The County Paid. The Province Decided.

Zhejiang's provincial constitution of 1921 is often introduced as a high point of Chinese federalism — a province writing its own fundamental law, enumerating what belonged to the province and what belonged to its counties. Read the county articles closely and a different document emerges. The counties received roads to build, taxes to levy, strictly limited borrowing, and budgets they were required to publish. What they did not receive was their own chief executive. Under Article 128, the governor appointed the county magistrates. Under Article 130, county councillors were directly elected — but under Article 131, when the council moved to impeach the magistrate, the case was routed through the very governor who had appointed him. Representation below, command above: the constitution built both into the same machine.

Generous on paper, conditional in the treasury

The text was not stingy. Article 126 distinguished provincial trunk roads from local branches; Articles 135 to 139 addressed county roads, taxes, limited-purpose borrowing, and the publication of county budgets and accounts. Article 101 capped the national-expense contribution at 30 percent of provincial revenue, and Articles 110, 119, and 124 prescribed minimum budget shares — 20 percent for education, 7 percent for industry, 5 percent for transportation. Articles 103, 107, and 109 required provincial budget approval, final accounts, and public disclosure; Articles 90 and 91 placed audit oversight over provincial treasury payments. It looks, at first reading, like a complete fiscal constitution.

But a spending floor measured against a budget is not a disbursement, an audit of the provincial treasury is not an audit of a county cashbox, and a published county budget is not a county-authorized one. Each guarantee in the text answers a different question from the one self-government actually poses: not "what may the county do?" but "who decides, who pays, and who answers?" On those questions, the decisive answers sat one level up.

1933: the approval chain in operation

A dozen years later, Zhejiang's administrative rules show the same architecture at work. The Provisional Rules for Preparing Zhejiang County Local Budgets, promulgated on 12 May 1933, counted local receipts and provincial subventions among a county's budget resources and told officials to reckon from the previous three years' actual receipts — but Article 5 required prior approval by the provincial Finance Department, together with the competent department, before appropriations for a new county undertaking could enter the budget at all. Drawing on the contingency reserve likewise required provincial authorization, and Article 12 required expenditure to follow the approved budget rather than new extra-budgetary spending. The county proposed; the province authorized; the county executed; the province assessed.

The personnel rules completed the circuit. The 1933 disciplinary regulations for county magistrates in road construction tied a magistrate's evaluation to fundraising, timely construction, and labor requisition — the burdens were local, the grading provincial. Provincial budget control and personnel discipline thus coexisted comfortably with county-level financing and execution. A superior authority could approve a project without bearing its costs or its maintenance; a county could possess duties without the full instruments needed to discharge them, or to answer for them.

The test that matters

None of this proves the supervision was merely obstructive — provincial review may have supplied technical scrutiny or coordination across counties, and distinguishing obstruction from coordination would require comparing matched road projects, which remains archival work. Nor do the province's own statistics close the question: the 1933 road schedule's printed construction-cost total, reconciled though it

now is, records reported costs, not county-treasury payments. What the Zhejiang record establishes is the mechanism itself. When revenue, budget approval, construction, appointments, and audit are divided among tiers, performance becomes difficult to identify and responsibility easy to displace. The 1947 Constitution of the Republic of China would later prescribe popularly elected county magistrates — a different legal design from gubernatorial appointment, though neither text by itself establishes how often elections actually happened. The lesson of Zhejiang's experiment is the standard against which both should be read: self-government is not the list of things a county is assigned. It is the alignment of assigned competences, usable revenues, democratic authorization, and auditable implementation — and in Zhejiang, the alignment never arrived.

Read the full paper: Unfinished Local Self-Government: Provincial and County Constitutionalism in China, 1909–1947