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The province in history

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History warns us to be ready and wary. We place our hope in reform!
Hu Gu, *Historical Boundaries and Administrative Territories in China* (1995)

The issues facing China at the dawn of the twenty-first century are so different in character and scale from anything that came before that it is difficult to imagine history supplying providential warnings today. A glance at contemporary institutions and trends heightens the contrast between the old-world empire and the modern nation-state across any number of social, political, cultural and economic indicators, to the point of discouraging facile historical comparisons. An exception may be made for the most stable element in the historical annals of the Chinese state: its system of territorial administration. For all else that has changed, there remains a remarkable degree of continuity between the units, the boundaries, and the echelon hierarchy of territorial administration in the People's Republic and those that preceded it in the Republic and the late empire. Transformations in China's economy, demography and communications at the turn of the twenty-first century may well compel reform of the country's system of territorial administration. But, the administrative historian Hu Gu warns that to tamper with the deep structures of province and county without regard to the lessons of history is to court peril.¹

Whether or not they provide a salutary lesson, such warnings do draw attention to the strengths and weaknesses of China's system of territorial administration in a period of rapid change. The Chinese state has undergone far-reaching transformations many times in its history, not least over the course of the twentieth century. Yet even rebels and revolutionaries have been reluctant to tamper with the core units of territorial administration. The lowest echelon of the county is the most obvious example. Circuits (*dao*), prefectures (*fu*), sub-prefectures (*ting*), departments (*zhou*) and districts (*qu*) have come and gone from one era to the next but the county of the People's Republic of China is in key respects similar to the county-level unit established in the Qin over two thousand years ago.²

Provinces have much in common with their antecedents as well. The province complements the county as the second most constant feature of China's territorial administration. Although not introduced until the Yuan Dynasty, the province has proven remarkably resilient as an echelon of territorial administration immediately below the central level of government.³ The function of the province has been to facilitate central administration over substantial territories corresponding in size or population to a fraction between 1:10 and 1:30 of the polity. Significantly, the province retains a uniquely complimentary relationship with the county in a system of local administration that has retained its equilibrium these seven centuries past.

This chapter traces the history of the province as a major echelon of territorial administration from imperial times to the present day. Rather than focus on relations between provincial and central governments, it places both province and center in a broader spatial framework of political dynamics affecting various echelons of territorial administration in a large and complex state. Locating the province in this broader framework enables us to evaluate the role and status of the province as a distinctive administrative echelon relative to other echelons of the system, in a territorial state that is undergoing rapid change. One recent sign of rapid transition is the emergence of the city as a standard intermediate echelon of territorial government between county and province. The challenge that the city presents for the province, the county, and the system of territorial administration as a whole highlights some of the historical fault lines of a system under stress, and offers a significant test of the state's capacity to adapt to change.

Is the province worth studying?

It could be said that provinces are constitutionally too weak to serve as anything but local agents for central governments, administratively too arbitrary to contain "natural" cultural communities, geographically too large to play a significant role in administering actual settlements and yet too small to account for larger regional patterns of economic activity. There is an element of truth in each of these claims. Provinces are certainly far removed from actual settlements, and their role in local government is attenuated by geographical distance and intervening layers of administration that separate them from direct contact with cities, towns, townships and villages. With the exception of periods of disunity, they have been too weak to count for much in the greater national scheme of things either. The third and fourth claims are even more compelling. The place of the province within extra-political (cultural, social and economic) regional frameworks requires close attention if we are to justify focusing on the province as a unit of analysis.

Provinces are, on the whole, fairly arbitrary administrative units with boundaries that fail to match regional and sub-regional patterns of social, cultural and economic activity. Historically, few provincial boundaries have

come close to matching China's socio-economic regions, and among those that have come reasonably close (notably Sichuan with the upper Yangtze, and Guangdong/Guangxi with Lingnan) the correspondence has been, in the words of William Skinner, "grossly imperfect." Several provinces run across regional boundaries, including Anhui, Guizhou, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Shaanxi and Zhejiang.⁴ Historically, provinces have been merged, divided and multiplied, in order to sever conformity between natural regions and administrative ones. From the Ming Dynasty, at least, provinces no longer conformed directly to physiographic areas, with the result that today few provincial boundaries conform closely to pre-existing cultural and economic territories.

Nevertheless, provincial identities are negotiated within patterns of government as well as those of language and culture. Once a territorial unit of government has been created at any level, it generates interactions among and between parts of the political system and elements of the social, cultural and economic environment. Over time, "communications circles" develop through negotiation among these different elements within the territorial administrative framework.⁵ So China's provincial communities have been hounded and informed by a provincial press, comforted by native place associations, mobilized by provincial cohorts of reformers and revolutionaries, and nurtured, educated, transported, licensed, and taxed by an everexpanding network of provincial government agencies. Today, people of one province show little difficulty and less reluctance in attributing particular characteristics to people of another province irrespective of any "natural" conformity between provincial boundaries and pre-existing cultural, economic or physiographic ones.

The economic argument against taking provinces as units of analysis is the most compelling of all. In the present reform era, economic growth has crystalized around the periphery of great metropolitan centers and along the major riverine, road, rail and sea links that connect the hinterland to urban and peri-urban centers on the coast. Contemporary growth patterns trace an urban trail up and down the coast and marginally inland that pays little heed to provincial boundaries. International trade and investment flows follow slightly different patterns that reflect geographical proximity, historical ties and particular market requirements of Chinese and foreign partners. Recurrent attempts by the provincial governments of inland provinces to stimulate comparable growth have not been notably successful; nor have intermittent attempts to share growth among wealthier and poorer regions within provinces repaid the effort put into them. From a regional economic perspective, all that provinces seem to do is increase transaction costs and set up real barriers to the free flow of goods, services, people and capital. For the purpose of understanding current patterns of economic development, provincial units appear far too closely tied to arbitrary lines of territorial administration to suffice as units of analysis.

Indeed, current patterns seem to confirm the general hypotheses and regional framework developed by G. William Skinner in his analysis of urban

and regional development in China's history. In his classic study of China's spatial organization, Skinner modeled the intensive internal operations and external relations of large territorial units known as macro-regions – nine in all – made up of nested clusters of marketing centers. Skinner classified the nests of urban marketing systems within each macro-region, which start from local market-town systems at the base and make their way up through central market towns at the center of each local marketing area, on upward through regional cities and regional metropolitan centers, each sitting at the apex of a progressively larger sub-system of the macro-region. The shape of macro-regions is said to be defined by physiographical factors, although the dynamism of each regional system and sub-system is indicated by market relationships reflecting the potential for communications, production and exchange with which its physiography endows each system. In relation to provinces, Skinner observes that it is “methodologically indefensible and generally misleading” to employ the province as a unit of comparison for urban studies and, by extension, for studies of socio-economic space more generally. From this perspective, the only meaningful way to analyze spatial aspects of economic development is to seek out trans-provincial ties or formal similarities among regions within adjacent sets of provinces.⁶

Even markets, however, need territorial states.⁷ They need strong, stable and predictable states capable of providing legal and regulatory frameworks, raising and distributing revenues, maintaining ethical norms, supporting social and other institutional networks, and building the infrastructure necessary for the efficient operation of commercial centers. Market actors also expect states to stay around long enough to insure the value of contracts and currencies. The question of whether the market needs provinces, then, rests not just on issues of the conformity of market space and political space but equally on the significance of the province for building and maintaining a rational, stable and predictable national state. China's history over the past century suggests that maintenance of a stable national state is a minimum condition for the predictable and efficient operation of markets. The province has played an important part in this history. Hence the point at issue is not simply whether the province is a market-friendly territorial unit, or even a useful tool of analysis, but whether and in what form it remains a viable or even indispensable unit of territorial administration in a continental state that is moving towards a market economy.⁸

States, too, may be said to have a “natural” history. In his *Urban Networks in Ch'ing China and Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton 1973), Gilbert Rozman presented a spatial model of urban organization that differed from Skinner's in key respects. In contrast to Skinner's model of market-driven urban differentiation and development, Rozman identified urban networks that developed out of the administrative structures of the Chinese empire.⁹ In place of positing an adversarial relationship between territorial administration and the growth of urban marketing systems, Rozman suggested a complementary relationship. Where Skinner, for example, attributed

nonconformity between the two regional systems to deliberate intervention on the part of the state, Rozman was inclined to offer explanations that highlighted the complementarity of administrative, economic and social systems in China's regional development.

It was the administrative partition of the country, Rozman argued, that determined the pattern of cities throughout the empire.¹⁰ While conceding that patterns of urban settlement incorporated periodic markets and market towns, he suggested that the development of rural periodic markets was dependent on the growth of commercial agriculture, which was in turn dependent on the expansion of major urban centers as sites of consumption. Substantial urban markets had to come into existence before small rural markets could develop. Further, big urban markets developed through administrative intervention on the part of armies, courts and bureaucracies rather than through incremental commercial growth. The current term for market town in China, *zhen*, illustrates this development quite pointedly:

During the ninth century, army officers formed independent provincial bases. Garrisons of troops called *chen* [*zhen*] became the centers of military control in local areas. Since commanders trying to strengthen their control of supplies brought marketing functions to some *chen*, the term “*chen*” later often came to mean a non administrative city with marketing more active than in ordinary rural periodic markets.¹¹

By the time *zhen* market towns and rural periodic markets came into existence, China could already claim an established urban network of administrative centers numbering in the order of 1,500 towns and cities. New networks of periodic markets and market towns were integrated into an existing urban hierarchy in which relations were first established along administrative lines.¹² The wealth and stability of the empire required both kinds of settlement because intensive commercial activity in villages and market towns assisted local administrative centers in controlling resource distribution.¹³ In contrast to Skinner, Rozman traced decisions on administrative boundaries (especially at sub-county level) to the rational choices of administrators seeking to minimize the costs of administration, while keeping cities and markets open.¹⁴

Needless to say, reference to an isolated point of difference distorts many points of convergence between the urban models of Skinner and Rozman. Both stressed the significance of urban settlements in the development of social, economic and political patterns of territorial differentiation in China's history. Both also acknowledged the importance of bureaucratic procedures for differentiating organs of the state from other institutions in local society, and for “centralizing” the state to insure bureaucratic efficiency, rationality and conformity within the field administration of the empire.

At base, the business of public administration in China has been a matter of linking central governments with village and urban settlements of one

kind and another. The capacity of territorial administration to meet and reconcile the sometimes conflicting and sometimes complementary interests of dispersed settlements and remote central governments is an important measure of their administrative effectiveness. Administrative effectiveness, in turn, requires a high degree of differentiation, rationalization, bureaucratization and technical “centralization,” and not only at the level of central government. When the province is situated within the broader framework of relations among settlements, on the one hand, and counties, cities and central governments, on the other, its utility can be measured by how successfully it enables state differentiation, rationalization, bureaucratization and centralization, and how well it bridges the administrative distance between widely scattered urban communities and the site of central government.

The origins of the province

The bureaucratic history of the province (*sheng*) can be traced through the derivation of the word *sheng*. Referring in the Han Dynasty to the inner quarters of the imperial court (*shengzhong*), the term was later attached to the three boards of imperial government located at court (*zhongshusheng*, *shangshusheng*, *menxiasheng*). In time, the term was transferred to the territorial units of government through which the imperial boards supervised the exercise of local authority. These were initially known as the *xingtai* (*sheng*) (Wei and Jin Dynasties), the *xingsheng* (Yuan), and ultimately the *sheng* (Ming). To this day, the Japanese form of the word (*sho*) continues to refer to a central board or ministry. The Ministry of Education, for example, is titled *Monbusho*.

Consistent with its origins in the inner workings of the central court, the major function of the province has been to mediate relations between the central government and the county (*xian*). As noted, the county has been the core unit of local government since the founding of the empire. Over the past two millennia, counties have varied as a fraction of territorial administration from around 1:1,000 to around 1:2,000 – too numerous for unified central governments to handle directly, too varied to allow for uniform administration and, on average, too distant to permit rapid relay of information or routine central intervention. Nevertheless, the center has characteristically retained a keen interest in the security, grain, water management and fiscal affairs of county governments. Successive attempts to resolve this conundrum have focused on two main issues: instituting a suitable number of echelons between the center and counties, and striking a balance between central control and local autonomy at each level. The province emerged as the most flexible and reliable instrument for meeting these conditions and hence, after the county, as the second-most constant feature of China’s territorial administration.

The introduction of the province addressed a recurring problem, associated with the number and autonomy of territorial echelons, that had come to a

head during the Song Dynasty. Before the Yuan, most dynasties operated an intermediate echelon of territorial units (*jun*, *fu* and *zhou*) between county and center ranging in jurisdiction from 1:100 to 1:300 of the empire. These were frequently placed under the *ad hoc* supervision of central inspectorates (*lu* and *dao*) each covering between 1:10 and 1:30 of the empire. There was therefore already something approaching a three-echelon system of local administration, of which only the second and third echelons referred to fixed territories: (1) the *lu* or *dao* (2) the *jun*, *fu* or *zhou* and (3) the *xian* (county).

By the advent of the Song Dynasty, a two-echelon system of local administration appeared too cumbersome for the center to manage directly. At the same time, the addition of a higher echelon to form a three-echelon system was thought to promote excessive central control and to undermine the capacity for local defense and, perhaps apocryphally, to have led to the disintegration of the empire in the Three Kingdoms and the Five Dynasties periods. The Song opted initially for a two-echelon system (*zhou* and *xian*) but yielded over time to the advantages of the three-echelon system (*lu* [or *fu*], *zhou* and *xian*) in order to assert stronger central control. On the Song model, however, it would be more accurate to term the highest of the three echelons (the *lu*) a lower tier of central administration rather than a peak tier of local government. The *lu* was neither a fixed territorial unit nor a unified administrative office. It referred to a web of imprecise territorial divisions assigned to a number of different imperial officers whose powers were defined by the functions assigned to them (for canals, granaries, security, punishment and so on) by their respective central Boards. Authority at the *lu* level was divided among the Boards of the imperial court. The effect was to centralize power within the imperial Boards and hence deny lower echelons sufficient discretionary authority to defend the realm. The chief beneficiaries of the Song system, it was later concluded, were the Mongol invaders of the Yuan.¹⁵

In place of the *lu*, the Yuan introduced the province (*xingsheng*) as a responsible horizontal echelon of local administration. The Yuan initially continued the *lu*, *zhou*, *xian* system of the Song, with the addition of *xingsheng* in particular regions to meet pressing local defense needs. As the military consolidation of the Yuan consumed the better part of the dynastic era, however, and as the Mongol imperial house faced local resistance to its rule in many parts of the empire, *xingsheng* evolved into integral parts of the routine system of territorial administration. The powers of the provinces also gradually extended from military affairs to other aspects of local administration. While appointments to provincial positions were considered central-ranking positions at the start of the Yuan, by the close of the dynasty they were considered local ones. The remnant *lu* of the Song, meanwhile, were reduced in size and expanded in number to the point where they became all but indistinguishable from units of the second echelon, including the *fu* and the *zhou*. In the Ming, the *lu* was abolished entirely.¹⁶ Hence, from the Yuan Dynasty, the province emerged as the apex of a three-echelon

system of territorial administration that exercised wide authority over large fixed territories.

Since the Yuan, the history of the province reveals symmetry with the county in the overall balance of territorial administration in a unified polity. The county's position as the basic administrative unit was most pronounced in periods of regime unity. After surveying periods of unity and disunity in China's imperial history, Gilbert Rozman concluded that regional governments in periods of disunity did not always feel the need to rely on county-level units to perform local administrative tasks. But unified imperial capitals, ruling over a vast empire, were invariably accompanied by county-level administrative centers.¹⁷ The emergence of the province as the highest echelon of local administration was dependent on political unification, on the one hand, and on the stabilization of the county as the basic echelon in the system on the other. Since then, province and county have been structurally related in providing between them the administrative facility and territorial reach for managing a vast and complex state.

This is not to say that counties or provinces have remained stable units in themselves. Counties have remained constant in number by expanding in area and population, and provinces by expanding in population. Changes in the number or size of counties appears less closely related to population growth than to levels of state capacity, or to the degree of state intensity that successive imperial governments could muster through their field administrations. That is to say, counties remained fairly constant in number, despite massive population increases, because central administrators showed a consistent preference for expansion in the population density rather than in the number of counties. William Skinner has noted that in the early Han, 1,180 counties administered an empire of 60 million subjects at an average per county of around 50,000 people. By the middle of the Qing Dynasty, 1,360 counties administered 425 million people at an average population per county of around 300,000. Today, they average around 600,000. Had the number of counties correlated directly with population, rather than with administrative fractions of the polity, China would have needed 8,500 counties in 1850 and 20,000 by 1990 (ten times their actual number) to maintain the population-to-county ratio established in the Qin. Neither the imperial nor the modern state could conceivably manage a field administration sufficiently large to preserve Qin or early Han levels of intensity. Problems of communication, coordination and control between the imperial center and upwards of 10,000 basic units would have been "beyond the capabilities of any agrarian state."¹⁸ Hence maintenance of regime stability and state capacity meant expanding the population density and limiting the number of counties to cope with population growth, and then containing them within the relatively large and stable administrative unit of an intermediate echelon – the province.

Similarly, the province has been a fairly constant territorial echelon despite periodic inflation in numbers. In the fourteenth century, one central

“sheng” (the *zongshusheng*) directly administered territory adjacent to the imperial capital and supervised the administration of ten regional “sheng” (the *xingsheng*) across the empire. In the succeeding Ming Dynasty, thirteen regional provinces and two provincial-level cities (Beijing and Tianjin) were known collectively as the “fifteen provinces” (*shiwusheng*). The Qing divided three of the larger provinces into six, and managed the resulting eighteen provinces until the 1880s, when it began creating a further five provinces in Taiwan, Xinjiang, Fengtian, Jilin and Heilongjiang. After surrendering Taiwan to Japan in 1895, the Qing bequeathed a total of twenty-two provinces to the new Republic. The Republican government retained the twenty-two provinces of the Qing but added four provincial-level Special Administrative Regions (*tebie xingzhengqu*: Jehol, Suiyuan, Chahar and Chuanbian (later Sikang Province)) with the aim of incorporating former Manchu territories and other minority/border areas into the regular administrative system. These four Special Administrative Areas were upgraded to provinces when the Nationalist Government came to power in 1928. With the addition of Ningxia and Qinghai provinces, the Nationalists supervised twenty-eight provinces at the outbreak of war with Japan. After the war, the Nanjing Government divided the three “north-eastern provinces” of Manchuria into nine provinces, and recovered Taiwan province, to administer thirty-five provinces. With the addition of one Territory (Tibet) and twelve centrally administered cities, the Nationalist Government left a legacy of forty-eight provincial-level territorial units for the new government of the People’s Republic when they fled the mainland for the province of Taiwan in 1949.¹⁹

After expanding briefly to fifty provincial-level units over the first few years of the PRC (thirty provinces, twelve provincial-level cities, three regions and five administrative areas), provincial numbers and boundaries stabilized in the mid-1950s around the late imperial pattern. Additional provincial-level status was initially granted to a few loyal base areas, including Pingyuan and Subei, at a time when the newly installed government operated through six supra-provincial administrative territories.²⁰ Over the next four or five years the central government eliminated all supra-provincial units, consolidated minority provinces into larger provincial-level autonomous regions, and confirmed the boundaries of remaining provinces in core Han areas more or less on the model of the Qing.²¹ Today, there are twenty-three provinces, five autonomous regions and four provincial-level cities, yielding a total of thirty-two provincial-level units.

Provinces and state-building

The character and problems of provinces in China turn on two elementary questions confronting central governments, one relating to the size and number of echelons in the country’s system of territorial administration, and the other to the degree of autonomy exercised by each echelon.²² These two questions framed a basic dilemma over the late imperial period. While the

court equated territorial unity with the maximization of central state power, the size of the country, the regional variety of its peoples and cultures, and the range of its environmental conditions called for decentralized decision-making. The advent of the province in the Yuan Dynasty provided a central check on local autonomy, although at some risk to effective local government if the center controlled provinces too closely, and at grave risk to the center if it failed to control them at all. Hence, imperial governments insisted on maintaining tight control of provincial appointments and revenues, and set strict limits to the provinces' scope for independent action, while provincial governments characteristically sought sufficient autonomy to insure effective local government. This tension has persisted into modern times. Every regime this century, including the Communist Party state, has illustrated an institutional contradiction between "the centralizing predilections of the rulers and the decentralizing dictates of the environment."²³

In recent history, however, the province has been instrumental not only in administering the state but in building the state. Attempts to balance the age-old demands of center and province in the twentieth century were compounded by an additional problem common to revolutionary states: the need to build new state structures on unorthodox ideological, social and economic foundations. From the last decades of the Qing, administrative reformers sought to penetrate below the level of the county, to town and village level, in order to develop state structures at sub-county level. The effort continued over the first half of the century, when competing revolutionary regimes struggled to substitute formal administrative structures for local elite organizations, and to differentiate, rationalize, bureaucratize and centralize local government. What began as a movement for administrative reform ended up as a social revolution.²⁴

This wider revolution had an impact on territorial administration as competing state-building regimes mobilized around existing fault lines within the territorial system. The Republican Revolution of 1911 and the "Second Revolution" of 1913, for example, each took the form of provincial secession movements. More worrying for many centralist revolutionaries was the endurance of autonomous provincial governments in the "warlord era" (1916–27) and in some cases into the mid-1930s. Some of these provincial administrations advocated an alternative federal model of territorial government that challenged the fundamental assumptions of the centralists. In other cases, notably the Nationalist Government of Guangdong in the 1920s and the Communist Government of Yanan in the 1930s and 1940s, revolutionary regimes pressed competing claims as central administrators. In sum, although the basic pattern of China's imperial territorial administration has been retained into the modern era, successive attempts to weld the old territorial model on to a new revolutionary polity heightened the tension between central control and effective local government embedded within the model itself.

The problem facing the territorial system in the modern period has involved more than reintegrating old territorial echelons around a new

central government. Early twentieth-century China was both a “disintegrating” territorial state and an “involutionary” one – a state in which territorial partition coincided with a chronic breakdown in differentiation and bureaucratization of the local state apparatus.²⁵ On the one hand, any central government that failed to retain strong control over its provincial territories ran the risk of surrendering authority to competing political, ideological and military forces. On the other, every central regime was under pressure to grant provinces sufficient authority, skills and resources to enable them to oversee the greater state-building project at county, town and village levels. As a result, although each national regime sought to create a modern, differentiated and bureaucratic national state on the site of an (increasingly remote) imperial one, not all showed similar enthusiasm for surrendering sufficient autonomy to provinces to penetrate the smallest units of human settlement in pursuit of local community mobilization and efficient revenue collection.

One measure of this problem was instability in the number and variety of territorial echelons and units over the first half of the twentieth century. We have noted the gradual and consistent increase in the number of provinces from the Yuan Dynasty (ten provinces) to the mid-nineteenth century (eighteen provinces). This was followed by a century of rapid inflation to between thirty and forty provinces by the end of the Nationalist era in 1949. The earlier period of measured expansion can largely be attributed to long-term historical changes in population, prosperity and the territorial reach of the state. The later period of provincial proliferation, however, resulted from systemic problems within the system of territorial administration itself, associated with new responsibilities assigned to local government which ultimately raised questions about the number and relative autonomy of echelons within the system.²⁶ Further, the unit at issue in earlier proposals for echelon reform tended to be the peak one – the *dao* of the Tang or the *lu* of the Song, for example – and the system was typically reformed by adding a new and more powerful echelon at the top of the system while demoting the previous occupant of that position to a lower echelon. But for much of this century it has been assumed that the highest echelon (the province) was as fixed as the lowest (the county). Centralizing governments have sought instead to experiment with an intermediate echelon (*fu*, *dao* and *zhou*), either eliminating it entirely and governing through province and county alone, or inventing new intermediate echelons to facilitate revolutionary (often military) control at sub-provincial level. In either case the status of the highest echelon, the province, was reduced relative to the sub-provincial level.

These developments are worth considering more closely. Throughout the Republic, successive central governments tried to reduce the number of administrative echelons from three to two, and to place strict limits on the autonomy of the province, with the aim of establishing more direct communications between the center and the counties. Under President Yuan Shikai, the Republican Government eliminated the prefecture (*fu*), and converted all

departments (*zhou*) and sub-prefectures (*ting*) into counties, in anticipation of implementing a simplified two-echelon system of province and county. The proposal proved impractical and was abandoned within a year of implementation. By 1914, President Yuan reintroduced an intermediate echelon of ninety-two circuits (*dao*).²⁷

Sun Yatsen also favored the two-echelon model, although in his case within a system that explicitly elevated the county at the expense of the province. Sun seems to have harbored grave doubts about provinces, particularly in his later years when they commanded resources sufficient to challenge a weakened national state. At one point he proposed a national government built on a confederation of counties that effectively by-passed the province as a territorial unit of any significance. Early in the 1920s, when a rival movement for a national confederation of provinces began to gather momentum, he dismissed the idea of provincial federation as a plot hatched by warlords and imperialists to break up China.²⁸ In October 1923 the provincial federation movement culminated in the first formal constitution of the Republic of China.²⁹ This was the country's first constitution to set out a significant formal division of powers between the center, provinces and counties. As a precedent, it was not widely emulated. Virtually all subsequent constitutional documents, including Nationalist and Communist state constitutions, have referred matters of authority, autonomy and functions of provinces and counties to separate Organic Laws (*zuzhifa*) subject to the whims of the central government of the day.³⁰

Sun answered the 1923 national constitution with a quasi-constitutional document of his own entitled Fundamentals of National Reconstruction for the Nationalist Government (*Guomin zhengfu jianguo dagang*), a short paper completed in April 1924 for the guidance of his alternative national government in Guangzhou. Here, provinces barely rate a mention: the business of government was a matter for negotiation between the center and the counties. Provinces were merely “intermediaries between the central and the county governments, providing for effective cooperation between them.”³¹

On coming to office in 1928, the Nationalist Government implemented Sun Yatsen's proposals to the extent of eliminating Yuan Shikai's intermediate circuits (*dao*) and returning to a simple twinning of county and province. At the same time, the province was reduced to a sub-echelon of central government under a committee system (*weiyuanzhi*). Provincial governments exercised little authority in their own right. Their executive organs (*ting*) reported not to the provincial government but to corresponding ministries of the central government, and their authority over subordinate counties was limited to the extent that county bureaux (*ju*) were ultimately answerable to the same central ministries. Provincial commissioners (*tingzhang*) were appointed by the Central Executive Yuan and received their instructions from central branch counterparts in their superior ministries. The regulatory powers of the governing Provincial Committee were confined to giving effect to the legislative and executive decisions of the

central government. In consequence, decisions on staffing, revenues and expenditure paid little heed to provincial revenue capacity or to the political impact of funding proposals on the communities that were expected to support them.³² While facilitating direct central intervention in local affairs, the committee system diminished local accountability and encouraged intense institutional rivalries at all levels of the state bureaucracy.

For all its faults, the committee system worked well when central and provincial governments happened to share more or less the same political space. It was effective when a government exercised central powers within a provincial jurisdiction, or when an essentially provincial government claimed to exercise the authority of a central one. Hence it proved reasonably successful in Guangdong Province from 1925 to 1927, when the Nationalist central government (*guomin zhengfu*) governed little more than one province. It worked effectively in Jiangsu Province when the national capital moved to Nanjing, the major urban hub in Jiangsu. It was reasonably effective under wartime conditions in Sichuan, and in one or two neighboring south-western provinces, when the Nationalists transferred their capital to Chongqing. And it proved remarkably successful in the province of Taiwan, ruled from 1949 by a national government whose jurisdiction overlapped with that of the Taiwan provincial government. By the time the Nationalists transferred their administrative center to Taiwan, however, the limitations of the committee system had been exposed in a series of unsuccessful attempts to extend the system to provinces beyond the immediate purview of the Nationalist Government. Under the committee system, provincial governments functioned poorly in provinces that were too far from Nanjing for the central government to intervene directly in their day-to-day administration and yet too close to escape its effective military reach.

Chiang Kaishek then called upon the army to establish and staff a new intermediate echelon of sub-provincial administration. In July 1932, the General Command Headquarters for Bandit-Encirclement ordered the three provincial governments of Henan, Hubei and Anhui to “partition each province into an appropriate number of districts within which to establish offices for administrative inspection personnel.” The new sub-provincial Administrative Inspection Districts (*xingzheng ducha qu*) were situated directly under General Command Headquarters, with lateral links to respective provincial governments. The experiment was subsequently extended to civilian authorities in neighboring provinces. In August 1932, the Central Executive Yuan introduced regulations permitting provincial governments outside the military zones to set up Inspectorate Personnel Offices (*ducha zhuanyuan gongsuo*) on the military model to oversee administration of counties in areas with “particular requirements,” most notably particular security requirements. The new offices were empowered to direct and supervise police and militia forces in their jurisdictions. Outside the Bandit-Encirclement zones, provincial governments retained effective control over subordinate districts. Hence not one but two separate systems of sub-

provincial administration emerged in different parts of the country in the 1930s, with formal districts under higher level military control in Bandit-Encirclement areas and *ad hoc* administrative inspection offices established elsewhere under provincial government control. The two systems were merged in March 1936. Revised regulations issued in December transferred the districts to provincial government authority.³³

Experience of the Jiangxi encirclement campaigns prompted a major revision of the provincial government system in October 1936, restoring a measure of autonomy to provincial governments and investing the Chair of the Provincial Committee with considerably greater authority. The new regulations obliged each provincial commission to coordinate its work with other jurisdictional commissions at provincial level (rather than seek the approval of its central branch office), to channel paper through a single office of the provincial government, to submit all regulations and directives for the provincial Chair's approval and to issue them directly through the provincial government.³⁴ This restructuring of the committee system was not extended to all provinces due to the outbreak of the war with Japan. The policy was revived immediately after the war and elevated, in modified form, to a constitutional principle in the Constitution of 1946.³⁵

In retrospect, it seems that the Nationalist Government denied provinces a significant measure of formal autonomy for fear that they would become the major beneficiaries of intensive state-building. At times they did so. When the push for local self-government from below encountered pressure for centralized control from above, the contest on occasion unfolded in ways that strengthened the province as arbiter between center and locality. In the 1930s, for example, local initiatives in the New Life Movement at county and village level in Fujian Province invited provincial government intervention to ensure that it retained control over central initiatives. Permitting local communities and governments to oversee their own cultural “modernization” without significant inputs from higher echelons would have deprived the province of an important rationale for its existence – the production of the modern (local) citizen. The province, needless to say, jealously preserved its civic duties.³⁶

Overall, the Nationalist Government lacked the capacity at central level to differentiate state agencies from social institutions or to bureaucratize lower level officials at county and sub-county levels in all but a few provinces. In consequence, local state institutionalization in the Nationalist era was confined to a few provinces more or less under Nanjing's direct control, and to a number of provinces and regions so far removed from Nanjing that they could assert their autonomy with impunity. Jiangsu and Zhejiang, immediately adjacent to the site of the national capital in Nanjing, remained under the close supervision and control of the central government.³⁷ Next in rank on the bureaucratization scale were provinces outside Nanjing's effective control, including Guangdong, Guangxi and Shanxi. Governments in these provinces were sufficiently remote from Nanjing to exercise authority in their

own right, and sufficiently powerful to make a start in imposing new state structures on local society and in bureaucratizing local administration. In each case, it was governments at the provincial level that took the lead in local state-building.³⁸ Elsewhere, the failure of successive attempts to implement the two echelon system and reduce the province to a cypher of central government under the governments of Yuan Shikai, Sun Yatsen and Chiang Kaishek suggest that they each overestimated the center's capacity to communicate effectively with county and city administrations, and underestimated the problem of institutionalizing new state structures at county and sub-county level. This is one of the lessons of history that might well be recalled in considering the status of provinces in China today.

The province at the turn of the twenty-first century

Recent studies on central–provincial relations have highlighted the growth of provincial power relative to that of China's central government in the reform era.³⁹ A somewhat different picture of provincial power and authority emerges from analysis of the broader spatial framework of territorial administration over the history of the People's Republic. Under the planned economy, provinces benefited from a central policy of horizontal-area (*kuai*) coordination that devolved significant powers to provincial governments. The sub-provincial echelon of the prefecture (called *zhuanqu* until 1975 and *diqu* thereafter) was subject to a vertical-branch (*tiaotiao*) structure of command that enforced local compliance with directives from the province.⁴⁰ The relative importance of vertical and horizontal lines of authority at different levels varied over time even under the planned economy. With the gradual introduction of market reforms in the 1980s, however, the central government strengthened horizontal-area integration at levels lower than the province and promoted the city (*shi*) as its favored “area” for integrated economic, social and political decision-making. In consequence, cities have been accorded greater powers as key sites of horizontal-area authority within provinces.⁴¹ Relatively speaking, the province has surrendered authority to the subordinate echelon of the city within a rapidly intensifying state.

The emergence of the city as a standard unit of territorial administration foreshadows one of the most significant reorganizations of China's territorial administration since Yuan times. The rise of the city is significant in its potential impact on the historical relationship between province and county, in establishing new grounds for congruence between economic space and political space, in presenting new challenges and opportunities for differentiation and bureaucratization of local government, and for the light this development sheds on the relationship between markets and governments in determining historical patterns of territorial administration in Chinese history. Indeed, the emergence of the city returns us to the questions with which we began. Can the state differentiate itself sufficiently from markets to ensure

the healthy growth of a market economy? Does the province have a continuing role in building the state, specifically in coping with new demands to differentiate, bureaucratize and centralize sub-provincial arms of the territorial system?

In the main, changes in China's urban network have been driven by the application of a "market mechanism" to the industrial sector within a policy framework favoring rural industrialization over urban renewal. As Barry Naughton has shown, the initial consequence of relaxing controls on urban development in the reform era was not a resurgence of traditional urban centers such as Shanghai and Tianjin, but great and rapid economic growth in areas surrounding existing cities. The profitability of industries in older urban centers had been built on artificial prices for raw materials and finished products. New "rural" industries eroded the profits of this price-supported state manufacturing sector by forcing up prices of undervalued raw materials and by lowering prices on consumer goods. As profitability declined in the state sector so, too, did the profits remitted as revenues from older urban centers to Beijing. At the same time, administratively contrived boundaries between city and countryside collapsed, creating space for the emergence of new semi-urban zones where "weak surveillance of economic activity" encountered "abundant economic opportunity." While Beijing's share of total revenues fell into decline over the first decade of reform, the "rural" share of industrial output grew from 9 percent in 1978 to 27 percent in 1990.⁴²

The central government moved quickly to harness and to formalize this new urban order. In an effort to recover control over unplanned urban growth, Beijing moved from the mid-1980s to grant greater autonomy to large cities, to reclassify counties as cities, and to redraft administrative boundaries of existing cities and counties so that they conformed more closely to economic regions. The rise of cities in recent decades is unprecedented not only in scale but in its potential impact on the scope of provincial and county government authority – and perhaps on the integrity of the territorial system as a whole.

In imperial times, cities were administered under an appropriate territorial echelon (*zhou*, *fu* or *dao*) and in some cases divided between several units of the same echelon. It was not until the second decade of the Republic that cities began to emerge as territorial units in their own right. Significantly, the very first city to receive formal urban classification was designated not as an administrative unit but as a "self-governing" one. In 1921, Chen Jiongmeng reorganized Guangzhou as a city administration in concert with a broader program for local self-government in Guangdong.⁴³ Four years later, the succeeding Nationalist administration reclassified Guangzhou as an administrative unit under provincial jurisdiction (Guangzhoushi) and eliminated all prospect for local self-government under the rubric of "party rule." Guangzhou nevertheless retained its city status.

With the territorial expansion of Nationalist authority from 1926 to 1928, the Guangzhou style of urban designation was extended to a number of other cities, now collectively termed Special Cities (*tebieshi*). Beginning in

1930, the Special City system was replaced by a system of urban classification that grouped cities under central or provincial government jurisdiction. One cluster of cities, answering to the center, was known as Direct Jurisdiction Cities (*zhixiashi*) or Yuan Jurisdiction Cities (*yuanxiashi*), referring to the central government's Administrative Yuan. Direct Jurisdiction Cities were classified alongside the province in the national administrative hierarchy. Those answering to provincial governments were termed Provincial Jurisdiction Cities (*shengxiashi*) and classified as county-level cities. There were six Direct (or Yuan) Jurisdiction Cities and sixteen Provincial Jurisdiction Cities at the outbreak of war with Japan. After the war, the number of Direct Jurisdiction Cities increased to twelve: Nanjing, Shanghai, Beiping, Tianjin, Chongqing, Dalian, Harbin, Hangkou, Guangzhou, Shenyang, Qingdao and Xi'an. Over the first years of Communist Party rule there were no less than fourteen Direct Jurisdiction Cities. From 1954 these were reduced to three – Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin – and, for a time between 1958 and 1967, to two cities when Tianjin was placed under Hebei provincial jurisdiction. Today, there are four Direct Jurisdiction Cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing.⁴⁴

There are three levels of city in China's current administrative hierarchy. These are, in descending order, provincial level cities under central jurisdiction (*zhixiashi*), prefectural-level cities (*shengxiashi*, colloquially *dijishi*) and county-level cities (*xianjishi*, colloquially *dixiashi*). There is a further subdivision at prefectural level of relatively privileged "separately planned" cities (*jihua danlie chengshi*), which exercise certain provincial-level economic powers denied others at the same level. Below the county-level city come towns (*zhen*) and, beneath towns, the "nonurban" settlement of the township (*xiang*) and the village (*cun*). At this "nonurban" level, around 900,000 villages are accommodated into roughly 45,000 townships, at an average of twenty villages per township.

The position of a town or city in the urban hierarchy largely determines the scope of state activity and local authority in its domain – and the extent of its encroachment on former areas of provincial jurisdiction. Generally speaking, the higher they rise in the hierarchy the greater the authority that towns and cities enjoy. Their place on the formal urban ladder determines the scope of their administrative powers, the degree of control they exercise over investment decisions (including foreign investment), their relative access to financial support from the state, their capacity to secure reliable food supplies from subordinate counties and, to a diminishing degree, the extent to which they qualify for subsidized food prices. Urban designation serves to limit or enhance a city's capacity to take full advantage of the economic reform policies introduced since 1978. Thus it is to the advantage of townships to seek classification as towns, for towns to become county-level cities, for county level cities to seek prefectural status, for prefectural cities to apply for classification as "separately planned" cities, and for these cities to upgrade to provincial-level cities.⁴⁵

Despite the actual demographic and economic growth of cities in the reform era, published statistics on urbanization over the past two decades tell us more about processes of administrative creep within the territorial hierarchy than they do about economic or social mobility to, from and within cities. There were ninety county-level cities on the eve of Deng Xiaoping's return to office in 1977. By 1995 there were over four times that number. The number of prefecture-level cities doubled over the same period, from ninety-seven to over two hundred. Expansion in the category of prefecture-level cities occurred through reclassification of many of the ninety cities that had been listed as county-level cities in 1977. The growth of the county-level category over the past two decades appears to be explained by the reclassification of 400 former towns as cities. Over the same period, the number of officially designated urban towns rose from 2,850 in 1978 to around 12,000.⁴⁶

In terms of administrative jurisdictions, this process of urban creep has come at the expense of both the province and the county. At provincial level, the trend is toward expanding the number of provincial-level cities (overseeing a significant number of rural counties) that report directly to Beijing rather than to their home provinces. At sub-provincial level, prefecture-level cities have been designated sites of local area government rather than subsidiary units of provincial government. Initially, provinces benefited from the renewed emphasis on horizontal-area integration and hastily reclaimed authority over areas of economic decision-making at provincial level that were no longer subject to vertical command from Beijing. In more recent years, however, urban units at and below the provincial level have been expanding their authority over areas that are no longer the province's to command. Even at county level, there has been a rapid conversion of counties into cities and, more significantly, a rash of new and old urban centers incorporating rural counties on the principle of "cities leading counties" (*shiguanxian*). In either case, provinces are uniformly and inexorably surrendering authority over large areas of territorial jurisdiction to cities, and counties are losing the right to appeal directly to provinces for assistance or redress.

The first casualty of this transfer of counties to city administration was the prefectural district (*diqu*), an administrative unit that was technically a regional arm of provincial government rather than an echelon in its own right. As early as 1991, provincial government prefectures disappeared from Jiangsu, Guangdong, Liaoning and Hainan Provinces under the weight of urban administrative reform.⁴⁷ In each case, the displacement of prefectures by new prefectural cities, or by county cities and "cities leading counties," signaled the transfer of authority over large fractions of provincial territory to local urban governments.

The second party to be affected was the county. Initially, counties and county-level cities turned to provincial governments for help in escaping the suffocating grip of prefectural cities. The growth of the "four little tiger" counties of Guangdong, for example, was conditional on their attainment

of city-level status independent of Guangzhou with the assistance of the provincial government. In contrast, adjacent counties under Guangzhou City jurisdiction were relatively slow to “take off.”⁴⁸ In more recent years, however, county officials have been heard to refer to the “cities leading counties” system as a system for “cities bleeding counties” (*shiguaxian*).⁴⁹ Counties placed under the jurisdiction of a new urban hub resented the loss of autonomy they formerly enjoyed under relatively benign provincial rule.

The third echelon to be affected was the province. It is not at all certain, however, that the province has suffered as an echelon from its relative loss of territorial jurisdiction. In one sense, the development of a sub-provincial urban echelon confirms the place of the province in a two-tiered system of territorial government. The pairing of province and city fulfills a structural need comparable to that of province and county in imperial times – although at a higher level of state intensification – while meeting many of the pressing needs that encouraged proliferation of intermediate sub-provincial units this century. Appeals from cities and counties to provincial governments to reconcile conflicts of interest among different levels of the new urban hierarchy illustrate one aspect of an emerging structural relationship. Second, under the planned economy, every provincial government had to contend with at least one prefecture-level city – the provincial capital (*shenghui*) – or perhaps two in the case of highly urbanized provinces. In the era of state planning, the provincial capital acted as an alternative to the province as a source of status, power and wealth for elite mobility within the party and state apparatus. Capital cities also attracted more than their share of state investment and concessionary policies. For most provincial governments, significant advantages were to be gained from expanding the number of prefectural-level cities to counterbalance the weight of the provincial capital and hence spread some of its privileges more widely around the province. Provincial governments also stand to gain from widespread economic development within their jurisdictions and from growing intensification of state activity at all levels within the system. State expansion at city level holds the potential to enhance the reach and capacity of the state as a whole. This appears to be conditional, however, on provinces continuing to play their historic role of institutionalizing and differentiating the state within their territorial jurisdictions – or at least on provincial governments retaining a stake in new developments within their own domains.

Perhaps the greatest casualty of urban administrative creep has been the operation of the territorial system as a *system*. This has been affected in several ways. First, it has suffered from attempts to maintain congruence between economic space and political space in the territorial arrangements of local government, to the point of confusing the distinction between economic and administrative rationality. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with congruence in itself. Absolute congruence between economic and political space is a shared ideal of many competing political models, including

the socialist planned economy (Maoist China) and the pure market economy (Hong Kong). The introduction of communes in the late 1950s, for example, altered the spatial structure of communications, administrative systems and the economy at village and township levels. Flows of people, information, goods and services were determined by the administrative arrangement of space within a commune: telegraph lines, wired-radio networks, roads and bus routes radiated from commune headquarters, reducing the effective administrative distance of settlements within a commune while inflating the relative distance separating villages of neighboring communes. New administrative centers grew at the expense of old market towns, and commune social and economic networks converged at every point with patterns of territorial administration. The effect of the commune on social and administrative space was to establish more direct conformity between administrative space and socio-economic space than possibly at any time in China's history.⁵⁰ Much the same might be said of Hong Kong, if in reverse. In this case, the organization of the territory around the ideal of a global free market played a large part in determining its administrative arrangements as a colonial (now "autonomous") territory. Neither political space nor economic space is corrupted, in the technical sense, when one is clearly subordinated to the other.

Maintaining balance and conformity between economic and political space in a state that is moving from a centrally planned economy to a market economy can lead to maldistribution of economic and political authority. Attempts to elevate the city as a basic unit of territorial administration appear to be founded on the principle that administrative space should conform with socio-economic space.⁵¹ More particularly, they seem to be founded on the assumption that economic development should drive administrative development. Much of this is "model driven" through well-publicized initiatives taken by the central government. Beijing's grand plan for restoring cities to their role as central places within the formal administrative system was set out in the widely publicized "Outline for the Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives to 2010," which detailed plans for seven economic zones spanning various provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities, each with at least one city at its heart. A number of provincial governments followed suit.⁵² In many regions, however, the contours of socio-economic space have been skewed by four decades of state planning that effectively naturalized the spatial structure of the party-state as a template for regional decision-making, investment, production and exchange. Today, the boundaries of many of China's new cities conform more closely with these old socialist administrative units than with ideal market networks; or, to put the problem more concretely, new urban marketing networks have developed around old patterns of territorial administration.⁵³ The beneficiaries in every case have been the state functionaries whose plans for economic development take close account of their own administrative territories.

Another point of administrative contamination is the role these state functionaries play in managing economic development. Basically, the fabric of the state is bursting at the seams with new social and economic elites that have been enriched and empowered by the “market mechanism” yet who continue to organize, mobilize and communicate around the spatial patterns and administrative institutions of local state and party structures. China’s system of territorial administration was not designed to contain the forces unleashed by market-driven urbanization. In the 1950s and 1960s, administrative planners could draw their territorial boundaries without regard to the possible emergence of social and economic coalitions that might threaten the integrity of the state; in fact, the only space for emergence of socio-economic coalitions was within the framework of the state itself. In any case, the new party-state favored conformity of administrative and economic units in its territorial administration so long as conformity meant making economic units correspond to administrative ones. Now, however, the territorial arrangements of the national administrative system must conform to the spatial structure of an economy that remains skewed by earlier territorial arrangements, while the authority of the state remains in the hands of elites that can no longer distinguish between administrative rationality and self-interested economic gain.

Differentiating between socio-economic elites and state institutions is rendered more difficult still by the phenomenon of “state sprawl.” Once counties had been reclassified as cities, or incorporated into cities-leading-counties, the local state apparatus began expanding to levels commensurate with its new responsibilities. Vivienne Shue witnessed this process at work in her study of a rural county upgraded to city status in 1986. The greater responsibilities assigned to Xinji City (formerly Shulu County) in Hebei, for managing the transition to a local market economy, led to significant growth in the size and complexity of the local state apparatus. Elsewhere in China, much the same has been happening at township (*xiang*) level, where the number of official employees is on average two to three times higher than levels approved or funded by higher echelons of government.⁵⁴ Shue classifies this process at sub-provincial level as one of “state sprawl.” Others have suggested that state sprawl may be closely related to the process of “state involution” identified by Prasenjit Duara in his study of local administration in the Republic.⁵⁵

Finally, the new cities blur echelon demarcation within the territorial system. The city is not an echelon but a unit (indeed the only unit) located on all three echelon levels: at provincial level (*zhixiashi*), at prefectural level (*shengxiashi*) and at county level (*xianjishi*). Confusion arises when the same term applies at different levels. This can have trivial consequences – in, for example, an increasing confusion of terms in local naming practices (e.g. Wancounty City, or Shacity City). More significantly, it highlights the extent to which the hierarchical administrative system is captive to an imperfect fusion of commercial development and administrative creep. Recent proposals

for reform have included reserving the term “city” (*shi*) exclusively for urban commercial centers; reviving old echelon terms for provincial-level cities (*dao*) and prefecture-level cities (*fu*); and eliminating the term “city” in referring to county-level units in any shape or form. Were this proposal implemented, the city would cease to be classified as an administrative unit in the territorial system.⁵⁶

In one sense this may be going too far, and in another not far enough. The problem, after all, is not that cities have been granted excessive bureaucratic recognition in the territorial hierarchy. Cities warrant formal acknowledgment appropriate to their social, economic and political significance, and for this reason have been nudging their way into the system since the 1920s. The administrative system needs to take account of cities chiefly because cities – that is, actual urban commercial centres – have been driving economic development. The problem lies, rather, in the conflation of cities as dynamic commercial and industrial centers, on the one hand, and cities as arbitrarily defined units in a formal system of territorial administration, on the other. This question is inseparable in turn from the role of the local state apparatus in owning and managing the burgeoning urban “cooperative” economy, which highlights a systemic failure at sub-provincial level to differentiate between state institutions and socio-economic ones.

The search for a workable method for differentiating, rationalizing and centralizing the system of territorial administration appears to require a return to the “state-building” strategies of the first half of the twentieth century. Suggestions put forward by administrative historians to change the system of urban nomenclature mark a small symbolic step in this direction, although in this case one that recalls the *dao* and the *fu* of imperial times. A more appropriate historical reference might be one that returns the city to its origins as a territorial unit of local self-government, as Chen Jiongming initially proposed for Guangzhou in 1921, within a constitutional division of powers among the center, provinces, cities and counties. The city is pushing China’s system of territorial administration to the limit because cities – real commercial ones – are not amenable to centralized administration. In cities, effective state-building perhaps requires an acceptable minimum of self-government.

An equally important historical precedent is the distinctive role of provinces as state-building agents over the first half of this century, and the centrally imposed limit to provincial autonomy that prevented provinces from completing this task in the Republic. Certainly, the emergence of administrative cities as standard units of territorial administration in recent years is strikingly reminiscent of Sun Yatsen’s early plan for an alliance between the center and the counties against the provinces, or the later strategy for undermining provinces set out in Sun’s *Fundamentals for National Reconstruction*. In each case, the aim was to reduce the province to a transparent window for central government supervision of territorial administration. In the absence of strong provincial government (and a highly

efficient party structure) his successors' attempts to implement this strategy came to very little. Whether the provinces will be allowed to perform their historic function of differentiating and bureaucratizing local state structures is an open question. The risk, of course, is that provinces may choose to do so whether they are permitted to or not.

Conclusion

The province is a national unit of local administration. So too are the county and, from the mid-twentieth century, the village. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century the domain of the local (*difang*) was gradually extended as a site of national bureaucratic authority from the province, to the prefecture, and to counties, wards and villages. Once the village became a site of local government it became, like the province, an integral part of the national administrative system. To be sure, the number of echelon levels and the function and authority of each level within the national system were and remain matters for discussion, and at times dispute, among networks and levels of the system. Resorting to terms such as "provincialism" or "provincial separatism" to capture inter-echelon contests at the highest level can be misleading when it implies that provincial demands for a greater share of political authority threaten the integrity of the territorial state itself. They may threaten the center, certainly, but they pose no more or less a threat to the territorial state than the center itself does. The central (*zhongyang*) and the local are, after all, two sides of the one national system.

The trend over the long twentieth century was toward increasing centralization based on an ideal of popular sovereignty. Looking back over the history of territorial administration in the Republic and the People's Republic, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the behavior of centralizing nationalists – from Yuan Shikai to Sun Yatsen, Chiang Kaishek and, to a degree, Mao Zedong – was informed by two basically populist assumptions. The first was that the Chinese nation ideally comprised a great many peasant farmers and working commoners. A second was that the Chinese state should represent the people, scattered as they were over a vast number of settled communities, through a centralized administrative system that could mobilize the people at village level. The art of government appeared to lie in linking the national capital with the counties and villages to educate and mobilize the common people, extract resources, develop the country, and defend the realm. Little allowance was made either for cities or provinces as relatively autonomous units of government. From the panoptic perspective of the metropole, all intermediate echelons of territorial administration, including provinces, prefectures, special zones and cities, appeared either as obstacles in the way of consummating the special relationship between the capital and the counties, or as expedient intermediaries arising from the temporary postponement of the romance of county and metropole, people and state. In the meantime, provinces, prefectures, districts and cities were

granted the bare minimum of authority and autonomy thought necessary to fulfill the elementary administrative and security requirements of the central arms of the state.

These assumptions were not just populist but also fairly realistic in the republican period. Centralizing nationalists appealed to the “people” (*renmin*) in the hope of forming an alliance against the powerful regional forces arrayed against them. The intransigence of provincial governments in Shanxi, Sichuan, Guangdong, Guanxi, Yunnan and the three Manchurian provinces consistently prevented central fiat from becoming national law. To give effect to national policy and to realize the will of the “people,” the province was circumvented as a significant echelon in the national system of territorial administration. But this is also where the assumption came unstuck. Perhaps no centralizing political movement could have taken effective control of the country without first eliminating the powerful regional forces aligned against it. On the other hand, no metropolitan government in the Republic could work effectively with the counties without the aid of powerful regional forces for the simple reason that very few counties in the country were functioning as effective administrative units. Intermediate echelons were indispensable for making counties work.

As a territorial state, the Republic suffered two major problems: it was a disintegrating state and it was an involutory one. The solution to disintegration, of course, was territorial reintegration. But there was little prospect of the center forming a meaningful alliance with the “people,” against disintegrative regional forces, when it lacked the institutional capacity to deal directly with sub-regional governments. Central procedures for communication, extraction, enforcement and mobilization at county and sub-county level were simply not up to the task. The solution to state involution was not territorial reintegration but rather technical centralization involving systematic penetration, differentiation and bureaucratization of the local state apparatus. The evidence to hand suggests, paradoxically, that disintegrative provincial warlord governments were just as adept as the central government in centralizing the local state in this technical sense. To compound the paradox, the evidence suggests that autonomous provincial governments were comparatively more successful in laying the foundations for a functioning local state than the weaker provincial structures set in place by the Nationalist Government in areas outside its immediate administrative reach. Indeed, given the level of state involution at the lowest levels of town and county, and the limited administrative reach of the metropole, it seems that the province was the only existing administrative echelon capable of differentiating, rationalizing and bureaucratizing the territorial state in many parts of the country. The centralizing nationalists who were largely responsible for the romance of metropole and county in the Republic failed to acknowledge one of the enduring lessons of China’s history. To ensure a functioning national polity, the province needed to exercise sufficient authority to institutionalize and to oversee local government.

National leaders have generally blamed provinces for China's territorial disintegration without regard for their instrumental role in local state-building and in confronting the problem of state involution. Each new centralizing regime, on its accession to power, tried to constrain provincial governments but later sought to enlist them in the struggle to maintain regime credibility. So there is a detectable pattern of centralization and relaxation in central-provincial relations from the start to the end of the Republican and Nationalist periods. The Republican Government of 1912 and the Nationalist Government of 1928 each tried to establish strong central control immediately on accession before settling into a modified centralist model that eliminated some of the excesses of over-centralization. In much the same fashion, the Communists' asserted strong central control on their accession as if to signal their determination to avoid the "errors" of their predecessors.⁵⁷ In attributing the crisis that brought down the Liberal and Nationalist republics to excessive latitude towards the provinces, Beijing was possibly mistaking the symptoms for the cause of system breakdown. Relaxation of central control came very late in the life of the Republican and Nationalist regimes, in fact long after the onset of regime crisis. In each case, regime collapse was only momentarily preceded by waves of constitutional amendments devolving greater power to the provinces, first under the Cao Kun constitution of 1923 and later under Chiang Kaishek's constitution of 1946.⁵⁸ Last-minute decentralization of authority marked a desperate attempt to avert a collapse that had been precipitated by excessive central control and insufficient attention to the institutionalization of the local state apparatus. This was a case *not* of too much latitude to the provinces but of too little latitude too late for the survival of each regime.

The historical role of the province in institutionalizing and bureaucratizing the sub-provincial state apparatus has been thrown into relief, once again, by the phenomenon of municipal state sprawl in the reform era. Beijing has tried to accommodate new markets by reclassifying its regions, redrafting administrative boundaries, and devolving authority to sub-provincial levels of administration. These initiatives have done little, however, to differentiate the state from newly emerging elites. To the extent that it resembles earlier processes of state involution in the Republican era, growing state sprawl at sub-provincial level fails to compensate for any diminution in the reach or capacity of the state apparatus at provincial level. The province is no less important for efficient collection of revenues and effective delivery of services in the face of rapid proliferation of local state and quasi-state agencies. This is simply beyond the capacity of the central state. It is also beyond the scope of markets themselves. If markets need a strong regulatory environment, then they also need provinces with sufficient authority to perform their historical function of overseeing sub-provincial arms of the state.

Notes

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 - 13 Rozman, *Urban Networks*, pp. 57–8.
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 - 15 Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, pp. 136–42.
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 - 19 Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, pp. 150–1, 155–7, 164–5, 173–7; Bo Qingjiu, "Difang zhidu," pp. 686–7; Whitney, *China: Area*, pp. 121–4.
 - 20 Dorothy J. Solinger, *Regional Government and Political Integration in Southwest China, 1949–1954: A Case Study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).
 - 21 Gao Yan and Pu Shanxin (eds) *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xingzheng quhua shouce* [Handbook of the administrative units of the People's Republic of China] (Beijing: Guangming Daily Press, 1986), pp. 9–11; Whitney, *China: Area*, pp. 126–9, 168.
 - 22 Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*; Whitney, *China: Area*.
 - 23 Whitney, *China: Area*, p. 166.
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- 25 Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).
- 26 Significantly, proposals have been put forward in recent times to reduce the size and double the number of provinces in the People’s Republic to the level of the late Nationalist era – that is to around fifty or sixty provinces. Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, pp. 193–4.
- 27 Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, p. 174; Bo Qingjiu, “Difang zhidu,” pp. 679–84.
- 28 Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Fitzgerald, *Awakening China*.
- 29 William L. Tung, *The Political Institutions of Modern China* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), pp. 59–85.
- 30 One limited exception was the Nationalist Constitution of December 1946, which signified the return of the province as a significant political unit after two decades of neglect in Nationalist administrative planning. For an English translation see “The Constitution of the Republic of China” (1946), in Chien Tuan-sheng, *The Government and Politics of China, 1912–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1950), pp. 447–64.
- 31 Sun Yatsen, *Guomin zhengfu jianguo dagang* [Fundamentals of national reconstruction for the Nationalist Government]. In *Guofu quanji* (Complete works of the father of the country) (Taipei: Dangshi shiliao bianzuan weiyuanhui, 1973), 6 vols, vol. 1, p. 752. English translation in Chien Tuan-sheng, *The Government and Politics of China*, p. 463.
- 32 Bo Qingjiu, “Difang zhidu,” pp. 688–9.
- 33 Bo Qingjiu, “Difang zhidu,” pp. 686, 696–9.
- 34 Bo Qingjiu, “Difang zhidu,” pp. 689–90.
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- 36 Sara L. Friedman, “Civilising the masses: the productive power of cultural reform efforts in Late Republican Era Fujian,” in Terry Bodenorn (ed.) *Defining Modernity? Guomindang Rhetorics of a New China, 1920–1970* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies of the University of Michigan, 2002).
- 37 Lloyd E. Eastman, *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).
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- 39 Shaun Breslin, *China in the 1980s: Center–Province Relations in a Reforming Socialist State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996); Dali Yang, *Beyond Beijing: Liberalization and the Regions in China* (London and NY: Routledge, 1997).
- 40 With the exception of a brief period in the early 1970s, when the prefecture was removed from direct provincial government jurisdiction and placed under a

- horizontal-area Prefectural Revolutionary Committee (*diqu geming weiyuanhui*). Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, p. 179.
- 41 Jonathan Unger, “The struggle to dictate China’s administration: branches vs. areas vs. reform,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 18 (July 1987), pp. 15–45; Kam Wing Chan, *Cities With Invisible Walls: Reinterpreting Urbanization in Post-1949 China* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 104–5; Chung Him and Tang Wing-shing, “Regionalism under Deng: localism centred around cities and towns,” unpublished paper presented to the 5th National Conference of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia, University of Adelaide, July 1997, pp. 6–7
- 42 Barry Naughton, “Cities in the Chinese economic system: changing roles and conditions for autonomy,” in Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds) *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China* (Washington DC and New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 77–82.
- 43 Leslie H. Dingyan Chen, *Chen Jiongmeng and the Federalist Movement: Regional Leadership and Nation Building in Early Republican China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1999), Chapter five, *passim*.
- 44 Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, pp. 174–8.
- 45 Chan, *Cities With Invisible Walls*, pp. 20–1; Chung and Tang, “Regionalism under Deng,” p. 3.
- 46 Chan, *Cities With Invisible Walls*, p. 26; Chung and Tang, “Regionalism under Deng,” Table 1, “Bureau Releases Statistics on Urbanization,” Beijing Xinhua, English, 28 Aug 1997, FBIS-CHI-97–240.
- 47 Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, p. 179.
- 48 John Fitzgerald, “Autonomy and growth in China: county experience in Guangdong Province,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 5, no. 11 (1996), pp. 7–22.
- 49 Chung and Tang, “Regionalism under Deng,” p. 7.
- 50 Whitney, *China: Area*, pp. 142–3.
- 51 Unger, “The struggle to dictate China’s administration.”
- 52 The Anhui Provincial Government seized on the strategy to promote its own plans for urban regional development in the Wan Jiang area. In his Annual Work Report for 1996, Provincial Governor Hui Liangyu highlighted the provincial government strategy for “developing Wan Jiang as Anhui’s answer to Pudong,” and noted the success the Wan Jiang strategy had achieved in “opening up the whole province.” Governor Hui also observed that over 20 percent of the province’s population was now registered as urban, and that his government aimed to achieve a target of 35 percent urban registrations by the year 2000. This target was to be achieved by “rationally distributing urban complexes, with big and medium-sized cities and small towns supporting each other” – on a pattern of urban development characterized by administrative creep. Hui Liangyu, “Report on the Outline for the Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Term Targets Through the Year 2010 for Anhui Province – Speech to the Fourth Session of the Eighth People’s Congress on 4 February 1996,” *Anhui ribao*, 12 February, FBIS-CHI-96–164.
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- 54 See, for example, Shai Oyster, "Taking China's elections to the next level," *Christian Science Monitor* (3 March 2001).
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- 56 Hu Gu, *Zhongguo lidai*, pp. 193–4.
- 57 Breslin, *China in the 1980s*, p.3.
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