



REMAKING URBAN GOVERNMENT IN CHINA: District Restructuring as a Window onto Territorial Politics

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If the governance of swelling mega-cities is central to the politics of the 21st century, there are few settings where the stakes are higher than China. China is home to dozens of multi-million-person metropolises – both national centers like Beijing and Shanghai, and regional hubs like Wuhan and Nanjing.¹ For an autocratic party-state, managing these cities represents a key political challenge and balancing act. Large cities are China's most important economic growth engines, centers of innovation, and gateways to the global economy (Jaros 2019). But large cities also strain the party-state's governance capacity. On the one hand, they represent latent threats to regime stability, with their potential for concentrated social unrest (Wallace 2014). On the other hand, big cities face a host of more routine – though no less serious – policy challenges, such as providing public services to diverse and demanding populations, reconciling economic growth with inclusive development, and managing environmental pressures (Saich 2008). In moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, both sides of this urban governance challenge become vivid.

One of the most fundamental, yet most difficult aspects of metropolitan governance in China

– as in other national settings – is the question of how to administratively organize sprawling urban areas. Around the world, the architecture of urban government varies widely. We find diversity in the pattern of power devolution, the degree of administrative fragmentation, and the blend of territorial and functional governance. Comparative scholarship makes it clear that these varying metropolitan governance arrangements have important consequences for development and politics. Among other things, metropolitan government structures affect the distribution of economic and social opportunities (Frug 1999; Freemark et al 2020), the dynamics of political power and participation (Myers and Dietz 2002; Lassen and Serritzlew 2011), and the efficiency of administration (Zhang 2013; Blom-Hansen et al 2016).

In China, where the entities called “cities” (*shi*) are often much larger than their counterparts abroad, and where the party-state penetrates virtually every aspect of political, economic, and social life, the structure of urban government would seem especially significant. Yet, despite extensive research by political scientists and other scholars on urban issues in China, there has been relatively little attention to the internal

Hierarchical governance system of China's party-state raises the stakes of conflicts over urban territory.

structure and workings of urban government. It is clear that in recent decades, China's big cities have existed in a state of near-constant institutional flux as the party-state has tried to adapt its structures of rule to manage population growth, land expansion, and economic restructuring (Chung and Lam 2004; Hsing 2010; Rithmire 2015; Cartier 2015). However, many key questions about China's urban government system remain only partly answered: How, and on what basis, is the territory of cities divided into different sub-units?

In what ways does the urban district structure shape the political, economic, and social life of cities? When and why do territorial-administrative arrangements in cities change, and how do such changes affect political elites and ordinary residents alike? Answering these questions is important not only for making sense of urban politics in China, but also to add a crucial dimension to comparative debates about the determinants of effective metropolitan governance.

To help address this gap in the literature, my current research examines the changing forms and workings of big-city government in China. As one element of this research, I examine cases of urban "administrative division reform" (*xing-zheng quhua gaige*) (ADR), or changes to the district structure of cities, to better understand the evolving nature of urban governance and the complex internal politics of China's metropolises. Urban district restructuring has occurred frequently in recent decades, reshaping the territory and governance arrangements of many Chinese cities. Though officials speak of ADR in technocratic terms as a way to enhance urban competitiveness, spatial coordination, and administrative efficiency, such reform is ultimately a manifestation of territorial politics within

Chinese cities. Urban ADR reflects pent-up tensions and political divisions within urban government, and it produces clear winners and losers.

In what follows, I use the case of the 2013 ADR in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province as a window onto the multifaceted territorial politics of a large Chinese city. As I discuss below, ADR in Nanjing highlights accumulating strains within the governance system of a fast-growing provincial capital and reveals conflicting interests between different groups of urbanites, different government units, and different urban priorities. Indeed, by examining changes to the urban district structure, the underlying significance of this structure becomes clearer. Urban districts in China are as large as municipal units in other settings, and are responsible for many of the same functions. In Nanjing, we find some of the same types of horizontal conflicts among different urban districts—and their residents—that might be observed between neighboring cities in other national contexts. But we also see how the hierarchical governance system of China's party-state raises the stakes of conflicts over urban territory.

Urban district structure and restructuring in the Chinese metropolis

The territorial units designated as cities in China are less like municipalities in other contexts than city regions or provinces: their administrative boundaries encompass densely populated urban cores but also suburbs, satellite cities, and large rural hinterlands. Four of China's largest cities, Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, and Chongqing, have populations in the tens of millions, land areas of several thousand square miles, and province-level administrative rank. Even prefecture-level cities, of which there are currently over 290, are typically home to several



million people and comparable in land area to small American states.

Based on province-level and prefecture-level cities' size alone, their internal administrative structures have important consequences for development and governance. Indeed, the administrative divisions of prefecture-level Chinese cities are large units in their own right. In addition to any remaining rural counties or county-level cities in their jurisdictions, prefecture-level cities contain one or more urban districts—administrative units with county-level rank that play a major governance role as the lowest full-fledged level of local government in urban areas. Urban districts have populations ranging from a couple hundred thousand to upward of one million, and are themselves subdivided into dispatched organs called street offices (*jiedao ban*). Urban districts are highly heterogeneous in character: in large Chinese cities, older core urban districts tend to be smaller and more densely populated than erstwhile suburban areas that have subsequently turned into districts. Additionally, both urban and suburban districts often differ strikingly from districts formed through cities' annexation of outlying counties or county-level cities, units that are often much larger in land area and largely rural in character (Lam and Lo 2010). Urban districts are often overlaid by special functional areas, including development zones of different types, ranks, and sizes, further complicating the territorial structure of urban governance.

With multiple local government units and levels of administration and dramatic variation in local conditions found within a typical Chinese municipality, it is natural for different political and economic interests to collide. Frictions often emerge at the boundaries between different

urban sub-units, and significant tensions can accumulate within cities over time. Although the lively territorial politics at play within China's cities often stay unreported and out of public sight, political fault lines erupt into view at times of change—particularly during moments when the structure of urban government itself is altered.

For contemporary New Yorkers, it would be almost unthinkable for the Bronx and Staten Island to suddenly cease to exist as separate boroughs and instead be absorbed into Manhattan and Brooklyn. But sweeping changes of this sort occur frequently in large Chinese cities, and more generally as well, large-scale “reterritorialization” is a regular feature of China's subnational governance system (Cartier 2015). For China's major cities, in particular, the past decade-plus has seen a major wave of changes to urban administrative divisions, with far-reaching consequences for the territorial make-up of cities and for authority relations, resource allocation, and state-society dynamics in the metropolis. In 2009 and the years following, many major cities, including Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanjing, and Ningbo, altered their district structures. Like earlier municipal restructuring in the late 1990s and early 2000s, ADR over the past decade has included various cases in which outlying counties and county-level cities have been converted into districts and incorporated into the city proper of Chinese metropolises. There has also been a growing number of cases of urban district mergers and more complex rearrangements of urban territory (Yin and Luo 2013). In some cases, such as in Nanjing (2013) and Ningbo (2016), multiple changes to a city's territorial configuration have occurred at once.

Some scholars have viewed recent cases of ADR as a product of practical considerations



like ensuring sufficient space for new urban development and growth, improving public service delivery through larger jurisdiction size, and reducing administrative costs (Yin and Luo 2013; Lin and Yang 2017). But ADR is also deeply political in the way it redraws territorial authority relations and changes the distribution of resources across different parts of the metropolis, and it must therefore be understood as an outgrowth of urban territorial politics. Along these lines, Cartier (2015) emphasizes the central party-state's ultimate control over ADR and its use as a tool of party-state power to achieve political and developmental objectives. Power asymmetries in the party-state hierarchy be-

Nanjing's 2013 ADR, municipal restructuring brings together multiple aspects of urban territorial politics and provides important clues into the conflicts playing out between different state actors, economic interests, and societal groups.

Nanjing's 2013 big bang-style ADR

Of the many instances of ADR across China over the past decade, the 2013 reorganization of Nanjing, the provincial capital of Jiangsu Province, was one of the most far-reaching. On February 20, 2013, with little prior public warning, authorities in Nanjing announced that the city had received approval from the State Council and Jiangsu to carry out a significant territorial restructuring. The city's two remaining rural counties, Gaochun County and Lishui County, would be converted into urban districts, bringing their territory under more direct municipal oversight. In addition, two pairs of core urban districts would be consolidated to form larger, more populous units. Gulou District, a densely populated and dynamic central city area home to Jiangsu's provincial government and party headquarters, would be merged with neighboring Xiaguan District to form a New Gulou District. And Qinhuai District, a commercial and residential area with a rich history, would merge with adjacent Baixia District to form a New Qinhuai District. This ADR thus involved 6 out of Nanjing's 13 sub-units, areas accounting for 29.7 percent of Nanjing's land area, 38.7 percent of its population, and 36.4 percent of its GDP.

This sweeping change to Nanjing's administrative geography was intended by city authorities to enhance Nanjing's economic competitiveness, spatial coordination, and government efficiency. First, authorities noted, the goal of economically integrating Lishui and Gaochun

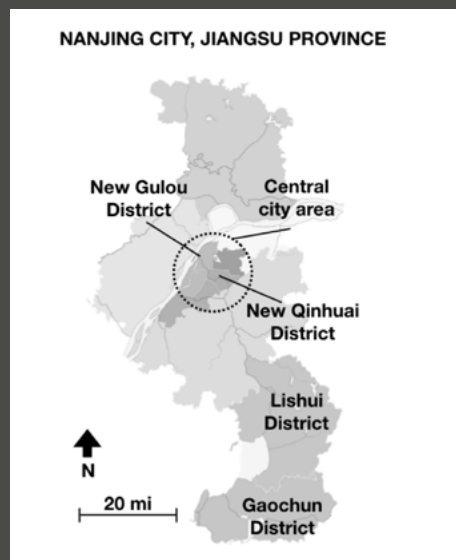


Figure 1:

Map of Nanjing, post-2013 restructuring.

Source: Map image from wikipedia.org; labels by author.

come reinforced through reforms that expand the boundaries and resource bases of politically privileged territorial units. Lu and Tsai (2017), for example, note how provincial capitals are more successful than other cities in annexing wealthy counties.

Overall, however, the politics of ADR in urban China remains a rich and little studied topic. As I discuss below in my analysis of the case of

Counties with the rest of the city had been hindered by the counties' underdeveloped infrastructure and public services. Converting counties to urban districts would allow for upgraded infrastructure and public service standards and would simplify administrative relations between the municipal government and erstwhile counties. Second, Nanjing authorities pointed to a lack of space for new development in "cramped" central-city districts like Gulou and Qinhuai. By consolidating core districts, economies of scale in urban development and improved planning coordination would result, while cost savings could be reaped (Zhang and Zhang 2013).

During March and April 2013, Nanjing mobilized municipal- and district-level leaders for a fast-paced implementation effort. The city established a leading small group and subordinate working groups to oversee district reorganization, issued a series of policy notices to guide the merger process, and launched a propaganda campaign and party discipline enforcement efforts to ensure smooth progress and to pre-empt backlash from affected district officials or residents. By early May 2013, new district leaders and departments were in place and open for business (Yong 2017, 196-197). Still, the work of district restructuring was far from over, as harmonization of institutions and policies in newly established or merged districts

would be phased in over several years. Lishui and Gaochun, which as counties had enjoyed greater fiscal and administrative autonomy than urban districts, were reassured that they could retain most of these privileges for another five years (Ibid., 203). Meanwhile, the city promised a tailored approach to administration of the newly merged core districts. There would be no fundamental changes to district-level policies during 2013, while gradual harmonization of practices across formerly separate districts would begin in 2014 (Ma 2013).

Involving several of Nanjing's sub-units, the 2013 ADR significantly affected the contours of the city as a whole and the average characteristics of its districts, as shown in *Table 1*. By annexing two rural counties, Nanjing achieved – statistically at least – a major expansion in urban land area, urban area population, and urban area GDP. By eliminating two sub-units, Nanjing further consolidated its administrative geography. With these changes, the average population, land area, and GDP of Nanjing's urban districts increase substantially.

The four central-city districts saw more dramatic changes. Merged districts differed from each other in terms of population, land, and economic indicators, and the resulting new districts also differed in important ways from their predecessors. *Table 2* compares indicators of the New

Table 1:
Nanjing's district indicators
before and after February
2013 restructuring

Data source: Nanjing
Yearbook and Nanjing
Statistical Yearbook.

	Total of urban districts	Average of urban districts
Resident population 2012 (mn)	7.323	0.666
Resident population 2013 (mn)	8.188	0.744
Land area 2012 (sq km)	4,728	429.8
Land area 2013 (sq km)	6,587	598.8
GDP 2012 (bn CNY)	465.1	42.3
GDP 2013 (bn CNY)	617.0	56.1

Gulou District with those of the former Gulou District and former Xiaguan District. At the outset, Gulou was a more populous and densely populated district with a larger overall economy and higher per-resident endowments of fiscal revenue and social resources than Xiaguan. Relative to the former Gulou, New Gulou had a substantially larger resident population of 1.29 million (first among Nanjing's sub-units) and GDP of 79.14 bn CNY (rising from fourth to second ranked among Nanjing's sub-units) and almost twice its original land area. Although its large size ensured it would have a high political profile, New Gulou had lower per-resident endowments of fiscal revenue and social resources than its predecessor.

District restructuring and urban territorial politics

While Nanjing's restructuring was justified by authorities in technical terms, this and other cases of ADR are intensely political in practice. As one media account acknowledged, a "change to administrative divisions is to some extent the reallocation of power and the readjustment of

interests," and authorities saw the potential for serious political difficulties (Zhang and Zhang 2013). Indeed, on closer examination, Nanjing's ADR highlights several aspects of urban territorial politics that normally remain hidden behind a façade of technocratic urban governance.

First, and most basic, this reform in Nanjing, like cases of ADR elsewhere, calls attention to the frictions that can arise between neighboring urban districts and between districts and city-level authorities. China's urban districts are often written off as mere "vassals" of the municipality, and sometimes not even regarded as a full-fledged level of local government (Lam and Lo 2010). But, as noted above, districts are large entities in their own right—comparable to major cities in other national settings. The fact that authorities go to great trouble to alter district boundaries makes clear that these boundaries matter significantly in the first place. Like city limits in other national settings, district boundaries are important for urban economic development and social governance as well as for the provision of many public services, such as pri-

Table 2:
Indicators for Gulou District,
Xiaguan District, and New
Gulou District
Data source:
Nanjing Yearbook and
Nanjing Statistical Yearbook.

Data source: Nanjing
Yearbook and Nanjing
Statistical Yearbook.

	Gulou District (2012)	Xiaguan District (2012)	New Gulou District (2013)
Resident population (mn)	0.839 (2nd/11)	0.451 (8th/11)	1.291 (1st/11)
Land area (sq km)	24.65 (9th/11)	28.35 (8th/11)	54.18 (9th/11)
GDP (bn CNY)	44.56 (4th/11)	25.36 (8th/11)	79.14 (2nd/11)
Local fiscal revenue (bn yuan)	5.14 (3rd/11)	1.67 (10th/11)	7.51 (3rd/11)
Local fiscal revenue per resident (bn yuan)	5974 (6th/11)	3703 (10th/11)	5812 (10th/11)
Residents per sq km	34,049 (1st/11)	15,901 (4th/11)	23,850 (1/11)
Middle school teachers per 10000 residents	27.1 (3/11)	19.4 (10/11)	24.5 (9/11)
Hospital beds per 10000 residents	116.64 (1/11)	32.59 (8/11)	103.12 (1/11)

mary and secondary education and basic urban welfare. And, though some urban districts are indeed tightly controlled by city-level authorities, other districts enjoy considerable autonomy in fiscal and administrative matters. Coordinating economic and spatial planning and public service provision across district boundaries is often a challenge for city-level authorities, a fact underscored in recent interviews with municipal officials in Nanjing (Author's interviews, 2019). As Hsing (2010) notes, China's municipalities have achieved a measure of territorial consolidation over the past few decades and work hard to present a unified face to the outside world, they remain internally divided entities in which district governments and other territorial players (e.g., development zone authorities, major state-owned enterprise units, etc.) continue to exercise considerable sway, resulting in frequent turf battles over development and governance.

Second, Nanjing's 2013 ADR highlights the differing priorities of city-level authorities and higher-level state actors when it comes to urban governance arrangements. Although ADR has been a recurring phenomenon across China's major cities, it is by no means easy to accomplish. Changes to China's county-level administrative divisions require State Council approval and must pass through the provincial level first. Gaining official authorization to conduct such reforms is a fraught, multi-year process. Even the 2013 Nanjing ADR, not a particularly contentious one, involved years of advance discussion and planning as well as a nearly year-long intergovernmental approval process. Following lengthy informal consultations with higher-level authorities, Nanjing's government submitted its proposal for restructuring to the Jiangsu Provincial Government on April 17, 2012. In late

June, Jiangsu province gave its tentative support to the proposal and relayed it upward to the State Council. Final State Council approval for the proposal did not come until February 8, 2013, and formal provincial guidelines for the ADR were not issued until February 19, 2013. In the interim, Nanjing officials engaged in a lengthy negotiation with higher-level officials, during which the latter expressed concerns about Nanjing undertaking such a large restructuring in one-off fashion and suggested more piecemeal changes instead (Yong 2017, 192-193).

The difficulty of securing higher-level approval for such changes speaks to the conflicting priorities of officials at different levels of the party-state hierarchy: While city authorities were intent on using administrative reforms to enhance the city's economic strength and competitiveness, central authorities were more concerned with maintaining stability and order in the city's governance arrangements. In this case, the provincial level of government, which likely perceived benefits in the economic strengthening of its capital city, was supportive. However, in many other such cases provincial support is withheld, thwarting cities' efforts to change their administrative geography. For Suzhou, another major city in Jiangsu that has historically been on strained terms with provincial authorities, it took years to gain approval for a similar administrative restructuring in 2012. Even then, the city had to make significant concessions to the province to get what it wanted (Cartier 2016; Jaros 2019, 216-218).

Third, Nanjing's ADR brings into sharper focus conflicts between municipal authorities and subordinate district and county leaders over resources and territory. For the leaders of outlying rural counties, "upgrading" to district status is a decidedly mixed blessing. Although district sta-

tus confers higher standards of public service provision and infrastructure, it can compromise the administrative and fiscal autonomy counties enjoy. In the case of Nanjing's 2013 merger, the existence of such concerns and pushback on the part of county leaders from Gaochun and Lishui can be inferred from the assurance given that existing powers and special policies enjoyed by the counties would not be changed for five years and by the fact that incumbent county leaders were left in place through the transition. In Nanjing's central city, by contrast, we see the greater ability of municipal authorities to flex muscle over district authorities. The elimination of existing districts and reorganization of their staff and territory gave city-level leaders an opportunity to dislodge entrenched district-level actors and to redraw districts in a way compatible with municipal development and governance priorities. During the process of consolidating four central urban districts into two, existing district governments were disbanded, and new leadership lineups and staffs were chosen. Unsurprisingly, there were concerns about potential grievances and pushback from affected personnel amid this major shake-up, and great care was taken to ensure a smooth reorganization. On the one hand, Nanjing carefully managed official discourse and public opinion around the district restructuring and placed heavy emphasis on enforcing party discipline throughout the process (Zhang and Zhang 2013). On the other, the effectively city co-opted several leaders of the abolished districts. After the Gulou-Xiaguan merger, for example, the former directors of each district were appointed as party secretary and director of New Gulou district, respectively, while the former party secretaries were reassigned to city-level leadership positions.

Fourth and finally, Nanjing's ADR lays bare the conflicting interests of different groups of urban residents. Insofar as significant cross-district disparities exist in the social resources and public services districts, restructuring of districts affects how resources are shared and influences the relative privilege of different territorial constituencies. During the Gulou-Xiaguan merger, a fiscally strong district with high-quality public services (Gulou) was paired with a district that lacked a comparably strong fiscal base and high-quality public services (Xiaguan). Many Xiaguan residents saw benefits in a merger that would help them access the superior amenities of Gulou. But some Gulou residents, including elderly residents receiving minimum-income guarantee (*dibao*) payments, feared their benefits would be diluted by merging with a poorer district (Wang et al 2013). The Gulou-Xiaguan merger and others like it also have major consequences for urban real estate prices, which affect different territorial constituencies and socioeconomic groups unevenly. Xiaguan's average real estate prices were roughly 6,000 CNY cheaper per square meter than Gulou's prior to the merger but were poised to appreciate quickly after the announcement, given the upgrading of district brand as well as public amenities (Zhang 2013). While this would benefit homeowners in Xiaguan and economic elites able to invest in Xiaguan real estate development, the district merger was less beneficial for Gulou owners, who saw some of their district's privileges reduced.

Similar dynamics have been documented during district mergers in other cities. In the month following the April 2019 announcement of a merger between Shanghai's Nanhui District and Pudong New Area, for example, real estate prices rose over 10 percent in the less-devel-



oped Nanhui (Tian 2009). Whereas urban residents in China have limited recourse to fight district mergers (indeed, they typically only learn of them once they are underway), mergers redistribute resources across different resident groups and between ordinary residents and those with the economic clout or political connections to financially speculate on news of such changes.

Conclusion

During moments when the administrative structures of large cities are in flux, observers get a glimpse into the multifaceted territorial

politics of urban China. As discussed above, the case of Nanjing's 2013 ADR shows the politically charged nature of municipal restructuring and highlights different dimensions of territorial interest conflict and intergovernmental bargaining. Given the frequency with which Chinese metropolises undergo such reorganizations and the variety of approaches taken, there is ample scope for research to clarify the political-economic drivers and consequences of ADR. Such work promises new insights into the evolving urban government system and patterns of urban politics in China, and will also offer an instructive counterpoint to studies of metropolitan governance restructuring in Western settings. ●

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