



# Journal of Current Chinese Affairs

China aktuell

Topical Issue: Policy Implementation in the New Socialist Countryside  
Guest Editor: René Trappel

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Trappel, René (2016),  
New Villages, Old Problems? Exploring Policy Implementation in a Rapidly  
Changing Chinese Countryside, in: *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 45, 1, 5–10.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-9444>

ISSN: 1868-4874 (online), ISSN: 1868-1026 (print)

The online version of this introduction and the other articles can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org)>

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Published by  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

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# New Villages, Old Problems? Exploring Policy Implementation in a Rapidly Changing Chinese Countryside

René TRAPPEL

Change is everywhere in rural China. Even the most casual observer would notice the impressive degree and scope of changes that have taken place since the beginning of the economic reforms in December 1978. When the collective economy disintegrated, it gave way to rural industrialisation and the return of smallholder farming. The introduction of markets in the countryside brought with it not only new economic liberties but also risks that had been absent during the socialist period. In response to new incentives and pressures, hundreds of millions of peasants have left agriculture and the countryside. For those who continued to stay in the villages, the volatility of rural life has become a daily experience. The transforming nature of agriculture, the rising costs of healthcare and education, and the determination of many local governments to develop the economy by any means necessary have forced villagers to adjust. In an attempt to counter some of the negative effects of these changes, the centre has put forward a steady stream of political initiatives. Today, rural China is witnessing a massive wave of new housing and infrastructure projects. Considerable financial support is also going into fostering commercial enterprises in agriculture and improving public service provision. Beijing wants to raise the rural standard of living to urban levels and has made this a central theme of its “New-Type Urbanisation Plan 2014–2020,” which it adopted in 2014.

Yet, at the same time, there is also a lot of continuity in the countryside. The structure of the political system, for example, has seen very little change since the start of the economic reforms. Much of what happens in the countryside is still decided with the priorities of urban China in mind. Institutions with a shared heritage in the socialist past such as the cooperative medical system, the classification of ethnic minorities, collective land, and household registration continue to exercise a large influence upon rural development in China. The rapid social changes and continuous political reforms of the past few decades, combined with a relatively stable political environ-

ment, form the backdrop of this topical issue on policy implementation in rural China. This publication comes at a critical juncture for the country's rural development. In light of the launch of the "New Socialist Countryside" in 2006 and the abolishment of the rural household tax in that same year, but before qualified statements on the effects of the New-Type Urbanisation Plan 2014–2020 can be made, this issue attempts to map the contours of policy implementation in an age of transition for China's villages.

Recognising the importance of varying actor configurations, resources, and institutions in different policy fields, each article is an empirical case study in one specific field. At the core of all contributions are the interactions between different groups of social actors and institutions. Of particular importance in this regard is the relationship between the central government, which sets the agenda, and the local state at the district, county, township, and sometimes even village level (the last, at least technically, not being part of the administration), which is responsible for its execution. In the remaining parts of this introduction, I will present each individual contribution in more detail before concluding with a few thoughts on the overarching themes. The following summary primarily focuses on issues related to policy implementation, which certainly does not do justice to the empirical and theoretical richness furnished by the authors.

The first contribution, by Armin Müller, explores how the local state deals with two conflicting targets of the New Rural Cooperative Medical System (NRCMS): voluntary enrolment of the rural population and universal coverage. Local governments, facing substantial scepticism on the part of villagers during the implementation of this system, have adopted a set of different strategies to increase enrolment rates. For example, they have adapted the contents of the NRCMS to better suit the interests of villagers in hopes of increasing enrolment. These changes include dedicating a portion of the NRCMS funds to outpatient service reimbursement and introducing exclusive medical savings accounts for rural households, which helped overcome those households' reluctance to contribute to redistributive funds. Another strategy has been to develop innovative mechanisms for premium collection to try to avoid conflicts with villagers. Finally, many local governments have transferred portions of the local insurance funds into the premium accounts, in clear violation of the regulations, rather than collecting premiums themselves.

All of these strategies have helped to increase the adaptation of the NRCMS, but often decreased the effectiveness of the new insurance system.

In his article, Christian Schnack touches upon one of the classical mysteries of policy implementation studies: How can it be that in locations with a similar institutional setup and comparable resources the outcomes of the same policy may vary to a large degree? In the case he examines, two schools in neighbouring townships in Yunnan employ very different strategies in regard to minority-language education. Schnack's findings point to a link between different accountability mechanisms for the contents of minority-language education, the status of such education, and the enthusiasm of teachers for this subject. In the absence of specific regulations by higher levels of the administration, the local state and the school principals decide upon accountability mechanisms and, consequently, the specifics of language education locally – leading to the great variance observed in the field.

Lena Kuhn, Stephan Brosig, and Linxiu Zhang turn our attention to the implementation of the Rural Minimum Living Standard, a social welfare programme modelled after an urban policy of a similar nature. Specifically, they discuss the programme's targeting: its ability to reach poor households and to avoid both leakage (usage of funds by non-eligible persons) and exclusion (exclusion of eligible persons from welfare benefits). Their analysis highlights how the ambitious technical nature of the programme and the nature of the administrative system, including its incentive system and local fiscal woes, have led to considerable variance and occasional mistargeting in the programme's implementation stage. Kuhn, Brosig, and Zhang conclude with a set of three recommendations on how to improve poverty targeting: strengthen cadre supervision, abolish funding limitations, and switch to demographic eligibility criteria in regions with high poverty rates and low administrative capacity.

Elena Meyer-Clement provides one of the first studies on the new patterns of urbanisation emerging in the Chinese countryside. She shows how different degrees of relative political autonomy of local administrations at district, county, and township levels lead to very different responses to provincial and national demands for the construction of rural communities. In localities where local governments have little political autonomy, this process is dominated by

nearby urban centres, and an absence of local urbanisation initiatives is common; in localities with more autonomy, responses encompass a diverse set of new approaches to *in situ* urbanisation. Meyer-Clement shows that given the right economic conditions and adequate steering capabilities of local administrators, the latter variant may contribute to solutions with improved sustainability and may be a better fit for local conditions. However, since higher degrees of local autonomy are usually also connected to less funding of and control over the actual implementation process, outcomes that neglect the demands of the rural population and disregard the intention of national policies are also a possible scenario.

René Trappel explores the role of local governments in promoting the transformation of agriculture from smallholder farming to commercial operations of scale. He argues that three factors contribute to the enthusiasm of local cadres for these agrarian change policies. First, carrying out this political initiative is relatively cheap for local administrations and may even improve their financial situation through transfer payments, tax income, and donations by entrepreneurs. Second, these policies are a national priority, easily quantifiable and with few unknown elements. In other words, there are many opportunities for cadres to demonstrate successful implementation in the annual evaluations, which is necessary for them to get ahead in their careers. Finally, these policies provide local cadres with a cognitive model and role to play in rural development. Within this framework, it is they who become agents of change and push forward the much-needed modernisation of the countryside.

While the dynamic of each of the policy fields introduced here is unique in numerous ways, several themes are shared by all of them to a certain degree. Three of these themes are also of great importance to the wider debate on policy implementation and the problem-solving capabilities of authoritarian governments.

The first theme is the strong impetus on all levels of the administration to introduce tools to control the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) and thereby create a system “to govern from a distance” (described for China in Kipnis 2008). This involves increasingly sophisticated efforts to monitor and quantify all forms of output of these actors, whether it be the rate of enrolment in cooperative healthcare schemes, as Armin Müller discusses, or standardised tests for minority-language proficiency, as Christian Schnack men-

tions. In a related observation, Kuhn, Brosig, and Zhang suggest that extending cadre monitoring and evaluation to village cadres and expanding the participation of villagers and external experts in the process might improve village-level policy implementation.

The second common theme is the continued importance of local interpretations of policy initiatives coming from higher levels of the administration. This theme is almost a mirror image of the first, as these interpretations take place in the shadow of hierarchy (Scharpf 2000). All contributions to this issue discuss how local governments have some political room to manoeuvre – Christian Schnack refers to this as a space of discretion and Elena Meyer-Clement calls it relative political autonomy – within which they develop their own understanding of how to react to policy guidelines handed down to them. Given the enormous funding obligations attached to some of the policies introduced in this topical issue (e.g. healthcare, poverty alleviation, and urbanisation) and the vast differences in locally available resources, it is very likely that local governments are continuing to re-evaluate higher-level policies in light of local priorities, which has led to great variance in policy outcomes. The introduction of earmarked and project-based funding, discussed by René Trappel, could be seen as the centre acknowledging this reality and trying a new approach to promote its agenda.

A third theme is the depoliticisation of state–society interactions in rural China (on the concept of depoliticisation, see Li 2007: 8–11). All policies discussed in this topical issue touch upon core aspects of the relationship between state and society, yet there is very limited input on the design and content of those policies by those for whom they are created. Insofar as policies envision the involvement of the general public at one stage or another, as for example in the NRCMS or in the building of new rural communities (described by Armin Müller and Elena Meyer-Clement, respectively), this is usually limited to financial contributions. One could argue that the local state is increasingly treating the population as customers of its various offerings. Looking at policy implementation from this angle, it is less surprising that local governments sometimes institute changes in policy content to offer a more attractive product, while ignoring the potentially resulting decline in utility. Transparency in the implementation of rural development policies remains weak, resulting in only margin-

al control or even influence on the part of the rural population in affairs that may profoundly impact their lives.

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