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# The Chinese model of urban development: city transformations and administrative division adjustments, 1978–2020

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## ABSTRACT

China's urban development has made unprecedented achievements since reform and opening. Government-led administrative division adjustments have played a crucial role, yet there is still a lack of comprehensive and systematic analysis of how administrative division adjustments affect urban development from a dynamic perspective. The differences and the logic behind various types of adjustments are also under-examined. An original GIS database was created that integrates yearly administrative division maps and statistical indicators at the county level to track the spatial-temporal transformation of administrative divisions in relation to urban development. Together with the policy contexts of different periods, this analysis reveals how administrative division adjustment, as a tool of administration, has shaped the characteristics of China's city transformation and evolution under reform. The research also provides new insights into administrative division adjustments at the county level. The results contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the system of China's sub-national territory and the logic of frequent changes.

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Urban development; city; administrative divisions; county; county-level city; city district

## Introduction

Over the past four decades in China, the urban population, number of cities, and city size have witnessed unprecedentedly rapid growth. Between 1978 and 2020, China's population urbanization rate significantly increased from 17.92% to 63.89% (NBS 2021). The number of cities increased from 193 in 1978 to 687 in 2020 including prefecture-level cities and county-level cities, with an average annual increase of nearly 12 cities (USSD 2022). The area of urban construction land has also increased from 6,720 km<sup>2</sup> in 1981 to 58,308 km<sup>2</sup> in 2019, with an expansion of more than eight times and an average

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annual increase of 1,323 km<sup>2</sup> (MHUD 2022). These significant conditions of growth and advancement have been achieved only after the implementation of reform and opening.

In the pre-reform period of the planned economy, as a traditionally agrarian and newly socialist country, China's central policies curbed urbanization and marketization (Chan 1994a). Since economic reform, the primary industry and related employment have decreased, and urban-related industries and employment have increased. The contribution of primary industry to GDP has continued to decrease, from 27.7% of GDP in 1978 to 7.7% in 2020, and employment in the primary industry has also declined steadily, with an average annual reduction rate of 1.1% from 1979 to 2020 (NBS 2021). Meanwhile, the share of tertiary industry mainly in urbanizing regions has continued to expand rapidly, from 24.6% of GDP in 1978 to 54.5% in 2020, and the corresponding employed population has also increased at an average annual rate of 4.9% from 1979 to 2020 (NBS 2021). The transformation indicates that over the past four decades, cities have undoubtedly been the most important engine of China's rapid economic advancement, and urbanization has been one of the core structural driving forces of socioeconomic transformation (Bai, Shi, and Liu 2014; Lu and Tsai 2019).

Comparative research on urban development in the history of the capitalist city assumes that urban growth and land development take place through coalitions of landowners and market developers, supported by city governments (Kim 2000; Logan and Molotch 2007; Stone 1989). Moreover, urban sprawl is identified as a spontaneous, endogenous, and sometimes anarchic process (Bae and Richardson 2017; Wolfe 2019). However, in China, cities have evolved into territorialized city-regions empowered with enlarged authority and accountability (Cartier 2013; L. J. Ma 2005). The city under reform is an amalgamation of types of administrative divisions with salient features of administrative powers and hierarchies, and their territory generally includes not only urban areas with urban populations but also vast rural areas with populations of rural *hukou* (Cartier 2022; Chan 2007; Chung and Lam 2004).

Given the unique hierarchical and territorial attributes of Chinese cities, Shu (1994) first identified the spatial economic phenomenon of the "administrative region economy" caused by rigid constraints of administrative divisions in China since reform. Specifically, local governments, based on their own interests, adopt various administrative interventions to actively protect enterprises and market activities within their jurisdictions and to impede the horizontal flow of production factors across administrative regions, resulting in such regional economy phenomena as market segmentation, local protectionism, and duplicative construction (J. Liu 1996). Under economic system reform, adjusting the administrative divisions was a strategic approach to enhance the status and function of cities, promote urbanization, and invigorate the economy nationwide.

Adjustment of administrative divisions is the highest-level policy design for China's territorial space (Feng and Wang 2022). A large body of research has examined the patterns and characteristics of different types of administrative division adjustments since reform (Z. Luo 2008; J. Wu 2019; Zhu 2015). These adjustments have had a significant impact on regional economic and social development, urbanization, land use, fiscal revenue, and ecological environment (Feng, Wang, and Wang 2022; H. Li, Guo, and Zhang 2023; H. Ma et al. 2024; K. Wang and Feng 2021; J. Wang and Yeh 2020; Yu, Deng, and Xu 2018). The resource attribute of administrative divisions *per se* has also raised a wider concern across various disciplines (Tian 2020; K. Wang 2019; J. Wu 2022; Xue 2023; Y. Yang 2024). An increasing number of studies have theorized the restructuring of administrative divisions from the perspectives of politics of scale and de-/re-territorialization and have validated the theories through empirical studies (X. Luo 2010; L. J. Ma 2005; Shen 2007; F. Wang 2019; J. Zhang 2016).

Much of the literature on China's urban development has focused on measuring the perplexing urbanization level and rural-urban migration, or examining the urban space transformation and expansion patterns (Chan 1994b; Chan and Zhang 1999; Friedmann 2005; F. Liu et al. 2016; F. Wu, Xu, and Yeh 2006; L. Zhang and Zhao 1998; Zhen et al. 2010). Y. Liu, Yin, and Ma (2012) conceptualized the Chinese model of urbanization in the post-reform period as "administrative urbanization" which emphasizes the forcefully decisive role that the party-state has played in the production and development of the new urban space, the decision and process of administrative division restructuring. Cartier (2015) adopted a spatial approach by interpreting the administrative divisions as subnational territories to formulate territorial urbanization as the state-led process of designating and expanding cities. Territorial urbanization highlights general and unique changes to administrative divisions' governing space, including mergers, re-ranking, and multiple types of remapping. Territorial urbanization differs from and generally precedes population urbanization and land urbanization (Cartier and Wu 2023).

With China's rapid urbanization and rising prominence in the global economy, quite a few concepts and theories derived from Western urbanology have been introduced and applied to urban studies in China. Tang (2014) critically identified two commonplace practices in urban China research: random conceptual indigenization and random conceptual appropriation. The former involves searching for those Western concepts that seem to depict approximate patterns and applying them to urban China; the latter refers to concepts introduced by researchers for the benefit of governing that may turn into rhetoric to rationalize policies. The interweaving of the two has produced epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and political problems (Tang and Chan 2021). For instance, in some of the international literature, the risk of theoretical

mismatch may exist when treating territorialized city-regions in China as if they are cities, ignoring the omnipresent party-state power relations and the continuity and legacy of the Maoist socialist practices post-reform, which may reproduce the research problem of simply using Chinese data to painstakingly “fit” Western models (Buckingham 2017; Cartier 2013; Oakes 2019; Zhou, Lin, and Zhang 2019). Following paradigms of the experience of the urban process under capitalism and lack of an adequate understanding of post-Mao reforms are the primary reasons for such problematic studies (Cartier 2019; Chan and Wei 2019).

A general academic consensus is that the state plays a critical role in the process of China’s urbanization and city growth (Cartier and Wu 2023; Shen, Wong, and Feng 2002; Tian, Ge, and Li 2017; Ye 2014), and the contribution of government-led administrative division adjustments is extremely significant (Cartier 2018; Chan 2010; Y. Chen et al. 2023; Y. Liu, Yin, and Ma 2012). However, there is still a lack of comprehensive and systematic analysis of how administrative division adjustments affect urban development and transformation from a dynamic perspective. Scant attention has been paid to the formative process of the current administrative division system and the historical and social context of its frequent adjustments. This article takes urban development as the main line of inquiry by examining changes in urban population, number of cities, spatial expansion, and the structural transformation and evolution of Chinese cities, systematically analyzing the logical nexus between urban growth and administrative division adjustments. It seeks to clarify key strategic changes to China’s sub-national territory system, from pre-reform to post-reform, and systematically expound on the “how” and “why” of their changing conditions.

An original GIS database was created for the years 1978–2020, which contains yearly county-level administrative division digital maps, and yearly official statistical development indicators on economy, finance, demographics, and city construction.<sup>1</sup> The database records all types of administrative division adjustments that have occurred each year between 1978 and 2020.

A set of progressive research questions frames the course of the analysis. If administrative division adjustments have had unprecedented impacts on urban growth, why do the impacts occur only in the reform period? What are the differences in administrative division structure and city spatial structure between the pre-reform and reform periods? What are the characteristics and implications of administrative divisions themselves? What are governments’ approaches, rationales, and motivations to adjust administrative divisions? How do policy factors constrain urban development and administrative division adjustment? What has been the impact of the different types of adjustments on the development of Chinese cities in various periods over the past four decades? What is the underlying logic behind the frequent adjustments, especially at the county level?

## Cities and administrative divisions, 1949–1978

Counties dominated by agricultural production have been the cornerstone of China's subnational territory since ancient times. During the Maoist era based on unshaken prejudices of socialist ideology, even though cities played an indispensable role of being the "cash cows" for the state, their growth was fairly successfully suppressed (Chien 2010; Naughton 2007; Whyte 1996). What is less well known, however, is that China's cities also experienced a brief period of prosperity in the early 1950s.

### *Cities in the pre-reform period*

In the early years of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), urban development experienced a short period of vigorous development. During the eight years from 1949 to 1957, the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1957) was formulated with industrial construction as its focus. Cities absorbed large numbers of rural people as industrial workers and a total of 44 new cities were established nationwide during this period (MIA 1958; P. Zhang 1951).

In the following eight years from 1958 to 1965, the number of cities underwent a chaotic period of severe oscillation. Influenced by the Great Leap Forward, a more massive wave of industrialization swept across the country, which led to another influx of peasants into cities and towns. Simultaneously, the Great Leap Forward in industrial production and construction also spurred a great leap forward in the number of cities. In less than three years, 1957–1960, 32 new cities were established (MIA 1958; MIA 1961). To control the disorderly and excessive growth of cities and urban populations, a series of coercive measures were put in place.

In 1963, the central government critically reviewed the existing designated cities following the criteria issued in 1955. According to the criteria, a designated city (*jianzhi shi* 建制市) was defined as an administrative unit under the leadership of a province, autonomous region, or autonomous prefecture, with a clustered population of more than 100,000. For cities or towns with a clustered population of less than 100,000 to be established as designated cities, they must be sites of provincial government bodies, important industrial and mining bases, larger material distribution centers, or located in remote areas (MCA 2000). Those cities that did not meet the standards were abolished in 1963. The number of designated cities rapidly declined and was virtually back to the same quantity as it was before 1957.

To control the urban population, the central government released multiple administrative fiats, requiring local governments to take such measures as regulating (*guan* 管), blocking (*du* 堵), jamming (*ka* 卡) and intercepting (*jie* 截) in order to dissuade or prevent peasants from pouring into cities (Song 2014). This culminated in the promulgation of China's first set of *hukou*

legislation by the National People's Congress in 1958. This new legislation established a fully-fledged *hukou* institution and granted state agencies much greater powers in controlling citizens' geographical mobility through a system of migration permits and recruitment and enrollment certificates (Chan and Zhang 1999). However, as the radical campaign of the Great Leap Forward was in full swing at this time, this legislation was simply brushed aside (Chan 1988; Cheng and Selden 1994). The urban population did not decrease effectively until the nationwide famine of the late 1950s. Between 1960 and 1964, the non-agricultural population decreased by an average of 4.1 million per year (CASS 1986). The *hukou* legislation further consolidated and reinforced China's urban-rural dual system, under which urban and rural areas were governed separately and treated differentially, and their respective populations and labor force were also not permitted to migrate without approval of the *hukou* authorities (Chan and Wei 2019).

In the decade that followed, 1966–1976, the country suffered the shock of the Great Cultural Revolution, which brought urban development-related work to a standstill. Restrictions on population movement were further tightened. The 1975 revised PRC Constitution removed the clause “PRC citizens have a freedom of residence and movement,” which was in the 1954 Constitution. This provision has not been reinstated in any subsequent revision of the Constitution.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Administrative division structure in the pre-reform period***

China's administrative division structure during the pre-reform period was changeable and characterized by urban-rural divided governance. A system of greater administrative regions (*da xingzhengqu* 大行政区) was briefly established between the central government and province-level governments but was only implemented for less than five years (1949–1954). Moreover, the system of dispatch agencies (*paichu jigou* 派出机构) was established between the formal tiers of administrative divisions, but such dispatch agencies were highly unstable and varied greatly from region to region (Cartier and Wu 2023).

During this time, rural and urban areas had completely different administrative division structures. In most rural areas, there was a formal three-tier administrative division structure consisting of the province level, county level, and township level. However, dispatch agencies were commonly established between these levels, despite the reality that the PRC constitutions never endorse or mention them. The system of “special prefecture office” (*zhuanqu zhuanshu* 专区专署) was one type of dispatch agency between the provincial and county levels, existing from 1949 to 1966. Then it was transformed into the system of “prefecture revolutionary committees” (*diqu geming weiyuanhui* 地区革命委员会) during the Cultural Revolution, and gradually developed into a formal administrative tier. The major responsibility of both systems, with their respective jurisdictions being called “special prefecture” (*zhuanqu* 专区)

and “prefecture” (*diqu* 地区), was to supervise and guide the work of a certain number of county governments. Another type of dispatch agency was established between the county and township levels, named the “county-administered district office” (*qu gongsuo* 区公所), which was responsible for the work of a certain number of township-level governments, with the jurisdiction being referred to as the “county-administered district” (*xian guanqu* 县管区). While dispatch agencies were usually not formal tiers of administrative divisions, they functioned as a real layer of local authority in practice. As a result, there was a *de facto* five-tier administrative division structure in the vast rural areas for a long time.

Cities, as a separate urban system, only had jurisdiction over very small city proper and suburban spaces. The city proper was a city’s core area and was composed of city districts, while suburbs were larger in size and delimited for functional needs, especially as production bases for the supply of vegetables and foodstuffs for cities. According to the subordination relationship (*lishu guanxi* 隶属关系) and hierarchy, designated cities were classified as province-level cities (or directly central-administered cities), province-administered cities (renamed as prefecture-level cities since 1983), and prefecture-administered cities (renamed as county-level cities since 1983). Of these, only prefecture-administered cities, i.e. county-level cities, are not authorized to establish city districts and they directly govern township-level units.

As shown on the left side of Figure 1, in the pre-reform period, the national territory at each level was divided into two separate governance systems of administrative divisions – the urban-based administrative division system and the rural-based administrative division system. The two systems were administratively not subordinate to each other. This means that cities were not legally entitled to exercise administrative powers over counties except over their city proper. Within the rural-based system, there were also urban-type administrative designations, such as province-administered cities at level two and prefecture-administered cities at level three under provincial jurisdiction, which

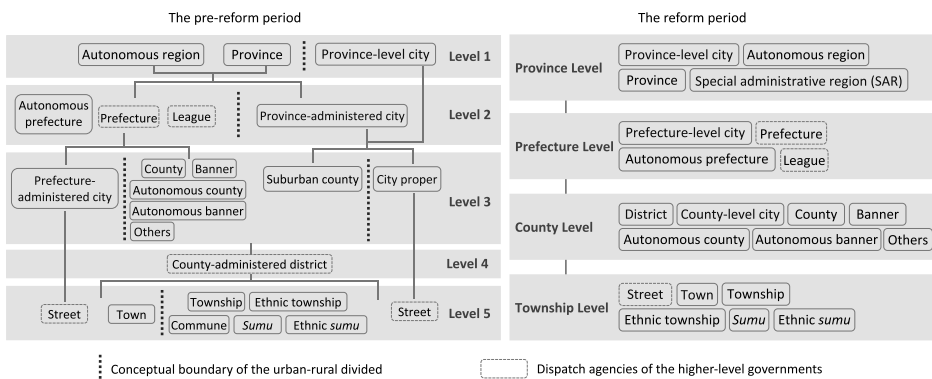


Figure 1. Comparison of administrative division structure in the pre-reform and reform periods.

were likewise governed separately from other rural-type administrative designations of the same level.

A limited connection was built between them in 1959 when the “city leading counties” first received legal recognition intending to ensure urban supply and demand for agricultural products. However, only province-level cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, and large province-administered cities were authorized to administratively lead a small number of their surrounding counties (SCNPC 2004). As of 1965, only 78 out of the more than 2,100 counties were under the administration of 24 cities, and the numbers did not change dramatically during the ensuing Cultural Revolution (Chien 2010).

The establishment of new cities in that era centered around the construction of small industrial and mineral cities and towns (J. Liu 2015). This mainly involved carving out a small section of a county, typically the most economically prosperous towns like the county seat or industrial and mining bases, to create a new county-level city, which was called “*qiekuai sheshi* 切块设市” (J. Liu 1999). These new cities were often limited in size and surrounded by the original county, leading to challenges in urban expansion and potential conflicts between the city and county.

## **The transition of the urban-rural governance system in the reform period**

The situation significantly transformed when China formally implemented reform and opening, and shifted its focus to economic construction. In the early 1980s, the central government began implementing administrative system reforms aiming to reform the economic system, streamline administrative institutions and personnel, improve efficiency – and integrate urban and rural administration. In this context, the system of “city leading counties” was revived but re-defined. The central government subsequently issued two circulars in late 1982 and early 1983 that deployed detailed plans for implementing this system (CPCSC 1982; CPCSC 1983; J. Yang 2001; Hou 2020).

The “city leading counties” system, in the age of reform, aimed to establish nationwide subordination relationships and connections between urban and rural areas, with a transition from the urban-rural divided governance structure to urban-rural integrated governance. It also created a unified four-tier administrative division structure, with prefecture-level cities gradually replacing prefectures as the dominant designation between the province and county levels (Figure 1, right side). Counties representing large rural areas were placed under the jurisdiction of prefecture-level cities. New prefecture-level cities under reform inherited and combined the authority and accountabilities of former prefectures and province-administered cities, and became responsible for both the economic growth and urban construction of city districts and the agricultural production of surrounding counties. Since then, most cities in China

evolved into city-regions which had jurisdiction over the city proper of city districts and vast rural counties. Additionally, instead of creating separate county-level cities for economically prominent towns within a county, the entire county was transformed into city status. This conversion of the whole county to a county-level city, replacing the previous method of establishing small cities, *qiekuai sheshi*, became one of the most common administrative division adjustments in the first 20 years of reform.

At the same time, the restrictions on population movement and rural-urban migration were also eased to a certain degree (MCA 2000). Allowing labor mobility and promoting the exchange of goods and supplies between urban and rural areas contributed substantially to breaking down the rural-urban divided governance structure. It is worth emphasizing that the persistence of the *hukou* system makes it impossible to fundamentally solve or eliminate the urban-rural dual governance. Urban-rural integrated governance reflects that the urban and rural administrative divisions are placed under the same jurisdiction for administration. Regarding the urban and rural populations, a notable evolution has been the change from the pre-reform strict restriction on place of residence to the post-reform differentiated treatment of social benefits only. However, the definite distinction between urban-rural administrative division designations and urban-rural land categories persists, although these divisions are not necessarily fixed and are in the process of change.

## Hierarchy and adjustments of administrative divisions after reform

### *The hierarchy of administrative divisions*

Since the widespread implementation of the “city leading counties” system, China’s administrative division framework has gradually evolved into an urban-rural integrated and stable four-tier administrative division structure across the country. Specifically, the Chinese administrative division system of subnational territory is vertically divided into four levels including province level, prefecture level, county level, and township level, as shown on the right side of [Figure 1](#). The administrative division level reflects subordination relationships between the levels, and each level contains a variety of different types of designation. For instance, at the county level, there are at least seven types of designation which are city district, county-level city, county, autonomous county, banner (*qi* 旗), autonomous banner (*zizhi qi* 自治旗), and forest district (*lin qu* 林区).

Ostensibly, each administrative division unit is framed in a definite position and hierarchy, meaning that administrative units at the same level and with the same type of designation should enjoy the same treatment and authorization of power. But the actual prerogatives enjoyed, and potential power of an administrative division unit, can be extremely complex, varied, and invisible. For instance, the bureaucratic rank of city districts under province-level cities is

higher than that of city districts under ordinary prefecture-level cities, despite all being at the same administrative division level – the county level. Furthermore, there are currently 15 deputy-provincial cities, which are at the prefecture level in the structure, but they all enjoy additional privileges such as legislative authority and financial autonomy from respective province governments, and their bureaucratic rank is half a level higher than that of ordinary prefecture-level cities.

Therefore, to fully understand the actual prerogatives and potential powers of an administrative division unit, in addition to its administrative division level, two additional aspects should also be considered: the administrative rank of local government and the administrative rank of local Party secretary (J. Liu 2015). These three aspects together determine the power actually enjoyed by an administrative division unit.

The administrative rank of local government refers to the administrative rank of the government body and bureaucracy, defining its empowered authority. Corresponding to the administrative division level, the rank is divided into four levels below the central government: province/ministry level (*sheng bu ji* 省部级), prefecture/department level (*di ting ji* 地厅级), county/division level (*xian chu ji* 县处级), and township/section level (*xiang ke ji* 乡科级). Additionally, each level includes a deputy level such as 15 deputy-provincial cities mentioned above. China's administration system at all levels is organized into two systems: functional administration and territorial administration, which is also known as "tiao kuai 条块" management (Mertha 2005). Functional administration refers to the top-down vertical management of functional institutions to specific fields or industries, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance, while territorial administration refers to local governments at all levels being responsible for administrative affairs within their respective administrative divisions, such as the Shanghai city government and the Guangdong province government. Functional institutions directly under the State Council share the same rank with provincial governments in the administrative hierarchy, e.g. the Ministry of Education of PRC and the Guangdong province government are at the same level and are therefore called province/ministry level. Other levels are similar to this.

Usually, the administrative rank is constrained by and corresponds to the administrative division level. However, the two can sometimes be inconsistent, especially if the administrative division tiers are greater or less than four. The province-level cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing all run a three-tier administrative division structure, with no prefecture level. All city districts under their jurisdiction are at the county level in the administrative division structure, but the administrative rank of all city district governments has the status of the prefecture/department level.

The administrative rank of local Party secretary refers mainly to the rank and status of the Party secretary in the national civil service system.

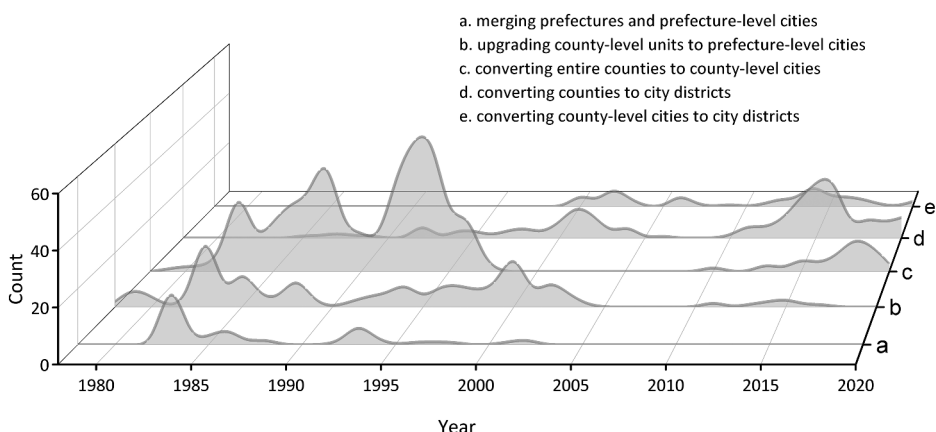
Usually, the administrative rank of the Party secretary matches that of the government body. However, in practice, the phenomenon of higher match (*gao pei* 高配) is very common, which means an administrative division unit is staffed with officials at a higher level than its government rank (Cartier 2016). The higher match highlights the important status of an administrative division unit and can be advantageous in political bargaining (Jaros 2023). For instance, Yan'an city in Shaanxi province is a prefecture-level city, but as a former revolutionary base of the Communist Party of China before 1949, its Party secretary is at the deputy-province/ministry level. Also, Suzhou city in Jiangsu province, as a prefecture-level city, is staffed with a Party secretary at the deputy-province/ministry level, which helps to coordinate the relationship between the economically strong county-level cities under its jurisdiction and the Suzhou city government.

### ***Characteristics and adjustments of administrative divisions***

The administrative division *per se* is a kind of resource (K. Wang 2019). Its hierarchy and type of designation define its power of economic and social administration, determine its capacity to access resources, and also affect its development relationship with surrounding administrative division units (Yu, Deng, and Xu 2018). Adjusting administrative divisions is intrinsically a redistribution of resources and jurisdictions in subnational territory, with different interested subjects or agents preferring different ways of adjustment.

Adjustments may involve the increase or decrease in administrative division tiers, changes in the type of designation, changes in the administrative rank, changes in subordination relationships, adjustments of boundaries, merger, partition, relocation of the governmental seat, and renaming of administrative regions. Each of these adjustments can take different forms, achieved in different ways, and the various adjustments are often intertwined together and appear simultaneously in a single adjustment.

By examining the policies of urban development during different periods and analyzing the various types of and motivations for administrative division adjustments, the data show that during the first two decades of reform, the adjustments closely related to urban development involved a) merging prefectures and prefecture-level cities, b) upgrading counties or county-level cities to prefecture-level cities, and c) converting entire counties into county-level cities. However, over the past two decades, promoting urbanization has become the dominant policy context, under which the adjustments have shifted to d) converting counties to city districts and e) converting county-level cities to city districts.



**Figure 2.** The historical evolution of the five dominant ways of administrative division adjustments, 1978–2020.

Figure 2 shows how these five types of administrative division adjustments have changed over the past four decades. Specifically, the first three adjustments (a, b, c) were the most common during the 1980s and 1990s, while the last two adjustments (d, e) became the main modalities between the 2000s and 2010s.

### City transformations and administrative division adjustments, 1980–2000

The coercive transfer of the type of designation from a rural-type administrative division to an urban-type administrative division is one of the urban development models unique to China. Under such a model, large numbers of traditional agricultural counties have been reclassified to urban-type administrative divisions including county-level cities, prefecture-level cities, and city districts. Behind these changes, policy is a crucial factor in determining the direction of urban development and approaches to administrative division adjustment.

The reform of “city leading counties”, as a macro-level policy, has been promoted by the central government since 1983, leading to large-scale administrative division adjustments at the prefecture and county levels. This specifically involves merging prefectures and prefecture-level cities and upgrading counties or county-level cities to prefecture-level cities.

#### *Merging prefectures and prefecture-level cities*

The merger of prefectures and prefecture-level cities involves combining the prefecture administrative office and the prefecture-level city government, followed by abolishing the prefecture administrative office. As a result, the county-

level administrative division units that were formerly under the jurisdiction of the prefecture are all placed under the jurisdiction of the prefecture-level cities. The purpose of this adjustment is to achieve the reform of “city leading counties.” Prior to being extended to the whole country, Jiangsu, as a pilot, was the first province to implement such adjustments in early 1983. For example, the prefecture administrative office of Nantong was merged with the Nantong prefecture-level city government, then the prefecture administrative office of Nantong was repealed, and its six counties were placed under the Nantong prefecture-level city to lead. Another common approach to the merger is directly abolishing a prefecture administrative office and placing all its county-level units in other prefecture-level cities for leadership.

After the Cultural Revolution, the prefecture revolutionary committees were renamed prefecture administrative offices and reverted their status as dispatch agencies. However, with the initiation of the “city leading counties” reform, the system of prefecture administrative offices was gradually phased out. In 1980, 170 prefecture administrative offices governed 1,680 county-level units, versus 107 prefecture-level cities leading only 137 counties. However, as of 2004, the number of prefecture administrative offices had decreased to only 17, governing just 141 county-level units, while the number of prefecture-level cities had increased to 283, leading more than 1,700 county-level divisions, excluding city districts. This adjustment has endowed prefecture-level cities with vast hinterlands for future expansion.

### ***Upgrading counties or county-level cities to prefecture-level cities***

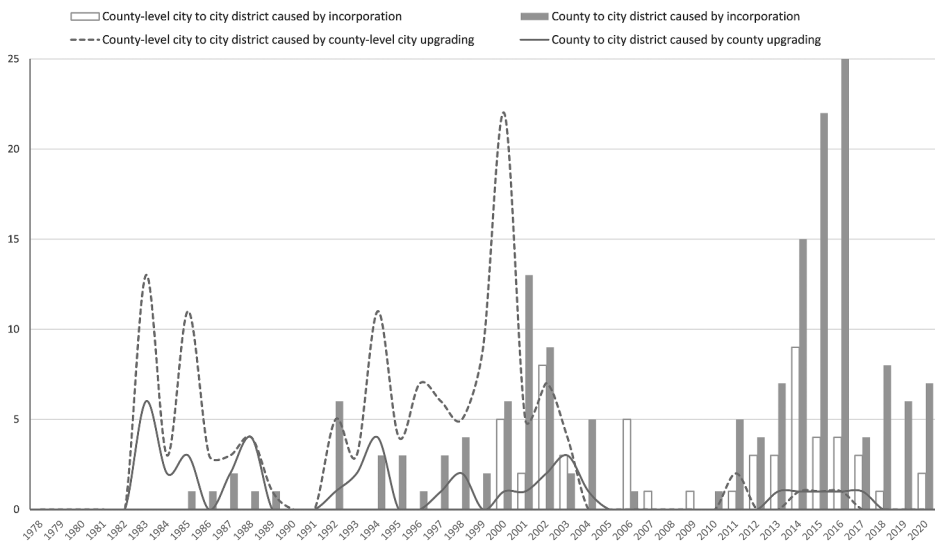
The central government also implemented another method for accelerating the “city leading counties” reform, which involves abolishing a prefecture administrative office and upgrading (*sheng ge* 升格) a county or county-level city within its jurisdiction to the status of a prefecture-level city to lead the remaining county-level administrative divisions. When a county or county-level city is upgraded to a prefecture-level city, the territory of the county or county-level city jurisdiction is converted into new city districts of the new prefecture-level city. For example, the prefecture administrative office of Zhaoqing in Guangdong province, located in the northwest of the Pearl River Delta, governed a county-level city named Zhaoqing and 10 counties. In 1988, it was abolished and the county-level city Zhaoqing was upgraded to the prefecture-level city Zhaoqing and then governed the remaining 10 counties. The original territory of the county-level city Zhaoqing was converted into city districts of the new prefecture-level city Zhaoqing: Duanzhou district and Dinghu district.

Sometimes, multiple county-level administrative division units under the jurisdiction of a prefecture are simultaneously upgraded to the status of prefecture-level city. For instance, in 1985, the prefecture administrative office of Mianyang in Sichuan province was abolished, when it governed one county-

level city and 14 counties. Then the county-level city and two counties were simultaneously upgraded to three different prefecture-level cities, and the remaining counties were assigned to these three new cities for leadership. The original territories of the county-level city and the two counties were synchronously transformed into their respective city districts.

This adjustment, which appears as one type of change, in fact, as the data show, involves at least two types of administrative division change. The first is the designation upgrade, where the county-level designation is upgraded to the prefecture-level designation. The second is the parallel transformation, where the county or county-level city is transformed into the city district designation. Sometimes, these changes also involve boundary adjustments such as dividing one county into multiple city districts after the parallel transformation. Based on a systematic analysis of the data, this study also takes this adjustment as an indirect type of adjustment of converting counties or county-level cities to city districts. This is because such adjustment is always accompanied by the creation of new city districts, and the territory of these new city districts is derived from that of the upgraded counties or county-level cities.

This adjustment greatly contributed to the increase in the number of prefecture-level cities and city districts during the first 20 years of reform. Additionally, the central government exclusively lowered the criteria for upgrading county-level cities to prefecture-level cities in 1999 to accelerate the process of the reform “city leading counties” (MCA 2000). This led to an abrupt peak of the adjustment of county-level cities upgrading to prefecture-level cities in the subsequent year 2000. Concomitantly, it can be seen from the dotted line graph in Figure 3 that the number of city districts reached a peak in 2000 as well.



**Figure 3.** The evolution and motivation of converting counties and county-level cities to city districts, 1978–2020.

Another significant policy context is the urban planning policy established in 1980, which requires urban development to adhere to the basic guideline and principle of “controlling the scale of large cities, rationally developing medium-sized cities, and actively developing small cities.” Specifically, controlling the scale of large cities refers to strictly controlling their population and land use scale; rationally developing medium-sized cities requires that their scale cannot be developed into new large cities; and actively developing small cities suggests prioritizing the allocation of more resources to the construction and development of small cities (GOSC 1980). This provided policy support for the development of small cities, resulting in a massive adjustment of counties to county-level cities in the early stages of reform. This adjustment has greatly increased the density of China’s cities.

### ***Converting entire counties into county-level cities***

The adjustment of converting an entire county to a county-level city once swept the country before 1998, as shown in [Figure 2\(see c\)](#). Supported by the urban development policy that limits the scale of large and medium-sized cities while encouraging the establishment of small cities, many counties worked hard to attempt to become county-level cities. This led to a significant increase in the number of small cities across the country. County-level cities and counties are at the same administrative division level, but the former has more independent economic and social administrative power. The Party secretary of county-level cities also has a greater chance to be promoted to the Standing Committee of the higher-level government committee compared to the Party secretary of counties (K. Chen 2019).

The newly designated city will have more non-agricultural construction land at its disposal. In addition, gaining the status of city usually means that the administrative division will develop better infrastructure such as road transport networks, and social welfare such as health care, education, and housing. Therefore, the title ending with city or *shi* 市 makes it more advantageous and competitive than a county in attracting external investment for economic development. All these potential changes created a joint vision and objective of striving to achieve city status, from officials to ordinary rural residents within most counties. The fervor of converting county to county-level city also caused a series of negative effects, such as rapid reduction of cultivated land and pseudo-urbanization (Yew 2012). Eventually, this adjustment was frozen by the central government in 1997.

Looking back at this history, from 1980 to 1997, a total of 406 counties were converted to county-level cities. In terms of their spatial patterns, the eastern coastal regions, with their location advantages of opening to the outside world and the rapid rise of township and village enterprises, have seen a far greater

number of adjustments than the middle and western regions. Especially in 1992, Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour Speeches firmly established the confidence that the road of reform and opening would never waver, thus further accelerating the pace of reform and opening in the southeast coastal regions. Then in 1994, the adjustment reached a historical peak, in which Guangdong Province, at the forefront of reform and opening, was also far ahead of the country in the number of adjustments.

After a freeze of more than a decade, the adjustment of converting entire counties into county-level cities was resumed in the 2010s. In 2016, new criteria and procedures for the establishment of county-level cities were formally introduced (MCA 2016). The new criteria and approval procedures become more stringent, highlighting "one policy for one region (*yindi shice* 因地施策)." According to the actual development situation, three different criteria were set for the east, the central and northeast, and the west, respectively, with explicit policy support for less developed and remote areas such as counties at the frontier.

## **Urban development and administrative division adjustments, 2001–2020**

### ***The necessity for city expansion***

The administrative region features of Chinese cities fundamentally mean that the urban scale can be controlled and regulated by changing the administrative divisions. The urban development policy formulated in the early 1980s sought to avoid "big city diseases" by limiting the size of large cities (B. Li 2008). However, it overlooked the driving role played by large cities as regional centers in the process of rapid economic growth and social development (Lin 2017). And it failed to consider the constraints on economic expansion that would be imposed by the confined size of large cities themselves (B. Li 2008). After more than 20 years of development, the siphon effect of regional central cities has been becoming more pronounced. The urban development policy was not adjusted accordingly to keep pace with the scale of development (J. Zhang and Wu 2006). Strictly controlling the size of cities by administrative means has been in contradiction with development demands.

Starting from the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005), the expression or formulation of "controlling the scale of large cities" that always existed in the previous plans no longer appeared in the new Plan Guidelines. In addition, the Urban and Rural Planning Law promulgated in 2007 also removed the relevant content and statement (Ren 2014). From the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005) to the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–2020), the tactics of urban development deployed by the country in the Plan Guidelines could be summarized as follows: follow the objective law to promote urbanization, coordinate the development

of large, medium, and small cities, give full play to the radiation-driven role of large cities and regional central cities, and accelerate the construction of regional urban agglomeration (NDRC [various years](#) 2015).

Objectively, for quite some time, the size of large and medium-sized cities had been strictly regulated, resulting in the small size of the city proper. This had a negative impact on the expansion of the economic scale that was heavily dependent on the scale or size of the city proper. As an example, Hangzhou, a deputy-provincial city and the capital of Zhejiang province, had a city proper area of only 683 km<sup>2</sup> and had to borrow land from neighboring counties for development before incorporating adjacent county-level cities Xiaoshan and Yuhang as city districts in 2001 (L. Wang 2018). As a reference, Tonglu County, the smallest county under Hangzhou, had an area of 1,830 km<sup>2</sup>.

### ***Approaches to city expansion***

In order to carry and accommodate a larger scale of economic development and rapidly promote urbanization, central cities have been expanding their city proper by means of administrative division adjustments. Incorporating entire counties or county-level cities into the city proper as city districts has been the most common adjustment over the last two decades. Sometimes they incorporate only a few towns, townships, or even administrative villages of adjacent counties or county-level cities. This has effectively and rapidly expanded the size of the city proper at the prefecture and province levels, as well as resulted in a significant increase in the number of city districts again, by 195, from 2000 to 2020, with an average of nearly 10 new city districts added per year. Central cities, as the biggest beneficiaries of this type of change, are the veritable promoters behind the adjustment.

Figure 3 shows that there were two distinct peak periods in the incorporation of counties and county-level cities into the city proper. The first peak period occurred between 2000 and 2004. As analyzed in the previous section, the rapid development of the economy and the policy emphasis on urbanization prompted central cities to expand their urban areas by incorporating surrounding subordinate counties or county-level cities. Additionally, urban land served as the main vehicle for the local state to consolidate its territorial authority in the era of fiscal and administrative decentralization, and land-related revenue directly determined local budgetary autonomy (Fan, Qiu, and Sun 2020; Ho and Lin 2003; Hsing 2006). The reform of housing commercialization in 1998 drove the boom of China's real estate market, and state-owned land conveyance fees gradually became the main source of easing local financial pressure, which in turn prompted central cities to increase their construction land reserves by incorporating adjacent subordinate rural areas into their city core. The proceeds received by local governments through the transfer of state-owned land use rights or land-transferring fees are extra-budgetary revenues

of local governments, at their disposal. The continued reliance of local governments on land finance has had a profound impact on urban development and expansion in China.

The second major period started in 2010 and reached its peak in 2016. Two pivotal factors contributed to this. In 2009, the pilot scheme of “province financially leading counties” accelerated the determination of prefecture-level cities to directly incorporate subordinate counties in the short term. The reform can reduce the finance withholding by the intermediate-level government—counties, bypassing prefecture-level cities, financially communicated with their respective province governments, which means that prefecture-level cities would lose their direct control and dominance over county finances. Even though the reform to a certain extent alleviates the issues of central cities using administrative means to exploit resources of subordinate counties for the construction and development of their city proper. Additionally, the “National Comprehensive Pilot Plan for New Urbanization” was formally released in 2015. The Plan approved a certain number of pilot areas at each level including two provinces (Jiangsu province and Anhui province), 35 cities, 25 county-level divisions (20 county-level cities, 4 counties, and 1 city district), and two towns (NDRC 2015). In the endorsed Plan, both provinces proposed expanding the development space of prefecture-level cities by incorporating counties or county-level cities into city districts. This, to a certain extent, provided policy guidance and implications for central cities across the nation, leading to a historical peak of counties to city districts in 2016.

### **Models of urban development at different stages**

This research takes the turn of the century as the demarcation point to divide urban development into two phases, as there were significant differences in policy contexts and approaches to administrative division adjustments in respective phases. During the first 20 years of reform, the central government actively endorsed the “city leading counties” reform, resulting in an increase in the number of prefecture-level cities. The urban development policy limited the expansion of large cities and encouraged the establishment of small cities, leading to the proliferation of county-level cities. The urban development during this time was characterized by a noticeable increase in the number of cities at both prefecture and county levels. In the following two decades, city governments *per se* have become the primary promoters for urban development, leading to an unparalleled increase in the rate of population urbanization and the size of the city proper.

The data show that, from 1978 to 2000, the number of designated cities including prefecture-level cities and county-level cities increased by a total of 470, an average of about 20 new cities per year. While from 2001 to 2020, the number of designated cities increased by only 25, an

average of approximately one city per year. In terms of city construction land area, between 1981 and 2000, China's urban construction land area increased by about 15,394 km<sup>2</sup>, an average of about 770 km<sup>2</sup> per year. However, between 2001 and 2019, with an average of only one new city added annually, the urban construction land area increased by a total of 34,115 km<sup>2</sup>, with an average annual increase of approximately 1,796 km<sup>2</sup>, which is 2.3 times the average annual growth rate of the period between 1981 and 2000. A similar trend is also noticed in China's population urbanization rate. From 1978 to 2000, the urbanization rate grew at an average of only 0.79% per year, while after 2000, it grew at an average rate of 1.31% per year.

To sum up, in the early stage of reform and opening, institutional reform was still in the exploratory phase, and the struggling transition to the market economy was always questioned. Policies regarding urban development were relatively cautious and conservative, and urban growth was somewhat rough. However, in the last 20 years, the 2000s and 2010s, the size of cities at the prefecture and higher levels has expanded significantly, leading to a rapid increase in both land and population urbanization levels. Throughout this development process, administrative division adjustments have been crucial and played a key role at every critical moment.

### **A comparative analysis of dominant administrative division adjustments**

Assumptions about similarities of adjustments at the same level belie the reality of significant differences in types of changes and their policy contexts. Among the administrative division adjustments at the county level, the data show that three types of adjustments, namely, converting a county to a county-level city, converting a county to a city district, and converting a county-level city to a city district, have accounted for 75% of all adjustments in terms of the type of designation. Together, they have propelled the rapid development of China's cities over the past four decades, especially contributing to the rise in urbanization level and the formation of regional urban agglomerations.

This section makes a comparative analysis of the three adjustments in attempting to reveal the dynamics and logic of adjustments. The adjustment of county to county-level city rapidly increased city density nationwide, while the adjustment of county and county-level city to city district contributed to advancing the expansion of cities at the prefecture and higher levels. Clarifying the nuances of these three designations is the key to analyzing their inter-adjustments and discerning the actual promoters and beneficiaries behind each type of change.

**Table 1** compares the differences of their hierarchy, financial power, and administrative power. Their administrative division levels are all at the county

**Table 1.** Comparison of three types of designations: city district, county-level city, and county.

		City district	County-level City	County
Hierarchy	<i>Administrative division Level</i>	County level	County level	County level
	<i>Administrative rank of local government</i>	From county/division level to prefecture/department level	From county/division level to deputy-prefecture/department level (such as Tianmen, Xiantao, and Qianjiang city in Hubei province)	From county/division level to deputy-prefecture/department level (such as some counties in Chongqing city)
	<i>Administrative rank of local Party secretary</i>	From county/division level to deputy-province/ministry level (such as Pudong and Binhai new districts)	From county/division level to prefecture/department level (such as some county-level cities in Hainan province)	From county/division level to prefecture/department level (such as some counties in Hainan province)
Fiscal power	<i>Budgetary management</i>	No independence. Subject to overall deployment and planning of the city.	Independent budgetary system. Fiscal revenues and expenditures are managed directly by the province-level government.	Independent budgetary system. For the Counties that implement “province financially governing counties”, fiscal revenues and expenditures are managed directly by the province-level government.
	<i>Fiscal expenditure responsibility</i>	No independent expenditure responsibility and no rural-related construction expenditure responsibility.	The focus is urban-related general public services and urban construction expenditures. Rural development and poverty alleviation.	The focus is rural-related general public services, town construction, and rural development expenditures. Less expenditures on urban social security and employment services.
	<i>Tax revenue sharing ratio</i>	Higher tax revenue ratio handed over to the city	The lowest tax revenue ratio handed over to the city	Lower tax revenue ratio handed over to the city
Administrative power	<i>Core responsibility</i>	Cooperate with the unified deployment and planning of the city, focusing on urban development and economic growth.	Give priority to urban construction, focus on the development of secondary and tertiary industries, and coordinate rural development.	Focus on agriculture, rural areas and peasantry, poverty alleviation, and county-town construction.
	<i>Subordinate to</i>	Administratively under the city.	Being subordinate to the province-level government but entrusting the prefecture-level city to lead.	Administratively under the city.
	<i>Social and economic authority</i>	No independence. Functional institutions are only branches of city functional institutions, being subject to both higher vertical institutions and the city government.	Independent, and more than county. City planning, construction, and land and resources management have independent decision-making power.	Independent, but less than county-level city. County seat planning and construction, rural land and resources management have relatively independent decision-making power.

level, but the ranks of governments and Party secretaries sometimes vary considerably. Factors such as economic conditions, historic contributions, policy preferences, and national strategic deployments may influence the administrative rank of governments and Party secretaries. In certain cases, the Party secretary of a city district can even attain the deputy-province level. In addition, a few special county-level cities rank at the deputy-prefecture level, and their corresponding Party secretaries enjoy the deputy-prefecture level such as the county-level cities listed in the table. Party secretaries of some county-level cities in Hainan Province are at the prefecture level.

In terms of finance, taxation, and administration, of the three, the county-level city has the greatest autonomy and independence, followed by county, while city district, as component of the higher-level city, is subject to the unified management and supervision of the city, with little independence. Generally, the tax revenue sharing ratio of counties is about 41%, approximately 1.5 times that of city districts (27%) (M. Wu 2023), indicating that counties hand over significantly less of their tax revenue to the higher-level city than city districts. In the regions where “province directly leading counties” and “devolution to strong counties (*kuoquan qiangxian* 扩权强县)” have been introduced, the autonomy and independence of counties and county-level cities have been further strengthened, and their differences from city districts are more pronounced. However, the differences between counties and county-level cities are becoming blurred, and their functions are converging, especially now that the townships (*xiang*) within the jurisdiction of many counties have all been converted into towns (*zhen*) and streets (*Jiedao*), and there are no longer any traditional agricultural townships. It is now a common reality that an agricultural county is completely composed of urban-type towns and streets.

### **County to county-level city**

The standards and workflow for establishing county-level cities have been adjusted multiple times and are now well defined. According to Article 30 of the PRC Constitution, designated cities have only two categories of subordination relations: being subordinate to the central government, like four province-level cities including Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing; and being subordinate to the province-level government, such as prefecture-level cities and deputy-provincial cities. When a county is converted into a county-level city, in order to avoid going beyond the two categories stipulated in the Constitution, the central government usually states in the official document approving the adjustment that the new county-level city will be subordinate to the province government but be substitutionally led (*dai guan* 代管) by the prefecture-

level city. This refers to the prefecture-level city being entrusted by its province-level government to maintain the leadership of the new county-level city.

The reality of disunity in subordination and leadership has caused a situation where the prefecture-level city and county-level cities separately develop and plan city construction on their own terms. It can also cause confusion in administration, especially when a county-level city's economic strength positions at the top within the prefecture-level city. The economically strong county-level cities or counties usually emphasize their administrative independence in some political bargaining, which is common especially in the developed coastal provinces (Zhen et al. 2010). For prefecture-level cities, incorporating counties or county-level cities into the city proper, becoming city districts, is widely considered an effective solution to minimize "soft resistance" and conflicts.

### ***County and county-level city to city district***

In China, designated cities at the prefecture or higher levels are permitted to set up city districts, but the approval authority for establishing city districts lies with the State Council. The adjustment of converting a county or county-level city into a city district usually follows two patterns. The first pattern involves transforming a county or county-level city into a city district after the county or county-level city is upgraded to a prefecture-level city, which is the previously mentioned adjustment type b. The second pattern involves a city at the prefecture or higher level incorporating a subordinate county or county-level city into the city proper becoming a city district. [Figure 3](#) illustrates the variation of these two patterns over the last 40 years. The line graphs show the changes in the former pattern, and the bar charts display the changes in the latter pattern.

### ***The 1980s and 1990s***

The first pattern emerged mainly in the first two decades of reform, during which central government actively promoted the reform of "city leading counties." This was achieved by gradually repealing prefecture administrative offices throughout the country and placing counties and county-level cities under prefecture-level cities. Another equally important alternative was to upgrade certain county-level cities or counties with strong economies to prefecture-level cities that would lead the surrounding counties. A county or county-level city selected for upgrading needs to assume a leading role in driving the economic development of the entire region. Economic strength and the proportion of the urban population are normally bound to be the most important evaluation indicators when selecting a potential county or county-level city within

a prefecture. County-level cities were often at an advantage, plus many seats of prefecture administrative offices that had been abolished were historically located in county-level cities.

As a result, the number of county-level cities upgrading to prefecture-level cities was much larger than the number of counties upgrading to prefecture-level cities. Correspondingly, it can be seen from the line graphs in [Figure 3](#), that there were two evident active periods of this pattern, 1983–1989 and 1992–2003, respectively. In addition, in both active periods, the number of county-level cities converting to city districts of prefecture-level cities (the dotted line graph) was consistently much larger than the number of counties converting to city districts (the solid line graph).

Throughout the reform period, from 1983 to 2020, a total of 131 county-level cities were upgraded to prefecture-level cities, synchronously their territories were converted to city districts. In contrast, only 40 counties were upgraded to prefecture-level cities, with their territories synchronously converting to city districts. Actually, as of 2004, all province-level divisions had virtually accomplished the reform goal of “city leading counties” and established a unified four-tier administrative division structure. The first pattern also almost ended at this moment except for a few sporadic cases in the west in the 2010s.

### ***The 2000s and 2010s***

The second pattern, a city at the prefecture or higher level incorporates a subordinate county or county-level city into the city proper becoming a city district, has occurred largely in the last 20 years. Unlike the first pattern, counties in this pattern are far more likely to be converted to city districts. Counties are subordinate to prefecture-level cities, and they may not have much of a voice when they are incorporated into the city proper, especially for counties that do not have a prominent economy within the city. Moreover, for the counties under province-level cities and deputy-provincial cities, their administrative rank would be promoted if they were converted into city districts, so there would be even less opposition to the incorporation.

Prior to 2014, central government had not released formal documents or criteria for the establishment of city districts. This meant, in part, that there were no official guidelines or standards available for the central decision-making groups to refer to when evaluating submissions for incorporation schemes. The decision-making process might take more account of the views of the provincial government which has a better understanding of the local realities. And the results of joint consultations between the province, prefecture-level city, and county-level governments might be adopted. Finally, in 2014, the Ministry of Civil Affairs released a draft for comments on the “Standards of Establishing City Districts.” The draft outlined some general requirements for counties or county-level cities being incorporated into city districts in terms of

spatial location, the proportion of non-agricultural employed population, secondary and tertiary industry ratios, GDP, and fiscal revenues. Nevertheless, the wave of establishing city districts has not been hindered, and in the years following the release of the draft, rapid growth of the incorporation of counties as city districts continued, as shown by the solid bar chart in [Figure 3](#).

Overall, between 1978 and 2020, a total of 168 counties were incorporated as city districts. In terms of spatial distribution, the GIS database shows that the east has the highest percentage of these incorporations at 53%, followed by the west at 29%, and the central at 18%. It is also worth noting that the majority of these incorporations, more than 83%, occurred after 2000. Since then, these counties have been the most significant source of land for the expansion of cities.

County-level cities, compared to counties, are directly subordinate to the province-level government and enjoy more independence in social and economic administration and city planning. These features make them less inclined to be incorporated by higher-level cities. Except for province-level cities, if a prefecture-level city wants to incorporate a county-level city into the city proper, significant preparatory and lobbying work is required in advance. One of the most important things is to first seek the support and consent of the province-level government, and the non-objection of the county-level city government. Then there is a chance to request the province government to submit the formal incorporation scheme to the central government for review and approval. This decision-making process is closed, nontransparent, and does not consult residents in impacted jurisdictions. Academics have thus been limited to case studies and have lacked a comprehensive, and universally applicable analysis of China's administrative division adjustment process.

This study analyzes all cases where incorporation adjustments have been completed and argues that the process is largely dependent on the prefecture-level city's economic strength and the administrative rank of the government and the Party secretary. The hollow bar chart in [Figure 3](#) indicates that the incorporation of county-level cities as city districts only began in 2000. From then to 2020, a total of 55 county-level cities were incorporated by 36 cities at the prefecture or higher level. Of these 36 cities, 31 are located in China's eastern coastal provinces. Of the remaining five cities in the middle and west, one is a province-level city, Chongqing; three are provincial capitals; and only one city is an ordinary prefecture-level city, Changzhi. The prefecture-level city Changzhi in Shanxi province has had the highest GDP within the province except for the capital city Taiyuan.

## Conclusion

This research provides an analytical framework from the perspective of administrative division adjustment to identify and understand the Chinese model of

urban development. The unique administrative region attribute of Chinese cities allows governments at different levels to rely on administrative means to address various problems encountered in the development process, including increasing or decreasing the number of cities, limiting or expanding the size of cities, rapidly increasing the urbanization rate, and developing differentiated urban development policies.

Administrative division adjustments and urban development have been intertwined in China. The position of a city in the system of administrative divisions reflects its subordination relationship and the administrative rank of its government body and Party secretary defines its authority and potential power. Urban development promoted by means of administrative division changes is essentially a reconfiguration of various resources, with a view to maximizing urban economic benefits in the reform era.

In the pre-reform era, urban development was suppressed, and the urban-rural divided governance system was carried out. At that time administrative division adjustments played an important role in separating urbanizing areas from rural areas. After the implementation of reform and opening, the status and role of cities as generators of economic activity began to be valued and emphasized. By means of administrative division adjustments, the relationship between cities and counties was shifted from divided governance to urban-rural integrated governance, with cities administratively leading counties. In the first two decades of reform, although the number of cities increased significantly and the density of small cities rose rapidly throughout the country, urban development was cautious and conservative, as reflected in the lower urbanization level and slower pace of urban expansion compared with the following two decades.

In the 2000s and 2010s, urban development entered the fast lane. The policy emphasis on urbanization led to an explosion in urban population and size. Additionally, the growing economy has prompted cities to seek more land to host larger-scale economies. Administrative division adjustments were again utilized by cities as an administrative tool to absorb neighboring county-level divisions. Incorporating spatially adjacent counties or county-level cities into the city proper has become the dominant way of administrative division adjustments in the last two decades. This has provided vast construction land and a larger population for urban development. In the process, the level of urbanization and the size of cities have increased significantly.

A comparative analysis of the differences between counties, county-level cities, and city districts reveals distinct logic and beneficiaries behind each administrative division adjustment. The non-openness and non-transparency of the adjustment process makes the administrative division adjustments politicized and mystified. This has also been a difficult gap for academic research to cross. However, by comprehensively analyzing all the completed adjustment

cases of particular adjustment types, certain regularities can be revealed. While this research focuses on systematic analysis of the data, many cities experience unique courses of administrative division adjustments. Future research can make significant contributions to scholarship through research on particular cases.

## Notes

1. The yearly county-level development indicator data in the database were derived from officially published statistical yearbooks and various industry census data. The production of annual county-level digital maps was based upon the 1:1,000,000 county-level vector maps issued by the National Geomatics Center of China, combining with historical maps from local gazetteers at the county and township levels, various atlases and archives, as well as the details of annual administrative division changes and administrative division codes released by Ministry of Civil Affairs. All these materials were collected from the Universities Service Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.
2. The first PRC Constitution was promulgated in 1954. Subsequently, updated versions of the Constitution were adopted in 1975, 1978, and 1982. The current Constitution is the 1982 Constitution and has been amended five times, in 1988, 1993, 1999, 2004, and 2018.

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