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“Building a New Socialist Countryside” – County and Township Cadres as Strategic Actors in Rural China

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1 Research topic

“Building a New Socialist Countryside” (*shehui zhuyi xin nongcun jianshe*) is the current official formula to focus on the Chinese government’s resolve to push ahead rural reforms in the coming years. It pinpoints the objective of developing agriculture and securing rural stability in the countryside by the following general strategies:

- (1) increasing farmers’ income and modernising the infrastructure in the countryside
- (2) providing more public services and establishing a comprehensive social security system
- (3) improving democratic participation and rural management

The success of this programme is indisputably linked to the cooperation of local authorities, above all cadres at the county and township levels. In fact, local cadres are key figures and indispensable links for the success of any central policy initiatives. Our point of departure is the hypothesis that in the course of “constructing a new socialist countryside” and implementing other policy initiatives, the center depends increasingly on the local cadre bureaucracy which, at the same time, enjoys a high level of political autonomy. This is 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 degree of reliability concerning the central state’s expectations on policy implementation.
- Regardless of periodic campaigns against corruption and regularly held cadre evaluations (as required by the *cadre responsibility system*), monitoring local

cadres by higher authorities is difficult. Whilst the success of open battles against corruption at the local level remains disputed, cadre evaluations are still based primarily on abstract, mostly macroeconomic, performance criteria and place little emphasis on the specific means by which cadres have achieved their alleged successes. This lends them a particular degree of discretionary power.

- The administrative reforms over the last years have streamlined the local administration, resulting in larger geographical entities at the county and township levels; this served to strengthen the influence of local cadres as well.
- Finally, rural fiscal reforms implemented since 2000 ascribe an important role to the county level as to the allocation of transfer funds from the central state to provide for important public goods and pay for local officials. Hence, the county level now occupies a key role in setting the priorities for China's internal development.

The increasing autonomy of county cadres has resulted, on the one hand, in local spurts of development and was also conducive to the diversity and pluralisation which has taken place in the countryside. On the other hand, negative consequences also emerged as the result of inconsistent strategies to promote agricultural development and social stability (read: arbitrary and corrupt cadre actions). Almost every county developed its own palace economy, thereby strengthening tendencies of localism or communalism. In some areas, local interests have clearly gained the upper hand over the interests of the central state.

- **Given this context, we will investigate the current and future significance of local cadres at the county and township levels for the Chinese transformation process. We will examine the local cadres' role in determining policy priorities, strategic implementation and (long-term) institutionalization of important reform initiatives in the local state by way of analysing specific policy fields (see below).**

Local cadres also 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 which goes beyond our field work possibilities. As cadre legitimacy can therefore only be assessed to a limited extent, we will 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 securing environmental protection) 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.

- **By assessing the impact of those policies directed at implementing the programme of “constructing a new socialist countryside”, we will also focus on the significance of the local cadre bureaucracy for building *legitimacy* and *stability* of the political regime in the local state and beyond.**

2 Conceptual framework

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 local level build ***strategic groups*** who are able to act in a purposive and coordinated manner and with a high degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the central state. Strategic groups may or may not comprise cadres at the provincial, prefectural, county and township levels. The identification of such groups (potentially as collaborating or competing bureaucratic groups) forms a central part of our research.

- **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.**

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

- **Rural development, referring to specific reform strategies for increasing agricultural productivity and farmers' income**
- **Environmental protection (sustainability)**

However, the selection of the localities where fieldwork is to be conducted should not be determined by these policy fields in the first place. Our point of departure is what priorities are set by county and township cadres within their specific interpretation of “building a socialist countryside”. We are primarily comparing cadre behaviour and strategic action under institutional constraints, not the formation and implementation of specific policies. Moreover, we will explore how their policies correspond with the interests of the local population, or to what extent they are *legitimate*.

3 Research questions and hypotheses

The following **overarching questions** guide our research on the realization of “building a new socialist countryside” in contemporary China:

- 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 mid-level (regions, provinces) and at the national level?
- 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?

More specifically, at the county level we will concentrate on the following questions:

- How do county cadres assess the policy guidelines issued by superior administrative levels (central government; province and prefecture) in relation to the local context in which they bear responsibility?
- What formal and informal strategies do they implement to secure success?
- What autonomous discretionary power do county 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 county cadres, i.e. how much are they concerned with public legitimization of their policies? Do

feedback processes exist which have an effect on the formulation and implementation of their policies?

With respect to the **township level**, the following questions should 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?
- How do the most recent administrative reforms aimed at streamlining China's rural governance structure, which have created larger entities at the 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.

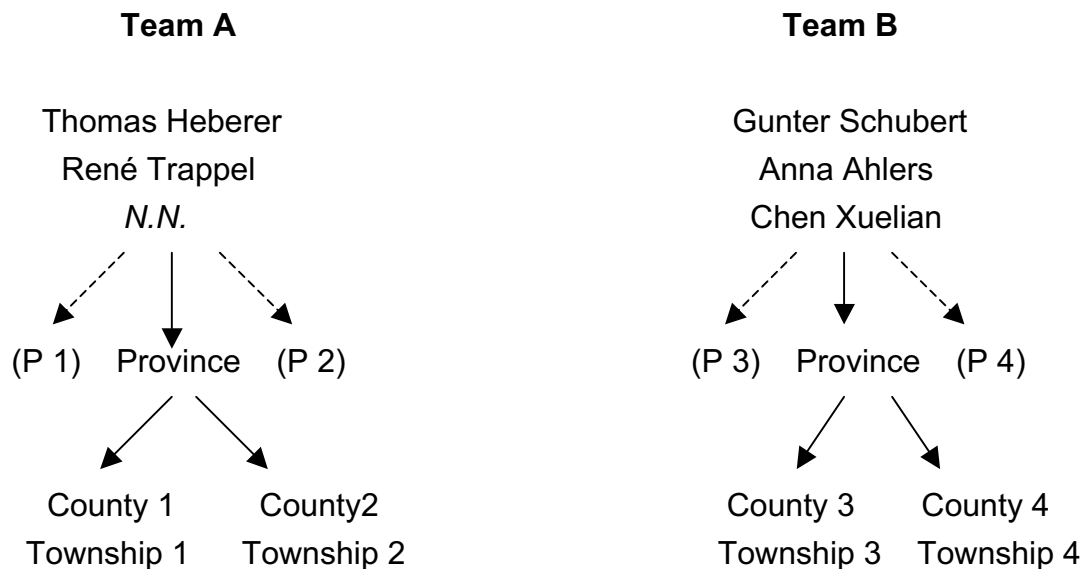
4. Seen against the backdrop of strategic action by local cadres and public responses to policy implementation, the stability of the CCP regime in the local state may require a different assessment than that insinuated by numerous reports on cadre corruption and peasant protest. The “political compact” 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.

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 two different provinces. The counties will be chosen as characterised by different levels of economic development, i.e. moderate and advanced levels of development.** This is based on the consideration that strategic thinking and action of local cadres in the context of rural development policies and issues of legitimacy can be best investigated in localities which are not poor. In poor areas, there is simply too little leeway for local cadres to shape policies, and too little public response to those policies with peasants being absorbed by their daily struggle of survival.

We will set up two research teams, which will each be responsible for two counties and two townships. Each county and township will be visited twice in the course of the field work. **This allows us to establish sound personal relations in the field and also to compare developments over a period of one year, as fieldwork should be conducted in the summer of 2008 and 2009 respectively** (see below). Together with one of the applicants, the team will include a research assistant from Germany, as well as a Chinese scholar from the partner institute. 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 will also conduct interviews at the provincial and prefectural levels, which must forward the transfer funds from the

central government to the counties and townships in compensation for the tax reform-related budget deficits at these levels in recent years. It is important to compare the outlooks on rural development between county cadres and those officials at higher levels who depend on the counties as much as the central state does.



Fieldwork will be conducted from 2008-2009 in localities to be selected in close co-operation with the *China Center of Comparative Politics and Economics* (CCCPE) in Beijing.

Issues of discussion with CCCPE

1. Selection of field studies

We do propose a selection of **moderate and well-developed counties** by partly drawing on those areas where we have done fieldwork before, i.e. Lishu county in Jilin province. We may also contact Dr. Xiao Tangbiao who now works in Chongqing to arrange a field study in Sichuan or Jiangxi province. It could also be helpful to take into account the “home counties” of the Chinese project participants or CCCPE staff, like Mrs. Chen Xuelian’s home county in Anhui.

We propose **not to choose any model counties** for the implementation of specific policies related to the programme of “building a new socialist countryside”. Moreover, counties should be chosen which have not yet been investigated by Chinese or foreign scholars.

2. Fieldwork

As 60 days of fieldwork for each research team can be financed by our budget, we propose two rounds of fieldwork in September/October 2008 and 2009 respectively. The first research trip may take up to 18 days for each county visited (36 days in total for each team), the second trip 12 days (24 days in total for each team).

Especially during the first trip, it is important to arrange for interviews at the provincial and prefectural level as well, while the second trip might completely focus on the county and township levels.

We need a catalogue of interview questions for all levels – township, county, prefecture, province – which should be jointly worked out. Also, we need questionnaires for the local people to be interviewed for assessing the legitimacy of cadre policies. The German side will make first proposals for the questionnaires and submit them to the CCCPE for comments and modifications.