s classification, territorial restructuring can be divided into two types: vertical restructuring and horizontal restructuring [30]. In fact, the above four stages of development are all forms of vertical restructuring. To achieve the economic goal of strengthening capital accumulation, the fundamental role of China’s state intervention in the restructuring of city-regional relations cannot be overlooked. The policy of city-regional integrated governance has undergone continuous advancement from counties to cities and then to provinces [31,32]. In this context, the city-regionalism theory has received increasing attention from the Chinese academic community, becoming the mainstream theory of research on the regional development and governance in China [33–35]. Recent studies mainly focus on some specific aspects of city-regional development, such as industrial clustering, regional planning, land use management, inter-regional disparities and sustainability, to investigate the city-region’s transition from rapid growth to high-quality development [36–39].

However, the framework of analysis of the Chinese city-regionalism theory makes it difficult to provide a sufficient explanation for the new phenomenon of cross-provincial integrated governance in recent years. This issue has become more prominent with the acceleration of regional economic integration. Although the existing literature has deep-

ened our understanding of the rescaling city-regional governance model, it also has certain limitations. Most studies are confined to theoretical frameworks based on Western experiences, focusing on how global capital shapes the development pattern of city-regions in the process of reterritorialization. However, against the Chinese institutional background, the formation of city-regions is not simply an economic clustering process, but also the result of political choices and policy implementation. Therefore, Western city-regionalism theory from a purely economic perspective lacks sufficient explanatory power for the institutional logic behind the formation of Chinese city-regions, while traditional Chinese city-regionalism theory focusing on vertical administrative division adjustments also fails to explain the fifth stage of regional development in China. The new practice of cross-provincial city-regional integrated development deserves further empirical research to enrich the existing city-regionalism theory.

3. Theoretical Framework of Cross-Provincial City-Regionalism

Based on the traditional Chinese city-regionalism, this section attempts to propose a new theoretical framework to explain the fifth stage of city-regional integrated development in China. We name the new theoretical framework “cross-provincial city-regionalism”, distinguishing it from traditional city-regionalism, which does not completely deny the logic of the traditional city-regionalism, but extends it in the new development stage. Cross-provincial city-regionalism aims to provide an analytical perspective for the empirical study by focusing on the two research questions mentioned above. The first question can be interpreted as what insurmountable obstacles traditional city-regionalism has encountered in addressing the development of cross-provincial city-regions, thus leading to failure. The second question can be interpreted as what innovations cross-provincial city-regionalism has made to effectively overcome obstacles to the development of cross-provincial city-regions.

3.1. *The Obstacles Faced by Traditional City-Regionalism in Cross-Provincial City-Regional Development*

At the stage of cross-provincial regional development, the biggest obstacle facing traditional city-regionalism lies in the intergovernmental relations between the central and local governments. Since the reform and opening up, the central–local relationship in China has gone through a process of change from a highly centralized system to a relatively decentralized one. Local governments have gained more autonomy, but at the same time, the problem of “fragmentation between departments and regions” has emerged, that is, there are difficulties in division and coordination among departments and regions. Xu Chenggang summarizes this characteristic of the central–local relations in China as “the fragmented authoritarian system of regional decentralization” [40].

The “fragmentation” feature is manifested as the existence of segmentation between vertical sectors and horizontal blocks. “Vertical sectors” refer to the top-down vertically managed departments, and “horizontal blocks” refer to local governments at all levels. When different vertically managed departments carry out work locally, there may be certain conflicts with the overall planning and coordination of local governments. For example, when some vertically managed environmental protection departments implement environmental policies, there may be contradictions with the short-term goals of local governments in pursuing economic development [41,42]. Under the intense pressure of regional competition, the fragmented administrative system leads local governments to formulate land use plans and economic development plans that may be contradictory to each other and implement competing policies within their respective administrative regions. When vicious competition occurs, there is a lack of necessary coordination mechanisms among local governments at the same level [43,44]. Generally speaking, the fragmentation

of the administrative system has created dual barriers at both the planning technical level and the governance institutional level.

The smooth progress of the previous four stages of governmental reform can mainly be attributed to the high level of authority that Chinese provincial governments have in solving the problem of fragmentation of local administrations within provinces. Under the Chinese-style local government structure, provincial governments, as the highest level of local government, often resolve the vertical “city–city” competition within provinces through vertical administrative division adjustments, resulting in the establishment of the city-regional integrated governance model centered around super-large cities within the province. However, when it comes to the problem of cross-provincial integrated governance, it has reached the power boundary of the local state.

3.2. New Institutional Logic of Cross-Provincial City-Regionalism for High-Quality Green Development

Since the new central leadership took power in China in 2012, a new trend of combining vertical and horizontal territorial restructuring beyond the provincial power boundary has emerged especially in the developed coastal areas, and the development of cross-provincial regional integration attempts to solve the horizontal cooperation issues among provinces. This not only changes the economic logic of traditional city-regionalism, but also proposes the new institutional logic of promoting green development. Green development refers to a sustainable approach to urban planning, construction, and land use that aims to minimize environmental impact while promoting economic growth and social equity.

The main connotation of cross-provincial city-regionalism is that the central government strongly intervenes to promote the cross-provincial city-regional smart planning technology innovation and integrated governance reform to overcome the dual barriers. At the planning technical level, a unified planning management information platform has been established. By leveraging digitization and networking, the smart planning aims to achieve the intelligent management of the entire life cycle of territorial and spatial planning, and explore multi-level construction methods, paths and policy mechanisms for high-quality land use at the cross-provincial scale. At the governance institutional level, the new structure of cross-provincial governance has been constructed through integrating vertical and horizontal territorial restructuring and bridging multi-level local governments rather than just resolving the vertical “city–city” competition within provinces through vertical administrative division adjustments. In addition, market forces and social forces are also incorporated into the governance structure to form a developer alliance, consisting of local governments, private developers, and social organizations (Figure 1).

Looking further, the success of cross-provincial city-regionalism is attributed to the strong intervention of the central government which breaks the existing fragmented administrative system and integrates the vertical sectors by restructuring the horizontal blocks, thus achieving intelligent planning and integrated governance of cross-provincial urban areas. The reason why the central government needs to intervene and establish new administrative institutions is that it is impossible to break through provincial restrictions merely through local government reforms. On the one hand, provincial governments are already the highest level of local governments and cannot exercise jurisdiction over local affairs outside their own provinces. On the other hand, the difficulty of cross-provincial collaborative governance is extremely high. It is impossible to effectively achieve the goals unless a powerful superior government intervenes. Previously, various relatively soft integrated governance methods, such as non-governmental integrated collaborative governance and network governance, were adopted, but the effects were rather limited. The failure of integrated governance was caused by the inability to avoid vicious competition between horizontal blocks. After the reform of cross-provincial city-regionalism, the

relationship between horizontal blocks has now transformed into a cooperative one instead of a competitive one by activating intrinsic dynamics for local governments. Moreover, the newly established blocks are detached from the original administrative subordination relationships. Therefore, the institutional basis for the vicious competition between the original horizontal blocks no longer exists.

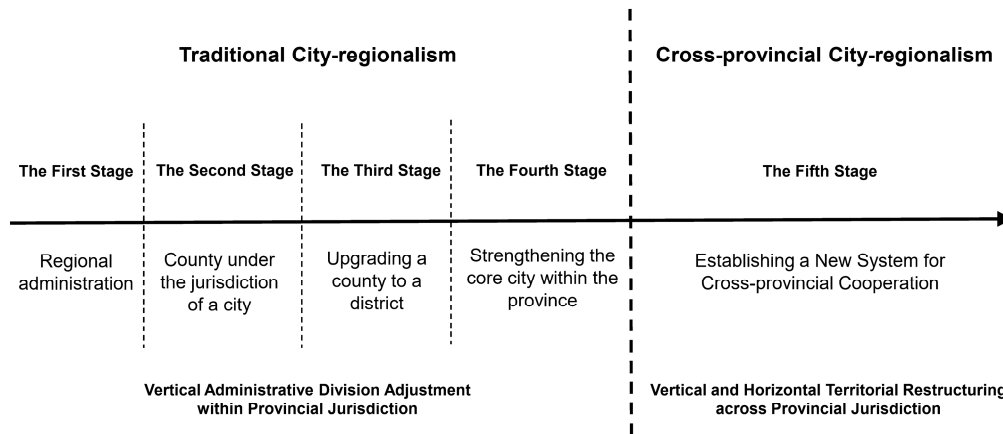


Figure 1. The traditional city-regionalism vs. cross-provincial city-regionalism. Source: Prepared by the authors.

3.3. Technological and Organizational Innovations of Cross-Provincial City-Regionalism Based on the New Institutional Logic

Cross-provincial city-regionalism has a new institutional logic compared to traditional city-regionalism. This is partly due to the changes in the relationship between the central and local governments caused by the strengthening of the central government's power over the last decade. With support from the central government, the cross-provincial administrative structure has been established to address various challenges in cross-provincial regional cooperation. Additionally, the green development goal set by the central government requires an increased level of economic integration beyond the provincial level, prompting local governments to enhance cooperation in order to reduce governance costs. As a result, the institutional logic that underpins the traditional city-regionalism has undergone significant changes. This also means that the theoretical framework of cross-provincial city-regionalism possesses a new institutional logic characterized by the central government's strong intervention and continuously improving technical regulatory capabilities.

The central government establishes a new model of smart planning and integrated governance by digital technology and institutional innovation (Figure 2). On the one hand, the unified planning management information platform based on the GIS database and AI technology facilitates the implementation of smart planning across provinces. The Demonstration Zone has built the first smart brain for cross-provincial planning in China. Its main function is to assist decision-making through a unified standard for data and institutions, cross-provincial planning implementation and annual inspection of planning implementation. On the other hand, some independent regional integrated governance administrative bodies have been founded to coordinate various regional governance affairs in the newly designated Demonstration Zone. Different from the scaling-up vertical administrative integration of traditional city-regionalism, the new governance structure under the intervention of the central government reflects the characteristics of vertical and horizontal territorial restructuring, which not only integrates the vertical administrative structure, but also rebuilds the horizontal administrative mechanisms. The vertical administrative structure mainly includes the leading group for integrated governance at the national and strategic level, the Demonstration Zone council at the decision-making and coordination

level, the executive committee at the policy implementation level and the developer alliance at the project management level, in which the central government, local governments, private enterprises and social organizations get involved, forming a new pattern of multi-level cooperative governance with distinctive features. The horizontal administrative mechanisms, including the personal co-employment mechanism, the co-management mechanism for project planning and construction and the fiscal and tax sharing mechanism, provide the institutional foundation for cross-provincial collaborative governance.

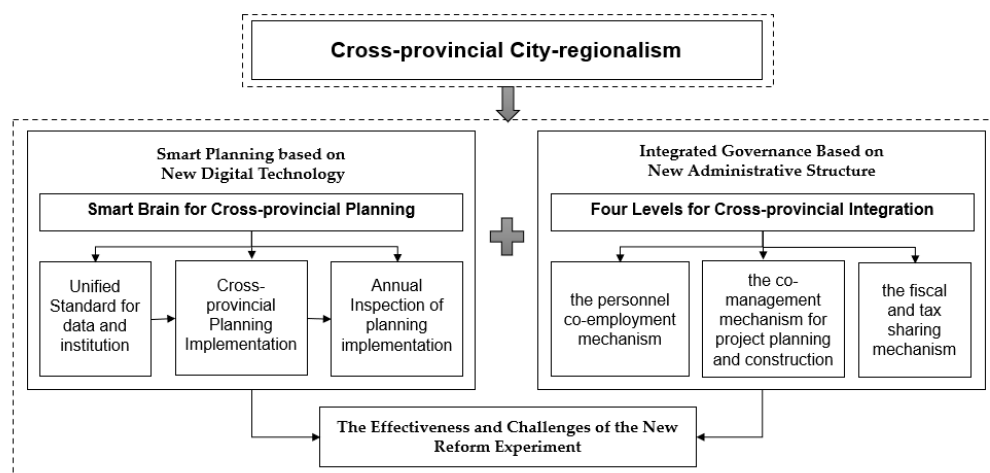


Figure 2. Theoretical framework of cross-provincial city-regionalism.

4. The New Institutional Reform Experiment Driven by Top-Down and Bottom-Up Forces

This article has selected the Demonstration Zone of Green and Integrated Ecological Development of the Yangtze River Delta as a research case for three main reasons. Firstly, the Demonstration Zone aims to conduct policy experiments extensively and deeply, especially in terms of applicability. Currently, the central leadership's Office for Promoting the Integrated Development of the Yangtze River Delta has requested the promotion and proliferation of the institutional innovation experiences gained in the Demonstration Zone. This indicates that the success of the pilot area has been recognized by the central government. Secondly, the theoretical value of this case study lies in its representativeness. As a typical policy experiment in the context of China's city-regional governance reform, its experience can provide a valuable reference for future reforms in other city-regions in China, such as the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei Region and the Greater Bay Area. The Demonstration Zone reflects the latest trend of China's city-regional evolution. Thirdly, although there is much research on the regional development of the Yangtze River Delta region, its fifth stage, or cross-provincial integrated development, has received less attention. We believe that the case study can enrich the existing body of the literature on Chinese city-regionalism.

With the intensifying global city-regional competition and China's economy entering a new stage of development, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the Outline of the Development Plan for the Yangtze River Delta and approved the establishment of the Demonstration Zone of Green and Integrated Ecological Development of the Yangtze River Delta in the border area of Shanghai, Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province in 2019 (Figure 3). The Demonstration Zone includes Qingpu District of Shanghai, Wujiang District of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province, and Jiashan County of Jiaxing in Zhejiang Province. The total area is approximately 2413 square kilometers. The top-down intervention of the central government helps local governments break down the administrative barriers at the provincial level and stimulates them to participate in the cross-provincial integrated development from the bottom up.

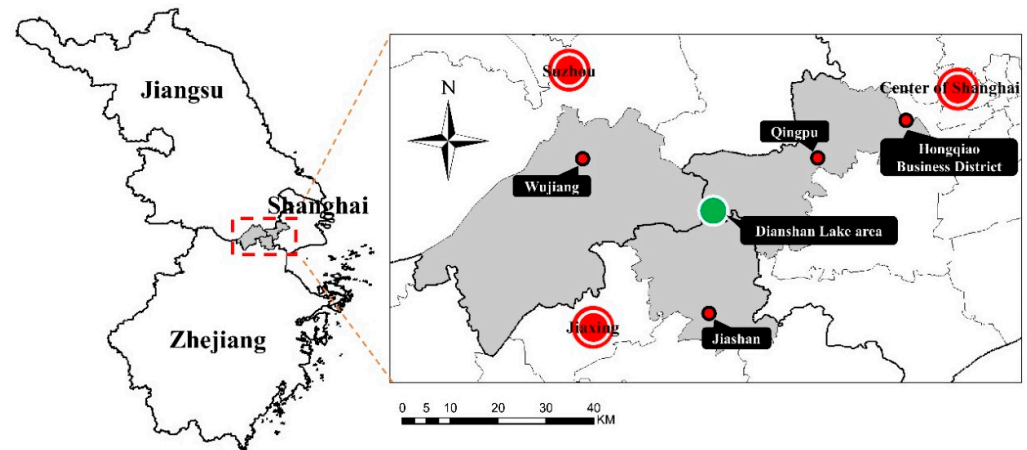


Figure 3. Location of the Demonstration Zone of the Green and Integrated Ecological Development in the Yangtze River Delta. Source: Prepared by the authors.

Our field survey started in September 2021 and ended in October 2024, conducting 12 on-site interviews and 2 online interviews with 22 interviewees, and collecting numerous first-hand documents through participatory observation. All the interviews were recorded and documented in both audio and written forms for empirical study. The interviewees mainly included officials from the central government, key personnel of the Demonstration Zone's executive committee, department heads, and policy research personnel, managers of other experimental areas, officials from local governments, experts, and scholars (Table 1).

Table 1. List of the interviewees.

No.	Interviewee	Date
01	Official from the Executive Committee of the Yangtze River Delta Demonstration Zone	29 September 2021
02	Head of a branch organization of the Executive Committee of the Yangtze River Delta Demonstration Zone	29 September 2021
03	Group Leader of the Management Team of the Executive Committee of the Yangtze River Delta Demonstration Zone	28 March 2022
04	Economic Officer, Regional Economics Department, National Development and Reform Commission	28 April 2022
05	Official from the Regional Economics Department, National Development and Reform Commission	28 April 2022
06	Official from Shanghai Development and Reform Commission	1 April 2022
07	Official from Suzhou Municipal Government, Jiangsu Province	1 April 2022
08	Leader from China Academy of Urban Planning and Design	1 April 2022
09	Head of the Shanghai Branch, China Academy of Urban Planning and Design	1 April 2022
10	Professor, Center for Urban Governance Research, Fudan University	15 April 2022
11	Professor, School of Government, Peking University	15 April 2022
12	Professor, School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China	13 August 2022
13	Leader of Beijing Tongzhou District Sub-Center	12 November 2022

Table 1. Cont.

No.	Interviewee	Date
14	Official from the Collaborative Development Center of Hebei Langfang Sanhe City, Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei Region	2 December 2022
15	Official from Tongzhou District Development and Reform Commission, Beijing	4 January 2023
16	Professor, School of International and Public Affairs, Shanghai Jiao Tong University	4 January 2023
17	Architect from State Engineering Survey and Design	2 September 2023
18	Academician of Chinese Academy of Sciences	2 September 2023
19	Official from the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources	2 November 2023
20	Professor, East China Normal University, Institute of Urban Development	24 November 2023
21	Official from Qingpu District Bureau of Planning and Natural Resources, Shanghai	20 March 2024
22	Official from the Bureau of Natural Resources and Planning, Wujiang District, Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province	21 October 2024
23	Head of a branch organization of the Executive Committee of the Yangtze River Delta Demonstration Zone	21 October 2024

4.1. Top-Down Promotion from the Central Government

Globalization has promoted the development of industrial clusters and the complexity of industrial chains, leading to the global economic competition expanding from global cities to global city-regions. To gain advantage in global regional competition, Chinese city-regions need to strengthen integrated governance. China's city-regions including the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region, the Yangtze River Delta, and the Pearl River Delta are undergoing this process. In the past four decades, rapid economic growth has not only exacerbated regional disparities, but also led to serious environmental problems. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the central government has been committed to promoting green and sustainable development while facilitating industrial transformation and upgrading. Therefore, changing the mode of economic development has become the new strategic goal of the state. But the regional attribute of the ecological environment requires local governments to strengthen cooperation to solve environmental problems and promote coordinated sustainable development. Due to the long-term accumulation of regional disparities and territorial divisions, achieving cross-provincial integrated city-regional governance faces technological and institutional challenges, requiring strong intervention and effective leadership from the central government.

For this purpose, the central government has high expectations for smart planning and integrated governance of the Yangtze River Delta. In November 2018, it elevated the coordinated development reform of the Yangtze River Delta to a national strategy. This demonstrates the determination of the central government to forcefully resolve the technological and institutional challenges. As the most economically developed city-region in China, the Yangtze River Delta has a solid foundation to undertake the significant mission of participating in global competition. The city-region covers an area of 358,000 square kilometers, with an economic output accounting for about a quarter of the national total, and it has two comprehensive national scientific centers, approximately a quarter of the top universities, best laboratories, and national research centers in the country. The annual

R&D expenditure and the number of effective invention patents account for about one-third of the national total. Because of the strong economic strength of each province and city in the Yangtze River Delta, the competition and conflict of interests in the city-region are the most prominent in China. For this reason, with the strong promotion of the central government, the Demonstration Zone across provincial boundaries was designated as a pilot zone for policy experimentation. As a senior official from the central government told us, “The designation of the demonstration zone is of great significance to promote the green and integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta, enhance its innovation and competitiveness, and improve economic agglomeration, regional connectivity and policy coordination efficiency, which is important to the high-quality development of China” (Interview No. 04).

The regional disparity in the Demonstration Zone is relatively significant, with serious governance deficits in infrastructure, ecological environment, industrial development, and public services, making the achievement of coordinated development in the city-region particularly challenging. From 2013 to 2022, despite the overall economic growth trend, there were obvious differences in economic volume between Qingpu, Wujiang, and Jiashan (Figure 4). There are also significant differences among the three in the indicators of per capita GDP, per capita disposable income, public budget revenue and expenditure (Figures 5 and 6). The above indicators reflect that, although the two districts and one county in the Demonstration Zone are geographically adjacent, there are relatively large regional disparities in economic development.

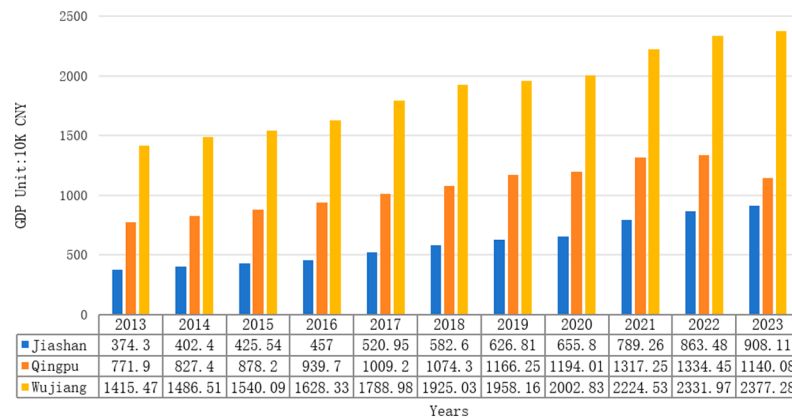


Figure 4. Comparison of GDP in total for two districts and one county from 2013 to 2023. Source: Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development.

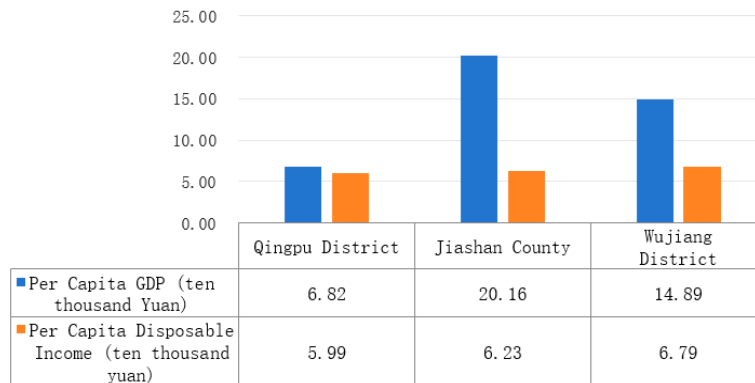


Figure 5. Comparison of GDP per capita and disposable income per capita (2022). Source: Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development.

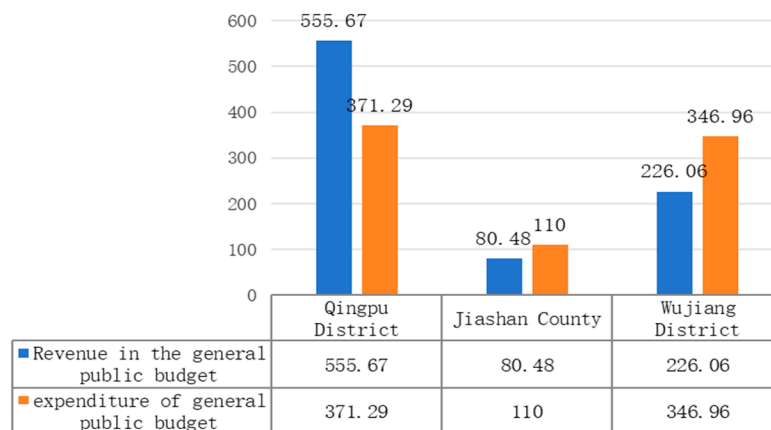


Figure 6. Comparison of general public budget revenues and expenditures (2022). Source: Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development.

4.2. Bottom-Up Cooperation from Local Governments

Despite continuous adjustments to the administrative boundaries of the provinces in the Yangtze River Delta in the past, the region has a deep basis of cooperation in terms of historical and cultural heritage, shared markets, and industrial clusters, gradually forming an urban spatial area radiating outward from Shanghai as a metropolitan area. Since modern times, Shanghai has become a pivotal node in the global city network and has earned its status. However, Shanghai has always been aware that this gateway hub status relies on strong support from the Yangtze River Delta’s economic hinterland. Therefore, the development of Shanghai and its surrounding areas is integrated and inseparable.

Since the 1980s, the Yangtze River Delta region has spontaneously formed various regional cooperation models. The first is the Adjacent Area Model. For instance, Kunshan, adjacent to Shanghai, actively integrates with Shanghai for investment promotion, and the level of integration between Kunshan and Shanghai is already very high. The second is the Leapfrog Model. In terms of integrated technological innovation, the G60 expressway links the technology industries of major cities such as Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Hefei. The third is the Enclave Economic Model. The Shanghai Economic Development Zone has established many branch zones in the cities of Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province, forming a base for close industrial cooperation.

From above, we can clearly see that the Yangtze River Delta with a solid foundation of economic ties and cultural similarities has exhibited an augmented intrinsic motivation among the local governments to promote regional development. Due to the deep cooperation basis, close exchanges of personnel, funds, and information have driven the economical integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta with strong endogenous dynamics, which has become even more prominent after the central government proposed a new goal of green ecology. The establishment of the Demonstration Zone has provided an experimental field for local governments to actively explore the new model of cross-provincial integrated development, focusing on solving some specific problems like transportation bottlenecks, administrative barriers to data flow, and obstacles to cross-provincial enterprise registration. As a senior official from the Demonstration Zone’s executive committee told us in the interview, “The key premise for the implementation of policy experiments in the demonstration zone is the good foundation laid in the previous decades. The officials from the three regions identify with each other and work together harmoniously to solve many difficult problems that would be hard to be solved only by themselves” (Interview No. 03).

5. Technological and Institutional Innovations of the New Reform Experiments

5.1. Smart Planning Based on New Digital Technology

Establishing a dynamic monitoring, evaluation, early warning, and regulatory mechanism for land spatial planning is a strategic deployment made by the central government. In recent years, in order to address issues such as an excessive number of planning types, overlapping and conflicting planning content, complex approval processes with long cycles, and frequent modifications of plans by local governments, China has restructured the spatial planning system. It has replaced the previous urban–rural planning and land use planning with territorial spatial planning. The Yangtze River Delta region, especially the Demonstration Zone, serves as a testing ground for promoting and practicing this new planning system. To meet the needs of enterprises and the industrial sector to break through administrative boundaries and layout industrial chains and supply chains, satisfy the horizontal cooperation needs of local governments, and avoid cross-regional disorderly competition and construction, under the guidance of the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Demonstration Zone has formulated the Overall Territorial Spatial Plan of the Demonstration Zone of Green and Integrated Ecological Development of the Yangtze River Delta (2021–2035), which is the first legal territorial spatial plan jointly formulated across provinces and submitted to the State Council for approval in China. Therefore, this is an innovative formulation and implementation of a new type of plan in the Yangtze River Delta region and a policy response at the national level to local demands. Under normal circumstances, plans at the county and district levels only need to be submitted by the city to the province for approval. However, this cross-regional plan has received the approval of the central government, thus enhancing the authority of the plan. The joint formulation method has connected the basic spatio-temporal data, enabling discussions on a unified platform and resolving conflicts in project and infrastructure layout among regions. In terms of the application of new technologies, the Demonstration Zone has built a cross-provincial smart brain in combination with plan formulation and implementation. By leveraging new technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence, it has integrated the four systems of plan formulation and approval, implementation and supervision, legal and policy, and technical standards onto a unified platform and connected them horizontally.

From the perspective of the spatial structure of the Overall Territorial Spatial Plan, the Demonstration Zone is located in the triangular area composed of three core cities of Shanghai, Suzhou and Jiaxing and four development corridors, and its coordinated development effect has a key impact on the integrated regional development of the Yangtze River Delta (Figure 7). To borrow the words of an official in the interview, “The demonstration zone places ecological green development as the top priority, reflecting the core value orientation of the new era’s development transformation. It uses new thinking and new approaches to drive regional environmental, economic and social development” (Interview No. 19). The Demonstration Zone primarily achieves unified regional dynamic spatial planning management through building China’s first cross-provincial smart brain with the following three characteristics (Figure 8).

Firstly, the system unifies regional planning standards and data standards and builds a data hub platform for cross-provincial spatiotemporal data collection and sharing. Relying on the data foundation of the Demonstration Zone’s smart brain platform, a standard specification for basic geographic information data and a standard for collecting public credit information have been established. Techniques such as remote sensing surveying, IoT perception, and AI recognition have been employed to analyze monitoring data, achieving dynamic planning evaluation of land use. The executive committee has promoted data interconnectivity and sharing among the two districts and one county through various

data collection methods, such as offline data aggregation, map service registration, and functional component registration.

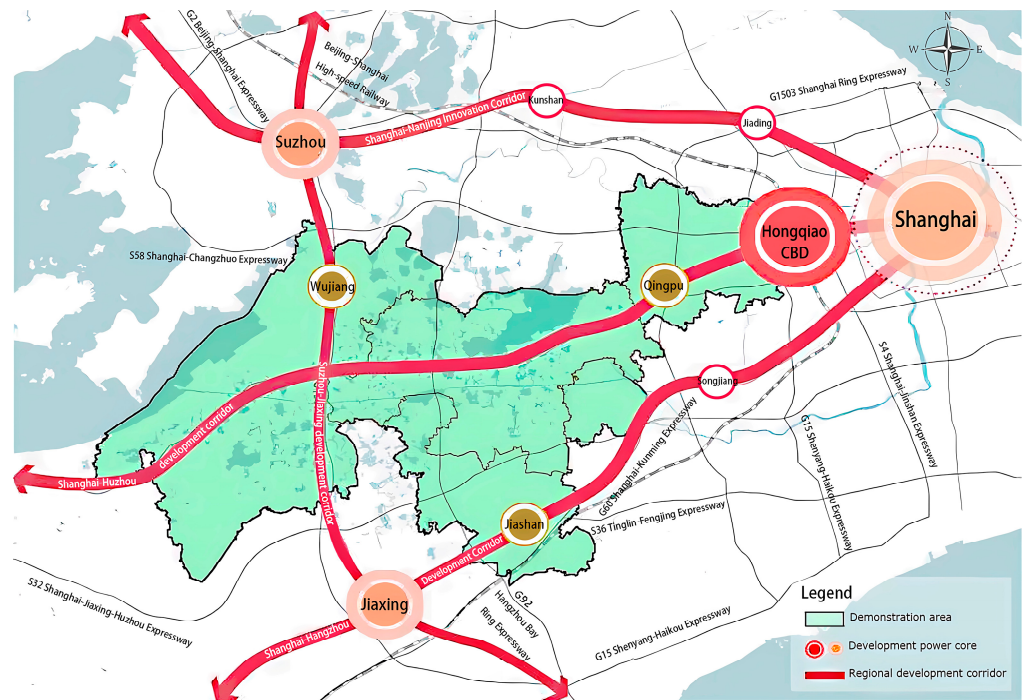


Figure 7. The spatial structure of the Overall Territorial Spatial Plan. Source: Prepared by the authors.

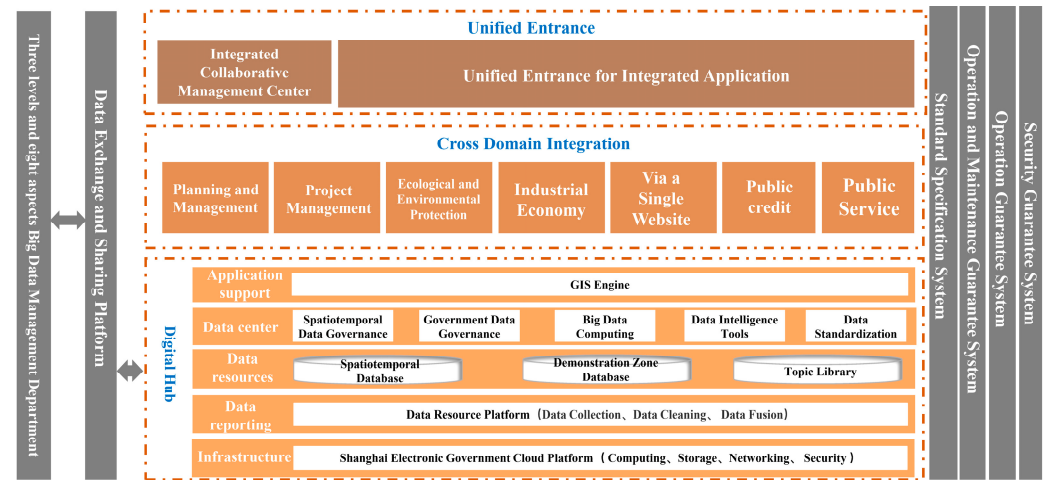


Figure 8. The technical architecture of the first cross-provincial smart brain in China. Source: Prepared by the authors.

Secondly, based on the data hub platform, a cross-provincial land spatial planning system has been constructed that provides digital technical support for various application scenarios, such as spatial connection intensity analysis based on population movement data and spatial pattern analysis based on nightscape lighting data. Relying on this system, the goal of managing the whole region with a blueprint has been achieved. Through digital technological innovation, the executive committee has explored the solutions to issues like cross-provincial digital infrastructure connectivity, data sharing, and land use management, achieving joint approval of detailed planning across provinces and joint review of urban development boundary adjustments.

Thirdly, the algorithm model of artificial intelligence is applied in dynamic monitoring of land spatial planning implementation. Also, the monitoring model has been connected

with the China Spatial Planning Online Monitoring Network. This not only enhances the consistency between planning proposals and actual implementation, but also increases the efficiency and effectiveness of regional environmental monitoring, such as carbon emissions. As a planning expert pointed out, “The intelligent planning monitoring system represents a new starting point for China’s spatial planning, which has achieved the national leading effect of planning implementation” (Interview No. 16).

5.2. Integrated Governance Based on New Administrative Structure

In addition to the technological innovation of smart planning, institutional innovation also promotes the green development of cross-provincial city-regions. The integrated governance of the Yangtze River Delta used to be achieved through vertical administrative boundary adjustments in the past decades. However, with the increasing demand for cross-provincial integrated development, the Demonstration Zone needs to build a new administrative structure to ensure the long-term sustainability of integrated governance. To this end, the Demonstration Zone proposes the idea of “not breaking administrative subordination, but breaking administrative boundaries” and focuses on institutional innovation through establishing a cross-provincial decision-making and execution system that integrates administrative resources and promoting horizontal and vertical intergovernmental cooperation.

Following the principle of collaborative governance, the decision-making and execution system incorporates different levels of government, market and social forces into the system and creatively constructs a four-level institutional framework (Figure 9). At the national and strategic level, the leading group for integrated governance was established to implement the deployment and decisions from the central government. This is a prevalent approach in China for resolving local administrative conflicts in regional development.

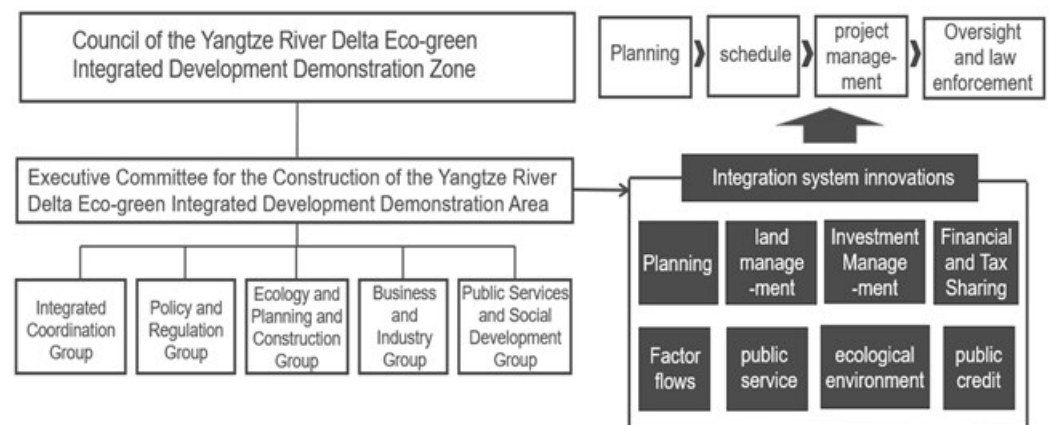


Figure 9. The institutional framework of the decision-making and execution system. Source: Prepared by the authors.

At the decision-making and coordination level, the Demonstration Zone council takes charge of making decisions and coordinating all the local public affairs in the city-region. This is mainly to achieve the integration of “province-to-province” relationships within the city-region and maximize the participation of market and social forces. The operation of the council adopts a rotation system, with senior provincial officials from Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang serving as the chairpersons of the council, holding regular council meetings and regional cooperation joint meetings to study and determine regional development plans and coordinate the promotion of major projects. The composition of the council reflects the characteristics of multi-level governance, breaking away from China’s traditional administrative hierarchy. Provincial, municipal and county departments are all

equal council members. Moreover, it also includes representatives from enterprises, social organizations, universities, think tanks, financial institutes, and research institutes as the council members.

At the policy implementation level, the executive committee is responsible for implementing the decisions made by the council and addressing cross-provincial administrative conflicts. It has five sub-groups: the comprehensive coordination group, the policy and regulation group, the ecological and planning construction group, the business and industry group, and the public service and social development group. Since its establishment, the executive committee has carried out a large number of institutional innovations in eight areas, including planning formulation, land management, investment management, fiscal revenue sharing, factor flow, public services, ecological environment and public credit, and has optimized a set of institutional processes from planning formulation, plan arrangement, and project management to supervision and law enforcement. As a scholar summarized, “the core organizational structure of ‘the Council-Executive Committee’ has indeed played a key role, and it has important reference significance for the integrated development and governance of the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region and other parts of the country” (Interview No. 12).

At the project management level, the Demonstration Zone has established the developer alliance consisting of consulting agencies, enterprises and industry associations, universities and research institutes, financial companies, and media to further strengthen the collaborative governance and solve specific issues in project management. As an advisory agency, the developer alliance provides timely feedback and advice to the executive committee in the process of land development and project operation. In addition, it also acts as a bridge for communication between public authority and private developers. Regarding the construction of the four-level decision-making and execution system that absorbs market and social forces, an official from the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei integration pilot zone compared it with the Demonstration Zone of the Yangtze River Delta: “Compared to Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei, the market and social forces in the Yangtze River Delta are very strong, which is an advantage for the integration of the Yangtze River Delta. The wisdom of the demonstration zone lies in incorporating these non-governmental forces into the governance structure through institutional innovation, allowing them to play a positive and promoting role in advancing cross-provincial city-regional integrated development” (Interview No. 14).

In addition, the Demonstration Zone has also innovated three major governance mechanisms. The first is the personnel co-employment mechanism, which combines the modern enterprise personnel management system with the party cadre management system and selects outstanding cadres from the two provinces and one municipality to rebuild a new civil servant team. All the officials are co-employed by the executive committee rather than by each province separately, and their salaries are linked to the fiscal growth and governance performance of the Demonstration Zone. They do not distinguish between Shanghai cadres, Zhejiang cadres, and Jiangsu cadres, and there are greater salary incentives here, all working for a unified goal. The second is the co-management mechanism for project planning and construction. It includes the first online approval and supervision platform for cross-provincial investment projects in China. This platform is directly connected to the national information center platform, making it convenient for the projects to be directly included in the project management database of the National Development and Reform Commission. The third is the fiscal and tax sharing mechanism. On the basis of artificial intelligence technology, it is used for the tax calculation generated in the Demonstration Zone, cross-provincial revenue distribution, tax filing, law enforcement, and fiscal supervision.

This city-regional governance innovation possesses distinctive value. It does not adopt the historical approach of large-scale government mergers in Europe and America, nor does it rely on intergovernmental cooperation agreements or governance alliances lacking hard constraints. It also does not follow China's previous approach of resolving local administrative fragmentation through vertical administrative territorial adjustments. Instead, it adopts a new form of integrated governance: the provincial governments supported by the central government establishes a joint agency to be responsible for the management of cross-provincial city-regional development. From a global perspective, this represents the most significant institutional innovation in the new stage of cross-provincial integrated governance in the Yangtze River Delta.

5.3. The Effectiveness and Challenges of the New Reform Experiment

Since the establishment of the Demonstration Zone in 2019, the new reform experiment has achieved preliminary positive results, which has improved top-level design, formulated regional spatial plans, unified regional standards for ecological environment protection, and established unified mechanisms for personnel co-employment, project co-management, and fiscal sharing. After more than three years of dedicated efforts, the Demonstration Zone has successfully implemented 154 institutional innovations, out of which 48 have been effectively replicated and widely promoted across the nation, and 180 projects have already been implemented (Interview No. 21). Consequently, it has significantly enhanced its coordination and efficiency in terms of ecological co-governance, shared responsibility, and outcome sharing.

It is worth noting that the long-standing issue of unified regional management has been systematically resolved. The executive committee has issued many unified plans, standards and norms for regional development, ecological environment protection, air pollution, and water environment governance. For instance, the Guidelines for the Planning and Construction of the Pilot Area for the Demonstration Zone in the Yangtze River Delta is the first set of cross-provincial planning and construction standards in China. The Comprehensive Plan for the Territory Space for the Demonstration Zone of Green and Integrated Development in the Yangtze River Delta (2019–2035) is another example, as the first territorial spatial plan jointly formulated by cross-provincial cooperation. In October 2020, the Demonstration Zone issued a list of 7 unified standards, including the Technical Specification for Environmental Air Quality Forecast, becoming the first batch of unified regional standards in the Yangtze River Delta region. The two provinces and one municipality jointly carried out a unified monitoring network system for air, water, emergency response, and pollution sources, established a joint law enforcement team, and clarified unified law enforcement standards. The Demonstration Zone has developed specialized cooperative governance schemes for key transboundary water bodies, establishing standardized implementation criteria for ecological restoration and enhancement projects targeting issues such as eutrophication, cyanobacterial blooms, and cross-border management.

From the perspective of green integrated development, the ecological protection quality in the Demonstration Zone has been significantly improved. For example, the proportion of surface clean water bodies has increased substantially from 75% to 98.1%, and the water environment quality has already met the 2025 planning target ahead of schedule (Interview No. 16). In addition, substantial progress has been made in promoting transportation integration in the Demonstration Zone. An official in charge of transportation affairs in the Demonstration Zone said, "Nine inter-provincial dead-end roads have been opened to traffic. The westward extension project of Shanghai Metro Line 17 has been completed and put into operation, and the Shanghai-Suzhou-Huzhou High-speed Railway was officially

opened on December 26th” (Interview No. 23). From the perspective of economic growth, the combined GDP of the two districts and one county in 2023 reached 472.5 billion yuan, and the total industrial output value of industrial enterprises above designated size reached 872.9 billion yuan. Compared with 2019, the average annual growth rates were 5.94% and 8.19%, respectively. In particular, the intensity of R&D investment increased to 4.2%, which is higher than the average level of the three provinces and one municipality in the Yangtze River Delta and leads the national average level (Interview No. 22). From the perspective of people’s well-being, the reform and trials in the Demonstration Zone have brought tangible happiness to the people. As an official of the Executive Committee of the Demonstration Zone put it, “At present, 531 designated medical institutions and 926 pharmacies have realized cross-provincial medical insurance settlement. There are over 3500 cross-provincial online service items, and the cumulative number of processed cases has reached 116,000” (Interview No. 2).

However, the Demonstration Zone still faces the dual challenges of efficient factor flow and deep institutional integration in the face of intensified global city-regional competition. Compared with leading city-regions globally, the Yangtze River Delta region still has shortcomings in terms of economic aggregate, modern industrial system, innovation capability, and interconnected infrastructure. Although a series of major projects have been initiated in recent years, such as high-speed railways and intercity metro lines, some provincial or municipal border areas still need to be connected. In addition, due to the fierce competition between China and the United States, the resilience and security level of the industrial and supply chains in the Yangtze River Delta region have also been impacted. Hence, it is imperative to engage a diverse array of market participants and localities in the developmental process while employing market-oriented approaches to tackle underlying issues. The most important challenge for the future integrated green development of the Yangtze River Delta is how to leverage city-regional integration to achieve free and efficient flow of factors. This requires further promotion of the deep integration of relevant institutions. The long-standing administrative barriers in the region are unlikely to disappear soon. There is still significant regional disparity in terms of economic strength, fiscal capacity, infrastructures and public services. Although the Demonstration Zone has explored fiscal sharing, the scale and proportion are relatively small, leaving considerable room for improvement. Due to the involvement of multi-level local governments, such as provinces, cities, districts, counties, and townships, within the Demonstration Zone, the intertwined administrative relationships are relatively complex. Although the Demonstration Zone has undertaken many technological and institutional innovations, local governments at the district and county levels remain the most important administrative entities in terms of actual control over the development of various regions. Therefore, further promotion of interests and actions between different regions still requires the continuous operation, promotion, and improvement of new technologies, institutions and mechanisms.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the review of western city-regionalism theory, this article proposes a new theoretical framework for cross-provincial city-regionalism in China’s new development stage, through reinterpreting the institutional logic of the new reform experiment based on smart planning and integrated governance. It is revealed that intensified global regional competition has prompted the central government to shift policy objectives and intervene strongly, thereby activating intrinsic dynamics for local governments in cross-provincial city-regional development and integration governance. Consequently, there has been a transition from adjusting vertical administrative boundaries at the provincial level to integrating vertical and horizontal territorial restructuring beyond the provincial level.

This article also reveals that the new administrative structure has promoted smart planning by digital technology through the establishment of the integrated governance system in the cross-provincial city-region. With the strong support of the central government, the Demonstration Zone has undergone comprehensive and robust governance restructuring in the personnel co-employment mechanism, project co-management mechanism, and fiscal sharing mechanism. Some institutional innovation achievements have already been promoted and replicated. The Demonstration Zone, despite still facing some challenges, undoubtedly represents a rare occurrence in China's previous regional integration governance reform and holds significant theoretical value.

From a theoretical perspective, the framework of cross-provincial city-regionalism extends traditional city-regionalism theory, explains the phenomenon of smart planning and integrated governance in the fifth stage of regional development, and provides a new supplement to western city-regionalism theory by incorporating new institutional logic and national vertical integration. On the one hand, the new framework breaks the economic logic of the existing analytical framework and focuses more on explaining the new institutional logic of green development. Under the authoritarian system in the Chinese style, the local governments can change their logic of action due to the central government's shift in policy objectives, transitioning from growth-oriented competition to cooperative development and ultimately transforming into a new regional governance structure that transcends the power boundaries of provincial governments. On the other hand, the new framework is evidently different from the framework of Western city-regionalism, which only focuses on the reterritorialization of global capital or excessively emphasizes bottom-up horizontal cooperative or integrated governance.

The theoretical value of the case is that China's new reform experiment offers a unique governance model, integrating vertical administrative levels and horizontal cooperative governance structures, distinct from the previous models used in China and Europe/America. However, for other countries, the new theoretical framework of China's cross-provincial city-regionalism only has partial technical applicability and institutional limitations. Regarding the former, the Chinese government has successfully promoted the formulation of overall plans for city-regions by building a smart brain with shared data and used digital technologies to dynamically monitor the implementation of city-regional plans. This has strongly promoted the green integrated development of urban regions. This is quite instructive for other countries. As for the latter, China adopts a unitary state structure form with the characteristics of a highly centralized system. The central government can directly lead local governments and directly promote the implementation of the new model of cross-provincial city-regional governance. It is difficult for other countries to imitate this if the central government lacks sufficient institutional authority. China's practice also shows that various "soft" forms of city-regional governance, due to the lack of strong institutional guarantees, may ultimately fail to truly and effectively solve the problems of city-regional collaborative governance. The reform experiment of smart planning and integrated governance in the Yangtze River Delta is still ongoing. Despite achieving preliminary results, it also faces many challenges. Therefore, the cross-provincial city-regionalism framework based on the current practice is only a preliminary theoretical thinking. Future practices may still need further refinement.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.G., Y.Y. and Y.J.; field work and data collection, T.G. and Y.J.; writing—original draft preparation, T.G. and Y.Y.; writing—review and editing, T.G. and Y.Y.; visualization, T.G., Y.Y. and X.Z.; funding acquisition, T.G. and X.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by National Social Science Fund of China, grant numbers 22BSH022 and 24BSH151; Tongji University Xinrui Young Talents Grant for Social Sciences and Humanities, grant number 2024XR03.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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