In *Suzhou in Transition*, edited by B. Tang and P. Cheung. Routledge, 2020.

Chapter 8

Suzhou and the City-Region: The Administrative Divisions in Historical Perspective and Rural-Urban Transition

Hu De and Carolyn Cartier

Introduction

In the long history of rural China, no one would deny China's great urban transformation after embarking on reform after 1978. In reflection on the subject, people first think of large-scale rural-urban migration and dramatic change in rural and urban landscapes. Few relate the transformations to changes in the institutional aspects of the urban system or the urban and rural administrative divisions. But a city in China is a product of changes to the administrative divisions and system of cities. A contemporary city might have a multiple-fold larger rural area than its urban core, while a densely urbanized area with half a million residents might not be a city at all. What is more complex is that governments at different levels often change the administrative divisions to suit developmental goals, using administrative divisions as a spatial tool to reterritorialize for "developmental fit." For example, merging a county or a county-level city into a prefecture-level city suits the land demand of urban expansion. Combining several urban districts works to restructure industrial space, while designating a county as a county-level city helps it to attract investment. Thus it

would be difficult or even misleading to understand the rural-urban transition in

modern China without exploring rural-urban relationships through the system of administrative divisions.

The reality that cities have become administrative divisions in China since the 1980s is actually not well understood. This shift demonstrates the direct relationship between the central state and the "local" in which cities exist at one of three levels: province, prefecture, and county. Since only the central state can designate a city, each and every city is a manifestation of the power of the central state to place a city on the map. Especially county-level cities demonstrate the relationship between the city and the countryside because county-level cities result from the process of designating a historic rural county as a city, which has allowed cities to engage in rural land use transformations and lease land for large-scale real estate development. The so-called urban revolution in China started not with building new cities, but with changing the administrative divisions to cities.

China's administrative divisions have included both rural and urban areas, which holds interesting implications for the evolution of Chinese cities. In the long dynastic era from the Qin to the Qing dynasties (221 BCE–1911), the emperors governed empire through the territorial administrative system in which the local governments took charge of the whole of their territories according to the administrative divisions—the walled city and the rural areas. Cities were not governed separately by a kind of municipal government like cities in urban systems of western countries; instead cities and rural areas were governed together by a territorial government like a province, a prefecture, or a county. This is the reality of Chinese cities existing historically in administrative divisions.

After political system reform in the late Qing dynasty and during the subsequent Republican period, reflecting learning from western systems, some cities in the coastal region became separate territories and were governed separately from rural areas. Following this logic, in modern China beginning in the 1950s, cities were designated by the Chinese central government according to administrative ranks; they had city governments and city territories with specific areas and boundaries. At this stage, cities and counties were two different types of administrative divisions and with no direct administrative relationship. Generally speaking, cities were urban areas and the territory of a city was quite small, usually just the highly urbanized core area plus a relatively small rural suburb, altogether less than 100 km^2. Counties, by contrast, were rural areas. Normally the territory of a county was relatively large, more than 1,000 km^2, with small towns scattered across extensive farmlands. But in the reform era after 1978, the new administrative territorial arrangement of "cities-leading-counties" re-established and re-structured the relationships between cities and counties. The reform era marks a turning point for cities and administrative divisions. We might ask how do cities lead counties and how do administrative territorial arrangements affect the rural-urban transition?

This chapter examines the administrative divisions of Suzhou and its larger region in historical perspective to explain the evolving transformation of the Suzhou city-region. The history of Suzhou is particularly rich and deep, antedating even the formation of the administrative divisions in the Qin dynasty and the *junxian* 郡县 or prefecture and county system. Suzhou was originally the capital of the state of Wu, which existed in the 6th century BCE before consolidation of the empire (Milburn 2013,

2015). In light of the significant origins of Suzhou, introduced by Koss (this volume), we also consider key moments in this "region of Wu" to recover the enduring significance of its historical geographies.

Most accounts of economic transition in Suzhou in the reform era consider township and village enterprises (see Han; and Zhong and Xin, this volume), yet questions about growth and economic power in Suzhou substantially emerge in changes to the administrative divisions. The difference is one of subject and scale. Where rural-urban transition based on local enterprises concerns market reform and economic production in firms at the town level and below, rural-urban transition based on the administrative divisions concerns general economic development at the prefecture and county levels or meso-scale. Extensive research on rural-urban transition as a function of market reform and sociological change has largely missed the spatial restructuring of political-economic space at the meso-scale. The dynamics of administrative divisions in China under reform, while structuring governance among administrative territories, strategically propel urbanization of former rural areas across larger-scale regions.

City and City-Region

In China under reform Suzhou has become as if it were three cities: the area of the historical walled city and its environs; the urban core of the city and its city districts; and the city-region of the prefecture-level city. In 1982 the Chinese government introduced the "city-leading-counties" reform or *shi lingdao xian* 市领导县 under which prefectures transformed to become prefecture-level cities administering a group of counties. It set in motion the establishment of hundreds of new city-regions in China.

The result is that prefecture-level cities in contemporary China are becoming meso-scale economic regions. Among them, Suzhou is also particularly distinctive because it typically ranks first by GDP growth. This section contextualizes and explains this transformation in comparative perspective.

What is a city in China?

The question—what is a city in China—asks to understand China-centred meanings about cities. This is important, not only in China, because there is no single concept of a city in urban theory or definition of a city among government institutions. Worldwide, governments of countries define cities and urban populations differently. In comparative urban studies, for instance, a city is usually theorized as a centre of economic growth or economic agglomeration, which is why most research on urbanization focuses on size and growth—population size and economic growth. "Urbanization—taken to mean the concentration of population in urban centers," in the words of Kam Wing Chan (1994, 1), "has accompanied economic development in many countries during their early stages of industrialization." Definitions of cities in China also reflect dynamics of political-economic rationalities. Since the middle of the twentieth century the Chinese government has periodically changed how it measures urbanization, in addition to revising definitions of urban places and their ranks in the territorial-administrative hierarchy (Chan 2007, 2010; Zhou and Ma, 2003). Let us take a closer look because major changes to the administrative divisions have been taking place in the reform era (Cartier and Hu, 2015).

The administrative divisions form the Chinese system of subnational territory at

levels of government, from provinces to prefectures, counties, and towns. Through a variety of changes to them, the Chinese government adjusts the space of economic development, introduces levels of administrative rank—corresponding to ranks of Party and government officials—and sets the stage for the introduction of new institutional structures including policies and plans. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, which adjudicates changes to the administrative system, oversees the process. In the reform era the leading general reform is reterritorialization of the historic rural meso-scale administrative divisions—the prefectures and counties—as "cities." Beginning in 1982–1983, in the Jiangnan region of the lower Yangzi delta, counties and prefectures were reterritorialized as cities. At the forefront, Suzhou became among the first prefecture-level cities under reform.

The origins, evolution, and continuity of the territorial-administrative system in China are unique in world historical geography. But the international comparative scholarship, grasping for comparison, often attempts to characterize dynamics of administrative divisions in China as "gerrymandering." In countries with federalist systems or separation of powers between the federal government and the states, gerrymandering refers to changing districts of political administration typically known as voting districts. The word gerrymandering is inapplicable to China in multiple ways. One reason is historical. The basic unit of administrative divisions in China, known as the county or *xian* 县 , became established in the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). Two thousand years later, the unit of the county in China continues to exist, challenging modern temporalities and ways of understanding cities. In 1983 the Ministry of Civil Affairs introduced the policy known as *che xian gai shi* 撤县改市 or "withdraw the

county, establish the city," through which historic rural counties became cities at the county level. This change ushered in numerous complexities for rural-urban transition.

In China the state maintains differing definitions for cities, for urban and rural areas, and for urban and rural populations. That contemporary cities in China often include large rural areas and rural populations makes their analysis particularly complex: all areas of the city are not necessarily urban, and may cities include area that are rural by definition. Unlike before reform, contemporary cities combine the areas of the old cities and the historic rural counties. Cities have become large administrative divisions at levels of government—administrative divisions with both urban and rural areas. The land area of the administrative divisions and the land area of cities are coextensive. These realities have significant implications for the idea of rural-urban transition.

A second way in which gerrymandering proves misleading is the notion of "fiscal federalism" in China. Fiscal federalism refers to allocation of fiscal powers and expenditure responsibilities between different levels of government. It is a popular approach in research on the local fiscal system in China, in which prefecture-level cities administer the budgets of their city districts but not the budgets of county-level cities under their jurisdiction. But actual federalism does not exist. China is a unitary state formation in which the central state holds power over the administrative divisions. Item 15 of Article 89 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China establishes that the State Council exercises power to approve changes to administrative divisions. The Constitution articulates power to establish new cities, enlarge, merge and re-rank existing ones, and administratively eliminate others. Such conditions are rare in federal

states.

Systems of subnational territory vary worldwide, and, in most countries, cities are not coextensive with administrative divisions. Typically, multiple cities exist within administrative divisions. For instance, in the state of California 88 cities exist in the county of Los Angeles among which one is the city of Los Angeles. San Francisco is both a city and a county but it is a small area on the tip of a peninsula and unusual in the U.S. system. (The U.S. system does not have a level of government like the prefecture.) In China under reform, as counties have become county-level cities, cities do not exist in counties; county-level cities exist in the administrative area of prefecture-level cities. This is a third way the Chinese system differs from notions of gerrymandering: administrative territory or political territory and economic territory have been aligned in China under reform.

In 1983 the PRC initiated an urban revolution by reclassifying historic rural administrative divisions—counties—as cities. This transformation established "county-level cities" or *xian ji shi* 县级市 under the jurisdiction of the "prefecture-level cities" or *di ji shi* 地级市 that would lead them. The rationale reclassified large areas of rural land, much historically owned by collectives, to urban land held under the jurisdiction of local governments. Local governments, in turn, leased the land for industrial and real estate development. Thus the reforms to the administrative divisions and urban system changed not only the definition of cities, but also their process of formative existence. Rather than expanding through economic growth, the *space* of cities became directly established on the basis of territorial reclassification.

Meanwhile, the administrative divisions and urban system reforms also changed

the processes of urban-rural transition dramatically. For example, when a county was designated as a county-level city, its new "city" status gave it advantages over a county. First, the newly established city would have the rights to lease land for industrial and property development, and consequently gain more fiscal income. Second, when competing for domestic investment, FDI, and public infrastructure projects, a city has significantly more potential than a county—cities are the future. Third, the status of city, ideologically, gains greater attention from government for urban construction, especially for urban development of the city centre rather than balanced development of urban and rural areas.

From under 200 cities in the Mao era, more than 650 cities became established by 2015. (Table 8.1) As the table shows, the second wave of these new cities at the country level was established in the 1990s subsequent to Deng Xiaoping's "southern tour" in 1992. Returning to rapid growth, after of events of 1989, depended on opening up vast new areas of land for urban development. This is only one outstanding episode among reform-era changes to the administrative divisions that promoted the development and growth of the domestic economy through the establishment and construction of cities.

<INSERT Table 8.1 HERE>

Number of Cities by Level of Government

Source: Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Handbook of the Administrative Divisions of the People's Republic of China*, multiple years.

City as a prefecture and a city-region

In the process of transformation under reform, cities as administrative divisions at the prefecture and county levels have become the standard of meso-scale territorial administration for the first time in Chinese history. The prominent relation between the prefecture and county levels is the cities-leading-counties policy, which has set in

motion the development of a prefecture-level city as a city system. The city-leading-counties policy means that the prefecture-level city leads or administers a group of counties or county-level cities. It refers to the system of a relatively developed prefectural city governing the surrounding counties and county-level cities. Since in law, provinces govern counties or county-level cities, the State Council adopted the term "leading" to indicate the new arrangement. The prefectural city is the leading city or central city in the city-region. The idea of a city-region expresses this relationship between a city and its larger governing area.

In 1982, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued Document No. 51 on requirements to reform the prefecture system and implement the system of cities-leading-counties. It was piloted in Jiangsu province and expanded nationwide in 1983. By the end of 1994, all provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities in the mainland, except Hainan province, had adopted the new system of governing cities (at the county level) and counties, with 196 prefecture-level cities leading 741 counties, 31 autonomous counties, nine banners and two special zones, and 240 county-level cities. The city-leading-county type of prefecture accounts for over 90 percent of prefecture-level cities. In the context of this reform, Suzhou was the seat of the prefectural government and gained administrative oversight of the county-level jurisdictions in Suzhou prefecture.

The formation of the city system based on the city-leading-county reform has established a national system of cities for economic development. It has resulted from the two simultaneous processes: urban-rural economic integration and government integration of rural and urban areas. Zhao Ziyang, who was premier from 1980–1987,

promoted development of cities as centres of economic functions. The rationale sanctioned social and economic development through urbanization—a stark reversal from the Mao era—and established prefecture-level cities governing multiple counties or county-level cities. Where the historical prefecture was a *paichu jigou* 派出机构 or dispatch office of the province, the prefecture-level city introduced a level of government, a defined territorial area, and new political-economic powers. It scaled-up the political focus of spatial governance to the meso-scale between the prefecture and the county and recovered the role of cities as centres of consumption.

Under the cities-leading-counties arrangement the contemporary prefecture-level city is a city-region of multiple jurisdictions with differential powers, and governs a de facto territory multiple times larger than the city from which it takes its name. This is the "third city" of Suzhou. From the administrative division perspective, the new arrangement made a prefecture-level city govern the whole territory of the old prefecture, not just the territory of the city itself. In this sense, a prefecture-level city occupies the space of a prefecture. From the city system perspective, the prefecture-level city governs the county-level city or cities, capitals of counties, and towns, in which the prefecture-level city functions as the central city. In this sense, a prefecture-level city forms a city system with Chinese characteristics, based on administrative ranks.

The prefectural city itself is comprised of city districts or urban districts. This is the "second city" of Suzhou. Historic districts tend to be relatively small. In 2012 the three small urban districts at the heart of the city of Suzhou—Pingjiang, Canglang, and Jinchang—were merged to form a single larger district, called Gusu. The root of the

name Su and the symbolism of the region appear in the ancient sobriquet of Suzhou, Gusu (see Wang and Nolf, this volume, note 6). In the same year the county-level city of Wujiang was turned into a district of the Suzhou prefectural city, greatly expanding its area. Beibei Tang (this volume) examines population urbanization in Wujiang. Such relatively large urban districts in prefectural cities usually result from changing counties or county-level cities to urban districts, in the process of urban expansion. In these ways, Suzhou is a complex territorial entity. Then to what political geography, past and present, does Suzhou refer? Has Suzhou been a "city" or an administrative division? A citadel or a city has existed in the area of Suzhou for two millennia. Then let us turn to discover the origins and evolution of Suzhou that became the paradigmatic walled city of the imperial era—the "first city" of Suzhou.

Wu, Su, and Historical Administrative Division

Suzhou's past traces a long history to its origins as the capital of the state of Wu in the 6th century BCE. The precursor to the modern city was at the heart of an important regional crossroads that later became an early type of prefecture-level administrative division. This brief account of Suzhou's regional history draws on Olivia Milburn's (2015) treatment of the "region of Wu" between the Qin and the Tang dynasties to gain perspective on the emergence of the prefecture and county system.

Wu was one of the earliest states in the Suzhou area. It was incorporated into empire in stages, prominently, in 223 BCE, when the Qin state conquered the kingdom of Chu, which had conquered Wu in the early fourth century BCE. In the process of unification, the expansionary Qin empire implemented an administrative-territorial

structure. A core area of Wu was reterritorialized as Kuaiji *jun* 郡 or commandery with supervision over more than two dozen counties, among which Wu county featured first in its list. Kuaiji, which named a range of southern hills, underscores the Suzhou region's defensive position at the crossroads of cultural and commercial exchange between the Bai Yue peoples of the south coast and the northern states. This commandery initially extended through modern Zhejiang to the region of the Min Yue. In the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) its territory was divided in two: Kuaiji retained the southern half and the new "Wu" commandery covered the Suzhou area. Wu commandery oversaw twelve counties led by Wu county. (Kuaiji *jun* was reduced to thirteen counties.) Wu commandery's "twelfth county" was Wuxi. The place and the name Wuxi—a major prefecture-level city on the contemporary boundary of eastern Suzhou—descends from the second century CE.

Wu commandery, straddling the Lake Tai basin, had a larger population than Kuaiji. In the year 140 CE, Wu commandery had 164,164 households and 700,782 people, whereas Kuaiji had 123,090 households and 481,196 people (Milburn 2015, 21). Wu spanned the area from the Yangzi River delta to the sea, and from the eastern shore of Lake Tai to the Qiantang River. The population and economy of Jiangnan region, fertile and productive, was growing. In expansionary economic conditions, the empire was inclined to divide prefectures and large counties in order to increase local control and better extract fiscal resources. By the Liang dynasty (502–557), the population of Wu county had substantially increased and the empire responded by dividing it to create a new county called Changshu—which endures today as a county-level city in Suzhou. The name Kunshan—the leading county-level city in

contemporary Suzhou—also first appears as a county in Wu commandery in the Liang period. In the subsequent Sui dynasty (589–618), Wu commandery oversaw five counties, including Wu, Kunshan, and Changshu. The prefecture of the past was less a precise territorial area than it was a level of territorial government with functional resources and supervisory relations over a set of counties.

When does "Suzhou" appear? Suzhou appears as a *zhou* called Su 蘇 in the Tang dynasty (618–907). The word *zhou* 州 , which meant a standard prefecture, is also translated as department, to distinguish it from *jun* 郡 and *fu* 府 and. In the Tang dynasty Su department replaced Wu commandery, yet Wu endured, as one of Su's six counties, in addition to Jiaxing, Kunshan, Changshu, Changzhou, and Haiyan, later joined by Huating. The county called Changzhou, which names the contemporary prefecture-level city east of Wuxi, was created in 696, "when the population of the city of Suzhou had expanded to the point that it could no longer be administered effectively by a single county" (Milburn, 25).

The capital of Wu gained the sobriquet Gusu 姑 蘇 during the kingdom's century of existence in the sixth century BCE. Gusu named a mountain and a monumental viewing terrace built by the kings Wu—the "su" of Gusu is the "su" of Suzhou. Wu had a monumental citadel long before the principles of the *Zhouli* or "Rituals of Zhou" diffused south. The *Zhouli*, a late Warring States (480–221 BCE) or Qin dynasty text, articulates the classic rectilinear form of the imperial capital and state administration in spatial form. It prescribes site, orientation, plan, form, and size for construction of an imperial city (Steinhardt, 1990).

Morphology of the imperial capital in the style of the *Zhouli* diffused south to the Jiangnan region in the 12th century, when the Song emperor resettled at Hangzhou, then called Lin'an. The area, at the southern terminus of the Grand Canal, was a dynamic commercial crossroads. But the landscape, defined by the West Lake and the Qiantang River, challenged monumental planning. The capital city of the Southern Song dynasty emerged in an elongate form along the eastern shore of the West Lake. It was Suzhou, along the shallow basin of Lake Tai, that had sufficient space and wealth to reproduce prescribed imperial form. The epigraphical evidence is the map of Suzhou when it was called Pingjiang *fu* or prefecture, in which a *fu* was a high-ranking prefecture and Suzhou was a significant city in the Southern Song administration. Its plan, carved on a stele in 1229, accurate to scale and inscribed with nearly two thousand features, is the most precise extant early plan of a city in China (Heng 1999, xi; Milburn, 26). In the historical record Suzhou reproduced this imperial form before any northern capital.

City of three counties

A small number of walled cities in imperial China hosted the capital of two counties. Most were major centres of economic activity, including Changsha, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Chengdu, Fuzhou, and Guangzhou. In *The City in Late Imperial China*, G. William Skinner (1977, 343) notes twenty-three cities served as capitals of more than one county. Only one, Suzhou, hosted three. The Qing dynasty walled city, in the early eighteenth century, was uniquely distinctive as the site of three *xian* capitals: Wu, Changzhou, and Yuanhe. In 1724, with increasing population, the imperial government

split Changzhou in two, resulting in the establishment of Yuanhe county in the southeastern area of Suzhou prefecture. From 1724 to the end of the imperial era, in 1912, Wu, Changzhou, and Yuanhe counties were the territories of county administration around the Suzhou walled city. Inside the walled city their county government offices, the *yamen* 衙门, existed faithfully in spatial order, reproducing their extramural territorial arrangement inside the walled city from west to east: Wu, Changzhou, Yuanhe. (Figure 8.1) Additional landmarks inside the walled city include the prefecture school.

<INSERT FIGURE 8.1 HERE>

Map of Suzhou Walled City, ca. 1910 (annotated).

Source: Wu County Gazetteer (吴县志, 民国), 1933.

In the Qing dynasty Suzhou also became for the only time in its history the provincial capital. Suzhou benefitted from the Ming–Qing transition: the Qing empire maintained a northern capital and sought to control and curtail vestiges of power in Nanjing, capital of the early Ming dynasty. The Jiangnan was important and had to be managed from an important center that was not Nanjing. In the 1660s, under the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1661–1722), the governorship of Jiangsu was established in Suzhou.

After the dynastic era, the counties of Changzhou and Yuanhe were revoked and their territory was combined into Wu county. The Republican era opened in Suzhou

with an expanded Wu county—the whole of the area, inside and outside the city walls, became Wu *xian* again. Wu *xian* had existed for over two millennia, but it changed substantially across the centuries. Yet without an analysis of the administrative divisions in historical perspective, it is possible to come to the false conclusion that the territory of Wu county had existed relatively unchanging.

Suzhou Under Reform

In Suzhou the counties transitioned to county-level cities and urban districts beginning in 1983. The decade 1985–1995 saw the greatest number of new county-level cities nationwide, as shown in Table 8.1. In 1982 Suzhou prefecture had eight counties: Changshu, Jiangyin, Kunshan, Shazhou, Taicang, Wu, Wuxi, and Wujiang. In January 1983 the counties were reassessed. The counties of Wu, Wujiang, Kunshan, Taicang, and Shazhou, in addition to Changshu were confirmed in Suzhou prefecture. In a set of administrative changes, the county of Changshu was revoked and reterritorialized as a county-level city. Jiangyin and Wuxi counties were reassigned to the jurisdiction of Wuxi, the prefecture-level city to the east of Suzhou.

In the 1980s Wu county remained at the core of Suzhou and Suzhou government offices were located in Wu. The county-level city of Zhangjiagang emerged in 1986 in association with a name change, replacing Shazhou county. As the counties experienced economic transition, from agriculture to industry, their status changed to county-level cities. Kunshan became a county-level city in 1989, followed by Wujiang in 1992, and Taicang in 1993. Wu became a county-level city only in 1995. The relatively late designation of Wu as a county-level city reflects the location of the suburban lands of Wu county on all sides of the Suzhou urban core.

Wu county came apart in pieces. Before Wu county was “cut up” for development, it encompassed the entirety of the area that is now Huqiu district (Suzhou New District), Xiangcheng district, Wuzhong district, and the Suzhou Industrial Park. The government “gave” pieces of its territory to the large new development areas on the western and eastern flanks of the city, respectively: the Suzhou New District,

established in 1992; and the site for the Singapore–Suzhou Industrial Park, established in 1994. In 2000 Wu county, at the heart of the trans-historical city-region, was finally abolished. Two districts were created from its northern and southern "remnants"—Xiangcheng district, north of the Suzhou core, and Wuzhong district, south of the core. During this decade, from 1990–2000, which corresponds to the fourth and the fifth population census, the resident population of Suzhou transformed from majority rural to majority urban. (Table 8.2)

<INSERT Table 8.2 HERE>

Urban and Rural Population in Suzhou

Source: *Suzhou Statistical Yearbook*, multiple years

The major shifts in the labour force began to take place in the 1990s. In the 1970s, the vast majority of people worked in primary industry, mainly agriculture, while less than one quarter was employed in secondary and tertiary industries or manufacturing and services, respectively. In 1975, for instance, 75.5 percent of the workforce was in primary industry, and just 16.1 percent in manufacturing with less than 10 percent in services. But after reform and rapid industrialization and urbanization, people rapidly shifted from the primary sector to the secondary and tertiary sectors. The distribution of the workforce changed dramatically. (Table 8.3) Even in 1980, about 60 percent of the total workforce still worked in primary industry. But by 1990 less than 30 percent of the workforce was in the primary sector, while more than 50 percent was in the secondary sector with about 20 percent in the tertiary sector. As for recent years, less than 5 percent of the workforce remains in the primary sector. Although rural and

agrarian areas remain in Suzhou, the data show that Suzhou underwent a great rural-urban transition.

<INSERT Table 8.3 HERE>

Workforce Distribution Among Industrial Sectors in Suzhou, 1970s–2010s

Source: *Suzhou Statistical Yearbook*, multiple years

Suzhou's latest major change to the administrative divisions took place in 2012. In that year Wujiang county-level city was reterritorialized as an urban district of Suzhou. This was a major "win" for Suzhou. The incorporation of Wujiang expanded the urban area of Suzhou city from 1,650 km^2 to over 2,700 km^2 and gave Suzhou a direct border with Shanghai. Through Wujiang, Suzhou gained a new basis of land urbanization and revenue, not just from land use transformations. Finances are at stake. The prefectural city maintains a direct budgetary relationship with districts; districts remit fiscal revenue to the city and the city administers the districts. County-level cities maintain their own budgets and decision making. Consequently, county-level cities seek to maintain their governments while prefectural governments seek to convert counties or county-level cities into districts. The conversion of large old counties to districts of the city, like Wujiang, as if joining the urban core, creates a new kind of district with large rural areas in prefectural cities. The notion of "fiscal federalism," i.e., division of local revenue among the administrative divisions, emerges in this context. In terms of industrial sector dynamics, Wujiang became a district at the time when the distribution of industrial production in Suzhou, by GDP growth, shifted from majority

manufacturing towards majority tertiary sector or services industries. The growth and transformation of the bridal fashion industry, among others, demonstrates this shift (see

Sterling, this volume). As Table 8.4 shows, between 2010 and 2015 the services sector became the largest single sector of GDP growth in Suzhou.

<INSERT Table 8.4 HERE>

Suzhou GDP by Industrial Sector (%)

Source: *Suzhou Statistical Yearbook*, multiple years

Territorial urbanization and the Suzhou Industrial Park

A city in China is a level of government made up of historic administrative divisions. Changing them to propel growth and urbanization has become a strategic practice in the reform era, with significant implications for targeted city-region development. In the process of territorial urbanization, administrative divisions are reterritorialized from rural to urban jurisdictions in advance of planned industrial development and urban growth (Cartier, 2015). This process of in Suzhou includes the industrial parks in Suzhou. The Suzhou–Singapore Industrial Park, now known as the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) and informally as the *Gongyeyuan* 工业园 , was established through a territorial process beginning in 1994. It was originally marked out on a 70 km^2 tract of prime agricultural land in the eastern suburbs of Suzhou (Pereira, 2003). Its spatial expansion took place in several phases. The extent of the area, now 288 km^2, has quadrupled from the original size. It was modelled on the special economic zones (SEZs) and given similar powers—effectively it became the fifth SEZ after Hainan Island. As a national-level project the State Council granted the Suzhou Industrial Park

Administrative Committee, and not the provincial capital, Nanjing, power to approve larger-scale investments. (Figure 8.2) shows its original land area outlined in red at the centre of the diagram. The dark-shaded areas across the middle of the planning diagram

indicate the main commercial axis, which starts at the eastern edge of the Suzhou historic core and continues from west to east across the length of the SIP.

<INSERT Figure 8.2 HERE>

Suzhou Industrial Park Master Plan, 2012–2030

(annotated). Source: Suzhou Industrial Park Administrative Committee.

The ironic condition of the *Gongyeyuan* is that it is less an industrial park than a large-scale diversified urban-industrial area of high-rise urban centres, university campuses and branch campuses, high and low-rise residential suburbs, and campus-like industrial parks. Its urban developments feature park-like shopping centres and greened, gated communities mixed among one of the largest centres of international tertiary education in the world. The 2012–2030 master plan for the SIP features two major urban cores and three subsidiary urban centres connecting in all directions. Their built environments feature over 100 skyscrapers and iconic projects led by the Suzhou Gate of the East.

Reterritorialization and revitalization of Suzhou city

In 2012 Wujiang county-level city was reterritorialized as an urban district of Suzhou, and simultaneously Canglang, Pingjiang and Jinchang, the three small urban districts in the Suzhou core, within the historic walled city, were merged to form a single larger district called Gusu, which honoured Suzhou's ancient history. This set of adjustments

constitutes the biggest administrative territorial change in Suzhou since 2000. It created new urban space and development opportunity for the revitalization of Suzhou city, and has been a big issue for the cadres of Suzhou because the county-level cities of Suzhou

are among the top cities nationally by GDP growth and are not easily converted to city districts (Cartier, 2016). For example, in 2011, Suzhou city, based on the urban districts directly under the control of the city, produced one-third or 33.50 percent of the total GDP of the Suzhou prefecture-level city. The share of the county-level cities varied from 7.16 percent in Taicang, the lowest, to 20.06 percent in Kunshan, the highest. In total, the five county-level cities accounted for 66.50 percent of Suzhou GDP. As for the per capita GDP and increasing rate of GDP, the county-level cities trumped Suzhou city irrespective of population. Table 8.5 shows the economic performance of the five county-level cities of Suzhou. All five routinely held top places on the list of the 100 strongest counties in China, the *bai qiang xian pai hang bang*, 百强县排行榜, and for many years occupied four or five of the top ten positions, prompting comments by common people, government officials and scholars alike, especially that "Suzhou is strong, but it is not because of Suzhou city, instead it is because of the county-level cities."

<INSERT Table 8.5 HERE>

Economic Performance in the Suzhou City-Region, 2011

Source: *Suzhou Statistical Yearbook*, multiple years

Thus with Wujiang reterritorialized as an urban district of Suzhou, it first made the city economically larger and stronger, as shown by the total investment in fixed assets. This is an important index to indicate how much capital is invested in a specific area for

economic production and social development. The general outlook from the perspective of government is that “the more, the better.” Table 8.6 shows the increase in total investment in Wujiang at the time of the merger, in both the absolute amounts and the

share in the whole of Suzhou municipality, i.e. including the county-level cities. In 1980, the share of Suzhou city was 56.56 percent, and it decreased each year to 48.89 percent in 1990, and 43.80 percent in 1995. In 2000, it rose to 48.96 percent, but this should not be seen as a "renaissance" of Suzhou city because the merger of Wu county-level city— contributed the additional part. This is the historic Wu county which had become a county-level city in 1995 and was cancelled in 2000. Wu's share was then added to Suzhou's. In 2010, the share dropped to 38 percent, the lowest after 1979. This decline indicates Suzhou city's weakening position relative to the surrounding county-level cities' booming strength—it is not difficult to understand the tension that exists among them. The investment environment also illustrates why Suzhou wanted and finally succeeded in merging Wujiang, the nearest county-level city: with the merger, the share of the new Suzhou city increased markedly in 2012 to 51.10 percent and 54.65 percent in 2015. However, it is worth noting that Suzhou's increasing share since the merger is not a simple case of addition or a zero-sum game. Suzhou city's share, excluding Wujiang, also rose in 2011, to 38.68 percent, and to 45.70 in 2015. To some degree the merger effectively signalled that a bigger, stronger Suzhou city meant the opportunity to re-emerge and be revitalized in the future, which helped the new Suzhou city gain more investment.

<INSERT Table 8.6 HERE>

Total Investment in Suzhou before and after the Wujiang Merger

Source: *Suzhou Statistical Yearbook*, multiple years

Second, the merger gave Suzhou city a new chance to re-draft the blueprint of urban development and spatial development strategies. Just several months after the

merger, in May 2013, the Suzhou city government issued the Immediate Construction Plan of Suzhou City, 2012–2015, and the Lake Tai New Towns project. (Figure 8.3) The Lake Tai project new towns in Wujiang and Wuzhong presented a new, higher standard of development than the High-Speed Rail New Town in the north and the Eco-Tech New Town in the west. In July 2013, the Party secretary of Suzhou, Jiang Hongkun, first put forward the new concept "Suzhou Bay" to define the future of the Tai Lake New Towns area. He also declared that the Tai Lake New Towns must be built to a high standard and become the leading highlight of Suzhou city in the 21st century (*Suzhou News*, 2013). At the end of August the Suzhou Civil Affairs Bureau published the 'Naming of Suzhou Bay' for public review (Suzhou Civil Affairs Bureau, 2013).

On New Year's Day 2014, the promotional video of Suzhou Bay and Tai Lake New Towns was broadcast on both the CCTV-1 and the CCTV morning news. Under the special planning and with strong support of the Suzhou government, first-tier housing enterprises such as Greenland, Beijing Capital Development Holding, and China National Real Estate Development Group joined Suzhou Bay and promoted the development of the Tai Lake new towns, which greatly increased the value of the area. They demonstrate the major changes in the Suzhou urban spatial framework and strategic development blueprint after the Wujiang merger.

<INSERT FIGURE 8.3 HERE>

Suzhou Bay Taihu New Town

Source: Google Earth

Third, the establishment of Gusu district by reterritorialization of the three small core districts of the old city helped to revitalized the urban core of Suzhou and protect

the historical landscape of Wu. Suzhou is a national historical and cultural city, and Pingjiang, Canglang and Jinchang not only formed its nucleus but also contained the main historical blocks, ancient dwellings, classical gardens, and city walls—Suzhou's classical historical landscapes, cultural landmarks, and heritage resources. The combination of the three districts as Gusu has formed a unified administrative division for the area of the ancient city. The government of Gusu works to develop an integrated cultural and environmental protection area for the ancient city.

Conclusion

A city for all time, Suzhou has thrived and revived across centuries of cultural, political, and economic change. The idea of a city-region, expressing a relationship between a city and its larger governing area, is especially dynamic in China because the Chinese state changes cities through the system of administrative divisions. Under reform, Suzhou is simultaneously the enduring ancient city of culture, economy, and identity; the modern city of old and new districts; and the prefecture-level administrative division of city-leading-counties—three cities of Suzhou.

This historical analysis of Suzhou shows how the prefecture has gained new meaning as the context of industrialization and urbanization in China under reform. The prefecture has become the leading administrative division of city-system development and the political-economic context of rural-urban transition. Different from rural-urban transition research focusing on rural-urban population migration or regional landscape transformation, analysis of administrative divisions in rural-urban transition sheds light on how their dynamics restructure the space economy, shaping the processes of

transformation from primary to secondary and tertiary industry and rural to urban development.

The administration of prefectures from major cities in China is not new. When Suzhou prefecture emerged in the Pingjiang map, in 1229, we find how Suzhou *fu* excelled at city building on the imperial standard. Suzhou was also at the forefront in the late twentieth century with the implementation of the city-leading-counties reform for organization of economic development through city-regions. The prefecture-level city is leading regional development in China's time of rural-urban transition. Its conditions and challenges reflect political and economic reform. And yet, whether historical empire or modern state, the prefectural administrative division serves the need for flexible administration of urban and economic transformation at the meso-scale.

References

Cartier, C. 2015. "Territorial Urbanization and the Party-state in China," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 3 (3), 294–320.

Cartier, C. and Hu, D. 2015. "Administrative Territory." In D.S.G. Goodman, ed., *The Handbook of Chinese Politics*, 147-164. Edward Elgar.

Cartier, C. 2016. "A Political Economy of Rank: The Territorial Administrative Hierarchy and Leadership Mobility in Urban China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100, 529-546.

Chan, K. W. 1994. *Cities with Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanization in Post-1949 China*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Chan, K. W. 2007. “Misconceptions and complexities: study of China’s cities.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 48 (4), 383–412.

Chan, K. W. “Fundamentals of China’s Urbanization and Policy.” *The China Review* 10 (1), 63-94.

Government of the Suzhou Industrial Park. 2011. “Scientific Masterplan.” July 4, 2011. http://www.sipac.gov.cn/english/InvestmentGuide/ScientificMasterPlan/201107/t20110704_102990.htm

Heng, H. C. 1999. *Cites of Aristocrats and Bureaucrats: The Development of Medieval Chinese Cityscapes*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Milburn, O. 2013. *Cherishing Antiquity: The Cultural Construction of an Ancient Chinese Kingdom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University East Asia Center.

Milburn, O. 2015. *Urbanization in Early and Medieval China: Gazetteers for the City of Suzhou*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Pereira, Alexius A. 2003. *State Collaboration and Development Strategies in China: The Case of the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

SIPAC. 2014. “Highlights 2013: Highlight 4: New City, New Appeal.” Suzhou Industrial Park Administrative Committee. http://www.sipac.gov.cn/english/zhuanti/201401ld/zg/201402/t20140211_255232.htm

Suzhou Civil Affairs Bureau. 2013. “Suzhou Naming Plan Publicity.” http://www.suzhou.gov.cn/news/gsgg/201308/t20130830_277080.shtml

Suzhou News. 2013. “Focus on Building Lake Tai Suzhou Bay.” July 26, 2013. http://news.2500sz.com/news/szxw/2013-7/26_2086532.shtml

Xu, Y. 2000. *The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press.

Zhou, Y.X. and Ma, L.J.C. 2003. “China’s Urbanization levels.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 173, 176-196.

Acknowledgements

The Australian Research Council Discovery Projects (DP120101901 and DP170100871) have funded fieldwork and research support for this work in collaboration with the East China Normal University Research Center for Administrative Divisions in China.