

The Problem of Defining Success in China's Bureaucracy


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Abstract

Why are some governments adaptable but not others? Why has China's government, in particular, displayed remarkable flexibility and adaptive capacity? While many observers acknowledge that China's bureaucracy is adaptive, few have tried to explain the sources of its unusual adaptability. To adapt means to select strategies or to make changes that improves performance according to some measure of success. Central to adaptive capacity, hence, is the definition of success itself. Effective adaptation requires a clear definition of and attractive rewards for achieving success. The main instrument for defining success in China's bureaucracy is the system of cadre evaluation targets. I document the evolution of evaluation targets over time, highlighting the problem of mission creep and the challenges that such a change poses to China's governance.

Introduction

Public bureaucracies are typically known for being risk-averse, rigid, and unadaptable. China's bureaucracy, on the other hand, is widely described by China experts as "entrepreneurial,"¹ "developmental,"² "nimble,"³ and "adaptive."⁴ China's national government makes ample use of policy experiments,⁵ encourages and incorporates social feedback into policy-making,⁶ coopts private

¹ (Duckett, 1998)

² (Oi, 1999)

³ (Heilmann & Perry, 2011a)

⁴ (Dimitrov, 2013; Heilmann & Perry, 2011b; Oi & Goldstein, Forthcoming)

⁵ (Florini, Lai, & Tan, 2012; Gallagher, 2005; Heilmann, 2011)

⁶ (Dimitrov, 2013; Mertha, 2009; Nathan, 2003; Tsai, 2006)



entrepreneurs and new influential groups,⁷ studies and learns from the experiences of other countries,⁸ while local officials pursue creative—even if problematic—ways of fostering growth and generating revenue.⁹

Yet while this abundant literature *describes* various adaptive or entrepreneurial actions, few studies seek to *explain* why China displays exceptional adaptive capacity.¹⁰ One notable exception is Perry and Heilmann, who argue in their volume, *Mao's Invisible Hand*, that the CCP's history as a revolutionary party, including its experiences in guerilla warfare and in mobilizing the masses for support, is the source of China's adaptive capacity. But if their argument were correct, it begs the question of why other post-communist nations are not nimble and entrepreneurial like China. Moreover, if revolutionary legacies enabled adaptability, then we should expect to see revolutionary bases in China, such as Jinggangshan in Jiangxi (also known as “the cradle of Chinese revolution”), display the greatest capacity for change and reform. But in fact, we find the opposite. Jiangxi, despite being relatively closer to the coast than other inland provinces like Sichuan or Hubei, remains one of the poorest and most backward provinces. It has a particular reputation for political conservativeness that some attribute to its history as a revolutionary base.¹¹

Perry and Heilmann are right to point out that historical legacies matter for adaptation. But legacies do not cause adaptive capacity or its lack thereof. Rather, precisely understood, legacies and past experiences provide raw material for adaptation or re-purposing to fit new goals. Why some organizations or societies are better able to adapt than others, as witnessed in China's bureaucracy, remains to be explained.

While there has been a growing literature on adaptive governance in China, this literature currently lacks a theoretical framework for understanding what adaptation means, what its mechanisms (steps and processes) are, and the sources of adaptive capacity. My research aims precisely to fill this theoretical gap. I do so by drawing on an established interdisciplinary field that has yet been introduced to China studies and political science more broadly: complex adaptive systems (also known as “complexity” for short).

Simply stated, complexity refers to the study of dynamic, non-linear, and adaptive processes.¹² Needless to say, such processes are abundantly found in the natural world around us. Hence, complexity is already a well-established and common paradigm in mathematics, biology, chemistry, who study or work on systems in natural, non-social settings. Only recently has it begun to percolate into social sciences, particularly public policy and development. Most recently, we see a proliferation of popular writing that invoke language from complexity, which, however, tends to

⁷ (Dickson, 2008; Tsai, 2007)

⁸ (Shambaugh, 2008)

⁹ (Ang, 2016a, 2016b)

¹⁰ For recent edited volumes on adaptive governance and innovation in China, see (Dimitrov, 2013; Heilmann & Perry, 2011b; Teets & Hurst, 2015).

¹¹ (Goodman, 1989)

¹² For a review of my work on complexity and development by Harvard economist Lant Pritchett, see <https://buildingstatecapability.com/2017/05/10/how-did-china-create-directed-improvisation/>.



skip over the substance of ideas and instead uses words like “complex,” “innovate,” and “emergent” as decorative slogans.

My work employs ideas from complexity for *analytical* (i.e., how does adaptation occur) and *explanatory* (i.e., why does adaptation occur) rather than *prescriptive* purposes (i.e., we should adapt). Departing from a growing policy literature that prescribes “adaptive management” as a solution to problems, my work underscores that in the first place, enabling effective adaptation is challenging and difficult. Many organizations and societies are unwilling or fail to adapt, even when they are told they should.

Thus understood, broadly speaking, what are the sources of adaptive capacity? Specifically, why does China display “adaptive governance”? Why do its bureaucrats behave in flexible, entrepreneurial and even risk-taking ways at all levels of administration?

In my earlier work, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, I provide a theoretical framework, which I term “directed improvisation,” to address these questions. The basic idea is that in order for leaders in any organization to foster effective adaptation among on-the-ground agents, they must first tackle certain problems of adaptation.

One problem is balancing variety and uniformity. In order for individuals or groups to adapt, they must first generate alternatives (a variety of options) in response to a given problem. Effective adaptation requires that individuals or groups generate a right amount of alternatives, neither too much nor too little. In *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, I examine how China used a flexible system of policy signals to calibrate the amount of flexibility assigned to local governments and thereby “balance variety and uniformity.”

A second problem, which is the focus of this paper, is to clearly define and reward success. To adapt means to select strategies or to make changes that improves performance according to some measure of success. Central to adaptive capacity, hence, is the definition of success itself.¹³ If the criteria of success are unclear or confusing, then agents cannot respond quickly and effectively to problems. In democracies, governments are often weak at adapting because they are splintered by conflicting demands from multiple constituents, each with its own measure of effective governance.¹⁴ In authoritarian China, on the other hand, the ruling party-state defines success for itself because it is relatively insulated from society. Even in authoritarian China, however, defining success can become tricky when central authorities add more and more yardsticks of success on their subordinates.

In China’s bureaucracy, the key instrument for defining success is the system of “cadre evaluation targets.” This institution comprises a list of targets assigned by higher-level governments to lower-level governments, according to which local officials throughout the country are scored and ranked annually. Through the assignment of targets, central authorities signal the party’s policy goals and priorities, as well as specify the criteria for assessing bureaucratic and political success.

¹³ (Ang, 2016b; Axelrod & Cohen, 1999)

¹⁴ (for example, on India, see Kohli, 2004)



Many observers believe that by tying career prospects to cadre evaluation, this institution provides a fundamental set of incentives that motivate the policies and behavior of local leaders.

While there has been an abundant literature on cadre evaluation, existing accounts have provided only snapshots of the system at particular points in time.¹⁵ Conclusions drawn from these accounts are thus temporally limited. This paper will trace the evolution of cadre evaluation targets over time, starting from the 1980s to the present period. This longitudinal analysis will lend insights into how and why targets have evolved. It will also reveal the consequences of this evolution for governance.

My analysis finds that during the early decades of reform, bureaucratic success was sharply and narrowly defined in economic terms, thus motivating local officials to strongly—sometimes even too aggressively—to pursue rapid economic growth at all costs. Over time, however, as China prospered, evaluation targets have proliferated and become muddled. They are no longer straightforward like before. More importantly, my study reveals that evaluation targets are now overloaded and conflicting, a pattern that I term “mission creep, Chinese style.” This trend threatens to impair the ability of local officials to adapt effectively and to implement central goals in years to come.

Background

The first step in studying any bureaucracy is to specify the bureaucrats who make up the organization. Let me first highlight three basic facts about the Chinese bureaucracy.

First, the Chinese bureaucracy is a giant matrix structure, composed of five horizontal levels of government (center, province, city, county, and township), and each level replicates the entire suite of party and state offices established at the central level.

Second, unlike in a democracy, political party and public administration are fused. In principle, the bureaucracy is composed of two parallel hierarchies—party and state—but, in practice, many officials hold concurrent party and state positions and are transferred seamlessly between the two hierarchies. Within each level of government, the highest decision-making body is the party committee, led by the party secretary, who is also known in Chinese as the “first in command.” The chief of the state hierarchy is the “second in command.” Hence, most analyses of bureaucratic incentives focused only on the party secretaries and state chiefs, ignoring the remaining actors in the bureaucracy.¹⁶

Third, China’s bureaucracy comprises not only the party and state organs but also a sprawling extra-bureaucracy, which provides administrative support and delivers both public and

¹⁵ (Edin, 2003; Whiting, 2004).

¹⁶ For example, see (Huang, 1996; Landry, 2008).



charge-based commercial services. About 80 percent of China's public employment is in the extra-bureaucratic segment.¹⁷

With five levels of government, panoply of party and state organs, and a sprawling extra-bureaucratic extension, the Chinese bureaucracy is a massive organization. In total, this party-state apparatus is staffed by about 50 million public employees,¹⁸ as large as the entire population of South Korea.

The terms “official/bureaucrat/cadre” are blanket labels for drastically different actors.¹⁹ One way to distinguish among elite and non-elite cadres is by administrative rank. Walder defines China's “political elites” as “all cadres at the rank of county magistrate or division chief and above” or the directorate (*chu*) rank.²⁰ Nationwide, there are roughly 500,000 political elites, making up roughly one percent of the entire bureaucracy. These officials at elite ranks are appointed by the next higher level,²¹ forming a national pool of appointees for lateral transfer and upward promotion.²² The remaining 99 percent of the bureaucracy are civil servants and public employees stationed permanently in one location.

In the remaining of my analysis, I will focus only on the top 1 percent of China's bureaucracy, that is, the leaders (party secretaries and heads of state) of each locale at every level. These leaders are assigned targets and held accountable for the governance and performance of their jurisdiction. It should be noted that individual agencies at each level of government are also assigned separate, finer-grain targets, which we will set aside for now.

The Cadre Evaluation System

In China, the method of evaluating local leaders is starkly mechanical. Through the “cadre evaluation system,”²³ each level of government designs a report card for leaders (party secretaries and state chiefs) at the next lower level. Each year, the higher level issues an internal formal document, typically restricted from public view,²⁴ which specifies a list of targets that subordinated leaders are expected to deliver in that particular year. Points are assigned to each target, usually totaling 100 points. To step up competitive pressures, local leaders are ranked relative to their peers annu-

¹⁷ (Ang, 2012) p. 692. In Chinese, extra-bureaucracy is termed 事业单位.

¹⁸ Ang, 2012, p. 691

¹⁹ In a separate article, I discussed the meaning of “cadre” and its evolution from the revolutionary period to the present day. I also clarify the distinction between “civil servants” (a modern administrative term that came officially into use after 2006) and other public employees who are not civil servants (Ang, 2012).

²⁰ (Walder, 2004), p. 195. In Chinese, these political elites are sometimes referred to as 领导干部.

²¹ Specifically, they are appointed by the Organization Department (a party organ) at the next higher level of administration (B2010-211, B2010-212).

²² (Manion, 1985)

²³ This is also known as the “cadre responsibility” (干部责任) and “target responsibility” (目标责任) systems.

²⁴ This is probably a main reason why actual documents on cadre evaluation are rarely shown and examined in the literature.



ally. The design of evaluation targets originates at the central level in Beijing and then percolates layer by layer down to the grassroots.

Surprisingly, despite abundant references to the importance of the cadre evaluation system,²⁵ only a handful of studies have shown what such evaluation criteria actually look like.²⁶ Filling in this gap, I will reproduce several evaluation documents that I collected in recent years, which will reveal the actual content of cadre evaluation, as well as the evolution of leadership evaluation criteria from the 1980s to the present day.

Cadre evaluation in the Maoist era

The cadre evaluation system was first implemented in 1949. At the time, the official central document, 《关于干部鉴定工作的规定》, released in November of that year states that cadre evaluation shall be an annual assessment of various facets of cadre performance. After facing difficulties in enacting the annual evaluation system nationwide, in 1956, the central party announced a change in the cadre evaluation system in the document titled 《关于干部年终鉴定问题的通知》. The document abolished the annual evaluation system and replaced it with an ad hoc evaluation that took place whenever officials were moved from their posts or promoted. Officials who stayed in their position will be evaluated every three to five years. This measure for evaluation was in use until 1966, interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (中国教育年鉴 1981).

Cadre Evaluation in the 1980s-1990s

In 1979, the cadre evaluation system was reinstated once again; the details were announced in the document 《关于实行干部考核制度的意见》, published by the central government in November. This 1979 system sets the foundation upon which the current cadre evaluation system was built. The system reverted back to the annual evaluation schedule and listed four main components for evaluation: 德(virtue), 能(ability), 勤(diligence), 绩(performance). Virtue was measured by officials' political stances, the quality of their thinking, and whether they are aligned with CCP's ideals. Ability was measured by the official's performance, skills, management, and competence. Diligence was measured by officials' perceived attitude in seeking growth and knowledge, as well as hard work. The last measurement of performance focused on economic performances and work towards modernization. To conduct these measurements, various methods were used, including interviews, citizen feedback, statistical analysis and miscellaneous reports. (中国教育年鉴 1981).

Breaking radically from Mao's fixation on class background and ideological radicalism, the reformist patriarch Deng advanced an economic- and results- oriented criterion of cadre evalua-

²⁵ See references to the importance of cadre evaluation for national economic development (Xu, 2011), local policy implementation (O'Brien & Li, 1999), and dynamics of protest (Cai, 2004).

²⁶ Some have described items on cadre evaluation guidelines (Edin, 2003; Heberer & Trappel, 2013; Tsui & Wang, 2004), but, to my knowledge, only Whiting (2001) has reproduced and discussed the entire list of targets.



tion. At the launch of market reforms, Deng announced that officials would henceforth be evaluated on the criteria of “advanced management, technical innovations, productivity, profits, and income.”²⁷ His own selection of new talents to the core of the central leadership, including entrepreneurial and reform-minded leaders like Zhao Ziyang and Wan Li, proved his commitment to the revised standards, setting a new and compelling exemplar of cadre evaluation for the communist hierarchy.

Going forward, the performance evaluation of local leaders was based on three targets: hard, soft, and veto. As Edin reports, “Hard targets tend to be economic in nature... [and] completion of hard targets is important both for bonus and for political rewards.”²⁸ Similarly, Whiting finds that economic targets constituted the bulk of scores in the evaluation of local leaders. Based on a township-level document she collected in 1989, Whiting reports that economic tasks, including the management of TVEs and agricultural sales, constituted 63 out of 100 points in total (see Table 1).²⁹ In addition, township leaders were sometimes required to sign “performance contracts,” i.e., written pledges to deliver concrete quantifiable results in industrial growth and tax collection. Soft targets were lower-priority and mostly non-economic tasks, such as implementing village elections and political education campaigns. Veto targets were goals that must be satisfied; in principle, failure to meet these targets could negate all other targets. A classic veto target was maintaining social stability. If a mass protest erupts, this could cancel out a local leader’s achievements in that particular year and even provoke dismissal.³⁰

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, evaluation directives specified results that local leaders were expected to deliver in concrete terms. This is evident from the township document, issued in 1989 and shown in Table 1. Economic targets were expressed as quantifiable ends (e.g., gross value of industrial output, total value of exports). Even among non-economic tasks, performance was assessed in terms of numerical output. For instance, success in delivering education services was measured as “scale of funds dedicated to education” and “completion rate for compulsory education.” Equally important, the allocation of points for each target unambiguously signaled the priority of tasks.

In short, during this period, it was clear to local leaders what they had to prioritize and to accomplish. It was equally clear which outcomes they need not deliver. Conspicuously absent from leadership evaluation were targets for environmental protection, energy conservation, cultural preservation, and other soft goals that were non-essential for—and even antithetical to—achieving rapid economic growth.

Another advantage of defining success in terms of economic results was that they were easier to quantify than social outcomes. Local officials could of course falsify GDP statistics (after all, GDP is a concept), which continues till the present day. This is an open secret, and local cadres are sometimes not shy to joke about it. Partly to mitigate falsification, economic performance is

²⁷ (Vogel, 2011), p. 244

²⁸ Edin, 2005, p. 39

²⁹ Whiting, 2001, p. 106

³⁰ Edin, 2003; O’Brien & Li, 1999, p. 172



measured not only as GDP, but also as tax revenue, actualized investments, and other monetary outcomes. Unlike GDP, tax revenue is actual funds deposited in banks. It was still possible to game the system, such as by “borrowing taxes” from local enterprises or other locales to decorate one’s record,³¹ but borrowed taxes would still have to be returned, and lending was not guaranteed. Moreover, excessive falsification of economic results came at a price. Each year’s targets and spending responsibilities were based on the preceding year’s reported statistics. So if local leaders exaggerated too much, they would confront higher targets the next year. In fact, I have encountered instances where high-performing locales deliberately under-reported economic statistics in order to keep their targets from ratcheting up too much.³²

The specification of bureaucratic success in unambiguous and measurable economic terms was reinforced by career, financial, and reputational rewards. High evaluation scores improved the prospects of promotion, as evidenced by several statistical studies that report a tight correlation between economic performance and promotion.³³ In addition, local governments were entitled to dispense bonuses using retained tax revenue. Leaders of top-performing locales were also crowned with honorary titles.³⁴ In each locality, the ranking of subordinated units based on their evaluation scores were publicly announced.

When bureaucratic success was unambiguously defined and reinforced by powerful rewards, the behavioral and economic effects were tsunamic. Local leaders dove headlong into promoting industrialization and growth, primarily by setting up township and village enterprises (TVEs). Paired with central policy guidelines that firmly endorsed the creation of TVEs, these enterprises flourished. However, as the success of TVEs was evaluated primarily in terms of gross output, rather than innovation or productivity, TVEs were incentivized more to produce than to perform. Over the long term, the profitability of TVEs declined.³⁵ Some even incurred heavy debts. This and many other unintended problems pushed the leadership toward the watershed decision in 1993 to shift gears from partial to comprehensive market reforms.

Cadre Evaluation from the 2000s Onward

The era after the 1990s presented a new policy environment that demands an update of earlier conclusions regarding the operation of leadership evaluation and incentives. In particular, I highlight two key changes. First, I argue that for local leaders (though not for street-level cadres), the appeal of performance-based bonuses to local leaders, as earlier described by Whiting, Oi, and

³¹ B2011-254; B2011-257

³² This strategy is known in Chinese as “skipping over water” (跳水). A sub-district leader elaborated with an example: “Let’s say we have collected 9 million Yuan in taxes. We will report only 5 million Yuan this fiscal year and leave the remainder for next year’s report... If our results this year are lower, the higher levels will lower their targets correspondingly. With lower targets next year and a surplus that is already in place, our pressure for meeting next year’s target will be lower” (B2011-229).

³³ (Chen, Li, & Zhou, 2005; Li & Zhou, 2005; Maskin, Qian, & Xu, 2000)

³⁴ Edin, 2003, p. 45

³⁵ (Kung & Lin, 2007)



Edin,³⁶ has been vastly overshadowed by the potential gains from high-stakes graft.³⁷ During the early decades of reforms, bonuses that amounted to thousands or tens of thousands of dollars were attractive rewards, especially in rural townships and villages,³⁸ where income was low. But since then, the situation has altered dramatically. After 1993, further market liberalization accelerated economic growth and also stimulated the exchange of money for preferential access to emerging markets, generating new avenues of grand corruption.³⁹ These avenues were further inflamed by a housing boom and the rise of land-based public finance. In this context of accelerated capitalism, powerful leaders could exchange lucrative deals and prime land for colossal kickbacks. One officer related an instance wherein an enterprise had bought a piece of land for industrial use at 35,000 Yuan per *mu* but was later able to convert the land to commercial use, tripling its value nearly thirty fold. “You can easily imagine the amount of grease involved in this transaction,” he said rhetorically.⁴⁰

Hence, going forward in the twenty-first century, commanding power over thriving economies is probably the primary incentive for political elites. This incentive overlaps with promotion, but being promoted to a higher rank in a “dry” office may not necessarily endow more power or rents. This calls into question the widely held assumption in statistical studies that all local leaders desire to be promoted upward. Nonetheless, this condition only applies to high-ranking officials who are positioned to dispense valuable favors. For the vast majority of the bureaucracy, which does not wield immense power individually, compensation is still the main source of rewards, as I will later discuss.

Second, the growing list of demands on local leadership has spawned a new problem that Americans may term “mission creep.” In particular, during the past decade, environmental protection has been elevated in cadre evaluation. Previously, degradation of the environment and depletion of natural resources and energy were absent from the national agenda. However, by the 2000s, it became clear to the leadership that environmental damage not only threatens long-term economic growth but also provokes social unrest, as seen in the spread of mass environmental protests.⁴¹ Hence, following the 11th five-year plan, carbon reduction and energy conservation targets were added to cadre evaluation, including in some regions, as veto targets.⁴² In addition, adapting from the earlier practice of issuing performance contracts for economic growth, I found

³⁶ Edin, 2003; Oi, 1999; Whiting, 2001

³⁷ Even setting aside illegal bribes, my data of county governments in Shandong province (1998-2005) find that bonuses constituted less than 1.4 percent of total compensation, including formal salary, allowances, bonuses, and other benefits. See Ang, 2012a.

³⁸ Whiting’s study in 1989 reported that leaders of a top-ranked township received 17,500 Yuan in bonuses, compared to only 6,000 Yuan in the weakest performer (2004, p. 110).

³⁹ Grand bribery rose in frequency and in scale in the recent decade (Ko & Weng, 2012; Manion, 2004; Wedeman, 2012).

⁴⁰ B2013-341

⁴¹ (Deng & Yang, 2013; Mertha, 2008)

⁴² (Zhang, 2010)



that some locales now also require local leaders to sign similar contracts for environmental targets.⁴³

Another area of growing emphasis is social stability. Since the 2000s, new sources of political tensions arose, including widening class inequality and searing conflicts between farmers and local officials over land disputes. More generally, with a rising middle class that commands greater exposure to information and freedom of expression on the Internet, Chinese citizens are better armed than before in contesting the state. These rising tensions set the stage for the Hu-Wen administration's emphasis on "building a harmonious society." This stability-centered governance fed and was fed by the escalation of policing forces under the charge of Zhou Yongkang, the power-grabbing security czar who has since been arrested for corruption by Xi Jinping. In an increasingly paranoid political environment, higher-level authorities responded by demanding their subordinates to deal with *all* the tensions. As a result, more and more items were added to the criteria of cadre evaluation—a fact and problem that surprisingly few have documented in the literature.⁴⁴

To illuminate the sprawl of cadre evaluation targets over time, I compare the national guidelines on the evaluation of local party and state leaders in 1991, as reported by Whiting, and in 2009, following a circular issued by the Central Organization Department (see Table 1 and Table 2 respectively). In 1991, eighteen items were listed for evaluation. By 2009, there were 26 items. In 1991, 14 of the 18 items listed were economic tasks, and the measurements were fairly straightforward (e.g., gross national product, gross value of industrial output, taxes and profits remitted). By 2009, we find 26 items grouped into six broad categories. Even in the category of "economic development," economic performance was no longer measured in unambiguous quantifiable terms. Rather, it included conceptually vague items like "overall economic efficiency" and "development costs," which are difficult to assess objectively.⁴⁵

Whereas in the past, local leaders were instructed to focus primarily if not only on the economy, by 2009, they were told that nearly every target is a priority. Leaders were expected to advance "social development" (encompassing the dimensions of education, employment, health care, culture, and community safety), promote "sustainable development," support "livelihoods," maintain "social harmony," and enforce "party and cadre discipline." Worse still, several of these dimensions are in tension with one another. For example, promoting economic growth—still the Number 1 item on the evaluation circular—is in conflict with the goals of conserving energy and

⁴³ I collected a document from a city of Zhejiang Province, entitled "Energy Conservation Target Responsibility Contract in 2008" (节能目标责任书), which was signed by the Mayor. In the contract, four pledges were made. (1) Energy consumption as a ratio of GDP would be reduced by 4.4% compared to the previous year; (2) Strengthen the implementation of energy conservation targets by the city agencies, (2) Strengthen and inspect energy conservation among local enterprises; (4) Energy conservation would be seriously taken into account in cadre evaluation and be considered a veto target.

⁴⁴ For notable exceptions, see (Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2013).

⁴⁵ In Chinese, the term for "overall economic efficiency" is 经济发展综合效益 and "development costs" is 发展代价.



Table 1. National Guidelines on Evaluation of Local Leaders, 1991

CATEGORY
Gross national product
Gross value of industrial output (not including any output below the village level)
Gross value of agricultural output (not including any output below the village level)
Gross value of output of township- and village-run enterprises
National income per capita
Rural income per capita
Taxes and profits remitted
Fiscal income
Labor productivity of state and collective enterprises
Procurement of agricultural and subsidiary products
Retail sales
Infrastructure investment realized
Natural population growth rate
Grain output
Local budgetary income
Local budgetary expenditure
Forested area
Nine-year compulsory education completion rate
Note: Each category was to be assessed by the relevant government organ and data on both level and rate of increase were to be provided.

* Note: Reproduced from Whiting, *Power and Wealth in Rural China*, pp. 103. The original source was Central Organization Department, "Notice Regarding Implementation of the Annual Job Evaluation System for Leading Cadres of Local Party and Government Organs," in *China Personnel Management Yearbook* (1991).



Table 2. National Guidelines on Evaluation of Local Leaders, 2009

CATEGORY	
I. Economic Development	Level of economic development
	Overall economic efficiency
	Income of urban and rural residents
	Economic disparity
	Development costs
II. Social Development	Compulsory education
	Urban employment
	Medical system and hygiene
	Cultural life of urban and rural residents
	Crime control and community safety
III. Sustainable Development	Energy conservation, emissions control, and environmental protection
	Ecological protection and conservation of arable land
	Family planning and birth control
	Technological input and innovation
IV. Livelihood	Income and living standards of residents
	Social security net expansion (<i>dibao</i>)
	Access to health care, education, and transportation
	Cultural infrastructure and activities
V. Social Harmony	Public security
	Grievance procedure and conflict resolution (e.g., petitions)
	Civic and moral education
	Civil rights protection and grassroots democracy
VI. Party and Cadre Discipline	Legal compliance and transparency
	Quality of administrative services
	Party organization at the grassroots
	Anti-corruption and clean governance

* Source: Translated from Central Organization Department, Document No. 13, “Criteria of Comprehensive Evaluation of Local Party and State Leadership,” 2009



Table 3. Performance Evaluation Criteria for Township Leaders, Shanghai, 1989

CATEGORY	POINTS
Township- and village-run industry	33
Increase in gross value of industrial output	10
Increase in industrial profits	10
Increase in profit rate on gross value of output	5
Township ranking by profit rate on total capital	4
Increase in total value of exports	4
Agriculture	30
Sales to the state of grain and vegetables	15
Sales to the urban market of pigs	10
Sales to the state of oil-bearing crops	3
Sales to the state of leather and cotton	2
Party building	21
Building of party organizations	7
Building of party spirit and discipline	7
Education of party members	7
Education	9
Completion rate for compulsory education	3
Participation rate for worker training	3
Scale of funds dedicated to education	3
Family planning	7
Family planning compliance rate	7
Public order	
Total	100

* Source: Reproduced from Whiting, *Power and Wealth in Rural China*, pp. 106. The original source was Jiading Party Document, Issued in 1989, Jiading County Yearbook 1988-1990.



protecting the environment, at least in the short term. Within the category of “social harmony,” the tasks of according “civil rights protection” and facilitating “grassroots democracy” could undermine “public security” by emboldening civic protests.⁴⁶

When national guidelines percolate down to the grassroots level—that is, townships—the list of evaluation criteria grows even longer and incredibly fine-grained. Again, I compare a document on the evaluation of township leaders in 1989, from Whiting, and a recent document issued in 2009 that I collected, shown in Table 3 and 4 respectively. Although the documents are issued by two different townships (the former in Shanghai and the latter in Zhejiang), both townships are located in prosperous parts of coastal China and hence comparable. In order to illuminate the extent of cadre evaluation sprawl, I reproduce the entire list of targets.

Several differences between the targets in 1989 and 2009 stand out. In 1989, townships were evaluated based on one page of targets, in six categories, totaling 100 points. By 2009, the targets ran several pages long, in five main categories, which were further sub-divided into 66 categories, totaling 400 points. Some items were even graded in decimal points. For example, auditing village accounts is worth 0.5 points; upholding “civil service morality and ethics” is 5.6 points; and addressing “the root causes of corruption” (a task that even central leaders can scarcely claim to handle) is assigned another 8.1 points. What began as the evaluation of local leaders as CEOs, based on economic performance and in clear measurable targets, has by 2009 evolved into the evaluation of super-leaders, who are expected to deliver nearly everything.

Table 4. Performance Evaluation for Township Leaders, Zhejiang, 2009

** Please refer to the table 4 at the end of this report.*

Implications of Mission Creep

What are the implications of these changes in leadership evaluation? First, as targets snowball over time, the ability of local leaders to effectively prioritize among multiple targets is compromised. In an earlier literature, O’Brien and Li argued that local officials could resolve contradictions among various targets by prioritizing hard targets and exerting less effort to implement soft targets, a strategy that they term “selective policy implementation.”⁴⁷ Indeed, when there were only six main targets, as was the case in 1989, developing an internal ranking of priorities from most to least important was manageable. However, when the list grows to five main categories and 66 sub-categories, the “fine-tuning” and juggling ability of local leaders, or any agent for that matter, starts to flag.⁴⁸

Second, with a creeping list of evaluation criteria, we can no longer assume that linking promotion to particular targets would incentivize local leaders to pursue these goals. Some believe

⁴⁶ (Birney, 2014)

⁴⁷ O’Brien & Li, 1999. See also Birney, 2013.

⁴⁸ O’Brien & Li, 1999, p. 182.



that the solution to China's environmental problems is to include environmental targets in cadre evaluation and to promote leaders for measurable improvements in the environment. One corporate report concludes that "China's pollution problem can be solved only if measurable environmental targets are prioritized."⁴⁹ Another study focusing on air quality asserts that "explicitly rewarding cadres with promotions for improving environmental conditions in their cities and explicitly punishing cadres who oversee environmental catastrophes might lead to visible ameliorations of China's environmental problems."⁵⁰ This recommendation ignores the fact that air quality is not within the direct control of government officials; pollution may flow in from surrounding regions even if a locale restricts air pollution within its jurisdiction. Assessing environmental outcomes is much trickier than measuring tax revenue and investments.⁵¹ Moreover, we must keep the *full* picture of cadre evaluation in mind, which is clear only if we view the actual sprawling contents of evaluation guidelines. Linking promotion to environmental outcomes might work if there are only a few items by which leaders are assessed but not when so much else has also been included.

Third and most important of all, the sprawl of cadre evaluation criteria implies that local leaders will continue to rank economic and fiscal growth as the highest priority, despite a growing number of additional mandates. This not only because growth promotion is still listed as the first item on the guidelines and constitutes the largest share of total scores, but also because economic outputs, compared to other soft targets like environmental protection are more measurable and visible. More importantly, regardless of the points they contribute to evaluation and promotion, thriving economies bring numerous personal benefits to local leaders, including opportunities to exert power, command prestige, distribute patronage, and collect personal rents. Hence, even though local leaders are compelled to cater to more and more demands, they will behave first and foremost as CEOs and only secondarily as populists.

The problems described above have received some policy attention within the Chinese bureaucracy. A collection of essays in *中国思想政治工作年鉴 2004* noted that the targets assigned by higher level governments demanded "revolutionary changes" that were not realistic. Such targets placed lower-level officials under immense pressure to produce rapid growth, which many parts of China could not achieve. Compelling by growth targets, local officials were forced to falsify data or pursue showy but useless construction projects that fail to achieve sustainable economic growth. The essays also noted that current targets are too convoluted and detailed to be accomplished within a year. Additionally, the document notes additional single item rejection tickets are now part of cadre evaluation. Other authors have noted the failure into clearly quantifying certain evaluation targets, making realistic evaluations difficult to achieve. These various problems, however, has not been picked up by China observers. There is an urgent need to update our understanding of China's cadre evaluation system.

⁴⁹ (Green, 2013)

⁵⁰ (Wu, Deng, Huang, Morck, & Yeung, 2014), p. 21

⁵¹ On the difficulties of verifying environmental outcomes, see Zhang, 2010.



In short, by studying the evolution of cadre evaluation targets, we gain concrete insights into the ability of China's central authorities to effectively signal policy priorities and guide local bureaucratic behavior. Many previous studies have argued that the target system is effective in that it allows local officials to multi-task and "fine-tune" priorities according to the relative importance of tasks assigned.⁵² These conclusions, however, apply to only the early period of China's reform, when targets were narrow and unambiguously defined. More recently, some claim that adding environmental targets will induce local officials to care more about the environment.⁵³ But again, if we look concretely at the targets assigned, it will be clear that adding more targets to an already exhaustive list of mandates is unlikely to modify bureaucratic incentives.

These institutional changes in turn have deep economic consequences because China's economy remains heavily dependent on local state actions.⁵⁴ Whether and how central authorities may continue to guide local bureaucratic behavior through targets is one of the toughest political challenges in years to come. ■

⁵² (Birney, 2014; Edin, 2003; O'Brien & Li, 1999)

⁵³ (Green, 2013 ; Wu et al., 2014)

⁵⁴ (Naughton & Tsai, 2015; Oi, 1995)



Table 4. Performance Evaluation Criteria for Township Leaders, Zhejiang, 2009

CATEGORY I: ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE				
CRITERIA			MAX POINTS	
1	Speed of development	Gross industrial output value of enterprises above designated size		4
		Gross agricultural output value		6
		Fiscal Revenue	National tax	5
			Land tax	5
2	Quality of development	Development of efficient agriculture		10
		Building of agricultural produce hubs	Hubs beyond city	2
			Hub for branded produce	8
		Per capita income of the rural population		2
		Income growth of low-earning farming households		3
		Shifting agricultural workforce to other sectors		4
		Development of rural tourism		4
		Brand name building		bonus
		Development of the animal husbandry industry		bonus
		Pest control and management		bonus
		Abandonment of farmland		penalty
3	Development potential	Investment Attraction	Foreign/Outside Investment	bonus
			Local Investment	5
		Industrial Investment		5
		Cultivation of market economy		bonus
		Request for funding from higher levels of administration		bonus
4	Development of environment	New infrastructure in villages		10
		Safe drinking water		3
		Ecological conservation		bonus



5	Development of special characteristics	Special services projects	4
		Outstanding work/projects	20
		Work innovation	bonus
CATEGORY II: BUILDING A HARMONIOUS MIDDLE-CLASS SOCIETY (XIAOKANG SHEHUI)			
CRITERIA			POINTS
1	Land management	Farmland preservation	1
		Supply of land converted from agricultural use	2
		Requisition and revitalization of land reserve	3
2	Agricultural development & construction of new countryside	Training of the agricultural workforce	0.5
		Area of early-season rice paddies	0.5
		Area of food crops grown	0.5
		Management and control of agricultural pollution	0.5
		Training on use of service website for farmers	0.5
		Provision of relocation assistance to residents in mountainous areas	bonus
		Public sanitation	bonus
		Audit village accounts	0.5
		Agricultural insurance	0.5
		Home insurance for farmers	0.5
Cultivation of non-commercial forests; prevention and eradication of major forest pests	0.5		
3	Education-related indicators		3
4	Culture- and sports-related indicators		2
5	Hygiene-related indicators		2
6	Social welfare-related indicators		2.5
7	Environment-related indicators		1
8	Talent management and labor-related indicators		1.5
9	Disaster and flood prevention		1
10	Creation of democracy and the rule of law in villages		1



11	Maintenance of social stability and public order	3	
12	Town planning and management	2	
13	Birth control	4	
14	Handling of petitions (letters and visits)	3	
15	Production safety	2	
16	Food and drug safety	1	
CATEGORY III: PARTY BUILDING AND POLITICAL WORK			
CRITERIA		POINTS	
1	Ideological, political and spiritual education	Ethics	3
		Promotion work	3
		Dissemination of directives from higher-level units to the public	3
		Culture	3
		Spirituality and civility	3
		Promotion of anti-pornography messages and related survey work	1
		Special projects	2
2	Research	Research	3
3	Technician appointment scheme	Assignment of technicians to villages	2
4	Organization building	Learning and implementation of the scientific development concept	3
		Intra-party democracy	3
		Cadre team-building	3
		Cadre education and reserve cadre team-building	1.5
		Talent management	5.5
		Grassroots organization building	13
		Distance education	4
		Survey research and information dissemination	2
5	Old cadres	Work related to old cadres	2



		Works related to the sports association for the elderly	0.5
6	Party-building within core organs	Party-building within core party-state organs	1
7	Building a clean party	Civil service morality and ethics	5.6
		Anti-corruption leadership responsibility scheme	4
		Punishment and prevention system	3
		Establishment of a disciplinary board	2.3
		Address root causes of corruption	8.1
		Address petitioners' complaints	9
		Penalty	0
8	Creating a united front	Non-Communist Party (Democratic Party) members	0.5
		Ethnic and religious groups	3
		New social class (entrepreneurial class)	2
		United front work in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and overseas	2
		Publicize research findings	0.7
		Integrated tasks	1.8
		Special projects	2
9	Party leadership on work related to the NPC and PCC	Party leadership on work related to the National People's Congress (NPC)	3
		Party leadership on work related to the People's Political Consultative Conference (PCC)	3
10	Work related to armed forces	Party control over the military	1.4
		Recruitment	2
		Organization and training of militia units	2.6
		Political construction	0.8
		National defense education	0.8
		Military family support services	1.4
11	Work related to mass organizations and groups	Trade union	2
		Communist Youth League	2
		Women's federation	2



		Association for science and technology	2
		Old-age	1.5
		Disabled persons' federation	1.5
		Working committee for care of the next generation	1.5
		Charity work	1
12	Responsibility system for party-building	Implementation of the party-building responsibility system	2
		Creation of a rating system for party and government organizations	2
13	Pioneering party-building initiatives (12 points in total)	Publications and promotion	
		Commendation for advanced members/campaigns	
		Major ceremonies	
		Exchange of experience	
		Criticisms and recognition	
CATEGORY IV: PROMOTING SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TOWN			
CRITERIA			POINTS
1	Technological collaboration		1
2	New products		0.5
3	Major technological innovation projects (including agricultural technologies)		1.5
4	Ratio of research and development (R&D) spending to sales revenue of enterprises above designated size		0.5
5	Number of patent applications		0.5
CATEGORY V: BONUS AND PENALTY ITEMS			
1	Support for infrastructure projects		
2	Promotion of efficient agriculture and culture in villages		
3	Inter-village competition		
4	Building standardized factories		
5	Technology and innovation hubs for small- and medium-sized enterprises		
6	Service sector development		
7	Commercial flow		



8	Promotion of headquarters economy (attracting corporations to set up headquarters in locale)	
9	Tourism promotion	
10	Handling of land-related petitions	
11	Separation of secondary and tertiary activities	
12	Matching technologies between military and civilian sectors	
13	Creation of a harmonious community	
14	Raising living standards of rural households	
15	Information management	
16	Management of records and statistics	
17	Law-abiding administration	
	Transparency of government administration	
	E-government	
	Website/online portal for farmers	
18	Fire safety	Rate of damage of forest fires
		Management of mixed-use (residential, production, storage) properties
19	Prevention and control of pests and diseases	
20	Funeral and interment management	
21	Proposals and suggestions	
22	Emergency management	
23	Management of floating population (migrants)	
24	Monitoring pollution from small-scale industries	
25	Notable entrepreneurial efforts	
26	Giving recognition	
27	Circulation of critiques from supervisory bodies	

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