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**Politics and Autonomy in the Local State –  
County and Township Cadres as Strategic Actors in the Chinese  
Transformation Process**

**Summary**

Any substantial assessment of China's state capacity cannot be undertaken without a careful analysis of the local state. County and township cadres are of utmost importance here – a fact which has rarely been researched so far. They hold a high degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the central state and are the decisive actors concerning all policy implementation critical for China's agricultural policies and the government's efforts to reform the system of rural finance. Moreover, it is the local cadres who decide about the central state's success in maintaining social stability and regime legitimacy among China's peasants. What is the rationality underlying their efforts when they implement central state policies and whose interests are at stake? What specific strategies do they follow? To what extent do they develop a collective identity which allows them to be identified as a self-conscious strategic group aware of its own workings in China's political system, and how does this impact on state capacity and regime legitimacy? The project intends to find answers to these questions by a systematic comparison of different counties and townships. In doing so, it makes an important contribution to the understanding of the relationship of local governance, political and economic development, and regime legitimacy in contemporary China.

## 1 Research topic and overview of current literature

A thorough assessment of China's current and future state capacity calls for a detailed examination of the specific capacity to be found in the local *state*.<sup>1</sup> Success in key policy fields essential for the future of the reform process in China as well as the stability of the political system are indisputably linked to the cooperation of local authorities, above all cadres at the county and township levels. This can also be postulated for the success of the "Great Western Development Programme" (*xibu da kaifa*), for maintaining control over a periodically overheated economy or for realizing the government's programme to establish a "new socialist countryside", which is closely connected to the restructuring of the rural finance system. Now more than ever, local cadres are key figures and indispensable links for the success of any central policy initiatives. **The starting point for our considerations is that in the course of the reform process the local cadre bureaucracy has now attained a level of significance and autonomy in the political system unprecedented in China's history.** Although the higher-ranking local cadres retain their close Party ties through the *nomenklatura* system, their political autonomy – above all that of the powerful county party secretaries – has steadily increased over the years due to a number of different factors:

- Increased coordination efforts related to the implementation of central policies has resulted in a heightened complexity of government action in the context of (still) weak formal institutions at the local level.
- Because of a weak institutional environment, a grey area of informal political arrangements has been established in the midst of which local cadres play a key role in guaranteeing a minimum security as to expectations and planning as well as political reliability for all other social actors and groups.
- Regardless of periodic campaigns against corruption and regularly held cadre evaluations (as required by the cadre responsibility system), institutionalised control over the local cadres by the higher authorities is rather weak. Whilst the success of battles against corruption remains disputed, cadre evaluations are still based primarily on macroeconomic performance criteria and place little focus on the specific means by which cadres have achieved their alleged successes. This lends them a particular degree of discretionary power.
- The administrative reforms taking place over the last years have led to a widespread reorganisation of local administration and resulted in larger geographical entities at the county and township levels; this too served to strengthen the influence of local cadres.
- Finally, rural finance reforms implemented since 2000 ascribe an important role to the county level as to the allocation of redistributive funds from the central state and the provision of important public goods. The county now occupies a key role in setting the priorities for China's development and putting them into practice.

Accordingly, the Chinese leadership has repeatedly emphasised that China's rural areas will have a special significance for the eventual success of the Chinese *transformation*

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term *local state* to denote primarily the county and township levels. However, the provincial level is customarily assigned to the local state and will also be taken into consideration in the present project.

*process*. Not only has the *san nong* issue (related to the three core problems of rural areas: development of agriculture, of rural areas and of the peasantry) been placed at the centre of the state development agenda; in a lead article of the central Party newspaper from early 2006 it was even pointed out that the rural population would have to assume the role of “the driving force in the reform process” in the future.<sup>2</sup>

Taking on the problems presented by the rural areas cannot be conceived without the cooperation of the local cadre bureaucracy, i.e. the party and government cadres at the county and township levels. Their increased autonomy has resulted, on the one hand, in local spurts of development and was conducive to the diversity and pluralisation of changes taking place in the countryside. On the other hand, negative consequences also emerged, for example in relation to the (in)consistency of national agricultural policy or more generally to social stability in rural areas (read: arbitrary and corrupt cadre actions). Each county developed its own palace economy, thereby strengthening tendencies of localism or communalism. Local interests have increasingly gained the upper hand over the interests of the central state.

- **Given this context, in the research project outlined below we will investigate the current and future significance of local cadres at the county and township levels for the Chinese transformation process. This question will be approached through the analysis of specific policy fields in the local state. We will examine the local cadres’ role in determining the concrete priorities, strategic implementation and (long-term) institutionalization of important reform initiatives in the local state.**
  
- **At the same time, we will also focus on the significance of the local cadre bureaucracy for building *legitimacy* and *stability* of the political system.**
  
- **Finally, we wish to ascertain if and to what extent local cadres align themselves as one or multiple *strategic group(s)* (see below) in pursuit of a concerted political agenda or shared developmental strategies.**

In the China studies field to date, the leading forces driving economic and social change have been mainly identified in the political leadership or the operational headquarters of the CCP (e.g. Deng Xiaoping as the “father of reforms”), the peasantry (e.g. in the context of agricultural reforms in the immediate Post-Mao Era), and meanwhile also private entrepreneurs. The role of local government and party cadres has been largely neglected to this point. However, throughout the Reform Era this group of political actors has played a central role in initiating processes of local development and change. First and foremost in the early years of the Reform Era, there were neither entrepreneurs nor a substantial number of professionals who could have initiated these processes. The single-party state established an incentive system of “cadre responsibility” that promised local officials higher salaries, rewards and upward political and occupational mobility for their positive performance reviews. This system proved to be immensely successful in large parts of China in the 1980s and 1990s. Few explanations can be made as to the Chinese “paradigm” of economic success or statements on the future of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Renmin Ribao*, 5 January 2006.

transformation process in China without a proper assessment of the local cadres' involvement.

Certainly enough, the local level has been studied intensively from various perspectives by China scholars in recent years. The strategic role and significance of the local cadre bureaucracies in China's economic and social transformation, however, have been widely ignored. In 1994 *Jia & Lin* published an edited volume containing an initial, rather general overview of the changing relations between the central and the local level over the course of the reform process. The role of the market as an agent of change in these interactions as well as problems posed by decentralisation, agricultural reform, fiscal policy, township and village enterprises (TVEs) and the topic of regional disparities stood at the centre of their work. *Blecher & Shue* (1996) presented a detailed look at the development of a county in northern China since 1949. They viewed important foundations for an explanation of successful development in that county as residing in the development policy of the Mao period (collective enterprises) and the orientation of local cadres toward locally appropriate development strategies. *Yang Zhong* (2003) presented a study on the system of local governance in China, in which he described the formal organisation of the party and government at the county and township levels as well as the cadre system and its political implications, among other issues. *Jean Oi* (1999) in turn addressed the role of the local state for local development processes. She departed from the premise that the decentralisation of fiscal policy in the 1980s and the possibility that it opened for rural counties and townships to generate additional income from the local economy contributed to local economic development. Oi characterized the interdependence of the local state and local enterprises as local state corporatism. The local state was portrayed as a multi-level enterprise, with the county at the top, the townships as sub-centres and the villages as branches. Susan Whiting (2001) also pinpointed the reason for the success of the TVEs in the local state's successful economic development. For *Jonathan Unger* (2002), *Xu Wang* (2003) and *Linda Chelan Li* (2006) transformation in rural areas built the crux of their focus as well, though primarily from the perspective of the state and in view of structural challenges. While the above-named works have some commonalities with our own research topic, their arguments contain heavy institutionalist overtones, and hardly include strategic action and actor-based rationality in their perspectives (although the latter do not operate free from institutional influences).

The same can be said for the work of *Chen Lijun* (2004), who places the development of local leadership groups, reform of the local bureaucracy and local state entrepreneurialism at the centre of his considerations concerning local state capacity. In this context, Chen analyses the weaknesses and disadvantages of the cadre system along with the continuous intervention of higher-ranking authorities and its consequences. He concluded that state capacity and institutional mechanisms represent central factors for successful local economic development. Institutions such as the *nomenklatura* system are central to his research, while the actors remain relatively secondary. *Jae Ho Chung* (2000a) examined the relationship between central control and local discretionary autonomy based on the example of various provincial entities. He argued convincingly that the existence of extensive personnel networks at various administrative levels possesses a strong explanatory potential for why the introduction of bottom-up reforms occurs in some counties and not in others. *Heberer & Taubmann*

(1998) and *Fan, Heberer & Taubmann* (2006) have presented detailed investigations of the role of counties, townships and villages as well as local leadership groups in the local development process. They found that the local cadres act as decisive agents for local development, and that well trained officials constitute an essential prerequisite for successful growth. At the same time, local cadres develop communalist interests and strategies: Their focus is centred on purely local interests while circumventing state policy (e.g. as regards the use of local fiscal revenues or development concepts). The local leadership level is conceived as composed of largely homogeneous entities, which act rationally based on objective conditions (resources) and subjective interests, either destined to successfully implement their development agendas or to fail in the process. This conceptualization approximates the theoretical underpinnings and directional focus of our intended research project.

## **2. Conceptual framework**

### *2.1 Strategic groups*

The theoretical and conceptual basis for the project is drawn from the concept of “strategic groups”, as groups of persons who “are connected by a common interest in the preservation or expansion of their shared acquisitive chances”, whereas acquisition not only refers to material goods, but also to immaterial entities such as power, prestige, knowledge or religious authority. Moreover, the members of these groups are characterised by shared long-term strategies as well as a collective awareness of their existence as meaningful social actors. Strategic groups stand in opposition to one another, and build alliances and symbioses with other strategic groups in order to secure their interests in the long term while simultaneously shaping the political system in accordance with their goals.<sup>3</sup>

As Berner has emphasised, strategic groups do not constitute factual and immediately observable objects for empirical research, but rather must be seen as analytical constructs which may be used to approximate the following general social circumstance: Within a society, action is varied, yet oriented toward specific goals, while the actors in pursuit of these goals are not necessary acquainted with others who follow the same lines of action.<sup>4</sup> However, empirical observations can be made of specific groups of actors who act as representatives of the overall interests of a strategic group, thereby implementing specific resources which are principally accessible to all members of a strategic group. From this perspective, the entire society or its different subsystems as well as the political institutions (or the state) become the arena of action for strategic groups.<sup>5</sup>

**In our project, we intend to explore to what extent local cadres at the county and township levels in China’s political system can be grasped and accordingly**

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<sup>3</sup> Evers & Schiel 1988; Evers 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Berner 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Publications on “strategic groups” written within the area of the sociology of development (*Entwicklungssoziologie*) have been present in larger numbers since the 1980s (cf. e.g. Evers 1987; Evers & Schiel 1988; Bierschenk 1988; Bucholt 1990; Berner & Korff 1991; Bierschenk & de Sardan 1997). Moreover, Gunter Schubert and Rainer Tetzlaff attempted in the 1990s, and Thomas Heberer from 2000, to render the concept useful for political science (Schubert, Tetzlaff & Vennewald 1994, Schubert & Tetzlaff 1998, Schubert 2005; Heberer 2001, 2003a, b and c).

**analysed as strategic groups.** Important research topics to ascertain the existence of these groups and their significance for the process of transformation in China include their internal capacities for mobilisation and communication, their specific resources of action (strategic resources) and the continual adaptation of their strategies to external conditions (e.g. reactions to guidelines issued by the party-state leadership, legal changes, institutional innovations like village elections, interventions by new actors such as private entrepreneurs, etc.), but also their *habitus* and a politically efficacious corporate identity.

The *strategic resources* of strategic groups which enable them to pursue their respective agendas can be both material and immaterial in nature. The most significant resources are – differentiated according to their ascribed relative standing in social subsystems – money/property (economic system), power (political system), knowledge/status/prestige (cultural system) and legitimacy/authority (social system). For strategic action, the central importance of the above-listed resources is twofold: First, the long-term objective of strategic groups is based on the acquisition of resources; second, control over resources builds the foundation for strategic action. In order to acquire this control, strategic groups attempt to (re)form the rules of the economic, political, social and cultural systems or they strive to gain direct control over parts of these systems (*steering*). The instruments and tactics of strategic groups are numerous and context-dependent; they include, for instance, network-building and creating alliances, confrontational threats or refusals, the tactics of cunning and deceit or demonstrations of power.

The term *strategic action* suggests that a group of persons with similar characteristics and shared interests and objectives strives to realize its goals in a *systematic* manner. It remains secondary, whether the pursuit of those objectives is driven by a *conscious collective* or whether it “happens” through *focussed strategic action* of subunits of strategic groups which do not communicate directly with one another. Strategic groups distinguish themselves by an overarching common interest and a collective identity, which brings about the development of similar strategies and a shared line of action even without immediate consultation between all “empirical” members belonging to those strategic groups.

According to Evers strategic groups tend to organise “structures of authority, society, economy and the political system in such a way to secure the optimal requirements for the long-term acquisition of resources”.<sup>6</sup> In this context, an understanding of *authority* should not be limited to *political* authority in the form of the power of enforcement held by formal institutions or to the pointed use of certain capacities for threats and refusals. It also refers to *informal* authority, i.e. the assertion of interests outside of formal decision-making hierarchies – a highly relevant matter for the context of the Chinese local state and the cadre bureaucracy active in that arena. When concrete objectives are to be obtained, however, further cognitive elements of strategic action become necessary, namely information and knowledge or *meta-cognition*, i.e. *strategic knowledge*. Strategic groups, or their representatives, must be able to process information, formulate group objectives, and reach and implement purposive decisions.

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<sup>6</sup> Evers 1999: 2.

Gathering strategically relevant information, performing strategic analyses, conducting strategic planning and realizing strategic goals are therefore essential attributes of strategic groups and their interest-based organisations.

Research on strategic groups to date has concentrated mostly on their mobilisation, the specific resources they attempt to monopolise and measures to secure their power horizontally and vertically. Furthermore, this strain of inquiry has primarily examined the effect of political actors at the level of the nation state or those with transnational influences (e.g. the “knowledge elite”). While the concept was mainly applied in the 1980s to analyse processes of decolonisation and state building; in the current context of complex social transformation processes, different research questions become relevant.

- **The objective of our research is a systematic analysis of local cadres at the county and township level in order to gain a better understanding of the interplay between the local and the national state, the process of social transformation in the local state and the evolution of the Chinese political system.**
- **In this context, we hypothesize that CCP officials at the county and township levels build strategic groups who are able to act in a purposive manner and with a high degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the central state. The identification of such groups (potentially as competing bureaucratic groups) forms a central part of our research.**

## *2.2 Analysing policy fields for the identification of strategic groups and strategic action*

The formation of strategic groups will be investigated by an examination of **four policy fields** which are particularly relevant for the local Chinese context and central to the official promotion of “constructing a socialist countryside” (*xin nongcun jianshe*):

- **social welfare** (introducing a comprehensive rural health care system)
- **education**
- **rural development** (poverty alleviation; rural credit policies; the modernization of agricultural infrastructure)
- **environmental protection** (ecological sustainability)

We will explore if and how – in the context of serious fiscal constraints caused by the rural tax reforms introduced earlier in the decade – local cadres follow a policy that corresponds with the interests of the local population (the issue of legitimacy, see below); why a specific strategy to implement this policy is chosen and how it is implemented, especially if facing resistance; and to what extent local cadres act in a coordinated, purposive and strategic sense, i.e. as strategic groups.

## *2.3 Legitimacy and locality as analytical reference points for conceptualising strategic groups*

According to Seymour M. Lipset, “legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society.”<sup>7</sup> The aspect of appropriateness is not solely procedural, determined alone by the democratic development of institutions. Nor does the functional aspect of legitimacy predominant within the Chinese leadership, i.e. performance-based approval for the state’s action, adequately round out an understanding of the concept. Legitimacy also contains a strong ideological component defined by the specific view of morality or justice held by a society. In this respect, legitimacy is the continually varied result of the interaction between a state and its citizens in relation to the citizens’ assessment of the political structure (i.e. the regime) and the political authorities (i.e. the local cadres).<sup>8</sup> In David Easton’s political systems theory legitimacy (or the belief in legitimacy) assumes a decisive role for *support* as the basic condition of the functional capacity and stability of a political system. Legitimacy refers to both the *regime* (the institutional order) and the *authorities* (those individuals who take charge of official positions) in a political system. Easton distinguishes between an ideological belief in legitimacy resulting from the conviction that a regime and its political authorities are morally right; a structural belief in legitimacy resulting from the identification with the institutions and rules within a political system (in our case the system of rural governance at the village, township and county levels); and a *personal* belief in legitimacy resulting from the positive view on the political authorities (in our case the cadre bureaucracy of a county or a township).<sup>9</sup>

Local cadres require legitimacy to maintain their positions, minimize resistance and implement policy guidelines. Besides our objective of identifying strategic thinking and action on the part of local cadres, we will also analyse their legitimacy at the political micro level. We are certainly aware that this can only be done through a comprehensive investigation of the public responses to cadre action. Thus in our qualitative research design we can only assess cadre legitimacy to a limited extent. **We will therefore foremost examine the functional legitimacy – or *suitability* - of the policies of leading cadres at the county and township levels, i.e. the degree to which they a) contribute to the improvement of the people’s living conditions (by elevating living standards and guaranteeing social security) and b) provide a positive impetus to the accountability and lawfulness of politics. *Suitability* is therefore measured by the objective results of policy implementation pursued by local cadres in relation to the specific policy goals defined before. However, we will also undertake a limited assessment of the public responses to these policies, grounded on qualitative interviews among the local populace.**

On par with legitimacy in its significance for the discretionary power of local cadres is the local space in which these actors operate. More so than political scientists, sociologists have analysed the concept of space seen as a field of socio-political action and a “field of authority” (Bourdieu).<sup>10</sup> The Political is imbued with a spatial or local dimension – above all, as in China, when the local level appears increasingly as an actor in its own

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<sup>7</sup> Lipset 1981: 64.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the editor’s introduction in White 2005; Brandtstädter & Schubert 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Easton 1965, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> As elaborated by e.g. Durkheim 1994: 590; Simmel 1995; Bourdieu 1998.

right.<sup>11</sup> Local action in networks and clientelistic relationships are closely tied to the concept of “locality”. As Elias and Scotson have shown early on, persons who have lived in a place for some time possess greater power and authority than those of external provenience. Their authority is based, among other factors, on stronger group ties and collective identities as well as established (traditional) local channels of communication.<sup>12</sup>

The communist party did preserve the “Rule of Avoidance” from the Imperial Era, according to which local authorities (party secretaries, mayors and their deputies) were required to be recruited from a different geographical area in order to avoid a “pillarisation” of power. Local cadres counter this imposed disadvantage to the development and entrenchment of their power by adopting a strategy of presenting themselves as locals for the duration of their terms of office: They adapt their habitus to achieve a better “fit” with the local political culture and attempt to increase the sense of a shared locality<sup>13</sup> within their ranks. Legitimacy in the local state can thus be achieved by local cadres through the production of locality, leading to the perception by both the cadres and the residents of a situated community (through local history, local annals, local custom, local “role models”, etc.). Therefore, as a further reference point for the analysis of local cadres as strategic groups, we are interested in how they utilize locality as a resource of action, i.e. how they secure support from other local actors and the populace by developing certain techniques for the production of locality. This factor (places matter) has been neglected in previous impact analyses of local policy implementation and legitimacy production,<sup>14</sup> since policy is largely comprehended as “national policy”.

- **To summarise our theoretical and conceptual considerations, we restate that the objective of our project is primarily to investigate the policy implementation of county and township-level cadres in China’s transformation process in order to identify the factors that determine their decisions and actions.**
- **We conceptualize local cadres hypothetically as strategic groups, i.e. groups of political actors who act strategically by making use of strategic resources and continuously adapt to the institutional environment.**
- **At the same time, we are interested in the degree of (functional) legitimacy that local cadres gain by their specific policy implementation; and in *locality* as a specific means and strategic resource of local cadres to reinforce this legitimacy.**

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. Schroer 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Elias & Scotson 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Appadurei 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. e.g. Aitken (Mexico) 1999: 89, for one of the few internationally analysed examples.

### 3 Research questions and hypotheses

As mentioned earlier, the project is comprehended as a contribution to the debate on state capacity<sup>15</sup> and regime legitimacy in China, contextualised by the indisputable observation that the central state must rely increasingly on the local level's willingness to cooperate in its efforts. The state's capacity to impact this level is increasingly limited by the growing complexity of reforms and corresponding coordination efforts for policy implementation, although it is in no way fully subject to the will of the local cadre bureaucracy. Hence the consideration that the Chinese political system increasingly adopts contours which allow it to be likened to a "flexible atomium", i.e. a structure of largely autonomous operational (local) centres connected to one another by a central coordinating mechanism, while each follows its own specific development strategy. The functional logic of the atomium lies principally in the stabilisation of the system as a whole, which in China operates within a space of continental, yet highly fragmented entities. The question as to the long-term viability of this model is posed as an implicit, yet overarching research interest. Apart from this more general aspect, the following questions guide our research:

- How can development (and also non-development) in different local contexts be traced to and explained by local cadres' action?
- How do local cadres at the township and county levels interact with their counterparts at the meso level (regions, provinces) and at the national level?
- How is the interplay between institutional changes in the political system and the actions of local cadres organised, and in what way does it serve to strengthen or weaken the formation of strategic groups?
- What role does legitimacy play in the actions of the local cadre leadership; and what can be said in view of the generation of legitimacy in the local state?
- What role does the production of locality play for the success of local cadres' actions and for the production of legitimacy in the local state?

More specifically, we will concentrate on the following questions:

- How do local cadres assess the policy guidelines issued by superior administrative levels (central government; province and prefecture; for township cadres also the county governments) in relation to the local context in which they bear responsibility?
- What formal and informal strategies do they implement for their success – above all concerning strategic alliance building (informal alliances) and the instrumentalisation of personal charisma, but also in regard to the production of locality?
- What autonomous discretionary power do local cadres have in implementing central-state policy? How is this autonomy conditioned by the provinces and prefectures?
- What role do the responses of the local population play for the cadres, i.e. the question of public legitimization of their policies? Do feedback processes exist which have an effect on the formulation of their policy implementation?

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<sup>15</sup> The concept of "state capacity" does not constitute a theoretical point of departure for our project, since we are primarily interested in the "strategic quality" of political actors as well as the consequences of these actors' specific policy implementation for regime legitimacy in the local state. Nonetheless, the question of efficiency and legitimacy also touches on the matter of local state capacity. Cf. also Chung 2000b; Brown 1998; Edin 2003.

With respect to the township level, the following questions should also be considered:

- What specific difficulties do township cadres encounter in regard to the implementation of political guidelines stemming from the county level? What effects can be attributed to the limited financial scope (under-financing) of most counties for policy implementation at the township level?
- What amount of political leeway do the townships have for setting their own priorities and how do they manoeuvre in that space?
- How do township governments deal with the difficult task of having to implement regulations issued by the county against the will of newly elected village leaderships? How do communication and conflict resolution function between villages and townships on the one hand and townships and counties on the other?<sup>16</sup>
- How do the most recent administrative reforms aimed at streamlining China's rural governance structure, which have created larger entities at the county and township level, impact on rural policy implementation?

The following **central hypotheses** guide our research:

- 1. Cadres at the county and township level form strategic groups, which realise their interests with the aid of the local party organisations as well as informal networks. These interests consist primarily in securing their exclusive political and economic position in the authority structure of the CCP regime, in that they are and wish to remain decisive actors for successful local development and social stability.**
- 2. The reform dynamics, stability and legitimacy of the CCP regime are highly dependent on the willingness of these strategic groups to cooperate with the central state as well as their own ability to generate legitimacy in the local state.**
- 3. Legitimacy is created by successful economic development and the maintenance of social stability; yet it also depends on other aspects of local politics (which furthermore assume a growing importance through regular cadre reviews), e.g. the legality of political action and the environmental sustainability of local policy implementation. Furthermore, the cultural contextualisation of local politics through the production of locality also produces legitimacy.**
- 4. Seen against the backdrop of strategic action by local cadres and public responses to policy implementation, the stability of the CCP regime in the local state may require a different assessment than that insinuated by numerous reports of cadre corruption and peasant protest. The “political compact” between the local state and the central state, which grants the cadres extensive autonomy as long as they act in accordance with central political guidelines is largely stable and acts in turn to stabilise the CCP regime.**

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<sup>16</sup> Here we can draw on the results of our recent DFG project on political participation and awareness-building in villages and urban neighbourhood communities.

#### 4. Operationalization

The project will be based on qualitative research methods: In-depth semi-structured interviews will be conducted with leading officials at the county and township levels. Participant observation in the form of accompanying county party secretaries in their daily work is also planned. An additional important aspect will be the evaluation and analysis of local documents in relation to the above named policy fields. **The sample will be constructed from a total of four counties and four townships (one township in each county) in four different provinces. The provinces will be chosen as characterised by different levels of economic development, i.e. advanced, moderate or low-level development, which should in turn be reflected as far as possible in the selection of the respective counties.** This is based on the consideration that the tasks, interests and strategies of local cadres in provinces and counties with different levels of development vary in their emphases. Only if taken as a whole, we can assemble a representative picture of the current political autonomy in China's local state.

We will set up two research teams, which will each be responsible for two counties and townships. Together with one of the applicants (A), the team will include a research assistant from Germany (B), as well as a Chinese junior-level scholar from the partner institute (C). A and B will divide up the work at the county and township level. This is primarily based on pragmatic concerns and due to the limited duration of the field stays. Interviewees will be chosen first and foremost from among county and township cadres of the party and government bureaucracy. A particular significance will be accorded to those cadres who are working in the departments and offices of the local government and party authorities responsible for the chosen policy areas. We also plan to conduct interviews at the provincial level, which must forward adjustment payments from the central government to the counties and townships in compensation for the dramatic reform-related tax deficits at these levels in recent years. Fieldwork will be conducted from 2008-2009 in localities to be selected in close co-operation with our partner institute, the *China Center of Comparative Politics and Economics* (CCCPE) in Beijing.

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