

# The Impact of Local Government Power Reform on Local Public Services: Evidence from Suzhou, China

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## Abstract

This study evaluates the impact of local government power reforms in Suzhou, China, on public services. Using a value-added analysis of survey data from residents, it compares perceptions before and after the 2010 reforms. The key finding is that while the reform generally improved public service capacity, the improvements did not meet residents' expectations, with mixed results across different service areas due to a subsequent phase of re-centralization.

## Keywords

Local Governance, Decentralization, Centralization

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## 1. Introduction

At present, in the process of socialist modernization in China's new era, the practical problems and social contradictions faced by various county-level administrative regions within China's prefecture-level cities are more complex than before, and the responsibilities and challenges they need to bear are also greater and more arduous. This poses a great test to the ability of local governments to provide public services. Objectively speaking, local public services with county-level governments as the main body have not received sufficient attention in the research scope of prefecture-level cities (Sun et al., 2024). Chen and Yeh (2023) pointed that the power control of prefecture-level cities over county-level governments has not only restricted the self-management of residents in the county-level area, but also restricted the management authority of county-level governments. As a result, local governments are unable to formulate and implement public service policies according to local conditions. Therefore, from the overall perspective, although the social public services of the entire prefecture-level city are not bad, the

public service levels among the county-level units within it are uneven.

Suzhou is in a leading position in the country in regional coordinated development (Luo & Shen, 2008). The reason is that Suzhou's county economy is relatively developed, and the public service levels among the county-level administrative units within it are good. To this end, this paper designed a questionnaire based on the relevant questionnaire of Shengze Town to explore the evaluation of Suzhou residents on the public service level of local governments in their counties before and after the power reform. The goal is to analyze Suzhou's experience in improving public services at the county level through internal power reforms, and to summarize a set of effective and widely applicable best practices that can be promoted to other prefecture-level cities.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Background

Wang & Zhao (2022) pointed out that county-level governments, including counties, county-level cities and districts, are located at the end of China's political system and directly connected to grassroots service-oriented township governments from the perspective of China's current local government structure. The county-level governments are also the governments in China's Chinese government system that are closest to the grassroots people, understand the actual needs of the grassroots people for public services, and have the ability to provide public services. Therefore, county-level governments are more suitable as research objects for improving the government's public service capabilities. To this end, improving the operating capacity and efficiency of county-level governments through power reform has a direct impact on improving the public service level of local governments and the living standards of residents in the county.

According to the Central Organization Office (No. 50, 2010), in accordance with the principle of "strengthening counties through expanded powers", some county-level cities are granted the economic and social management authority of prefectural-level cities. Efforts are made to decentralize administrative management authority in urban construction, environmental protection, public security and other aspects related to urban construction and management.

Jiangsu Province responded promptly in accordance with the spirit of this regulation. The document Subanfa (No. 24, 2010), jointly issued by the General Office of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and the General Office of the Provincial Government, clearly pointed out that prefectural-level cities in Jiangsu Province need to focus on transforming functions and enhancing efficiency. Prefectural-level cities also need to grant pilot counties/county-level cities economic and social management authority in accordance with the principles of "consistency of power and responsibility" and "decentralization when possible". In this way, the endogenous driving force for the development of pilot counties can be enhanced. At the same time, the pilot counties themselves should also do a good job in taking over the decentralized powers. Administrative licenses, administra-

tive approvals and public services that are decentralized and entrusted to counties/county-level cities should, in principle, be transferred to county-level administrative service centers to implement one-stop services for the people. Government agencies stationed in counties/county-level cities by functional departments at or above the prefectural-level city level should, in principle, be managed by the pilot counties. Departments that have been approved not to adjust their management systems for the time being should also be fully authorized. And prefectural-level cities should take the initiative to propose research opinions on delegating power to vertically managed departments.

After that, the Suzhou Municipal Party Committee Office and the Municipal Government Office jointly delegated the economic and social management authority of the four county-level cities under their jurisdiction in Subanfa ([2012] No. 59) in 2012 to make clear provisions. The economic and social management authority mainly involves various county-level approval powers, licensing powers, punishment powers and other administrative powers related to urban construction, management and services. The powers that can be delegated cannot be just lip service, but must be issued in the form of municipal government documents. And the content of the document should respond to the guiding opinions mentioned in Subanfa ([2010] No. 24) issued by Jiangsu Province.

Among them, the regulations mainly involving public service-related content are mainly instructions for the establishment of county-level administrative service centers. The establishment of the pilot county administrative service center should also be guided by the Suzhou Administrative Service Center. Its responsibilities can be determined by referring to the current responsibilities of the Suzhou Administrative Service Center. Its internal personnel composition can be supplemented through multiple channels such as support from relevant functional departments of Suzhou City, internal selection from the county-level city, and external recruitment. In addition, the operation model of the administrative service center should be based on the Suzhou Administrative Service Center. Specifically, the business process should be familiarized and the operation mechanism should be improved through on-site observation and learning.

It is worth mentioning that one of the important reasons why Suzhou's power reform differs from other cities is that it implements recentralization measures while decentralizing power. Among them, the most critical measure is the administrative division adjustment policy called "abolishing county-level cities and establishing districts". In this way, it can not only promote urban integration and optimize spatial layout, responding to the macro requirements of coordinated regional development, but also improve the efficiency of local resource allocation and enhance the work and service levels of local governments.

## **2.2. Documents Related to Power Reform**

Since 2010, the central government (Beijing), Jiangsu Province and Suzhou City have successively issued more than 10 policy documents to guide and regulate the

power distribution reform of county-level cities around the theme of “strengthening counties through decentralization” (Weihe, 2023). The core idea is to fully implement the scientific development concept around the overall goal of deepening the reform of the administrative system. In accordance with the requirements of strengthening grassroots political power construction and coordinating urban and rural coordinated development, efforts should be made to break the institutional obstacles encountered by economically developed counties. Then, the relationship of responsibilities should be straightened out, the organizational structure should be optimized, and efforts should be made to improve social management and public service capabilities. This is to give full play to the radiation and driving role of economically developed counties in regional economic and social development and create favorable conditions for promoting China’s urbanization process. Finally, based on the good results already achieved, the goal of improving the level of public services at the county level will be achieved.

1) The first type is the opinion notice on “strengthening counties through decentralization”, which is a system regulation of consistency and overallness of the objects under the jurisdiction of governments at all levels (Shao et al., 2020). Jiangsu Province, as an economically developed province with 25 top 100 counties, ranks first among all provinces in the country in terms of the number of top 100 counties. As early as October 2010, the General Office of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and the General Office of the Provincial Government jointly issued the “Notice on Carrying out Pilot Reform of the System of Directly Governing Counties by the Province” (Subanfa [2011] No. 39), ahead of the central government (Beijing). It also pointed out that the county-level governments, prefecture-level municipal governments and provincial departments in the province should focus on learning and implementing it. Among them, Kunshan is the pilot county of the system of directly governing counties in Jiangsu Province that is the focus of the notice. Based on the reform content of Kunshan, the General Office of the Suzhou Municipal Party Committee and the General Office of the Municipal Government jointly issued the “Notice on Issuing the Guiding Opinions on the Pilot Reform of the Administrative Management System of Economically Developed Towns in Suzhou” (Subanfa [2012] No. 59) in July 2012. The decentralization was further deepened to the town-level governments in Kunshan. The focus is on clarifying the overall goal and reform tasks of matching the powers and responsibilities of county-level governments through decentralization so as to provide better public services to local residents.

2) The second type is the approval documents for pilot reform plans. For example, in 2011, the General Office of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and the General Office of the Provincial Government successively issued the “Approval on the Pilot Plan for Administrative System Reform in Kunshan City” (Suban [2011] No. 53), “Approval on the Pilot Plan for Administrative System Reform in Changshu City” (Suban [2011] No. 71), “Approval on the Pilot Plan for Administrative System Reform in Fenghuang Town, Zhangjiagang City” (Suban

[2011] No. 72), “Approval on the Pilot Plan for Administrative System Reform in Taicang City” (Suban [2011] No. 73), and “Approval on the Pilot Plan for Administrative System Reform in Shengze Town, Wujiang City” (Suban [2011] No. 74). They are mainly used to approve specific reform plans for economically strong counties and their affiliated township governments to implement reforms that suit local characteristics, reflecting the flexibility and pragmatism of reforms tailored to local conditions.

3) The third type is the documents for normative promotion. For example, in January 2014, the General Office of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and the General Office of the Provincial Government issued the Notice on “Opinions on Granting Some Municipal-level Economic and Social Management Powers to Pilot Counties for Administrative System Reform” (Subanfa [2014] No. 1). In addition, the Provincial Organization Department and the Legal Affairs Office jointly issued the “Opinions on Standardizing Convenience Services Work in Pilot Counties for Administrative System Reform” (Subanfa [2014] No. 2). With the introduction and issuance of the above-mentioned normative documents, some common and key issues such as what kind of powers the pilot counties should take on and how to carry out convenience services and comprehensive law enforcement have been specifically required and stipulated. Ultimately, [Bu et al. \(2020\)](#) insisted that “strengthening counties through decentralization” has become more rule-based and well-founded. Ultimately, it made public service reforms at the county level more standardized and more based on evidence.

The above three types of documents are the institutional system for delegating power to counties/county-level cities from the central government (Beijing) to the whole province of Jiangsu and then to Suzhou. They reflect the progressive and interconnected nature of each level, and also reflect the combination of principle and practice. They have become the basis for the implementation of the institutional guidelines and policies for the county-level administrative units under Suzhou to expand their own power. Only with specific rules and regulations from top to bottom can this reform and innovation be promoted in an orderly, powerful and effective manner ([Stewart, 1981](#)). In fact, many notices are currently limited to party notices. However, China is a multi-party cooperative country with the Communist Party of China as the core, and the Communist Party of China is the ruling party with the right to govern all regions within the country. Therefore, although the notices related to decentralization are not written into the Constitution, these notices can still be effectively implemented.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Survey Design**

The Administrative Service Center of Shengze Town, Wujiang District, Suzhou City designed a questionnaire in 2014. The purpose is to measure the actual results and effects of “strong town empowerment”. The survey subjects are the masses and enterprise representatives who go to the administrative service hall of Shengze

Town to do business. The design of the questionnaire reflects the value concept of the local government to serve the people as the core, and pays more attention to the personal feelings and experiences of local residents. It aims to understand the relevant evaluation of local residents on the results of government reform before and after the reform. According to Qian and Xu (1993), the power distribution among all levels of Chinese governments has structural consistency, that is, the power relations among local governments at all levels are the reproduction and projection of the power structure of the central government. Therefore, the content involved in the survey questionnaire applied to Shengze Town at the township level can also reflect the relevant issues within the prefecture-level city.

For that, this article is adapted from the template of the relevant questionnaire of Shengze Town. In order to understand and grasp the impact of the power reform of county-level cities from the personal feelings of residents living in county-level cities, I set up a questionnaire survey for residents living in districts and county-level cities that can reflect the feelings of the people before and after the reform. It should be noted that the original purpose of the questionnaire designed by Shengze Town was to investigate the effectiveness of the administrative system reform of economically developed towns, so the questions set in the original questionnaire were mainly for the investigation of the township administrative level. However, the main research objects of this section of this article are districts and county-level cities, so the questionnaire questions were modified to investigate the county-level administrative units. The reason why this modification can be recognized is that the internal structure of governments at all levels in China is highly consistent, and the same functional departments form a vertical system from the central to the local level and refer to unified standards. Therefore, it is feasible and meaningful to change the questions for township governments to those for county-level governments. The options of the questionnaire are designed based on the five-point scoring method of the likert scale, with 1 - 5 representing different levels from low to high.

The questionnaire is divided into two parts. One part is that local residents need to answer questions by recalling the relevant situations when handling government affairs before 2010, and the other part is the relevant situations when handling government affairs currently. The reason for setting 2010 as the time node is as follows: This article found that in 2010, Suzhou City, under the background of Jiangsu Province's comprehensive promotion of streamlining administration and decentralization, began to decentralize some powers to county-level cities based on the actual needs of county residents, opening the prelude to Suzhou City's power distribution reform. Since then, reforms of different degrees and types have occurred in almost all districts and county-level cities under Suzhou. This also means that only the answers of respondents who have lived in the local area for more than 14 years and were over 18 years old in 2010 are the respondents who have personally experienced the power distribution reform and have reference value. Therefore, the respondents of this survey were

all residents living in county-level administrative units under the jurisdiction of Suzhou City. The criteria for inclusion were that respondents must be over 32 years old and have lived in the local area for more than 14 years. Based on the principle of data diversity, this article also sets the number of respondents to be 50 who live in county-level cities and 50 who live in districts. When collecting data from 50 residents of county-level cities, I gathered 14 data points each in Changshu, Kunshan, Taicang, and Zhangjiagang. In each county-level city, I selected two communities located in the local urban and rural areas, respectively, collecting 7 data points from each. After excluding invalid responses with missing answers, a total of 53 data points remained. From these 53 data points, I randomly selected 50 as representative data for residents of county-level cities. For the data from 50 district residents, I collected 10 data points each in Gusu, Xiangcheng, Wujiang, Wuzhong, and the Industrial Park, ensuring that all questionnaires were fully completed, meaning all data were valid. Similarly, these data were collected from communities in both urban and rural areas of each district.

### 3.2. Reliability and Validity Test

Resnick et al. (2021) point out that the purpose of reliability testing is to measure the reliability and consistency of a questionnaire, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient commonly used as the evaluation standard. The main body of the questionnaire in this section adopts a five-point Likert scale, and the internationally recognized Cronbach's alpha coefficient is used as the reference standard in the reliability assessment.

**Table 1.** Results of reliability and validity analysis.

|                         | Reliability Analysis         | Validity Analysis |   |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|---|
|                         | Cronbach's alpha coefficient | KMO               | P |
| <i>Data before 2010</i> | 0.707                        | 0.621             | 0 |
| <i>Data after 2010</i>  | 0.848                        | 0.762             | 0 |

Source: Calculated by SPSSAU software.

This article utilizes the SPSSAU software to conduct reliability and validity tests on the questionnaire data obtained before and after the 2010 power reform. The results are shown in **Table 1**. The reliability coefficients for the two sets of questionnaire data are 0.707 and 0.848, respectively, indicating that the questionnaire demonstrates internal stability and consistency. In the validity analysis, the evaluation indicators of each subscale in the two questionnaires are within an acceptable range. Therefore, the results are reliable and suitable for academic research.

### 3.3. Sample Characteristics

**Table 2** shows the basic information of the respondents in this study, which is

divided into four individual characteristics: gender, years of residence, career, and hukou (household registration). In order to ensure that the respondents have experienced the situation before and after the county power reform in 2010, all respondents have lived in the county-level administrative unit for no less than 14 years.

**Table 2.** Basic information of respondents to the questionnaire on the effectiveness of county-level government power reform.

| Gender  |                        | Hukou (household registration) |                 |  |        |
|---|------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|--|--------|
| Male  | Female                 | Urban                          | Rural           |  |        |
| 64  | 36                     | 58                             | 42              |  |        |
| Length of living in the county-level administrative area                                |                        |                                |                 |  |        |
| 14 - 19 year  | 20 - 25 years          | 26 - 31 years                  | >31 years       |  |        |
| 42  | 34                     | 8                              | 16              |  |        |
| Career  |                        |                                |                 |  |        |
| Public sector (School, Hospital, government-affiliated institutions, etc.) & Government | State-owned enterprise | Private enterprise             | Foreign company | Individual producer or trader, and freelance | Retire |
| 23  | 8                      | 47                             | 8               | 3  | 11     |

Source: Personal Collection.

In the sample, the proportion of males is larger than that of females, which is more in line with the current situation in China where there are more males than females. The number of residents with urban hukou is also greater than the number of residents with rural hukou. The reason may be that the main location for distributing the questionnaire was in various residential communities in urban areas and rural areas rather than in self-built housing areas.

#### 4. Discussion Based on an Added-Value Analysis

In essence, the value-added valuation model is actually developed on the basis of modern statistics. But Jackson (2001) pointed out that when value-added evaluation is applied to evaluate the effectiveness of government reform, it provides a framework for thinking about problems.

Based on this framework, the research in this section first counts the overall evaluation of local residents on the government services and work before and after the reform based on the returned questionnaires. Then, this article conducts a value-added evaluation analysis on the data from the two periods before and after the reform. This model uses regression based on the least squares method.

##### 4.1. Analysis of the Overall Effectiveness

The value-added analysis of this section is based on the Likert five-point scale. Combined with the content of this questionnaire, 1 and 2 points represent that the local residents are dissatisfied with the relevant services and work of the county government involved in this issue in the scoring standard. 3 points repre-

sent passing. Only when the score reaches 4 and 5 points, it proves that the relevant services and work of the county government are done well.

**Table 3.** Frequency statistics of the questionnaire scores on the effectiveness of county-level government power reform.

| Score | Economic development achievements (Q9-Q13) |              | Government management efficiency (Q14-Q18) |              | The degree of improvement in people's livelihood (Q19-Q23) |              | Fairness of government management and social development (Q24-Q28) |              |
|-------|--|--------------|--|--------------|--|--------------|--|--------------|
|       | Before reform                              | After reform | Before reform                              | After reform | Before reform  | After reform | Before reform  | After reform |
| 1     | 16   | 8            | 46   | 22           | 50   | 24           | 51   | 29           |
| 2     | 111  | 81           | 321  | 241          | 253  | 201          | 167  | 136          |
| 3     | 216  | 223          | 114  | 191          | 169  | 264          | 235  | 242          |
| 4     | 126  | 147          | 16   | 39           | 20   | 53           | 40   | 79           |
| 5     | 31   | 41           | 3  | 7            | 8  | 12           | 7  | 14           |

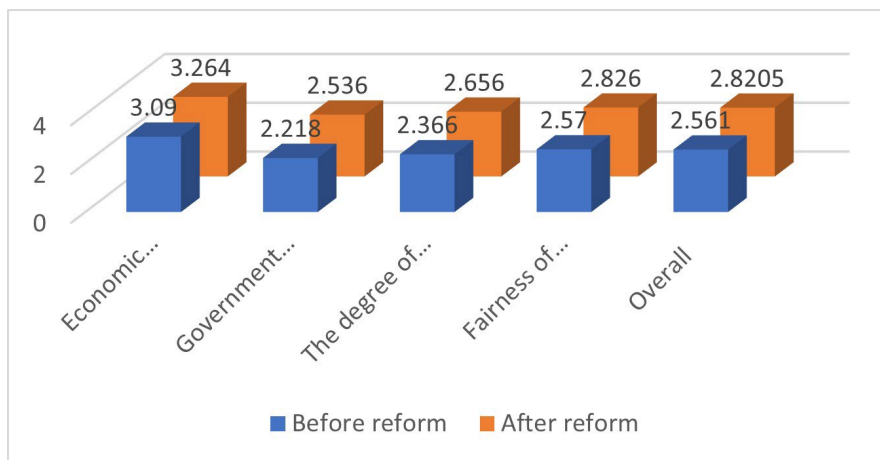
Source: Personal Collection.

**Table 3** summarizes the results of the questionnaire survey conducted for this value-added analysis. The results of the power reform of county-level governments under Suzhou City in the field of Economic development achievements are presented in questions 9 to 13 of the questionnaire. The results in the field of Government Management Efficiency are presented in questions 14 to 18. The results in the field of the degree of improvement in people's livelihood are presented in questions 19 to 23. The results in the field of Fairness of government management and social development are presented in questions 24 to 28.

The results of **Table 3** clearly show that the number of local residents who gave 3, 4 and 5 points to the five questions about the work and services of local governments after the power reform has increased. It means that the power reform has played a positive role in improving the relevant work and services of local governments. It is worth mentioning that the number of local residents who expressed dissatisfaction (1 and 2 points) in the areas of Government Management Efficiency (Q14-Q18) and the degree of improvement in people's livelihood (Q19-Q23) was higher than that in the other two areas, both before and after the reform. If the number of local residents who are dissatisfied is used to measure the shortcomings of local governments, the county-level governments under Suzhou currently do the worst in terms of work and services in the field of Government Management Efficiency, but do the best in the field of Economic development achievements. This also indirectly reflects that in the power reform, the current local governments have done the best in terms of power balance in Government Management Efficiency.

Based on the statistics of the initial and final questionnaire data, the overall average scores of local residents' evaluation of the services and work in various fields before and after the county-level government power reform are shown in **Figure 1**.

According to the statistical data of two questionnaires before and after the reform, the work and service level of county-level governments after the reform is



**Figure 1.** Overall evaluation of the effectiveness of county-level government power reform by local residents.

2.8205, which is higher than the 2.561 before the reform. Although there is still a gap from the benchmark level overall, the work and service related to economic development achievements exceeded the benchmark level before and after the power reform. Comparing other data from the two periods, it can be found that other work and services of county-level governments have improved after the power reform, and the improvement value is not less than 0.25. However, the improvement in Government Management Efficiency is huge, at 0.318, which is the only difference exceeding 0.3. Overall, the common point of the data from the two periods is that county-level governments performed best in Economic development achievements and worst in Government Management Efficiency.

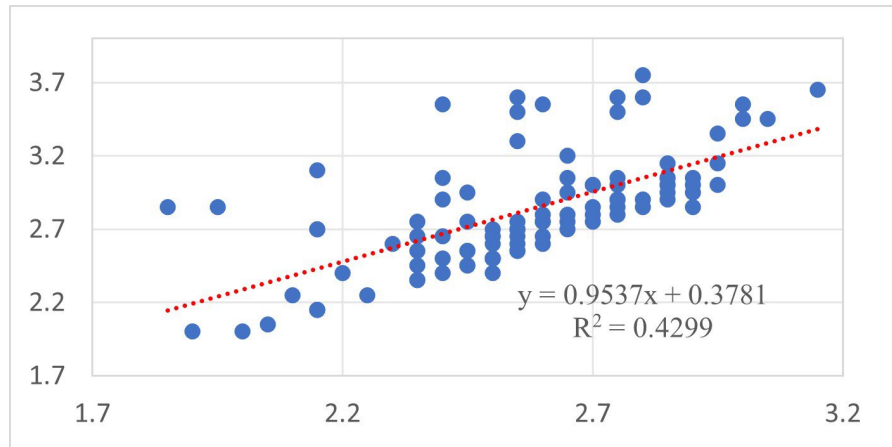
#### 4.2. Value-Added Analysis of the Overall Effectiveness of County-Level Government Power Reform

##### Step 1: Build the model

According to the value-added evaluation method, the score of the county government after the reform is used as the dependent variable (final period) and the score before the reform is used as the independent variable (initial period), and then the scatter plot shown in **Figure 2** is obtained. In this way, the prediction model is “ $y = 0.9537x + 0.3781$ ”. It means that every 1 unit change in the score of the county government by local residents before the reform (initial period) will affect the score change by 0.9537 after the reform (final period).

##### Step 2: Value-added calculation

Based on the above model, we can obtain the predicted values of the evaluation of the various work and services of the county government by the 100 local residents interviewed. It means that when the actual value after the reform is subtracted from the predicted value, the added value of the 100 respondents can be obtained. The specific situation is as follows: Although the overall value-added of the power reform of county-level governments under Suzhou is  $-0.0000257$ , 34% of the evaluations still have positive value-added and 66% have



**Figure 2.** Scatter plot of the overall score of the effectiveness of county-level government power reform.

negative value-added. In short, although the original intention of the power reform of county-level governments is to improve their own service and work capabilities, the overall value-added of local residents' evaluation is negative. However, it should be noted that it does not mean that the power reform of county-level governments has not improved the work and service level of county-level governments, nor does it mean that the power reform is ineffective. Overall, the work and service level of county-level governments is still improving, but this improvement has not met expectations.

### 4.3. Value-Added Analysis of the Effectiveness in Terms of Economic Development Achievements

The prediction model in this term obtained through the scatter plot is “ $y = 0.8634x + 0.596$ ”. It means that before the reform, every 1 unit change in the score of local residents on the effectiveness of the county government’s power reform in the field of Economic development achievements will affect the score change after the reform (at the end) by 0.8634. Then, according to the same steps, the mean value added of questions 9 to 13 is obtained, as shown in **Table 4**.

**Table 4.** The added value of local residents’ evaluation of the effectiveness of county-level government power reform in the field of economic development achievements.

|             | The formula for value-added trends | R <sup>2</sup> | Average value added |
|-------------|------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Question 9  | $y = 0.7668x + 1.0093$             | 0.5911         | 0.000024            |
| Question 10 | $y = 0.856x + 0.5759$              | 0.691          | -0.00014            |
| Question 11 | $y = 0.9623x + 0.1854$             | 0.8047         | -0.000038           |
| Question 12 | $y = 0.859x + 0.6346$              | 0.7658         | -0.00008            |
| Question 13 | $y = 0.8986x + 0.4312$             | 0.8362         | -0.000216           |
| Overall     | $y = 0.8634x + 0.596$              | 0.7422         | 0.000094            |

From an overall perspective, the average value added is 0.000094, which is

greater than 0, so the results of the power reform of county-level governments in the field of Economic development achievements have met expectations. However, in terms of details, the average value added of questions 10, 11, 12, and 13 are all negative, proving that in terms of government work and services related to these four issues, the power reform of county-level governments under Suzhou City has not met the expectations of continued decentralization.

Specifically, the local employment environment is in a state of improvement and growth, but it has not met the original expectations because of the emergence of re-centralization. It proves that the county government's improvement in this work is extremely limited in the power reform.

Fundamentally, the county-level government, led by the Suzhou municipal government, concentrated on implementing reforms. This process actually focused too much on building infrastructure from a macro perspective to improve the business environment and business scale, while neglecting to pay attention to the details of individuals and enterprises.

As a result, the Suzhou municipal government, as the competent department, failed to achieve targeted improvements in enterprises and local characteristic industries because it was far away from the grassroots people at the county level. Although it did not meet expectations, it is certain that the local government has done a good job in overall economic development. At the same time, it can also reflect that the purpose of power reform is not mainly to improve the level of GDP development, but to improve the operational capacity and efficiency of county-level governments through power reform. After all, this is a process of achieving a benign urban power structure of coordinated urban and rural development, rather than a result obtained after urban and rural development are achieved at the same time.

#### **4.4. Value-Added Analysis of the Effectiveness in Terms of Government Management Efficiency**

Harguindéguy, Cole and Pasquier (2021) interpreted available human resources as the personnel turnover of local government staff after reviewing and comparing a data set consisting of 25 decentralization indices. For this reason, questions 14 to 18 selected in the field of government management efficiency are mainly aimed at the relevant evaluation of the staff of the newly established county-level government service centers after the personnel adjustments caused by changes in power in the county-level governments of Suzhou City.

Specifically, the questionnaire in this area mainly focuses on the executive power of the county-level governments under Suzhou during the power reform. There are five questions in total (Question 14 - Question 18) and they are mainly set for the newly established county-level administrative service centers in the decentralization reform. The establishment of county-level administrative service centers means that the Suzhou Municipal Government has realized that the functions of the county-level governments under its jurisdiction should be transformed from "management" to "service". They not only centralized the approval matters originally scattered in multiple departments to one platform, reducing the complex pro-

cess of multi-department approval and improving administrative efficiency; but also further decentralized power to the county-level region, so that local enterprises and residents do not need to go to Suzhou municipal departments to handle affairs.

This term still follows the same steps to obtain the mean value-added of questions 14 to 18, as shown in **Table 5**. Judging from the number of people with positive and negative value-added, it seems that the results of the power reform of the county government in the field of government management efficiency are not very satisfactory. However, it cannot be ignored that the average score in this field was 2.218 before the reform, and the average score in this field rose to 2.536 after the reform. In other words, from the overall score, the power reform of the county government in the field of government management efficiency is effective and has improved the satisfaction of local residents.

**Table 5.** The added value of local residents' evaluation of the effectiveness of county-level government power reform in the field of government management efficiency.

|                    | The formula for value-added trends | R <sup>2</sup> | Average value added |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| <i>Question 14</i> | $y = 0.8465x + 0.6685$             | 0.3525         | -0.000055           |
| <i>Question 15</i> | $y = 0.8051x + 0.7725$             | 0.529          | -0.000077           |
| <i>Question 16</i> | $y = 0.7658x + 0.8382$             | 0.5086         | 0.000014            |
| <i>Question 17</i> | $y = 0.8334x + 0.6015$             | 0.5681         | -0.000006           |
| <i>Question 18</i> | $y = 0.6483x + 1.0696$             | 0.2227         | -0.000057           |
| <i>Overall</i>     | $y = 0.9852x + 0.3509$             | 0.5269         | -0.0000736          |

From the perspective of average value-added, only Question 16 shows positive value-added, indicating that after the power reform established county-level administrative service centers, the competence of staff at service windows handling resident-related tasks in county-level governments not only improved but also met expectations, unaffected by the later re-centralization of the reform. However, this does not mean that the re-centralization reform did not involve adjustments to the newly established county-level administrative service centers. This is because, apart from Question 16, the average value-added for Questions 14 and 15, which are related to the staff of these centers, is negative.

Before the reform, the county-level administrative service centers had not yet been established, and cooperation among various departments of the county government was not close, with offices located separately. Naturally, residents had many complaints about the convenience of the service processes. However, after the reform, the county-level administrative service centers were established, and a new model of multi-departmental staff working together at the same location significantly reduced the complexity for residents to handle government affairs. Local residents no longer needed to visit different departments at different locations according to the process and sequence, but could communicate and handle affairs with staff from many departments at the same time and place. Moreover, the general structure and regulations of the county-level administrative service

centers largely followed those of the Suzhou prefecture-level administrative service centers. Therefore, the work attitudes of the staff at various department windows were not only supervised by the municipal departments but also subject to positive comparisons and performance reviews among themselves.

After the re-centralization reform, although the county-level administrative service centers were retained and the configuration of their service windows remained unchanged, the personnel assignments underwent changes. For example, while the staff's salary is paid by the Wujiang Tax Bureau, their performance evaluation is managed by the Suzhou Municipal Tax Bureau in the Wujiang Administrative Service Center. This can easily lead to confusion regarding the staff's sense of belonging and may result in a decline in their service attitude, as the Suzhou Municipal Tax Bureau, which evaluates their work, does not control their salary. In short, whether the staff performs well or poorly does not affect their salary. Additionally, this situation where both higher and lower-level departments jointly manage a service can easily confuse local residents who come to handle affairs, as they may not know whose instructions to follow. This has led to the situation where, after the re-centralization reform, although the value-added scores for Questions 14 and 15 are still increasing, the score growth is not as expected.

At the same time, it easily leads to the need for staff to consult the managers of the municipal department to decide whether the previous business processing methods can still be used when facing a simple business. It has caused local residents to question the transparency of the window staff. Therefore, it is not difficult to explain why the mean value-added values of Question 17 and Question 18 are  $-0.000006$  and  $-0.000057$ , respectively, are less than 0.

#### 4.5. Value-Added Analysis of the Effectiveness in Terms of the Degree of Improvement in People's Livelihood

Tumuhulawa and Moonti (2021) pointed out that the purpose of doing so (decentralizing administrative management power to local governments) is not only to avoid the overlap of power execution, but also to improve people's livelihood. For this reason, when selecting questions from the Shengze Town questionnaire, this article mainly selected questions (Q19-Q23) related to people's livelihood such as social security services in the term of the degree of improvement in people's livelihood.

**Table 6.** The added value of local residents' evaluation in terms of the degree of improvement in people's livelihood.

|             | The formula for value-added trends | R <sup>2</sup> | Average value added |
|-------------|------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Question 19 | $y = 0.8289x + 0.6126$             | 0.6872         | $-0.000098$         |
| Question 20 | $y = 0.6889x + 1.0267$             | 0.3933         | $-0.000055$         |
| Question 21 | $y = 0.8091x + 0.7309$             | 0.3456         | $-0.00001$          |
| Question 22 | $y = 0.5987x + 1.2107$             | 0.0966         | $-0.000074$         |
| Question 23 | $y = 0.8589x + 0.5849$             | 0.7136         | $-0.000066$         |
| Overall     | $y = 0.9248x + 0.4679$             | 0.3768         | 0.0000232           |

**Table 6** shows the average value-added of the evaluation of five specific issues in the degree of improvement in people's livelihood field of the county-level governments under Suzhou. Although the average value-added is positive in general, which is in line with the expectation of growth, the average value-added of these five specific issues is negative. It means that the results of decentralization corresponding to these five issues have begun to shrink due to re-centralization, rather than growing. In short, the power reform of county-level governments in the degree of improvement in people's livelihood field has been recognized by residents as a whole, but there are obvious shortcomings in specific issues:

1) The overall average value added is positive

Overall, the reason why the mean value of added value is positive is that the results of the reform at the macro level are significant. It requires the Suzhou municipal government to grant sufficient power to the county-level government and not compete for power with the county-level government. Although the Suzhou Municipal Government does not authorize the county-level government does not mean that the Suzhou Municipal Government will not improve the people's livelihood in the county, the reform and construction projects initiated by the Suzhou Municipal Government cannot fully take targeted measures based on the actual situation in the county. For example, when it comes to the issue of constructing affordable housing as mentioned in Question 22, neither the scenario where the Suzhou municipal government invests significant effort and funds to build as much affordable housing as possible, nor the situation where the Suzhou municipal government fails to provide sufficient affordable housing, can satisfy local residents. Only by delegating the authority for land planning to the county-level governments, which have a better grasp of the local problem, can the task of improving public service be accomplished in line with the actual local needs, thereby truly retaining the local residents.

2) The average added value of the five individuals is negative

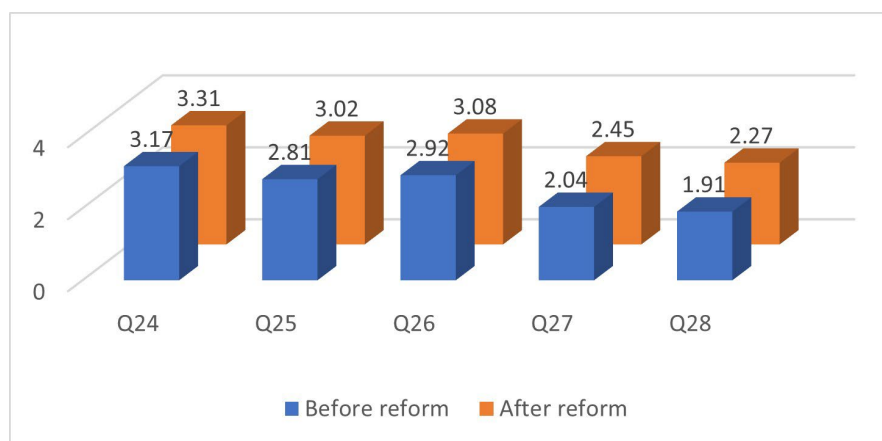
Suzhou City has adopted different degrees of power reform for its county-level administrative units. In some areas, the proportion of decentralization is greater than that of re-centralization, while in some areas, the power recovered by re-centralization is stronger than the power that was previously decentralized. Therefore, although the power reform covers every county from the perspective of Suzhou City, there are relatively large differences among the county-level administrative units in terms of specific resource allocation and execution. The means of reform is to hand over the power of livelihood-related projects to the county-level government or to the Suzhou prefecture-level city government. In short, this is not to directly let the county-level government or Suzhou Municipal Government build a hospital or school, but to allocate the power to build a hospital or school to the power agency that can do it best through the redistribution of power. It means that the effect of reform often takes quite some time to show. However, the publicity work of power reform has raised public expectations, especially the construction of a new hospital or a batch of affordable housing is often the top priority

of government publicity. In fact, these projects, from planning to construction, completion, and use, each link often takes a lot of time. Ultimately, it will result in not all local residents being able to personally feel the benefits of power reform in the short term.

In summary, many measures of re-centralization can help Suzhou City coordinate the management of various livelihood services and work in the county, avoid waste of resources, and improve the coverage and quality of public services. However, problems still exist. Firstly, the county-level administrative units may face resistance caused by the reduction of power in the process of re-centralization. Secondly, not only can the fairness and rationality of redistribution not be guaranteed, but also the infrastructure of different county-level cities and districts is different, and the effect of the reform may not be obvious in the short term.

#### 4.6. Value-Added Analysis of the Effectiveness in Terms of Fairness of Government Management and Social Development

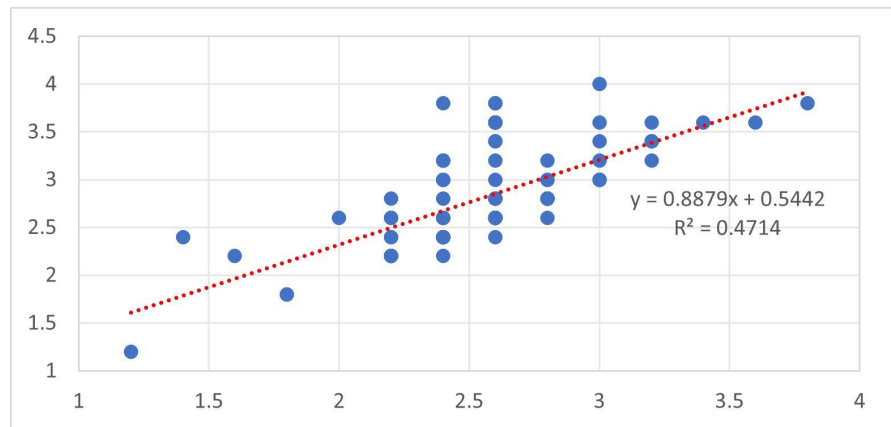
As shown in **Figure 3**, both before and after the reform, the evaluation of the work and services of county-level governments in the field of fairness of government management and social development was quite polarized. Before the reform, educational resources were not distributed fairly, and the grassroots democracy construction in the county was not satisfactory. The county-level government did well in the construction of urban and rural public services, with a score of more than 3, reaching 3.17. Question 25 on caring for vulnerable groups and question 26 on law enforcement also barely reached the passing level, almost reaching 3 points. They were 2.81 and 2.92 points respectively. After the reform, the scores of these three questions were improved, all exceeding 3 points. Although the score increase of question 27 and question 28 was larger than that of the other three questions, they were still not satisfactory, and the scores did not exceed 2.5 points.



**Figure 3.** Evaluation of local residents on the effectiveness in terms of fairness of government management and social development.

As shown in **Figure 4**, the reform results of the county-level governments under Suzhou in this field have not met expectations in the evaluation of most local res-

idents and in the overall evaluation. Although this article cannot clearly point out what factors in the power reform affect such a result, it can be speculated that the change in autonomy ownership that occurs over time during the reform, which is the decentralization first and then the centralization, is one of the reasons for this result.



**Figure 4.** Scatter plot of the overall score in terms of fairness of government management and social development.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Firstly, the survey results show that when county governments provide public services in the field of Economic development achievements, although decentralization has promoted the capacity of grassroots governments, the supervisory role of re-centralization has played a positive role in park construction and enhanced the coordination of resource integration and policy implementation. Overall, county-level governments have shown stronger industrial development and regional planning capabilities after the reform, but they still need to improve the optimization of the employment environment and support for enterprises. This result highlights the importance of power structure adjustment in the coordinated development of urban and rural areas, and emphasizes the necessity of balancing macro-planning and micro-management in the reform.

Secondly, in the discussion of the Government Management Efficiency field, this paper found that the power reform significantly improved the overall satisfaction of local residents. Before the reform, residents had a low evaluation of county-level governments, especially in terms of transparency (question 18), which showed that the service quality and efficiency of county-level governments faced significant challenges before the power reform. After the reform, the establishment of county-level administrative service centers has significantly improved the overall score of local governments, although it is still unsatisfactory. Further analysis of the mean value of added value shows that the power reform has brought about significant positive changes. However, it should be noted that the coordination mechanism between the prefecture-level city and county governments needs to be further optimized after each department has established its

guiding position over the county-level departments through centralization. Among them, personnel management and business transparency should be paid special attention to in order to achieve more efficient and satisfactory public services.

Thirdly, the power reform of county-level governments in Suzhou in the field of the degree of improvement in people's livelihood has effectively promoted the improvement of public services in key areas such as the improvement of medical standards, the improvement of the social security system, and the construction of affordable housing. These results respond to the original intention of the reform, that is, to achieve coordinated development of local governance through power adjustment. However, the value-added analysis results of the five sub-areas show that the actual effect of the reform is still insufficient at the micro level. The reform is difficult to meet the high expectations of the public in the short term, and some areas have negative value-added due to long implementation time or uneven resource redistribution. Especially in the construction of affordable housing and public services, Suzhou municipal departments have insufficient grasp of the actual needs of the county, which affects the accuracy and effectiveness of policies. Overall, although Suzhou's power reform has made breakthroughs in the field of improving people's livelihood, it is still necessary to further strengthen the coordination between county-level governments and Suzhou Municipal Government to achieve more extensive and in-depth positive value-added. The specific measures mainly include optimizing the power distribution mechanism and paying attention to the long-term sustainability of the reform effect.

Finally, the reform has also achieved certain results in the areas of fairness of government management and social development, but it has also exposed many challenges. Although county-level governments promoted infrastructure development during the decentralization phase, the flexibility of resource allocation has decreased after re-centralization. Therefore, the urban-rural gap still exists. The protection of the rights and interests of vulnerable groups has made progress in the early stages, but the protection of some groups has not been continuously improved due to the weakening of targeted services by local governments due to policy standardization. In the public services related to the allocation of educational resources, although the hardware facilities have been improved, the administrative division adjustment caused by the re-centralization has led to the loss of teachers and students in the educationally backward areas. At the same time, the problem of uneven allocation of educational hardware resources (modern campuses and modern teaching equipment, etc.) and software resources (famous teachers and excellent students) has not been solved, so residents still have a low evaluation of educational fairness. In terms of grassroots democracy, there have been some improvements during the decentralization phase. However, the democratic mechanism has gradually weakened during the re-centralization process, and residents' evaluation of participation and transparency is the lowest, indicating that local political participation needs to be improved urgently. In short, Su-

zhou's power reform has given Suzhou the ability to allocate resources from a macro perspective, narrowed the gap in urban and rural services, and coordinated regional development. However, in the fields of education, livelihood security, and democratic construction, it is necessary not only to continue to maintain the collective investment of the entire Suzhou city in related facilities and services, but also to work with county-level governments to focus on soft construction and optimization based on local characteristics and social conditions. This requires that local governments in the future should further strengthen the county-level government's independent decision-making capabilities, improve the mechanism for allocating educational resources, attach importance to grassroots democracy, and find a balance between regional coordination and local flexibility to ensure that the results of the reform are sustainable and benefit more groups.

Overall, although the reform as a whole has not fully achieved the expected goals, the comprehensive scores of local residents on various issues and various fields have basically shown positive growth. Therefore, the power reform implemented by Suzhou on county-level governments is effective, which has improved the relevant work and public service capabilities of county-level governments.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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