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In the Name of the State: Interactions between local administrators and citizens

Editorial

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Editorial

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The studies collected in this special issue offer the reader a wide variety of subjects. The working practices observed in a Residents' Committee in Beijing (Wang Di), the interactions between *chengguan* (the quasi-official units of the urban police) and street vendors, also in Beijing (Emmanuel Caron), the different actors involved in renovation projects in the Old Shanghai and their interactions (Zhang Kai), the expropriation and expulsion of the inhabitants of a village in Guangdong Province (Boris Svartzman), the legal recognition of adopted children in Kunming and its environs (Karine-Hinano Guérin), development brokerage in the Tibetan areas of Qinghai province (Xenia de Heering): the diversity of places and topics may be surprising.

Nevertheless, not only does each article complement or renew the literature in its own field, but bringing them together also fulfils a specific purpose: to shed light on the relations between ordinary Chinese citizens and those who, invested with official administrative functions, no matter how disparate, are in a position to represent the authority of the state and of the Party at the most local level. It is thus not a matter of opposing two clearly delineated and homogenous blocs, but rather of starting out from specific situations characterised by an asymmetry between those who perform official duties of control or management and those they are responsible for controlling or managing.

This issue is therefore not a continuation of the important literature that exists on state-society relations, devoted either to discussing the relevance of different paradigms to the current transformations observed in China (democratisation and civil society; clientelism and neo-traditionalism, corporatism of different types [1]) or to using this perspective to study specific empirical realities. [2] Nor does it stem from an approach questioning the difficult constitution of collectives in China and their relations with the administration. [3] It rather strives to analyse the interactions *in situ* that occur between low-ranking administrators and the administrated, the wide range of injunctions, expectations, and constraints they stem from, and the shared norms of interaction or the specific solutions, more or less justified or arbitrary, they can lead to.

The interactions observed here are very diverse. They sometimes take place at the initiative of the citizens, such as when villagers from the rural zones of Qinghai request access to running water or when families from Kunming and its environs seek to regularise the presence of an adopted child in their midst; in other cases, they result from a sometimes brutal intrusion into the public space – in order to expel street vendors – or even into private spaces such as rural or urban homes. Other contributors, by contrast, analyse the routine administrative practices stabilised within a Residents' Committee or an "expulsion company." Most of the interactions studied concern essential aspects of citizens' lives such as access to water, the possibility for street vendors to make a living in cities, the recognition of parental ties in the case of adoption, or, in the case of villagers resisting the destruction of their village, the preservation of not only their habitat and their living environment, but also their modes of sociability and economic know-how. At times, however, they simply disclose the relations between low-ranking administrators and citizens that reflect the operating norms of the administration.

It should be emphasised from the outset that the issue of the official status of those referred to here as administrators would have deserved more extensive development. Persons involved in negotiations surrounding real estate expropriation, *chengguan*, members of Residents' Committees, employees of the Civil Affairs Office, police station, or "work team," township heads: the actors considered here are many and hold very different positions within the administration; their relations with the political and administrative authorities are similarly diverse. They are nonetheless considered together in this issue because they can all claim, in diverse situations and for various reasons, to interact with the citizens in the name of the state, despite the vagueness and inconsistency of this formulation.

Understanding these interactions *in situ* has required the six contributors to pay attention to the administrative, political, or legal framework in which they take place, but without viewing them as mechanical results of this framework (for a simplified overview of administrative levels in the PRC, see the inserted table at the end of this editorial). They study practices in order to understand how rules, expectations, anticipations, or constraints are formed and perceived and how they constrain actions on both sides. They further strive, when possible, to follow the possible interpretations inherent in each situation, rather than attempting to piece together motivations or intentions retrospectively. Whether studying moments of confrontation, as with Emmanuel Caron; listing the various social actors the administrated are confronted with in specific circumstances, as with Zhang Kai; or showing how the administrators anticipate the reactions of those they govern and adjust their behaviour accordingly, as with Wang Di, all the contributors seek to grasp these moments in their context. They try to understand how the individuals themselves – referred to here as the administrators and their administrated – contextualise their situation – that is, identify the elements that matter to interpret it and orientate what is possible, necessary, or desirable in the process of their interactions with the other party. [4] They do not adopt a constructivist approach but simply em-

1. See for example: Elisabeth J. Perry, "Trends in the Study of Chinese Politics: State-Society Relations," *The China Quarterly*, No. 139 (September), pp. 704-713, 1994; Andrew Walder (ed.), *Zouping in Transition: The process of Reform in Rural North China*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1998; T. Brook and B.M. Frolic (eds.), *Civil Society in China*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 1997; Elisabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, conflict and resistance*, London, Routledge, 2000; Deng Zhenglai (ed.), *State and Civil Society, The Chinese Perspective*, Singapore, Hackensack, NJ, London, World Scientific, 2011; Pierre-Etienne Will and Mireille Delmas-Marty, *La Chine et la démocratie* (China and democracy), Paris, Fayard, 2007.
2. Such as the very interesting article published in 2011 by Ethan Michelson ("Public Goods and State-Society Relationships: An Impact Study of China's Rural Stimulus," Indiana University, Research Centre for China Politics and Business, Working Paper 4, February 2011, 22 pp.) and the special issue of *China Perspectives* on this subject ("Locating Civil Society: Communities defending basic liberties," No. 3, 2012).
3. Cf., for example, Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng, "Administrative Absorption of Society: A Further Probe into the State-Society Relationships in China," *Social Sciences in China*, Special Issue, NGOs and Social Transition in China, summer 2007, pp. 116-128; Jonathan Unger (ed.), *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces*, Armonk-London, ME Sharpe, 2008.
4. On the issue of contextualisation, see Alain Cottereau and Mokhtar Mohatar Marzok, *Une famille andalouse. Ethnocomptabilité d'une économie invisible* (An Andalusian family: Ethno-accounting of an invisible economy), Paris, Editions Bouchêne, 2012.

phasise that researchers cannot ignore how individuals themselves see the situations they are engaged in, how they break them down into various constituents and give priority to some of them, how they classify and rank the particular objects and individuals they encounter by endowing them with typical expectations, knowledge, and power.

One difficulty of their approach is to acquire the familiarity necessary to understanding the often contrasting ways in which the administrated and the administrators understand and appraise the situations they are involved in, even though the barrier between the two parties is not always rigid. Gaining access to the former is indeed often an obstacle to knowing the latter, and vice-versa. Therefore, although none of the essays entirely leaves out one of the two sides, they are studied in varying proportions in each text. Xenia de Heering clearly embeds her analysis in the point of view of the development brokers and how they perceive their key interlocutors, including the local authorities, just as Boris Svartzman follows the different measures resorted to by the inhabitants of a village threatened with expulsion. On the whole, however, this special issue may contain more insights about the administrators (their interpretation systems, the constraints they point out, the way they are judged) than the administrated.

This collection also results from a concern with varying the places, situations, and goods that are at stake in the observed interactions. For instance, the judgments and actions observed differ widely in a cockroach extermination campaign and in the adoption procedures for abandoned children analysed by Karine Hinano Guérin, who brings up the problem of responsibility towards other human beings. Despite this diversity, these studies cannot claim to exhaust all possible configurations, nor do they authorise quick generalisations: important elements, such as a more elaborate description of the different administrative levels and of the relations between them, or a study of the appeals available to counter abuses by the administration, are missing. Institutional innovations and their implementation, although observed by some of the contributors, are also outside the scope of this special issue. Nevertheless, this collection does authorise some tentative comments.

There is no lack of reforms that have left their imprint since the early 1980s on the lower levels of the Chinese administration in both the cities and in the countryside, in particular by reallocating duties between administrative services and the local levels of the Party (without challenging the latter's leading role). This special issue does not claim to list them, but simply to highlight one aspect. Although their impact may vary, all face the question of how to resolve the now public and direct confrontation between local representatives of the Party or state and those they administer, a confrontation that had been partly avoided or hidden during the first three decades of the regime. After 1949, a complex set of persuasive and dissuasive means and tools was used used that were effective in avoiding – whatever their other aims and political agenda may have been – both a direct and public confrontation between local officials and those they governed, and the emergence of intermediaries or representatives endowed with a stable and acknowledged authority. The situations brought about by such means may well have been fabricated, but their effects were real enough. For example, the confrontations "among the people" or "between the people and its enemies," which took place within the framework of the mobilisation of the masses, consisted in confrontations between specific individuals. In the process, some individuals were endowed with the necessary power to establish a relation, primarily of accusation, generating the negative positioning of others and a positive personal positioning for themselves, however unstable it may have been, in the new social hierarchy. The main actors of these confrontations were "the masses" or "the people," and they took place among the population, which they divided (even though they also took place within the bureaucracy during the Cultural Revolution). These confrontations were promoted especially during the great mass campaigns but also orientated the more daily interactions within society and with the administration. It is known today that an administration such as the Bureau of Letters and Visits began receiving, from the second half of the 1950s, complaints and accusations directed mainly against local officials. [5] Nevertheless, relations between the administrators and administrated were constrained by the systems of mass mobilisation, in which local officials intervened in theory as representatives of the people and at the people's request.

At that time, activists (*jijifenzi* 积极分子) officially played the role of model citizens and, as such, of intermediaries between the population and those who administered it. Hua Linshan emphasises the important part thus assigned to the "advanced people," describing how the new regime sought, as soon as it came to power, to establish groups representing about 10 to 20 percent of the local population in each village, each district and each municipality. [6] By relying on the "advanced people," the Party was able to govern and control the rest of the population. The author demonstrates that these groups included various profiles of activists, some well respected locally, others simply feared. Without going into detail, it should be noted that these activists played an important part in every political campaign. Through a process of progressive extension and using both dissuasive and persuasive measures, they were usually able to exercise their influence in concentric circles: first on their close relatives and friends, then on more distant relations, eventually claiming to represent the majority of the local population. Those who resisted were isolated, stigmatised as backward elements, and punished until they joined the majority, at least in appearance. But the activists also played an important role at other times: Chang Shu, who describes in a recent article the terror imposed in Dazhai by such a system, suggests that the specific requests made to local officials were either blocked by the presence of local activists or evaluated on the basis of their words and actions. [7] Because they were recognised by political officials as exemplary elements, these activists played a fundamental role on the structural as well as on the normative level. While they appeared to speak in for the masses, or at least for those among the masses "who mattered," they were in fact acting according to orders given from above and were rapidly deprived of their title by local officials if they did not execute the orders they were expected to follow.

This brief reminder of one of the means of control and governance during the first decades of the People's Republic simply aims at emphasising, by contrast, what is at stake today. Now that belief in the laws of historical development has been abandoned and class labels have been done away with, the disappearance or marginalisation of these previous devices has led to new forms of control and governance, in which confrontations between

5. Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, *Les Ruses de la démocratie. Protester en Chine contemporaine* (The tricks of democracy: Protesting in contemporary China), Paris, Seuil, 2010.

6. Hua Linshan, "Les causes sociales de l'essor du mouvement rebelle" (The social causes of the rise of the rebel movement), *Notes de recherche et documents 9,* Centre de recherche et de documentation sur la Chine contemporaine, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1994.

7. Chang Shu, "Mandatory organization and Incapacity to act together: Governance techniques of Dazhai under Mao," in Isabelle Thireau (ed.), *De proche en proche. Ethnographie des formes d'association en Chine contemporaine* (Step by step: Ethnography of the forms of association in contemporary China), Berne, Berlin, Brussels, Frankfurt, New York, Oxford, Vienna, 2013, pp. 23-50.

administrators and the administrated are laid bare. These confrontations, often tense and hostile, are now much more explicit and visible.

These confrontations are all the more complex and difficult as the lower-level administrators are subject to the orders and requests of the higher levels rather than to the expectations and judgments of those they administer. The collection of articles in this special issue emphasizes how the acts of the low-level administrators under study are dominated by the responsibility demonstrated towards the higher levels rather than towards the administrated. These confrontations are also all the harsher as the new sources of legitimacy and exemplarity that might arise from the administrated and that could transform them into spokespeople or representatives are suppressed, even though none of the articles describes citizens as being completely powerless, regardless of the violence of the situations to which they are sometimes subjected. Although this collection lacks the space to undertake an extended discussion of the Chinese administration and the political system in which it operates, it identifies some of the processes that both stem from these confrontations and orientate them, the importance, frequency, or extension of which may inspire further studies.

One of these processes is the *breakdown* of political and administrative authorities into multiple constituents. *Breakdown* refers here to the division of an entity into distinct constituents that are considered relevant to the issue. This is the case when the district authorities tailor their involvement in urban renovation projects by devolving distinct responsibilities to new bodies that are dependent on them in multiple ways. While local governments were single-handedly managing forced evictions and the resulting relocations during the 1990s, "centres for the management of relocations" (*dongqian zhihui bu* 动迁指挥部) and relocation companies (*dongqian gongsi* 动迁公司) were established, with complex links to the local government authorities from which they emanated, allowing the administration to appear as a third party and arbitrator in the process. The hybrid nature of these bodies should be emphasised in terms of their funding, of the authorities they report to, and of the skills and experience of their employees. To these three bodies we may add the property developers and the Residents' Committees, who also have complex dependency links with the local government authorities, resulting in a *breakdown* of what we might call the official sphere, a *breakdown* that is not a dilution but rather a deliberate blurring of norms and responsibilities, which helps avoid any negotiation or direct confrontation between the inhabitants and the local governments.

This *breakdown* process can also be observed in the case of supposedly autonomous mass organisations such as the Residents' Committees of Neighbourhood communities (*shequ* 社区), which also have a hybrid nature. In order to partly comply with the law, which provides that Residents' Committees emanate from the residents to carry out their assigned role of low-level political and administrative management, the organisation under study has endowed itself with, in addition to a Party committee, a Residents' Committee theoretically elected by the inhabitants (*juweihui* 居委会) and a Workstation (*gongzuo zhan* 工作站) hiring employees paid by the Subdistrict Office (*jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处). This means that the former Residents' Committee has been broken down into a supervision body (the Residents' Committee) and an executive body (the Workstation) in order to resolve the internal contradictions related to the status of the Residents' Committees. Since the main constraint for the local administrators is the achievement of the goals set by the higher levels, who remain their only evaluators, the local adjustments and diversions often result in the same persons being appointed on both sides.

In these two examples, *breakdown* might have different motivations: in one case, a specialisation of duties and the local government's wish to avoid direct confrontation with inhabitants, in the other, the establishment of direct hierarchical ties between the Residents' Committee and the Subdistrict Office without transgressing the fiction of the existence of autonomous, local mass organisations. Nevertheless, both are inseparable from the context briefly outlined above: the ostensibly non-official status of the new bodies formed in the shadow of the district authorities echoes the clearly official status of the new Residents' Committees. These observations tally with the findings of other studies on the externalisation of the state's duties to players sometimes described as para-governmental, such as NGOs. However, a more detailed typology of these processes is needed, differentiating, for example, between cases in which the duties are given to new ad-hoc organisations established by the government (this may be termed a fragmentation of official services) and cases in which they are transferred to associations that were originally established outside of the sphere of the state, with varying degrees of autonomy. The nature of the links established between these organisations, the state, and the Party also needs to be identified: different degrees and forms of internalisation and absorption may be found – especially when organisations to whom new duties are given are integrated into the evaluation system of the Chinese administration. Alternatively, only partial absorption or even coexistence may be observed, and may be claimed or, on the contrary, hidden.

Parallel to this process is the *categorisation* and *classification* process of situations and people by the administrators. These processes are inherent to any administration, but goals, constraints, or resources may vary according to time and place. Firstly, legal classifications may lead a government to distinguish between different situations and persons in order to apply different rules to them. This is the case for example, in China, with the official directives that differentiate, among inhabitants impacted by an urban renovation or a rural expropriation project, between those who are eligible for compensation or rehousing and those who are not. Other directives differentiate, in the case of adoption, between families that may adopt a child and those that cannot. These types of distinction, at times challenged or revised, sketch out the borders and the sources of public responsibilities. Secondly, there are completely official, internal standardisations in use among a group of administrators to allow its members to reduce the diversity of situations and better target their action. The handbooks for the *chengguan*, for example, designate five groups that are especially difficult to deal with: ethnic minorities, the disabled, the elderly, persons with serious diseases, and those infected by HIV/AIDS. The often eclectic lists of those for whom special attention or action is recommended, far from being automatic, would deserve a more systematic study, since they give rise to interpretations, judgments, and hierarchies that are considered valid and relevant by the government in view of specific situations.

But there are also the less explicit classifications of individuals conducted by the administrators themselves to redefine the effective targets of their work. Often invisible to the higher levels of administration and to the population, and sometimes intentionally concealed, these categorisations can be difficult to grasp without an ethnographic investigation. Nevertheless, they structure the daily work of the administrators and eventually lead to the formation of internal operating norms that rely on a breakdown of local inhabitants. They are separated into different types, considered relevant to selecting some on which to carry out, or at least pretend to carry out, certain measures that are in theory targeted at everyone. More specifically, the an-

swers implicitly given by the administrators to the questions "to whom are you accountable?" and "how are you accountable?" influence the way they perceive situations and strive to implement instructions often considered difficult or impossible under the existing complicated relations between administrators and administrated. Therefore, these answers also determine the unofficial but quite formalised categorisations that administrators make within the population in order to carry out these instructions for the benefit of "those who matter." The aim may be to ignore certain people and activities, and even to remove the administrative files of given residents: those who might prevent the implementation of certain measure sor who might make it too difficult, complicated, or risky. Conversely, the selection aims to identify and rely on those inhabitants who are too dependent to refuse their help or, on the contrary, those who will be heard if they complain.

In a way, the mechanisms observed here can be understood as motivated by the designs to serve as well as possible the interests of those upon whom the administrators are dependent, while taking into account the displays of attention or of indifference, the expectations but also at times the powerlessness of those who are dependent upon them. According to the situations and how they are defined, certain typologies and attitudes arise repeatedly, redefining the goals set out by lower-level administrators, and the means of achieving them.

In a more or less official manner, locations and timeframes are also categorised and broken down. Emphasising the principle of selective implementation of official policies does not suffice to unveil the multiplicity of – more or less openly formulated – processes at work that lead to selecting, naming, and thus instituting, at the most local level, new realities concerning acts, persons, times, and locations. These new realities reveal how, beyond the general principles that prevail in theory, individuals effectively see the situations in which they are involved and the asymmetrical relations that constitute them.

Another process observed is the sometimes difficult progress of interpreting the social and moral principles considered valid by low-level administrators, even though these principles, including those enshrined in the legislation, are at times inconsistent and contradictory, and above all do not rely on a shared normative framework. The existing literature often invokes the normative breakdown (anomie) that supposedly prevails in today's Chinese society, stemming from the economic reforms and the subsequent expression of diversified and antagonistic material interests that it entailed. I would like to argue that the formation of shared normative, ethical, and moral standards was first and foremost undermined and prevented during the initial three decades of the regime. The monopoly of an exclusive language imposing a unique meaning on all situations and types of behaviour effectively hindered a genuine debate over consolidation and validation of common norms. Deprived of the capacity to offer interpretations connecting specific situations and general principles in any other way than that deemed admissible, and deprived of the capacity to judge in any public manner, members of Chinese society were unable to invalidate, qualify, or stabilise the distinctions between justice and injustice, right and wrong, legitimate and illegitimate. Those that could be expressed became artificial, disconnected from the lived realities and experiences. This specific political ability of give meaning to the particular by referring to shared general principles, and by orienting oneself in a world understood as common and tested, was thus largely denied at that time. The economic reforms launched at the beginning of the 1980s, and the political reforms that preceded them – scrapping the concept of class struggle and the belief in irresistible laws of historical development – have simply brought to light the frailty of the normative foundations of Chinese society and the breadth of its semantic and normative uncertainties. These fragile foundations have continued to evolve in light of the unique situations that arose in the wake of reforms, but also of the refusal to acknowledge and publicly debate these uncertainties in order to allow people to formulate and probe the meaning of words, and to question the shared understanding of "what is" and "what should be" within the Chinese society.

The work of low-level administrators is thus very complex, in particular when the issues or goods at stake create moral dilemmas; it requires selecting and interpreting the relevant directives, and articulating them with the ethical principles and the different sources of legitimacy mentioned in several articles, which the administrated usually emphasise. Indeed, administrators must evaluate the situation and possible solutions without being able to refer to an evaluation system that is stable, familiar, external to the situation they are involved in, and officially acknowledged by those who evaluate them. This results in heterogeneous negotiations between specific situations and general principles: more or less coherent, often varying with the people involved, and underscoring the varying, random, and almost arbitrary nature of the solutions that are cobbled together. Given the absence or weakness of such a normative framework, this situation also contributes – even if it is not its sole factor – to skewing any interaction between administrators and administrated either towards the reinforcement and preservation of personal ties and their multiple and complex mechanisms, including corruption, or towards violence.

This situation alone does not explain but facilitates understanding the significance, mentioned by some of the papers in this issue, of *government by numbers* in China today. This technique is not specific to the Chinese administration – as described very persuasively by Alain Supiot, quantification operations that reduce different individuals and situations to the same accounting unit prevail throughout the world today [8] – nor is it a radically new phenomenon in China. Alain Supiot himself emphasises that the current quantification operations use the same dogmatic approach as the indicators of the Soviet – and Chinese – planning system. He also describes how the blind trust in all sorts of statistics and indexes today is progressively replacing the realities they are supposed to represent, how it separates leaders from the people and the situations they are supposed to govern, and therefore removes the necessity to judge the represented situations through an external evaluation system. However, it is probably useful to consider the extension and the specific forms of government by numbers in China today, the way in which the acts and goals of administrators are evaluated and rewarded as a response to the legitimacy and credibility issues faced by the state and Party administrations, and the leeway they have at this specific historical moment. More pointedly, it is important to differentiate between the lower-level administration, which is confronted with the diversity of experiences and people, and those above this level who manage only charts, indicators, and statistics. It is also important to understand how requiring lower-level administrations to be statistically accountable to the higher levels, and the difficulties this entails, has implications on the way the reality of Chinese society is officially grasped and understood.

This issue is linked to another theme common to all the six articles collected in this special feature, and which would deserve further study: inter-

8. Alain Supiot, *L'esprit de Philadelphie. La justice sociale face au marché total* (The spirit of Philadelphia. Social justice facing the total market), Paris, Seuil, 2010.

actions between the administrators and the administrated imply differentiations between what is confidential and what is public, what is invisible and what is visible, between concealing and showing, displaying what is real and making present what is not real. It is not so much a matter of highlighting the existence of these binaries, which are not unique, but rather of understanding the answers given, *in situ*, to questions such as who says what, and who shows what to whom, and how. Although none of the articles collected here offers a definitive answer to these questions, they all show that the actions of the lower-level administrators remain incomprehensible if one does not take into account what they must display to the higher levels and what they must therefore reveal to, hush up, or conceal from those they administer.

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Table 1 – Simplified overview of administrative levels in the PRC

Level	Divisions
Provincial level administrative divisions (*shengji xingzhengqu* 省级行政区)	• Provinces (*sheng* 省) • Autonomous regions (*zizhi qu* 自治区) • Municipalities directly under the central government (*zhixia shi* 直辖市)
Prefectural level (*diji xingzhengqu* 地级行政区)*	• Prefectures (*diqu* 地区) • Prefecture-level cities (*diji shi* 地级市) • Autonomous prefectures (*zizhi zhou* 自治州)
County level (*xianji xingzhengqu* 县级行政区)	• Counties (*xian* 县) • Districts (*shixia qu* 市辖区) • County-level cities (*xianji shi* 县级市) • Autonomous counties (*zizhi xian* 自治县)
Township level (*xiangji xingzhengqu* 乡级行政区)	• Towns (*zhen* 镇) • Townships (*xiang* 乡) • Subdistricts (*jiedao* 街道) – Subdistrict Offices (*jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处)
Village level (*cunji xingzhengqu* 村级行政区)°	• Villages (*cun* 村) - Village committees (*cunmin weiyuanhui* 村民委员会) • Neighbourhoods or Neighbourhood communities (*shequ* 社区) – Residents' Committees (*shequ jumin weiyuanhui* 社区居民委员会)

* This partly theoretical level is mainly represented by prefecture-level cities; in practice administrative authority tends to be concentrated on the three other official levels (province, county, township).

° This level is not officially considered a state administration.

Source: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xingzheng qu hua 中华人民共和国行政区划 (Administrative divisions of the People's Republic of China), www.gov.cn/test/2005-06/15/content_18253.htm (consulted on 20 February 2013)