

**Beyond Retreat and Adaptation: Blind Spots in the
Transformation of the Nation-State in the Era of Globalization
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Introduction

Globalization at the turn of the 21st century presents a paradox: on one hand, the flows of capital, information, personnel, and even viruses appear to increasingly disregard traditional territorial boundaries, fostering the imagination of a "borderless world"; on the other hand, border controls have been unprecedentedly strengthened under the influence of global issues such as security, migration, and public health (Gülzau et al., 2021), accompanied by a robust resurgence of populism and local protectionism in many regions. This contradictory phenomenon subjects the world order—based on territorial states with absolute sovereignty—to unprecedented scrutiny (Held et al., 1999). Consequently, a sociological question arises: Is the nation-state retreating amidst the waves of globalization?

This paper argues that while the perspective of "adaptationists" is more accurate than the claim that "the nation-state is ending," the debate itself contains blind spots. Arguments on both sides are largely predicated on Western historical experiences, treating the nation-state as a universal, functionalist entity, and viewing its development as a long-term process of structural adjustment and social transformation (Escobar, 2011). This perspective fails to explicate the specific connotations of the nation-state framework in the non-Western world, particularly in societies that have undergone colonialism, revolution, and struggles for international status.

To explore this process in depth, beyond revisiting adaptationist views, this paper adopts the perspective of "China as Method." By engaging in a critical dialogue with adaptationist arguments, this paper aims to transcend the binary of retreat versus adaptation, thereby understanding why the nation-state retains potent influence in the 21st century.

Focusing on the Debate: From Retreat to Adaptation

The "end of the nation-state" thesis is represented by the views of Kenichi Ohmae and Thomas Friedman. Ohmae (1995) argues that the free global flow of capital, industry, information, and individuals renders the nation-state's function as an economic intermediary obsolete. Similarly, Friedman (1999) suggests that international norms such as the "Washington Consensus" act as a

"Golden Straitjacket," constraining the policy autonomy of various countries, thus depicting a landscape where state sovereignty is unilaterally eroded by globalizing trends. In response, "nation-state adaptation" theorists offer robust rebuttals through three primary pathways.

Weiss (2000) introduces the concept of the "Catalytic state," forcefully refuting the narrative of "state powerlessness." She contends that the "zero-sum logic" opposing global market forces against state power is erroneous, pointing out that states actively promote globalization to enhance their own competitiveness. Weiss further argues that ceding partial sovereignty through international agreements to gain substantive governance capacity is, in fact, a "strategy for state augmentation."

Meyer's "World Polity Theory" presents a challenging proposition: globalization does not weaken state power but rather reinforces state legitimacy. Meyer argues that while the global cultural system lacks state leadership to some extent, it explicitly validates the dominant status of the nation-state (Meyer, 2000). The need for recognition and resources within the international community expands the scope of state functions and responsibilities; under internationalized and standardized governance models, nation-states are compelled to attend to areas previously neglected.

Castells (2008) proposes that the nation-state will not vanish but will adapt to new conditions through self-transformation. He introduces the concept of the "Network state," characterized by sharing sovereignty and responsibility with other states, international organizations, NGOs, and other actors. In this model, power is no longer concentrated in a single state but distributed through flexible cooperative governance networks. In his vision, "There is a process of the emergence of de facto global governance without a global government" (p. 89), where the nation-state remains a key node in the governance structure rather than being replaced by a supranational world government.

These theories clearly demonstrate that the nation-state is not a passive victim of globalization. However, they share a common limitation: they often view the impact of globalization as singular and universal, and understand the state from a functionalist perspective, assuming the evolution of the nation-state can be explained along a single trajectory of power and function.

The China Perspective: Re-examining the "Nation-State"

To transcend the West-centric analytical framework, this paper attempts to focus on China,

employing "China as Method." As elucidated by scholars inspired by Takeuchi Yoshimi, this method does not seek to establish a new geopolitical center but calls for a fundamental shift in perspective. This necessitates focusing on the historical experiences of peripheral regions filled with struggle, understanding their processes of self-transformation under the pressure of colonial rule. As Takeuchi pointed out, the essence of "method" is "the process of subject formation" (Takeuchi, 1978). Wang Hui further deepens this view in *The Genealogy of Asian Imagination* (2002), arguing that in many Asian countries, including China, the formation of the modern nation-state did not stem from the internal evolution of a "Westphalian" framework, but from a dual struggle: the critique of one's own tradition and resistance against imperialism.

The threat of the nation-state framework lies in its tendency to detach social science research from world history and the world system when discussing political, economic, and social relations within the nation-state, falling into the trap of "methodological nationalism" (Zhao Yuezhi, 2011). The demands of genuine nationalism are bidirectional: emphasizing independence and liberation from external oppression while simultaneously seeking external recognition in the international community (Liang Xuecun, 2018). Thus, we can understand how seeking national liberation and breaking through the nation-state framework becomes a duality in the process of subject formation. This reflexivity of subject consciousness allows the concept of the "nation-state" to break free from existing frameworks and be reconstructed through revolutionary practice.

Understanding "China as Method" rooted in China's anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles allows us to identify differences from nation-state adaptation theory when examining contemporary Chinese practices. At the macro-policy level, China's "Belt and Road Initiative" should not be viewed merely as economic or geopolitical expansion, but as an attempt to practice a new type of globalism. This reflects a vision to establish a world order based on "connectivity," abandoning the binary structure of "center-periphery" (Wang Hui & Yang Beichen, 2019). Regarding specific measures, the friction between Alibaba and the Chinese government in infrastructure construction, and the fissures between emerging global capital projects and state socialist ideology and the national rejuvenation agenda, present three mechanisms: "public-private partnerships," "corporate prosumption networks," and "imagined global competition" (Tse & Pun, 2024). This corroborates Mann's (1997) finding that

the expansion of global capitalism is experienced distinctly differently in the Global North and the Global South. Here, we see the nation-state as an active agent attempting to reshape the framework of the global order.

Theoretical Dialogue: Towards a Pluralistic State Theory

Although the Chinese experience occurs in a specific region, it possesses universality because it takes place within the process of colliding with global capitalism and attempting to transcend it (Zhang Zhihua, 2022). "China as Method" is not an isolated Sinocentrism, but an open perspective capable of dialogue with both Western and non-Western global state theories and practices.

Facing the cultural and economic shocks of globalization, the South Korean government utilized free trade agreements to drive the "Korean Wave" (Hallyu) and Korean cuisine industries globally from the top down, achieving immense success (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). This vividly embodies the "Catalytic state" and "World Polity Theory." However, one must also recognize the historical background of South Korea—from its establishment, stabilization, and development in reliance on the United States, to the anti-globalization protests by the Korean people against the KORUS FTA—to understand the pursuit of a missing subjectivity.

Patterson and Balogun (2021), analyzing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic by African nations and the Africa CDC, found that despite resource constraints and external pressures, African states actively coordinated policy implementation based on indigenous experience and local knowledge through Pan-African solidarity, regional cooperation, and civic interaction. They even engaged in negotiation and contestation with global norms such as those of the WHO regarding medication use. This differs from Meyer's (2000) logic that states follow global norms to gain legitimacy; instead, it reveals that from a Global South perspective, globalization is a complex process realized through repeated negotiation, reflecting the agency of Global South nations in international relations.

There is nothing inevitable about globalization, as it is driven forward more by political forces (Chang, 2008). Therefore, the transformation of the nation-state in globalization cannot be understood merely as functional adaptation; it must simultaneously be viewed as a continuous struggle to secure

equal recognition, maintain indigenous narratives, and cope with the resulting internal political pressures within a highly unequal global system rife with political and cultural bias.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper proposes that the nation-state is neither retreating nor simply adapting; rather, it is undergoing reconstruction within an unequal global system, becoming a crucial vehicle for shaping subjectivity through revolution and struggle. Specifically, the exploration of the "nation-state" should transcend universalist presuppositions and metrics of power fluctuation, turning instead toward the diversity of state forms under different historical and civilizational paths globally and their struggles against the existing international order. Only in this way can we move toward a truly pluralistic and equal global state theory that better explains this era of contradiction.

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Appendix

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超越退却与适应：全球化时代民族国家转型的盲点

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引言

20 世纪末 21 世纪初的全球化呈现出了一组悖论：一方面，资本、信息、人员乃至病毒的流动似乎愈发无视传统领土边界，催生了一种“无国界世界”的想象；另一方面，国界管控在安全、移民、公共卫生等全球化问题的影响下空前强化（Gülzau et al., 2021），民粹主义与地方保护主义在多地强势回潮。这一矛盾现象使得以拥有绝对主权的领土国家为基本单位的世界秩序面临前所未有的审视（Held et al., 1999）。由此，一个社会学议题应运而生：在全球化的浪潮中，民族国家是否正在退却？

本文认为，尽管适应论者的观点比“民族国家正在终结”的观点更为准确，但争论本身仍存在盲点：双方的观点大多基于西方的历史经验，将民族国家视为一个具有普遍性、功能主义的实体，并将其发展视为长期的结构调整和社会转型过程（Escobar, 2011）。这种视角未能解释民族国家框架在非西方世界中的特殊内涵，尤其是那些经历过殖民、革命以及国际地位争夺的社会。

为了深入探讨这一过程，在重访适应论的观点之外，本文还将采用一种“中国作为方法”（China as Method）的视角。通过与适应论观点展开批判性对话，本文希望超越退却或适应的二元对立，进而理解民族国家在 21 世纪依然具有强大影响力的原因。

关注争论：从退却到适应

“民族国家终结论”以大前研一（Ohmae）和弗里德曼（Friedman）的观点为代表。大前研一（1995）认为资本、产业、信息和个人的全球自由流动使得民族国家作为经济中间人的功能已经过时，而弗里德曼（1999）认为“华盛顿共识”等国际规范如同“黄金约束衣”般限制了各国政策的自主性，描绘了一幅国家主权被全球化趋势单向削弱的图景。对此，“民族国家适应论”的观点从三个主要路径进行了强有力的反驳。

韦斯（Weiss, 2000）在提出了“催化型国家”（Catalytic state）的概念，有力地驳斥了“国家无能为力”的论调。她认为将全球市场力量与国家权力对立起来的“零和逻辑”是错误的，并指出国家实际上是在积极推动全球化以提升自身的竞争力。Weiss 还认为国家通过国际协议等方式让渡部分主权以换取实质性的治理能力提升，也是一种“强化国家能力的策略”。

迈耶（Meyer）的“世界政治理论”（World Polity Theory）提出了一个富有挑战性的观点：全球化并非削弱国家权力，反而是强化了国家的合法性。迈耶认为，尽管全球文化体系在某种程度上缺乏国家主导，但它确实认可了民族国家的主导地位（Meyer, 2000）。在国际社会中获得认可和资源的需要使得国家的职能与责任范围得到扩展，在国际化、标准化的治理模式下，民族国家反而必须关注那些以前可能被忽视的领域。

卡斯特尔斯（Castells, 2008）则提出，民族国家并不会消失，而是会通过自我转型来适应新的形势。他提出了“网络国家”（Network state）的概念，认为这种新型国家的特点是与其他国家、国际组织和非政府组织等多个行为主体共享主权与责任。在这个模式下，权力不再集中于单一国家，而是通过灵活的合作治理网络进行分配。在他的设想中，“There is a process of the emergence of de facto global governance without a global government.”（p. 89），民族国家仍是治理结构中的关键节点，而非被一个超级世界政府所取代。

这些理论都清楚地表明，民族国家并非全球化中被动的牺牲品。然而，它们也都有一个共同的问题，也即通常将全球化的影响看作是单一的、普适性的，并从功能主义的角度来理解国家，认为民族国家的演变过程可以沿着权力与功能的单一轨迹进行解释。

中国视角：重新审视“民族国家”

为了超越以西方为中心的分析框架，本文尝试将目光放在中国之上，以中国为方法。正如受竹内好启发的学者们所阐述的那样，这种方法并非推出某个新的地缘政治中心，而是呼吁我们彻底转变看待问题的视角。这意味着我们需要去关注那些边缘地区充满了斗争的历史经验，了解它们在殖民统治压力下不断进行自我变革的过程。正如竹内好所指出的，“方法”的本质就是“主体形成的过程”（竹内好, 1978）。汪晖通过《亚洲想像的谱系》（2002）一文进一步深化了这一观点。他认为，在包括中国在内的许多亚洲国家中，现代民族国家的形成并非源自于“威斯特伐利亚式”民族国家框架的内部演变过程，而是源于对自身传统批判与对帝国主义抵抗的双重斗争。

民族国家框架的威胁在于，它让社会科学研究脱离世界历史和世界体系来讨论民族国家内部的政治经济和社会关系，陷入到方法论民族主义陷阱中（赵月枝, 2011）。真正的民族主义的诉求是双向的，既强调独立自主、摆脱外部压迫，也在国际社会中寻求外部认可（梁雪村，

2018)。由此，我们可以理解寻求民族解放和冲破民族国家框架如何成为主体形成过程的两重性。这一种主体意识表现的反身性（Reflexivity），使得“民族国家”这一概念跳脱出了既有的框架，在革命实践中得以重构。

理解了根植于中国反帝反封建斗争的“中国作为方法”，当我们再回过头来看中国的当代实践，便能够发现其与民族国家适应论的区别。从宏观政策上看，中国的“一带一路”倡议，就不能仅仅被看作经济或地缘政治上的扩张行为，而应被视为实践一种新型全球主义的尝试。这体现了中国试图建立一个摒弃“中心-边缘”的对立结构、基于“互联互通”的世界秩序的愿景(汪晖 & 杨北辰, 2019)。从具体举措上看，阿里巴巴与中国政府在基础设施建设中的分歧、新兴全球资本项目与国家社会主义意识形态及民族复兴议程的裂隙，呈现出了“公共-私人伙伴关系”、“企业产消网络”和“想象的全球竞争”三种机制（Tse & Pun, 2024）。这与曼（Mann, 1997）的研究中全球资本主义扩张在全球北方与南方国家的体验截然不同的发现相互印证。由此我们可以看到，民族国家作为积极的行动者，正在试图重塑全球秩序的框架。

理论对话：迈向多元化的国家理论

中国经验尽管发生在特定的地域，但因为发生在与全球资本主义“碰撞”的过程之中并尝试超越资本主义，因而具有了普遍性（张志华，2022）。“中国作为方法”并非孤立的中国中心论，而是能够同西方与非西方的全球国家理论及其实践对话的开放视角。

面对全球化带来的文化与经济冲击，韩国政府利用自由贸易的协议保障，自上而下地推动“韩流”、“韩餐”产业走向全球，获得了巨大的成功（Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008），这正是“催化型国家”与“世界政治理论”的生动体现。但我们也需要认识到韩国从依赖于美国而建立、稳定和发展，到韩国人民对《韩美自由贸易协定》的反全球化抗议的历史背景，进而理解韩国对其所缺失的主体性的追求。

帕特森和巴洛冈（Patterson & Balogun, 2021）通过分析非洲国家以及非洲疾控中心对新冠疫情的应对，发现尽管面临资源限制和外部压力，非洲国家仍然通过泛非团结、区域合作以及公民互动，基于本土经验和本土知识积极协调政策实行，甚至在药物使用问题上与 WHO 等全球规范展开协商和博弈。这不同于迈耶（2000）所认为的各国为了获得合法性而遵循全球性的规范规则的逻辑，这揭示了在南方视角下，全球化是一个在反复谈判中逐步实现的复杂过程，

体现了全球南方国家在国际关系中的能动性。

全球化没有什么不可避免的，因为推动它前进的更多的是政治力量（Chang, 2008）。因此，对民族国家在全球化中的转型，不能仅仅理解为功能性的适应，而应同时将其看作一种在高度不平等且充满政治文化偏见的全球体系中，为争取平等承认、维护自身叙事并应对内部由此产生的政治压力而进行的持续斗争。

结语

综上所述，本文提出民族国家并未退却或适应，而是正在不平等的全球体系中经历重构，成为在革命与斗争中塑造主体性的重要载体。具体而言，对“民族国家”的探讨应该超越普适性预设和权力增减，转向对全球不同历史文明路径下国家形态多样性及其对既有国际秩序的斗争。唯有如此，我们才能迈向一个真正多元、平等，并能够更好地解释这个矛盾时代的全球国家理论。

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附录

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