

The year 2017 has short, medium, *and* long-term significance in China.

Its short-term significance comes from the Communist Party's quinquennial leadership transition, which is being held a week from today.

Its medium-term significance comes from being the twentieth anniversary of the most recent notable geopolitical transition in China; namely, of Hong Kong leaving the British to join (in effect) China's largest province Guangdong, and of Chongqing leaving China's formerly-largest province Sichuan, in 1997*.

Its long-term significance comes from being the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution; of which, with the Soviet Union now long gone, the Chinese Communist Party is the only major remnant. The Party's centennial is itself arriving in 2021, the first deadline in Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream".

It is interesting to think on how these factors may overlap. The Russian Revolution of course brings to mind the Soviet collapse. That collapse occurred 69 years after the Soviet Union's formation; next year will be 69 years since the People's Republic of China's formation. These memories may be reinforcing the desire of China's leadership to avoid the mistakes they perceive Gorbachev to have made. In a small way, this might be contributing to the Party's granting more power to Xi Jinping. The promotions Xi makes this week are being watched closely, worldwide, as a yardstick of his clout.

Geopolitics *within* China

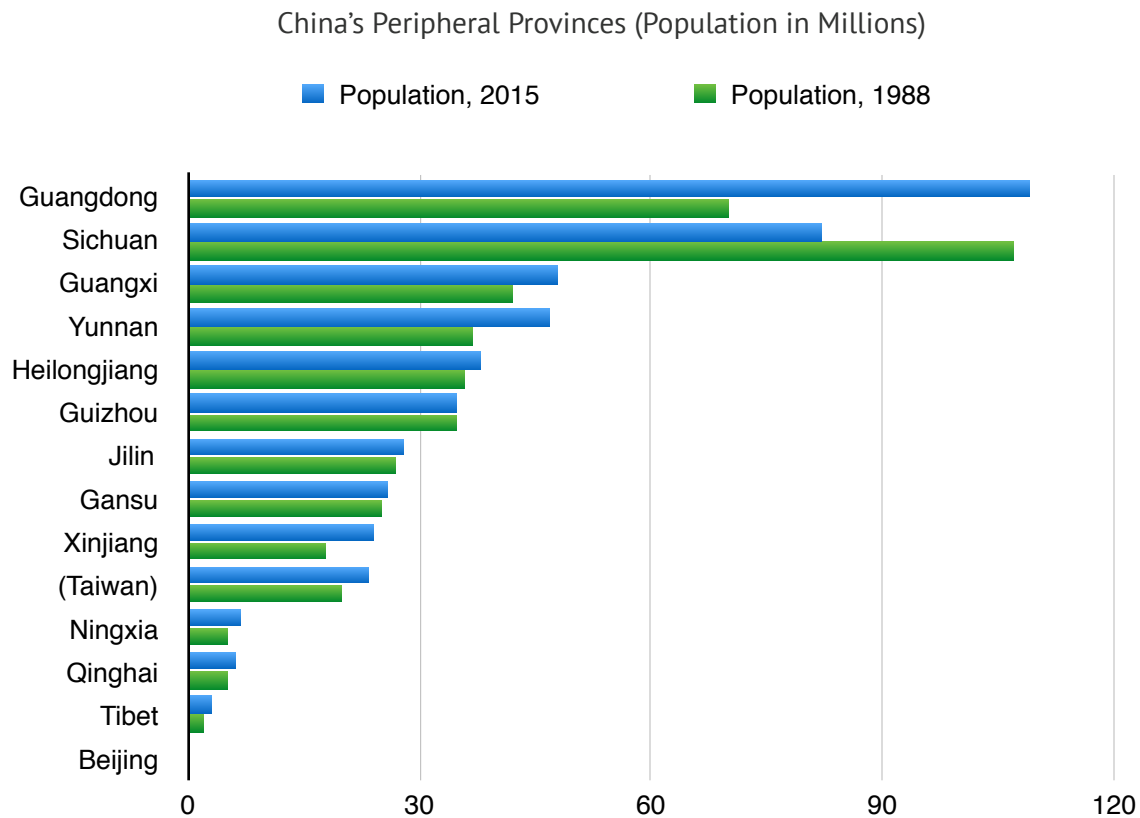
The twentieth anniversary of the political changes to the Hong Kong-Guangdong and Sichuan-Chongqing regions are, arguably, deeply relevant to this issue.

First, the two men Xi is expected to highlight as long-term successors of himself and of Premier Li Keqiang currently lead those regions. Chen Min'er is the party chief of Chongqing, Hu Chunhua of Guangdong. Both may have an incentive to keep their regions pliant, in order to realize this rise to the top.

Second, the strongest moves in Xi's anti-corruption campaign have been taken against top leaders in the Sichuan-Chongqing region: against Sun Zhengcai, party chief of Chongqing, a few months ago, and against Zhou Yongkang, a former chief of Sichuan, in 2015. Sun will be the first Politburo member kicked out under Xi. He will be just the third incumbent Politburo member to fall in the past 20 years, and yet the second party chief of Chongqing (the other being Bo Xilai, in 2012) to do so.

Third, Guangdong and Sichuan are by far the largest of China's "peripheral" provinces (see graph); provinces outside of the part of China that, roughly speaking, lies between or near Beijing and Shanghai. Few recent Chinese leaders have been born in peripheral provinces; the new Standing Committee that Xi is expected to pick will not have anyone born in a peripheral province. Neither was anyone on the current Standing Committee* born in one. Nobody from Guangdong or Sichuan

holds any of the 43 positions within the Communist Party's Politburo, Secretariat, or Central Military Commission.

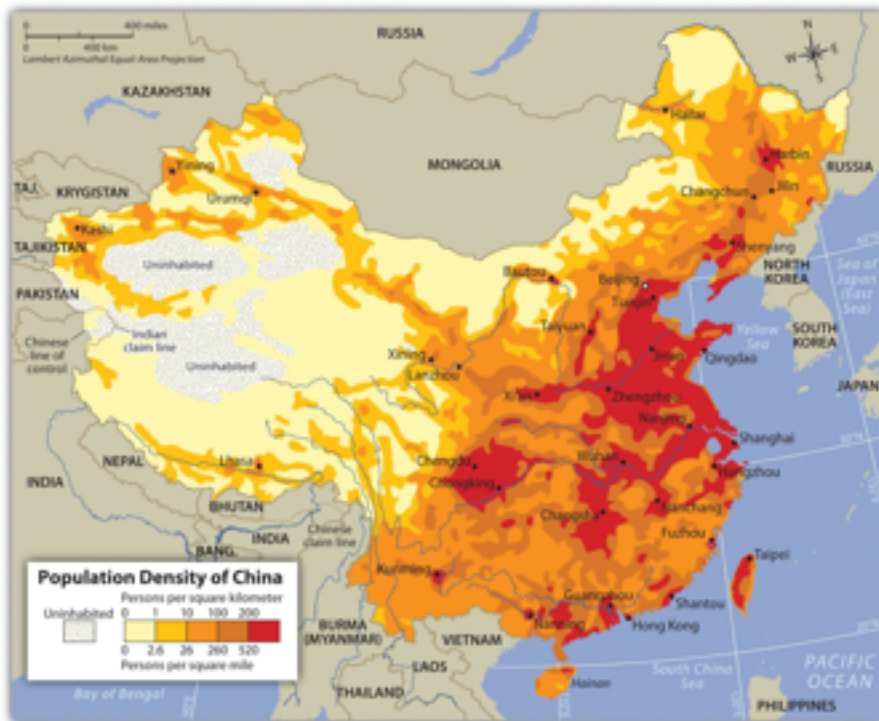
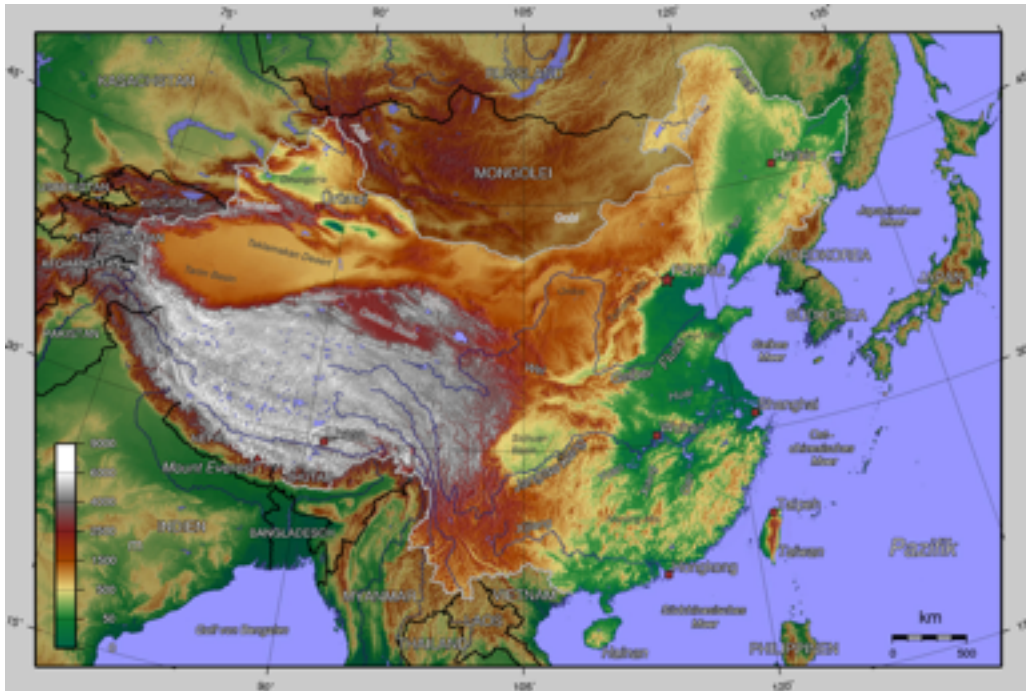


What makes a province “peripheral” is up for debate, of course. This list simply includes the provinces furthest from China’s Beijing-Shanghai “core”. Guangdong’s growth in recent decades has been due to migrants moving from other provinces to its booming economy. Sichuan’s shrinking has been because of losing Chongqing in 1997, and because of migrants leaving Sichuan to find work in other provinces

Peripherality

Guangdong and Sichuan might be considered peripheral from a geographic, linguistic, or historical perspective.

Geographically, Sichuan (together with Chongqing) is located deep in Chinese interior, and is ringed by several layers of mountains or plateaus on all sides. Guangdong (and Hong Kong) is in China’s deep south, with mountains and dense forests on its land borders but links to the outside world via the sea.



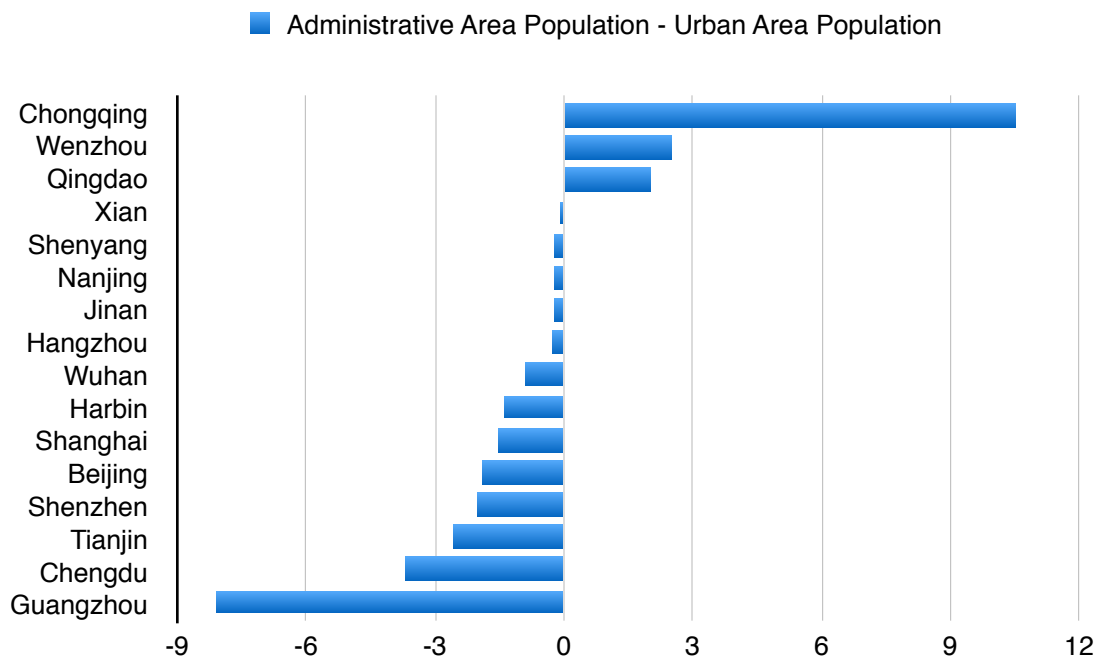
Linguistically, Sichuanese dialects are relatively distinct from the Standard Mandarin that serves as the lingua franca of China as a whole. Guangdong, meanwhile, is home to non-Mandarin languages, notably Cantonese, which is also spoken by a disproportionately large share of the global Chinese diaspora.

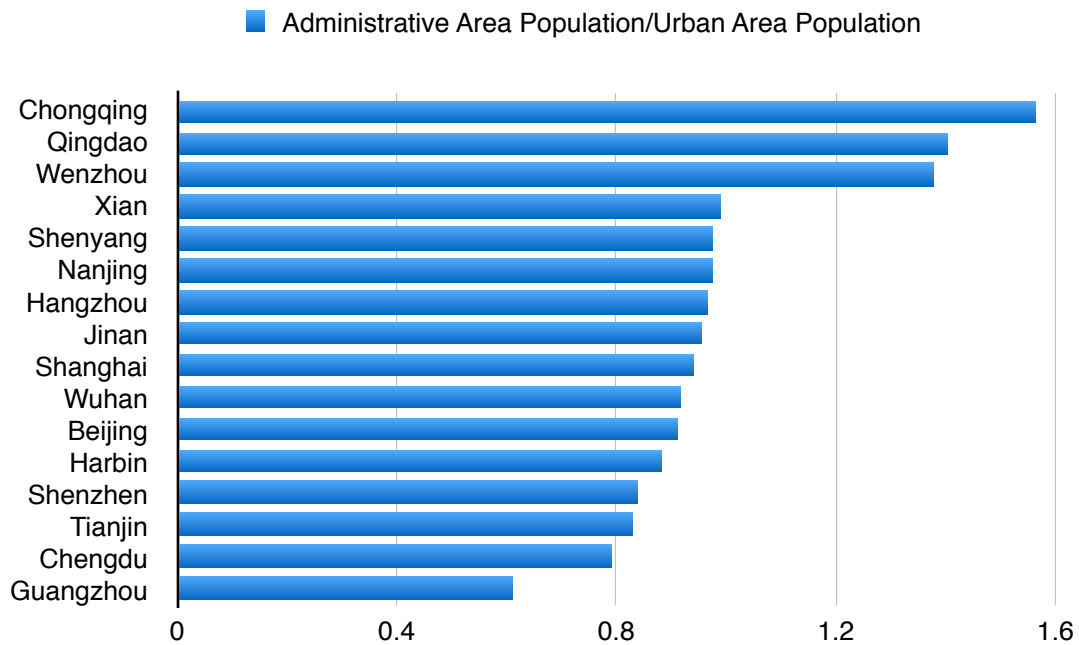
Historically, southern China and Sichuan have often been anti-establishment in their politics. When the Qing were in power, revolutionaries like Sun Yat Sen were raised and based out of Guangdong. When the Nationalists were in power, revolutionaries like Mao and Deng came from areas like Sichuan and Hunan. When the Japanese were in power, Chongqing in Sichuan became the capital of the Chinese resistance. And even since the Communists have been in power, these areas may have sometimes caused the Party trouble—during the 1989 protests, for example, in Sichuan’s capital city Chengdu.

...Administratively?

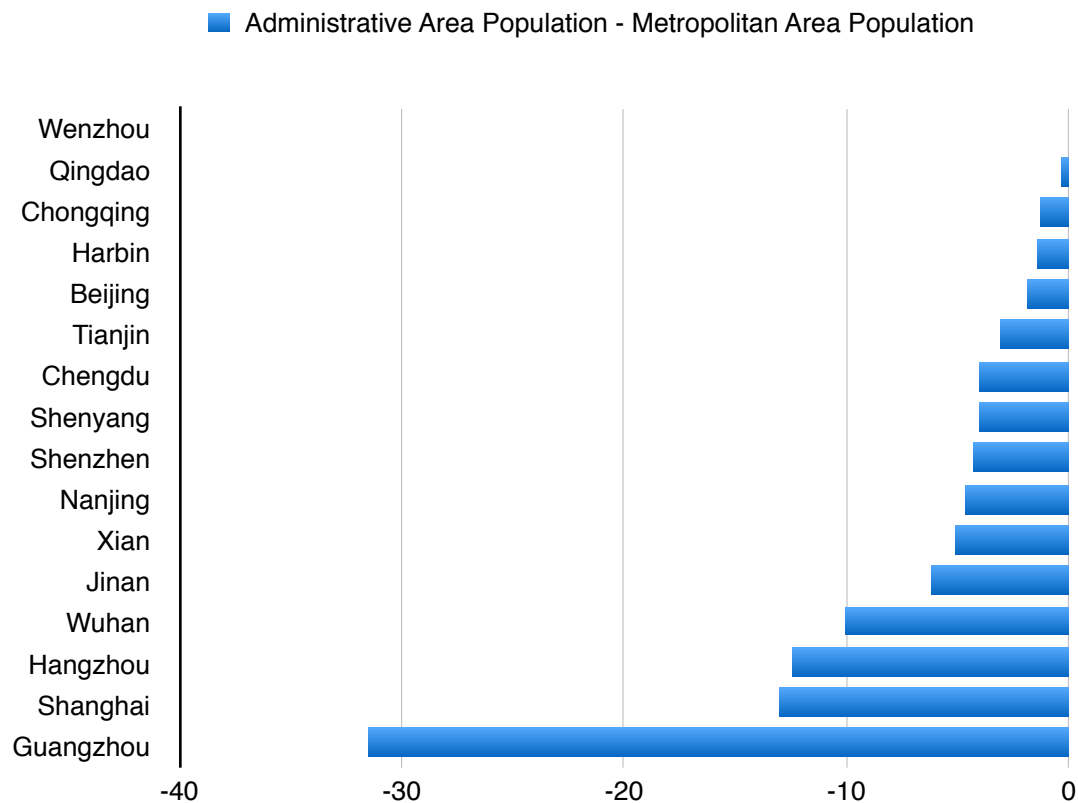
The cynical or conspiratorial-minded could perhaps also argue that Sichuan and Guangdong have been weakened deliberately by administrative boundaries drawn by the central government. The only two new provinces China has created in the past fifty years shrunk Sichuan and Guangdong: Chongqing was carved out of Sichuan in 1997 (prior to which, Sichuan was China’s most populous province); Hainan was carved out of Guangdong in 1988.

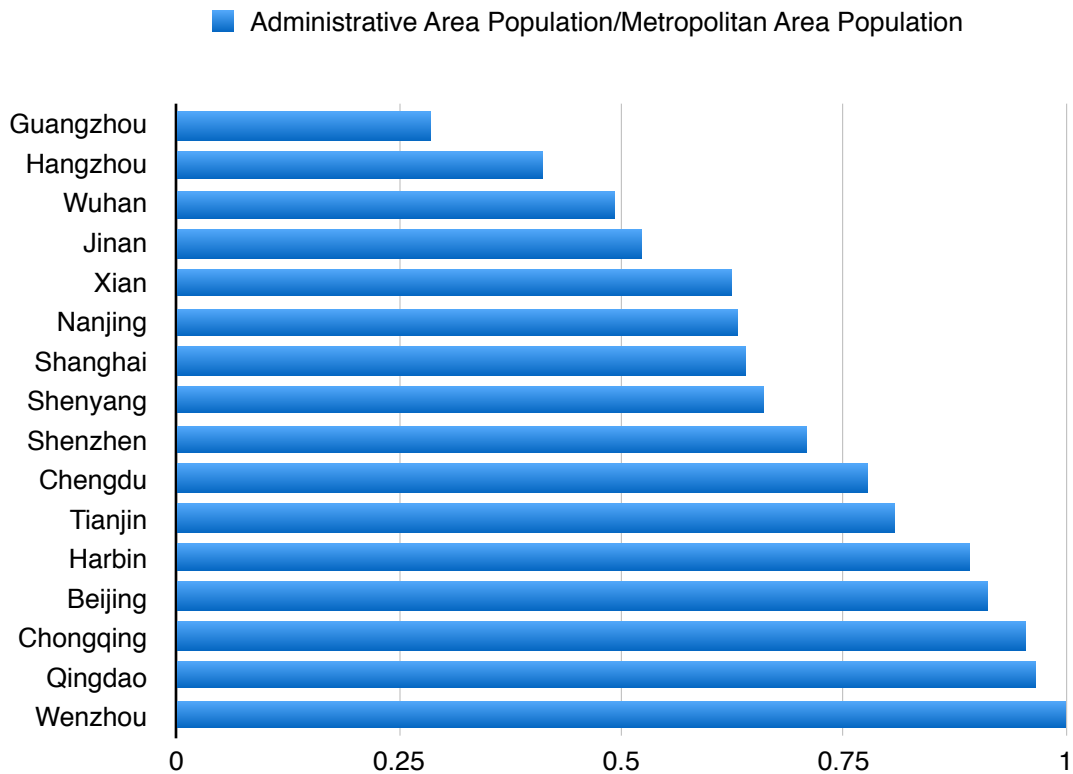
The geography of Chongqing may be especially suspicious in this regard. Unlike its three fellow direct-controlled Municipalities (namely, Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin), Chongqing is not a densely urbanized administrative area. Rather, it has been given a large area of Sichuan’s countryside to govern over (see graph). It is almost as if the Party was aiming purposefully to shrink Sichuan in size, by making the areas that Chongqing officially governs over much larger than the actual *city* of Chongqing.





If, on the other hand, you look at the capital cities of Guangdong and Sichuan – namely, the megacities Guangzhou and Chengdu – they seem to be the precise opposite of Chongqing. Not only have they not been given large areas of countryside to administer, as Chongqing has, but they do not even administer their entire urban areas. (They are the bottom of the two graphs above). Guangzhou also administers only a small portion of its “metropolitan areas” – which uses a wider definition of urban (see below). In addition, neither Guangzhou nor Chengdu have Municipality status. They are by far the two most populous urban areas in China not to have been given such status.





While there is no reason to be too cynical or conspiratorial about regionalism and domestic geopolitics in China, we should also try not to succumb to the temptation to view China as many outsiders do; namely, as a country that is largely free of the potential for regional disunity outside of small, special cases like Hong Kong or Tibet. In particular, it may be important to keep an eye on events relating to Guangdong and Sichuan, the two powerhouse provinces within the Chinese periphery.

- * the only other administrative changes in the past fifty years have been much less significant: Macau's transfer of sovereignty at the end of 1999, and Hainan's leaving Guangdong province in 1988
- * unless you consider Fujian "peripheral"; in which case, Zhang Gaoli was born in one. Zhang may be the first person in thirty years born outside of north or central China to make it to the Standing Committee. He is the only person currently serving in the Politburo born outside north or central China

