

Administrative Rescaling and Identity Integration: The Impact of County-Level Administrative Affiliation Changes on Place Identity

Hongmou Zhang and Shan You
Peking University

1. Introduction

Administrative boundary reform is a recurring instrument of multilevel governance. Across Europe, municipal amalgamations and regional restructuring have repeatedly altered administrative hierarchies in pursuit of coordination, fiscal efficiency, and development capacity. While such reforms are often evaluated in terms of economic performance or service provision, their long-term consequences for residents' place identity remain less systematically examined.

In the meantime, administrative division adjustment in China provides a large-scale and long-term setting to examine this issue. Since the early 1980s, China has implemented extensive county-level administrative affiliation changes under the "city-governing-county" system. In these reforms, entire county-level administrative regions were reassigned to new prefecture-level administrative regions (Under the "*prefecture-level*" cities, and therefore called city-governing county, and also therefore, the cities so called are *de facto* regions). Affiliation change reorganizes reporting hierarchies, fiscal relations, planning authority, and symbolic representation.

This study investigates whether and how such affiliation changes influence residents' place identity with the newly assigned prefecture-level administrative region. Rather than assuming that institutional restructuring automatically reshapes identity, the study examines identity adjustment as a gradual process shaped by temporal exposure, socio-economic interaction, and individual characteristics.

Three research questions are proposed:

1. Does the timing of administrative division adjustment affect residents' place identity toward the prefecture-level administrative region?
2. Is the relationship between adjustment timing and place identity mediated by residents' socio-economic contact with the prefectural center?
3. Do identity outcomes cluster into differentiated patterns across social groups?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes empirical evidence to debates on administrative boundary reform and multilevel governance, focusing specifically on the identity consequences of institutional affiliation change.

2. Administrative Division Adjustment and Place Identity

Administrative division adjustment in China has involved large-scale restructuring since 1982. One major form has been county-level administrative affiliation change, through which counties formerly governed by one prefecture (or none, but directly governed by the province) were reassigned to another. Such adjustments are not marginal boundary corrections; they represent full shifts in upper-level jurisdiction.

Affiliation change affects multiple dimensions of governance. It modifies fiscal allocation, development priorities, statistical reporting, infrastructure investment, etc. Over time, residents may increasingly interact with the new prefectural center for employment, education, health care, and administrative services. However, institutional incorporation does not necessarily produce immediate changes in place identity.

Place identity in this study refers to the degree to which individuals identify with a prefecture-level administrative region as a meaningful spatial entity. It captures cognitive, emotional, and symbolic attachment. Identity adjustment may depend on duration since affiliation change, intensity of interaction with the new administrative center, and generational experience.

While existing research has examined specific cases of identity response to administrative reform, systematic evidence across a large number of counties over a long time horizon remains limited. The Chinese case allows examination of identity adjustment over more than four decades.

3. Data and Research Design

3.1 Identification of Affiliation Changes

Using official administrative records and historical statistical yearbooks, 1,225 county-level administrative regions that experienced affiliation change between 1982 and 2025 were identified.

3.2 Sampling and Survey

To ensure geographic and socio-economic diversity, 100 counties were selected using stratified sampling based on region and development level. A structured survey was conducted in July 2025, yielding 700 valid responses from 96 counties.

The survey collected information on place identity, socio-economic contact patterns, demographic characteristics, and household registration status.

3.3 Measurement

Place Identity

Residents' place identity toward the prefecture-level administrative region was measured using a seven-item scale adapted from established place identity instruments. Respondents rated agreement on a Likert scale. Reliability tests indicate strong internal consistency. Factor analysis confirms unidimensionality.

Administrative Division Adjustment Timing

The year of affiliation change was recorded for each county and operationalized as temporal distance from 2025.

Contact with Prefectural Urban Center

Intensity of socio-economic contact was measured using indicators of frequency of work, service use, and social interaction with the prefectural center.

Control Variables

Household registration status (local vs non-local), income, age, education, gender, and county-level GDP were included to account for social and structural factors.

4. Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages.

First, multivariate linear regression models estimate the association between temporal distance since affiliation change and residents' place identity, controlling for individual and county-level characteristics.

Second, mediation analysis assesses whether socio-economic contact with the prefectural center explains part of the timing effect.

Third, *k*-means clustering identifies distinct identity configurations. Multinomial logistic regression then examines predictors of cluster membership.

This design allows examination of both average effects and heterogeneous identity patterns.

5. Preliminary Results

5.1 Temporal Distance and Place Identity

Regression results indicate that earlier administrative affiliation changes are associated with higher levels of place identity *toward the prefecture-level administrative region*. Counties reassigned earlier show stronger average identification among residents.

The association remains statistically significant after controlling for demographic and socio-economic variables. This suggests that identity adjustment unfolds over extended periods following institutional restructuring.

5.2 Mediation through Contact Intensity

Mediation analysis shows that socio-economic contact with the prefectural urban center partially mediates the timing effect. Earlier affiliation change is associated with greater interaction with the prefectural center, which in turn is associated with stronger place identity.

However, the direct effect of timing remains significant, indicating that both duration and interaction contribute to identity outcomes.

5.3 Generational Experience

Residents who personally experienced the administrative affiliation change display different identity responses compared with those born or migrating after the adjustment. Experiencing the transition is associated with stronger identification with the prefecture-level administrative region.

This suggests that lived experience of institutional change may influence identity formation.

5.4 Heterogeneous Identity Configurations

Clustering analysis identifies four identity types:

1. Dual identification
2. County-dominant identification
3. Prefecture-dominant identification
4. Weak identification

Multinomial logistic regression indicates that household registration status and contact intensity significantly influence cluster membership. Non-local household registration reduces the likelihood of dual identification. Stronger contact with the prefectural center reduces the probability of county-dominant and weak identification.

Identity integration following affiliation change is therefore uneven and socially differentiated.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that administrative division adjustment does not automatically produce identity integration. Institutional affiliation change modifies governance structures, but identity adjustment occurs gradually and varies across groups.

Temporal distance since reform is positively associated with place identity. Socio-economic contact partially explains this relationship, suggesting that interaction supports identity adjustment. At the same time, identity responses remain differentiated across social categories.

These results are relevant to broader discussions on administrative boundary reform. European municipal amalgamations and regional restructuring have often raised concerns about local belonging and representation. This study provides large-scale evidence that identity adjustment after affiliation change is neither immediate nor uniform. Instead, it is shaped by time, interaction, and social position.

7. Conclusion

Using nationwide survey data from counties that experienced administrative affiliation change since 1982, this study examines how administrative division adjustment relates to residents' place identity.

Earlier affiliation changes are associated with stronger identification with the prefecture-level administrative region. This relationship is partly mediated by contact intensity. Identity outcomes cluster into multiple configurations and are socially differentiated.

Overall, the study contributes to debates on administrative boundary reform by providing empirical evidence on how institutional affiliation changes shape place identity over time. Administrative restructuring changes formal governance arrangements, while identity integration emerges gradually and unevenly.