Reconstructing Urban Scale: New Experiments with the “Provincial Administration of Counties” Reform in China

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Abstract

Since 2005, China has witnessed the emergence of a new form of administrative organization. In contrast with the earlier model of “City Jurisdiction Over Counties,” which placed counties under the jurisdiction of cities, a new pilot program known as “Provincial Administration of Counties” has been launched. This program places counties and county-level cities under the direct administration of provinces, instead of prefecture-level cities. The central state has played a modest role in implementing this pilot program, whereas provincial and county-level governments have taken a more proactive approach. The central government hopes that such a reform can address development imbalances that exist between counties and cities. Meanwhile, provincial governments see the reforms as a way to promote economic development initiatives in counties and county-level cities. However, the

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implementation of reforms at the local level is not proceeding smoothly. This is mainly due to an asymmetry of power in city-county relations, itself a legacy of earlier economic reforms that created the City Jurisdiction Over Counties system. This asymmetry has prevented urban-rural tensions from being resolved. Instead, such tensions have been shifted downward to the city district level or upward to the regional level.

1. Introduction

China carried out a significant restructuring of its urban administrative system through the implementation of the “City Jurisdiction Over Counties” (市代縣 shidaixian) reform in 1978. This system redefined the relationship between cities and rural counties and clearly benefited those cities at the core of such an arrangement: these core cities are charged with administering neighboring counties and are also given a more prominent role in spurring national and regional economic development.\(^1\) Chung argues that China’s expanding urban scale is in fact a localization process, because a significant portion of political and economic power has been devolved from central government to prefecture-level city governments.\(^2\) At the same time, he argues that the expansion of urban scale to encompass counties and county-level cities shows how the administrative power of cities is spilling over into the countryside, reinforcing the government’s influence in those rural areas where rural communes have been dismantled.

More recently in 2005, further provincial-level administrative reforms were introduced in China’s 11\(^{th}\) Five-Year Plan. The new administrative system, namely the “Provincial Administration of Counties” system (省管縣 shengguanxian), was established as a replacement for the City Jurisdiction Over Counties system. Under the new system, counties are placed under the direct administration of provinces instead of being subordinate to prefecture-level cities. This article attempts to bring up to date studies on urban administrative restructuring in China and to assess the latest developments in this field, as well as their impacts. The article is based upon existing studies which view the restructuring of urban administrations as an attempt by the state to restructure its territorial organization.\(^3\) This research highlights the conflicted nature of this administrative restructuring. It has been found that recent attempts at administrative restructuring have involved various