



# Overstretched Leviathan: Bureaucratic Overload and Grassroots Governance in China

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Date: April 21, 2023

# **Overstretched Leviathan: Bureaucratic Overload and Grassroots Governance in China**

A dissertation presented  
by  
*Hanyu Zhao*  
to  
*The Department of Government*

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the subject of  
Government

Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2023

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**Overstretched Leviathan:  
Bureaucratic Overload and Grassroots Governance in China**

**ABSTRACT**

Grassroots governance provides micro-foundations for regime capacity and durability. Although the Chinese state is often characterized as strong and resilient, the bureaucratic roots of the state have been increasingly stretched thin and are under enormous pressure. Grassroots cadres are burdened with exhausting and increasing governance demands set by higher levels, an intrusive and intensified supervision and accountability system, and burgeoning red tape. This study addresses the question of bureaucratic overload in grassroots governance by investigating its causes, manifestations, impact on organizational behavior and governance outcomes, and implications for regime capacity and durability.

Drawing on extensive field research across China conducted in 2021-2022, the study proposes a supply-and-demand framework that focuses on the structural imbalances between the governing capacities of the grassroots bureaucracy and the governing ambitions of the authoritarian state. The supply-side story investigates the grassroots bureaucracy's limited and declining capacity and governing resources along three dimensions – political, personnel, and fiscal. The demand-side analysis explores the growing ambitions of the authoritarian regime leadership that aims to achieve extensive control over both the populace and its own state agents. The increasing tension between limited capacity on the ground and the expanding scope of state control alienates local officials and undermines overall governance. By making sense of the

conundrum faced by street-level bureaucrats, the study analyzes party-state operations at the grassroots with attention to the broad patterns, structural changes, and inner logic of the Chinese political system.

Bureaucratic overload provides opportunities for observers to see through the façade of a strong state and scrutinize the roots of authoritarian rule. It shows that what matters is not just the absolute level of state capacity, but the gap between state capacity and the state's ambitions. If state capacity fails to match the scope and depth of state intervention, the Leviathan can be overstretched, undermining the quality of governance it seeks to achieve. I demonstrate these patterns by examining how the state penetrates society in two key policy areas — rural governance and pandemic control — and how the state controls its agents. Given the high-profile victories declared by Chinese national leaders in rural poverty elimination and COVID-19 management, I show how street-level bureaucrats tell a different story of these successes. Shifting from the party-state's control of the masses to its internal control of state agents, the dissertation investigates various kinds of red tape within the Chinese bureaucracy. Finally, I discuss why the official remedies for alleviating the burden remain ineffective for most grassroots cadres.

This research contributes to our understanding of state building and state capacity at the local level by highlighting the tension between state (in)capacity and state governing ambitions, scope, and approach, especially the hidden costs of state penetration and overstretching. It also sheds light on the nature and trajectory of the Chinese bureaucracy in comparison with the Weberian ideal type. Finally, it adds to the scholarship on authoritarian politics by paying special attention to the understudied grassroots, non-elite regime enablers in China and the interplay between the authoritarian political environment and bureaucratic governance.

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## *Acknowledgements*

Through my master's thesis, I developed a growing interest in the behavior of bureaucracy and the functioning of the Chinese party-state system at the grassroots level, particularly in relation to Xi Jinping's anti-poverty campaign in rural China. I believe that delving into the roots of authoritarian rule can unravel the intricacies and complexities of grassroots governance while shedding light on the broader landscape and underlying currents of Chinese politics. This doctoral dissertation represents years of challenging exploration and hard work, but I did not walk this path alone. I owe a great deal of gratitude to many individuals who supported me from beginning to end.

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## ***Chapter 1***

### ***What is Grassroots Overload and Why It Matters***

#### **Introduction**

China is widely viewed as a representative case of a strong, centralized state with a capable and extensive bureaucracy. However, when “the state meets the street,” the story gets more complicated. For street-level bureaucrats, excessive workloads have become the new normal. Local state agents are overburdened with exhausting tasks and demanding requirements. The central state places enormous pressure on officials at the bottom of the hierarchy that lack the necessary resources and capability to implement policies. Grassroots bureaucrats also find their time and energy sapped by staggering amounts of red tape, including endless paperwork and meetings. Intensifying monitoring and control over local agents, aimed at preventing political deviation and misconduct, has further exacerbated this pressure. The prevalent frustration, alienation, and career burnout among grassroots cadres not only affects their health and job performance, but risks undermining governance outcomes.

My dissertation research addresses the question of bureaucratic overload in grassroots governance by investigating its causes, manifestations, impact on organizational behavior and governance outcomes, and implications for regime capacity and durability. By making sense of the conundrum faced by street-level bureaucrats, this study analyzes party-state operations at the

grassroots with attention to the macro patterns, structural changes, and inner logic of the Chinese political system.

Despite extensive scholarship on the concept of the bureaucracy as a whole, less research has been dedicated to the idea of bureaucratic overload. Max Weber and his followers recognized bureaucracy as an effective organizational form of the modern state: they were concerned about the negative implications of the “iron cage,” such as conformity, rigidity, and dehumanization, on human freedom, but in doing so they often assumed the bureaucracy was ultimately efficient.<sup>1</sup> Michael Lipsky, in his seminal work on street-level bureaucracy, did identify resource constraints as one of the working conditions faced by grassroots bureaucrats on the ground, but he was more interested in the discretionary power bureaucrats possess and the implications for state-citizen interaction,<sup>2</sup> which has inspired further discussion on the moral agency of street-level bureaucrats.<sup>3</sup> Students of principal-agent theories focus on political oversight of the bureaucracy and its limits by highlighting various agent problems, such as moral hazard, bureaucratic drift, and shirk. Applying this to the Chinese context, scholars have examined pathological or strategic bureaucratic behaviors, including selective policy implementation,<sup>4</sup> cross-governmental collusion,<sup>5</sup> and “muddling through” as coping strategies of

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968). Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary expanded ed., (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*, (Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China,” *Comparative Politics* 31, no.2 (1999): 167-186.

<sup>5</sup> Xueguang Zhou, “The Institutional Logic of Collusion among Local Governments in China,” *Modern China* 36 (2010): 47-78.



local bureaucrats.<sup>6</sup> While this research illuminates many of the ways bureaucrats operate in practice, the research focus often stems from concerns about bureaucrats doing too little work, rather than too much.

The idea of bureaucratic overload has only recently started to catch the attention of scholars, especially in the context of development. Most notably, Dasgupta and Kapur identified bureaucratic overload in their study of local rural development officials in India.<sup>7</sup> They use the concept to capture the situation in which local bureaucrats are under-resourced relative to their responsibilities, which undermines the capacity of local bureaucracy in policy implementation. In addition to demonstrating the consequences of bureaucratic overload, they locate the political determinants of the phenomenon in the incentive structure in Indian elections, finding that the lack of clarity over who is responsible for what discourages politicians from investing in the capacity of the local bureaucracy.

Drawing on empirics from China, I update and expand the concept of bureaucratic overload in several ways. First, I argue that bureaucratic overload is not limited to the resource deficiency of local bureaucrats, but also includes organizational red tape and pressure from an intrusive and intensified accountability system. The phenomenon I investigate is more capacious and more consequential than the narrowly defined idea of an overloaded bureaucracy. Second, by focusing on China, I expand the institutional context of studying overload to the case of an authoritarian party-state in which electoral mechanisms do not apply. Third, I offer a supply-and-

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<sup>6</sup> Xueguang Zhou et. al. “A Behavioral Model of ‘Muddling Through’ in the Chinese Bureaucracy: The Case of Environmental Protection,” *The China Journal* 70, no.1 (2013): 120-147.

<sup>7</sup> Aditya Dasgupta and Devesh Kapur, “The Political Economy of Bureaucratic Overload: Evidence from Rural Development Officials in India,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no.4 (2020): 1316-1334.

demand framework to capture both the limited governing capacity and resources at the grassroots level and the expansive demands and “totalistic”<sup>8</sup> ambitions of the authoritarian state. By focusing on political investment in bureaucratic resources, existing scholarship is only attentive to the supply side of the problem while overlooking the sources of bureaucratic obligations and burdens. The framework I offer pinpoints the structural imbalances between the supply and demand sides of state governance that serve as the fundamental cause of bureaucratic overload.

Bureaucratic overload in grassroots governance provides opportunities for observers to see through the façade of a strong state and scrutinize the bureaucratic roots of an ambitious and totalistic state. It shows that what matters is not just the absolute level of state capacity, but the relationship between state capacity and the state’s governing scope, approach, and ambitions. If state capacity fails to match the scope and depth of the state intervention, the Leviathan can be overstretched. The growing tension between limited capacity on the ground and the expanding scope and totalistic approach of the central state alienates local cadres and undermines overall governance.

This introductory chapter proceeds as follows: in the first section, I empirically identify the phenomenon of bureaucratic overload in China through an original survey showing high workload and job stress among street-level bureaucrats; and I illustrate the manifestation of an overburdened grassroots workforce from three aspects. In the second section, I demonstrate why overload matters by discussing how it affects organizational behavior and governance

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<sup>8</sup> By “totalistic” I mean a governing mentality that views state power as omnipresent and omnipotent, believing the state should take charge of everything and is competent in achieving whatever goal it pursues. It is translated in Chinese as “全能主义” (omnipotent-ism). I borrow this term from the political scientist Tsou Tang who used it to characterize only state-society relations rather than the regime type. I refrain from using “totalitarian” because it is a very loaded term, and it is debatable to what extent the current Chinese political regime can be characterized as totalitarian. I elaborate on the conceptualization in the second chapter.

effectiveness. Section III summarizes the supply-and-demand framework I propose to explain the origins of bureaucratic overload. Section IV discusses the theoretical and practical relevances of this research and Section V introduces the methodology and data sources. In the final section, I provide an overview of the dissertation.

## Unpacking Overload in Grassroots Governance

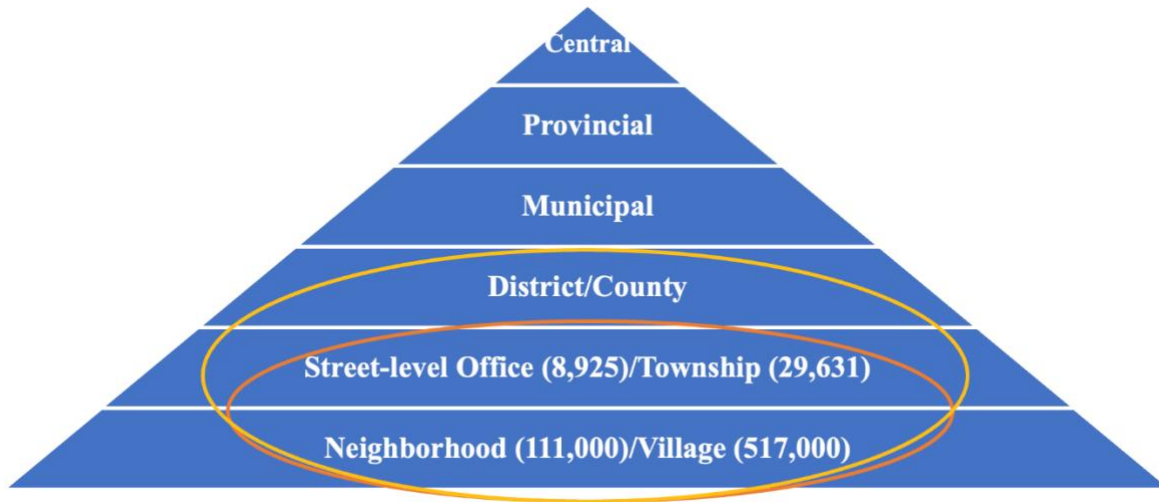
Within the hierarchy of the Chinese party-state, the grassroots bureaucracy (基层干部 *jiceng ganbu*)<sup>9</sup> can have multiple definitions. In a narrow sense, it refers to village and township cadres in the countryside and those who work in urban neighborhoods and street-level offices (街道 *jiedao*). In a broad sense, it includes all party-state cadres and officials at or below the county (or district) level (see *Figure 1.1*). According to official 2021 statistics, there were 8,925 urban street-level offices in China comprised of 111,000 neighborhoods, along with 29,631 rural townships that included 517,000 villages.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Chinese bureaucracy includes both the Communist party organizations and government departments and agencies, namely equating with the party-state apparatuses. In the study, “government” at all levels of the hierarchy generally refers to the party-state governing authority, unless otherwise specified. I use the terms “bureaucrat” (官僚 *guanliao*), “official” (官员 *ganyuan*), and “cadre” (干部 *ganbu*) interchangeably in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Civil Affairs of PRC, 2021, retrieved from <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/sj/tjtb/2021/202104qgsj.html> (accessed April 20, 2022).

*Figure 1.1 The Governing Hierarchy of the Chinese Party-State*

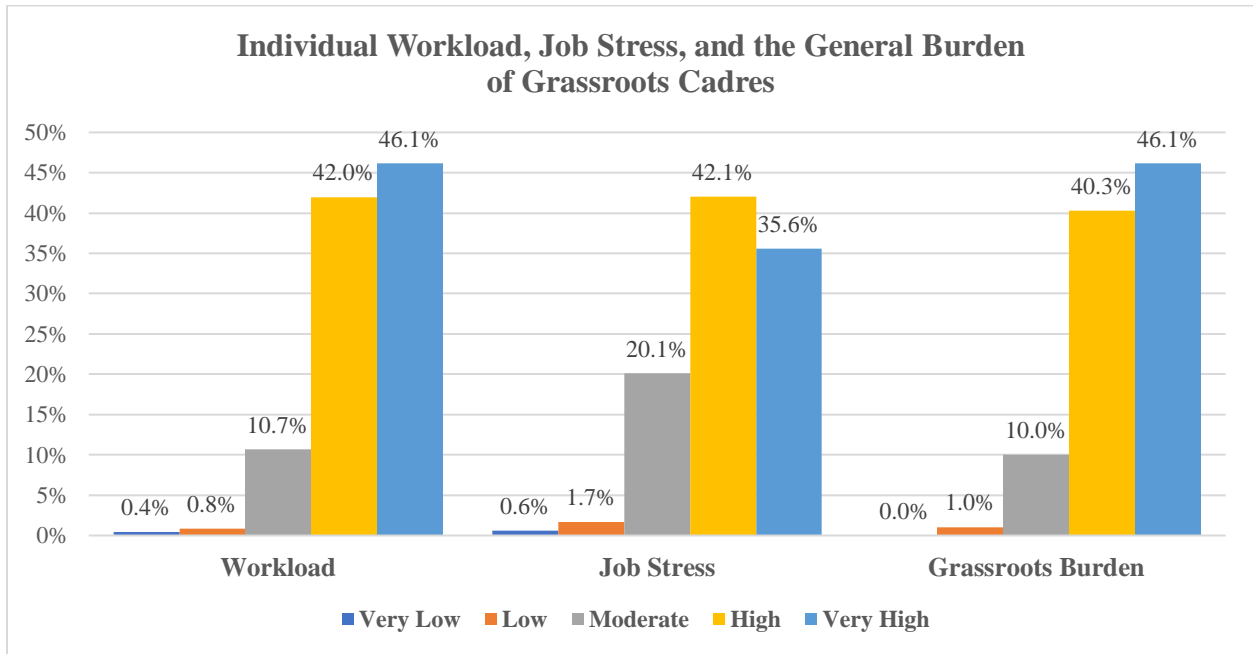


Contrary to the stereotypical image of local cadres loafing off and drinking tea in the earlier period, bureaucrats working at the roots of the party-state find themselves under enormous strain under the leadership of Xi Jinping. In November 2021, I fielded an original survey of over 470 local bureaucrats (among whom 88% are currently working at or below the county level) across China.<sup>11</sup> The results show that most grassroots cadres are burdened with a heavy workload and experience a high level of job stress. Eighty-eight percent of respondents think their workload is either heavy (42%) or very heavy (46%), while only 1 percent report having a “light” workload. Similarly, 42 percent complain that they have a high level of job stress, and another 36 percent feel they are extremely stressed at work. The vast majority (86.4%) agree that the overall burden and strain faced by the grassroots bureaucracy in China today is severe (see *Figure 1.2*). The consensus that emerges from the survey corroborates my own impression based on grassroots field observations and public commentaries.

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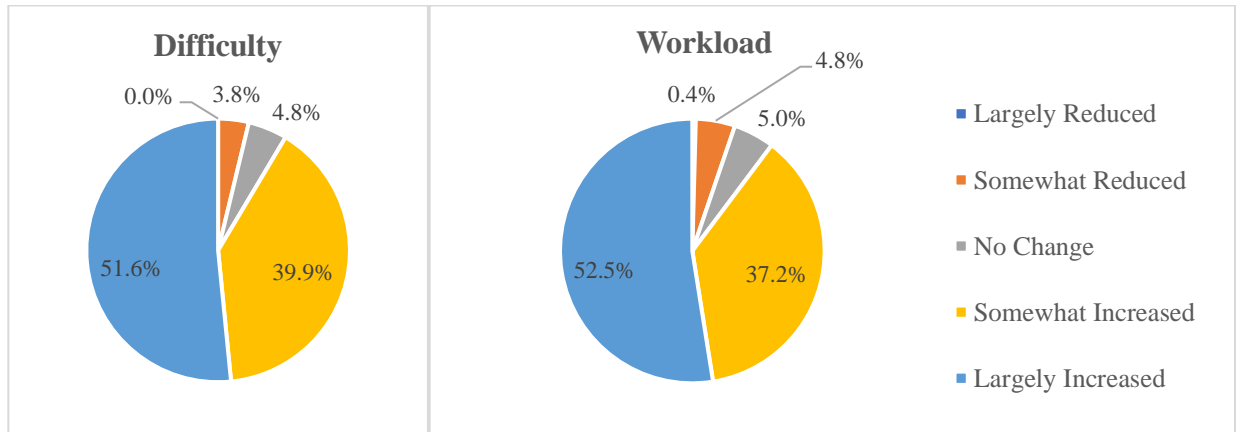
<sup>11</sup> For more information about the survey on Chinese grassroots cadres, please see the appendix at the end of this thesis. Source: Hanyu Zhao, *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey (CGCS)*, Nov. 2021.

Figure 1.2 Individual Workload, Job Stress, and General Burden of Grassroots Cadres



Local bureaucrats acknowledge that it has become more difficult to work at the grassroots level, as both the governing load and job difficulty have substantially increased since the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012 that marketed the transition of top power. Ninety-two percent agree that the grassroots bureaucracy has much more work than before, and 90% feel that grassroots governance has become more challenging (see *Figure 1.3*). The survey data indicate that the more experienced grassroots bureaucrats tend to agree that the burden and difficulties of grassroots work have increased significantly.

Figure 1.3 How Has Grassroots Governance Changed in Recent Years?



Interestingly, the survey results reveal that the workload and stress levels of local cadres vary across different levels of the hierarchy, with grassroots bureaucrats—and village and township cadres in particular—facing tougher jobs and greater burdens than bureaucrats at higher levels of government. *Table 1.1* breaks down the distribution of job stress in terms of the administrative level where a cadre’s work unit is located. Cadres in the township or street-level government report being the most stressed, followed by village or neighborhood cadres. Above the township level, the average level of reported stress decreases as one moves up the ladder of the hierarchy. The exact same pattern of variation can be found in the workload of cadres at different administrative levels (see *Table 1.2*). Chi-squared tests confirm that the differences in both reported stress and reported workload across administrative levels are statistically significant (p-value < 0.001).

Table 1.1 Job Stress of Cadres Working at Different Administrative Levels

	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	Average Score (5-point scale)
<b>Village/Neighborhood</b> (52)	0%	2%	13%	42%	38%	4.22
<b>Township/Street-level office</b> (228)	0%	1%	13%	40%	45%	4.30
<b>County/District</b> (136)	0%	1%	27%	43%	26%	3.94
<b>Municipal</b> (37)	3%	0%	32%	41%	22%	3.81
<b>Provincial and above</b> (24)	0%	8%	38%	42%	8%	3.52

Note: The number of observations is in parentheses under each category.  
 Pearson's Chi-squared test:  $X\text{-squared} = 65.882$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 8.439e-07$

Table 1.2 Workload of Cadres Working at Different Administrative Levels

Administrative Levels	Average Score (5-point scale)
Village/Neighborhood	4.32
Township/Street-level	4.48
County/District	4.24
Municipal	4.00
Provincial and above	3.91

Pearson's Chi-squared test:  $X\text{-squared} = 52.469$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 9.725e-05$

I use the concept of *bureaucratic overload* to characterize a Chinese grassroots bureaucracy that is saddled with (1) extensive governing tasks and increasing demands imposed by higher-level authorities, (2) burgeoning organizational red tape, and (3) an intrusive and intensified supervision and accountability system.

#### (1) Exhausting Governing Tasks and Demands

Local state agents are tasked with extensive governance duties set by higher levels. In order to achieve policy goals and demanding, sometimes even unrealistic, targets, working overtime and sacrificing holidays have become commonplace for grassroots cadres. They are often pressured to implement policies under severe time and resource constraints. Commentators depict the overloaded, under-resourced grassroots bureaucracy as the “single nail that has to withstand a thousand hammers” or the “eye of the needle through which a thousand threads must pass.”<sup>12</sup>

For instance, during the COVID-19 outbreak, street-level bureaucrats were swamped by the demands sent from a variety of higher-level agencies, ranging from contact tracing and quarantine enforcement to securing hospital beds for patients and providing supplies to the community. But they were handicapped by a severe shortage of manpower, administrative clout, and personal protective equipment. Higher levels of government are eager to pass down responsibilities while showing little interest in solving the practical difficulties faced by subordinates.<sup>13</sup> The following satirical cartoon, titled “*a blueprint of transforming grassroots cadres*,” illustrates the wide range of tasks and challenges facing grassroots cadres during the pandemic control.<sup>14</sup> Even before the coronavirus pandemic, cadres had been stretched thin; the public health crisis intensified what was already a very difficult situation.

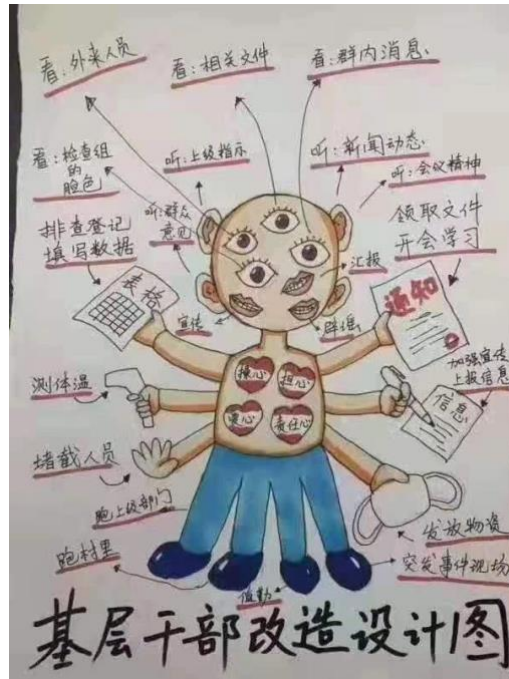
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<sup>12</sup> In Chinese, “上面千把锤，下面一颗钉” and “上面千条线，下面一根针”.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, a township cadre commented, “今天一天收了妇联、振兴办、组织部、政府、县委、卫计局等十来个部门的文件，都是给乡镇安排防疫工作，好像大家都非常重视，但没有一个文件一个部门帮助乡镇解决哪怕是一个口罩、一瓶消毒水的实际问题。(Today I received directives from more than ten higher-level agencies, assigning tasks of disease control to the township government. It seems that all of them prioritize the crisis. However, none of the documents or agencies have helped us obtain a single mask or sanitizer.)” in “口罩下的形式主义与基层减负 (Formalism under Masks and the Grassroots Burden Alleviation),” 基层实录 Jiceng Shilu, Jan. 28, 2020. Retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hZ1guw4Q2nuIY2HZEGJv-A>

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0205/c1003-31572816.html>





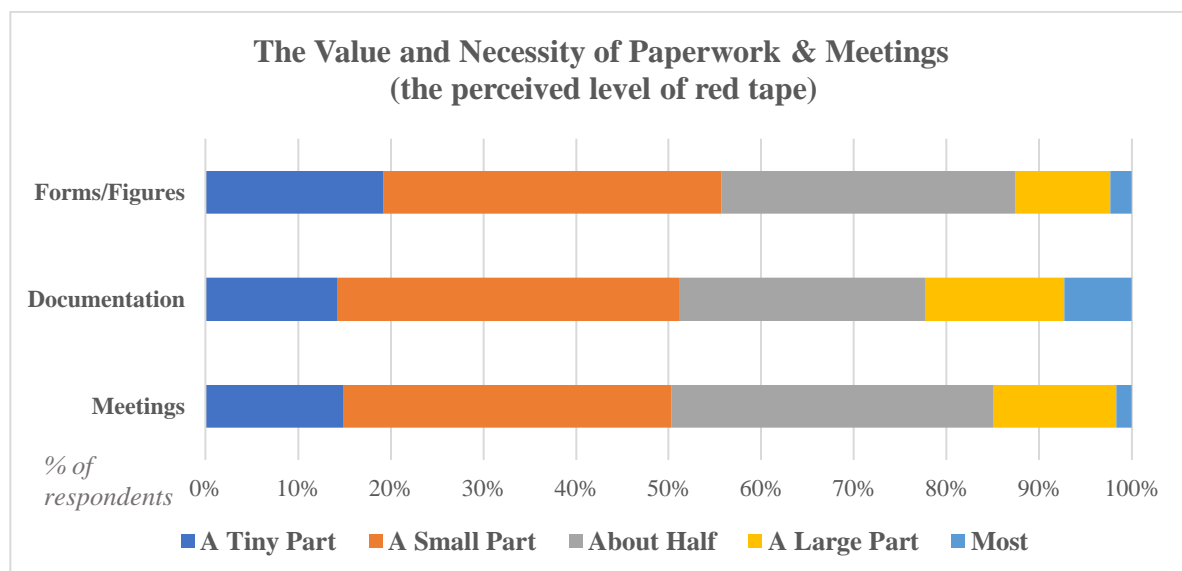
## (2) Burgeoning Organizational Red Tape

Beyond substantive workload requirements, grassroots bureaucrats find their time and energy sapped by staggering amounts of red tape, characterized as “mountains of paper and a sea of meetings” (文山会海 *wenshan huihai*), a term for overreliance on meetings and paperwork. Grassroots cadres must fill out endless forms, convene and attend numerous meetings, and prepare extensive documentation for each task they are assigned, even if they see most of these demands as duplicative and cumbersome formalities that actually crowd out their substantive work.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For example, a grassroots cadre, referring to the anti-poverty campaign in rural China, commented, “一个不到两万人的小乡镇，脱贫资料一间办公室堆不下了，顶到了天花板，蔚为壮观！统计的时候，要求一头牛价值不得高于七百，全是形式主义 (In a small town with less than 20,000 residents, one office fails to store all the documents about poverty alleviation. Piles of records and files have nearly reached the ceiling. How magnificent it is! ... But they are just signs of formalities.)” in “反形式主义反官僚主义：听听基层的声音 (Overcoming Formalism and Bureaucratism: Voice from Grassroots Cadres),” 侠客岛 *Xiakedao* (a WeChat Public Account of *People's Daily*), Dec. 12, 2017.

The survey finds that paperwork is the most time-consuming task for cadres: 47 percent of respondents spend more than 40% of their work time on various paperwork obligations, such as writing reports, filling out forms, and keeping records. In comparison, mass work (群众工作 *qunzhong gongzuo*) or “serving the people,” which is supposed to be the priority of grassroots governance, has retreated to secondary importance. Front-line bureaucrats question the value and necessity of the incessant demands from higher-ups to collect and tabulate statistics. Over half of the respondents believe that only a very small portion of these reports are necessary or useful. Similar views can be found on documentation and meetings, with half of the respondents perceiving most record-keeping and meetings as neither necessary nor useful (see *Figure 1.4*).

*Figure 1.4 Value and Necessity of Paperwork and Meetings*



### (3) Intensified Supervision and Accountability

Intensified monitoring and control over local agents, aimed at preventing political deviation and misconduct, has exacerbated the problem of overwork. Lower-level cadres need to devote a substantial amount of time to respond to frequent inspections and performance

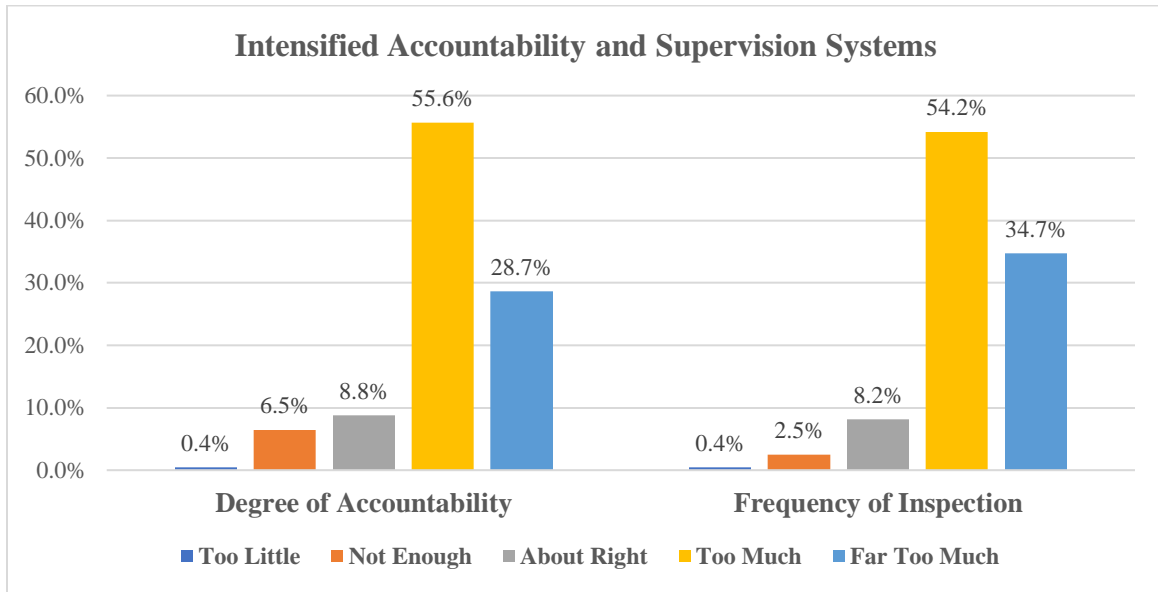
evaluations conducted by higher-ups. Excessive supervision and overemphasis on negative incentives discourage local bureaucrats and trigger a variety of risk-averse behaviors and blame-avoidance strategies.<sup>16</sup>

The strain of intensive monitoring and punishment can be seen in the survey data. Regarding the degree of accountability (问责力度 *wenze lidu*), 55.6% agree that it is “intense,” and 28.7% believe it is “excessively intense,” together accounting for 84% of the respondents. For grassroots cadres, frustration with the system primarily comes from the fact that they are held accountable for things beyond their control. When the paternalistic state attempts to take care of everything, local state agents are held responsible for anything that happens within their jurisdiction. Local cadres emphasize the prevalence of the mismatch between authority and responsibility. Ninety-three percent believe the situation of “little authority yet heavy responsibility (权小责重 *quanxiao zezhong*)” is common in grassroots governance, while only 7% think it is rare. Similarly, most local cadres (89%) are upset about the frequency of inspections and performance evaluations, with 54% characterizing these monitoring devices as “too many” and 35% as “far too many” (see *Figure 1.5*). Grassroots cadres grumble that agencies at higher levels use inspections and evaluations as a means of evading their own responsibilities and passing down the burden to the grassroots.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, a grassroots cadre complained, “左一句属地管理，右一句痕迹化管理，前一句处分问责，后一句不担当不作为！基层在这种高压状态下已经濒临崩溃，我已经身心俱疲！准备辞职了。当官的多，督察的多，摄像头多出现一点纰漏就被问责，请问基层如何是好？(Higher-level authorities reiterate jurisdictional duty and record keeping; they threaten us with discipline and punishment; they criticize us for irresponsibility and inactivity. We grassroots cadres are on the brink of collapse under such hyper pressure. I feel so exhausted and plan to quit my job. With so many authoritative figures, so intense supervision, and so many surveillance cameras, we could be held accountable for a small misstep. What are we supposed to do?)” in “是谁导致了基层的疲惫？(Who Has Caused Grassroots Fatigue?)” 基层干部参阅 (*References for Grassroots Cadres*), August 14, 2018.

Figure 1.5 Intensified Accountability and Supervision Systems



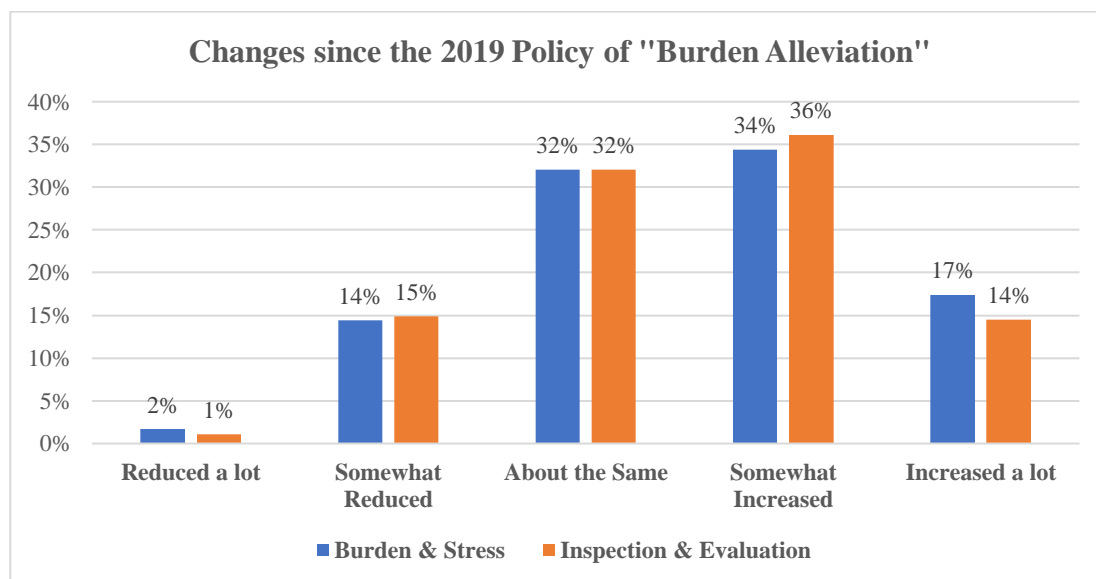
The central leadership has to some degree recognized the problem of grassroots overload and has issued a series of directives to mitigate the stress of local officials and to remedy certain bureaucratic pathologies, identified in the Communist lexicon as “formalism” (形式主义 *xingshi zhuyi*) and “bureaucratism” (官僚主义 *guanliao zhuyi*).<sup>17</sup> The national government, for instance, urges all subnational governments to substantially reduce meetings and paperwork and to address abuses in inspections, evaluations, and documentation. It also instructs local governments to streamline their cadre performance appraisal system and incentive structures. But although 2019 was designated as “the year of easing the burden on grassroots cadres (基层减负年 *jiceng jianfu nian*),” the actual effect of “burden alleviation” remains limited.

<sup>17</sup> General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP, “关于贯彻落实习近平总书记重要指示精神 集中整治形式主义、官僚主义的工作意见 (Opinions on Addressing Formalism and Bureaucratism),” Sept 2018; “关于解决形式主义突出问题为基层减负的通知 (Notice on Solving Severe Problems of Formalism and Alleviating Burdens on Grassroots Governments),” March 2019; “关于持续解决困扰基层的形式主义问题为决胜全面建成小康社会提供坚强作风保证的通知 (Notice on Continuously Solving the Grassroots-disturbing Problems of Formalism and Providing Firm Support to Successfully Building A Moderately Prosperous Society in All Aspects),” April 14, 2020.

Cadres are largely pessimistic about the initiative to alleviate the burden on the grassroots workforce. Official remedies fall short, or are counterproductive. When asked about the changes since 2019, only 16% say that the burden and pressure imposed on grassroots cadres has lessened somewhat (14%) or a lot (2%); 32% see no visible change; and more than a half believe that the burden and stress have either somewhat (34%) or substantially (17%) increased. Opinions are similar on the system of top-down supervision and control, as 50% see an increasing number of evaluations, inspections, and rankings in recent years (see *Figure 1.6*). Moreover, 61% believe that the likelihood of truly easing the burden on grassroots cadres in future is low.

Why has the government effort been of little avail? As I will explain in the following pages, with critical structural factors that underlie the problem still intact, issuing palliative directives has little effect.

*Figure 1.6 Changes since the 2019 Policy of Burden Reduction*



## Why It Matters

Grassroots overload is consequential at the individual, collective, and regime levels. It contributes to career burnout of individual cadres, promotes bureaucratic involution in grassroots governance, and eventually weakens regime capacity and durability.

Concerning the personal well-being of grassroots cadres, scholars find that work overload and a lack of control are directly linked to burnout, which “has been frequently associated with various forms of negative reactions and job withdrawals, including job dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, absenteeism, intention to leave the job, and turnover.”<sup>18</sup> In particular, work overload induces burnout “by depleting the capacity of people to meet the demands of the job. When this kind of overload is a chronic job condition, there is little opportunity to rest, recover, and restore balance.”<sup>19</sup> Among the six key organizational risk factors that researchers have identified as causes of burnout,<sup>20</sup> at least four domains of mismatch apply to the Chinese grassroots bureaucracy: work overload, a lack of control, insufficient reward, and a sense of unfairness, or organizational injustice due to excess accountability. No wonder “grassroots fatigue” (基层疲惫 *jiceng pibei*) has become a buzzword in public commentaries on the plight of grassroots cadres.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, “Understanding the burnout experience: recent research and its implication for psychiatry,” *World Psychiatry* 15, (2016): 103-111.

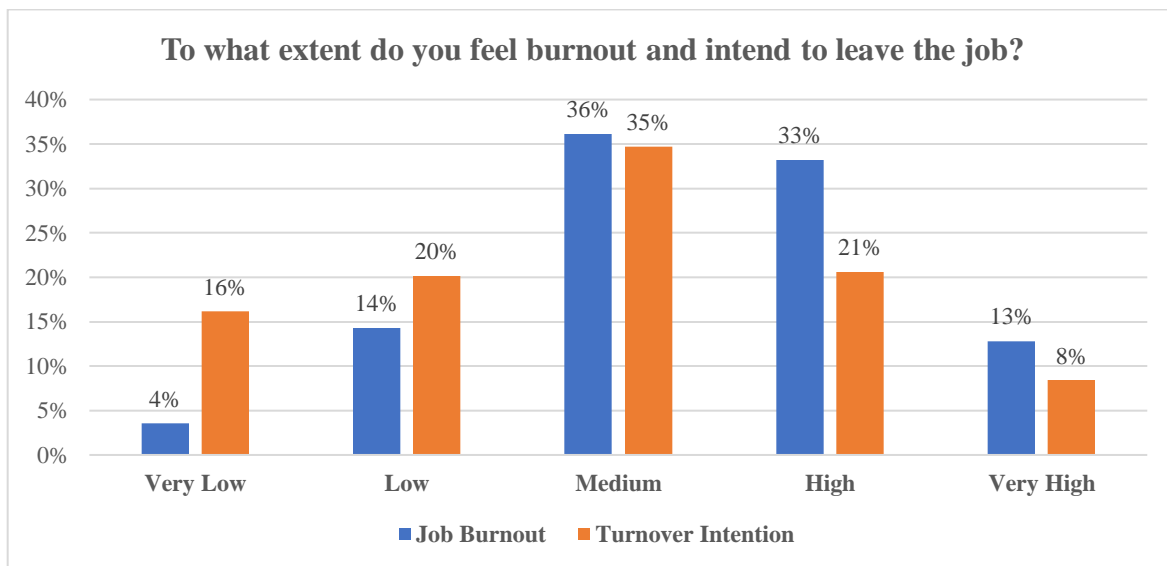
<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> The six main causes of burnout are person-job mismatches in workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and value. *Ibid.*, 105-106.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, a commentary titled “是谁导致了基层的疲惫? (Who Has Caused Grassroots Fatigue),” was published on a Wetchat public channel, 基层干部参阅, Aug. 14, 2018, retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/VEaEjqyZfHA2ReheKBPI5w>

The self-reported results from the survey indicate that 82% of local cadres feel a medium to high level of burnout in their work, with nearly 30% expressing a strong intention to leave their job (see *Figure 1.7*). Regression analysis of the data further confirms that both burnout and turnover intention are significantly correlated with job stress.<sup>22</sup>

*Figure 1.7 Career Burnout and Turnover Intention of Grassroots Cadres*



In his pioneering study of street-level bureaucracy, Michael Lipsky points out that the alienation of street-level work comes from working on segments of the product while unable to control the outcome, input, and pace of work,<sup>23</sup> making grassroots bureaucrats resemble assembly line workers in the classic Marxist sense. Here I attempt to identify the sources of

<sup>22</sup> For detailed regression analysis results, please see the tables in the appendix of this dissertation.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary expanded ed., (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2010).

bureaucratic burnout and alienation in the Chinese context. Six factors are primarily responsible for robbing grassroots-level work of meaning, purpose, efficacy, and achievement.

First, goal displacement. In addition to pragmatic considerations, many grassroots cadres are motivated to serve the public by delivering policies, solving problems, and improving general welfare. But their people-serving vision has largely been eclipsed by reams of low-value paperwork and trivial formalities and the rush to meet one target after another set by higher-ups. Aware of the lack of substantive outcomes, they experience a low sense of accomplishment.

Second, shrinking autonomy. When facing unrealistic demands, grassroots cadres have little if any bargaining power against higher-level decision-makers. Often the need to comply under severe time constraints means they bear moral hazard by feeling forced to fabricate materials and manipulate numbers.

Third, role conflict. Grassroots cadres have dual identities – they are expected to be both civic entrepreneurs representing the interests of their constituency/fellow residents and state agents carrying out top-down directives and the will of the state. However, grassroots cadres often find themselves caught between superiors and the masses. In most cases the role of the citizen agent is overshadowed by the role of the state agent, rendering grassroots cadres further detached and estranged from the people they are supposed to serve.

Fourth, tying hands. In addition to enjoying little discretionary power, the toolkits and resources that grassroots cadres can utilize during implementation are highly limited. They may find their hands tied in meeting certain policy goals.

Fifth, being scapegoated. Subject to the principle of “jurisdictional responsibility (属地责任 *shudi zeren*),” they are held accountable for things that occur beyond their control. To placate



public discontent, grassroots cadres are more likely to be “sacrificed” to protect higher authorities and preserve state institutions.

Sixth, incentive deprivation. Grassroots cadres are not effectively incentivized. In material terms, many of them lack decent salaries; in political terms, they face bleak prospects for promotion. As for intrinsic motivation, many have grown disillusioned by the gap between their original ideals and the reality of the situation, seeing little room for personal growth and career development.

The prevalent frustration, alienation, and career burnout among grassroots cadres not only affects their health and job performance, but risks undermining governance outcomes. In the survey, 74% of local cadres agree that bureaucratic overload has had a large or very large negative impact on grassroots governance, in contrast to the mere 5% who believe the impact is small (see *Figure 1.8*).

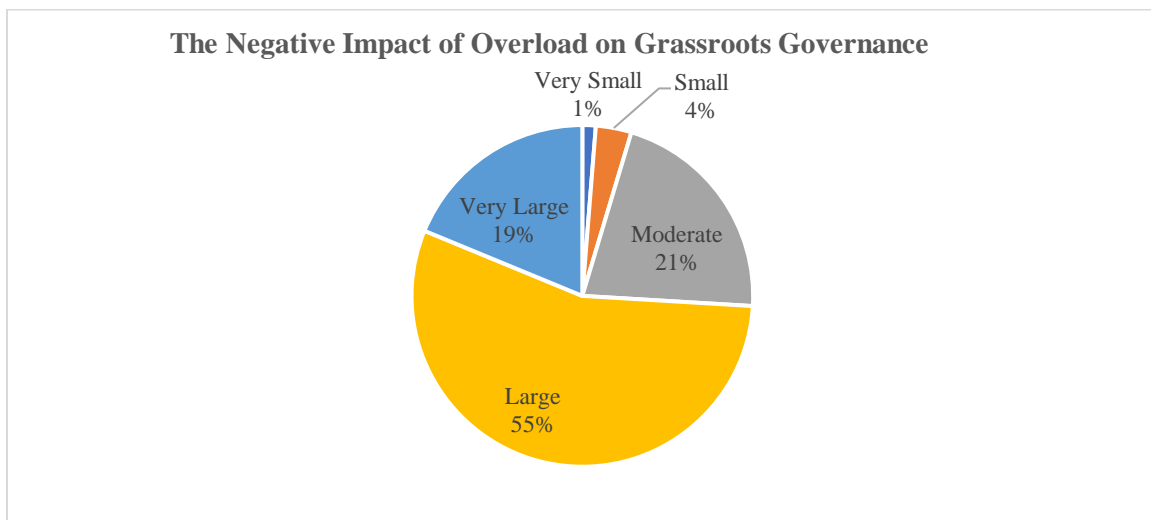
I argue that overload tends to aggravate the internal friction of the bureaucratic system and therefore increases the likelihood of *bureaucratic involution*.<sup>24</sup> This is a situation in which grassroots cadres devote considerable time and energy coping with demands, decrees, and inspections assigned by higher-ups, without their efforts translating into substantive policy delivery and improved governance quality inasmuch as much of their effort is internally consumed and wasted by red tape. Moreover, ordinary residents, who are usually passive recipients rather than active participants in grassroots governance, are unlikely to express appreciation to the overloaded cadres. The top-down approach and limited public participation

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Huang in a paper reviews the concept of involution and distinguishes “agricultural involution,” “state involution,” and “bureaucratic involution,” but he fails to clearly define the last concept. See Philip Huang, “农业内卷与官僚内卷：类型、概念、经验概括、运作机制 (Agricultural Involution and Bureaucratic Involution: Types, Concepts, Empirical Generalizations, and Theoretical Mechanisms),” *中国乡村研究 (Rural China)*, 18.2, 2021.

are likely to create a lose-lose situation: grassroots cadres are demotivated for being unappreciated by the public, and residents largely stay aloof or grumble about policy outcomes. The actual policy return does not match the administrative costs and state investment, and local agents have a low sense of achievement.

*Figure 1.8 Impact of Overload on Grassroots Governance*



With grassroots cadres accounting for 99 percent of the bureaucratic workforce, their frustrations could have major implications for regime stability in the long run. After all, tens of millions of grassroots, rank-and-file cadres serve as the microfoundation of the party-state apparatus. They are policy implementers, public service providers, information and intelligence collectors, problem solvers, and conflict mediators and arbitrators. They are supposed to be local regime stabilizers and enablers. However, press reports indicate that among the younger

generation of cadres who graduated from elite universities, many have become disillusioned about their jobs in grassroots governments and have either resigned or intend to resign.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the absence of publicly available information on the turnover rate of Chinese officials, the survey results indicate that even among local bureaucrats who have held office for some time, the proportion of those intending to resign is high. Admittedly, given the current environment of economic downturn, many college graduates, including those from elite universities, prefer the public sector to private companies for the sake of job security and stability, which may explain why many disillusioned or disaffected insiders have not yet left the system. That is also why the number of registrations for the civil service exam reached a record high in 2022. Nevertheless, the public enthusiasm for secure jobs within the party-state system contradicts the lived experience of numerous grassroots cadres who enter the job with passion and vision but then want to escape. In a sense, the grassroots government has become a “besieged city” (围城 *weicheng*) where outsiders crave entry while insiders yearn to exit.

Looking into the breakdown of the numbers in *Table 1.3*, we can find that village and urban neighborhood cadres on average have the strongest turnover intention, significantly higher than that of other groups. This is understandable because this cadre subgroup is not officially recognized as “civil servants” (公务员 *gongwuyuan*) and thereby has the least desirable pay and benefits. For these cadres, the exit option might be a less costly prospect. In a similar vein, it is not surprising that as one progresses up the administrative ladder, the average cadre’s turnover

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<sup>25</sup> 王言、谢操：“选调生自述：985 毕业女生在基层的经历与困惑 (Narratives by students-turned-cadres: Experience and confusion of female grassroots cadres graduated from elite universities in China)”，*正午故事*，Aug. 14, 2021, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/KvdQQ8e3te\\_VQ0ETNdznCQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/KvdQQ8e3te_VQ0ETNdznCQ) (accessed August 20, 2021); 李颖迪：“400 万社区工作者是如何被‘逼’疯的？ (How have four million neighborhood workers been driven crazy?)”，*先生制造*，Feb. 14, 2022, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/wTz\\_auYYGTIDAjBTjUpOGA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/wTz_auYYGTIDAjBTjUpOGA) (accessed Feb. 16, 2022).

intention decreases. Nevertheless, only by disentangling the structural factors behind the overload, can we truly grasp why so many cadres desire to abandon the grassroots.

*Table 1.3 Turnover Intention of Local Cadres at Different Administrative Levels*

<b>Administrative levels</b>	<b>Average Turnover Intention (5-point scale)</b>
Village/Neighborhood	3.47
Township/Street-level	2.86
County/District	2.73
Municipal	2.64
Provincial and above	2.52

*Pearson's Chi-squared test:  $X\text{-squared} = 36.344$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.014$*

## **Structural Mismatch/Imbalances in State Governance**

To understand the origins of grassroots overload, I propose a supply-and-demand framework that focuses on the structural imbalances between the governing resources possessed by the grassroots bureaucracy (the supply end) and the governing ambitions of the central state (the demand end). The central argument is that grassroots overload results from an increasing gap between the limited and declining governing capacity available at the grassroots level and the expanding scope and the totalistic governing approach of the authoritarian regime. This analytical framework also highlights the mismatch in the structures of governing demand and supply within the Chinese state. Due to the fact that obligations grow heavier as one descends the hierarchy, China's governmental demand structure resembles a pyramid. Grassroots officials at the bottom of the system are responsible for receiving and carrying out orders from all higher-up authorities. The availability of governing resources and capabilities, in contrast, tends to concentrate at higher levels of government and become progressively scarce further down the

hierarchy, generating an upside-down pyramid of supply. Bureaucratic overload is a product of the mismatch between the supply and demand structures of state governance.

On the supply side, the grassroots bureaucracy faces deficiencies across all three dimensions of governing capacity – political, personnel, and fiscal. The centralization of the decision-making structure has largely reduced the discretionary power and autonomy of the grassroots bureaucracy. Grassroots cadres, who actually have better local knowledge, are relegated to mere implementers, and their input and feedback are hardly incorporated into policy-making processes. Their declining political capacity widens the gap between central instructions and local conditions, rendering policy failures more likely on the ground.

On the personnel front, the grassroots government faces substantial difficulties in recruiting and maintaining talent. Constraints imposed by the personnel quota system and the siphoning off of competent cadres by higher-level authorities have contributed to manpower shortages at the grassroots. The grassroots workforce also suffers in terms of human resources due to negative historical legacies and the guaranteed nature of the “iron rice bowl.” Moreover, the obvious career ceiling saps the motivation of many grassroots cadres.

Besides limited political incentives, the material benefits of grassroots cadres have been constrained by local fiscal strength and centrally imposed financial frugality. Despite a few exceptions in the rich coastal region, most inland localities are too fiscally feeble to offer attractive payment and work conditions to grassroots cadres. Weak fiscal capacity also hinders effective policy implementation as the grassroots government often falls short of sufficiently subsidizing or compensating the targeted population. Expanding expenditures and shrinking revenue bases during the three-year period of pandemic control have further eroded the financial foundation of local governments.

On the demand side, the top leadership's concern with absolute regime stability and security has driven the central state to exert comprehensive control over both the populace and state agents. Specifically, the central state has adopted a totalistic approach to state-society interactions, which has deepened state intervention in society as well as increased state liability and public expectation of and dependence on the state, increasing the risk of overstretching state capacity. Loath to welcome civil society and market forces to share its governing burdens, the central leadership insists on pressuring its own "trustworthy" bureaucratic workforce to undertake unrealistically extensive governance duties. The grassroots bureaucracy, with inadequate capability, has been put under perpetual stress to realize the goal of constructing an "omnipresent" and "omnipotent" state.

In the management of the internal party-state apparatus, the central authority aims to tame the party-state agents via organizational strengthening and bureaucratic formalization. To reassert and ensure the unchallenged leadership and supremacy of the CCP, the Party center has reinforced Leninist discipline, expanded and deepened organizational networks, and emphasized membership dedication. As a result, grassroots cadres are now subject to stricter organizational rules and harsher disciplinary measures; they have to dedicate much more effort to grassroots party-building activities as well as shoulder proliferating obligations as party members. Additionally, with bureaucratic operations becoming increasingly formalized and standardized, grassroots cadres need to follow more complex procedures, carefully document every administrative move, and enjoy much less flexibility during policy implementation.

To better make sense of grassroots overload, it is important to unravel three underlying processes that have occurred in the Chinese party-state: the centralization of power and authority, the politicization of administrative tasks, and the bureaucratization of grassroots governance. The

latter two structural changes are the natural consequences of centralization, and they help sustain the highly centralized power structure. Policy demands have largely been politicized to guarantee the faithful enforcement of central orders, turning into unnegotiable political missions with high stakes (and less cost sensitivity). To signal political loyalty to the center and reduce their own risks, subnational leaders at each level tend to double down on those missions, driving policy targets to unreasonable levels when they are assigned to the grassroots bureaucracy. Being completely incorporated into the bureaucratic machine, grassroots governing units have largely lost their autonomy as well as bargaining power against higher-level authorities. With mounting responsibilities and pressure transferred downstream, overburdened grassroots cadres turn to “formalities” (including fabrication of materials and numbers) as feigned compliance or passive resistance.

## **Theoretical and Practical Relevance**

The project has the potential to make contributions to three distinct areas of social science. First, it aims to contribute to the literature on state-building and state capacity at the local and grassroots levels. Investigation of bureaucratic overload in China sheds light on the tension between state (in)capacity and state governing ambitions, scope, and approach. It also brings our attention to the hidden costs of state penetration and overreach. Second, it engages with studies of bureaucracy, management, and organizational behavior by delving into the nature and trajectory of the Chinese bureaucracy in comparison with the Weberian ideal type. Part of the project seeks to ascertain whether overload is the unintended consequence and inevitable cost of making the bureaucracy more accountable, transparent, and standardized. Bureaucratic overload also provides an opportunity to understand the managerial philosophy and

organizational culture of the CCP. Finally, it adds to the scholarship on authoritarian politics in two ways. The study pays special attention to the tens of millions of grassroots, non-elite regime stabilizers and enablers in China, who have been understudied. In addition, it examines the interaction between the authoritarian political environment and bureaucratic governance. I elaborate on the theoretical contributions and implications of this research in more detail in the concluding chapter.

The study deepens our knowledge of how the Chinese party-state operates at the grassroots and enriches our understanding of the inner logic of the Chinese political and bureaucratic systems. The Chinese party-state under Xi Jinping's leadership is committed to an ambitious blueprint of socio-economic development and governance projects, ranging from revitalizing the countryside to "grid management" in cities. But it is not clear exactly how the policies have been implemented and to what extent their goals have been fulfilled. For instance, what lies behind the high-profile victories declared in rural poverty elimination and COVID-19 control? How would street-level bureaucrats tell a different story? With the reshaping of the political landscape in Xi's "new era," it is worth considering whether the unprecedented centralization of power, plus the supremacy of the Communist Party, is compatible with the official goal of "modernizing the governing system and governing capacity of the state." Answers to these questions will help us understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Chinese approach to governance.

## **Methods and Sources of Data**

In this research, I adopt an eclectic methodological approach that combines a *structural-institutional* perspective and an *agent-behavioral* perspective. To investigate the root causes of



bureaucratic overload, I focus on structural variables, including organizational and institutional changes and constraints. This structural perspective allows the researcher to use the phenomenon of grassroots overload as a starting point of the probe and then try to discern the deep undercurrents in Chinese politics. In addition, part of the inquiry looks at how the *modus operandi* of the bureaucratic system influences the attitudinal and behavioral variables of individual bureaucrats, such as how grassroots cadres view their profession and identity, what they choose to prioritize in work, and what strategies they use to cope with overload and other challenges. This agent-based approach recognizes street-level bureaucrats as important actors in the political system and enables the researcher to better theorize their experience.

The project employs mixed methods and leverages diverse sources of information. The main empirical data come from a year of extensive fieldwork in multiple localities and at different levels of local government in urban and rural China. From March 2021 to June 2022, I visited 33 villages and urban neighborhoods and 25 township governments and street-level offices in 22 counties and districts located in inland and coastal regions, including Hunan, Hainan, Guangdong, and Zhejiang Provinces. The selection of field sites was largely driven by pragmatic considerations of personal connections and accessibility, given the political sensitivity of doing government-related research in China and disruptions caused by the pandemic control. In those field sites, I conducted a large number of semi-structured interviews with more than 60 local officials for over one hundred hours and collected internal government documents and publications, and other firsthand materials. To diversify the pool of interlocutors, I interviewed cadres from both urban and rural areas, at different levels of the political hierarchy, in different sectors of the bureaucracy, and in leadership positions as well as rank-and-file.

Moreover, I designed and implemented a questionnaire to survey Chinese grassroots cadres and gathered a sample of 479 local bureaucrats with a certain degree of national representativeness (see the appendix for detailed information). The survey statistics supplement the ethnographic data by providing more comprehensive information about local cadres' working conditions and perceptions of grassroots governance. I also conducted textual analyses of official materials and archives, newspapers, and public commentaries to examine, for instance, how authorities have diagnosed bureaucratic pathologies and proposed varying solutions at different points in time. The following table summarizes the main methods and data sources.

*Table 1.4 Methods and Data Sources*

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Sources of Data</b>
Quantitative analysis	Original survey statistics on the Chinese grassroots bureaucracy
Ethnographic approach	Interviews and participant observation
Textual and historical analysis	Local government archives, official documents, press materials, online comments and blogs, cadre memoirs, etc.

## **Overview of the Dissertation**

The dissertation chapters are structured as follows: This introductory chapter unpacks bureaucratic overload and discusses its impact on grassroots bureaucracy and governance; it summarizes the core argument and key findings of the research, highlights the study's academic and practical significance, and introduces the methodology.

The second chapter, "Explaining Grassroots Overload: the Supply-and-Demand Dynamics of State Governance," serves as the crucial theory-building part of the project. It first reviews the relevant scholarship and then proposes an analytical framework to understand the root causes of the overburdened grassroots bureaucracy in China. The explanation focuses on the

increasing disparity and mismatch between the supply and demand sides of state governance.

The supply-side story investigates the limited and declining capacity and governing resources of the grassroots bureaucracy along three dimensions – political, personnel, and fiscal. The demand-side analysis explores the growing ambitions of the authoritarian regime leadership that aims to achieve extensive control over both the populace and its own state agents. This chapter also discusses how power centralization has politicized governance tasks and bureaucratized grassroots organizations as well as how the intensification and routinization of campaigns has generated prevalent fatigue among local bureaucrats.

The first two empirical chapters examine the state's expansive control of society and its effect on grassroots governance in two main policy areas – rural revitalization and pandemic control. Chapter three, “Rural Governance,” focuses on the party-state penetration in the countryside by scrutinizing changes in rural governance and several specific policy interventions of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, such as living environment management and transformation of the traditional way of life. With greater government investment in the countryside, the party-state has broadened its interference in rural life, forcing on the rural populace its own modernized rural vision regardless of peasants' real needs and acceptance. Village cadres have become professional bureaucrats, facing stricter requirements to govern villages in a more standardized and transparent manner. They also have shouldered greater responsibility to implement both developmental and social transformative policies to realize the state's blueprint. However, due to the marginalization of peasants in rural governance, the efforts of grassroots cadres have not been rewarded by public approval.

Chapter four, “Pandemic Control,” continues the discussion of state control of society, while shifting the attention to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic that enlarged the

supply-and-demand gap and exacerbated bureaucratic overload at the grassroots. I study how the Chinese approach to the epidemic and totalistic governmentality imposed an intolerable load on frontline workers and threatened grassroots governance by concentrating on two key elements of pandemic control, vaccinations and lockdowns. While conducting the vaccination program, the central authority claimed to be displaying benevolence toward the people by allowing them to opt out of the shots, but it also used the accountability system to put pressure on subnational governments to set strict vaccination targets for grassroots units. Although the lockdown in Shanghai and other locations pushed the grassroots workforce beyond practical bounds, state omnipotence remained a delusion rather than a reality due to restrictions on the market and civil society.

Turning from the external control over the masses to the internal control of the bureaucratic apparatus, Chapter five, “Varieties of Formalism,” investigates the varied kinds of organizational red tape that have frustrated the grassroots bureaucracy. By looking into the structural factors and underlying political logic, I tackle the question of why formalism persists despite objections from both central leaders and grassroots cadres. I identify two kinds of paperwork that have plagued grassroots governance – excessive documentation (Trace-ism) and overproduction of forms (statistical overload). Trace-ism can be attributed to three causes: First, in performance assessments and inspections, documentation outweighs actual work because of the defective performance measurement and the perverse incentive structure. Second, when the central principal wants to exert the most control over local agents, grassroots cadres are compelled to document all they do since the authoritarian regime only relies on top-down and internal monitoring of the bureaucracy. Third, the highly politicized bureaucracy and intensified accountability has further motivated risk-averse agents to utilize documentation as a self-

preserving strategy. The phenomenon of statistical overload reflects the fundamental tension between the leadership's ambition to create an all-seeing state and the grassroots bureaucracy's constrained informational capacity. This chapter also discusses the "formalism at the fingertips" in the digital era and the diffusion of formalism to the broader public sector.

Chapter six, "Alleviating the Burden: Official Remedies and Their Limits," analyzes why the Chinese party-state's own initiative of addressing bureaucratic overload remains ineffective, if not counterproductive, for most grassroots cadres. Bringing in a historical perspective, I trace the official effort of remedying bureaucratic pathologies from Mao to Xi. Although Mao Zedong had launched sporadic campaigns against bureaucratism, his quixotic battles with his longtime foe mainly failed due to his inability to identify the root cause of the problem. Deng Xiaoping made a significant advancement by realizing that the highly centralized governing system was the structural source of bureaucratic pathologies. Though Xi Jinping is attentive to the plight of the grassroots bureaucracy, the official response has only scratched the surface without touching upon the core issue of the supply-and-demand imbalances in grassroots governance. The effect of these superficial remedies will be negligible as long as the CCP's managerial style and the governance approach of the party-state leadership are unaltered.

The concluding chapter recapitulates the main argument and findings, reflects on the study's theoretical contributions and implications, and discusses limitations and potential future research directions.

## ***Chapter 2***

### ***Explaining Grassroots Overload: The Supply-and-Demand Dynamics of State Governance***

Some might be inclined to dismiss the overload problem faced by the Chinese grassroots bureaucracy, as high work intensity is evident in many professions and sectors. For instance, students of management and organizational behavior investigate work overload among IT workers in technology companies.<sup>1</sup> They find that practitioners in the IT sector are frequently tasked with too many demands yet provided too few resources to accomplish what is expected. Researchers attribute overload to micro-level factors that include personality, internalized norms, and identity, as well as to the policy context of labor relations and structural changes in the economy and technology at the macro level. In particular, the “shareholder revolution” has increased the financial pressure on firms to oversell their products by setting unrealistic timelines and deadlines; globalization has shaped staffing strategies that exacerbate job insecurity; and digitalization has facilitated the expectation of always being available.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years heated discussion and debate over the intensive work pattern (the so-called “996”) and fierce competition (coined as “career involution”) in the IT sector also unfolded in China.

<sup>2</sup> Erin L. Kelly and Phyllis Moen, *Overload: How Good Jobs Went Bad and What We Can Do about It* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020).

Bureaucratic overload shares some similarities with work overload in firms but differs in terms of driving forces and underlying mechanisms such as the power dynamics in the political hierarchy, the governing rationale of the state, and the organizational features of the bureaucratic system. My intention is not to demonstrate that being a grassroots cadre in China is necessarily tougher than being a software engineer or a member of any other profession, but to explore the distinct sources of work overload in an authoritarian political environment that operates under a fundamentally different logic from profit-seeking economic organizations.

Political scientists have investigated the political determinants of bureaucratic overload in democracies. Drawing on the empirics from Indian officials of rural development programs, researchers find that divided agency and a lack of clarity over responsibilities disincentivize politicians to allocate resources to local bureaucrats because incumbent politicians do not receive electoral credit for their investment in local bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> By focusing on the spatial variation and uneven political investment in bureaucratic resources, the scholarship highlights the *supply side* of the problem, which is why local bureaucracy is understaffed and under-resourced. However, the *demand side* is equally, if not more important, for we need to know what generates and drives up responsibilities, burdens, and pressure upon the bureaucratic agents on the ground to fully grasp the issue of overload. The configuration of state-society relations and the organizational approach to managing the bureaucracy both factor into overload.

Chinese scholars, particularly longtime observers of rural governance, have been attentive to and concerned about the changing circumstances and challenges faced by grassroots bureaucrats. He Xuefeng describes the current grassroots governance system as “overheated” (过

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<sup>3</sup> Dasgupta and Kapur, 2020.

热 *guore*) and “exhausted” (过度消耗 *guodu xiaohao*).<sup>4</sup> He observes that higher-level agencies and departments all assign standard, specific, and strict targets to grassroots units and pressure them to comply through intensive monitoring, inspection, evaluation, and ranking. In his view, the main factors driving the grassroots government to exhaustion include the evasion of responsibility by higher-level authorities and the distrust of the grassroots bureaucracy.<sup>5</sup> However, He’s inquiry is incomplete as it fails to address questions of why superiors deflect their accountability and what causes a trust deficit within the bureaucratic system. Answering these questions requires that researchers dig deeper into the tectonic forces shaping bureaucratic behavior.

Scholars such as Lv Dewen and Yang Hua highlight the shrinking autonomous space of local governments as the most concerning change that has undermined the efficacy of grassroots governance.<sup>6</sup> They point out that the top-down control system has transformed from an emphasis on policy results to an emphasis on policy-implementing processes. This has formalized bureaucratic operations while intensifying the tension between proceduralism and the informality and flexibility required for governing grassroots society. Lv and Yang, along with Zhao Shukai and other rural experts, advocate the empowerment of grassroots units by granting them greater

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<sup>4</sup> 贺雪峰 (He Xuefeng), “基层体制过度消耗透支未来治理资源 (The Exhaustion of the Grassroots Governance System Overdraws the Future Governing Resources),” *社会科学报 (Social Science Weekly)*, April 15, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> 贺雪峰 (He Xuefeng), “基层困在系统里 (Grassroots Cadres Trapped in the System),” *新乡土*, April 14, 2021, retrieved from <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20220326A01IEU00>

<sup>6</sup> 吕德文 (Lv Dewen), 《基层中国：国家治理的基石》 (*China at the Grassroots: the Foundation of State Governance*), (Dongfang Press, 2020); 杨华 (Yang Hua), “基层治理要有自主空间 (Grassroots Governance Needs Autonomous Space),” in 《县乡中国》 (*County and Township in China*), (Remin University of China Press, 2022).



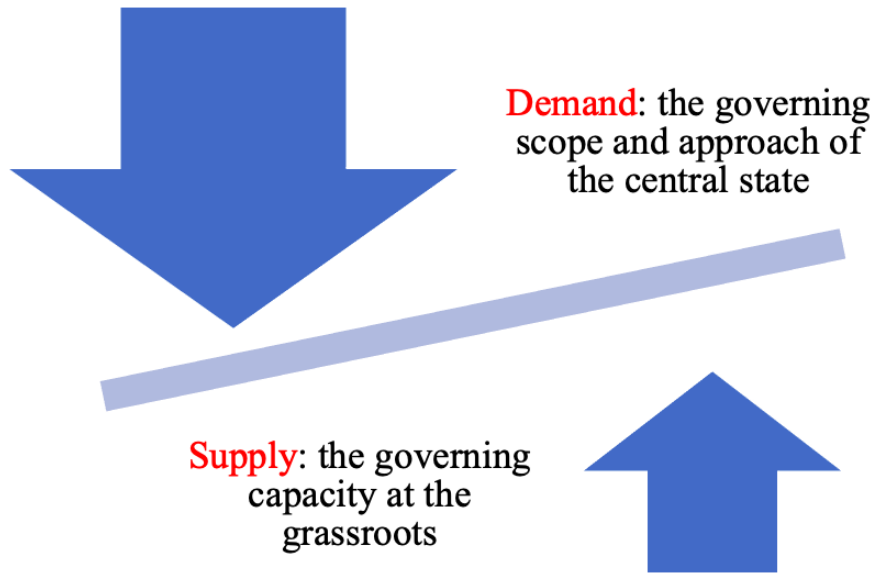
autonomy in self-governance.<sup>7</sup> But their consensus leaves the puzzle unsolved and even more perplexing – why is the system moving in the opposite direction? A more systematic, integrated, and theorized analysis is needed to understand both the supply-side and demand-side stories as well as the political dynamics at both micro- and macro-levels.

The analytical framework I propose explains bureaucratic overload through the *supply-and-demand dynamics* of state governance. The supply side refers to the governing capacity and resources (political, personnel, and fiscal) possessed by the grassroots bureaucracy whereas the demand side includes the governing ambition, scope, and approach of the central state. The core argument is that bureaucratic overload results from the increasing tension between the existing and declining governing capacity and resources available at the grassroots level and the expanding scope and totalistic approach of the central state. If the state's ambition exceeds its capability, then state capacity will be overstretched, and state actions are likely to undermine the actual quality of governance it seeks to achieve. What ultimately matters is less the absolute size of the state or its capacity than the gap between state capacity and the state's governing scope, complexity, and approach. Bureaucratic overload is a product of structural imbalances between the supply side and the demand side of state governance (See *Figure 2.1*). In the following sections, I will demonstrate that on the supply side, the grassroots bureaucracy faces deficiencies in political, personnel, and fiscal capacity, while on the demand side, the central authorities attempt to exert comprehensive control over both the masses and state agents.

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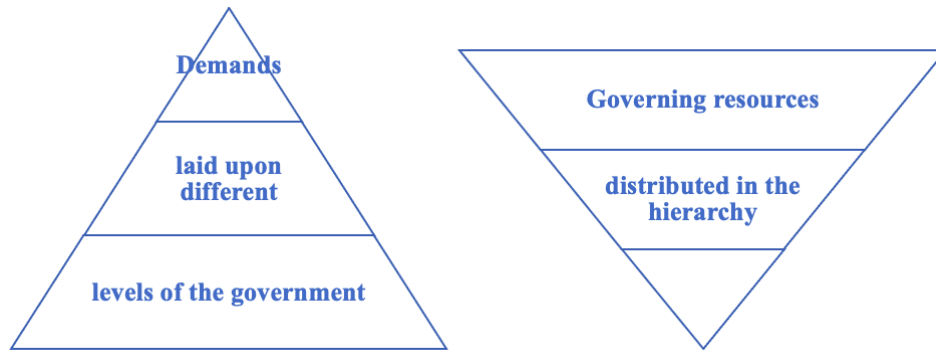
<sup>7</sup> 赵树凯 (Zhao Shukai), 《乡镇治理与政府制度化 (修订版)》 (*Township Governance and Government Institutionalization*), (The Commerical Press, 2018); 陈义媛 (Chen Yiyuan), “内卷化的基层政权悬浮 (Suspension of the Involved Grassroots Government),” *三农中国*, Aug. 9, 2021, retrieved from [http://www.snzg.cn/article/2021/0809/article\\_42620.html](http://www.snzg.cn/article/2021/0809/article_42620.html)

*Figure 2.1 The Supply-and-Demand Dynamics of State Governance*



This framework is attentive to intra-state or central-local dynamics by delving into the interaction between political actors at multiple levels of the hierarchy as well as the uneven distribution of governing demand and supply at different levels of the government. In the case of China, the governmental demand structure resembles a pyramid, for burdens increase further down the hierarchy. Officials at the grassroots must receive and implement policies, decrees, and requirements from the authorities at all upper levels. In contrast, the supply of governing resources and capability tends to concentrate and cumulate at higher levels of the government, and become increasingly scarce down the hierarchy, thereby forming an upside-down pyramid of the supply structure. By putting the two pyramids in parallel, *Figure 2.2* illustrates the mismatch between the structure of governing demand and the distribution of governing capacity within the Chinese party-state.

*Figure 2.2 The Mismatch between the Demand and Supply Structures*



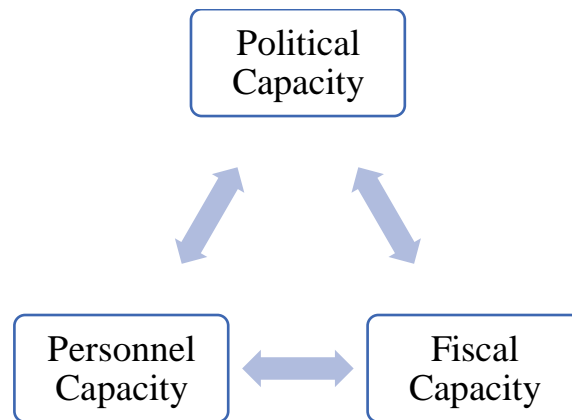
The variations in cadres' workload and job stress across different administrative levels, shown in the first chapter, can be explained by the pyramid-shaped structure of demand and supply in state governance. As government at upper levels generally faces fewer demands and pressures, yet is endowed with greater governing resources, it is not surprising that cadres in higher-level governments find their jobs to be less burdensome and stressful than those of their colleagues at lower levels. This also helps explain why township or street-level office bureaucrats report having harder jobs than village or neighborhood officials beneath them. Because villages and urban neighborhoods technically belong to self-governed units beyond the scope of the main party-state hierarchy (despite increasing bureaucratization and incorporation), township and street-level offices, as the lowest level of government, are actually at the bottom of the bureaucratic hierarchy. However, in terms of organizational structure and institutional completeness, the township or street-level office is only a "condensed" version of a "full" government. A county government, excluding all the CCP-related agencies (such as personnel, propaganda, and disciplinary departments), on average has 27-28 functional bureaus and

numerous affiliated organizations.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, a township or street-level government only has 13-14 offices or sub-divisions in total but needs to report and respond to twice that number of administrative and Party agencies at the county level.<sup>9</sup>

## The Supply Side – Governing Capacity at the Grassroots Level

Let us first examine the supply side, namely the governing capacity and resources available at the grassroots level. There are three interrelated dimensions of supply-side capacity – political, personnel, and fiscal – commonly referred to by local officials as power, people, and money.

*Figure 2.3 Three Dimensions of Governing Capacity*



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<sup>8</sup> For example, see the organizational structure of the government of Liuyang (浏阳), a county-level city in Hunan Province, on its official website: <http://www.liuyang.gov.cn/lyszf/xxgkml/> (accessed Feb 6, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the list of offices or sub-divisions of a township government (大围山镇 Daweishan) in Liuyang, Hunan at <http://www.liuyang.gov.cn/lyszf/xxgkml/xzjd/dwsz/zzjg/nsjg/> (accessed Feb 6, 2023).

### ***Political Capacity***

First, political capacity denotes the discretionary power or autonomy enjoyed by grassroots governing organizations in both decision-making and policy-implementing processes. Political capacity at the grassroots is determined by the degree of centralization in the hierarchical power structure (i.e., central-local relations). Decentralization and devolution of power empowers local cadres and increases their political efficacy, while centralization reduces local autonomy, rendering the decision-making process less participatory and limiting implementing toolkits deployed by grassroots agents. In a highly centralized bureaucracy, subordinates at the bottom of the hierarchy become mere implementers, without any bargaining power or agency of their own.

A lack of political capacity exacerbates the information problem found in all bureaucratic organizations. When higher-level governments are setting policy goals and designing targets and incentive schemes, they have a limited ability to understand the unique challenges of each locality. Grassroots agents possess the local knowledge necessary to facilitate successful policy implementation on the ground, especially in a large and diverse territory. Moreover, grassroots officials tend to have more realistic and pragmatic estimations about the necessity and feasibility of policy targets set by their superiors. As a result, an overcentralized system widens the gap between central intentions and local needs and makes a mismatch between policy requirements and local realities more likely. Depriving local cadres of sufficient political capacity has worsened information asymmetry in decision-making and rendered policy implementation a distorted and highly frustrating experience.

The protection of arable land, one of the major challenges faced by grassroots cadres in rural governance, is a telling example. As the central leadership has made ensuring food security

a national strategic goal, local and grassroots governments in the countryside are required to preserve certain grain fields and prevent the land from being converted to construction sites for commercial use.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, farmers are prohibited from planting non-food cash crops in designated grain fields.<sup>11</sup> Grassroots cadres are expected not only to bulldoze any non-grain planted in designated arable land, but also to mobilize and persuade villagers to plant grain there. Although this plan for food security may seem reasonable to central leaders, for rural grassroots cadres it runs counter to the local interest in rural economic development and often fails to achieve its goals.<sup>12</sup>

Rural residents have no economic incentive to plant grain. With procurement prices low and little state compensation for grain, it is much more profitable for villagers to either work in cities as migrant workers or plant cash crops. In addition, rural areas face a manpower shortage and infrastructure inadequacy for effectively planting grain. With continuing urbanization, there are simply not enough peasants left to engage in labor-intensive farming. Furthermore, in many villages, due to fiscal deficits, the agricultural infrastructure (canals, irrigation, roads, etc.) is outdated. Grassroots cadres understand that forcing farmers to plant grain goes against basic economic interests. Yet they have little bargaining power vis-à-vis the Ministry of Natural

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<sup>10</sup> 国务院办公厅 (The General Office of the PRC State Council): 《关于坚决制止耕地“非农化”行为的通知》 (Notice on the Absolute Prohibition of Non-agricultural Uses of Arable Land), September 2020.

<sup>11</sup> 国务院办公厅 (The General Office of the PRC State Council): 《关于防止耕地“非粮化”稳定粮食生产的意见》 (Opinion on the Prevention of Converting Arable Land to Stabilize Grain Production), November 2020.

<sup>12</sup> The field observation about the policy case mainly came from my interviews with local cadres in different rural areas across Hunan Province. Interviews in the field are coded by the following rules: [code for the interview location]-[date (yy/mm/dd)]-[code for the informant]. Interview codes: LD20210721PSJ, XX20211108WGL, CS20211116DMC, and CS20211116ZZR.

Resources, which now uses satellite surveillance to monitor nationwide land use and directly penalizes those who deviate from the spatial plan for national land.

Similar cases can be found in policy areas such as the COVID-19 pandemic control, social stability maintenance, rural poverty alleviation, and more. Grassroots cadres are so occupied with trying to fulfill top-down requirements that they have little remaining bandwidth to design and launch programs that are in the best interests of local development and welfare. Although higher-level authorities pay lip service to grassroots empowerment and capacity building (放权赋能 *fangquan funeng*), the governance system is moving in the opposite direction by further tightening control rather than loosening it.

### ***Personnel Capacity***

“We are so understaffed” is one of the most common statements I heard when talking with grassroots cadres. The talent deficit is evident in three areas: recruitment, personnel structure, and promotion prospects. Personnel capacity at the grassroots level of the bureaucracy has been profoundly shaped and severely restricted by both political and material incentives.

#### **(1) Recruitment**

It is an open secret that the grassroots has had difficulty attracting and retaining talent, especially young civil servants with a college degree. The primary problem lies in the Chinese communist time-honored *bianzhi* (编制) or nomenklatura system that assigns personnel quotas to every work unit and agency in the public sector. Though in theory the personnel quota of a township government is determined in proportion to the local population, *bianzhi* is highly path-dependent and fails to adapt to changing circumstances. Moreover, to prevent endless bureaucratic expansion, central authorities have capped the overall number of formal government

employees. Local *bianzhi* quotas can be internally reallocated among government agencies, but cannot expand.<sup>13</sup> Under this condition, township governments rarely have room to recruit new civil servants.

To make the situation worse, the small reservoir of talent at the grassroots level is constantly siphoned off by higher-level governments. County and municipal governments are also in desperate need of capable young cadres who are good at drafting documents and speeches and tabulating forms. Hence, superiors often “borrow” (借调 *jiediao*) young cadres from the grassroots in the name of emergency measures, but rarely do they let them return to their home institutions.<sup>14</sup> Under the rules of *bianzhi*, “borrowed” cadres count as personnel in their original agency; thus, even though they have been borrowed to work elsewhere, they still occupy a quota slot in the previous unit’s *bianzhi* and the home institution cannot hire new people to fill the vacancy. For instance, a township government in Guizhou Province has a personnel quota of 48 people, among which 9 cadres have been relocated to higher-level governments, meaning a loss of nearly 20% of its personnel.<sup>15</sup> Borrowed cadres, in their early thirties, are generally regarded as the backbone of their home agency. Borrowed cadres are usually happy to stay in their new offices, which often come with better prospects for career advancement. After all, most young cadres tend to view their work at the grassroots as a temporary stepping-stone to a higher-level position. Due to the extractive nature of the upper levels of personnel management and the quirks

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<sup>13</sup> The central document on *bianzhi* restriction: The Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council of PRC, 《中共中央办公厅 国务院办公厅 关于严格控制机构编制的通知》 (Notice on the Strict Restriction of Personnel Quotas of All Institutions), 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Interview code: LD20210719WSJ, LD20210719ZSJ.

<sup>15</sup> Information obtained from an internal report on the issues of grassroots governance written by one of my informants in Guizhou.



of the rules for siphoning off talent, it is difficult for grassroots governments to retain and recruit high-quality human capital.

## **(2) Personnel Structure**

In addition to difficulties in recruiting new talent, the existing personnel structure of the grassroots bureaucracy is far from optimal. In many locales the cadre population is aging, and many positions are occupied by unqualified people. The problem can be partially attributed to historical legacies. One issue is *chaobian* (超编), or overstepping quotas, which in an earlier era was a widespread tendency of exceeding the allocated staff quota at all levels.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in one county I visited in inland China, the *bianzhi* system had almost ceased to function in the 1990s and all township governments in the county were employing more personnel than the quota permitted. Due to the severity of *chaobian*, the central government cracked down, and township governments found themselves without spots for which to recruit new workers. The only way they can hire new cadres is to wait for existing middle-aged cadres to retire.<sup>17</sup>

Another historical legacy is the annual placement of military veterans in the grassroots bureaucracy, an obligation of local civilian governments required by the central state.<sup>18</sup> Veterans have become a stable, yet problematic, source of grassroots bureaucrats. Despite the absence of accurate and open information, it is estimated by local cadres that veterans cumulatively account for at least half of the bureaucratic workforce at the township level and in some localities as high

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed investigation of the Chinese Bianzhi system, see Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard, “The Institutional Reform and Bianzhi System in China,” *China Quarterly* 170, (2002): 361-386.

<sup>17</sup> Interview code: LD20210720CSJ

<sup>18</sup> The State Council of the PRC, 《退伍义务兵安置条例》(Regulations on the Placement of Conscripted Serviceman Veterans), Dec.12, 1987.

as 80 percent of grassroots cadres.<sup>19</sup> Among them, only a small proportion are former military officers (with ranks), who tend to be more capable and are usually assigned leadership positions in local civilian governments. The majority were conscripted servicemen (义务兵 *yiwubing*) with relatively low educational attainment who only served in the military for a short period. Local leaders tend to view them as incompetent and unhelpful. However, due to the “iron rice bowl” that comes with their military service, veterans-turned-cadres are not easily replaced regardless of their performance.

Some local leaders derided the personnel system as “three sluggish bystanders plus one diligent worker” (三懒加一勤 *sanlan jia yiqin*).<sup>20</sup> Cadres in the party-state system enjoy a certain level of personnel privileges: they can be excused from annual performance assessments; unless they violate the law or party discipline, they are safe from removal. An official’s comment attests to the point:

“In the township and street-level government, one-third of people probably do all the work, and the rest are simply paid to do nothing. But you cannot fire those people unless they commit crimes. Working in the system (体制内 *tizhinei*), nobody can mess with you as long as you don’t cross a red line. There is no elimination mechanism (淘汰机制 *taotai jizhi*), which is both the good and bad part of the system.”<sup>21</sup>

During my field trips, interviewees frequently pointed out the substantial number of unqualified cadres who underperform in their jobs. In my survey, I asked respondents to roughly estimate the competence of grassroots cadres and the educational attainment of their colleagues.

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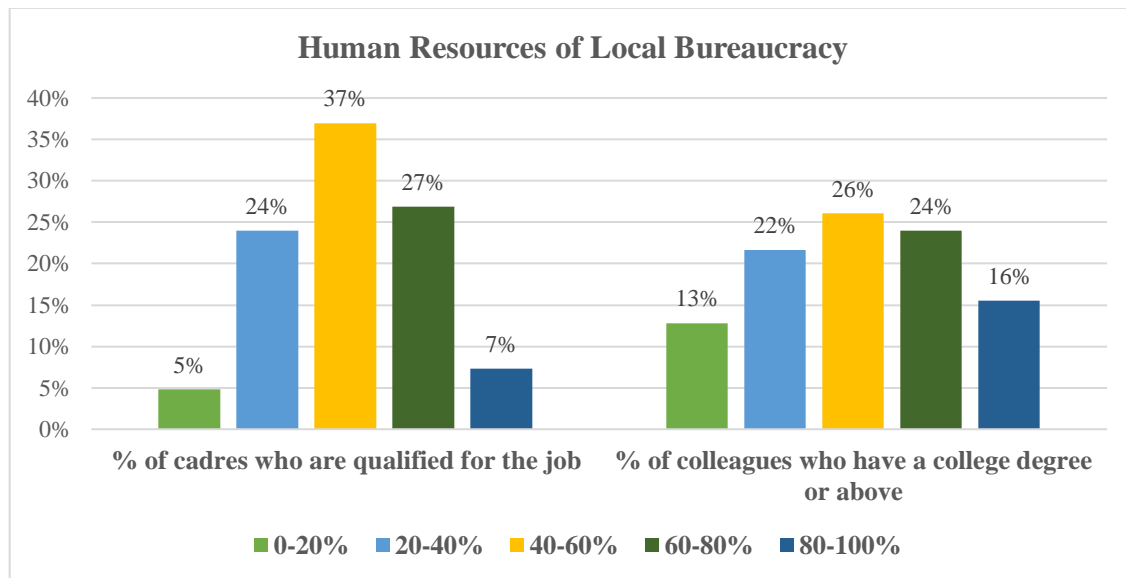
<sup>19</sup> Interview code: LD20210720CSJ, LD20210719WSJ/ZSJ, LD20210721PSJ

<sup>20</sup> Interview code: LD20210719WSJ/ZSJ, LD20210721TZZ

<sup>21</sup> “选调生自述,” 2021.

About one-third of survey respondents believe that less than 40% of grassroots cadres are qualified while another one-third think that 40-60% are competent. Only the remaining one-third have confidence in the qualification of more than 60% of the grassroots workforce (see *Figure 2.4*).

*Figure 2.4 Human Resources of Local Bureaucracy*



### (3) Promotion Prospects (Upward Political Mobility)

In addition to the quality of human resources, promotion prospects shape the ethos and morale of the grassroots bureaucracy. The lack of a competitive atmosphere and the difficulty in attracting new talent can be partly ascribed to the highly limited upward political mobility faced by grassroots cadres. Analyzing a sample of more than 300 section-level cadres (科级干部 *keji ganbu*) in the past five years in a county, researchers found that grassroots cadres face an obvious career ceiling and low probability of promotion. According to their calculation, the probability for a grassroots cadre to be promoted to the position of township leader, a section-level job, is between 12.5% and 13.5%; the probability of a section-level cadre being promoted

to county leadership, a bureau-level position (县处级 *xianchuji*), drops even lower, to 3.1 to 3.4%.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the majority of promotion candidates are not township cadres, but those already working in other county or municipal government agencies. In their dataset, the researchers found only one local cadre that had been successfully promoted from a township party secretary to a standing member of the county party committee (县委常委 *xianwei changwei*).<sup>23</sup> For most grassroots cadres the highest position they can ever achieve in their political career is a section-level job, which still involves a tortuous process – it is estimated that an entry-level cadre must climb 22 “career stairs” to become a township party head.<sup>24</sup>

Political mobility within the system is highly asymmetrical. Although it is extremely difficult for a grassroots leader to get promoted to a county or municipal position, cadres in a municipal department with the same rank can easily relocate (or be rotated to) a leadership position in the township government. As a result, very few key decision-makers at higher levels of the party-state have any direct working experience at the grassroots. Among leading cadres at the central level, only 15% worked in township government or below at any point in their careers, and less than one-quarter worked at the county level. At the provincial and municipal levels, the same pattern exists. In Hunan province, for example, only 6 out of 55 leading cadres have working experience at the grassroots level (township and village), and more than 70% never worked at the county level and below. In Changsha, the capital of Hunan, only one-third of

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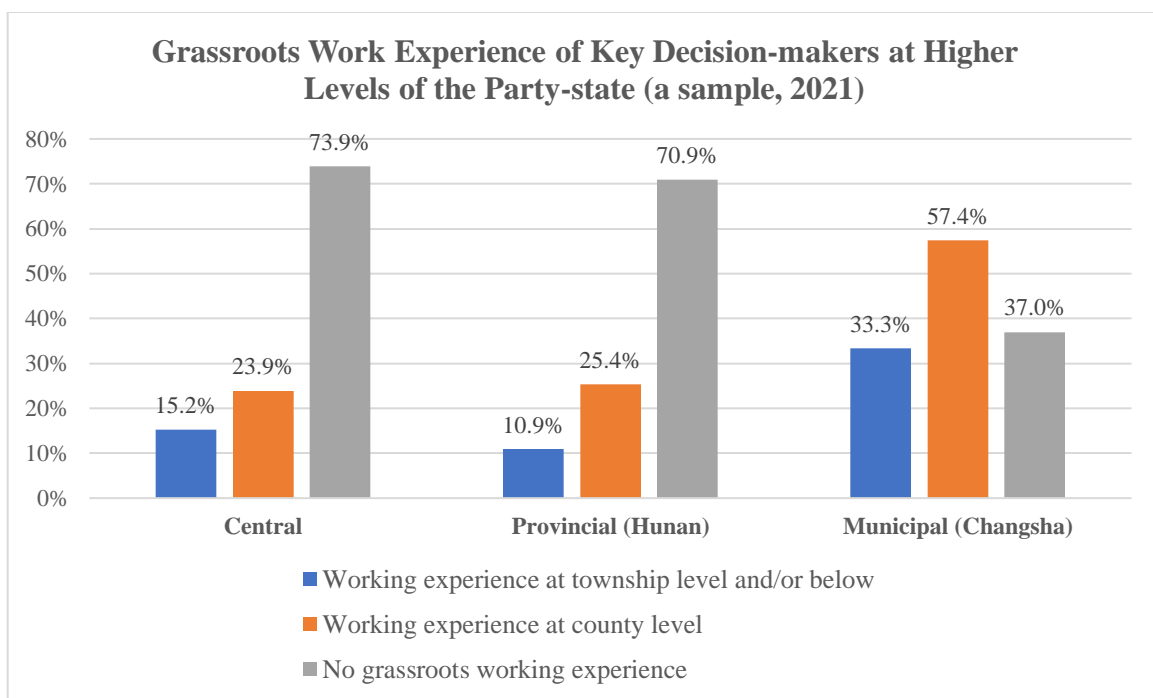
<sup>22</sup> 陈家建、赵阳 (Chen Jiajian and Zhao Yang): 《“科级天花板”: 县域治理领域视角下的基层官员晋升问题》 (“Section-level Ceiling”: the Problem of Official Promotion in County Governance), 《开放时代》 (*Open Times*), May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Interview code: LD20210721PSJ.

leading officials ever worked as grassroots cadres (see *Figure 2.5*). The bleak promotion prospects limit the effectiveness of career incentives for the grassroots bureaucracy, to the detriment of efficiency and creativity. Moreover, the general lack of direct work experience at the grassroots increases the likelihood that higher-ups will give instructions that are detached from local reality.

*Figure 2.5 Grassroots Work Experience of Decision-makers at Higher Levels*



*Note: Key decision-makers refer to leading cadres (party secretary and director) of both government functional departments and party organizations at each level of the hierarchy (excluding those whose resume information is not publicly available).<sup>25</sup>*

<sup>25</sup> Source: the data on working experience of the Chinese party-state cadres were collected and coded by the author based on public information about the officials' resumes in summer 2021. The author thanks Huang Hanjing for her research assistance in the data collection.

## *Fiscal Capacity*

Local fiscal strength and the ongoing anti-corruption campaign have also constrained material resources. As soft budget constraints harden, grey zones of income have been eliminated, and a variety of employment perks have disappeared for local cadres. To borrow grassroots cadres' own words, they now merely rely on a "frozen salary." In fact, they do have more than a fixed income when performance-related bonuses are included. However, in the eyes of the stakeholders, performance-based pay fails to serve its purpose. It has four categories – excellent, good, fair, and unqualified – depending on one's performance evaluation, but the monetary difference between different ranks is too small to effectively incentivize cadres (for instance, 2000 yuan/300 USD per year). Since the performance income structure, similar to the personnel quota, is determined by higher-level authorities, township leaders do not possess the autonomy to decide how to distribute bonuses among their own employees. "If we don't properly reward those who are diligent and decisively punish those who are shirking, how could we motivate cadres to make a difference?" questioned a township party secretary when discussing the inadequacies of the incentive structure.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to shrinking material gains, some grassroots cadres complain about poor workplace conditions. Again, due to the ongoing anti-corruption campaign, local governments are not permitted to construct or renovate buildings, offices, cafeterias, or other work-related facilities. Admittedly, workplace quality varies a great deal across localities, and some places were lucky enough to build new offices before austerity orders arrived. But many local governments are demotivated by the low-quality, run-down facilities where cadres must spend

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<sup>26</sup> Interview code: LD20210721PSJ

not just weekdays but also many weekends and holidays. Change in material inducements impacts bureaucratic behavior. Drawing on empirical evidence, Chinese scholars find that grassroots cadres, compared with higher-ranking officials, are more vulnerable and sensitive to decreasing material incentives. For lower-ranking bureaucrats at and below the township level, reduction in material inducements, rather than increased risks, is more likely to generate bureaucratic slack and lower passion for work.<sup>27</sup>

Fiscal capacity at the grassroots is closely correlated with the level of local economic development, which further constrains the personnel capacity of local bureaucracy. Fiscally strong governments in coastal regions are free to use considerable monetary compensation and first-class infrastructure to lure college and graduate students from top-notch universities to work at the grassroots.<sup>28</sup> But numerous inland localities are so fiscally feeble that their lifeline largely depends on transfers from higher levels. The abolishment of agricultural taxes in 2005 further reduced the revenue base of township governments that were already struggling fiscally and in heavy debt.<sup>29</sup> For instance, in one provincially designated poor county that I visited, township leaders are paid 70-80 thousand yuan (about 10,000-12,000 USD) a year, and the annual income for a village head is less than 20 thousand yuan (about 3,000 USD).<sup>30</sup> In addition to the

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<sup>27</sup> Wei Chen et al., “China’s Bureaucratic Slack: Material Inducements and Decision-Making Risks among Chinese Local Cadres,” *The China Journal* 89, no.1 Jan. 2023.

<sup>28</sup> See the news report on the recruitment of Tsinghua and Beida graduates as grassroots cadres in Yuhang district (2019 per capita GDP 249,900 yuan/38,446 USD) in the city of Huangzhou, Zhejiang. “街道办招 8 人，全是清华北大博士、硕士！这张图刷屏了，真相是...”，每日经济新闻 (*National Business Daily*), Aug.22, 2020, retrieved from <https://m.nbd.com.cn/articles/2020-08-22/1487524.html> (accessed 21 Sept, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> See Jean C. Oi and Zhao Shukai, “Fiscal Crisis in China’s Townships: Causes and Consequences,” in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman eds, *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (Harvard University Press, 2007): 75-96.

<sup>30</sup> Interview code: LD20210720CSJ

extremely low pay, village cadres are not even entitled to a pension, for they are not formal civil servants.

To make matters worse, three years of stringently managing the COVID-19 pandemic has further stretched the central and local fiscal capacity. China's budget deficit rose to a record \$1.3 trillion in 2022.<sup>31</sup> On one hand, local governments' land sales to real estate developers, a main revenue source, plummeted due to the looming property market crisis; on the other, spending demands of pandemic control skyrocketed under the Zero-COVID policy.<sup>32</sup> Together, these factors have intensified the financial crisis of local governments.

The survey results show that, in the eyes of local cadres, the grassroots bureaucracy is deficient in all three dimensions of governing capacity: political, personnel, and fiscal. Twenty-eight percent of respondents state that more local autonomy is "absolutely necessary," and 60% endorse "somewhat necessary," as opposed to 12% in the "unnecessary" camp. Seventy-seven percent believe that their organizations do not have sufficient personnel capacity to fulfill all the requirements, in contrast to 17% who think they have enough manpower. Financial shortages are relatively less severe than human resource shortages, perhaps due to larger regional variations in fiscal strength. Sixty percent believe the fiscal capacity of their work units falls short, while 24% feel confident in the financial resources of their organizations.<sup>33</sup> (see *Figure 2.6*)

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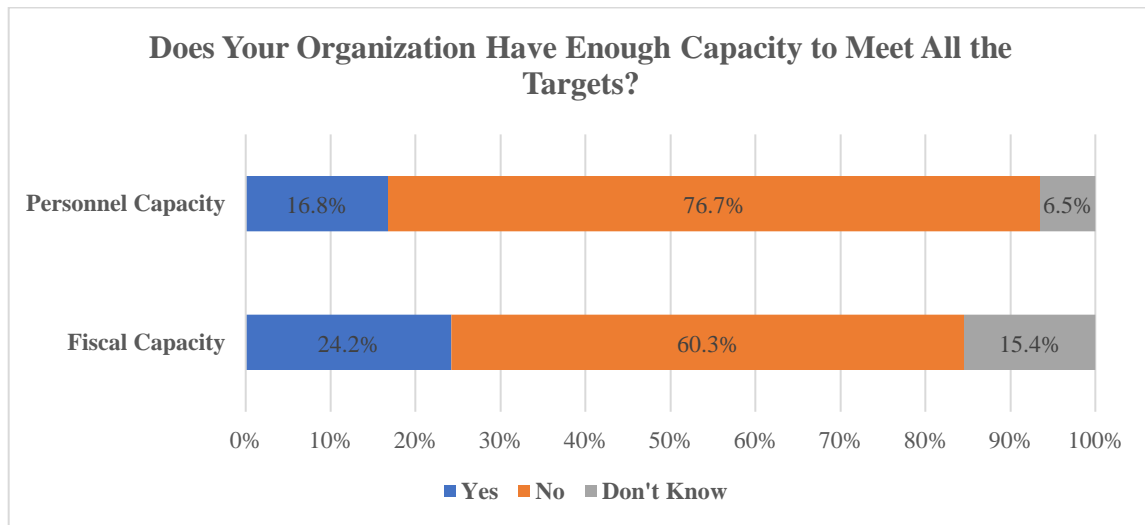
<sup>31</sup> "Covid Zero, Property Slump Drive China Into Record Deficit," *Bloomberg News*, Jan. 30, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Laura He, "One Chinese province spent \$22 billion on eliminating Covid before policy U-turn," *CNN*, Jan. 16, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Note that the nonresponse rate (i.e. % of respondents who chose the option "I don't know") for the fiscal capacity question is higher than the previous one on personnel capacity (15.4% vs. 6.5%), indicating it might require deeper knowledge about one's organization to have a clear idea about its financial situation.

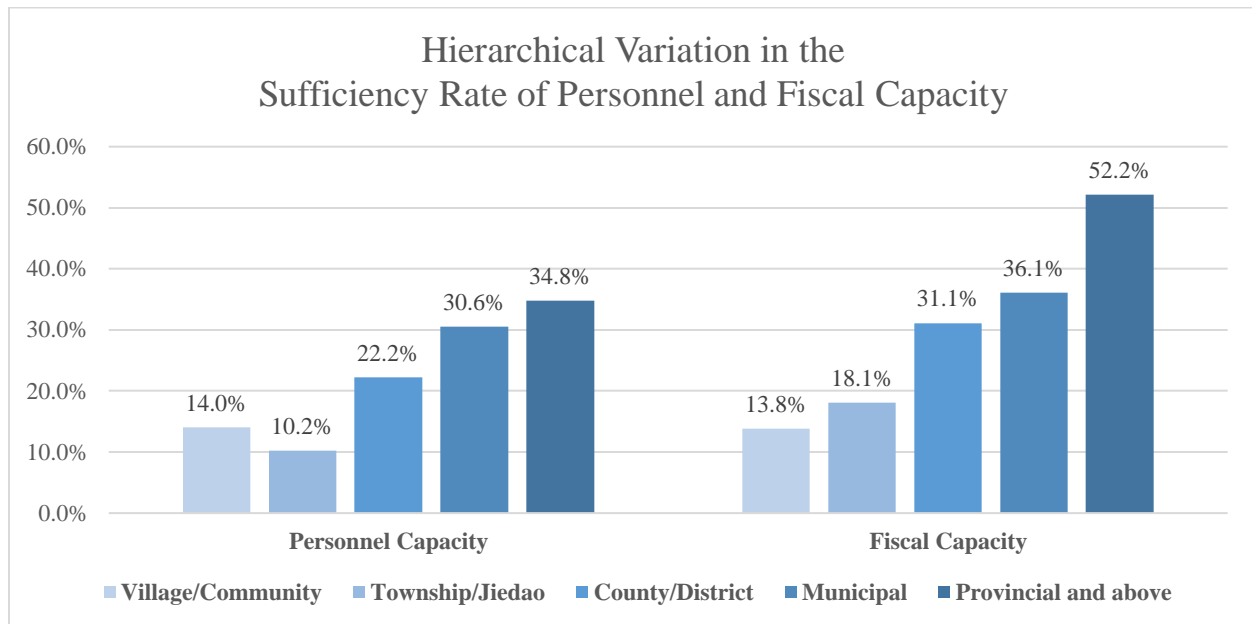


Figure 2.6 Personnel and Fiscal Capacity of Local Bureaucracy



These supply-side measures of governing resources, particularly the personnel capacity and fiscal capacity, reveal a similar pattern of hierarchical variation as the average job stress described in the first chapter. *Figure 2.7* displays the variation of personnel and fiscal capacities across different administrative levels, showing the upside-down pyramid-shaped distribution of the governing resources (i.e., the supply structure) in the party-state hierarchy. Township governments and street-level offices are the most understaffed, followed by villages and neighborhoods. As the government level increases, personnel capacity also increases, and the sufficiency rate (calculated as the mean of survey responses in which capacity is coded as 1 for sufficient and zero for insufficient) at the provincial level is more than three times that of the township level. Villages and neighborhoods face the worst financial situation and most of them are struggling fiscally (with less than 14% having enough money to carry out policies). By contrast, more than 52% of provincial departments or agencies meet the sufficiency standard.

Figure 2.7 Hierarchical Variation in Personnel and Fiscal Capacity



Both variation patterns are statistically significant. The personnel part: Pearson's Chi-squared test:  $X^2 = 20.466$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.0004041$ ; the fiscal part: Pearson's Chi-squared test:  $X^2 = 24.187$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 7.328e-05$ .

## The Demand Side – the Governing Scope and Approach of the Central State

The demand side focuses on the governing ambitions and mentalities of the central party-state. Demand can be investigated along external and internal dimensions, using the state as a reference point. The external dimension looks at state-society relations, especially the regime's goal of controlling the masses via state intervention and penetration into society. The internal dimension examines the party-state apparatus *per se*, particularly the regime's agenda of controlling its agents through internal party-building and bureaucratic management and reform. The central state's attempt to tighten control over both the populace and state agents is driven by its relentless search for security.

Before diving into the analysis, a note on why the demand side does not refer to public demands is in order. Theoretically speaking, the grassroots bureaucracy faces both top-down and

bottom-up pressures. However, as upward accountability, rather than downward or constituency accountability, dominates in the Chinese political system, top-down pressures remain the driving force in achieving any governance goals. Bottom-up pressures, in the forms of public opinion, collective action, and media advocacy, on most occasions, only matter and have the potential to affect cadre behavior when they catch the attention of higher authorities and then translate into leaders' directives. My survey data also attest to this bureaucratic mindset. Asked to identify job stressors, local cadres point to their higher-ups (chosen by 72% of respondents) as the greatest source of stress. Only one-third of cadres regard public opinion as a job stressor. In this sense, public demands should be factored into and work through the demands of the central state.

### ***The External Dimension: A Revival of the Totalistic State***

The expansion of the governing scope and depth of the state is characterized by a totalistic approach to governance or state totalism. The notion of “totalism” (全能主义 *quanneng zhuyi*) was conceptualized by political scientist Tsou Tang to delineate a particular form of state-society relations in which political power can unrestrictedly transcend, penetrate, and control every social stratum and domain at any time.<sup>34</sup> The totalistic system, Tsou argues, has the same origin as the Chinese social revolution: it is a response to the total crisis the nation was facing in the early twentieth century. Revolutionaries believed that only by constructing a powerful political institution or party and exercising its political power and organization to infiltrate and

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<sup>34</sup> 邹谠:《中国二十世纪政治与西方政治学》(Chinese Politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Western Political Science),《政治研究》(*Political Research*),1986年第3期;“后记:从传统权威政治系统到现代全能主义政治系统,”(Epilogue: From a Traditional Authoritarian System to a Modern Totalistic System)《二十世纪中国政治》(*Chinese Politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*) (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994).

control every class and domain could the nation be fundamentally transformed and rebuilt. In this sense, state totalism has been embedded in the Chinese party-state since the beginning of the social revolution.<sup>35</sup>

Building upon Tsou's conceptualization, I argue that the totalistic approach is essentially a governing mentality that views state power (in the Chinese case, it is the party-state power) as omnipresent and omnipotent and distrusts all other non-state players, such as the market and civil society, that can be involved in co-governance. It is a strong belief and a guiding principle held by rulers that the state should take charge of everything and can take care of everything. My goal here is not to conceptualize "totalism" as an alternative or competing notion to "totalitarianism." I borrow this term from Tsou mainly because I think its Chinese translation (全能主义, literally meaning "omnipotent-ism") better characterizes the governing mentality of the current leadership that believes in the party-state's mastery and therefore the unrestricted exercise of state power. I avoid using "totalitarian" to depict Xi's regime because it does not satisfy all the defining features of totalitarianism (such as ideological dominance, state planning of economy, mass mobilization) identified by Friedrich, Brzezinski, Linz, and others.<sup>36</sup>

Historically, Chinese imperial regimes adopted a minimalist approach to governance: the formal bureaucratic apparatus reached only the level of the county magistrate.<sup>37</sup> Except for

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Tsou Tang explained that he used *totalism* "to characterize only state-society relations so as to disentangle it from an implied automatic link to regime type." Tsou argued that the regime type and state-society relations are two separate dimensions of a political system; while the regime type remains the same, state-society relations can undergo important changes. The concept of *totalitarianism*, in his view, mistakenly lumps the regime type and state-society relations dimensions together. See Tsou Tang, "Interpreting the Revolution in China," *Modern China* 26, no.2 (2000): 235.

<sup>36</sup> See Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Philip C. C. Huang, "Centralized Minimalism: Semiformal Governance by Quasi Officials and Dispute Resolution in China," *Modern China* 34, no.1 (2008): 9-35.

public security, taxation, and conscription, community affairs and grassroots governance were largely left to the local gentry class and clans. The Communist takeover was both a regime transition and a social revolution; it sought to establish a totalistic system in which production and consumption were planned and in which the party-state governed every aspect of life. Deng Xiaoping's pragmatism in the reform period, however, left a crack in state totalism, granting more local and societal autonomy and economic freedom. However, in the past decade and particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping, tightening social control, rapidly shrinking civil society, and heavy-handed corporate governance signal a revival and even an upgrade of the totalistic state, bolstered by technological advancements.

Though fully investigating the resurgence of state totalism is beyond the scope of this study, we can at least suggest some clues. First, the supreme leader's personal characteristics play an important role in his obsession with regime security. Xi Jinping, as a "princeling" – the second generation of the founding revolutionaries, expresses a strong sense of responsibility to defend and maintain the "red dynasty" established by the blood and sweat of his father's generation. The collapse of Soviet Communism indicated the urgency of a totalistic approach to safeguard the CCP regime. Right after taking office, Xi ordered all party-state cadres to closely learn from the breakup of the Soviet Union and the downfall of the Soviet Communist Party to make sure the CCP wouldn't follow the same path. In an internal speech, he unleashed his anger and bitter resentment by saying that "No one in the entire USSR was man enough to defend the regime,"<sup>38</sup> revealing his strong emotional attachment to Communist rule.

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<sup>38</sup> In Chinese, "竟无一人是男儿, 没什么人出来抗争". Chinese State Media, *Qiushi*, published an excerpt of his internal speech, see [http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/bk/jx/2019-10/08/c\\_1125078819.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/bk/jx/2019-10/08/c_1125078819.htm) (accessed 2 May 2022).

Changes in China's international environment and domestic landscape have profoundly shaped the regime's threat perception and deepened the leader's sense of insecurity and crisis.<sup>39</sup> The trade war and escalating strategic competition with the United States has fueled concern about a looming new-Cold War. The threat of decoupling, strengthening of the US alliance system and instabilities in China's peripheries – political upheaval in Hong Kong, ethnic antagonism in Xinjiang, geopolitical risk across the Taiwan Strait – all have reinforced the CCP's belief that the “American Imperialists” are trying to sabotage the regime. Domestic economic downturn, compounded by the reverse course of globalization and pandemic-caused disruptions, has exacerbated the leader's sense of insecurity and crisis. Xi himself characterizes the current age as “a period of major change rarely seen in a century (百年未有之大变局 *bainian weiyou zhi dabiaoju*),”<sup>40</sup> resembling premier Li Hongzhang's assessment of the situation encountered by the late Qing court – the exact kind of total crisis that, according to Tsou Tang, had incubated a totalistic state.<sup>41</sup>

Though a new social revolution is probably not envisioned by Xi Jinping, putting everything under party-state control to eliminate all risk and concentrating power in the hands of a ruling group is the guiding governing mentality of the Communist Party.<sup>42</sup> The regime's desire

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<sup>39</sup> Susan Shirk, a China expert, argues that even before Xi's takeover, the CCP oligarchs and bureaucratic interest groups, what she calls the “control coalition,” had exaggerated international and domestic threats to boost their own power and pursue their own agenda. See Susan L. Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*, (Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>40</sup> See Xi Jinping's New Year Speech of 2019 (with English translation), retrieved from [https://www.sohu.com/a/285875519\\_256852](https://www.sohu.com/a/285875519_256852) (accessed 30 September 2021).

<sup>41</sup> “数千年未有之变局 (a period of major change rarely seen in thousands of years)” was stated by Li Hongzhang (李鸿章) in his memo (《因台湾事变筹画海防折》) to Emperor Guangxu in 1875.

<sup>42</sup> Selznick acutely points out the fundamental difference between the Communist Party and other political parties of democracies in that the former's “goal of total power necessarily entails the overthrow of a constitutional system

for a total hold on power and a monopoly of control over society is driven by an intrinsic sense of insecurity. Leaving a crack in power and evading the party's radar, be it NGOs, market actors, spiritual practices, digital space, or nascent industries, might allow an independent force to quietly grow big and influential enough to challenge and compete with the ultimate authority of the party. Telling examples in recent years include the crackdown on the video gaming and private education industries and the regulatory storm sweeping the Internet sector. Another concern of the leader is that those untamed forces might accumulate certain types of risk that would eventually threaten the power base of the party and regime stability, such as the considerable amount of personal data stored by IT giants and the financial instability created by real-estate and capitalist speculators. Hence, the insistence on absolute security and stability leads to absolute control.

In state-citizen interactions, a totalistic governing style can result in state overstretching. With the expansion of state governance and control, the responsibility of the state expands accordingly, which in turn increases public expectations of and dependency on the state. To respond to increasing public needs and demands, then, the government strives to become even more “omnipotent” and “omnipresent.” As the government moves from limited liability to unlimited liability, it imposes greater stress and burden on the bureaucracy, further stretching state capacity. As the state attempts to take care of everything, policy demands proliferate and many soft targets harden, rendering grassroots governance unfocused and unable to prioritize. As local cadres vividly describe, when every task becomes “central work”<sup>43</sup>, no work is truly

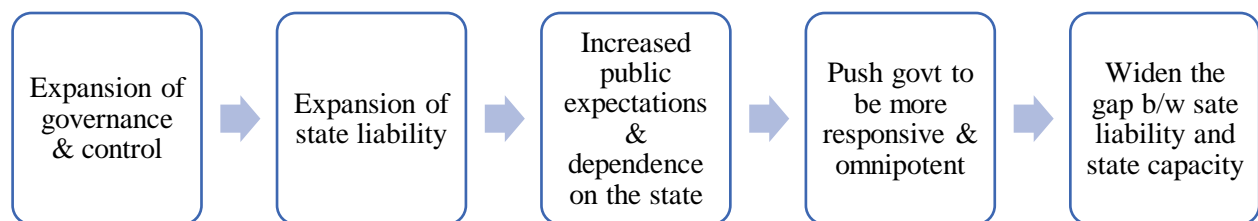
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granting only limited and temporary power to an elected government.” Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategies and Tactics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952).

<sup>43</sup> In Chinese: “每项工作都变成了中心工作.”

central, and the tempo of work is disrupted. The process eventually widens the gap between state capacity and state liability, thereby exacerbating bureaucratic overload (see *Figure 2.8*).

*Figure 2.8 State Totalism and Overstretching*



The pandemic control and lockdowns in China demonstrated the consequences of the totalistic approach. Guided by the Zero-COVID policy, China adopted a pandemic control strategy that was much more stringent than lockdowns in other countries. When a few cases of the virus were discovered, the entire city was put on a pause with public transportation suspended, public venues closed, roads and highways blocked by checkpoints, and people confined to residential compounds for long periods and only permitted to leave their houses during rounds of mass testing. By getting rid of market mechanisms, social spontaneity, and individual agency, the party-state in Shanghai and other cities during lockdowns turned itself into a totalistic state with unlimited liability. The totalistic state must feed and take care of millions of infantilized adults whose autonomy has been removed by the authorities. In this way, both risks and responsibilities are transferred onto the shoulders of the state. It is extremely difficult for any state to promptly respond to and satisfy huge numbers of urgent requests and idiosyncratic needs, no matter how confident leaders may feel in the state's mastery and no matter how stringently the grassroots workforce is mobilized and pushed to their limits. Public anger and discontent



mounted as collateral damage caused by lockdowns kept occurring, while at the same time frontline cadres were pressed to the brink of breakdown.

### ***The Internal Dimension: Management of the Party-State Apparatuses***

Shifting the attention from state-society relations to the internal management of the party-state apparatuses, we can discern two main pillars that uphold the regime's goal of controlling its agents: party-building and bureaucratic formalization.

#### **1. Strengthening the Party**

Party-building includes a series of systemic, institutionalized efforts to strengthen party organization and reassert the party's supremacy over the Chinese state and society. This includes (1) reinforcement of party discipline; (2) network expansion and organizational deepening; and (3) requirements on membership dedication.

Among these measures, leaders have prioritized reinforcing the principles and discipline of Leninist organization. For instance, if we compare the central document on the guiding principles of political life within the party in 1980 and the new version updated in 2016, the contrast could hardly be more striking.<sup>44</sup> The 1980 guidance, promulgated shortly after the Cultural Revolution, indicates a preference for intraparty democracy and collective leadership over centralism and autocracy; political tolerance and equality over radicalization and polarization; and consultation and debate over policy issues instead of personal arbitrariness and despotism. Conversely, the 2016 version puts unprecedented emphasis on the unified will, voice,

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<sup>44</sup> 中国共产党第十一届中央委员会 (The 11th Central Committee of the CCP): 《关于党内政治生活的若干准则》 (Principles of Political Life within the Party), 29 Feb. 1980; 中国共产党第十八届中央委员会 (The 18th Central Committee of the CCP): 《关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则》 (Principles of Political Life within the Party under New Circumstances), 27 Oct. 2016.

and action of the party, compliance with party discipline, and increased enforcement of central party commands. Moreover, if we pay attention to the verdicts against higher-level officials purged during Xi's anti-corruption campaign (especially during his second term), they are first found politically guilty of violating party discipline, unlike previous verdicts that highlighted corruption.<sup>45</sup> In the eyes of the party center, being politically submissive and conscious is even more important than staying clean and impartial.

In addition to reasserting Leninist discipline and organizational cohesiveness, expanding and building out the party's organizational network is another major effort. Studies have revealed the increasing role of party-building in the corporate governance of both state-owned and private enterprises.<sup>46</sup> For grassroots bureaucracy, party-building at the grassroots (基层党建 *jiceng dangjian*), or deepening organizational roots in rural villages and urban neighborhoods, has not only cost local officials substantial time and energy but has occupied a central position in their everyday work, as the official catchphrase implies, "grassroots governance guided by party-building."<sup>47</sup> Party leaders expect cadres to establish and publicize their own "party-building brands" (党建品牌 *dangjian pingpai*) with local, customized characteristics. As my survey indicates, local cadres now devote even more time to party-building activities, such as political

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<sup>45</sup> Compare the verdict of Bo Xilai in 2012 and that of Sun Zhengcai in 2017 (both fell from the position of Chongqing Party Secretary), the difference could not be more stark. See 《中共中央决定给予薄熙来开除党籍、开出公职处分》(The Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Expelling Bo Xilai from the Party and Dismissal from Office), *Xinhua News Agency*, Sept.28, 2012 and 《中共中央决定给予孙政才开除党籍、开出公职处分》(The Decision of the CCP Central Committee on Expelling Sun Zhengcai from the Party and Dismissal from Office), *Xinhua News Agency*, Sept.29, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance, Daniel Koss, "Party Building as Institutional Bricolage: Asserting Authority at the Business Frontier," *The China Quarterly* (2021): 1-22.

<sup>47</sup> In Chinese: "党建引领基层治理."

study sessions and visits to revolutionary sites, than to convening meetings. Change in the official performance evaluation metrics is another indicator of the party-building's rising importance. In 2014, a county authority assigned only 4 out of 100 points to party-building requirements when evaluating township governments. But by 2021, the proportion of party-building tasks increased from 4% to 26% in the total scores of township governments' end-of-year evaluation, surpassing the weight of "social stability and production safety."<sup>48</sup>

With the organizational network of the CCP having expanded into virtually all social domains and burrowed into the grassroots, greater emphasis has been put on membership dedication and personal commitment to the party cause. Being a Communist Party member today, regardless of one's initial motives for joining, is not merely a convenient identity. Instead, it is to dutifully behave as an "organization man/woman" by participating in party-building activities and study sessions on a regular basis as well as being mobilized to contribute to substantive governance tasks, ranging from rural poverty alleviation to patrolling urban neighborhoods. Xi Jinping reiterates that party members should never forget their initial beliefs and historic missions, echoing political sociologist Philip Selznick's take on the nature of cadres: "Communist cadres are dedicated men." Selznick, an observer of the Bolshevik party, insightfully points out that Communist members are not just adherents who agree with the party program, but *deployable personnel* who are "emotionally dedicated, physically mobile, and prepared to sacrifice time, career, and life itself."<sup>49</sup> To paraphrase John F. Kennedy, CCP

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<sup>48</sup> Information based on internal materials (a county government's annual performance evaluation metrics in multiple years) obtained from informants in inland China.

<sup>49</sup> Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategies and Tactics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952): 19-25.

members are instructed: “Ask not what the Party can do for you; ask what you can do for the Party.”



- (1) The photo on the upper left shows that the CCP members must publicize their political identity (“党员亮身份”) and serve as contact persons for their residential compounds;
- (2) the lower-left photo displays the structure of a party cell and the rights and obligations of the party members in the office of an urban resident committee;
- (3) the right one depicts a three-year action plan for party-building implemented by a village party branch (all taken by the author in the field, 2021-22).

## 2. Formalizing the Bureaucracy

Besides the overall strengthening of party organizations and greater demands on party members, the central leadership, aiming to “modernize the governing system and governing capacity of the Chinese state,”<sup>50</sup> has placed higher expectations and requirements on the bureaucratic workforce. To a large extent, these reform efforts are aimed at making the Chinese

<sup>50</sup> In Chinese: “中国国家治理体系与治理能力的现代化”.

bureaucracy formalized and Weberian. Bureaucratic operations are required to be more rule-based and sensitive to procedural legitimacy. Previously, local cadres were only expected to get things done regardless of the means exploited in the processes. Now their hands are tied by rules and the standardized implementation of policies.

Additionally, stress is now put on the documentation of bureaucratic operations, which serves two purposes. First, documentation contributes to government transparency, at least in theory. For instance, village organizations have to publish documents and materials on village finances, corporate businesses, collective decisions on major village affairs, construction projects, welfare programs, party-cell activities, membership fees, etc. on village bulletin boards. Similar requirements also apply to township and county governments.<sup>51</sup> Second, detailed record-keeping facilitates the performance evaluation and inspection system by which superiors and inspectors can easily check, if not verify, the key steps local cadres took in policy implementation. Not surprisingly, documentation requirements have substantially increased the workload of grassroots cadres. They now must not only achieve policy goals but also carefully document the exact process through which the policy was implemented. In the eyes of grassroots cadres, however, excess documentation (过度留痕 *guodu liuhen*) has created a situation in which the gesture of “doing something” outweighs the actual results of the action, contributing to the tendency of “performative governance”<sup>52</sup> within the bureaucracy. In other words, form triumphs over substance, and process replaces outcome. In the fifth chapter on “Varieties of

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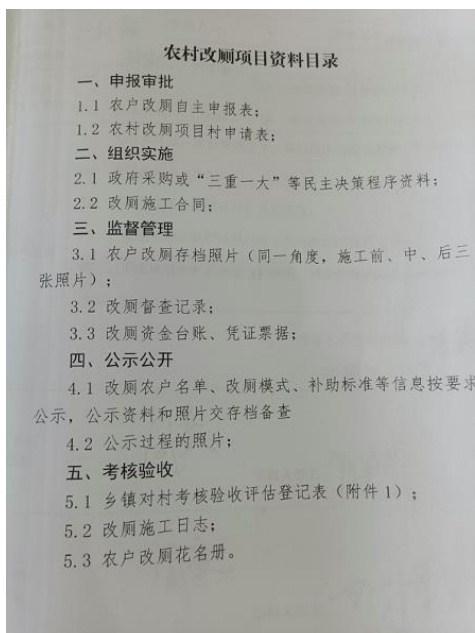
<sup>51</sup> 国务院办公厅 (The General Office of the State Council): 《关于全面推进基层政务公开标准化规范化工作的指导意见》 (Guidance on Comprehensively Enhancing the Standardization and Formalization of Grassroots Governance Transparency), Dec.26, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> See Iza Ding, *The Performative State: Public Scrutiny and Environmental Governance in China*, (Cornell University Press, 2022).

Formalism,” I conduct an in-depth analysis of the structural factors behind excessive documentation and other types of red tape that have plagued grassroots governance.



*Documents related to village governance and party affairs are published on bulletin boards in a village. Slogans on the bulletin boards read “let transparency be a normal state; bring power under supervision” (Photos were taken by the author in the field, 2021).*



*(1) On the left: a detailed catalog of required forms and materials in the rural toilet renovation program; (2) On the right: documents and ledgers compiled by a village for evaluation and inspection (photos taken by the author in the field, 2021-22).*

To make the bureaucratic apparatus more formal, standard, rule-bound, accountable, and responsive to public needs, the central state has solidified the hierarchy and intensified monitoring, inspection, and punishment for bureaucratic shirking and other misconduct. The managerial style of the Chinese state and particularly the demand on the grassroots bureaucracy is summarized by a prominent Chinese scholar as “four extremes” – the heaviest workload, the highest criteria, the strictest requirements, and the biggest time pressure.<sup>53</sup> Local cadres are expected to “do everything, do it best, do it right, and do it fast,” an approach that can dramatically drive up administrative costs and reduce flexibility and adaptability, rendering formalism inevitable.

Finally, a few words reflecting upon the relationship between the two main pillars of controlling the agents are in order. The ideology-oriented party-building and the Weberian management of the bureaucracy in fact contradict each other. There is an inherent tension between a Weberian ideal-type of bureaucracy based on legal-rational authority and the entrenched patrimonialism of the Chinese bureaucracy (as well as the charismatic elements of the expanded role for the party).<sup>54</sup> Strengthening the centralized, disciplined Leninist organization and political culture exacerbates negative “iron cage” tendencies intrinsic to the Weberian bureaucracy such as conformity, rigidity, red tape, and dehumanization, which Weber himself cautioned against. The relationship and interaction between a government’s bureaucracy and the political regime and institutional setting in which it operates deserve further attention.

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<sup>53</sup> 房宁：《“顶格管理”逼得基层搞形式主义》(Excessive Requirements Force the Grassroots Bureaucracy to Generate Formalism), 《北京日报》(*Beijing Daily*), Jun.8, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> See Xueguang Zhou, “Chinese Bureaucracy through Three Lenses: Weberian, Confucian, and Marchian,” *Management and Organization Review* 34, (2021): 1-28.

### 3. Centralization, Politicization, and Bureaucratization

To better understand what has happened inside the party-state, we can summarize the structural change in three intertwined processes – (1) the centralization of power and authority, (2) the politicization of administrative tasks, and (3) the bureaucratization of grassroots governance, among which the latter two processes are the natural consequences of centralization. Politicization and bureaucratization in turn help to perpetuate the centralized structure of power.

The centralization of power and authority requires two conditions: a unified political will and absolute enforcement in carrying out that will. Successful centralization must achieve two goals: First is to make sure the supreme leader's will is portrayed as the unified will of the ruling body (the Party center) and thus the general will of the regime; second is to make sure decisions and orders of the supreme leader are faithfully implemented down the hierarchy and on the ground.

The first goal entails the absence of a second voice speaking on behalf of the party. No dissent is tolerated. To achieve this goal the CCP has substantially strengthened the organizational discipline among its members and its supremacy over the Chinese state and society. The party constitution and laws make clear that the party's leadership is equivalent to the party center, and the party center is equivalent to Xi Jinping as the core leader. Insistence and reinforcement of the “comprehensive leadership of the party” essentially means a policy of “two defenses” – defending the authority of the party center, which necessitates defending Xi-the-Core, and never challenging the supremacy and ultimate authority of Xi Jinping.<sup>55</sup> The “two

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<sup>55</sup> “坚持和加强党的全面领导，最重要的是坚决维护党中央权威和集中统一领导；坚决维护党中央权威和集中统一领导，最关键的是坚决维护习近平总书记党中央的核心、全党的核心地位。” in 《中共中央关于加强党的政治建设的意见》 (Opinion of the Central Committee of the CCP on Strengthening Political Building of the Party), January 31, 2019.



defenses” are deemed to be the primary content of political discipline.<sup>56</sup> Every party member pledges to “support the Core, follow the Core, and defend the Core.”<sup>57</sup>

Additionally, the 2016 updated version of the “Principles of Intraparty Political Life” states that regarding all the major partywide and nationwide policy issues, only the party center has decision-making and interpretative authority, and departmental and local party branches and leading cadres can only make suggestions to the party center but are not allowed to make decisions and advocate their own statements without permission.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the Core’s voice epitomizes the unified authority of the Party leadership. Furthermore, it is embedded in the Principles that subordinates must resolutely enforce decisions and policies made by the party center regardless of any disagreement. After implementation, they can either reserve their own opinions or submit them to higher levels in accordance with approved organizational procedures.<sup>59</sup>

If a personalized authority and unified will are clear enough goals, implementation is much less certain. This can be seen as a classic principal-agent problem: to ensure effective enforcement, the center must increase both monitoring (by routinizing and frequently dispatching inspection teams) and the stakes of deviation and shirking (by heavily relying on accountability and punishment). Administrative tasks are increasingly likely to be labeled as political missions,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> In Chinese: “拥护核心、跟随核心、捍卫核心”, Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> The Central Committee of the CCP, 《关于新形势下党内政治生活的若干准则》 (On the Principles of Intraparty Political Life under the New Circumstances), October 27, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

and party-state agents in the hierarchy are subject to party discipline if they fail to put the supreme leader's words into action.

When a policy demand becomes a political mission, it is no longer part of routine administrative operations, but something that requires priority, greater attention, and more resources from local cadres. Most importantly, it now carries political consequences. Failure to implement the policy not only makes the superior question a cadre's competence but also raises doubts about the subordinate's political awareness, loyalty, and soundness<sup>60</sup>, suspicions which could prove fatal for party-state officials under the current atmosphere.

Previously, the party secretary of a locality only needed to take charge of the most important and central task within the jurisdiction, namely socio-economic development, by designing preferential policies to attract investment and putting the right people in the right positions to achieve that goal (i.e., the use of personnel power). Secondary tasks were taken care of by deputies. However, under the politicization of administrative tasks, the realization of almost every policy goal and implementation of demands from higher levels are closely tied to the political career of the party head.<sup>61</sup> The party secretary is now responsible for everything happening within his/her jurisdiction, despite the person's limited attention, time, and energy. For party heads, the "diffusion of accountability" (问责泛化 *wenze fanhua*) naturally increases their motives to minimize risk and deflect blame by prodding their underlings to get things done by any means. Since party secretaries possess important personnel power in deciding

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<sup>60</sup> In Chinese: “政治觉悟” and “政治站位”.

<sup>61</sup> In Chinese: “一把手负责”, or “一把手工程”.

promotions, overloaded subordinates, for the sake of their career advancement, dare not challenge their boss.<sup>62</sup>

Fundamentally, politicization means that an official in the Chinese party-state has a dual identity (as in the “politicalized bureaucracy,” a term coined by Ezra Vogel half a century ago).<sup>63</sup> A cadre is not just a position-holder in the bureaucratic hierarchy who must comply with administrative rules and a superior’s directives, but essentially, he or she is a member of the highly disciplined, centralized political organization, the CCP. Political membership outweighs a cadre’s administrative identity. The Chinese bureaucracy is by nature partisan, and cadre behavior and performance in the administrative arena are subject to the party constitution and regulations. Bureaucrats must demonstrate their loyalty in order to gain trust from the party center, especially the central party secretary, through resolute enforcement of central orders.

The rise of the politicized bureaucracy is evident more broadly. Villages and neighborhoods, which are grassroots “autonomous” units, are much less autonomous than before.<sup>64</sup> With rapidly shrinking space for autonomy and agency, nominally self-governed

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<sup>62</sup> Insights on the changing responsibilities of party secretaries, the diffused accountability, and consequences on bureaucratic operations are obtained from conversations with cadres who worked in township governments and local party secretaries, former and incumbent. Interview code: GZ20210525WP, LD20210721LSJ, LD20210721PSJ.

<sup>63</sup> Ezra F. Vogel, “Politicalized Bureaucracy: Communist China,” in Cohen and Shapiro ed., *Communist Systems in Comparative Perspectives*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1974): 160-170.

<sup>64</sup> Though the self-government of grassroots organizations might be a myth from the very beginning, the Party dominance has further eroded the remaining grassroots democracy. The CCP strengthens control at the expense of democratic institutions at the grassroots, exemplified by the requirement that the village party secretary and the director of the village committee (村主任 *cunzhuren*) being the same person (“一肩挑” *yijiantiao*) who is appointed by higher-level authorities rather than popularly elected (the same rule applies to urban neighborhoods). Village elections have fewer substantive meanings, and the party secretary represents the trinity of political, administrative, and economic power in a village. See the Central Committee of the CCP, 《中国共产党农村工作条例》 (Regulations of the CCP’s Rural Work), Sept. 1, 2019. For the scholarly analysis of *yijiantiao* policy, see Yanhua Deng, “The Party Rules All: The Policy of Multiple-position Holding and Its Implementation in Rural China,” in Jacques Delisle & Guobing Yang, ed., *The Party Leads All* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2022).

grassroots organizations have been fully incorporated into the giant party-state bureaucracy. They have been reduced to mere implementers at the bottom of the hierarchy, mechanically receiving orders from higher-ups and carrying them out to the letter. Bureaucratization alienates grassroots cadres by shifting their role expectation from citizen agents to state agents, thereby making them more detached from their fellow residents. Similarly, we can observe a trend of politicizing professional institutions such as universities, hospitals, banks, mass associations, and state-owned enterprises: professional criteria are increasingly subject to “political correctness.” The politicization generates bureaucratization, since the political stakes reduce professionals to risk-averse rule-followers. Not surprisingly, red tape and formalism have skyrocketed as self-protective ways to cope with soaring political risk and accountability.

### ***Campaign Fatigue***

Another important factor in the demand side of the equation of state governance is the launching of multiple *campaigns*. Besides the structural changes of centralization, politicization, and bureaucratization, the “new era” under Xi’s rule is also characterized by the intensification and routinization of campaign-style governance and the concomitant “campaign fatigue” among local bureaucrats.<sup>65</sup>

*Table 2.1* shows the configuration of varied kinds of campaigns in different periods in PRC history. I roughly categorize major campaigns into four types: (1) developmental campaigns, aimed at achieving agricultural and/or industrial modernization and other grand social transformative goals; (2) disciplinary campaigns, mainly targeting bureaucratic misconduct among party-state agents and illegal activities in the social domain; (3) ideological

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<sup>65</sup> I am indebted to Professor Elizabeth Perry for her comments and suggestions that inspired many ideas presented in this section.

campaigns, marked by intensive class struggle, ideological indoctrination, political study, and party-building activities; and (4) public health campaigns, launched to address public health emergencies or crises, such as epidemics.

*Table 2.1 Major Campaigns in PRC History*

	<b>Developmental Campaign</b>	<b>Disciplinary Campaign</b>	<b>Ideological Campaign</b>	<b>Public Health Campaign</b>
<b>Mao</b>	Collectivization (1953-57) Great Leap Forward (1958-61) Learn from <i>Dazhai</i> in Agriculture (1963-78)	Three Antis & Five Antis (1951-52) Four Clean-ups (1963-65)	Anti-rightist (1957) Anti-right Leaning (1959) Cultural Revolution (1966-76)	Four Pests Campaign (1958-62)
<b>Deng</b>		Strike Hard Against Crime (1983-86)	Anti-Spiritual Pollution (1983) Anti-Capitalist Liberalization (1987)	
<b>Jiang</b>			Patriotic Education (1994-?) Three Stresses (1996-2000) Three Represents (2002)	
<b>Hu</b>	Constructing a New Socialist Countryside (2005-2010)		Scientific Outlook of Development (2003) Harmonious Society (2004) 保持党员先进性教育 <sup>66</sup> (2005-6) 8 Honors & 8 Shames (2006)	SARS (2003)
<b>Xi</b>	Precision Poverty Alleviation (2015-2020) Rural Revitalization (2018-now)	Anti-corruption (2013-now) Sweeping Black (2018-2021)	The Mass Line (2013-14) 三严三实 <sup>67</sup> (2015) 两学一做 <sup>68</sup> (2016) 不忘初心、牢记使命 <sup>69</sup> (2019) Learning the CCP History (2021)	Covid-19/Zero-COVID (2020-2022)

<sup>66</sup> “Maintain the Advanced Nature of Communist Party Members”

<sup>67</sup> The campaign is officially translated as the “3+3 Initiative” – it calls on party-state cadres to be “strict with themselves in self-cultivation, in the exercise of power, and in self-discipline, and act in good faith when performing official duties, taking initiatives, and interacting with others.”

<sup>68</sup> “Two Studies, One Action” – all the CCP members are asked to study the Party constitutions and rules as well as Xi Jinping’s remarks and become qualified Party members.

<sup>69</sup> “Remain true to the original aspiration and keep the Party’s founding mission in mind”

We can find that both the Mao and Xi eras have no shortage of all four categories of campaigns. In comparison, in the Deng, Jiang, and Hu periods, lacking at least one type of campaign, the overall intensity of campaigns was much lower. Though the Xi era is reminiscent of Maoist days, there are some significant differences in terms of campaign configuration and the nature of campaign management.

In Maoist China, most campaigns were sequential and cyclical – a disciplinary campaign (e.g. the Four Clean-ups) after a developmental one (e.g. the Great Leap Forward) and then followed by an ideological one (e.g. the Cultural Revolution). It was relatively rare that cadres and the masses found themselves overwhelmed by several campaigns at the same time. As A. Doak Barnett observed, the rhythm of cadres' life and work was largely determined by campaign cycles – tension and exhaustion during a campaign period and relaxation during the interval between campaigns.<sup>70</sup>

However, under Xi's leadership with prolonged and routinized campaigns, local bureaucrats are simultaneously subject to the pressure of multiple campaigns. For instance, a rural cadre in 2021, not yet catching her breath after the exhaustive anti-poverty campaign, had to start implementing a new round of policies to revitalize the countryside; she also needed to carefully follow the rule-bound procedures to avoid penalties in the ongoing anti-corruption campaign and devoted a substantial amount of time to study sessions, learning the CCP's glorious history to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Party's founding; and at the same time to comply with the strict Zero-COVID policy, she was obliged to make sure that none of her villagers contracted the coronavirus. The combination of developmental, disciplinary,

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<sup>70</sup> A. Doak Barnett, *Cadre, Bureaucracy, and Political Power in Communist China*, (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967): 70.

ideological, and public health campaigns has greatly increased the demands and strain on grassroots cadres.

The other major difference lies in the changing nature of campaign management. Elizabeth Perry points out that, unlike the Maoist mass movements, managed campaigns in the post-Mao period have largely reduced the extent of mass involvement and enthusiasm. As Perry observes, “These days it is grassroots officials, rather than ordinary peasants, who appear to be the main objects and actors in state-managed campaigns.”<sup>71</sup> With the campaign method shifting from mass mobilization to bureaucratic mobilization, grassroots cadres have been put under great pressure to realize demanding campaign targets. Additionally, the intensive mobilization of bureaucratic resources leads to the diffusion of pressure across the entire party-state apparatus. As a result, local bureaucrats in agencies/departments only remotely related to agriculture are often burdened with numerous anti-poverty and rural development tasks in addition to their regular, routine work. However, as I will elaborate in the next chapter on rural governance, due to the low level of public participation and marginalization of peasants in those developmental campaigns, despite the enormous effort of grassroots cadres, the campaign results are not well received by the masses.

Perhaps the campaign-mode governance, a time-honored strategy of the Leninist organization, is perceived by Xi, a good student of Mao, as a convenient weapon to combat bureaucratic rigidity and resistance. Ironically, however, the prolongation and routinization of campaigns, and the attendant fatigue, may well end up making bureaucratic inertia even worse.

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<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, “From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: ‘Constructing a New Socialist Countryside’,” in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry ed., *Mao’s Invisible Hand*, (Harvard University Asia Center, 2011): 50.

## Conclusion

As a response to the growing perceived threats to regime security, the authoritarian leadership has reinvigorated a totalistic approach to governance. The ruling authority attempts to monopolize its influence over the populace via further state penetration into society and better command its agents by strengthening the Party organization and formalizing the bureaucratic apparatus. During these processes, state liability expands with its scope and depth of control. Increasing public expectations of and reliance on the state prompts the government to be more responsive and interventionist, imposing heavier burdens on the grassroots workforce. The gap between limited state capacity and ambitious state expansion widens.

The grassroots bureaucracy, with insufficient political, personnel, and fiscal capacities, is ill-equipped for the totalistic governing approach adopted by the central state. Perpetual stress and soaring demands lead to bureaucratic overload that not only impedes the well-being of local cadres by inducing burnout at the individual level, but also undermines governance outcomes by generating bureaucratic involution at the collective level. Lack of an institutionalized feedback loop (i.e. the upstream communication channel and participatory management) prevents the system from effectively calibrating its governing scope and approach. Hence, the top-down reaction and adjustments, exemplified by central initiatives to alleviate the burden on grassroots cadres, lag behind actual circumstances and prove ineffective in reducing the bureaucratic workload.

The central leadership, distrustful of its local agents, has responded with centralization. Tightened monitoring, control, punishment, and elimination of local autonomy and discretionary power has politicized and bureaucratized grassroots governance, heightening local cadres' inclination toward risk aversion and blame avoidance. The outcome is either inaction or



overperformance, depending on one's self-protective coping strategy. Red tape and formal procedural hoops proliferate. Those bureaucratic behaviors, in turn, exacerbate the trust deficit, creating a vicious cycle. Though it is too early to foretell an inflection point, the sustainability of the overall governing system is far from certain.

## ***Chapter 3***

### ***Rural Governance***

To delve into the operations of the Chinese party-state at the grassroots level, let us first turn to the countryside. To understand changes in rural grassroots governance, it is helpful first to review briefly the evolution of state-rural society relations in the Reform period. Rural reform from the late 1970s to the early 1980s – characterized by de-collectivization, marketization, and decentralization – had temporarily freed the Chinese countryside from the heavy-handed, intrusive party-state power. Though the rural sector had experienced considerable development, the urban-rural gap kept widening due to the extractive nature of the central agricultural policy and its urban bias. On one hand, the peasants' heavy burdens (increasing taxes and fees) led to more protests and rural unrest; on the other, the poor capacity of local governments to deliver public goods and services hastened the outmigration of the rural population and the hollowing-out of villages.<sup>1</sup> To address urban-rural disparities, after the historic abolition of agricultural taxes in 2006, the central state started to pour resources into rural areas that had long been exploited and squeezed to support industrialization and urban development. State-rural society

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<sup>1</sup> Kristen E. Looney, *Mobilizing for Development: Modernization of Rural East Asia*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2020): 117-125.

relations then gradually transformed from predatory extraction of economic resources from peasants to providing peasants with public goods and services.<sup>2</sup>

The Hu Jintao administration launched the campaign of Building a New Socialist Countryside and extended the social welfare regime to rural areas. Then Xi Jinping pledged to eliminate extreme poverty in rural China through his signature “Precision Poverty Alleviation” program and designed a national blueprint to revitalize the countryside eroded by emigration and environmental degradation. Driven by the national policies and “top-level design,” township and village cadres now find their governance tasks and duties substantially expanded, as the state’s intervention in the rural economy and people’s daily lives deepens. With more resources being channeled to the countryside, the central state tightens control and monitoring of local and grassroots bureaucrats to prevent misuse and embezzlement of government funds. With reduced autonomy and spontaneity on the part of rural officials, policy implementation becomes increasingly standardized, formalized, and rule-bound. Though village cadres have no longer been bothered with tax collection and family planning enforcement, the expansion of bureaucratic burdens and tightened top-down control has disrupted the tempo of rural governance and led to a loss of focus and priorities.

This chapter proceeds as follows: in the first section, I discuss the bureaucratization of village governance, manifested in personnel management, operational mode, and administrative delegation, and then I zoom in on the strengthened supervision of village finance. Grassroots cadres not only face stricter rules to govern villages in a more standardized fashion and more transparently, but they also shoulder greater responsibilities to implement developmental and

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<sup>2</sup> An Chen, *The Transformation of Governance in Rural China: Market, Finance, and Political Authority*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

social transformative policies to realize the state's blueprint. In the two following sections, I scrutinize two specific policy interventions of the Rural Revitalization Strategy: living environment management (including village beautification and the toilet revolution) and transformation of the traditional way of life. With greater government investment in the countryside, the party-state has broadened its interference in rural life, forcing on the rural populace its own modernized vision regardless of peasants' real needs or even their acceptance. Due to the marginalization of peasants in rural governance, the hard work of grassroots cadres has not been rewarded with public approval. Despite a highly centralized power structure, grassroots cadres have not completely lost their agency. In the fourth section, I recount a village case where the leadership successfully cultivated communal development and mass participation via governance innovation. In the final section, I examine the organizational infrastructure that has enabled the party-state's penetration into grassroots society – the work team mechanism and the combination of party-building and grid management.

## **Bureaucratizing Village Governance**

As Chinese scholars of rural studies observe, the party-state has not only invested enormous resources in the countryside but also imposed more rules, monitoring, and control upon rural governance.<sup>3</sup> With villages' growing fiscal dependence on the state, the bureaucratic incorporation of grassroots "self-governing" organizations into the party-state has deepened. The bureaucratization of village governance is manifested in several aspects, including personnel

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<sup>3</sup> 贺雪峰 (He Xuefeng): 《规则下乡与治理内卷化》 (Rules Go Down to the Countryside and Governance Involution), 《社会科学》 (*Social Science*), 2019 年第 4 期。

management, rule-bound operations, and delegation of administrative functions to the village level. For personnel management, village cadres have become professional bureaucrats, being transformed from part-time jobs with token subsidies to full-time, salaried employment with specific job descriptions and subject to top-down performance assessments.<sup>4</sup> Before, as village authorities often had their own business and agricultural production to take care of, they did not need to show up and stay in the office. Since 2015, many local governments began to require village cadres to keep regular office hours every day (村干部坐班制 *cunganbu zuobanzhi*).

Village officials are also expected to govern in a more rule-based and transparent manner, being attentive to procedural legitimacy and careful documentation. When the policy implementation was result-oriented with little emphasis on formalization, grassroots governments enjoyed sufficient leeway to meet policy goals by any means including coercion and violence. As a former township leader recalls, in the 1990s, with peasants increasingly reluctant to pay taxes and fees, the state implicitly permitted local administrations to use coercive measures during tax collection.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in family planning enforcement, if a household violated the birth control quota, grassroots cadres usually confiscated their means and materials of production to force the wife to undergo an abortion and/or require the husband to undergo a sterilization operation.<sup>6</sup> Now village leaders must pay close attention to the protocol and meticulously record every step of implementation to prove that they have carried out policies acceptably.

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<sup>4</sup> See Tan Zhao, “Professionalizing China’s Rural Cadres,” *The China Journal* 89, no.1 Jan. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> 李万忠 (Li Wangzhong): 《乡镇干部手记: 中国乡村治理中鲜为人知的实况 (1990-2017)》(*Notes from a Township Cadre: Less Known Stories of Rural Governance in China from 1990 to 2017*), (知识产权出版社, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. & Field interview: YZ20210511HJZ

In addition, with the goal of improving rural public service provisions, higher authorities have passed down many administrative obligations to grassroots units. In every village headquarters (now called “village service centers”), desks and windows have been set up to offer public services, such as social welfare applications and certificate issuance, so that villagers no longer need to travel a long distance to upper-level governments.

In this section, I investigate the financial operation of grassroots governing units, which has been substantially standardized and regulated under strict government requirements. Though the central authorities had begun to encourage transparency and openness of village governance (村务公开 *cunwu gongkai*) in the early 2000s, the frequency and quality of publicized data varied considerably across localities and villages.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the targeted audience was largely limited to villagers, who might lack the knowledge to discern any data manipulation, as village cadres were only required to publish relevant information on bulletin boards near the village headquarters. Now, facilitated and pressured by digitalization, grassroots governments, especially in their handling of financial resources, are subject to much greater top-down and public supervision.

In Hunan, for instance, the online public platform of “Internet + Supervision” (互联网+监督 *hulianwang + jiandu*), overseen by the provincial Commission of Discipline and Inspection, exemplifies the government’s effort to formalize grassroots governance.<sup>8</sup> On the “Village Finance” webpage, one can search the name of any administrative village or urban

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Levy, “Village Elections, Transparency, and Anticorruption: Henan and Guangdong Provinces,” in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, ed., *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2007): 37-42.

<sup>8</sup> The online platform can be accessed by following a WeChat official account called “Sanxiang E-Supervision” (三湘 e 监督) on the app of WeChat.

neighborhood in the province and have access to detailed financial information, including the itemized account of monthly revenue and expenditure, balance sheet, assets, and liabilities at the village level. For each item of expenditure, the public can find information about its amount, name, category, and specific purpose, and a photocopy of the official receipt or other supporting materials is attached. Similarly, for every item of income, the website specifies the source and usage.



The online platform “Internet + Supervision” of Hunan Province through which citizens can have access to financial information of grassroots governing organizations.

As an illustration, I inquired about Jingshen Village (静慎村) in the Wangcheng District, Changsha, which I visited during my field research. Among the village expenditures in August 2022, there was an amount of 2,000 yuan expended as a handout to a CCP member in hardship (see the screenshots below). The attached supporting document not only records the name, address, description, and phone number of the aid recipient, but also contains 11 signatures from

the recipient, the accountant (经手人 *jingshouren*), two witnesses (证明人 *zhengmingren*), two cadres who verified the expense (审核人 *shenheren*), and five members of the Village Affairs Supervision Committee (村务监督委员会 *cunwu jiandu yuanweihui*) as well as three official stamps. This is just one item randomly picked from the list. Every entry of the expenditure comes with detailed proof to minimize the possibility of fraud and petty corruption. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine the amount of time and energy that village cadres must spend on documenting, compiling, inputting, and uploading the required information.

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所属地区 长沙市>望城区>茶亭镇>静慎村

支出类型 其他管理费用

支出名称 慰问款

支出金额 2000.00元

支出日期 2022-08-31

经办人 肖建军

摘要 付2022年8月困难党员帮扶慰问

发票





Detailed information and the supporting document about an itemized expenditure in a village

As an important component of supervising the “village-level micro-power” (村级小微权力 *cunji xiaowei quanli*), financial transparency has been included in the performance evaluation



metrics of village organizations.<sup>9</sup> If a village failed to report its financial records to the platform promptly, accurately, and comprehensively on a monthly basis, it would have its points deducted, and when the overall score is below a certain level, village leaders would be held accountable and face punishment. Comparatively, not every level of government is subject to the same degree of transparency. Although the financial operation of government agencies at higher levels is under supervision through annual audits, inspections, and publication of their budgets and final accounts, only the lowest and most basic governing units are required to publish and specify every component of their income and expense. In addition to village finance, higher authorities give specific instructions to villages to collect and report data on village-level construction projects, social welfare, and poverty alleviation programs. These institutional efforts, to a large extent, have constrained and formalized bureaucratic operations at the village level, making grassroots governance cleaner, more accountable and transparent. For grassroots cadres, however, this means substantially increased workload and reduced flexibility and leeway.

Using Jingshen Village as an example, drawing on the public financial information, I created the following two tables that summarize the village revenues and expenditures for June 2022. From the first table, we can find that the source of village revenues came almost exclusively from fiscal transfers of higher-level governments. The fiscal dependency of village governance on state resources and investment entails top-down restrictions and the state's control of resource allocation. Additionally, the table of expenditures gives us a sense that the largest

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<sup>9</sup> Internal official documents obtained from field sites: 《XX 镇 2019 年度村级小微权力+“互联网+监督”工作职责及考核办法》(Responsibility and Evaluation of Village-level Micro-power + “Internet + Supervision” in XX Township in 2019), 《XX 县“互联网+村级小微权力监督”改革试点措施工作培训会议资料》(Materials for Training Sessions of “Internet + Village-level Micro-power Supervision” Experimental Sites in XX County), and 《XX 镇“互联网+村级小微权力监督”平台“四个一”工作制度》(Guidelines of “Internet + Village-level Micro-power Supervision” Platform in XX Township).

part of rural spending (67% in this case) is devoted to infrastructure building and upgrading (village renovation) in the name of “Rural Revitalization,” a national strategy adopted by the Xi Jinping government aiming to modernize the countryside.<sup>10</sup> The strategy emphasizes the revitalization of five aspects – industry, talent, environment, culture, and organization, with the overall goal of achieving “vibrant industries, pleasant environment, civilized culture, effective governance, and prosperous life”<sup>11</sup> in rural China. In the following two sections, I examine two specific policy demands of the strategy – village beautification and lifestyle transformation – to illustrate the state’s extensive and paternalistic intervention in not just rural production but also regarding the peasants’ way of life, as well as challenges faced by grassroots governments during the policy implementation.

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<sup>10</sup> 中共中央、国务院 (The Central Committee of the CCP and the PRC State Council): 《关于实施乡村振兴战略的意见》 (Opinion on Implementing the Strategy of Rural Revitalization), Jan.2, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-02/04/c\\_1122366449.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-02/04/c_1122366449.htm); 《乡村振兴战略规划（2018-2022 年）》 (The Strategic Planning of Rural Revitalization), Sept. 26, 2018; 《中华人民共和国乡村振兴法》 (PRC Rural Revitalization Law), Apr. 29, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> In Chinese, “产业兴旺、生态宜居、乡风文明、治理有效、生活富裕”.

Table 3.1 Revenue of Jingshen Village in June 2022

Village Revenue (June 2022)			
Category	Subcategory	Description	Amount (RMB)
Targeted fiscal transfers from higher levels	Social welfare	2022 Health insurance subsidy for the Disabled	10080
		Fiscal subsidy for social management of the private sector retirees	1040
	Pubic health and sanitation	2021 first-quarter sanitation funds	34992.45
		Sanitation subsidy by the Bureau of City Management	100000
		Pandemic control funds	10000
	Irrigation	Xiangyangping Reservoir repair	40000
	Party building	Party-building funds	30000
	Public service	Serving-the-masses funds	10000
	Rural revitalization	Xinwan road construction	120000
		Zhulingtang road construction	90000
		Infrastructure construction	60000
Non-specific fiscal transfers from Township	Subsidies for the operation of village organizations	First quarter subsidy for “Hotline+Grid” evaluation	600
		Housing survey funds	7693
		Office expenditure	10000
Interest on bank deposit			572.68
Total			524978.13

Table 3.2 Expenditure of Jingshen Village in June 2022

Village Expenditure (June 2022)		
Category	Description	Amount (RMB)
Condolence payment	Compensation for the families of the deceased in June	2200
Rural revitalization (infrastructure construction)	Vegetable garden fence	50000
	Domestic fowls-pen	27000
	Ponds clearing and repair	737
	Road expansion & solidification	113200
	Dujiachong Wuchang sanitation fees	1200
	Purchase waste containers	28960
	Dujiachong road repair & solidification	50000
	Public Cultural Center construction	18000
	Shenjiaoqiao drain & canal construction	41152
	Dujiachong vegetable garden renovation	50000
	Model Wuchang's yard and pavement greening	100000
	Chengxing Wuchang renovation	49800
Irrigation	Wenxinhe canals dredging & sanitation	3370
	Dam maintenance & renovation	46000
Rewards for village cadres	2021 Tongguan Industry Park service rewards	50000
Social welfare	2022 Health insurance subsidy for the disabled	10080
	June social insurance fees for village cadres	9157.5
Housing reserve	June housing reserve for village cadres	4320
Facility fees	Village Service Center and public area water rate	5934
Public health and sanitation	Overwork pay for janitors during the Duanwu holiday	2000
	Salaries for janitors (May 2022)	20600
	Salaries for market town managers (May 2022)	5200
Office expenditure	Purchase checkbooks	50
Printing fees	Publicity of "Transforming the Lifestyle"	88
Other special expenditures	Gentry Plaza decoration and publicity	100971
Transaction fees	inter-bank transfer fees	20
Total		790039.5

Source: The database of Village Finance on the Hunan "Internet + Supervision" Platform, WeChat official account "Sanxiang E-Supervision" (accessed October 10, 2022).

## Tidying Up the Villages

One of the goals of Rural Revitalization is to transform the image of Chinese villages from “dirty, chaotic, and backward” (脏乱差 *zhangluancha*) to “clean, tidy, and beautiful” (干净、整洁、美观 *ganjing zhengjie meiguan*). Through deep intervention in rural life and “the way-of-life governance,” the party-state has imposed a unified, top-down imagination of a modernized countryside upon rural residents regardless of whether it is necessary or convenient. Aiming to narrow the urban-rural gap, the authorities reconstruct rural space and reorganize rural life in accordance with the standards and practices of urban life. In this modernized vision, it is unacceptable for villagers to raise domesticated animals in the traditional, cage-free way, to dump garbage on nearby mountains or rivers, and to pile up firewood and other farm tools in a haphazard fashion in their yards. The official action plans of the living environment governance in rural China (农村人居环境整治 *nongcun renjun huanjing zhengzhi*) contain three major aspects: (1) garbage disposal that includes promoting garbage classification and recycling; (2) human waste and sewage treatment, commonly known as the “toilet revolution” that is aimed at expanding flush toilets and the sewer system in rural areas; and (3) village renovation which means not only infrastructure upgrading, such as building more roads and street lamps, but also greening and beautifying the village environment by rearranging public and private space of rural households.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 中共中央办公厅、国务院办公厅 (The Central Committee of the CCP and the PRC State Council): 《农村人居环境整治三年行动方案》 (A Three-Year Action Plan of Living Environment Governance in Rural China), Feb.5, 2018; 《农村人居环境整治提升五年行动方案 (2021—2025 年)》 (A Five-Year Action Plan of Rural Living Environment Governance and Improvement 2021-25), Dec.5, 2021.

Beautiful, tidy, and clean villages satisfy the official vision of a modern and prosperous countryside. In the eyes of the authorities, villages after transformation are attractive to investors, developers, and tourists, which is crucial for rural development. It is not entirely clear, however, that those images are genuinely desired and envisioned by rural dwellers themselves, who are voiceless during the policy processes. Without active participation and independent interest articulation, peasants have become outsiders in rural governance and passive recipients of top-down policy directives. They simply watch the paternalistic state intervene for their own good and on their behalf. In comparison, during the “Patriotic Hygiene Campaigns” (爱国卫生运动 *aiguo weisheng yundong*) in Maoist China, following Mao’s directives, tens of millions of people, from young to old and across all walks of life, passionately participated to eliminate “four pests” (mosquitos, flies, rats, and sparrows) that were believed to be responsible for disease transmission or detrimental to agricultural production. For instance, when the campaign against the four pests was launched in Shanghai, nearly half of the rural labor in the city’s outskirts was mobilized to attack sparrows.<sup>13</sup> In the year 1958 alone, 210 million sparrows were reportedly killed across China.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the sweeping Maoist mass movements, “Tidying Up the Villages” in the Xi era accords with what Elizabeth Perry characterizes as the “state-managed campaign” that relies upon bureaucratic mobilization rather than mass mobilization.<sup>15</sup> The policy intervention matters less to peasants since it is not endogenous to rural communities, but more to

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<sup>13</sup> Yanzhong Huang, *Governing Health in Contemporary China*, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012): 32.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, “From Mass Campaigns to Managed Campaigns: ‘Constructing a New Socialist Countryside,’” in Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry ed., *Mao’s Invisible Hand*, (Harvard University Asia Center, 2011): 30-61.

local and grassroots bureaucrats as a political mission that affects their performance evaluations and promotion prospects. As a township official observes, “every time it comes to cleaning, it is only cadres who sweep streets; peasants just look at the cadres with amusement, thinking this is the government’s business and has nothing to do with me.”<sup>16</sup>

Though it is beyond the scope of this work to systematically assess the policy efficacy, a previous campaign of rural development offers some useful references. Kristen Looney, in her study of “Building a New Socialist Countryside” by the Hu-Wen administration, finds that largely due to the absence of autonomous peasant organizations in China and low levels of mass participation, the modernization campaign was much less successful in terms of rural development outcomes compared with similar programs in Taiwan and South Korea.<sup>17</sup>

Though it is inconclusive with respect to the policy outcomes, one cannot deny or ignore the enormous state effort and investment of resources. For instance, in a single village in Guangdong, a pioneer province in improving the rural living environment, the local government invested 8.4 million yuan in establishing a sewage system and another 5.6 million yuan in building and maintaining village roads. Additionally, 130,000 yuan were spent on constructing 17 designated pens to raise domesticated animals, 180,000 yuan on 18 designated sites for villagers to stack up their firewood and other odds and ends (see the picture below), and 50,000

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<sup>16</sup> In Chinese, “每次打扫卫生，都是干部扫大街，农民看着好玩，觉得都是政府的事情，和自己没关系” in 武汉大学中国乡村治理研究中心课题组 (Research Center of Governance in Rural China, Wuhan University): 《提升农村人居环境整治效能的建议》 (Suggestions on Improving the Efficacy of Rural Living Environment Governance), *新乡土(Xinxiangtu)*, Feb. 3, 2023, retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/HRQSeQQ6k7VrKXsYCJvcIw>.

<sup>17</sup> Kristen E. Looney, *Mobilizing for Development: Modernization of Rural East Asia*, (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2020).

yuan on decorating facades and mini gardens of rural houses.<sup>18</sup> It is reported that from 2014 to 2018, the provincial government of Guangdong cumulatively assigned 43 billion yuan to improve the rural living environment, and starting from 2018, on average every administrative village in less developed regions of Guangdong would receive a subsidy of 10 million yuan from the province.<sup>19</sup> Policy analysts caution, however, that in many localities with weak fiscal capacity, substantial financial resources poured into rural beautification have exacerbated local government debts, leaving other public demands unmet and unfunded.<sup>20</sup>



In a village in western Guangdong, local officials ask villagers to raise domesticated animals in designated pens and stack up firewood and other miscellaneous items in designated sites.

<sup>18</sup> Information obtained from field trips in rural Guangdong in March 2022.

<sup>19</sup> 《从脏乱差到示范村——广东“三清三拆”打造美丽乡村推动乡村振兴》 (From Dirty, Chaotic, and Backward to Model Villages: Guangdong Beautifies the Countryside to Push for Rural Revitalization), *Xinhua News Agency*, Aug.24, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> 《提升农村人居环境整治效能的建议》 (Suggestions on Improving the Efficacy of Rural Living Environment Governance), *新乡土*, Feb. 3, 2023.



Despite the vast state investment, “tidying up the villages” is not once-and-for-all, nor could it be sustained automatically by state effort alone. As the demand did not originate from local communities, rural residents are not motivated to maintain a “tidy and clean” village environment by themselves spontaneously. Some even find the official interventions are against their interests. Therefore, local cadres need to constantly compel peasants to carry on the will of the state. For example, on March 20, 2022, a township government in western Guangdong made the following announcement:

*Dear Fellow Residents,*

*Greetings! Rural Revitalization is an important national strategy. To revitalize the countryside, we need to attract external investment in industrial development and construction, and the very first step is to make our villages clean and tidy. According to the County Action Plan of Rural Living Environment Governance and Sustained Improvement, every household must take the five steps as follows:*

- *Tear Down: Demolish any run-down houses, discarded pigsties and cattle pens, and rural pit toilets.*
- *Round Up: Raise all domesticated animals in pens and clean any animal feces in your yard and by the roadside.*
- *Throw Away: Discard all unwanted stuff in front of and behind your house.*
- *Tidy Up: Arrange farm tools, firewood, and other miscellaneous items around your house in a neat way.*
- *Clean Up: Keep your yard and nearby ponds and environment clean and garbage-free.*

*We urge every household to act immediately. Township and village cadres and your village head will come to inspect from door to door. By the end of March, all the households must pass the inspection! For more information, please see the attached flyer.*



A government flyer showcasing the differences before and after the tidying-up campaign.

But what are the challenges and obstacles during the policy implementation? Let us now take a closer look at a high-profile component of Tidying-Up the Villages, the so-called “Toilet Revolution” – a revolution without the agreement of the masses.

Peasants in many areas across China were still using pit toilets, which was a problem bothering Xi Jinping (who spent seven formative years in a poor village in northwestern China). In November 2017, he issued a directive that stressed rural toilet renovation as an important part

of the Rural Revitalization strategy and urged officials to fix the “shortest stave” affecting people’s quality of life.<sup>21</sup> Then a toilet revolution began to unfold in rural China.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA), by September of 2022, the national coverage of flush toilets in the countryside had exceeded 70%, and more than 40 million rural household toilets had been renovated since 2018.<sup>22</sup> Behind the numbers, however, are huge regional disparities. In Zhejiang and Guangdong, the two most developed coastal provinces, almost every rural household uses flush toilets.<sup>23</sup> Supported by strong fiscal capacity, local governments in these provinces provided sufficient subsidies for rural households to build new toilets that meet the standards. More importantly, villages in Zhejiang and Guangdong have constructed supporting infrastructure such as a sewer system to make sure flush toilets can function effectively.

In several localities across Hunan, however, I met many grassroots bureaucrats who were struggling to meet the targets of toilet renovation.<sup>24</sup> The reluctance of rural residents stemmed from various concerns. Constrained by local fiscal capacity, many villages in Hunan cannot

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<sup>21</sup> 习近平批示：“厕所问题不是小事情，是城乡文明建设的重要方面，不但景区、城市要抓，农村也要抓，要把这项工作作为乡村振兴战略的一项具体工作来推进，努力补齐这块影响群众生活质量的短板。” (Xi Jinping instructed, “The toilet problem is not a small matter but an important aspect of building civilized culture in both cities and countryside. It should not only be addressed in scenic areas and cities but also in rural areas. This work should be promoted as a specific task in the Rural Revitalization Strategy, striving to fill in the gap that affects people’s quality of life.” Nov.21, 2017)

<sup>22</sup> 农业农村部国家乡村振兴局有关司局同志就农村户厕问题摸排整改相关情况答记者问 (a press conference by MARA concerning rural household toilets), Sept. 27, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> According to a survey conducted by researchers at Peking University, in 2019, the usage rate of sanitary toilets in rural Zhejiang and Guangdong has almost reached 100%, but in rural Liaoning, the usage rate drops to 40%. 李冬青等 (Li Dongqing et. al.), 《农村人居环境整治效果评估》 (Assessment on Rural Living Environment Governance Outcomes), 《管理世界》 (*Management World*), Oct. 2021.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, in 2021 a township in central Hunan received a target to renovate 1180 rural household toilets, but only had renovated 627 toilets, completing 53% of the target; in 2022 the target was 180 toilets, and they have only finished renovating 50 toilet, 28% of the target. (Information obtained from an anonymous informant.)

afford to build sewage disposal facilities, which means even after building flush toilets, villagers themselves are responsible for cleaning the septic tank regularly. This creates a heavy burden for rural households, especially the families of migrant workers, composed only of the elderly or children. Therefore, the lack of supporting facilities disincentivizes villagers to renovate their toilets. A village cadre in northern Hunan admits, “we are just getting rid of pit toilets at the surface without solving the real problems.”<sup>25</sup> He points out that the official subsidy is only 1,000 yuan per household, while a thorough renovation costs more than 7,000 yuan. Peasants do not want to pay out of their own pocket, nor could local governments afford it. As a result, the partial renovation leaves a facility that fails to separate domestic wastewater and feces. The septic tank gets filled quickly and peasants can no longer utilize feces as organic fertilizers.<sup>26</sup>

It is therefore not surprising to see rural residents choose to discard those ill-functioning toilets after renovation. In a village in western Hunan, I came across a showcase toilet that had been abandoned by villagers. A publicity board was hung outside the toilet contrasting its images before and after the renovation. But the showcase toilet seems to have completed its entire mission after the evaluation(s) and inspection(s) by the higher-level governments. Now the door has been blocked, and the toilet is surrounded by stacks of firewood (see the pictures below). The situation I encountered is far from unique. In a notice of criticism issued by MARA, in two villages of Shanxi province, out of 43 households randomly visited by inspectors, 32 have stopped using their renovated toilets.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Interview code: CS20211116WSJ

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> 农业农村部国家乡村振兴局 (Bureau of Rural Revitalization, MARA): 《关于农村户厕问题摸排整改问题典型案例的通报》 (Notice on typical cases concerning problems in rural household toilets), Sept.2, 2022.



A renovated toilet has been abandoned in rural western Hunan (Photos taken by the author in 2021).

In addition to local fiscal constraints, the poor quality of government-sponsored projects also has undermined public confidence. A village party secretary from central Hunan reveals that a few years ago, the local government began to lay sewage pipelines in his village. Perhaps discontent with the low profit of the government project, the contractor did shoddy work and used inferior materials. After the construction, leakage occurred and polluted the field. Because of this “tofu-dreg project” (豆腐渣工程 *toufuzha gongcheng*), villagers lost confidence in government-led construction projects, which makes it more difficult to persuade residents to participate in the government program of toilet renovation.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, an ethnographic case study of a village in Shanxi Province shows that unlike the 100% public satisfaction claimed in official documents, many villagers in private expressed their disappointment about the renovated toilets.<sup>29</sup> Since the government-handpicked

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<sup>28</sup> Interview code: LD20210721PSJ

<sup>29</sup> 张源 (Zhang Yuan): 《走样的“厕改”：农村改革项目落地中的行政问责及内在逻辑——基于山西省赵村的调查》 (Why the Toilet Revolution Went Awry: Administrative Accountability and the Logic of Rural Reform), 硕

construction team usually had special connections with local officials, they were not customer-oriented nor held accountable to rural residents. Therefore, the contractor seldomly tailored the renovation to meet the individual needs of peasants. For instance, in the aforementioned Shanxi village, all the squatting pans in old toilets were replaced by toilet seats, as the local government unilaterally decided for villagers. Peasants, however, were used to squatting toilets, and some households believe squatting toilets better suit their needs than sitting toilets. After official inspections, the researcher found that some villagers would rather remove the toilet seats and switch back to the traditional squatting pans.<sup>30</sup> Even though peasants did have complaints, pressured by village cadres, they would nevertheless approve the result by signing their names and ticking the box next to “satisfied” on the acceptance appraisal form (验收表 *yanshoubian*). After all, what really matters to grassroots bureaucrats is the completeness of documents and paperwork that are subject to higher-level evaluation and inspection rather than the authentic feedback from their “constituencies.”

As one outspoken township administrator comments, “the outcome [of the toilet revolution] is that the government spent tons of money while peasants are not happy.”<sup>31</sup> He then adds, “a simple truth is that if people truly find this a good policy, how come they are not willing to cooperate?”<sup>32</sup>

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士论文 (Master's Thesis), 华中师范大学中国农村研究院 (Institute of China Rural Studies, Central China Normal University), March 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Zhang Yuan, “Why the Toilet Revolution Went Awry.”

<sup>31</sup> In Chinese, “结果是政府花了钱，农民不满意。”

<sup>32</sup> Interview code: CS20211116ZZR

**农村改厕项目资料目录**

**一、申报审批**

1.1 农户改厕自主申报表；

1.2 农村改厕项目村申请表；

**二、组织实施**

2.1 政府采购或“三重一大”等民主决策程序资料；

2.2 改厕施工合同；

**三、监督管理**

3.1 农户改厕存档照片（同一角度，施工前、中、后三张照片）；

3.2 改厕督查记录；

3.3 改厕资金台账、凭证票据；

**四、公示公开**

4.1 改厕农户名单、改厕模式、补助标准等信息按要求公示，公示资料和照片交存档备查

4.2 公示过程的照片；

**五、考核验收**

5.1 乡镇对村考核验收评估登记表（附件1）；

5.2 改厕施工日志；

5.3 农户改厕花名册。

**长沙市望城区茶亭镇静镇村人居环境满意度调查表**

为推进农村人居环境治理工作，确保农村非卫生厕所得到有效管控，农村人居环境整治，现开展我村居民对卫生改厕工作满意度调查工作。该调查为不记名调查，请根据您的实际情况和亲身体会，对以下问题作出回答。

调查对象为本村常住居民，为累计在本村居住6个月以上的农户。

住址：长沙市望城区茶亭镇静镇村 组： 户： 调查日期：2019年12月21日

调查人： 调查人： 调查人：

**一、调查对象个人信息**

1. 您的性别：  
☒男 ☐女

2. 您的年龄：  
☐34-35 周岁以下 ☒35-55 周岁 ☐55-65 周岁

3. 您的学历：  
☒小学或初中以下 ☐高中 ☐大学本科 ☐大学本科以上

4. 您所从事的职业：  
☐务农 ☐企事业单位 ☒商业 ☐教育、科研 ☐医疗 ☐学生 ☐其他

**二、调查内容**

1. 您家生活污水是怎么处理的？  
☒通过（四级）化粪池 ☐集中管道收集后处理 ☐没有处理 ☐其他非卫生方式

2. 您对家内卫生厕所情况满意吗？  
☒满意 ☐比较满意 ☐不满意

3. 您周围有无未改厕住户？  
☐有 ☒无

4. 您对本村整体的居住环境如何评价？  
☒好 ☐一般 ☐差

Left: a table of contents that lists all the documents required for the program of rural toilet renovation;  
 Right: an official questionnaire that records public satisfaction with the village living environment (it shows that the respondent is satisfied with his household sanitary toilet).

## Transforming the Rural Lifestyle

The party-state intervention in rural life and peasant behavior is not limited to changing the hygiene practices of villagers and beautifying the countryside, but also includes transforming traditional norms and practices of rural communities (移风易俗 *yifeng yisu*), especially the ways in which people celebrate important life events and commemorate the deceased. In the official blueprint, the authorities conceive lifestyle transformation as the key to the cultural dimension of rural revitalization and an indispensable part of building a modern, socialist countryside. A specific policy demand is to reform weddings (婚事新办 *hunshi xinban*) and simplify funerals

(丧事简办 *sangshi jianban*) in rural China.<sup>33</sup> According to the official discourse, influenced by the “face culture” and traditional values, rural residents tend to hold extravagant wedding ceremonies and prolonged funerals (and other celebrations of big life events) where invited guests are pressed to give a substantial amount of money as gifts to the host. The Chinese government argues that high expenditures on those rituals have imposed a heavy financial burden on villagers and drawn increasing public complaints and criticism. In some rural areas, the groom and his family are expected to pay a prohibitively high bride price (“天价彩礼” *tianjian caili*) that makes the cost of marriage unaffordable for a large population of single males in the countryside. In addition, some rural families fail to take good care of their elders, but instead, hold extended funerals with superstitious rituals as compensation to the deceased (“薄养厚葬” *boyang houzang*). Considering gender imbalance and an aging society, those practices, in the eyes of the authorities, certainly are not helpful to promote fertility rates and mitigate the demographic crisis, thereby necessitating state intervention and rectification.

After the central policy announcement in 2019, local governments and grassroots officials were mobilized to advocate for the simplification of weddings and funerals which are generally referred to as “red and white activities” (红白事 *hongbaishi*) in folk Chinese. During the implementation, three policy instruments are noteworthy: the “Village Constitution” (村规民

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<sup>33</sup> 中央农业工作领导小组办公室等 11 家部委 (The Central Rural Work Small Leading Group and other ten ministries): 《关于进一步推进移风易俗，建设乡风文明的意见》 (Opinions on further transforming traditional practices and building a civilized culture in rural China), Sept.4, 2019; 《开展高价彩礼、大操大办等农村移风易俗重点领域突出问题的专项治理工作方案》 (Plan on addressing salient issues in the transformation of rural traditional practices), Aug.1, 2022.



约 *cungui mingyue*), the “Red-White Committee” (红白理事会 *hongbai lishihui*), and the exemplary role led by the CCP members and cadres (党员干部带头 *dangyuan ganbu daitou*).

Village constitutions show the art of being governed. Perhaps foreseeing the difficulty in transforming longstanding traditions and practices and the public discontent against compulsory enforcement, the government chose not to promulgate administrative regulations on weddings and funerals directly, but instead, encouraged villages to include guiding principles and restrictions on red and white activities in their own “constitutions.” Usually, the village constitution is drafted by village leaders, revised and approved by the township government, and ultimately verified at the meeting of village representatives (村民代表大会 *cunming daibiao dahui*). As a product of “democratic” decision-making, it has procedural legitimacy. And more importantly, by reconstructing community norms and values, the village constitution internalizes the will of the state and political obedience as communal consensus and moral constraint. Though it is not law, it could shape villagers’ behavior via social pressure, and reputational and material incentives. Although in many places, village constitutions are merely formalities without concrete contents and serious enforcement, in one township I visited, the township Party Secretary put so much emphasis on village constitutions that he requested every village to collect opinions from its residents and customize the script rather than simply “copy and paste.” He then carefully read and commented on every village’s draft before the public verification.<sup>34</sup>

For the section on lifestyle transformation, despite variations in details, most village constitutions include the following guidelines on weddings and funerals:<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Interview code: LD20210721OYSJ

<sup>35</sup> Based on village constitutions obtained from a township government in central Hunan in July 2021.

- *Receptions are only allowed for wedding ceremonies, funerals, and birthday celebrations for senior citizens above 70; in other situations such as the one-month-old celebration, birthday, engagement, opening, college entrance, joining the army, and housewarming receptions are not encouraged;*
- *The gift of money should not exceed 200 yuan per person;*
- *The size of the reception should not exceed 20 tables (200 people in total);*
- *The number of wedding or funeral cars should not exceed 6;*
- *Fireworks and firecrackers are prohibited;*
- *Keep the environment clean by following the rules of garbage classification (do not use disposable plastic tableware);*
- *The length of a funeral should not exceed three days, and the overall expenditure should not surpass 40 thousand yuan;*
- *The maximum bride price is 20 thousand yuan;*
- *Collective wedding ceremonies and other creative and simplified ceremonies are highly encouraged;*
- *CCP members should strictly follow the relevant regulations.*

Some villages have even more specific instructions about the expenditures of the reception: the cost of food for every table should not be more than 300 yuan, the cost of drinks per table should not exceed 100 yuan, and the price of cigarettes distributed during the banquet should not exceed 20 yuan per pack. Many villages include monetary punishment for violating the Red-White guidelines in their village constitutions. Some require residents to pay 300 yuan as a deposit to the Red-White Committee before the reception. If the host fails to clean all the garbage generated by the reception in time, the Committee will use the deposit to hire someone to clean the trash. Other villages raise the fine to 500-1000 yuan for each ceremony.



The publicity of Lifestyle Transformation in Jingshen Village, Changsha, Hunan (photo taken by the author in 2021)

In addition to the village constitution, a mass organization is designated to manage and supervise wedding ceremonies and funerals in villages: the Red-White Committee. The Committee is usually chaired by the village party secretary, and its members might include village cadres, heads of villagers' small groups (村民小组组长 *cunming xiaozu zuzhang*), and the elderly representatives who are generally respected in the village. Like many other nominally autonomous mass organizations in China, the Red-White Committee essentially functions as a bureaucratic extension of the “village government.” As Daniel Mattingly argues in his study of rural China, local civil society groups help strengthen state capacity and serve as hidden tools of informal control.<sup>36</sup>

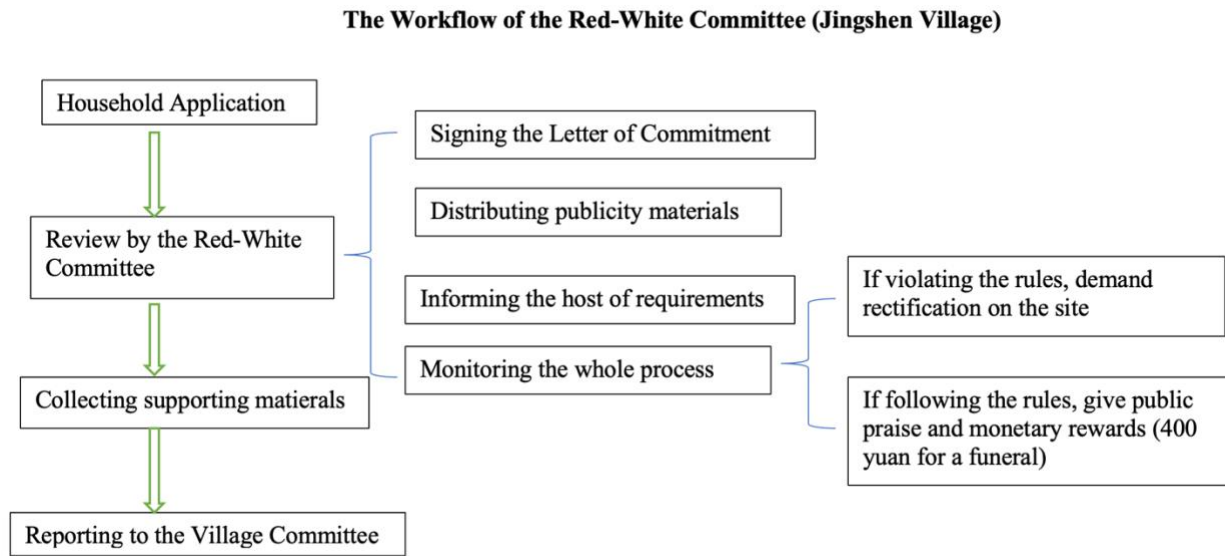
<sup>36</sup> Daniel Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

According to the following workflow of the Red-White Committee published by Jingshen Village, before holding a reception, the host household must submit an application to the Committee for review. Then the Committee will ask the host to sign a Letter of Commitment (承诺书 *chengnuoshu*) and give the host publicity handouts about food security, garbage classification, and lifestyle transformation, making sure the host is fully informed of the restrictions about Red and White activities. During the ceremony and reception, the Committee members monitor the whole process. If violations are spotted, the Committee will demand rectification on the site; otherwise, the host family has to pay a penalty ranging from 200 to 500 yuan. If the ceremony strictly follows the guidelines, the Committee will give the host family public praise and monetary rewards. After the ceremony, the Committee is required to complete the paperwork and report to the village leadership.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The actual effectiveness of the Red-White Committee varies considerably across different villages. Some grassroots cadres point out that in many villages the Red-White Committee only exists in name and can hardly change the villagers' longstanding beliefs and practices.

Figure 3.1 Workflow of the Red-White Committee



Source: Adapted from “茶亭镇静慎村红白理事会工作流程图” (obtained from the field site).

Another mobilizing instrument is to urge village leaders and CCP members to set good examples for their fellow villagers. Party members and leading village cadres are believed to have a demonstrative effect on the community. Hence, it is crucial to ensure that they are complying with the rules. For instance, in early 2019, the Party Secretary of Shanhe Village in central Hunan issued an obituary of his mother in the village-wide WeChat group. In the announcement, he emphasized that as a Party Secretary, he was committed to adhering to the Village Constitution and national policies, which led to his decision to keep his mother’s funeral simple. He urged relatives and friends not to bring any fireworks and firecrackers. Furthermore, he asked villagers who had not frequently interacted with his family to refrain from coming to his house to send condolences. By using the obituary as an advocacy of lifestyle transformation, the village Party Secretary mobilized his fellow villagers to support the nascent official initiative of funeral simplification. In many places, Party members and government officials will be fined twice as much as ordinary villagers if they fail to follow the guidelines.

The following lists, obtained from fieldwork in two different localities in Hunan, record information about the families who held simplified weddings and funerals in 2020 and 2021. Ledgers like these have become part of the performance evaluation materials for village governments to demonstrate their effort and achievement in transforming the traditional rural lifestyle. However, some grassroots cadres I interviewed acknowledged the huge difficulty, if not impossibility, in changing the villagers' longstanding beliefs and practices. They admitted that it is very challenging to persuade villagers to follow every requirement on Red and White activities, and in recent years many peasants chose to simplify weddings and funerals not because of their willingness to change their way of life, but largely due to the pandemic restrictions.

序号	村名	组名	户主	事项	劝导人	劝导时间	成效
1	车田	龙新	江安章	2月4日丧事	村支两委	2月4日	简办
2	车田	红旗	王耀庭	七十寿宴	村支两委	2月6日	简办
3	车田	余家	余定庚	女儿结婚	村支两委	初八	延期
4	车田	新屋	王义照	八十寿宴	村支两委	2月5日	简办
5	车田	红旗	王益初	丧事	村支两委	7月25	简办
6	车田	上尧	王增林	丧事	村支两委	7月26	简办
7	车田	凌角	王和五	丧事	村支两委	7月27	简办
8	创新村	双树	王双生之子	婚事	村支两委	初四	延期
9	创新村	青山	胡凤英	丧事	村支两委	3月6日	简办
10	创新村	大谢	王力英	丧事	村支两委	5月29日	简办
11	创新村	龙头	陈海盛	丧事	朱友道、王加祥、余晚生	5月6日	简办
12	创新村	易家	王爱香	丧事	村支两委	6月6日	简办
13	创新村	报木	宁详元	丧事	村支两委	8月26日	简办
14	大溢塘	新建	袁梅初	丧事	村支两委	初二	简办
15	大溢塘	毛除	王小群	丧事	邹霞光、村支两委	2月4日	简办
16	大溢塘	舒家	王延安	父亲丧事	谭海、邹霞光、村支两委	2月8日	简办
17	大溢塘	红梅	王继春	丧事	王安居	2月10日	简办
18	大溢塘	杉元	陈祝志	丧事	村支两委、联村工作组	5月21日	简办
19	大溢塘	小雅	刘华玉	丧事	谭海、邹霞光、村支两委	6月15日	简办
20	大溢塘	下头塘	王光华	丧事	村支两委、联村工作组	8月4日	简办
21	芙蓉	新功	赵清华	丧事	村支两委	4月27日	简办

序号	户主姓名	家庭住址	事由	是否按 要求操 办	奖励金 额 (元)	备注
1	余文山	静慎村怀清塘组	户主母亲肖利娟逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
2	李世波	静慎村廖家坪组	户主父亲李国祥逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
3	易正午	静慎村黄组	户主母亲李碧梅逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
4	余特	静慎村鸭婆冲组	户主父亲余坤凡逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
5	姚光斌	静慎村细坝湾组	户主父亲姚仁贵逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
6	余雄	静慎村黄家坡组	户主父亲余义仁逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
7	姚成	静慎村董坝子组	户主父亲姚定国逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
8	姚军华	静慎村董坝子组	户主父亲姚长明逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
9	余红军	静慎村宋家桥组	户主母亲肖爱英逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
10	鄧元珍	静慎村谭老屋组	户主丈夫胡国祥逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
11	余学义	静慎村鸭婆冲组	户主母亲刘应桃逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
12	余光	静慎村宋家湾组	户主母亲蔡菊连逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
13	姚长庚	静慎村杜家组	户主母亲胡翠英逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	
14	余顺广	静慎村新屋组	户主母亲姚文秀逝世追悼晚宴	是	400	

Township and village ledgers about weddings and funerals held by rural households.

## Leadership and Village Governance

Although the party-state's intervention and top-down control in rural affairs have been strengthened, this does not mean that village-level governance has been homogenized, nor does it mean that grassroots governing units have completely lost their autonomy or agency. Village leaders still have room to exert their leadership, and they can still initiate some innovative measures to improve rural grassroots governance. During my fieldwork in rural China, I was impressed by highly motivated, capable, and entrepreneurial village heads under whose leadership village governance has entered a virtuous cycle. I also have observed that the more successful villages are often those where village cadres are able to truly respond to and address the actual needs of the villagers, and in terms of governance philosophy, they respect the spontaneity of peasants. They deliberately encourage and improve the participation and contribution of rural residents to village affairs through institutional and organizational innovation, instead of marginalizing peasants, which would lead to a situation where “cadres are busy, while the masses just watch.” In this section, I recount a village case that attests to the importance of leadership in revitalizing the countryside.

Jingshen Village (静慎村, the name literally means “silent prudence”) with a population of 9,880 is in the north end of the Wangcheng District, about a two-hour drive from downtown Changsha, the capital city of Hunan. In his office at the village headquarters, Yao Luohua, the Party Secretary and village head, told me how he has turned a village of conflict and contention into a national model of rural governance.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The interview was conducted on June 22, 2021.

Before 2008, village leadership's infringement of peasants' land rights had led to a highly adverse population-administration relationship. Villagers frequently went to municipal and provincial governments to protest and submit petitions, which eventually triggered a clash with local police and resulted in nine villagers being arrested and seven put into custody. The village was in a hopeless situation, as most residents distrusted village officials, and young people were migrating to cities, hollowing out the village. In 2008, a year of political turnover, Yao was invited by the township government to return to his home village and run for office. At that time, Yao, in his early forties, had already established his name among villagers as a successful businessman, and his father was a retired Party Secretary of the village, a position he held for 30 years. Yao's resolution was to take ten years to completely transform the place into a national model village, a goal that was realized in 2019. How did he achieve that? Yao summarizes his governing philosophy as trying to accomplish two main things – to enrich the minds and pockets of villagers (让村民“思想富”和“口袋富” *rang cunming sixiangfu he koudaifu*).

After taking office, Yao prioritized regaining the trust of villagers by resolving the conflict. Working with former village leaders, his team collected and identified a total of 117 lingering problems in the village, among which the thorniest was the land sale. They had solved 113 problems within a year and eventually tackled the land-related issues 2-3 years later. All land illegally sold was taken back and returned to peasants, thereby mitigating the tension between the masses and village cadres. As a former entrepreneur, Secretary Yao compares the village government to a commercial brand, and he points out, what is crucial for a brand is to cultivate a good reputation. Every year, since the first day of the Chinese lunar new year, he pays a New Year's visit to all the households in hardship and families of Party members. For those in trouble, he tries his best to help. As rural communities value new year's greetings (拜年



*bainian*), Yao utilizes this opportunity to win the hearts and minds of his fellow residents. To date, he has been doing this for 13 years.

Another governance innovation Yao finds very useful is nurturing a group of “new gentry” (新乡贤 *xin xiangxian*) within the village. Though there are no political, economic, or cultural elites or celebrities from Jingshen, the Party Secretary set a rule that anyone who comes from a harmonious family and is positive and public-minded is qualified to be elected as a new *xiangxian* and to be admitted to the Gentry Committee (乡贤理事会 *xiangxian lishihui*), a village mass association established in 2012 and now with more than 1,600 members. In the gentry cultural festivals (乡贤文化节 *xiangxian wenhuajie*) held annually in the village, the newly admitted *xiangxian*, who donated money, land, or labor to village construction and development projects, are publicly recognized and rewarded by local leaders. Moreover, the images of the new gentry are exhibited and advertised on the light boxes along the village roads (see the picture below).

For Yao, the title and honor of the new gentry exerts a positive demonstrative effect on ordinary villagers by incentivizing them to actively participate in village affairs. The new gentry initiative is a reinvention of tradition that takes advantage of social capital and moral accountability to improve village governance and public goods provision. Village leaders coopt ordinary villagers by offering them elite standing in exchange for their contributions to collective goods in the village. In addition, by building thirty “Gentry Auditoriums” (乡贤讲堂 *xiangxian jiangtang*) across the village, the leadership provides public space for residents to discuss family and village issues, facilitates dialogues between the masses and local bureaucrats, and creates venues to propagate policies.



Left: an image of a new *xiangxian* on a light box by the roadside; Right: the village headquarters (public service center) of Jingshen

In the economic realm, Yao's secret is to "make sure everyone can find something to do," by individualizing employment plans based on the characteristics of villagers. Yao introduces the employment situation of his residents who can be roughly divided into two major groups: the first group includes about 1,000 households living in the market town and having small businesses; the second group is 1,000 rural households out of which 400 are doing business in cities, and some 400 craftsmen have become small contractors working in urban construction projects. Another 300 villagers, most of them female workers under 60, are employed by the industrial park in the vicinity of the village as compensation for taking land from the village. For the primary sector, the village, in cooperation with agricultural companies, has focused on developing four agricultural industries, sweet potato processing, Dongcheng pepper, oil-seed camellia, and prime rice, which has created 500 jobs for families without any capital, technical, or age advantages. The annual income for the agricultural sector exceeds 30 million yuan, and the village collective economy (村集体经济 *cunjiti jingji*) has a revenue of 300 thousand yuan every year.

In retrospect, Yao emphasizes the importance of cultivating a positive civic culture, which takes time and cannot be rushed. In his words, governing people's minds (治人心, 抓思想 *zhirenxin zhuasixiang*) is a prerequisite for good village governance. Many local leaders, in his view, seek instant success and quick returns by throwing money at showcase projects and demanding visible achievements in one year or two. This approach is in fact detrimental to rural development, as heavy investment and sheer material interests corrupt people's minds and poison the political ecosystem of the village. Commenting on the challenge of attracting and retaining talent in the countryside, Yao admits that not many village party secretaries are as committed as he is. His full dedication to work is made possible because of a stable, supportive family and no concerns about livelihood. As being a village cadre has become a full-time job, he stresses that it is necessary to make the grassroots workforce feel economically secure by providing them with sufficient material rewards and perks. He aims to build a young and capable team for village governance (the average age of the staff in his village is 38) by recruiting more college graduates who grew up in the village and training them as future village leaders. In addition, he suggests that the government should provide more support and guidance to young people devoted to agriculture by promulgating preferential policies and facilitating their interaction with government agencies.

## **Organizational Infrastructure**

To intervene, mobilize, and control (rural) society effectively and comprehensively, the Chinese party-state needs organizational infrastructure. As stated in the national strategy of Rural Revitalization, one of the five dimensions of revitalization is “organizational revitalization” (组

织振兴 *zuzhi zhengxing*). From an organizational perspective, several important mechanisms have been conducive to deepening the party-state's penetration of rural areas.

The first one is to create an effective work team, a time-honored revolutionary practice that the CCP borrowed from the Soviet Union, sinicized, and has kept to this day.<sup>39</sup> The village-stationed work teams have played a significant role in Xi Jinping's signature *Precision Poverty Alleviation* program, which I analyzed in detail in my master's thesis.<sup>40</sup> With routinization and institutionalization, the work team mechanism continues to work in Rural Revitalization. In summary, work teams serve two major functions: resource mobilization and reinforcement of the grassroots governing regime. Through work teams, the party-state has mobilized enormous bureaucratic resources in an effective and timely manner to achieve grand developmental goals. The central leadership demands that every agency in the public sector, especially those at higher levels, "subcontract" or "adopt" a poor and backward township or village and dispatch a full-time work team to the designated place. The team leader is usually appointed as the chief Party Secretary (第一书记 *diyì shūjì*) of the adopted village or township. In this way, work teams bring administrative, financial, and personnel capacity and technical know-how, resources scarcely available at the bottom of the hierarchy, to the roots of the party-state.

Those "political subcontractors" are expected to make full use of their institutional strength and comparative advantages to help their adopted villages to develop. As a chief Party Secretary puts it, his team's core mission is to design a strategic plan for the village's

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<sup>39</sup> See Elizabeth J. Perry, "Making Communism Work: Sinicizing a Soviet Governance Practice," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, no.3 (2019): 535-562.

<sup>40</sup> Hanyu Zhao, "The Politics of Poverty Alleviation in Rural China: Xi Jinping's War on Poverty," Master's Thesis for the Regional Studies – East Asia Program, Harvard University, 2017.

development and then channel resources from higher-level governments to the village.<sup>41</sup> It is noteworthy that most chief Party Secretaries are selected from the young and capable members of their home agencies, and many of them are the so-called “reserved cadres” (后备干部 *houbei ganbu*), namely candidates for leading positions, with promising careers. The time they spend in the countryside, two to three years in most cases, is a critical period for the Party’s HR department to evaluate them for future promotion. Thanks to this strong career incentive, most work teams are highly motivated and strive to demonstrate their capability in rural areas.

In addition to mobilizing resources, work teams supervise and strengthen the grassroots governing regime to ensure that the will of the Party center will be firmly and faithfully carried out down to the vast countryside. As an outside force to local rural communities, work teams embody the authority endorsed by higher-level governments and have less vested interests in local affairs. Although grassroots bureaucrats are supposed to coordinate and cooperate with the work teams, they are in fact under the work teams’ direction and supervision. Township and village leadership may behave more cautiously and may be more rule-sensitive, and at the same time, their room for maneuver is further compressed. After all, the disciplinary inspectors or evaluators sent by higher-ups cannot come to villages every day, but work teams are stationed in villages. Hence, their existence has tightened the party-state’s monitoring and control over the grassroots bureaucracy.

The second mechanism is the combination of “Party-building at the grassroots” (基层党建 *jiceng dangjian*) and “grid management” (网格化管理 *wanggehua guanli*). Neither of the two devices is brand-new. In the past decade under Xi’s leadership, Party supremacy has been

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<sup>41</sup> Interview code: LX20211109XSJ

emphasized to an unprecedented degree. “The Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country,”<sup>42</sup> the official slogan claims. The countryside is no exception. The village Party Secretary (or the chief P.S., if applicable) represents absolute authority in village governance – a trinity of leadership over the Party branch, the Committee of Villagers, and all socio-economic organizations in the village. The dual leadership of (and often conflicts between) the Party Secretary and the popularly elected village head has become history.<sup>43</sup> Under Party dominance, village elections have little meaning, and self-governance by villagers degenerates into a right only on paper. Meanwhile, the CCP’s organization-building and political rituals, such as study sessions, “democratic life,” and branch meetings, are gaining increasing importance and taking more and more time from grassroots cadres. Moreover, being a Party member is no longer a mere political label or identity but a serious commitment to the Party’s causes. Besides participating in symbolic political rituals, CCP members are required to make tangible contributions to the regime’s solidification and longevity by taking extra and substantive governance duties, such as grid management.

Minxin Pei, in an article, gives a thorough introduction and assessment of grid management.<sup>44</sup> Starting from some experimental sites in Beijing in 2004 and with more than a decade of continuous expansion, grid management has become a nationwide institutional tool of social control deployed in both urban neighborhoods and rural villages. Simply put, the common

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<sup>42</sup> In Chinese, “党政军民学，东西南北中，党是领导一切的。”

<sup>43</sup> According to the CCP’s Regulations on Rural Work, promulgated on September 1, 2019, “the Village Party Secretary, through legal procedures, should take charge of the Committee of Villagers and village collective economic organizations and cooperatives.”

<sup>44</sup> Minxin Pei, “Grid Management: China’s Latest Institutional Tool of Social Control,” *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 67, Spring 2021.

practice is to divide the basic governing units (i.e., neighborhoods and villages) into geographically smaller “grids” and deploy one to several attendants to regularly patrol and manage each grid, assisted by information and big data technologies. In this way, the regime aims to realize total surveillance as well as better service deliveries to every household and every individual across the country. The society is expected to become completely “legible” and penetrable in front of the party-state power. As a statecraft, grid management is designed to be a fine-grained method of governance and a mechanism of control operating at the micro-level of Chinese society. Pei, however, acutely points out in his assessment, as many local governments are constrained by their fiscal capacity, grid management in reality is a labor-intensive and low-tech system. In places where local governments cannot afford to hire full-time grid attendants, those positions are staffed by neighborhood and village cadres who already have been overburdened with existing governance tasks.

Against this background, mobilizing CCP members becomes a plausible solution. For instance, Liuyang County and other localities in Hunan have launched a program of “Party-building plus microgrids” (党建+微网格 *dangjian + weiguangge*) (despite different names of the programs, their content is almost the same).<sup>45</sup> It requires Party members not only to participate in activities organized by their work unit’s party cell, but also to register at the party branch of the neighborhood or village where they live and be tasked with grid management. Registered Party members would then be appointed as directors of microgrids (微网格长 *weiguanggezhang*), even smaller subdivisions of a grid that usually have 100 to 300 households.

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<sup>45</sup> Some places name the program “党员网格三微工作法” (Party Members Grid Three-Micro Approach) or “党员双报到” (the Double Registration of Party Members).

The microgrid director is responsible for contacting and taking care of all the households in his/her microgrid. The number of households in a microgrid ranges from a few to a couple dozen, depending on who are the director's neighbors or/and acquaintances in the community.

A common practice is that the director will set up an online WeChat group and add all the residents of the microgrid into that group to facilitate management. The rationale behind microgrids is a version of “political subcontracting” at the individual level, resembling the practice by which local cadres were required to adopt poor households during the anti-poverty campaign. The major responsibilities of the party member-cum-microgrid director include propagating policies, collecting information, monitoring and persuading residents, delivering public services, and organizing and mobilizing the masses. Among these obligations, the core task is to identify and deactivate any unstable or risk factors promptly and effectively through constant surveillance and intelligence gathering. In one locality, for example, microgrid directors are supposed to check in with residents at least once a week via online communication and pay quarterly visits to them in person.

The graph below shows the structure of microgrids in a village in northern Hunan.<sup>46</sup> We can see the village has been divided into 86 microgrids and every microgrid has been assigned to a CCP member. Similarly, in another county in central Hunan, through microgrids combined with Party-building, a total population of 900 thousand had been put under the surveillance and management of 30 thousand Party members. The implementation, however, is not free from problems. One of the major challenges for organizing microgrids in the countryside is the aging of rural Party members. With the recruitment to the CCP getting stricter in recent years,

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<sup>46</sup> Obtained from an informant during a field trip to Liuyang County in November 2021.



compounded with the emigration of young people, the number of new CCP members increases slowly in rural areas. It is very challenging for the elder Party members to fulfill the role of microgrid management, because they have difficulties in mastering smartphones and thus completing the requirements of information collection.<sup>47</sup>



The structure of the “Party-building plus microgrids” in a village in northern Hunan

<sup>47</sup> Interview code: LY2011116WSJ. Without sufficient materials, it is hard for me to give an overall assessment of the effectiveness of grid management. One piece of reference is that in my survey, 38% of respondents believe grid management is somewhat effective and 7% think it is very effective, in contrast to 17% who think the effectiveness is small or negligible. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 means not effective and 5 is very effective), the average score of grid management is 3.3.

## Conclusion

For Chinese grassroots governments in the countryside, their workload and pressure have sharply increased. On the one hand, this is due to the bureaucratization and formalization of village governance in recent years. Village cadres have become increasingly professionalized as civil servants and must faithfully meet the various requirements of upper-level authorities, and receive frequent assessments, inspections, and supervision. They must strictly follow all the procedures and regulations in the use of government funds and management of village affairs, striving to achieve legitimacy, openness, and transparency. They also must undertake many administrative and public service responsibilities delegated by the higher-level government.

On the other hand, rural grassroots officials need to implement the ambitious rural transformation plan of the central leadership. This involves deep intervention and control over all aspects of agricultural production and peasants' life, including how villagers raise poultry, how they arrange their courtyards, personal hygiene practices, and how they hold weddings and funerals. When grassroots cadres are busy creating a "modern" countryside, however, the true owners of the rural area – peasants – are absent, becoming outsiders and spectators, and passive recipients of the transformative blueprint. In the grand "revitalization" campaign, we see little official effort to hear their true voices and understand their real needs.

The consequence is that grassroots bureaucrats are so occupied responding to directives from higher authorities, that rural residents do not necessarily appreciate them, and may, in fact, resent their "hard work." Cases like Yao, the Party secretary of Jingshen Village, who can effectively mobilize villagers to actively participate in rural governance and build a sense of village community, are likely to be few. Therefore, senior rural researcher He Xuefeng is deeply concerned about the future of rural governance:

“The more strict and specific the state’s requirements for village governance are, the greater the intensity of supervision, and the more the village cadres lose their autonomy and spontaneity. As a result, grassroots governance is more likely to be trapped in internal friction and involution, and grassroots-level work is more likely to be ineffective and disconnected from the needs of peasants and the realities of rural areas.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> He Xuefeng, “农村基层治理的辩证法 (The Dialectics of Grassroots Governance in Rural China),” in 《大国之基》 *The Foundation of a Big State*, (Beijing: Dongfang Press, 2019): 288-304.

## ***Chapter 4***

### ***Pandemic Control***

The workload, stress, and governance difficulties of the Chinese grassroots bureaucracy had begun to increase before the coronavirus outbreak, but the pandemic control enlarged the gap between the supply and demand sides of state governance and exacerbated bureaucratic overload at the grassroots level. In this chapter, I further discuss the state control of society, while shifting the attention from rural governance to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on two main aspects of the pandemic control, the vaccination campaign and lockdown, I investigate how the Chinese approach to the pandemic and totalistic governmentality has created an unbearable burden on the frontline workforce and thereby imperiled grassroots governance.

The state's handling of vaccination and lockdown indicates that the structural imbalance and mismatch between the discretionary power and accountability faced by the grassroots bureaucracy (基层责权不对等 *jiceng zequan buduideng*) can be understood as a strategic, deliberate design to protect the legitimacy of the central authority of the Chinese Communist regime at the expense of grassroots cadres. By centralizing power while decentralizing responsibility (上收权力, 下放责任 *shangshou quanli, xiafang zeren*), the regime leadership can take full credit for all policy dividends while at the same time deflecting potential risk and blame

from itself. During the vaccination campaign, the central government maintained a benevolent image to its citizens by allowing them to vaccinate voluntarily, yet utilizing the accountability system to pressure subnational governments into assigning hard vaccination targets to grassroots units. In the case of the Shanghai lockdown, it was the top leadership that made the final decision to lock down the metropolis, but the public discontent and resentment was diverted to local and grassroots bureaucrats. Moreover, the unfolding of the lockdown demonstrated that without the normal functioning of the market and civil society, despite pushing the grassroots workforce beyond reasonable limits, the omnipotence of the state remained a delusion rather than reality.

### **The Benevolent Emperor vs. Villainous Local Bureaucrats: the Case of the COVID-19 Vaccination Effort**

Until 6 September 2021, China was reported to have administered 21.1308 billion cumulative COVID-19 vaccine doses, more than three times the number in India which has a similar population size (see *Figure 4.1*).<sup>1</sup> The total number of people who have received at least one dose of the vaccine has exceeded 1 billion, accounting for 77.6% of the total population, and among them, 969.72 million have been fully vaccinated.<sup>2</sup> Surely at that time the central leadership (and the propaganda apparatus) were pleased with these data suggesting that China was winning the global struggle against the pandemic.

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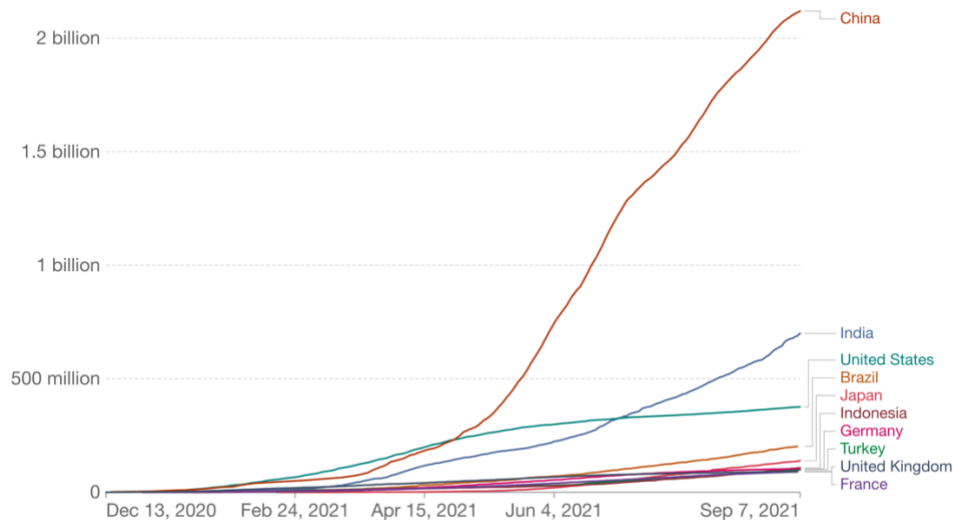
<sup>1</sup> Source: Our World in Data, “COVID-19 vaccine doses administered,” <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-covid-vaccinations> (accessed 9 Sept. 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The National Health Commission of the PRC, “国务院联防联控机制 2021 年 9 月 7 日新闻发布会文字实录 (the Transcript of 7 September 2021 Press Conference),” Sept. 7, 2021, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/fkdt/202109/8b207c33c04145e4942ff946b53adc7c.shtml> (accessed 9 Sept. 2021).

*Figure 4.1 COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Administered*

### COVID-19 vaccine doses administered

For vaccines that require multiple doses, each individual dose is counted. As the same person may receive more than one dose, the number of doses can be higher than the number of people in the population.



Source: Official data collated by Our World in Data – Last updated 8 September 2021, 19:30 (London time)  
OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

However, local state agents and grassroots bureaucrats were far from feeling triumphant. To them, the vaccination campaign was a nightmare. During a field trip I took to Dual-Peak County in inland China in July 2021, when asked about the most difficult and challenging task they were facing, almost every township and village leader I met poured out “bitter water” of complaints about the impossible COVID-19 vaccination mission. In this section, I adopt a multilevel approach to analyze the distinct motives, rationale, and behavior behind different levels of the Chinese party-state. By unpacking the state, I demonstrate that the vaccination campaign, a crucial part of China’s pandemic control, has created an unbearable workload and stress for grassroots cadres, as well as perpetuating the stereotypical image of “a benevolent

emperor vs. villainous local bureaucrats,” consistent with the Chinese public’s hierarchical satisfaction towards different levels of government manifested in numerous opinion polls.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The Central Level: the Benign-Image Maintenance***

In order to maintain an image of a benevolent and highly responsive authority to the public, the central government reiterates the primary principle of “informed, consenting, and voluntary” (知情、同意、自愿 *zhiqing, tongyi, ziyuan*) in its vaccination policy and discourages local governments from adopting any forced, radical measures to compel residents to get vaccinated. In some locales, unvaccinated residents were denied access to public transportation, shopping malls, and hospitals, while other places linked vaccination status to salaries, pensions, and even social credits among public sector employees. When state media exposed these localized restrictions, the National Health Commission (NHC hereafter) quickly responded by announcing that those coercive measures violated the voluntary principle of vaccination and thus should be corrected firmly.<sup>4</sup> However, under the highest directive of “preventing imported cases from outside and resurgence of cases from inside” (外防输入、内防反弹 *wanfang shuru, neifang fantan*), the central authorities in fact put huge pressure on subnational governments, especially at provincial and municipal levels, by holding them accountable for even a single case in their jurisdictions. Therefore, subnational governments were pushed to maintain a zero-case

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<sup>3</sup> See Tony Saich-led public opinion surveys in China from 2003 to 2016: Edward Cunningham et. al., *Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time*, the Harvard Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, July 2020; and Lianjiang Li, “Reassessing Trust in the Central Government: Evidence from Five National Surveys,” *the China Quarterly* 225, (2016): 100-121.

<sup>4</sup> “国家卫健委再次明确：新冠病毒疫苗接种遵循自愿原则 (The NHC Reassures the Voluntary Principle of the COVID-19 Vaccination),” CCTV, July 16, 2021, [https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/202107/t20210716\\_246297.html](https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/202107/t20210716_246297.html) (accessed 30 August 2021).

situation by any means, even at the expense of violating the vaccination principle. In this way, the central leadership could enjoy the policy dividends, taking full credit for the visible fruits of pandemic control, and the propaganda advantage, the image of a responsible state caring for the safety of its citizens, without getting its own hands dirty.

### ***The Subnational Level: Stakes Are Just Too High***

While the central government refrained from adopting a coercive tone, subnational governments issued hard vaccination targets to their subordinates at the grassroots. Township leaders in the field site told me that the NHC had announced that in theory, a vaccination rate of 76.8% was sufficient to build national herd immunity; however, when the target reached local governments, it had increased to 92% of the targeted population (namely the entire resident population above age 18).<sup>5</sup> For instance, Dual-Peak County was required to have more than 300 thousand initial vaccine doses administered by July 1 and have 92% of the adult population (around 517 thousand) fully vaccinated by the end of September 2021.<sup>6</sup> The overall targets were then broken into smaller quotas and assigned downstream to every rural village and urban neighborhood as a political mandate that must be carried out. The following table, solicited from Sweet Crab-Apple Town in Dual-Peak County, shows the breakdown of vaccination targets that the township authority assigned to the fifty villages under its jurisdiction<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview code: LD20210721PSJ

<sup>6</sup> Interview code: LD20210719WSJ. Sweet Crab-Apple Township Government, “关于下达 7-9 月新冠病毒疫苗接种任务的通知 (Notice on the COVID-19 Vaccination Targets Assignment from July to September),” 19 July 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the target population should all have received the first vaccine dose by 15 August and the second dose no later than 20 September.



*Table 4.1 2021 July-September COVID-19 Vaccination Targets for Villages in Sweet Crab-Apple Town<sup>8</sup>*

Village Name	Total Population (above 18)	Vaccination Target	Vaccination Rate
Village 1	1003	923	92%
Village 2	786	723	92%
Village 3	891	820	92%
Village 4	2030	1868	92%
...	...	...	...
Village 50	1293	1190	92%
Neighborhood 1	1960	1803	92%
Total	62929	57895	92%

There is a good reason to believe local governments nationwide issued similar directives for reaching an impressive number of vaccine doses before the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCP's founding on July 1, 2021, along with high vaccination targets by the end of each month. *Figure 4.2* shows the daily vaccine doses administered from December 2020 to September 2021 in China, with almost every bump on the dotted line occurring at either the very end or the beginning of each month (the graph shows a rolling 7-day average).<sup>9</sup> In no other countries can we find a similar pattern to that of China. Not surprisingly, the peak of the daily counts appeared at the end of June, exceeding 22 million doses per day, which indicates that local governments around the country were rushing to complete the targets by the crucial deadline.<sup>10</sup>

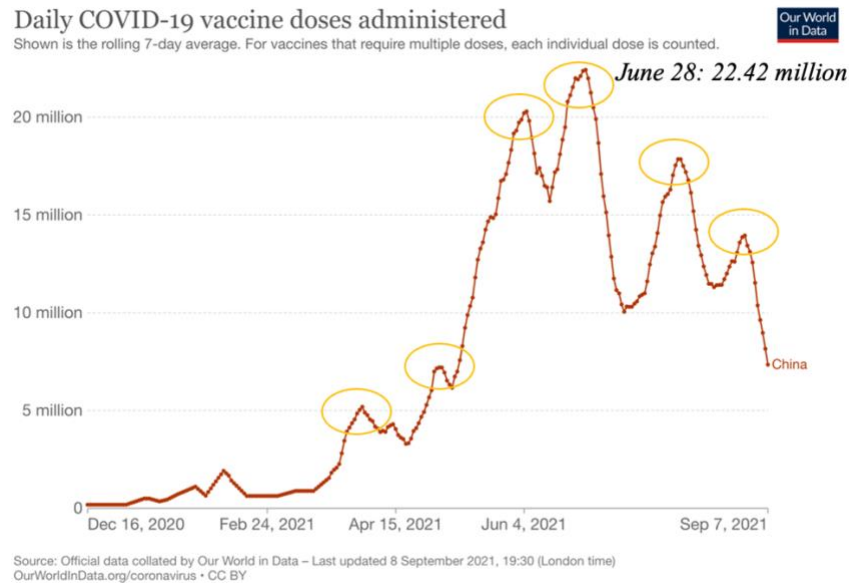
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<sup>8</sup> This is an anonymized, partial table with all identification information being removed. The original one: Sweet Crab-Apple Township Government, “各村 7-9 月新冠病毒疫苗接种任务表,” 19 July 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Source: Our World in Data, “Daily COVID-19 vaccine doses administered,” (by country) <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/daily-covid-19-vaccination-doses?country=~CHN> (accessed 9 Sept. 2021).

<sup>10</sup> The official Chinese vaccination data should be treated with a grain of salt, for they may indicate fraudulent inflation of the number. As I mention later in the text, it has been reported that local governments had falsified

*Figure 4.2 Daily COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Administered in China*



The approach taken by the provincial, municipal, and county authorities is understandable when we consider the prohibitively high socioeconomic cost and political risk for a local government if a coronavirus breakout occurred within its jurisdiction. Once several local cases were spotted, the whole region would be locked down with national travel restrictions for its residents, multiple rounds of regionwide testing, suspension of all public transportation and public events, and a long pause on local trade and economic activities until the number of cases fell to zero and remained stable for 2-3 weeks. For leading cadres in key positions, more importantly, a breakout put their political careers at huge risk stake. In August 2021, in the wake of the May-June coronavirus breakout in Guangzhou (in fact a mild one by international standards), the provincial party disciplinary commission (CDI) punished 20 leading cadres, including two vice mayors, the head of the municipal health commission, the head of local CDC,

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vaccination records to satisfy unrealistic mandates from above. However, falsification evolves high risk – once found out, local cadres may face severe penalties.

the district- and street-level party secretaries and governors, by dismissal, demotion, or serious demerit and warning.<sup>11</sup>

Against this backdrop, maximizing the coverage of vaccination by assigning strict targets to lower-level governments was a rational choice for subnational leaders to avoid blame and risk. Compared with other preventive and pre-emptive measures, such as the mask mandate, social distancing, and regular testing of essential workers, vaccination was the most straightforward, effective, and cost-efficient option. Moreover, subnational governments shouldered no responsibility for the efficacy of the Chinese vaccines, for they are the products of national biomedical teams. Any doubt cast on domestic vaccines and individual reports about potential side effects of the vaccines would be swiftly silenced and censored in public discussion. Therefore, local authorities had no reason to feel politically unsafe or uncomfortable in signaling their dutiful implementation of the central policy by launching the vaccination campaign. After all, the hardest work would fall upon the shoulders of grassroots bureaucrats.

### ***The Grassroots Level: Carrot-And-Stick Mobilization***

For grassroots agents, the difficulties and challenges were at least three-fold – distorted targets, limited mobilizational devices, and daunting paperwork.

To begin with, they are caught between the upper-level pressure of meeting hard targets within a short timeframe and directly facing non-cooperation, hesitancy, and discontent from

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<sup>11</sup> “广州市新冠肺炎疫情防控问责情况通报 (Notice on the Accountability of the COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control in the City of Guangzhou),”南粤清风网 (the official website of the Guangdong CDI), 12 August 2021, [http://www.gdjct.gd.gov.cn/ttxw/content/post\\_138753.html](http://www.gdjct.gd.gov.cn/ttxw/content/post_138753.html) (accessed 30 August 2021). Similarly, see the Henan provincial CDI’s decision on punishing nine officials for the covid-19 breakout in Zhengzhou in July 2021: “郑州 9 名公职人员因疫情防控不力被严肃追责问责,” 河南纪委监委网站, 4 September 2021, [https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/202109/t20210904\\_249493.html](https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/202109/t20210904_249493.html) (accessed 14 Sept. 2021).

many residents, if not the majority. To demonstrate “how the pressurized system works,” a township head showed me a WeChat work group of township leaders (乡镇领导干部微信工作群 *xiangzhen lingdao ganbu weixin gongzuoqun*) that he and his peers belong to. A competition occurs every day as the daily ranking of all towns in the county in terms of the progress of vaccination is announced in the group and supervised directly by the county party secretary. The county boss relentlessly pushes the group and rebukes the town leadership whose ranking falls behind by publicly shaming them.<sup>12</sup> Even though it is all about *face*, every township leader feels the top-down and peer pressure and no one wants to rank low in the tournament. An anecdote by Meng Beiyu, a cadre blogger writing under a pseudonym about his current work unit, the municipal transportation bureau, corroborates this scenario. With a vaccination rate of 85% of the bureau’s employees and a low ranking among all municipal agencies, the director was singled out at the municipal meeting on pandemic control. In the wake of the face-losing meeting, the director commanded that the entire bureau, including retired cadres, must achieve 100% coverage. Under the direct supervision of the boss, many subordinates who previously had excused themselves from vaccination work dutifully followed the order.<sup>13</sup>

To complete the mission, some local governments even extended the subcontract system to everyone working in the public sector – cadres, teachers, and SOE employees – all of whom were assigned a certain quota (such as 5-10 persons) and were told to persuade their relatives and friends to get vaccinated. Kevin O’Brien has written about the “relational repression” by which

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<sup>12</sup> Interview code: LD20210721TZZ

<sup>13</sup> 孟北鱼 (Meng Beiyu), “体制故事：新冠疫苗接种之战 (Story of the System: the Battle of the COVID-19 Vaccination),” August 30, 2021. Retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/6eCumqJmtdQ-P8G1z25VJQ> (accessed 1 September 2021).

teachers and officials are under systemic pressure to discourage their acquaintances from taking collective action such as petitions and protests.<sup>14</sup> What we witnessed during the vaccination campaign can be termed “relational mobilization” – employees in the public sector expending social capital to mobilize people around them to complete a political mandate set by their superiors.

Unfortunately, the targets were not easy to fulfill for several reasons. First, the quota was determined by upper levels based on the latest (seventh) national census conducted in 2020 when most people were trapped at home by the pandemic. However, for an inland county like Dual-Peak with a significant size of emigrants, the actual number of residents at the moment of vaccination might be well below the assigned quota. This gap would not be a major problem if the vaccination coverage rate were the only target, and it did not matter where a person got vaccinated since he or she could be counted according to the location of his/her household registration. But as the grassroots cadres pointed out, the targets were assigned unreasonably by including the absolute number of cumulative vaccine doses administered locally, which turned the competition among different localities into a zero-sum game. Towns, counties, and cities were in a battle with each other to mobilize people to come to their places to get vaccinated (“抢人大战” *qiangren dazhan*). Many local governments even warned their counterparts that efforts to organize and transport residents to get vaccinated outside their county would be harshly punished by the public security apparatus.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin J. O’Brien, “China’s Disaffected Insiders,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no.3 (2017): 5-13.

<sup>15</sup> Official announcements can be easily found on numerous local government websites (such as 隆回县, 城步县, 新邵县 in Hunan Province, 凤阳县, 五河县, 宁国市 in Anhui Province, 唐山市, 邯郸市, 张家口 in Hebei Province). For instance, see 中共隆回县委新冠疫情防控工作领导小组 (The COVID-19 Pandemic Prevention and Control Leading Group of the CCP Longhui Committee), 《关于严厉打击破坏疫苗接种工作秩序行为的通告》 (Notice on Serious Crackdown on Disruptive Behaviors on the Vaccination), August 24, 2021. Retrieved from

Making the situation worse, the party secretary of Sweet Crab-Apple Town revealed a “secret” in our interview. As the resident population (常住人口 *changzhu renkou*) largely determines the amount of fiscal transfer a town could receive from the upper level, it is rational to inflate the number when reporting the census statistics. To meet the inflated quota, they needed to summon people from outside the town to get vaccinated physically in their jurisdiction. Despite taking political advantage of the statistical manipulation in fiscal transfer, they were now plagued by the unintended consequence during the daunting vaccination campaign.<sup>16</sup> This trick is not unique to Sweet Crab-Apple, but is a widely shared practice in many locales, which exacerbates the zero-sum game.<sup>17</sup>

Second, despite the fierce competition and political pressure, the implementing and mobilizational toolkits possessed by grassroots cadres are quite limited. Though they adopt a carrot-and-stick approach, neither the “carrot” nor “stick” are ideal. Material incentives entail a heavy financial burden and huge manpower costs for the already under-resourced grassroots units. Restrictive and coercive measures are not only disliked by the public but also at odds with the voluntary principle endorsed by the central authority, and thereby at risk of being publicly refuted by their superiors or even Beijing. Grassroots cadres told me that many rural residents were reluctant to vaccinate, but since they could not be forced, cadres had to undertake “thought

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<http://www.longhui.gov.cn/longhui/gsgg/202108/caad3811e03c43898d319bb9f8562235.shtml> (accessed 12 September 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Interview code: LD20210721PSJ

<sup>17</sup> A reader’s comment follows a sina microblog posted by the *People’s Daily* (about the vaccination) attests to my conjecture. It reads, “人口统计的时候为了编制数量等原因故意多报了人口，打疫苗的时候缺口通通暴露出来了，于是各种跨区，跨市补贴打疫苗的骚操作就来了……(Local governments deliberately overestimated the local population during the census for various benefits; then they had to deal with the gap in the vaccination by using subsidies to motivate people to get vaccinated.)” retrieved from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/670554.html> (accessed 10 September 2021).

work” (namely persuasion) household by household. Moreover, to meet the unrealistic targets, local states not only dispatched cars and buses to pick up migrant workers and send them back to get vaccinated in their hometown, but also lured them with free meals and subsidies.<sup>18</sup> Material incentives ranged from free groceries to monetary rewards as high as 1,000 RMB (about 150 USD) per person.<sup>19</sup> Street-level bureaucrats generally think it is nonsensical to incentivize citizens in such a costly manner. A deputy party secretary of a street-level office complained that he couldn’t understand why it wasn’t possible to have a national regulation restricting the unvaccinated from entering certain public venues. A simple regulative or restrictive measure, he believed, would make the whole mobilization process much easier. But once a locale took any coercive action, the NHC would quickly “deny the rumor” (辟谣 *piyao*), sabotaging their plan.<sup>20</sup>

With their hands tightly tied, some grassroots cadres clearly feel frustrated and angry when further pressured by their superiors. A village party secretary, when interviewed, said he was informed by the latest notice from the county that every adult in his village, except those with pre-existing conditions, should be vaccinated by the end of the week. After attending the mobilizational meeting, he felt at the end of his rope and could do nothing about it. Similarly, he heard another cadre murmur, “Can’t they just hand me a pistol?”<sup>21</sup> It was unclear whether the cadre wanted to shoot himself or force his villagers to cooperate at the barrel of a gun.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview code: LD20210719WSJ, LD20210719ZSJ

<sup>19</sup> 小晖原创: “接种乱象录 (Documenting the Chaos of Vaccination),” retrieved from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/670554.html> (accessed 10 September 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Interview code: LD20210719ZSJ

<sup>21</sup> Interview code: LD20210721PZS

Under the heavy pressure of the vaccination campaign, some grassroots cadres chose to take risks and falsify vaccination data in order to complete the almost impossible task. Although it is impossible to evaluate the scale and prevalence of the falsification, Chinese media has sporadically reported incidents of local vaccination records being fabricated. For instance, a resident in Shanxi Province reported that his mother had passed away in 2019, but he was able to find records indicating that she had received three doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. After the incident was exposed, local officials including the township party secretary and the head of the township clinic were dismissed from their positions.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the difficult task of mobilizing and organizing residents to get vaccinated, grassroots cadres are burdened with extremely time-consuming and labor-intensive paperwork and statistics that require collecting detailed personal information from residents and compiling complicated tabulations. The following (partial) table from Sweet Crab-Apple Town is exemplary.

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<sup>22</sup> “山西逝者‘被’打疫苗 官方冷处理造假事件 (A deceased person in Shanxi was ‘vaccinated’ and the authorities downplay the falsification),” 自由亚洲电台 *Radio of Free Asia*, Jan.10, 2023, retrieved from <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/huanjing/ec-01102023073412.html> (accessed March 6, 2023); Similar reports on the fabrication of vaccination data in Hunan: “长沙老人去世七天出现接种疫苗记录 (Vaccination record appears for a deceased elderly in Changsha),” 联合早报, Dec. 5, 2022, retrieved from <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/china/story20221205-1340471> (accessed March 6, 2023).



Table 4.2 The Overall Statistics for COVID-19 Vaccination in Sweet Crab-Apple Town<sup>23</sup>

Village Name	Total PPL	Age 18-59															
		Resident				Within the county				Within the province				Outside the province			
		Vaccinated	Not allowed	Postponed	Unvaccinated	Vaccinated	Not allowed	Postponed	Unvaccinated	Vaccinated	Not allowed	Postponed	Unvaccinated	Vaccinated	Not allowed	Postponed	Unvaccinated
V 1	1306	302	19	2	5	10	7	1	4	51	6	1	22	163	5	3	133
V 2	985	123	47	8	7	44	3	1	0	72	12	10	18	148	20	16	37
V 3	1127	139	19	3	6	21	2	0	11	37	0	2	16	383	1	0	39

Age above 60																Outside-town vaccination certificates collected	Note
Resident				Within the county				Within the province				Outside the province					
Vaccinated	Not allowed	Postponed	Unvaccinated	Vaccinated	Not allowed	Postponed	Unvaccinated	接种	不宜接种	暂缓接种	未接种	接种	不宜接种	暂缓接种	未接种		
110	120	0	0	0	5	0	0	2	9	0	0	6	17	0	0	221	
74	85	0	0	2	4	0	0	4	4	1	0	3	3	0	0	198	
45	96	0	4	0	2	0	0	1	2	0	1	15	3	0	0	80	

For each village (51 in total governed by the township), the entire adult population was first divided into two age groups – those from 18 to 59 and those at and above age 60 (senior citizens are more vulnerable and thus subject to stricter conditions of screening); each age group was sub-divided into four categories based on the physical location of the villagers – residents in the village, living inside the county or the province, or outside the province; then within each location group were four additional subcategories concerning vaccination status – the vaccinated, those unsuitable for vaccination, postponed for vaccination due to various reasons, and unvaccinated without legitimate reasons. Additionally, for those who had been vaccinated outside the town, the staff were asked to obtain a copy of their vaccination certificate as proof.

<sup>23</sup> This is an anonymized, partial table with all identification information being removed. The original one: Sweet Crab-Apple Township Government, “全镇新冠病毒疫苗接种汇总表,” July 2021.

Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine the overall workload of grassroots bureaucrats who must contact every adult in their jurisdiction, carefully record all the information required, and organize all the data into this giant table regardless of the actual value of the figures. Leading cadres explained, due to the large size of the emigrant population, it is very hard to get all numbers right by making phone calls to everyone. (On the other hand, ordinary people feel annoyed by their local cadres' repetitive reminders of vaccination.<sup>24</sup>) Given the short timeframe in which to complete the mission, grassroots cadres first had to spend at least one week surveying the whole population and collecting the information.

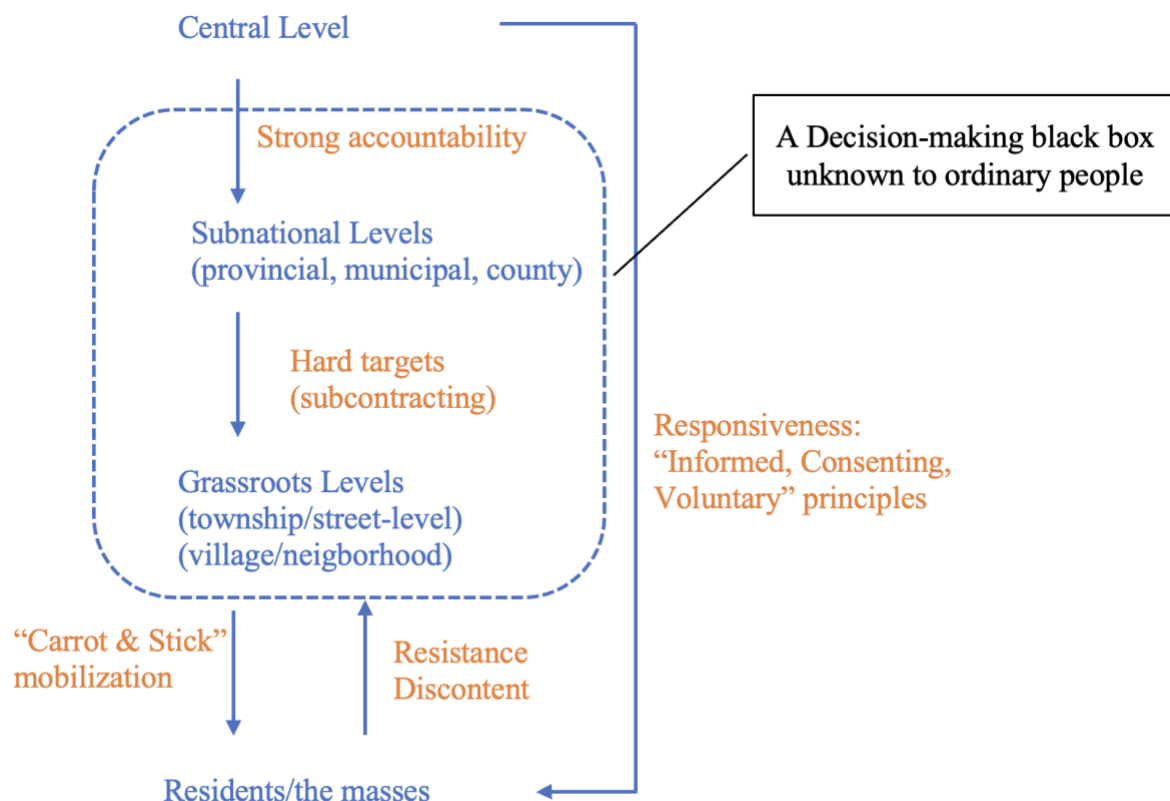
In contrast to the Chinese party-state's victorious narrative of pandemic control, analyzing the vaccination campaign in terms of the multilayered dynamics within the Chinese bureaucracy presents a more sober perspective. The multilevel analysis (summarized in *Figure 4.3*) illustrates how the campaign reinforced the public image of a benevolent, responsible, and responsive central leadership versus a villainous, incompetent, and coercive local bureaucracy. By emphasizing the "humanistic" principles of the vaccination policy and holding the subnational governments accountable for COVID breakouts, the central government takes the credit for successes without shouldering the actual burden of implementation. With prohibitively high political and socioeconomic costs at stake, subnational authorities assigned hard vaccination targets to their grassroots subordinates for accountability and blame avoidance. The contradiction between the voluntary principle for the public and the unreasonable targets for local governments with limited implementing resources has substantially lowered the morale of grassroots agents. But the public is largely unaware of the actual decision-making process within the black box of

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<sup>24</sup> See a sample of the netizens' complaints at <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/670554.html> (accessed 10 September 2021).

the bureaucratic hierarchy (i.e., the accountability and target system). Loathing the extralegal restrictive and coercive measures, local constituencies direct their resentment and resistance to grassroots cadres. Cornered by demanding superiors and noncooperative residents, grassroots bureaucrats often find themselves trapped in a no-win situation.

*Figure 4.3 A Multilevel Analysis of the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign in China*



Beyond the case of vaccination, similar dynamics can be discerned in other policy areas, such as the long-lasting social stability maintenance, which also epitomizes the dichotomy between the public image of benevolent governance by the central authority and the hard-target,

strong-accountability system within the bureaucratic apparatus. Beijing recognizes petitioning<sup>25</sup> (信访 *yìngfāng*) as a lawful right of the citizenry and explicitly prohibits local governments from obstructing and intercepting petitioners in public sight, for instance in front of the buildings of national bureaus. Nevertheless, the maintenance of social stability, indexed by the number of petitions in provincial and national capitals (meaning illegally bypassing local governments 越级上访 *yueji shangfang*), remains a veto item in the performance evaluation system for local cadres. In other words, regardless of the petitioners' motives and justifications, the local authorities are held accountable and face severe punishment if someone under their jurisdiction goes to Beijing to file a complaint. Therefore, to make sure that "everything looks fine" during important political events, such as the annual Two Sessions, local and grassroots cadres are pressured to invest enormous time and energy to identify, monitor, and placate discontented residents, especially the "professional" petitioners. And very often cadres have no alternative except to buy off petitioners despite the heavy financial burden it imposes on local government.

As a township leader explained, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCP's founding in 2021 brought a "special period of stability maintenance" (维稳特护期 *weiwēn tèhùqī*) lasting for two entire months when every cadre in the town, putting down the work at hand, was mobilized and tasked to closely monitor potential conflicts and suspicious targets.<sup>26</sup> The extended special period, the cadre pointed out, was very disruptive to normal work. In this sense, "a time of peace and prosperity" governed by an apparently benevolent, competent, and responsive central

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<sup>25</sup> It is officially translated as "public complaints and proposals," see the webpage of National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration (国家信访局), <https://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/gjxfj/index.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Interview code: LD20210720CSJ.

leadership has been superficially achieved at the cost of a physically, mentally, and financially exhausted grassroots bureaucracy.

## **Lockdown: The Great Delusion of State Omnipotence**

The pandemic control and lockdowns of many cities in China demonstrated the consequences of the totalistic approach and the illusion of state omnipotence. During the lockdowns, when the governing scope exceeded state capacity, the state was overstretched, creating serious burdens for the frontline workforce and imperiling grassroots governance.

### ***Why is the Cure Worse than the Disease?***

From Wuhan and Xi'an to Shenzhen, Jilin, and Shanghai, guided by the Zero-COVID policy, China adopted a form of lockdown much more stringent than lockdowns practiced by many other countries. Basically, the entire city was put on pause with all public transportation suspended, public venues closed, roads and highways blocked by checkpoints, and people confined to their residential compounds for days and nights and only permitted to leave their houses for rounds of mass testing. Shanghai, a metropolis with a 25-million population after an outbreak of the highly contagious Omicron variant, entered a total lockdown at the beginning of April 2022, while numerous compounds where positive cases were identified had already been locked down since early or mid-March. The draconian lockdown measures, lasting for two straight months, were not lifted for the entire city until June 1, 2022. (Please see the Appendix at the end of the section for a detailed timeline of the Shanghai lockdown.)

After the Omicron outbreak began, Shanghai's decision-makers, advised by many pandemic experts, initially agreed to avoid the extreme measure of locking down to maintain life

in the city as usual. However, under direct intervention by the supreme leader who was reportedly furious about the local decision, the Shanghai government then had to loyally enforce the zero-COVID policy that Xi Jinping insisted on.<sup>27</sup> To avoid using the frightening term “lockdown” (封城 *fengcheng*), the metropolitan authorities chose the phrase “total static management” (全域静态管理 *quanyu jingtai guanli*) as a euphemism. The less frightening term could not disguise the terrifying fact that people living in the most affluent region of China were struggling with fear of hunger in the year 2022, not 1959, the beginning of the Great Famine.

During the lockdown, survival supplies for all households depended on three sources: (1) food and other groceries stocked before the lockdown, which would eventually run out at some point; (2) food packages distributed by the government, which varied greatly across neighborhoods, ranging from some who received fresh meat, vegetables, and fruits regularly to others who got nothing at all (or simply a box of instant noodles); and (3) limited channels and platforms of online shopping and delivery, whose pages constantly went down due to the flooding of demands, and many transactions canceled because of supply chain issues and delivery manpower shortages on the ground. No matter how carefully people rationed their food and groceries, it was hard to remain calm when supply sources failed. Sometimes people were “rescued” by well-meaning neighbors and exchanged goods with each other in case of need. Some turned to social media to cry out for help, but their voices were quickly silenced by the censorship apparatus operating in full gear.

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<sup>27</sup> Cai Xia, a former professor at the CCP Central Party School, revealed the details of the decision-making process concerning the Shanghai lockdown she learned from an informant at the PRC State Council. See Cai Xia, “The Weakness of Xi Jinping: How Hubris and Paranoia Threaten China’s Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 6, 2022.

The shadow of starvation and shortage that recalled the failures of the command economy was only part of the collateral damage inflicted by the lockdown. Hospitals were required to shut down their out-patient departments, the limited number of ambulances were restricted to transporting covid cases, and other patients were required to wait for their PCR test results before receiving treatment. Numerous heartrending tragedies occurred: a woman suffered a miscarriage while waiting in front of a hospital that denied her admission; an elderly person was stricken by a heart attack and passed away due to the delay of first aid; a nurse who suffered from acute asthma was denied access by her own hospital where she had worked for more than 20 years and died; countless patients with renal failure or cancer were reduced to a critical condition as they struggled to gain access to regular dialyzes or chemotherapy.

The Initium (端传媒 *danchuanmei*), an independent Chinese-language news outlet, has collected and sorted the scattered information about the collateral damage on the Chinese internet. According to their statistics, from March to April, the zero-COVID policy and lockdown measures, directly and indirectly, caused the death of at least 170 people in Shanghai. The deaths of 90 individuals have been verified, and among them, 48 died because of delayed medical treatment or the lack of medical resources, 22 elders died in nursing houses that suffered mismanagement, and 8 grassroots frontline workers or volunteers died from exposure and overwork. The oldest among them was 98 years old, while the youngest was only 3 years and 10 months.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See the Initium Media's online project that has collected a list of tragic cases and summarized the collateral damage caused by the Shanghai lockdown, retrieved from <https://theinitium.com/project/20220506-mainland-covid-shanghai-lockdown/> (accessed June 3, 2022).

In addition, there were stories of desperate mothers whose children had tested positive being forced to be separated from their uninfected parents in quarantine; of angry migrant workers who were infected on the construction site of mobile hospitals being exiled to unlivable quarantine quarters; of domestic service workers evicted from their collective rental apartments, and of delivery men sleeping on the streets of the city where they selflessly served. Why did the “cure” cause more damage than the disease?

By getting rid of the market mechanism, social spontaneity, and individual agency, the party-state in Shanghai had turned itself into a nanny state with unlimited liability operating on the anachronic logic of central planning. The totalistic state is deemed responsible for feeding and caring for tens of millions of infantilized adults whose autonomy has been deprived by the authorities. In this way, all the risks and responsibilities are transferred onto the state, while it is a mission impossible for a planned system to promptly respond to and satisfy an unending stream of urgent requests and idiosyncratic needs.

Even under normal circumstances, preventable deaths occur due to limited medical resources or traffic jams that delay ambulances. In those cases, people usually mourn their losses and accept the vicissitudes of life. But when the state itself exerts total control and deprives citizens of personal agency, they are likely to see the deceased as victims of a “humanitarian disaster” caused by the lockdown and the zero-COVID policy. Efforts to regain agency were often in vain. On 1 April 2022, residents in a compound in Pudong, Shanghai collectively signed a petition letter, demanding that people with mild symptoms and asymptomatic cases be permitted to remain at home for quarantine, accepting full responsibility for the consequences.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Chinese media Caixin covered the story, but the report was later deleted by the censor.



The request was immediately rejected by the local CDC which asserted that all positive cases must be transmitted to designated locations, despite the lack of necessary logistical and medical resources at the time.

As the failure of planned economies in the past demonstrates, the totalistic state does not have the capacity to process all the necessary information, allocate resources scientifically and efficiently, and fill in the gap between supply and demand, no matter how confident the leaders may feel or how much the grassroots workforce has been mobilized and pressured. Without assistance from the market force and civil society, the party-state's ambition to be omniscient and omni-responsible was doomed to failure. As a grassroots cadre in the Chinese public health system comments,

“The mere reliance on bureaucratic institutions doesn't work. But the leaders believed we could handle the pandemic by relying on our own people – civil servants and party members and the healthcare system. This mindset never changed. This is the inertia of the Chinese bureaucratic system and the mindset of the people within the system....

The decision-makers still believed if we mobilized all the people in the public sector (体制内的人 *tizhinei de ren*) we could get things right. In reality, the answer is no. If that were the case, why did we need to reform and open up? Why didn't we just get rid of society and the private sector? ... Who is most tormented by the pandemic control? People in the public sector. They have no alternative but to obey. If we continued this approach to the pandemic, the entire grassroots workforce would eventually be paralyzed and collapse.”<sup>30</sup>

To some extent, the central commander's blind faith in the state's omnipotence is based upon the unrealistic overestimation of the competence and potential of the implementers on the

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<sup>30</sup> “二十大前防疫收紧，基层卫生官员自述：现在不是想控制疫情，是想控制人” (Pandemic Control Tightens before the 20th Party Congress, A Grassroots Cadre of Public Health Reveals: The Point is Not to Control COVID but to Control People), 端传媒 (*Initium*), Oct 3, 2022, <https://theinitium.com/article/20221003-mainland-communist-party-congress-zero-covid-policy/>

ground. In a sense, this is dehumanization, as humans have degenerated into mere instruments of governance and the believer in state mastery fails to recognize the limits of human capacity.

During the pandemic control, it was hard to detect any reasonable official estimation of the total manpower demands, the size of the workforce, and the length of working hours – as if a person’s physical and psychological energy would never be exhausted. Instead, what was stressed in the official statements and state propaganda was the spirit of sacrifice – serving the collective good at the expense of individual interest – among the frontline workers. But the brutal fact is that the grassroots workforce was pushed to the brink of breakdown.

### ***The Grassroots Workforce: Trapped in the Totalistic System***

Some scholars argue that the pandemic accelerated the administrative expansion of the Chinese state, as the central authorities delegated some surveillance and even coercive power to grassroots governing entities.<sup>31</sup> They observe, “once largely invisible to most urban residents, neighborhood organizations now brought highly salient state control right to the doorstep of most urban households.”<sup>32</sup> However, by mainly drawing on policy documents, these scholars seem to overestimate the “empowerment” of grassroots cadres and their exercise of “almost unchecked enforcement power in the realm of COVID control,” while neglecting the governing challenges and limitations of capacity they experienced in reality.

Materials that circulated widely on the Chinese internet during the Shanghai lockdown suggest the difficulties faced by grassroots governing units in the midst of the coronavirus

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<sup>31</sup> Yutian An and Taisu Zhang, “Pandemic State-Building: Chinese Administrative Expansion in the Xi Jinping Era,” 16 Feb. 2023, *SSRN*, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4356026>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

outbreak: an open resignation letter from a party head of a resident committee,<sup>33</sup> a revelation, titled “On Fighting against the Pandemic,” written by a rank-and-file grassroots cadre who had been working in an urban neighborhood for four years,<sup>34</sup> and a taped phone call between a resident and the director of her resident committee.<sup>35</sup>

These materials indicate that the major challenge faced by grassroots cadres is that of being sandwiched between their superiors and the masses. Looking up, they must obey all orders from higher levels regarding the pandemic, even when some of the commands turned out to be impractical and unreasonable on the ground. Due to the lack of autonomy and bargaining power, grassroots cadres could not disobey, but they are the ones who bear the consequences of those orders, for they must directly face the residents who were negatively affected by the zero-COVID policy and related measures. Being at the bottom of the hierarchical control system, grassroots cadres possess little leverage to roll back higher-ups’ decisions and lack critical resources, even though, as frontline practitioners, they have firsthand experience and knowledge about the flaws of the system in operation.

A telling example was the frequent mass testing. Frontline workers quickly discovered that in the populated residential compounds, this measure actually increased the hazard of infection from mass gatherings inasmuch as limited social distancing could not prevent the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant. The high frequency of mass testing not only

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<sup>33</sup> Source: 吴颖川, “春天快来了” (The Spring is about to Come), 7 April 2022, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20220415/20220415A08S3500.html>

<sup>34</sup> Source: “记抗疫” (On Fighting against the Pandemic), 10 April 2022, *Sina Weibo* (original piece censored and archived here: <https://www.epochtimes.com/gb/22/4/11/n13708843.htm>)

<sup>35</sup> Source: “上海居民与居委会书记的电话录音（完整版）” (a taped phone call between a Shanghai resident and the director of a resident committee), 4 April 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tD\\_JBsm7CY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tD_JBsm7CY)

exhausted the grassroots organizers, but brought harm to people as the testing process itself became a source of contagion. Despite grassroots opposition, the decision-makers insisted on one round of mass testing after another. A resident committee cadre wrote in her statement that when positive cases were detected (right after mass testing) in a residential compound that had managed to keep a clean record for 12 straight days, she felt their efforts had all been in vain, and the feeling of despair was intensified by the scolding from fellow residents who realized that mass testing had caused the infection.

“I remember clearly that a resident whose building had positive cases called us twice, and he cursed all the staff in the resident committee, saying we deserved to die from cancer because we were helping the devil (助纣为虐 *zhuzhouweinue*) and putting their health in peril.”<sup>36</sup>

The grassroots workforce not only lacks political capacity, but also falls short along the informational dimension. Located at the periphery of the cumbersome planning system, many policy details and major decisions, such as the timetable of reopening, were beyond the knowledge of grassroots cadres. Hence, they could not effectively respond to public inquiries, nor could they clarify residents’ confusion. In addition, they were not informed of up-to-date information about quarantine-related logistics such as when and where to transport the infected. Grassroots cadres, therefore, endured huge psychological and even moral strains in policy implementation when sending their residents to centralized quarantine facilities. As the former party secretary recalls, after hearing that some infected people waited on the bus for an entire night, but no place was available to admit them, he was extremely upset and felt he had failed his

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<sup>36</sup> “记抗疫”

residents.<sup>37</sup> Another neighborhood-level cadre confessed that she later learned that a mother with two children, whom she persuaded to leave their home for a centralized quarantine site, were sent to a construction site. The temporarily built cabin where they were confined had deplorable living conditions and was completely devoid of the facilities and medical resources she had imagined. She recalled that after hearing from the desperate mother, she experienced the darkest moment of her life, overcome with regret and resentment. She felt betrayed by the higher-ups who had not informed the grassroots about the reality of the quarantine facilities.

“It was we who sent them to the designated quarantine site, it was I who persuaded them to go to that mismanaged and terrible place. In the beginning, you authorities said all the positive cases should be transferred, and you promised that the centralized quarantine sites had everything they needed, but now my residents are in a horrible situation and crying for help, and you turn a deaf ear to them.... I am so disappointed, not by your incompetence to control the disease, nor by your failure to protect people’s well-being, but by all the lies and deception and endless delays.”<sup>38</sup>

For the director of the resident committee in the taped phone call, after being bombarded by residents’ questions about why positive cases in their buildings had not been quarantined, her emotion reached a breaking point, and she sobbed that she had reported the situation countless times to the superiors, but with all the hospitals and designated sites packed with the infected, there was nothing more she could do.<sup>39</sup>

The totalistic state promises to take care of everything and everyone, but as a result, it has pushed the grassroots workforce, who are directly responsible for realizing the nanny state, to a

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<sup>37</sup> “春天快来了”

<sup>38</sup> “记抗疫”

<sup>39</sup> “上海居民与居委会书记的电话录音”

mission impossible. As the party head who openly resigned points out, his resident committee had only 8 members, but they were serving 1847 households, more than 4000 people in total. Without additional resources or helping hands, it was impossible for them to meet the needs of all residents, despite overworking for days and nights.

“I have stayed in the resident committee office since March 11, and for ten days I couldn’t go home to take care of my parents and child(ren), and only slept for two to three hours a day or stayed up all night. Since March 24, all of us were summoned to stand by in the office, and even today (April 7) we have still not been able to go home and see our families. We have no places to take a shower, and we missed many breakfasts and lunches and usually have our first meal at 2 or 3 pm, and sometimes just muddle through with instant noodles. No one bothers to check whether we have basic supplies. For 15 days, we haven’t had one shower or a good sleep. At 3 am, the street-level office was still assigning tasks for a new round of mass testing, sending notices about test results and orders of transferring positive cases as well as verifying residents’ information.

One of our social workers was infected, but we are just quarantined in the office, with no rest and supplies, working more than 16 hours per day and staying up to deal with the mass testing results. Some of my colleagues had an emotional breakdown and burst into tears. Despite having countless phone calls every day, when facing various demands from 1847 households, we are unable to respond to and meet their needs. We couldn’t bear the burden anymore. After all, we are someone’s husband, wife, and child. We are just a bunch of ordinary people with human emotions, and we also have our bottom lines.”<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in the conversation recorded, the director said that her cell phone rang all day, and she had no time left to take care of her family. She even paid out of her own pocket to purchase groceries and food for her residents. “But it is no longer a job, it has become something that will take my life,” she confessed, “I have no capacity and mental energy to continue this

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<sup>40</sup> “春天快来了”

work.”<sup>41</sup> In a statement made by the Hancheng Resident Committee in Pudong, Shanghai, the staff members decided to collectively resign, stating, “Everyone and every government department ask us to understand and cooperate, but no one tries to understand us, no one cares about our feelings and moods. We are also humans, not machines without emotions, and there are times when we could no longer persist. Please do not treat us as iron men.”<sup>42</sup>

It is noteworthy that these statements all stressed the point that neighborhood-level cadres are just ordinary human beings who have family roles and commitments, with normal emotions, and have limits and basic principles. This humanistic claim resists the “dehumanized” official rhetoric and propaganda that glorifies the heroic and sacrificing spirit of Communist party cadres. In the eyes of the totalistic party-state, the grassroots agents are simply an instrument of governance and control rather than flesh and blood.

One deflated grassroots cadre, after experiencing all the hardship, began to question and reflect on the nature of resident committees. Why should a nominally autonomous, self-organized entity be burdened with responsibilities that far exceed its capacity?

“What is a resident committee? By definition, it is a self-governed organization of residents. If so, then why should an autonomous organization be tasked with such a huge responsibility in pandemic management?

If we could control doctors and hospitals, then on March 22 when the elderly woman collapsed, I would have asked the hospital that denied her admission to save her by any means, and perhaps she wouldn’t have died; if we could command the CDC, then I would ask them to suspend the non-sensical, unrelenting rounds of mass testing as soon as possible, and switch to providing separated PCR tests (in the form of home service) to individuals who

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<sup>41</sup> “上海居民与居委会书记的电话录音”

<sup>42</sup> Source: “三林镇翰城居委会集体辞职 (Collective Resignation of the Hancheng Resident Committee in Sanlin Township)”, 12 April 2022, retrieved from <https://hk.epochtimes.com/news/2022-04-12/50676274> (accessed Nov. 10, 2022).

test positive; if we could take charge of the logistics, I would immediately collect my residents who have been sent to the horrible quarantine site and bring them home.

But we do not have any power and authority, nor do we have any resources. Instead, what we have are just social workers infected one after another, volunteers burned out in the battle to achieve zero-covid and lambasting from residents who think we are incompetent to solve any problems or do anything.”<sup>43</sup>

When the totalistic state aims to take charge of everything and requires grassroots organizations to serve as tentacles of the Leviathan, then the neighborhood-level resident committees are subject to complete bureaucratization and become the implementing end of the bureaucratic system. However, when the myth of the omnipotent state was shattered by the astonishing collateral damage of the months-long lockdown of Shanghai, the government chose to shy away from the responsibility of its own decision. Instead, it claimed the confinement and blocking of tens of thousands of residential compounds as voluntary and spontaneous behavior of residents themselves, attributing the consequences of lockdown to resident committees that are theoretically self-managed and self-governed. In this way, the government attempts to separate its role and accountability from the grassroots organizations that implemented its orders. Although the authorities never acknowledge they have said so publicly, the leaked information about the official guidelines for propaganda and news outlets indicates their intention to attribute the Shanghai debacle to grassroots cadres and ordinary people.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “记抗疫”

<sup>44</sup> 顾万明：《上海“封城”原来是乌龙，让人情何以堪》(Shanghai Lockdown was made up? What a shame!), “大记有话说”, 31 May 2022, (the original article was censored on WeChat, and the text is archived by the *Chinese Digital Times*; the author is a retired journalist of the authoritative state media, Xinhua News Agency), retrieved from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/682358.html> (accessed 2 June 2022).



Clearly, the duality of the nature of grassroots governing entities (villages and resident committees) provides a convenient excuse for the government's manipulation and exploitation. When the state needs grassroots units, they are incorporated as an indispensable cog in the bureaucratic machine. When missions fail and the state wants to evade responsibility, then grassroots units are left on their own as "autonomous civil organizations" (自治民间组织 *zizhi mingjian zuzhi*) that have nothing to do with the government.

### ***Epilogue: From (Delusion of) Omnipotence to Incompetence***

Despite the firm central endorsement, the lockdown of Shanghai heralded the unsustainability of the zero-COVID doctrine. Following Shanghai, hair-trigger regional lockdowns kept exhausting grassroots and frontline workers, driving local governments' fiscal circumstances to bankruptcy, contributing to a looming economic crisis, and fraying public patience and tolerance. Collateral damage continued to occur and social discontent accumulated until a tragic fire in Urumqi, a city under lockdown for more than 100 days, became a tipping point. Nationwide resistance against zero-COVID among university students, city dwellers, and migrant workers spiraled up to anti-regime protests as demonstrators demanded political freedom and challenged the leadership of Xi Jinping and the CCP. To many's surprise, two weeks after the Urumqi fire, the Chinese government suddenly abandoned its zero-tolerance policy in early December 2022, lifting all restrictive measures overnight and letting the country face the full force of the virus unprotected. With the dereliction of duty on the part of the party-state, the

official language shifted to stress the individual responsibility for personal health.<sup>45</sup> As COVID swept across China, people were left to improvise and battle the disease themselves in the midst of a severe medicine shortage and overflowing hospitals.

How can we make sense of the 180-degree policy turnabout? Especially, why did the Chinese party-state stop trying to be totalistic or omnipotent? Though it is impossible to see through the decision-making black box, I conjecture that multilayered pressures have collectively contributed to China's pandemic u-turn. First, days, or perhaps even weeks before the policy change, the spread of the Omicron variants had already outpaced the strategy of containment, rendering the failure of zero-COVID a *fait accompli*. Second, routinized PCR mass testing and overexpanding centralized quarantine became fiscally unsustainable for local governments, even those in rich regions.<sup>46</sup> Third, the increasing socio-economic toll began to impose tangible threats on the stability and legitimacy of the regime. And the mass protests provided a convenient excuse for the top leadership to cast aside zero-COVID, for the central government could portray itself as responsive to public demands and at the same time shift the blame for the reopening's consequences to people themselves. Fourth, the mounting international pressure Xi felt and his personal experience during the G20 and APEC conferences (one cannot rule out the possibility that he was infected and experienced Omicron firsthand) might have helped change his mindset.

In addition to the possible rationale behind the turnabout, I would argue that, to some extent, the post-zero-COVID governance failure and irresponsibility of the Chinese party-state is

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<sup>45</sup> After discarding the zero-COVID policy, the Chinese government adopted a new line, "Be the first person responsible for your own health (每个人都是自己健康的第一责任人)."

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Laura He, "One Chinese province spent \$22 billion on eliminating Covid before policy U-turn," *CNN*, Jan. 16, 2023.

the worst-case result from the overstretching of state capacity and the exhaustion of governing resources after years of trying to be totalistic or omnipotent. It resembles the sudden failure of a metal object after a long period of fatigue and overuse. The local and grassroots governments had been so tired out by the zero-COVID campaign that they were left with little governing bandwidth to prepare and take necessary measures for an inevitable reopening. Just as it is difficult to predict the exact timing of fracture out of metal fatigue, it could happen in the blink of an eye from living in the illusion of the state’s omnipotence to a sober awakening to realize the state’s incompetence.

## Appendix

A timeline of the 2022 Shanghai lockdown:<sup>47</sup>

Feb. 28	Shanghai reports the first local case of Omicron BA.2 infection
Mar. 15	The municipal leadership ensures that Shanghai won’t be locked down
Mar. 28	Announcement of a two-staged lockdown: Pudong first and then followed by Puxi
Mar. 30	Shanghai adopts the “total static management” (avoid using the word “lockdown”)
Apr. 2	Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan visits Shanghai to inspect covid control
Apr. 7	Party Secretary of the neighborhood Changli Garden issues a public letter of resignation
Apr. 11	Shanghai government announces the differentiation of “Lockdown Zones” (封控区), “Controlled Zones” (管控区), and “Precautionary Zones” (防范区)
Apr. 17	Banners and placards with protest slogans appear on Huashan Road (such as “Oppose unrestricted lockdown”, “People are dying”, “Namelist of the deceased”)

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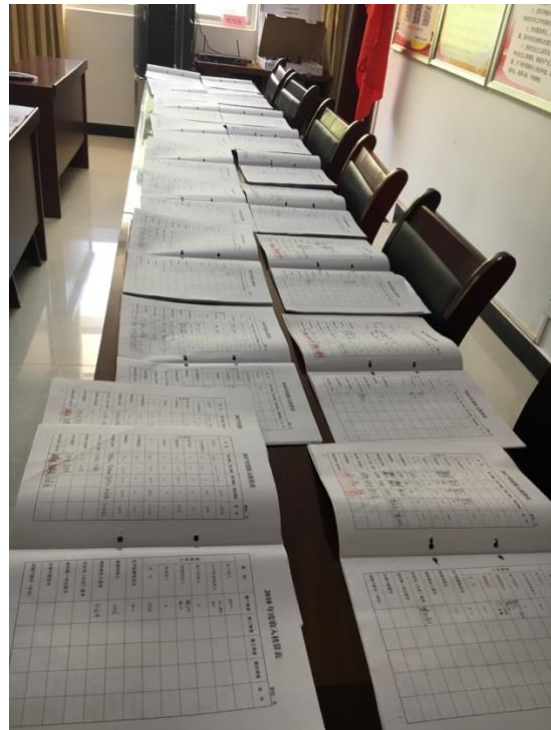
<sup>47</sup> Based on information from <https://theinitium.com/project/20220506-mainland-covid-shanghai-lockdown/> and 上海发布 *shanghai fabu*, the official WeChat account of the Shanghai Municipal Government.

Apr. 22	<i>The Voice of April</i> (四月之声), a video clip about the Shanghai lockdown, is censored on the Chinese internet, and netizens have a tug of war with online censors by unceasingly forwarding the video
Apr. 28	Residents in many Shanghai neighborhoods protest against the monthlong lockdown at their balconies, using kitchen utensils to make noise
May 1	The number of people living in Precautionary Zones (limited movement within the zone is permitted) reaches 15 million, but the rest 9 million people are still in Lockdown and Controlled Zones.
May 5	Xi Jinping in a Politburo Standing Committee meeting demands the insistence of “dynamic zero-covid” and the victory of the “Battle to defend Great Shanghai” (大上海保卫战)
May 17	All 16 districts in Shanghai declare they have eliminated community transmission of the disease (社会面清零)
May 29	The municipal government of Shanghai promulgates the Action Plan of Accelerating Economic Recovery and Revitalization
May 30	The municipal government of Shanghai holds a meeting on coordinating pandemic control and socio-economic development
May 31	Shanghai government announces reopening (全面恢复正常生活) on June 1 (again, avoid using “the end of lockdown”)
Jun. 1	The municipal government publishes a Thank You letter to the people of Shanghai; Shanghai reopens and enters the phase of “routine management of covid” (疫情防控常态化管理)

## ***Chapter 5***

### ***Varieties of Formalism: Deciphering Organizational Red Tape in the Chinese Bureaucracy***

On a hot summer day in 2018, I was in a poor village located in the mountainous area of Shaanxi Province, conducting field research about Xi's anti-poverty campaign. A few days later, a delegation sent by the provincial government would come to the village to inspect and evaluate its poverty alleviation performance. The chief party secretary leading the work team summoned me to the village headquarters to give a helping hand – they still had to prepare an enormous number of documents for the incoming inspection. In particular, I was asked to sign the names of certain local cadres in those materials. During the campaign, work team members and village cadres were expected to visit poor households quarterly and record their income and other production and financial information. The records should be verified by several local officials. However, those officials were too busy to visit the village regularly and they had no



*Picture 1 Preparing Paperwork for the Inspection, Shaanxi 2018 (photo taken by the author)*

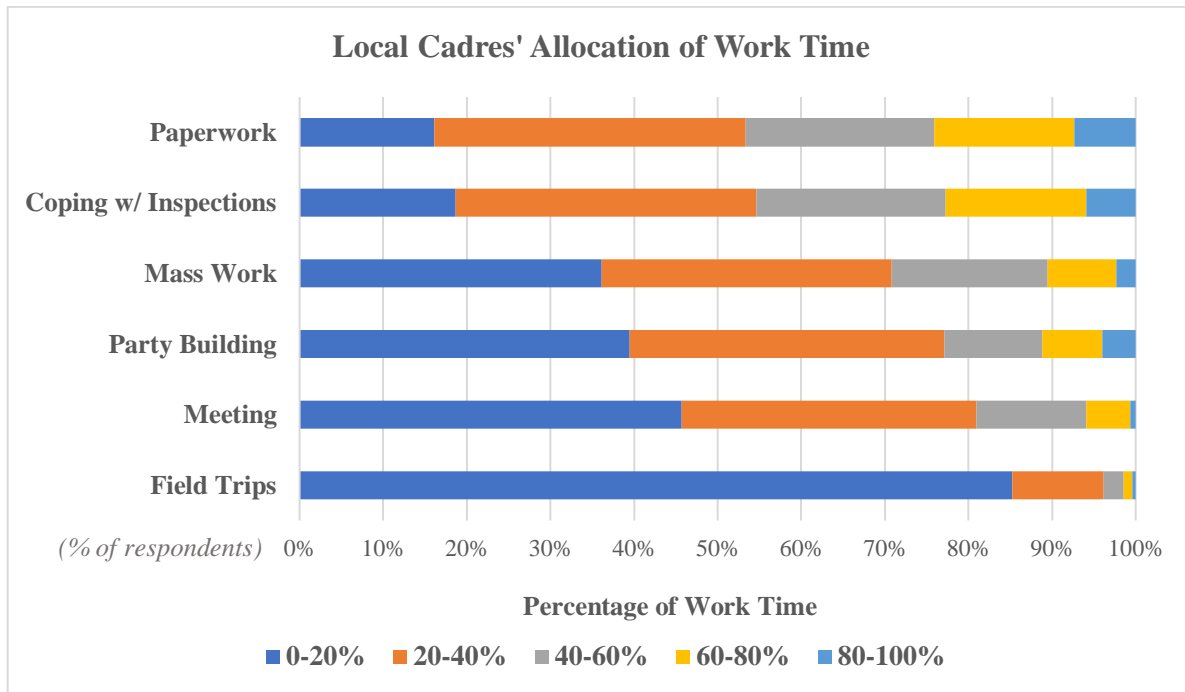
means to confirm the authenticity and accuracy of the personal information of villagers. Their signatures are mere formalities, but without them, the materials are incomplete and might be troublesome in the inspection and performance evaluation. Therefore, we had to “fill in the blanks,” which turned out to be a labor-intensive job: there were hundreds of poor households, and each had an independent file with a few signatures to make up (see *Picture 1*). It took us half a day to sign those cadres’ names. The work team leader complained to me, recognizing the behavior as meaningless formalism and expressing her frustration with it. Nevertheless, to cope with the top-down inspection, she had no choice but to falsify the materials.

In the Chinese grassroots bureaucracy survey I conducted, I find paperwork and preparation for inspections and evaluations to be the two most time-consuming categories in local cadres’ work. As *Figure 5.1* shows, 47 percent of respondents spend more than 40% of their time at work on various paperwork obligations, and 45 percent are occupied by inspection/evaluation-related preparations in a large proportion (40-100%) of their time. Moreover, the survey respondents view a large part of, if not most, paperwork as red tape with little value and necessity in policy-making processes and implementation (see *Figure 1.4*). The statistical analysis of the survey data indicates that this high level of perceived red tape is associated with a reduced sense of meaning, efficacy, and work achievement on the part of grassroots cadres, contributing to their career burnout, low job satisfaction, and even turnover intention. Also, the prevalence of bureaucratic pathologies (i.e., formalism and bureaucratism) is significantly and positively associated with the stress level of local cadres and the general burden shouldered by the grassroots bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the details of the statistical analysis of my survey data, please see the regression tables in the appendix of the dissertation.

Figure 5.1 Allocation of Time by Local Cadres



Source: Hanyu Zhao, *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey (CGCS)*, Nov. 2021

Why has grassroots governance been plagued by formalism? How can we make sense of the “mountain of paper” that local cadres complain is smothering them? In this chapter, turning from the party-state’s control of the society to the internal control of the bureaucratic apparatus, I investigate the burgeoning organizational red tape and varied forms of formalism that beset the Chinese bureaucracy. First, I differentiate various kinds of paperwork in the Chinese political context and identify two main manifestations of formalism – excessive documentation and statistical overload. Then I discuss the political logic of formalism by analyzing the structural factors and rationale behind the system’s increasing obsession with keeping records, issuing forms, and collecting numbers. After that, I look into how technological advancement has made political and administrative obligations more intrusive to grassroots cadres, thereby generating the so-called “formalism at the fingertips.” Finally, I show that as political pressure diffuses, formalism has spilled over from the cadre group to other sectors with broader implications.

The existing literature doesn't allow us to fully understand the roots and mechanisms of excessive red tape or formalism in grassroots governance. Harry Harding, in his classic *Organizing China*, systemically examined bureaucratic pathologies in Maoist China, but his focus was not to explain their root causes but to analyze Chinese leaders' competing approaches to addressing the organizational problems in the party-state.<sup>2</sup> For Harding, though he observed that grassroots cadres were required to "attend too many meetings and complete too many forms,"<sup>3</sup> excess red tape or formalism was less of a concern, compared with other organizational inadequacies within the Maoist bureaucracy.<sup>4</sup>

More recent research by Ding and Thompson-Brusstar traces both the persistence and evolution of the CCP's anti-bureaucratic ideology from Mao to Xi.<sup>5</sup> They find that recent decades have seen a sharp increase in concerns about formalism in the leadership's critiques of bureaucratism. The authors highlight Xi's high-profile and seemingly resolute anti-bureaucratic rhetoric, but they don't acknowledge the irony that it is Xi's governing style and the subsequent organizational structural change that has exacerbated the bureaucratic problems the top leader strives to overcome. Ding et. al. point out that Party theoreticians tend to attribute bureaucratic pathologies to personal moral failure while Chinese scholars point to more structural and institutional factors. The scholarly examination focuses on excessive demands and perverse

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<sup>2</sup> Harry Harding, *Organizing China: The Problem of Bureaucracy 1949-1976*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 43 and 56.

<sup>4</sup> Harding identified eight major bureaucratic pathologies: lack of commitment, low zeal and poor morale, inadequate skills, loss of control, inadequate information, inefficiency, alienation, and corruption.

<sup>5</sup> Iza Ding and Michael Thompson-Brusstar, "The Anti-Bureaucratic Ghost in China's Bureaucratic Machine," *The China Quarterly* 248, Nov. (2021): 116-140.



incentives that motivate street-level bureaucrats to use formalism as a means of blame avoidance.<sup>6</sup> I agree with this argument, but believe it is still a partial, simplified explanation rather than the full story. Formalism actually has different manifestations in bureaucratic practices at the grassroots level. And the underlying political logic and causes of each variant of formalism might be distinct and should not be overgeneralized.

Overall, formalism, as a bureaucratic behavior, is a product of intergovernmental relations and strategic interactions between political actors in the hierarchy. When facing the “bureaucratism” of higher-level authorities – unreasonable demands detached from local realities, formalism is a rational choice by grassroots cadres under resource constraints. As Herbert Kaufman famously argued, “One person’s red tape may be another’s treasured procedural safeguard.”<sup>7</sup> For subordinates, formalism serves as a device of self-protection to cope with top-down pressure and signal feigned compliance. The totalistic state’s reliance on campaign-mode governance and politicization further exacerbates and perpetuates formalism and other bureaucratic pathologies.

## A Typology of Paperwork

Some conceptual clarifications are in order before delving into the root causes of excessive paperwork. In fact, the “mountain of papers” (文山 *wenshan*) in the Chinese political context is composed of multiple things and different kinds of papers or documents serve different

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Fang Ning, “‘顶格管理’逼得基层搞形式主义 (Excessive Requirements Force the Grassroots Bureaucracy to Engage in Formalism)”, *北京日报 (Beijing Daily)*, Jun.8, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Kaufman, *Red Tape: Its Origins, Uses, and Abuses*, (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1977).

purposes and functions. I categorize them into four types: (1) official documents, (2) reports, (3) documentation/record-keeping, and (4) forms and figures. What really annoys and frustrates grassroots cadres are the third and fourth types of paperwork, while the official remedies focus on reducing the number and length of the first and second categories of documents.

The first category is formal written documents, officially known as “wenjian” (文件) in Chinese. As a device of formal political and bureaucratic communications, official documents include laws, policies, directives, notices, opinions, plans, regulations, and resolutions issued by various levels of party organizations and state apparatuses. Those documents carry the political and institutional authority of the issuing institution and demonstrate power relations. Documents are transmitted along the chain of command, and the recipients of the documents are usually subordinates and lower-level governments who are supposed to specify and enforce the directives according to local conditions.

The second category is “reports” (报告、材料 *baogao, cailiao*) in a broad sense, including summaries of one’s work, leaders’ speeches, oral reports, briefings, and publicity materials. The main purpose of those reports is to manifest and show off the performance and particularly achievements of a governing entity. The materials are primarily aimed at impressing superiors and upper-level authorities and, on some occasions, the public. For instance, during and after the anti-poverty campaign, local governments, villages, and work teams had to prepare periodic reports that summarize their accomplishments in poverty alleviation and rural development. But not every report is uplifting and focuses on achievements. A small proportion might be investigative reports (调研报告 *diaoyan baogao*) after field trips and inspections which emphasize more on problem-solving and policy suggestions.

The third category is record-keeping, detailed documentation of every step in the policy implementation conducted by local and grassroots cadres. It is commonly known as “leaving a trace” (留痕 *liuhen*) and “trace management” (痕迹管理 *henji guanli*) in the Chinese political lexicon. And the records of policy implementation and outcomes are generally referred to as “ledgers” (台账 *taizhang*). Take the rural toilet renovation program as an example. To complete the program ledger, a village has to prepare more than 12 kinds of materials that document every stage of the program, including preparation, initiation, construction, supervision, and evaluation. For every rural household, village cadres must take pictures of each toilet before, during, and after the renovation as part of the records demonstrating that grassroots cadres have fulfilled their supervisory role in the construction. Not surprisingly, grassroots cadres’ limited time and energy is sapped by the workload of keeping records. The over-emphasis on “leaving traces,” the so-called “Trace-ism” (痕迹主义 *henji zhuyi*), has led to goal displacement. Forms overshadow the substance in the sense that documentation has degenerated into formalities that crowd out substantive policy and service deliveries. Though excessive documentation alienates grassroots implementers, they nevertheless continue to produce those papers because “Trace-ism” serves several purposes:

- (1) Proof that the implementing processes are rule-bound and have procedural legitimacy;
- (2) Demonstration of grassroots cadres’ investment of efforts;
- (3) A self-protective and blame-avoidance strategy against the intensive accountability system; and
- (4) A tactic of feigned compliance to cope with unrealistic demands and targets set by higher-ups.

The fourth component of the “paper mountain” is statistical overload – the numerous forms that grassroots cadres are required to fill out and the amount of data they must collect and report to higher-level agencies, usually within a very short time frame. A driving force behind grassroots bureaucrats’ work in gathering data and submitting forms is trying to satisfy the totalistic state’s craving for total information and the complete legibility of society. Maximizing control necessitates massive information collection and processing. For instance, in the anti-poverty campaign, the Chinese state demanded comprehensive and detailed personal information from all impoverished households in rural areas. During the coronavirus pandemic, street-level bureaucrats were tasked to submit and update information about every resident’s migration history and health condition in their jurisdictions. The tabular forms of the COVID-19 vaccination shown in the previous chapter exemplify the quantity and complexity of data that frontline cadres need to collect and sort out in a single policy area. What particularly frustrates grassroots bureaucrats is the demand for duplicative and redundant forms due to the lack of interagency coordination and information sharing among different bureaucratic clusters at higher levels.

The tension between the higher authorities’ thirst for data and the “informational black hole” at the grassroots persists. Take the income information of poor rural households as an example. In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of Xi’s anti-poverty campaign, the Chinese government expects to see the income of the rural poor increase annually, and grassroots cadres are tasked to collect that information. However, villagers have incentives to hide and under-report their income, because a lower income level means they remain “impoverished” and can continue to benefit from anti-poverty policies and receive aid from the government. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for village cadres and work teams to know (and impossible to verify) the

actual income of the rural poor. The numbers they write down on paper are usually estimations or negotiated results between cadres and peasants.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the statistics fail to capture and reflect reality, instead, they are “politically correct” artificial figures that satisfy higher-ups and justify the war on poverty.

In fact, in some locales, grassroots cadres complain that when they reported the less polished numbers to their superiors, the county government urged them to “recount” the numbers because it was politically unacceptable that so many peasants earned less than in the previous year.<sup>9</sup> But, as grassroots cadres point out, because of the market fluctuations and decreasing prices of most agricultural products, it is an undeniable fact that peasants couldn’t earn as much as before. If grassroots cadres choose to stick with the truth, they fail to please their superiors and risk flunking the performance evaluation. If they persuade peasants to collude with them to falsify the figures, they “alleviate poverty by numbers” (数字脱贫 *shuji tuopin*), a misconduct berated by the central leadership.

## The Political Logic of Formalism

Formalism in the Chinese official rhetoric has become an umbrella concept that captures many ills of the bureaucracy, such as feigned compliance, bureaucratic slack, red tape, conformity, over-complying (or “adding layers” 层层加码 *cengceng jiama*), and the “one-size-fits-all” (一刀切 *yidaoqie*) approach. But the essence of formalism is that the substance of policy

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<sup>8</sup> Interview code: XX20211108MSXM

<sup>9</sup> “不要继续在测算脱贫户收入上为难基层干部了(Stop putting grassroots cadres in a dilemma when calculating the income of poor households),” 新乡土(*Xinxiangtu*), Nov. 17, 2021, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/CHycKKIRIzdyivqAvRo65w> (accessed Nov.18, 2022).

and governance outcomes is overshadowed by superficial formalities. Hence, in this section, I focus on two primary manifestations of formalism in grassroots governance – excessive documentation and statistical overload (or overproduction of forms). As mentioned above, these two burdens have sapped grassroots cadres’ time and energy. So occupied by paperwork, grassroots cadres could not devote themselves to more meaningful substantive work, such as communicating with residents and helping them solve real problems. In addition, frontline practitioners generally cast doubt on the true value and necessity of most ledgers, forms, and figures, believing they only serve formalistic purposes.

### ***Excessive Documentation (“Trace-ism”)***

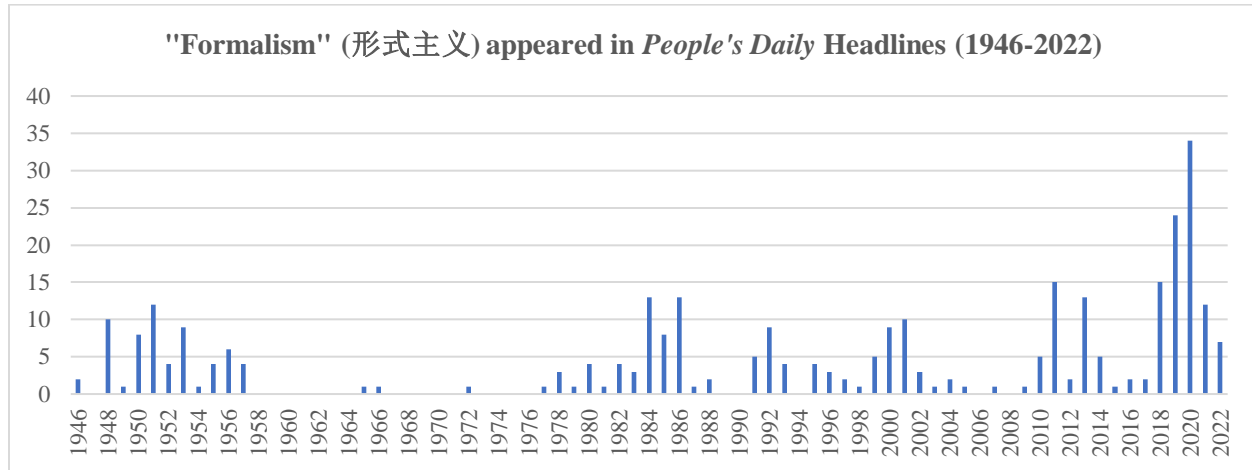
Documentation is an intrinsic feature of the Weberian bureaucracy. Emphasis on procedures and record-keeping indeed indicates the Chinese party-state’s effort to formalize and institutionalize its bureaucratic apparatus. However, bureaucratic formalization does not necessarily lead to formalism. Drawing on the change of word counts on *People’s Daily* over time (keywords such as institutionalization, normalization, and standardization), Ding and Thompson-Brusstar find that the central authority has increasingly highlighted the importance of bureaucratic rationalization in the post-Mao era.<sup>10</sup> But the exacerbation of formalism as well as the official criticism against it only appeared in the past decade (see *Figure 5.2*), which is closely related to the structural changes in the party-state system, particularly centralization and politicization. What I want to emphasize is that formalism is not a natural product of formalizing the bureaucracy. Nor could it be attributed to moral reasons and subjective factors of individual

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<sup>10</sup> Iza Ding and Michael Thompson-Brusstar, “The Anti-Bureaucratic Ghost in China’s Bureaucratic Machine,” *The China Quarterly* 248, Nov. (2021): 116-140.

bureaucrats as stated in the official diagnosis of formalism. According to Xi Jinping, the fundamental issue is some officials' "misplaced attitude to political achievement" (政绩观错位 *zhengjiguan cuowei*).<sup>11</sup>

Figure 5.2 "Formalism" Appeared in People's Daily Headlines



Source: 人民日报图文数据库 (People's Daily database) at <http://data.people.com.cn/rmrb/20230312/1?code=2>

Why has “leaving traces” morphed into “Trace-ism”? To understand the root causes of excessive documentation, it is important to situate bureaucratic operations and practices in the power structure and political environment where they are embedded. The interplay between the bureaucratic system and the political regime matters, for bureaucratic behavior is shaped by the features of and constraints imposed by the political system. As a rational choice by street-level bureaucrats in a specific organizational environment, I argue that Trace-ism is a product of intergovernmental strategic interactions. From a Principal-Agent perspective, I identify three

<sup>11</sup> Institute of Party History and Literature of the CPC Central Committee ed., *Xi Jinping's Discourses on Fighting Formalism and Bureaucratism*, (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2020). 中共中央党史和文献研究院：《习近平关于力戒形式主义官僚主义重要论述选编》，中央文献出版社，2020年。

interrelated sources of Trace-ism: (1) the imperfect performance measures and the distorted incentive scheme; (2) the gap between the principal's desire to maximize control and the limited monitoring capacity; and (3) self-protective strategies of feigned compliance and responsibility avoidance adopted by risk-averse agents.

**First, the performance measurement issue in multitasking circumstances.**

Economists argue that when an agent's job involves multiple tasks which are not equally measurable and compete for the agent's attention, the agent tends to allocate more effort to the easy-to-measure activities than to the hard-to-measure tasks. If the easily measured tasks are given high-powered incentives, then it becomes more likely that they will crowd out tasks that are harder to measure their quality.<sup>12</sup>

To simplify the situation, I assume that the local state agents are tasked with two main activities, *substantive policy implementation* and *bureaucratic requirements*. In the Chinese context, due to limited institutional capacities and information channels, the agent's performance in substantive policy implementation is difficult to measure and poorly monitored. Furthermore, the actual policy outcome might be subject to many factors that are beyond the local cadres' control. In other words, a gap, or measurement error, exists between the observed output of the task and the effort invested by the agent. By contrast, the agent's fulfillment of bureaucratic requirements, such as documentation and other forms of paperwork, are more tangible and quantifiable and thus easy to measure and better monitored.

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<sup>12</sup> Bengt Holmstrom and Paul Milgrom, "Multitask Principal-Agent Analyses: Incentive Contracts, Asset Ownership, and Job Design," *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization* 7 (1991): 24-52; Bengt Holmstrom, "Pay for Performance and Beyond," *Nobel Price Lecture*, Dec 8, 2016.



Since the performance measure of substantive implementation faces greater uncertainty, it is rational for the principal to lower the incentive strength for tasks that are badly monitored. Moreover, the principal optimistically believes that the relationship between the two tasks is complementary, that is investing effort into one task could facilitate the accomplishment of the other task. Superiors somehow ideally assume that strengthening bureaucratic restrictions – filling out more forms, compiling more files, holding more meetings, and launching more inspections – could push local officials to collect and process better and more information and thereby improving policy implementation. Anthony Downs similarly argues that the compliance-inducing functions of written reports explain “why bureaus normally require so many more reports than high-level officials can possibly read.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, bureaucratic requirements were given high-powered incentives by the higher-ups, despite agents questioning the true value and usefulness of those requirements and conceiving them as red tape in practice.

For local agents, the two tasks are in fact contradictory, for coping with time-consuming formalities severely hampers their effort to deliver policies on the ground. However, under this distorted incentive scheme, it is simply a rational choice for the local state agents to allocate more time and energy to meet bureaucratic requirements that were over-incentivized. As a grassroots cadre comments, carefully preparing reports and ledgers is even more important than doing substantive work, because it is what the superiors prioritize during the assessment.

“If you want to do a good job, then you must understand the importance of producing sufficient documents. Though falsification is prohibited, the completeness of written materials is so crucial in the performance appraisal and inspections conducted by higher-level governments. If you make up those materials without doing any substantive work,

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<sup>13</sup> Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967): 146.

the superiors know they are fake, but they don't care. What they care about is the formality – files need to be neatly bound and stored in unified boxes with tables of contents and stylish cover designs.”<sup>14</sup>

The following satirical cartoon depicts the annual evaluation in some localities where inspectors, instead of conducting a thorough appraisal, simply look at the materials prepared by lower-level agencies and score their performance high, based on the “completeness, rich content, innovative forms, and delicate layout” of those materials. During the anti-poverty campaign, local governments even held contests where villages had to compete for supremacy in the poverty alleviation materials they had prepared.<sup>15</sup>



Source: Jiang Yaixin, “纸上谈兵 (Being an armchair general),” the Xinhua News Agency, April 16, 2018.  
[http://www.xinhuanet.com/comments/2018-04/16/c\\_1122689553.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/comments/2018-04/16/c_1122689553.htm)

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<sup>14</sup> “督查的多，抓落实的少！基层困局如何破？基层干部有话说 (Too much supervision, yet too little implementation! How to solve predicament at the grassroots? Listen to the grassroots cadres),” 半月谈 (China Comment), Sept. 12, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> “警惕‘痕迹主义’在基层流行 (The Prevalence of ‘Trace-ism’ in Grassroots Governance is a Warning Sign),” 新华网 (Xinhua net), Aug. 1, 2018, retrieved from [http://m.xinhuanet.com/comments/2018-08/01/c\\_1123205012.htm](http://m.xinhuanet.com/comments/2018-08/01/c_1123205012.htm)

This practice of “under-incentivizing substantive work, yet over-incentivizing formalistic documentation” (轻实绩 重痕迹 *qingshiji zhonghenji*) has been criticized by the central leadership as a problem that demands rectification, but an overall fix of the performance evaluation system is hard to realize. To put more emphasis on substantive outcomes and to downplay formalities, superiors then are expected to bear a higher evaluation cost. Rather than just check ledgers and other written materials, evaluators and inspectors might be required to conduct thorough investigations during their on-site visits and take “democratic evaluation” (民主评议 *mingzhu pingyi*), namely public opinion and satisfaction, more seriously. Increasing the measurement precision of the agent’s substantive performance entails a greater burden on the shoulder of the principal who is unlikely to follow through. The ethnographic study of the rural “toilet revolution” reveals that during the evaluations, higher-level officials rarely surveyed villagers to collect their real feedback on the program implementation.<sup>16</sup> Instead, higher-ups simply inspected a few showcase households carefully selected by grassroots cadres and relied on prepared materials that superficially documented 100% public satisfaction yet failed to reflect residents’ true opinions.

## **Second, the principal has a limited set of monitoring devices.**

In addition to imperfect performance measures, the principal has limited monitoring capacity and can only bear a certain level of “policing cost.” Due to the structural constraints imposed by the political regime, the principal mainly depends on top-down and internal monitoring devices, such as inspections and verification of records, to address moral hazards and

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<sup>16</sup> 张源:《走样的“厕改”》(Why the Toilet Revolution Went Awry), 2021.

other agent problems. Information asymmetry is a major source of agent problems, and the central principal of the Chinese bureaucracy is eager to make the system more centralized and formalized to minimize bureaucratic misconduct on the part of the agents. However, the principal is facing a self-generated gap between the desire to maximize control and insufficient supervising capacity.

Political oversight of the bureaucracy in representative democracies can rely on a wide range of supervisory channels and instruments, such as monitoring by media and watchdog organizations and bottom-up inputs from constituents as well as legislative checks. But autocracies have a self-imposed limitation on the oversight of the bureaucracy. The authoritarian institutional environment minimizes the use of alternative monitoring mechanisms that have the potential to undermine the power base of authoritarian regimes. Public supervision of the bureaucracy might compel autocrats to allow some degree of freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Admittedly, in China “letters and visits” (信访 *xingfang*) and “denunciations” (举报 *jubao*) made to inspection teams imply some degree of constituency accountability.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, bottom-up and independent, external monitory channels are still highly restricted and have not yet played a dominant role in cadre evaluation and promotion processes. As autocrats are reluctant to adopt and institutionalize monitoring alternatives, they would rather unrelentingly dispatch inspection teams and demand that local agents keep records of everything they are supposed to do that is subject to verification.

Moreover, the central principal’s need to increase control over the bureaucracy leads to the expansion and empowerment of internal monitoring agencies, the Commission on Discipline

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<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Professor Perry for pointing this out.

and Inspection (CDI) in the Chinese case, and the aggrandizement by monitoring bureaus in turn multiplies controls. As Downs explains, “Once a separate monitoring organization has grown large enough to become a bureau in itself, it exhibits typical bureaucratic behavior. Its officials become advocates of greater control over the operating bureaus they monitor, both because they wish to perform their function better and because this increases their significance. As a result, the monitors tend to agitate for ever more detailed reports from operating bureaus, and ever greater limitations on the discretion of those bureaus.”<sup>18</sup> Hence, through this mechanism of ever-expanding control, the accountability system intensifies, and cadres are more likely to adopt self-protective strategies.

**Third, formalities serve the protective function for local agents.**

The organizational structural change affects the interaction between the principal and the agent. After Xi Jinping took the top leadership of China in 2012, he continuously centralized the power structure and decision-making system. As I explained in the second chapter, to sustain a highly centralized authority, politicization has become necessary. Political loyalty and the Communist Party’s disciplines have been re-emphasized to such a degree that even a slight deviation from and critique of the central decisions can be treated as a political felony and thus face severe consequences. The ongoing anti-corruption campaign, to date the largest and longest in modern Chinese history, is also a testament to the central leadership’s determination of using coercion, punishment, and discipline, negative incentives rather than positive ones, to push its bureaucratic workforce.

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 149-150.

The politicization of governance and administrative tasks, along with the emphasis on negative incentives, has changed the risk calculation of local agents. To minimize political risk and personal accountability, subnational leaders and middle-level bureaucrats tend to have the following strategic behavior:

- (1) They overcomply by doubling down on central directives and thereby drive policy demands to unreasonable and unrealistic levels.
- (2) They utilize meetings and documents, performative formalities, to signal compliance and allegiance to superiors, yet pass down the real burden of realizing policy goals to lower-level cadres.
- (3) Distrusting subordinates, they tighten control over the process of policy implementation and thus reduce the autonomy and leeway of grassroots bureaucrats.

Facing unreasonable demands imposed by higher-ups, grassroots cadres dare not openly and directly challenge their bosses, but faithfully carrying out the commands either is beyond their capacity or entails huge compliance costs. The only option left is formalism – by manipulating or fabricating the documentation, grassroots cadres display feigned compliance with much lower implementing cost. Iza Ding finds that bureaucrats engage in “performative governance” when they face a high level of public scrutiny yet have little capacity to satisfy public demands in any substantive sense.<sup>19</sup> Following a similar logic, grassroots cadres embrace formalism when they are subject to heavy top-down pressure but are ill-equipped with resources to implement costly directives from above. A key difference between formalism and

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<sup>19</sup> Iza Ding, *The Performative State: Public Scrutiny and Environmental Governance in China*, (Cornell University Press, 2022).

performative governance lies in the target audience – the former is used to cope with upper-level authorities, while the latter is targeted at citizens.

Poverty alleviation is a good case to illustrate the role of formalism. During the anti-poverty campaign, township cadres in certain localities were required to hold meetings twice a day – morning meetings focused on planning and deployment and evening ones involving summary and reflection of work. However, such a high frequency of meetings was both unnecessary and disruptive to cadres' routine work in other policy areas. They simply didn't have enough new content to discuss on a daily basis. Hence, one solution by grassroots cadres was to convene a meeting every three days, and at the meeting, participants would change their seats and outfits and adjust the room light to take six distinct pictures, pretending they had held six meetings in those three days. The staged photos and fabricated meeting records served as the documentation or "traces" that could fulfill the higher-ups' requirements.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, local cadres who have been paired with poor rural households (结对帮扶 *jiedui bangfu*) were asked to visit their "adopted" households four times each month. Again, such frequent visits have little practical value, for the life of the impoverished is unlikely to have experienced significant change over such a short period, but weekly visits entail a major time commitment for officials whose primary job is not poverty alleviation. The coping strategy resembles the previous case. In reality, work units organized collective trips to visit poor households only once a month or every other month. For those omitted visits, local cadres would take multiple photos and make up the records (sometimes they needed to persuade and collude

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<sup>20</sup> Interview code: GZ20210525WP

with peasants) to cope with top-down inspections.<sup>21</sup> Though there is no systematic data to determine how common the tactic of deception is in local governance, it seems to be a widely used coping strategy among grassroots cadres. In my survey, sixty-four percent of the respondents believe that one of the consequences of bureaucratic overload is deceptive behavior – falsifying materials and statistics.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Statistical Overload: “Seeing Like a Totalistic State”***

The fundamental cause of the statistical overload is the leadership’s ambition of creating an all-seeing and all-knowing state. Grassroots cadres, as the intelligence collectors on the ground, are pressured to realize the state’s goal for total information and complete legibility of society. In his seminal work, *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott emphasizes that making local knowledge and practices “legible” to central state officials is crucial to building a centralized, efficient state.<sup>23</sup> “Legibility implies both (a) that the state possesses information about local practices and (b) that this information is rendered in standardized forms that are understandable to state administrators.”<sup>24</sup> The demand for information increases with the state’s tightening and expansion of control and further penetration into society. This is the reason we see very similar developments in terms of information demand between the early PRC period – the building of a totalistic state after the victory of the revolution and the revival of the totalistic state under Xi’s

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<sup>21</sup> Interview code: GZ20210525WP

<sup>22</sup> Hanyu Zhao, *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey (CGCS)*, Nov. 2021.

<sup>23</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Melissa Lee and Nan Zhang, “Legibility and the Informational Foundations of State Capacity,” *The Journal of Politics* 79, no.1 (2016): 118-132.



leadership. In Arunabh Ghosh's study of statistical work in the early PRC, he points out that the overproduction and excessive issuance of forms that overburdened grassroots bureaucrats were prevalent during the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> For instance, it was reported that a county government in Northern China was required to fill out at least 106 kinds of statistical forms during two months in 1950, excluding another 32 forms related to taxation and finance.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the burden on the grassroots bureaucracy is compounded by the particular method of information collection preferred by the state. Ghosh identifies three major approaches to statistics, exhaustive, stochastic, and ethnographic. Unlike the stochastic approach which is based on random sampling and the ethnographic approach which utilizes qualitative sampling and case studies, the dominant approach of "socialist statistics" is exhaustive enumeration, namely counting everything. It is built upon a belief that "everything can be counted accurately, and the best count is a complete count."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, for leaders, the illusion of control created by exhaustive counting is extremely hard to resist. And quantifying everything brings an appearance of objectivity, precision, and scientism.<sup>28</sup> Even though random sampling has become a well-practiced approach by the national statistical apparatus today, it seems that when higher-level agencies issue forms and demand data from grassroots subordinates, the dominant logic remains

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<sup>25</sup> Arunabh Ghosh, *Making It Count: Statistics and Statecraft in the Early People's Republic of China*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> 政务院政法委员会参事室：《不要滥发调查统计表格》(Stop the Excessive Issuance of Statistical Forms), 《人民日报》(*People's Daily*), Sept.8, 1950.

<sup>27</sup> Ghosh, *Making It Count*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Jeremy Wallace, *Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts: Ideology, Information, and Authoritarianism in China*, (Oxford University Press, 2022), 40.

exhaustive counting that could superficially satisfy the bureaucratic obsession with completeness and comprehensiveness.

During the anti-poverty campaign, for example, grassroots cadres were tasked to collect and update “basic information,” containing fifty items of data points, about every rural household in poverty-stricken villages. Among that information, village cadres had to enumerate the exact numbers of each kind of livestock raised by peasants and the specific items of household annual income and expenditures. The following screenshot of a partial spreadsheet documents the detailed financial balance sheet of rural households in a natural village in western Hunan.<sup>29</sup> The complexity and comprehensiveness of the data is indeed impressive at first sight and seemingly exemplifies the core feature of “precision” of the poverty alleviation program. However, the quality of the data is questionable.

The state’s efforts to make the rural poor “legible” can be impeded by popular resistance for various reasons. Some households, in an attempt to receive more benefits from the welfare program, choose to underreport their income or hide part of their assets. Some rural dwellers hesitate to cooperate simply because they do not want local cadres to know “too much” about their financial situation. In other cases, illiterate peasants fail to keep close track of how much they have earned and spent and thus have no clue about their financial circumstances. In this sense, no matter how hard the leaders press the grassroots workforce to enhance its informational capacity, there is always a tension between the state’s data thirst and the illegibility of the grassroots society.

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<sup>29</sup> Obtained from an informant working at the prefecture poverty alleviation office during a field trip to western Hunan in 2016.

总收入	工资收入	家庭经营收入	养老金收入	总支出	就学支出	就医支出	外出支出 (省内)	外出支出 (省外)	留守支出	生活支出	家庭经营支出	全年可支配收入	人均可支配收入	人均纯收入
Total Income	Employment income	Family Business income	Pension	Total Expenditure	Tuition	Medical care	Travel within the province	Travel outside the province	Stay-at-home spending	Life expense	Family business expense	Annual disposable income	Per capita disposable income	Per capita net income
40293.5	34200	5193.5	900	33960	0	3600	0	15000	14400	33000	960	39333.5	9833.375	1583.375
54864.5	50400	4464.5		40960	20000	0	20000	0	0	40000	960	53904.5	13476.125	3476.125
55526	50400	4226	900	31300	5000	0	20000	0	4800	29800	1500	54026	10805.2	4845.2
5920	0	5020	900	12600	0	1000	0	0	0	9600	10600	2000	3920	-3340
42356.5	25200	15356.5	1800	31140	2500	1000	10000	0	14400	27900	3240	39116.5	7823.3	2243.3
89633	84600	4133	900	43300	0	2000	20000	15000	4800	41800	1500	88133	22033.25	11583.25
182824.5	175500	6424.5	900	57000	0	0	20000	30000	4800	54800	2200	180624.5	36124.9	25164.9
110203	93600	12203	4400	54734	7500	0	10000	30000	4800	52300	2434	107769	15395.5714	7924.14286
90643	84600	6043	0	41210	5000	0	20000	15000	0	40000	1210	89433	17886.6	9886.6
87203	84600	2603	0	40800	0	0	20000	15000	4800	39800	1000	86203	21550.75	11600.75
30543	25200	4443	900	17480	0	1000	10000	0	4800	15800	1680	28863	14431.5	6531.5
70353	59400	10053	900	34220	0	2000	10000	15000	4800	31800	2420	67933	16983.25	9033.25
123072.5	118800	4272.5	0	67980	7500	0	20000	30000	9600	67100	880	122192.5	13576.9444	6121.38889
99000	93600	13923	1800	71000	12000	1000	10000	30000	14400	67400	3600	95400	13628.5714	4000
36000	34200	3149.5	0	30230	0	0	0	15000	14400	29400	830	35170	8792.5	1442.5
38104.5	25200	11104.5	1800	39460	12500	0	10000	0	14400	36900	2560	35544.5	5924.08333	-225.91667
55918	50400	4618	900	38230	12500	0	20000	0	4800	37300	930	54988	10997.6	3537.6
101218	100800	418	0	49750	0	0	40000	0	9600	49600	150	101068	25267	12867
55618	50400	3418	1800	32000	0	1000	20000	0	9600	30600	1400	54218	27109	11809
52408	50400	2008	0	28000	7500	0	20000	0	27500	500	51908	12977	6102	
119958	109800	8358	1800	81870	5000	1000	30000	15000	28800	79800	2070	117888	14736	4761
91251.5	84600	5751.5	900	50170			20000	15000	14400	49400	770	90481.5	12925.9286	5868.78571
54258	50400	2058	1800	40470	10000	0	20000	0	9600	39600	870	53388	6673.5	1723.5

A screenshot of a partial spreadsheet that records rural household information in a poor village (this part only shows the financial data about 23 households, and different colors denote different categories of households)  
(Hunan, 2016)

For grassroots bureaucrats, the primary driver of statistical overload is the state's voracious appetite for information and its proclivity to count things exhaustively. But their frustration with collecting data and filling out forms has been exacerbated by the entrenched pathologies within the bureaucratic system and particularly manifest at higher levels of the hierarchy. In the early 1950s, those bureaucratic pathologies were characterized and criticized in Maoist campaign language as "Subjectivism (主观主义 *zhuguanzhuyi*)," "Decentralism (分散主义 *fensanzhuyi*)," and "Bureaucratism (官僚主义 *guanliao zhuyi*)."<sup>30</sup> Seventy years later, the same problems and practices have persisted, if not worsened, and as a result, forms and figures have degenerated into cumbersome and often valueless formalities.

<sup>30</sup> 《消灭调查统计工作中的混乱现象》(Wipe out Chaotic Phenomena from Statistical Survey Work), 《人民日报》(*People's Daily*), Sept. 7, 1953.

The manifestations of Subjectivism, being detached from reality and the masses, include excessive and unrealistic demands with unreasonable time constraints. For instance, forms issued by higher levels to survey agriculture in the countryside in 1950 in preparation for Land Reform required comprehensive and detailed statistics about every kind of livestock (with breakdowns by sex and reproduction information), every sort of farm tool, farming areas of each crop, different categories of land, and even the rate of change comparing the pre-war and post-war situations.<sup>31</sup> Other even more complicated calculations and technical terms were included in the forms. It was not surprising that the demands were beyond the capacity of local and grassroots cadres who were short of both infrastructural power and technoscientific knowledge to produce the required statistics. As an editorial in the *People's Daily* in 1953 pointed out,

“Many of our agencies and cadres, when designing survey forms and indicators, demand complete counting of everything. They never give a second thought about the exact consumption of manpower and resources if so many forms and indicators must be filled out carefully. They have never thought about whether the reported numbers are accurate and whether those numbers bear any true utility. Without considering the necessity and feasibility in practice, they merely decide out of subjective thinking and fail to apply the appropriate methods in accordance with the nature and conditions of the subject. This is the main manifestation of Subjectivism in the current statistical work.”<sup>32</sup>

Meng Beiyu, a township cadre wrote under his pseudonym that in late January 2020 during the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, the township office was flooded with forms issued by the county and higher-level governments. One of the spreadsheets was designed to

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<sup>31</sup> 政务院政法委员会参事室：《不要滥发调查统计表格》(Stop the Excessive Issuance of Statistical Forms), 《人民日报》(*People's Daily*), Sept.8, 1950.

<sup>32</sup> 《消灭调查统计工作中的混乱现象》(Wipe out Chaotic Phenomena from Statistical Survey Work), 《人民日报》(*People's Daily*), Sept. 7, 1953.

collect information on the whereabouts of every person who had registered his/her residence in that town. With a local population of more than 100 thousand, such massive and urgent data collection was impossible for village and neighborhood cadres who were already burdened with numerous tasks. Moreover, it was unclear to the frontline practitioners that knowing everyone's location would make epidemic prevention and control more effective. Meng also mentioned he was given only one hour to fill out another form sent from a county department, and with that little time, he couldn't wait for village cadres to collect and report numbers on the ground. Hence, he chose to make up the figures that seemed to "make sense" and submitted the form in time.<sup>33</sup>

In the official diagnosis, the second factor contributing to the overproduction of forms is Decentralism, referring to the compartmentalization of the bureaucracy and the lack of interagency coordination. Functional agencies do not bother to coordinate and establish an information-sharing system or mechanism. Instead, they find it more convenient to request data from grassroots units directly and separately even though different agencies are looking for the same set of information. Neither the centralized structure nor the digitalization of the government has been effective in overcoming informational barriers among different agencies.<sup>34</sup> The victims of "decentralism," again, are grassroots cadres who have to conduct extra work on duplicative and redundant forms. As Meng observed during the COVID-19 control,

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<sup>33</sup> 孟北鱼 (Meng Beiyu): 《口罩下的形式主义与基层减负》 (Formalism under the Mask and Alleviation of the Grassroots Burden), *基层实录* (a WeChat Public Account), Jan. 28, 2020. Retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hZ1guw4Q2nuIY2HZEGJv-A> (accessed Jan. 29, 2020; taken down by Chinese internet censors).

<sup>34</sup> Interview code: CS20210311ZSJ, LY20210316ZZR

“As I roughly estimate, village and neighborhood cadres must submit five forms before noon every day. They did one hour of substantive work but were forced to spend another five hours completing the paperwork. Despite inquiring about the same thing, five agencies invented five distinct forms in completely different formats.”<sup>35</sup>

Meng attributed this practice to the “arrogance” of functional agencies. “They are too arrogant to take the initiative to approach other departments and sit together and collectively design a unified form that can be used by every department. They have no idea about communication and coordination.”<sup>36</sup>

The final aspect of the problem is Bureaucratism which generally refers to a haphazard and pretentious style of work among party-state officials. Not a product of careful and thorough research, many forms are so badly designed that they are almost incomprehensible. Grassroots cadres can only fill out the forms based on their own interpretation, which might eventually lead to incompatible and incomparable data. After issuing and receiving forms, functional agencies seem to be satisfied with “data amassing” without treating the statistics seriously. Absent serious analysis, the huge amount of information collected on the ground fails to improve the policy-making and decision-making quality. Furthermore, given limited resources and time, being bombarded with forms, grassroots cadres’ coping strategy may be estimation at best and fabrication at worst.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the system has gathered more information but not necessarily better information.

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<sup>35</sup> Meng Beiyu, “Formalism under the Mask and Alleviation of the Grassroots Burden.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, a comment by a grassroots cadre: “我就是基层[干部], 工作核心之一就是报数据, 各种乱七八糟的不知道有什么用的数据, 这些数据哪里来的? 没错, 就是我们凭空创造出来的, 为何凭空创造, 因为无法统计, 不造假无法交差。(*I am a grassroots cadre, and one of the core tasks of my work is to report figures, all kinds of miscellaneous numbers that I don't know the use of. Where did these data come from? Yes, we created them out of thin air. Why? Because we are unable to collect them, and we cannot fulfill our responsibilities*)”

In Meng's reflection, grassroots cadres are the most pragmatic group of officials, for they remain the closest to the masses and they are the ultimate implementers. Grassroots cadres resent formalism, but they are forced to produce formalities because formalism serves the interests of their superiors. During the early outbreak of the coronavirus, Meng once thought that in the face of a national crisis, pragmatism would triumph over formalism within the bureaucracy. However, when he was overwhelmed by the convoluted yet practically worthless form-filling, he found his wishful thinking totally wrong. Even during a national emergency, bureaucrats' dual motivation of claiming credit and avoiding blame, combined with their inability to solve real problems, produced the perfect formula for the fetishization of formalism. Many functional agencies, despite their work being not directly related to public health, were eager to send instructions to and demand reports from grassroots units. Their intention was to signal that they had prioritized the epidemic as well as shielding themselves from being punished for inactivity. As Meng points out, "Most people in the system don't do things to solve problems. They do things to solve responsibilities."<sup>38</sup>

## Formalism at the Fingertips

The central leadership orders local governments to reduce the number of "red-headed" documents and meetings in the hope of combating formalism and alleviating some burdens on the grassroots bureaucracy. However, as the governmentality of the Chinese party-state remains

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*without fabricating data.*)" in "为什么现在的基层公务员忙得像条狗? (Why are civil servants at the bottom of the hierarchy so busy nowadays?)," 知乎 (Zhihu), retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/321836051> (accessed Jan. 21, 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Meng Beiyu, "Formalism under the Mask and Alleviation of the Grassroots Burden."

largely unchanged, “traditional” bureaucratic burdens simply have morphed into “modern” forms with the help of technological advancement. The prevalence of instant-messaging apps, such as WeChat and QQ, have channeled offline directives into online platforms, which renders top-down and peer pressure more intrusive. Usually, every work unit, subdivision, and functional agency has its own WeChat work group (工作群 *gongzuoqun*), but beyond that, for each campaign, policy, and program, new groups are created to coordinate people involved, leading to group proliferation. The attention of cadres is therefore hijacked by messages (most of them are commands) constantly popping up in the numerous work groups, and they are compelled to respond and act under greater time pressure. In addition to the work groups, cadres must take extra burdens from the various apps developed by central and local authorities. Those apps can be roughly classified into three categories, administrative apps (政务类 *zhengwulei*), party-building apps (党务类 *dangwulei*), and ideology-oriented study apps (学习类 *xuexilei*). Despite local variations, grassroots cadres are usually obliged to log on to specific state-developed apps every day and accumulate a high enough score to fulfill part of their performance evaluation requirements.

The proliferation of work groups and party-state apps and their associated obligations have created the so-called “formalism at the fingertips” (指尖上的形式主义 *zhijian shangde xingshizhuyi*). To combat this new manifestation of formalism, some local governments order grassroots cadres to eliminate unnecessary WeChat groups and try to minimize the number of required apps.<sup>39</sup> Against this backdrop, I asked my survey respondents to estimate the number of

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<sup>39</sup> For instance, see “除‘指尖’之苦，减基层之负——各地区各部门扎实开展整治‘指尖上的形式主义’工作综述” (Eliminate the Chore at Fingertips and Reduce the Burden on the Grassroots), *Xinhua News Agency*, June 20, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-06/20/c\\_1127580640.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-06/20/c_1127580640.htm).



their work groups and the party-state apps they are required to use. As *Table 5.1* presents, more than 70 percent of local cadres are in ten work groups or more, and cadres who participate in more than twenty work groups take up 30% of the sample. As for required apps, only about 2% of cadres have no obligations, 42 percent have 1 to 3 apps to take care of, 36 percent are asked to use 4 to 6 apps, and the remaining 20 percent are burdened with 7 apps or more.<sup>40</sup>

*Table 5.1 Number of Work Groups and Required Apps*

<b>Work Groups</b>	<b>Less than 5</b>	<b>5-10</b>	<b>10-20</b>	<b>20-50</b>	<b>More than 50</b>
<i>% of respondents</i>	9.2	29.4	31.7	22.6	7.1
<b>Required Apps</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1-3</b>	<b>4-6</b>	<b>7-10</b>	<b>More than 10</b>
<i>% of respondents</i>	1.9	42.1	36.4	11.5	8.6

Among the digital obligations of local cadres, there is a “popular” app particularly designed for political education and ideological indoctrination, *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国, hereafter XXQG). The name of the app plays with an official pun on the surname of the Chinese supreme leader, Xi Jinping. As the Chinese word, *xuexi*, means learning or “to learn from Xi,” XXQG can be literally translated as both “study to strengthen the nation” and “learning from Xi to make a great country.” Designed and built by the CCP’s Central Department of Propaganda, the app was officially rolled out on the first day of 2019 and was vigorously promoted by the authorities as Xi’s version of the Little Red Book for the digital era. As the app’s name indicates, it is basically all about Xi, featuring the top leader’s speeches, statements, visits, activities, and personal stories, along with other state media reports and propaganda materials.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hanyu Zhao, *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey*, Nov. 2021.

<sup>41</sup> See the webpage version of the app: [www.xuexi.cn](http://www.xuexi.cn)



Screenshots of the App *Xuexi Qiangguo*

(the left picture highlights the news about Xi, and the right one shows the rule of earning study points)

The platform has a built-in “study points” system that aims to quantify people’s political loyalty based on their habitual use of the platform. Users can earn points through active engagement with the app, including reading articles, viewing videos, posting comments, and completing quizzes. Eager to demonstrate their allegiance to the Party Center, many local governments demand that cadres use the app daily and obtain a certain number of points. Similar requirements have been applied to employees in educational institutions, SOEs, and grassroots party cells in urban neighborhoods and rural villages.<sup>42</sup> Work units and Party branches are under

<sup>42</sup> For more information, see “下载量破亿的‘学习强国’，到底是个什么 App? (Xuexi Qiangguo has been downloaded more than 100 million times, what is the app about?),” 端传媒 (*The Initium*), April 2, 2019, <https://theinitium.com/article/20190403-mainland-xuexiqiangguo-app/>; and David Bandurski, “The Dawn of the

peer pressure to compete for higher collective points, and have also developed internal rankings and incentive schemes to reward “activists” and punish those who score low. For instance, a township government in central Hunan has incorporated the use of XXQG into the cadre evaluation metrics, requiring officials to accumulate 30 points every day with an average monthly score not lower than 660 points; otherwise, the result will be a subtraction from their salary.<sup>43</sup>

As a township leader explains, using XXQG helps grassroots cadres to keep up to date with central policies and improve their “political theoretical capability.” He also implies that spending their personal time with XXQG is healthier compared to binge-watching short videos on TikTok.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, XXQG represents the party-state’s renewed effort to compete for people’s limited attention with popular social media platforms. At a provincial-level training session on XXQG platform management in which I participated, a propaganda department official emphasized that a major purpose of XXQG is to “occupy and defend the ideological battleground in the digital space.”<sup>45</sup> This statement echoes an analyst on China who points out that the significance of the app lies in “the way it reinvents the process of ideological dominance for the digital era.”<sup>46</sup>

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Little Red Phone,” *China Media Project*, Feb. 13, 2019, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2019/02/13/the-dawn-of-the-little-red-phone/>

<sup>43</sup> 《锁石镇机关事业单位人员考核办法》(Evaluation Plan for Officials in Shuoshi Township), April 21, 2020 (internal document obtained from the field site).

<sup>44</sup> Interview code: LD20210721BGSZR

<sup>45</sup> In Chinese, “占领和守卫网络意识形态的阵地”.

<sup>46</sup> David Bandurski, “The Dawn of the Little Red Phone,” *China Media Project*, Feb. 13, 2019.



A training session on the *Xuexi Qiangguo* platform for party-state officials held by the Hainan Provincial Department of Propaganda (Haikou, Sept. 2021, photo taken by the author)

Despite the official investment in reinventing ideological indoctrination, compulsory political study has inevitably degenerated into another variant of formalism, with gaining points becoming the ultimate goal. Technologically savvy young people handle the app to help out parents who otherwise would have to spend several hours a day accumulating sufficient points.<sup>47</sup> Cadres of a neighborhood resident committee complain that as most elderly party members in their community do not use smartphones, every cadre has been assigned to take care of 20 XXQG accounts to meet the targets set by higher-ups.<sup>48</sup> Netizens share “cheat sheets” that can help overtaxed users of the app earn points more efficiently, and one can even find paid services online to hire someone to do all the work on your behalf.<sup>49</sup> In the case of my mother, who is now a retired local government official, before retirement her common practice was to let the

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<sup>47</sup> “‘学习强国’与我的母亲 (Xuexi Qiangguo and My Mother),” 纪城故人, Feb.2, 2019, a WeChat piece deleted by the censors and archived by the *China Digital Times*, retrieved from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/605284.html>

<sup>48</sup> “学习强国 app 相关，强制基层要求学习没人能管吗？ (Grassroots units are forced to use the app of Xuexi Qiangguo),” *China Digital Times*, retrieved from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/614469.html>

<sup>49</sup> For example, see “学习强国刷积分技巧 (How to earn points quickly on Xuexi Qiangguo),” 知乎(Zhihu), Feb.9, 2022, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/465622734>

newscast on the app play on its own while she read an internet novel or watched a TV drama. Involuntary users of the app clearly desire a more productive use of their time.

## **Diffusion/Spillover of Formalism**

Formalism has not only frustrated and alienated grassroots cadres, but also spilled over to other professions, particularly teachers in public schools. Short of manpower, local governments find it convenient to outsource and transfer governance duties and burdens to teachers who are also “street-level bureaucrats” in a broad sense. As a result, for educators in primary and middle schools, it is reported that only 30% of their work is related to teaching and educational activities, while the other 70% is occupied by political and administrative tasks.<sup>50</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were asked to “volunteer” in PCR mass testings and contact tracing. They also needed to monitor students’ health conditions, organize them to get vaccinated, and even mobilize their parents and grandparents for vaccination. Beyond public health, various functional agencies assign teachers to pass on all kinds of government policies and instructions to students’ parents, as trivial as urging parents who are scooter drivers to wear a helmet for traffic safety. As the Chinese state includes “anti-drowning” (防溺水 *fangnishui*) among students as one of its own duties, in summer after-school time, teachers have to join grassroots cadres to patrol river banks and ponds to watch over and discourage students from swimming in those waters. As additional bureaucratic responsibilities pile up and sap their time

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<sup>50</sup> 《“挤破头”拥有教师编制，他们后悔了》(After becoming teachers through fierce competition, they regret the decision), 三联生活周刊(*Sanlian Lifeweek Magazine*), April 26, 2022, retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/va8KrbasiQAWs2gFSGovbw>

and energy, educators feel a growing disrespect from the government for their professional commitment to teaching.<sup>51</sup>

Li Tiantian, a village school teacher in western Hunan, posted a piece titled “A Group of Rural Kids with a Ruined Future” on her personal WeChat account in October 2019 as an outcry against formalism and pathological bureaucratic practices.<sup>52</sup> The article drew much attention but was quickly taken down by censors, and Teacher Li was pressured by the local authorities to keep quiet. In that piece, she reveals that rural school teachers in poverty-stricken regions have been assigned heavy duties of poverty alleviation. In addition to contacting and helping five poor households that had been subcontracted to her, she needed to assist grassroots cadres and work teams to collect household information, fill out forms, and prepare paperwork, all of which severely impeded her normal teaching job. Sometimes she and other teachers had to cancel their classes to work overtime in the government office to cope with urgent inspections.

Moreover, rural schools in poor regions are subject to frequent inspections that cause teachers and students to devote a significant amount of time to cleaning so that higher-level inspectors/leaders are duly impressed by a clean and tidy school environment. Teacher Li complained, however, that during rounds of inspections, besides superficial instructions, no officials bothered to address the fundamental problems faced by rural schools, such as the lack of

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<sup>51</sup> During the annual meetings of the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in 2023, several delegates from the educational sector submitted proposals suggesting that the government should refrain itself from assigning administrative tasks to teachers to reduce their burdens. See “让老师催缴医保？委员建议严格把关社会事务进校园 (Teachers were asked to collect health insurance fees; delegates suggest that social affairs should be kept out of campus),” *南方都市报* (*Southern Metropolis Daily*), March 7, 2023, retrieved from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/693595.html>

<sup>52</sup> 李田田：《一群正被毁掉的乡村孩子》(A Group of Rural Kids with a Ruined Future), “山花诗田” (*Shanhua Shitian, Personal WeChat Account*), Oct. 2019, deleted by Internet censors and archived by the *Chinese Digital Times*, retrieved from <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/620430.html>

educational resources and personnel capacity. Witnessing the precious time of teaching and learning being crowded out by formalistic work in the anti-poverty campaign and never-ending preparation for inspections, Teacher Li wrote,

“We grassroots teachers are too frustrated to complain (苦不堪言 *kubukanyan*). Working overtime to 2 or 3 am, how much energy did we have left to devote to our students? If we didn’t comply, if problems were spotted in poverty alleviation, and if we missed the income information of poor households, we would be punished. But is it really our fault? We are intellectuals who teach and cultivate the future of the country. How come we have regressed to an instrument of power? Why not let us wholeheartedly teach, focusing on what we are supposed to do?”<sup>53</sup>

Why have educational institutions also fallen victim to formalism? Resembling village organizations, after the abolition of tuition and other fees for compulsory education, primary and middle schools have become fiscally dependent on the party-state, increasingly bureaucratized and subject to political control. With autonomy reduced and professionalism compromised, the dominant logic of school management has shifted from “being held accountable to the school” (对校负责 *duixiao fuze*) to “being held accountable to the government” (对上交代 *duishang jiaodai*).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> 雷望红 (Wei Hongwang): 《对上交代：教育形式主义的运行机制与生产逻辑》 (Upward Accountability: the Mechanism and Logic of Educational Formalism), *新乡土(Xinxiangtu)*, Jan. 30, 2022, retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/U0r9V7seJkgqOkSD2YrE-g>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, by investigating the structural factors and the political logic underlying organizational red tape, I tackled the question of why formalism persists even though both the central leadership and grassroots bureaucrats dislike it. I discussed the specific components of the “paper mountain” and identified two kinds of paperwork that have overburdened grassroots cadres – excessive documentation (Trace-ism) and overproduction of forms (or statistical overload).

I attribute “Trace-ism” to three interrelated factors: First, due to the flawed performance measurement and distorted incentive scheme, documentation outweighs substantive work and outcomes in performance evaluations and inspections. Second, as the authoritarian political oversight of the bureaucracy can only rely on top-down and internal monitoring, grassroots bureaucrats are forced to document everything they do when the central principal desires to maximize control over local agents. Third, the politicization of governance and administrative tasks and the intensification of the accountability system has further incentivized risk-averse agents to turn to formalities and documentation as self-protective strategies.

The phenomenon that the grassroots bureaucracy has been flooded with statistical forms reveals the fundamental tension between the leadership’s ambition of building an all-seeing state and the limited informational capacity of the grassroots bureaucracy. Compounded by problems intrinsic to the bureaucratic system (such as detachment from reality and the lack of coordination), the overproduction of forms and figures fails to generate better information that can help enhance governance quality. Despite the huge consumption of grassroots cadres’ time and energy, “statistical/big data management” (数目字管理 *shumuzi guanli*) gives the authorities only the illusion of greater control. Even worse, the prevalent statistical falsification



and low-quality or distorted data can do more harm to state governance if they form the basis of policymaking, as the history of the Great Leap Forward and Great Famine reveals. In this sense, forms become toxic formalism.

Besides mountains of paperwork, technological advancement has brought formalism to people's fingertips. The case of the *Xuexi Qiangguo* App illustrates how ideological indoctrination in the digital age has morphed into an exhausting game of earning points. And formalism has a spillover effect, as its victims are not limited to grassroots cadres but also include teachers in increasingly politicized and bureaucratized schools. Though the central leadership seems to be determined to combat and overcome formalism and other bureaucratic pathologies, their rhetoric and periodic campaigns have more symbolic meanings than substantive effect. Without touching the structural, systemic, and institutional elements, the soil that nourishes formalism remains intact. This is also the fundamental problem faced by the official remedies of "alleviating burdens on the grassroots bureaucracy," which I will address in the next chapter.

## ***Chapter 6***

### ***“Alleviating the Burden”: Official Remedies and Their Limits***

How have the leaders of the Chinese party-state diagnosed and responded to bureaucratic overload and how effective have their policy interventions been? What do grassroots cadres think about those measures? In this chapter, I bring in a historical perspective to discuss the official effort to remedy bureaucratic pathologies from Mao to Xi. Drawing on document research, field interviews, and survey findings, I investigate why the “Burden Alleviation” initiative remains ineffective, if not counterproductive, for most grassroots cadres.

Though Mao Zedong had waged periodic campaigns targeting Bureaucratism, his inability to locate the true source of the problem rendered his quixotic fights with his lifetime enemy largely failed. In a major step forward, Deng Xiaoping recognized that the institutional roots of bureaucratic pathologies stemmed from a highly centralized governance system that simply controlled too much. However, thorough structural reform that might bring a fundamental fix to the bureaucratic system was overshadowed by more urgent concerns of regime survival during times of political crises. Fast forward to Xi Jinping’s “new era,” the central leadership has not turned a blind eye to the plight of the grassroots bureaucracy. Though it recognized the existence of bureaucratic overload, the official response has barely scratched the surface without touching upon the core issue of the supply-and-demand imbalances in grassroots governance. As

long as the managerial style of the CCP and the underlying governing mentality of the party-state leadership remain unchanged, these attempts at reform remain superficial and largely ineffective.

## **Mao's Unending Battle with Bureaucratism**

Though the official expression of “alleviating the burden on the grassroots government” was non-existent in the Mao era, the workload and stress of grassroots cadres grew with the expansion of the state’s control of and intervention in all aspects of society. In the early PRC period, grassroots overload, to some degree, was manifested as the so-called “Five-Excess” problem identified by the local government. Specifically, the higher levels assigned too many tasks with too little time; grassroots agents were buried by excess meetings, training sessions, and paperwork; grassroots units had to set up a large number of ad hoc organizations to cope with various missions; and activists among peasants participated in too many activities outside of agricultural production. Mao did pay substantial attention to the problem and responded in a proactive and timely manner. He viewed the issue of bureaucratic overload as an integral part of the longstanding pathology of Bureaucratism. In his own words, “*Bureaucratism, a negative legacy of the old society, if left unswept once a year, will recur as weeds reemerge every time the spring wind blows.*”<sup>1</sup> Despite conceiving of Bureaucratism as a long-term target to constantly combat and stressing its persistence, Mao never dug deeper into the root cause of this stubborn pathology, failing to understand its institutional and structural origin.

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<sup>1</sup> In Chinese, “官僚主义这种旧社会遗留下来的坏作风，一年不用扫帚扫一次，就会春风吹又生了。” in 毛泽东 (Mao Zedong): 《中共中央关于反对官僚主义的指示》(The Directive of the CCP Central Committee on Anti-Bureaucratism), March 30, 1960.

### *Solving the “Five-Excess” Problem in 1953*

A local report in December 1952 caught Mao’s attention. It addressed the problems in the party-state’s rural work that had severely alienated peasants, disrupted agricultural production, and infringed on the interests of the masses (especially those of activist peasants). The problems were described as the “Five Excesses” (五多 *wuduo*) – the excessive numbers of (1) missions and tasks, (2) meetings and training sessions, (3) official documents, reports, and ledgers, (4) organizations, and (5) additional part-time work for activists.<sup>2</sup> In the central directive Mao drafted in response, he stated that these issues were long-standing problems, and that despite central orders in the past, they had not been tackled and were even getting worse. Numerous departments at every level of the government assigned tasks to lower levels, summoned subordinates and rural activists to meetings and training sessions at a whim, and bombarded local agents in the countryside with documents, forms, and endless demands on submitting reports. Mao ordered a stop to these unhealthy practices, while leaving each level of government to find specific solutions.

Mao proceeded to diagnose the pathology by locating its cause at the upper levels of the hierarchy rather than the grassroots level. In Mao’s analysis, the problem was generated by Bureaucratism and Decentralism (分散主义 *fensanzhuyi*), or the lack of interagency coordination. Although he partially attributed it to the negative legacies of the revolutionary war and the Land Reform campaign, he mainly ascribed the issue to the party-state’s over-intervention in agricultural production and rural lives. Mao cautioned against extensive

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<sup>2</sup> In Chinese, “任务多、会议集训多、公文报告表册多、组织多、积极分子兼职多” in Mao Zedong, “解决‘五多’问题 (Solving the ‘Five-Excess’ Problem),” 19 March 1953, in the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong (Volume V)*, (Beijing: The People’s Press, 1977): 77-79.

“planning” of agriculture, which would ignite opposition and resentment from peasants. It would also endanger the CCP by estranging farmers who accounted for more than 80% of the total population. However, with the agricultural collectivization expanding to a nationwide movement in the following years, Mao’s admonition to refrain from excessive intervention was essentially disregarded, as even he himself failed to follow to his own orders.

### ***A Quick Reaction to Bureaucratism in 1960***

Perhaps not to Mao’s surprise, Bureaucratism reared its head again years later without much change in form. It was accompanied by an amazingly quick bottom-up chain reaction from the county level to the provincial and central governments (at least on paper).

During the heyday of the Great Leap Forward, in order to ensure a robust harvest and loyally implement provincial policies, the party leadership of the Licheng County in Shandong Province (山东省历城县委) submitted a report to the higher authorities on 14 March 1960.<sup>3</sup> In the report the county leadership reflected upon the problems exposed in their work and summarized them as five-“too many” and five-“not enough” (五多、五少 *wuduo wushao*):

“We have too many meetings, but not enough probes into reality and contact with the masses;  
too many documents and forms, but not enough summaries of experience and lessons;  
too much time spent in the office, not enough time spent on on-site investigation and research;  
too many mandates and tasks, but not enough studies;

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<sup>3</sup> 中共历城县委 (The CCP Committee of Licheng): 《关于贯彻执行省委关于六级干部会师到田指示的报告》 (The Report on Implementing the Provincial Directive of Summoning Six Levels of Cadres to the Field), 14 March 1960, in 《建国以来毛泽东文稿》 (*Mao Zedong’s Works since the Founding of PRC*) (Volume 9), (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 1996):114-117.

too many general slogans, but not enough carefully organized work.”<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate the consequence of this problematic working style (作风 *zuofeng*), the county provided a series of “impressive” numbers that exemplified the severity of “mountains of paper and a sea of meetings”:

“From January 1 to March 10, in these seventy days, at the county level, we have had 184 meetings with party secretaries of people’s communes and department heads attending in person and 56 telephone meetings. We have issued 1047 pieces of documents and 599 sheets of forms. The county had established 22 ad hoc offices, and more than 100 cadres were assigned to cope with paperwork. In the whole county, the number of personnel who were busy filling out forms and delivering documents all day long was close to one thousand.”<sup>5</sup>

If we do the math, the statistics show that the county government, on average, held 3.4 meetings and issued 23.5 pieces of documents and forms per day. County leaders openly admitted statistical manipulation and falsification and even depicted the unrealistic, unreasonable demands a county department sent to lower levels with a sense of humor rarely seen in official reports.

“Leaders of the county and communes also have been trapped in their offices to deal with the paperwork and daily routines. They haven’t carefully studied the directives from higher levels and investigated local circumstances, thereby rendering their style of work oversimplified and generalized. The Bureaucratic working style has boosted Commandism (命令主义 *minglingzhuyi*), pompousness, and falsification among grassroots cadres. Thanks to the excess forms, complicated tabulations, and lack of time,

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<sup>4</sup> In Chinese, “会议活动多, 深入实际联系群众少; 文件表报多, 总结经验少; 蹲在机关多, 调查研究少; 事务多, 学习少; 一般号召多, 细致的组织工作少。” Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The CCP Committee of Licheng, 1960.

subordinates had no choice but to fabricate numbers. Some even had no time to cook up figures. For instance, the county Rectification Office (整风办 *zhengfengban*) once ordered the Dongjiao Commune to survey the attitude of every commune member towards the rectification campaign within one hour. This command drove comrade Xiaozhao, the female statistician in the commune, who is nicknamed ‘Hearty Laughter,’ to cry out loud over the phone.”<sup>6</sup>

The county leadership acknowledged that many reports and figures generated in such a hasty way were far from reality and risked sabotaging the fulfillment of agricultural production goals. Hence, they proposed four major measures to address the issue:

- First, be practical – all department leaders are required to step out of their offices and go into the field to get first-hand experience on the ground. It is sufficient to leave the party secretary and the county head in the headquarters to take charge of routine work.
- Second, practice the Mass Line – cadres at all levels should eat, live, and work together with peasants (三同 *santong*) and participate in agricultural production.
- Third, improve coordination between local governments (块块 *kuaikuai*) and functional clusters (条条 *tiaotiao*), and keep a balance between the central task and the routine business of each department.
- Fourth, largely reduce the number of meetings and paperwork – instead of summoning cadres to the county seat, consult local cadres to solve problems on the spot; only convene a meeting if a department has collected sufficient information from local experiences; cut off all the unnecessary forms and prohibit the issuance of redundant forms.

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<sup>6</sup> The CCP Committee of Licheng, 1960.

A week later, the Shandong Provincial Party Committee firmly endorsed the position of their subordinates in the Licheng County by forwarding the report to all party committees and departments within their jurisdiction as well as handing it up to the party center in Beijing.<sup>7</sup> The endorsement began with the sentence that “The report is good enough to be carefully read twice.” The provincial leadership not only urged local governments to adopt the four measures suggested by Licheng cadres, but also took responsibility for their own role in the red-tape-generating process. They demanded all agencies at the provincial level investigate the problem of “five-too many and five-not enough” in their work and streamline meetings and documents. In addition, they insisted that leaders must spend four months a year leaving their offices and conducting field research to get in-depth knowledge at the grassroots level.

Before long, the original report, along with Shandong’s endorsement, reached Zhongnanhai. Again, Mao drafted a central directive on anti-Bureaucratism, promulgated on 30 March 1960, only 16 days after the submission of the county report.<sup>8</sup> He referred to Bureaucratism as a recurrent, persistent, and prevalent problem that necessitates a rectification campaign against it on a regular basis. The astonishing amount of red tape experienced by Licheng County officials was quoted in the text, and Mao commented, “We cannot let this situation continue and must put an end to the bureaucratic tendency.” Instead of reproving his underlings, Mao underwent self-criticism by referring to his 1953 directive (which had been

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<sup>7</sup> 山东省委批转历城县委《关于贯彻执行省委关于六级干部会师到田指示的报告》(The Report on Implementing the Provincial Directive of Summoning Six Levels of Cadres to the Field), 22 March 1960, in 《建国以来毛泽东文稿》(Mao Zedong’s Works since the Founding of PRC) (volume 9):114-117.

<sup>8</sup> 毛泽东：《中共中央关于反对官僚主义的指示》(The Directive of the CCP Central Committee on Anti-Bureaucratism), 30 March 1960, in 《建国以来毛泽东文稿》(Mao Zedong’s Works since the Founding of PRC) (volume 9):114-117.



largely disregarded by the central government) and acknowledged Bureaucratism at the central level.<sup>9</sup> This self-reflection echoes his previous judgment that the root of Bureaucratism lies at the top rather than the grassroots.

Mao had attributed Bureaucratism to the negative legacy of the traditional society, the residuals of the previous anti-revolutionary regime, and the detachment from people on the part of some cadres. Compared to Mao's limited reflection, Deng Xiaoping's diagnosis of Bureaucratism is a major step forward, for he began to touch upon the systemic and institutional sources of the problem.

## **Deng's Diagnosis: The Institutional Problem**

On 18 August 1980, in a historic speech on reforming the leadership system of the Chinese party-state, Deng Xiaoping systematically reflected upon and addressed some of the institutional problems that had haunted the CCP and contributed to the devastating Cultural Revolution, such as the over-centralization of power, paternalism, lifelong leadership, and the party-state fusion.<sup>10</sup> Given the political context and power dynamics behind the speech, some believe Deng's main strategic purpose was to undermine the power base of Hua Guofeng, Deng's biggest political rival at the time.<sup>11</sup> Despite its instrumental value, this speech is one of the most reform-minded central documents in the CCP's history. In the speech, Deng pinpointed

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<sup>9</sup> “中央几年前曾对这个问题发过指示，后来没有再过问，自己也有官僚主义，不能只怪别人。” Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> 邓小平 (Deng Xiaoping), “党和国家领导制度的改革 (Reforming the Leadership of the Party and State),” 18 August 1980.

<sup>11</sup> 吴伟 (Wu Wei), “邓小平《党和国家领导制度改革》的讲话 (Deng Xiaoping's Speech on Reforming the Leadership of the Party and State),” *纽约时报中文网* (*New York Times, Chinese version*), Jan.21, 2014, retrieved from <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20140121/cc21wuwei/>

the fundamental structural source of Bureaucratism – the party-state had adopted highly centralized control over all kinds of domains, and the Chinese governing system was taking charge of many things beyond its capacity. Therefore, the solution should be power devolution and greater autonomy given to lower levels as well as economic, professional, and social organizations. Deng said,

“Bureaucratism is a long-term, complicated historical phenomenon. The Bureaucratism we have nowadays, despite similarities with Bureaucratism in history, has its unique features and is different from Bureaucratism in imperial China and capitalist countries. It is closely associated with our governing system about which we hold a longstanding belief that the socialist and planning system should have highly centralized control over the economy, politics, culture, and society. Our leading institutions at every level are controlling so many things that we shouldn’t, couldn’t, and are unable to control. Based on certain rules, if we delegate those issues to lower levels, to enterprises and professional and social work units, and let them manage autonomously under the true principle of democratic centralism, things could be easily handled. But if we bring all the things to party-state institutions and central ministries, it becomes difficult to manage. No one is omnipotent to handle such heavy and complex tasks. This is the general root cause of the unique Bureaucratism we currently have.”<sup>12</sup>

Besides the governmentality of “controlling too much,” Deng identified other factors underlying Bureaucratism. Due to the insufficient formalization and legalization of the Chinese bureaucracy, especially with respect to the lack of strict and clear job codifications that demarcate individuals’ authority and responsibility, people always had to seek their superiors’ approvals and opinions, and thus, red tape proliferated. In addition to the issue of individual accountability, Deng also pointed out the flaws in the personnel system. The nature of the “iron rice bowl” and the absence of cadre elimination and withdrawal mechanisms led to the

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<sup>12</sup> Deng Xiaoping, 1980.

overexpansion of the bureaucracy and its low level of efficiency. Most importantly, Deng recognized, to fix the bureaucratic system, institutional causes were of primary concern and the cadres' moral and working style issues (思想作风问题 *sixiang zuofeng wenti*) were secondary. Without solving the institutional problems, he believed, it was impossible to change the attitudinal and behavioral issues among bureaucrats. Deng thus emphasized the necessity and hard work of institutional reform rather than merely launching rectification campaigns and ideological indoctrination.

### **Xi's New Era: The Paradox of Burden Alleviation**

Realizing the severity of bureaucratic burdens and being sympathetic toward overloaded grassroots cadres, Xi Jinping and the Party center has shown a certain degree of responsiveness. Designating 2019 as the “year of alleviating the burden on grassroots cadres” (基层减负年 *jiceng jianfu nian*), the central leadership initiated a series of measures to mitigate grassroots overload. Specifically, to address the staggering amount of red tape, subnational governments have been required to impose quotas on meetings, documents, paperwork, and the issuance of statistical forms. Moreover, higher level governments have been asked to reduce the frequency and scope of top-down inspections and evaluations. Performance appraisals should be result-oriented rather than procedure-oriented, focusing on substantive work instead of formalities and documentation. For the issue of increasing risk aversion and bureaucratic inaction among local cadres, the central government has promised to reform the accountability system and the

incentive structure to re-motivate state agents. Higher authorities have been asked to refrain from using “one-item veto” and signing “responsibility contracts” with lower levels.<sup>13</sup>

However, as I will demonstrate in this section, these seemingly responsive and targeted measures have largely become empty promises and have had very little real effect on easing the stress of grassroots bureaucrats. This result is not entirely surprising, for the remedies have only scratched the surface, and none of them are aimed at changing the underlying structural imbalances between the supply and demand relationship of grassroots governance. Compared to the deep reflection in Deng’s 1980 speech, Xi’s central directives are a retrogression. The documents have shied away from any systematic diagnosis of bureaucratic pathologies and discussion of institutional factors and instead re-emphasize the importance of political education and ideological commitment on the part of party cadres and officials. They demand more intensive studies of and internalization of Xi Jinping Thought as well as resolute enforcement and faithful implementation of central commands.

A primary reason for the policy inefficacy of “Burden Alleviation” lies in the persistence of the CCP’s managerial style. Douglas McGregor identifies two managerial philosophies that rest upon completely different assumptions about human behavior and human motivation.<sup>14</sup> According to the authority-centered, control-oriented theory of management, namely Theory X, employees need to be coerced, controlled, directed, and threatened with punishment to get them

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<sup>13</sup> General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP, “关于贯彻落实习近平总书记重要指示精神 集中整治形式主义、官僚主义的工作意见 (Opinions on Addressing Formalism and Bureaucratism),” Sept 2018; “关于解决形式主义突出问题为基层减负的通知 (Notice on Solving Severe Problems of Formalism and Alleviating Burdens on Grassroots Governments),” March 2019; “关于持续解决困扰基层的形式主义问题为决胜全面建成小康社会提供坚强作风保证的通知 (Notice on Continuously Solving the Grassroots-disturbing Problems of Formalism and Providing Firm Support to Successfully Building A Moderately Prosperous Society in All Aspects),” April 14, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).

to put forth adequate effort toward the achievement of organizational objectives. Theory X assumes that the average human being has an inherent dislike of work, wishes to avoid responsibility, prefers to be directed, has relatively little ambition, and wants security above all. In other words, trust has no place in a Theory X-dominating system where managers presume employees will always shirk or take advantage unless being closely monitored. Moreover, authority is believed to be the central, indispensable means of managerial control. Therefore, decision-making and goal-setting tend to be a top-down process in which objectives are decided by higher levels and imposed on lower levels of the organization.

In contrast, Theory Y, assuming employees are worthy of trust and respect, proposes that with proper support, employees would be intrinsically motivated to do their best job. Unlike Theory X's cynical views on human behavior, Theory Y believes that people do not inherently dislike work and will exercise self-direction and self-control in the service of objectives to which one is committed. Human growth is self-generated and furthered by an environment of trust, feedback, and authentic human relationship. Hence, the real challenge for management is to create an organizational climate conducive to human growth. For people whose important needs are egoistic, external control and the threat of punishment are of limited motivational value. Instead, Theory Y advocates adopting appropriate forms of influence, such as persuasion, consultation, and professional help, to best integrate individual goals and organizational objectives. Based on those more positive assumptions, the predicted managerial and decision-making style tends to be participatory and interactive – with subordinates more likely to take initiative and superiors playing less of an authoritative role.

The Chinese bureaucracy is perhaps best characterized as operating under the logic of Theory X. Control and authority prevail in the system, while trust is scarce. The leaders' desire

to maximize control and monitoring of subordinates, along with their reliance on excessive record keeping, performance appraisal, coercion, and punishment, have demoralized and alienated local bureaucrats. Also, lower levels of the organization are always the passive recipients and implementers of the directives and policy goals set by higher levels, rather than those who can proactively influence decision-making processes. Though the central leadership is eager to address the bureaucratic problems and to “rescue” grassroots cadres, there is no sign of any transformation from Theory X to Theory Y. A close reading of the seemingly reformative policy documents reveals that the underlying assumptions of the managerial logic in the Chinese bureaucracy have not changed at all. Those policy papers, aimed to cure bureaucratic pathologies, still stress absolute compliance with the central authority. There is no mention of participatory management or governance, no invitation of alternative supervision mechanisms, and no presumption of trust. No wonder the “Burden Reduction” policy has had limited effects.

As evident in both my survey results and my conversations with local cadres in the field, cadres’ attitudes toward the central initiative of alleviating the burden on the grassroots workforce are largely pessimistic and even cynical. In a township government office in Hunan, after I was introduced as someone interested in studying grassroots burden reduction, a cadre immediately responded, “The louder the rhetoric of reduction, the heavier burden we have (基层减负, 越减越负 *jiceng jianfu, yuejian yuefu*).” Her colleagues, hearing her remonstrance, all erupted in laughter. Their reaction is not exceptional. Comments left by respondents at the end of my survey reveal their disillusion about burden reduction.

Comment A:

“The grassroots burden has never been reduced. Although the central government issued a series of burden alleviation interventions, the grassroots stress is increasing rather than decreasing, and grassroots cadres are too frustrated to complain about it.”<sup>15</sup>

Comment B:

“Please do not advocate grassroots burden reduction anymore. The real situation is that the more they are supposed to reduce, the heavier burden we have, and the more frequent the inspections. I simply ask to go back to the old days when we could focus on our business and assert our own pace, and the public satisfaction rate was even higher.”<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, in some places, the requirement of alleviating burdens in fact has become an *additional* burden for grassroots cadres who must come up with specific implementation plans and create extra periodic ledgers to record how many meetings they have held and how many documents they have received and produced.<sup>17</sup> For instance, a local bureaucrat recounted that after the central-level document announcing the burden alleviation policy was issued, a relevant meeting with exactly the same contents was held *three times* at the provincial, municipal, and county levels respectively. Ironically, all the cadres in grassroots bureaus were asked to write a report on their opinions and suggestions regarding burden reduction as well as what they had

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<sup>15</sup> The original Chinese text: “从没减过负，即便中央出台了系列减负措施，但基层压力只升不减，基层工作人员苦不堪言。” Source: Hanyu Zhao, *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey (CGCS)*, Nov. 2021.

<sup>16</sup> The original Chinese text: “请不要再提基层减负，减负就是越减负担越重。越减，检查越多。回到以前就好，安心做事，按部就班，群众满意度还高。” Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Exemplary comments by local cadres: “我记得当时我们是晚上 9 点开完基层减负的会的，会后说明天早上交一个减负的方案，然后整理部门减负台账，然后打印机又冒烟了”；“前几年又提了一个给基层减负，我发现只是多了一个叫‘减负’的工作材料整理，其他再无变化。”；“每周召开基层减负研判会，每月递交基层减负统计表，每季度递交基层减负季度工作总结。基层减负就是这么减负的。” in “为什么现在的基层公务员忙得像条狗？(Why are the grassroots-level civil servants so busy nowadays?),” 知乎 (Zhihu), retrieved from <https://www.zhihu.com/question/321836051> (accessed Jan. 21, 2023).

learned from the policy document.<sup>18</sup> The commentator ensured that this was a real story rather than a made-up political joke. Due to systemic inertia and path dependency, the bureaucracy is paradoxically using formalism to combat formalism, holding more meetings on how to cut the number of meetings and producing more documents to convey the directives of reducing the amount of paperwork.

Official remedies fall short or are even counterproductive. In my survey, when asked about changes since 2019, only 16% of respondents think that their burden and pressure have lessened somewhat (14%) or a lot (2%). Thirty-two percent see no visible change, and more than a half believe that the burden and stress they faced have either somewhat (34%) or substantially increased (17%). They have a similar response to top-down supervision and control, as 50% have witnessed an increasing number of evaluations, inspections, and rankings in recent years (see *Figure 6.1*). As for the accountability system, 59% believe it has become even more draconian, as opposed to 12% who think the system is moving in a more reasonable direction.<sup>19</sup>

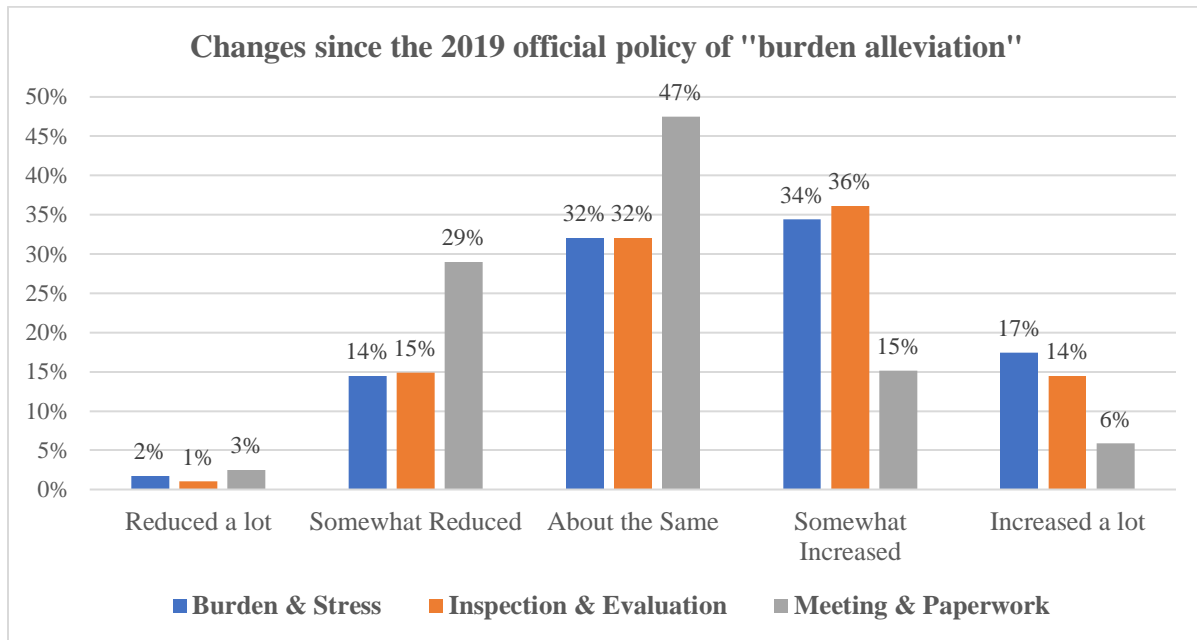
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<sup>18</sup> “为什么现在的底层公务员忙得像条狗？(Why are the grassroots-level civil servants so busy nowadays?),” *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Source: Hanyu Zhao, *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey (CGCS)*, Nov. 2021.



Figure 6.1 Changes since the Initiative of Burden Reduction



The only aspect that shows appreciable improvement is the “mountains of papers and oceans of meetings” – people believing the situation has been improved (32%) outnumber those who think the opposite (21%), but there are still 47% who believe the situation remains the same. In fact, the central decree imposes quotas on meetings and document issuance as well as requiring local governments to reduce the number of meetings and documents below the county level by 30% to 50%.<sup>20</sup> The decree even regulates that any policy documents issued by the central government and ministries should not exceed ten pages, and bureaucrats are encouraged to hold fewer, shorter, and more effective meetings.<sup>21</sup> Though the central initiative should be given due credit for saving some grassroots cadres from the red tape quagmire, systemic inertia

<sup>20</sup> General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP, “关于解决形式主义突出问题为基层减负的通知 (Notice on Solving Severe Problems of Formalism and Alleviating Burdens on Grassroots Governments),” March 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

continues, and local leaders and bureaucrats can easily circumvent the central regulations. Instead of issuing hard copies of red-headed documents (“红头文件” *hongtou wenjian*), they now bombard grassroots subordinates with orders via instant messaging on WeChat that are hard to trace and won’t be counted in the official numbers. “Old wine in new bottles,” as the saying goes. The actual workload of grassroots cadres, therefore, has not been reduced.

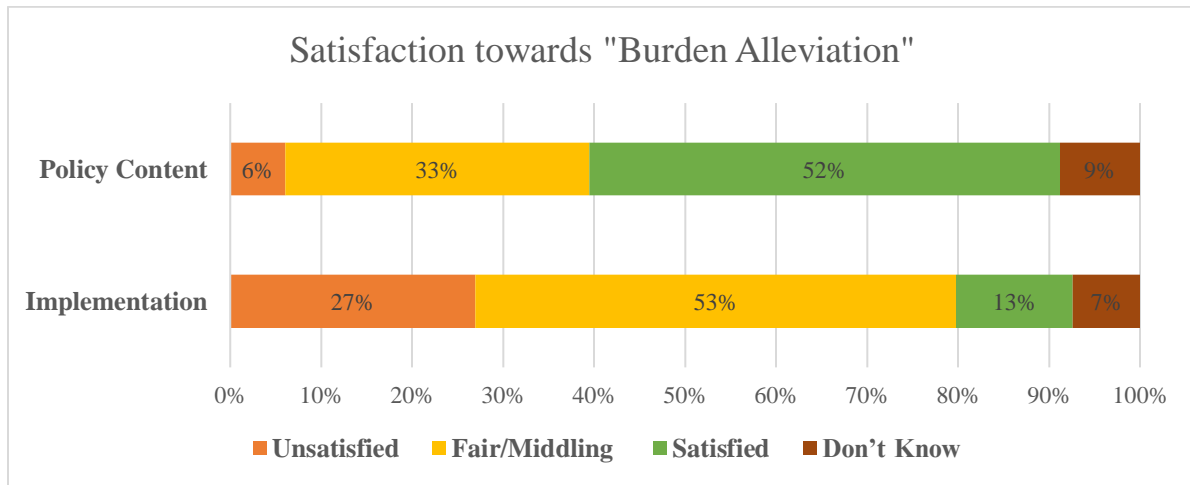
Importantly, most grassroots cadres are happy about the increasing awareness of their grievances at the central level, as 52% feel satisfied with the content of the “Burden Alleviation” policy. However, they are disappointed at its implementation and effectiveness, charging higher-level authorities with only paying lip service to the policy slogans. When polled on the policy’s implementation, the satisfaction rate drops to 13% (see *Figure 6.2*). What has prevented the policy from being enforced? A major reason might be that the policy content lacks feasibility, as it basically asks the higher-ups to impose restrictions on themselves and to empower the grassroots level. Following the decree does nothing for upper-level governments except limit their own power, while shirking brings little if any punishment from the central authorities.<sup>22</sup> In other words, subnational governments have little incentive to enact the policy. Despite sympathy from the center, grassroots bureaucrats do not feel comfortable voicing their grievances and dissent to their superiors. As a party secretary of a street-level office said, “Who wants to be the child pointing out the emperor’s new clothes?” In his view, the effort would not just be futile but also bring political risk, as leaders would criticize subordinates for lacking “political awareness and consciousness” (政治觉悟不高 *zhengzhi juewu bugao*).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Interviews in the field: YZ20210511LSJ, LD20210719WSJ

<sup>23</sup> Interview: LD20210719WSJ

Figure 6.2 Local Cadres' Satisfaction towards Burden Alleviation



A concrete example might help illustrate why the proposed measures of burden reduction fail to work in practical terms. The so-called “regulation on task assignment to grassroots units” (基层工作事项准入制度 *jiceng gongzuo shixiang zhunru zhidu*) instructs upper-level governments to specify a list of legitimate responsibilities and functions of villages and neighborhood resident committees (职责清单 *zhize qingdan*), and whenever higher-level departments plan to assign tasks outside the list to grassroots units, they must seek out approval from the party-state leaders at the same level.<sup>24</sup> However, in practice, grassroots cadres told me neither the list nor the regulation could shield them from surging burdens.<sup>25</sup> It is, more or less, an empty promise. Due to asymmetric power relations, when higher-ups assign targets or pass down

<sup>24</sup> Many localities have proposed similar regulations. See for instance, 广东省民政厅 (Guangdong Provincial Bureau of Civil Affairs): 《广东省村（居）民委员会工作职责事项指导目录》 (The Guiding Catalog of Functions and Responsibilities of Villages and Resident Committees in Guangdong), Jul.12, 2018; 中共湖南省委 (CCP Hunan Committee): 《关于全面加强基层建设的若干意见》 (Opinions on Comprehensively Reinforcing Capacity-building at the Grassroots Level), Jul.13, 2019; 山东济宁 (Jining, Shandong): 《关于实行社区工作事项准入制度的实施意见（试行）》 (Opinions on Implementing the Regulation of Task Assignment to Neighborhoods), Oct.20, 2020; 重庆 (Chongqing): 《基层群众性自治组织依法协助政府工作事项细化清单》 (The List of Government-Assisting Functions of Grassroots Organizations), Mar.9, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Interviews in the field: HK20211217CSJ, LD20210721LSJ

tasks, grassroots units have little bargaining power to reject out-of-list demands. Moreover, the list cannot protect grassroots units from receiving commands issued by governments from two or three levels above.

What is missing in the official remedies is participatory management: democratizing the policy-making and decision-making processes by incorporating grassroots cadres, truly valuing their input, granting them autonomy, and respecting local conditions and needs. Another radical solution is to revolutionize the cadre performance evaluation system by allowing a two-way evaluation (双向考核 *shuangxiang kaohe*) so that grassroots cadres could assess higher-ups and hold their superiors accountable for bureaucratic and formalistic behavior. In this way, downward accountability might be realized. Otherwise, empowering and enabling the grassroots government is simply cheap talk.

Examples like this have made grassroots cadres doubt the actual realization of burden reduction. In the survey, 61% think that the likelihood of *truly* easing the burden on grassroots cadres is low, as opposed to only 13% who believe it is highly possible to reduce grassroots burdens in a real sense. In fact, many cadres understand the responsibilities shouldered by grassroots government and tolerate the heavy workload imposed upon them, but what they request is (a) eliminating the exhausting red tape to leave them with time and energy to complete the meaningful work; and (b) equipping grassroots units with sufficient authority, manpower, and fiscal resources to do their job well. The following comments from cadre respondents are exemplary.

Comment C:

“The political ecosystem falls far behind the current and future demands on grassroots governance. Relieving the burden on grassroots cadres is unnecessary, but what really should be reduced are the parts of formalism and bureaucratism. The normal and

substantive tasks in grassroots governance are understandable, and it is fine for grassroots party cadres to shoulder more responsibilities.”<sup>26</sup>

Comment D:

“As social governance becomes increasingly refined, public demands on the government are also getting higher. It is imperative to bridge ‘the last mile.’ To better serve people and manage society, the workload of the grassroots bureaucracy should not and cannot be reduced. However, the workload, authority, responsibilities, and number of personnel carried by most grassroots units are extremely mismatched. Since grassroots units are closest to the people, they are supposed to work hard and bear great pressure. But if we want grassroots work to be more authentic, effective, and people-oriented, what we need is not slogans about burden alleviation, but to provide grassroots units with personnel, fiscal, and political resources while increasing workload. That’s the real way to reduce the burden.”<sup>27</sup>

In the survey, when asked about which level of government matters the most in burden alleviation, respondents rank the county and district government as the most important, followed by the municipal, provincial, and central governments in descending order (see *Figure 6.3*). This result implies several things. First, local cadres generally agree that the source of the problem is rooted in the upper tiers of the hierarchical system rather than at the bottom. Second, the county/district government is conceived as the crucial player in burden reduction because this level of government is the direct leader of the grassroots bureaucracy and is thus responsible for

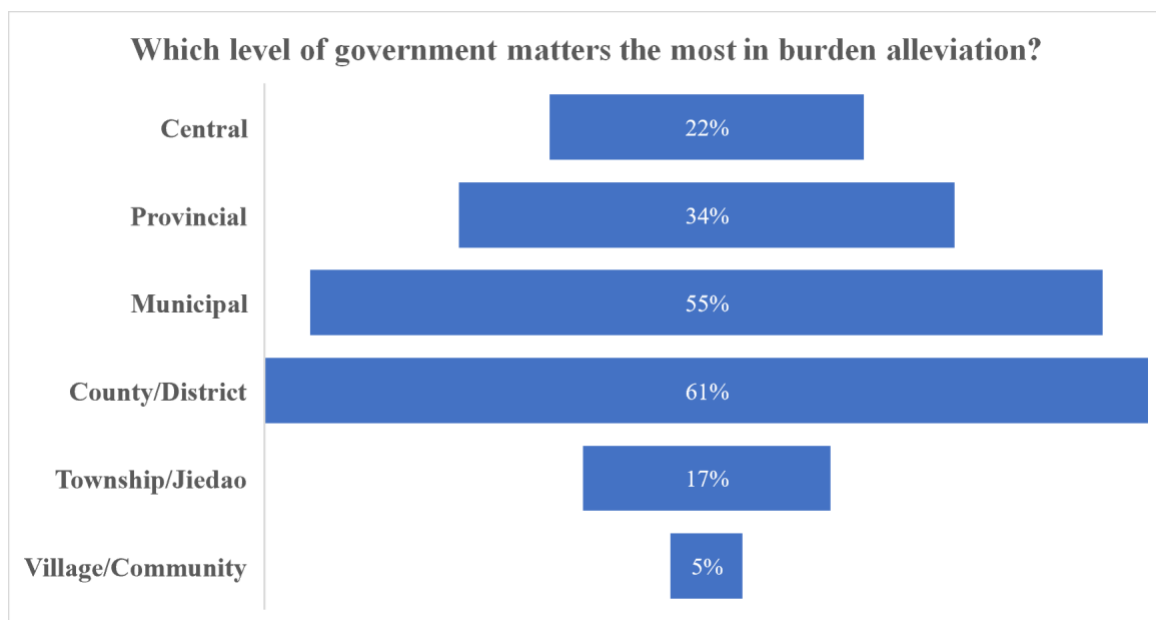
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<sup>26</sup> The original Chinese text: “政治生态还远未达到与目前和未来基层治理需求相适应的程度！基层减负原本并不需要，基层真正的负担本就应该多些，减负是应该减少那些形式主义，官僚主义的那部分，基层治理中正常的负担多一些并不过分，基层党员干部多担当一些也属正常！！” Source: Hanyu Zhao, *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey (CGCS)*, Nov. 2021.

<sup>27</sup> The original Chinese text: “随着社会治理日益精细化，百姓对政府的要求也越来越高，打通最后一公里势在必行。为了更好的服务百姓做好社会治理，基层工作量不会也不应该减少，但现在多数基层承担的工作量与权限职责及人员数量极度不匹配，基层既然离百姓最近，工作可以多干担子可以多压，但想让基层工作更真实更有效更得民心，不用喊口号减负，增加工作量的同时要同步给人给钱给权，那才是实在的减负。” Ibid.

most workload and pressure received by grassroots cadres. Third, as the previous chart presents, grassroots bureaucrats are relatively satisfied with the burden reduction interventions announced by the central and provincial authorities; it is the municipal and county levels that have failed to implement those policies. Moreover, when assigning top-down targets, these two levels tend to double down and add extra burden on grassroots units.

*Figure 6.3 The Role of Different Levels of Government in Burden Alleviation*



*Note: It is a multiple-choice question, therefore the sum is larger than 100%.*

Finally, only 22% of the respondents agree that the central level is crucial for solving the problem, which indicates that the majority have not realized the root cause of grassroots overload lies in the fundamental governing mentality and ruling style of the Chinese party-state. For CCP cadres, attributing the grassroots plight to the central leadership and regime properties is politically incorrect and dangerous. Nevertheless, some did recognize the necessity to shift away from the totalistic governing approach to promote self-governance and social autonomy. One cadre states, “For grassroots governance, I think we should not build an omnipotent government

that controls everything and takes care of everything. It should only focus on what it is supposed to do. Society has its own rules, and our leaders should have a more inclusive and open-minded governing philosophy.”<sup>28</sup> Another commenter reports, “Don’t be a nanny state, and work on improving the awareness and capacity of self-governance.”<sup>29</sup>

The conundrum of grassroots burden reduction resembles the government’s ineffectiveness in easing the stress of students in the educational domain. I remember the official rhetoric of “Burden Alleviation” in the 1990s as a primary school student, and yet, after all these years, the central leadership is still cracking down on the private tutoring sector and ordering teachers to minimize the amount of coursework and exams in the name of lessening students’ pressure.<sup>30</sup> Why has the government’s effort been of little avail? Just as in the case of grassroots governance, the critical structural factors underlying the issue remain unchanged: the scarcity and uneven distribution of quality educational resources, the competitive college entrance examination, and the evaluation of schools according to admission rates. The private education sector has been smashed but demands from students and parents persist and continue to sustain a black market of tutoring. Exams and home assignments have been curtailed but educational inequality persists, and disadvantaged students must struggle even more to stand out in the

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<sup>28</sup> The original Chinese text: “我觉得，基层治理，我们不要搞全能政府，什么都管，什么都包办，而应该做好该做的，社会本来就有自己的潜规则，我们的领导们的执政理念应该更加包容。” Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> The original Chinese text: “不要当保姆，在促进自治意识和自治能力上下功夫。” Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> 中共中央办公厅、国务院办公厅 (General Offices of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council): 《关于进一步减轻义务教育阶段学生作业负担和校外培训负担的意见》 (Opinion on further reducing coursework and extracurricular tutoring of students in compulsory education), 24 July 2021; 教育部 (Ministry of Education): 《关于加强义务教育学校考试管理的通知》 (Notice on strengthening management of exams in compulsory educational institutions), 30 Aug. 2021. For sure, the real rationale behind the crackdown of private education is not student burden alleviation but reasserting the CCP’s ideological control of education and limiting the influence of Western ideas and capitalization of education in China.

competition. Hence, superficial tinkering with the system has had little effect on solving the real, fundamental problem.

As one of my informants in the local government sharply put it, if the examination-oriented educational system remains unaltered, then calls for reducing the burden on students will be empty talk; in the context of strengthening the Communist Party and the Party's control over everything, it is also impossible to achieve a reduction in the burden at the grassroots level.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Interview: GZ20210525PW



## ***Chapter 7***

### ***Conclusion***

#### **The Central Argument and Key Findings**

To understand the origins of bureaucratic overload in grassroots governance, I propose a supply-and-demand framework that focuses on the structural imbalances between state capacity and state ambitions. Bureaucratic overload, I argue, results from a widening gap between the limited, declining governing capacities of the grassroots bureaucracy and the expanding scope and totalistic approach of the central state. On the supply side, the grassroots bureaucracy lacks political, fiscal, and personnel capacity, which prevents bureaucrats from effectively doing their jobs. On the demand side, the authoritarian regime's obsession with absolute security has compelled it to exert comprehensive control over both the masses and state agents. Specifically, in state-society relations, China's central leadership has renewed a totalistic approach, which not only has deepened state intervention into society but also extended state liabilities and increased public expectation of and dependency on the state, thereby overstretching state capacity. In the management of the internal party-state apparatus, the central authority aims to tame its agents via organizational strengthening and bureaucratic formalization. The over-centralization of the power structure has politicized administrative tasks and bureaucratized grassroots governing

units, which has made local cadres more risk-averse, less autonomous, and further detached from their constituencies.

Investigating the overburdened grassroots bureaucracy in China today gives observers the chance to see through the façade of a powerful state and scrutinize the roots of authoritarian rule. The gap between the state's capacity and its ambitions, rather than the strength of the state in absolute terms, is what matters in the end. The state may become overextended, which will undermine the quality of governance it seeks to achieve if its capacity does not meet the breadth and depth of state intervention. I demonstrate these patterns by examining how the state penetrates society in two key policy areas—rural governance and pandemic control—and how the state controls its own agents. Given the high-profile victories declared by Chinese national leaders in rural poverty elimination and COVID-19 management, I show how street-level bureaucrats tell different stories of these successes. The Chinese party-state has deepened and expanded intervention in rural lives, imposing its own modernized vision of the countryside on the rural population, regardless of people's authentic needs and acceptance. Despite the exhaustion of the grassroots workforce, the totalistic approach to the pandemic has revealed the illusion of state omnipotence, particularly during the lockdown of megacities. I then turn from the external control of the masses to the internal control of state agents by investigating various kinds of red tape and formalism within the Chinese bureaucracy. Finally, I show that the official remedies for alleviating the burden on grassroots cadres remain ineffective because of the center's distrust of its local agents and unwillingness to address the structural imbalances in state governance.

## Contributions and Implications

This study deepens our knowledge of how the Chinese party-state operates at the grassroots and enriches our understanding of the organizational logic of the Chinese bureaucratic system. My research engages with and contributes to three distinct areas of social science: state-building and state capacity; bureaucracy and organizational behavior; and authoritarian politics.

### *Leviathan at the Grassroots: Rethinking the Depth of the State*

The state-building literature has thoroughly examined the *breadth* of the state, namely the spatial and territorial reach of the state, but has not paid sufficient attention to the *depth* of the state, or the state penetration into society and people's lives.<sup>1</sup> Joel Migdal's state-in-the-society approach highlights that the relative strength of the state depends on the distribution of social control in a society where the state is embedded.<sup>2</sup> But my emphasis in this research is more on the governance costs of the state's social control. Bureaucratic overload among grassroots governing units brings our attention to the latent costs of state penetration and overreaching. By unpacking the Chinese state and investigating its bureaucratic roots, this study also highlights the uneven distribution of governing capabilities within a hierarchical system. In the Chinese case, governing resources, such as political clout, human capital, and fiscal strength, all concentrate at higher levels of the government and become increasingly scarce down the hierarchy. Therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell, "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin-American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries," *World Development* 21, no. 8 (1993): 1355-69; Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

the under-resourced grassroots bureaucracy has been driven beyond reasonable limits to realize the state's ambition of exerting comprehensive control over its population.

Even though a state is deemed strong and capable in fiscal, coercive, and regulatory terms, if the governing body's ambitions exceed the strength of the state, then state capacity could be overstretched and eventually undermine the actual quality of governance. Samuel Huntington, in his classic work *Political Order in Changing Societies*, argued that if political participation exceeds political institutionalization, a country will experience political decay; only when the pace of political institution-building matches public participation in politics could stability be safeguarded.<sup>3</sup> Following a similar logic, I stress that good governance depends on a balanced relationship between state capacity and the state's ambitions. If the state's governing capabilities are overwhelmed by its governing scope, the outcome may be state overstretch and even governance failure.

The collateral damage inflicted by the Chinese style of pandemic lockdowns indicates the limits of the totalistic state and questions the viability of regime security through overcontrol. Trying to achieve omnipresence and omnipotence is self-defeating for the state. Expanding the governing scope and tightening social control also means increasing the liability of the state and enlarging the gap between state liability and state capacity. As a result, when the overburdened grassroots workforce falls short in addressing people's expectations and demands, public discontent and disappointment rise, ultimately weakening regime stability.

The antidote to a "overstretched Leviathan" requires that rulers overcome their obsession with absolute regime security and discard their ambitions of building an omnipotent state. For

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

state-society relations, rulers should admit the limits of state power and learn to co-govern with civil society and market forces. For internal bureaucratic management, the central leadership should genuinely trust, enable, and empower grassroots bureaucrats through devolution and downward accountability, increasing their governing autonomy and holding them accountable to their own constituencies rather than their superiors. The true solution to bureaucratic overload lies in the democratization of decision/policy-making processes and personnel management.

### ***Become or Beyond Weber? The Chinese Bureaucracy and Red Tape***

Is the bureaucracy in China today moving toward or beyond the legal-rational Weberian model? There is no straightforward answer to this question. But the investigation of bureaucratic operations at the grassroots provides us a valuable opportunity to contemplate the nature and trajectory of the Chinese bureaucracy in comparison with the Weberian ideal type. By tracing the sources of overload in grassroots governance, this study exposes the contradictory forces that are shaping the Chinese bureaucracy. On one hand, higher-level authorities have pushed for bureaucratization and formalization of grassroots governing units by enhancing the “Weberianness” of the street-level bureaucracy. Numerous top-down interventions and requirements put emphasis on greater transparency, procedural legitimacy, rule-bound implementation, standardization, and documentation. Though these changes have compressed the room for the flexibility and informality that some practitioners and scholars deem necessary in grassroots governance, the increased Weberian characteristics have at least theoretically reduced the probability of petty corruption and wrongdoing on the part of street-level bureaucrats.

On the other hand, politicization has triumphed over professionalism. Political discipline and loyalty overshadow and compromise professional autonomy and legal rationality. The supremacy of the Communist Party over the state has intensified the tension and incompatibility

between the Weberian bureaucracy and the Leninist political organization. What is worse, the political environment created by a highly centralized and even personalistic regime tends to amplify problems intrinsic to bureaucracy as an organizational form. For instance, the growing political stakes and personal dependency on the Party Secretary exacerbate the tendency of conformity, rigidity, and a “yes-man” mentality in the bureaucracy. And as I analyzed in the empirical chapters, blame and responsibility avoidance, combined with institutional deficiencies embedded in the authoritarian regime – the lack of bottom-up supervision and downward accountability – have contributed to the excessive red tape in the Chinese bureaucracy. Through examining how local state agents strategize in a Leninist organizational environment, my research sheds light on the interplay between the political regime and the bureaucratic system.

### ***Authoritarian Politics: Control and Motivate Rank-and-File Regime Enablers***

Milan Svolik points out that authoritarian parties serve as an important co-optation mechanism for political elites, as those institutions induce “sunk political investment” by junior officials who pay costs early in their careers with the promise that they will reap the rewards as they are promoted up the chain of command.<sup>4</sup> However, the limitation of “party-based co-optation” lies in the fact that not everyone in the system gets a chance to climb up the ladder of hierarchy. In China, the vast majority of the bureaucratic apparatus is comprised of non-elite cadres in grassroots governments with the possible summit of their career as the head of a township government or the director of a county bureau. China’s political elites are commonly defined as “all cadres at the rank of county magistrate or division chief and above” (县处级

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<sup>4</sup> Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

*xianchui*). According to Yuen Yuen Ang, there are roughly 500,000 political elites nationwide, making up about 1 percent of the entire bureaucracy. Elite cadres are appointees for lateral transfer and upward promotion. The remaining 99 percent of the bureaucracy are what she refers to as “stationary street-level bureaucrats,” civil servants and public employees stationed permanently in one location.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, tens of millions of lower-level and grassroots cadres are important yet often overlooked political actors for regime durability, for they serve as micro-foundations of the party-state apparatus. They are supposed to enable and stabilize the authoritarian regime by implementing policies, providing public services, collecting intelligence, mediating conflicts, and solving the problems of the masses. However, compared with the upper echelons, such as provincial and municipal Party secretaries, governors, and mayors, whose promotion patterns and political selection have received extensive examination, behavioral regularities of grassroots cadres in China have been understudied with a few notable exceptions. Daniel Koss demonstrates the role of rank-and-file CCP members in enhancing regime capacity;<sup>6</sup> Yuen Yuen Ang looks into the salary and supplemental compensation received by street-level bureaucrats;<sup>7</sup> Kevin O’Brien investigates certain groups of disaffected regime insiders: the street police, veterans, and protest de-mobilizers.<sup>8</sup> My research has provided a more comprehensive depiction

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<sup>5</sup> Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, (Cornell University Press, 2016): 106.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Koss, *Where the Party Rules: The Rank and File of China’s Communist State*, (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Ang, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin J. O’Brien, “China’s Disaffected Insiders,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no.3 (2017): 5-13.

of grassroots bureaucrats by documenting and analyzing their daily work situation, allocation of time, perceptions of their jobs, sources of stress and frustration, and governing resources.

Moreover, the investigation of bureaucratic overload reveals the challenging trade-off faced by authoritarian rulers between effectively controlling and motivating grassroots regime enablers. Intensive monitoring, top-down pressure, and the threat of punishment alienate local cadres rather than boost their morale. The incentive scheme is ineffective, but difficult to restructure. Material incentives, both legitimate ones and those in the grey zone, have been substantially curtailed during the anti-corruption campaign. Political motivation has little positive effect on grassroots cadres who usually face a very bleak prospect of promotion. Ideological commitment has largely faded away despite the official effort to renew it. And negative incentives have proved to have chilling effects and intensify the blame game within the bureaucracy.<sup>9</sup> Designing an effective and sustainable incentive structure to motivate grassroots agents remains a thorny issue for regime leaders.

This study also unravels the more nuanced dynamics of authoritarian rule by unpacking the governing body to scrutinize strategic interactions between the central leadership and local bureaucrats. Through the centralization of power and resources and decentralization of accountability, regime leaders can secure their positions by signaling benevolence to the public, harvesting policy dividends, and maintaining popular support while deflecting potential risk and blame to lower levels and grassroots implementers when things go wrong. Therefore, the structural mismatch between authority and responsibility in grassroots governance can be viewed

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<sup>9</sup> Erik Wang, "Frightened Mandarins: The Adverse Effects of Fighting Corruption on Local Bureaucracy," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019; Christopher Hood, *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy and Self-Preservation in Government*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).



as a legitimization strategy deliberately orchestrated by the central leadership, sacrificing the interests of bureaucrats at the bottom of the hierarchy. However, under the growing risk of being scapegoated by superiors and top-down exploitation, grassroots state agents counteract by turning to red tape and formalities as a self-preserving strategy and utilizing deception and falsification as passive resistance against unreasonable demands. Grassroots cadres' feelings of being mistreated and exploited might lower their organizational commitment, which in turn could increase higher-ups' distrust of the subordinates and lead to further tightening of control and more restrictive measures. As this pattern of interaction continues, the entire bureaucratic system may suffer from an increasingly severe trust deficit and greater internal friction, eroding governance efficiency and regime capacity in the long run.

## **Limitations and Future Expansion**

One of the limitations of the study is the imperfect measurement of the workload, burden, and stress of street-level bureaucrats. My measurement largely relies on self-reported subjective experience rather than objective, comparable, and quantifiable indicators. Another limitation is the snowball sampling method used in the survey of the Chinese local bureaucracy. This method runs the risk of network/community bias, meaning I have only accessed certain subgroups of local and grassroots cadres.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the representativeness and measurement precision of the survey may be negatively affected.

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<sup>10</sup> The risk of self-selection bias is also unavoidable here, for local cadres who were more burdened and concerned about grassroots governance might be more likely to take the survey.

Although some objective measures such as average length of work and frequency of overtime were included in the survey, curious readers might wonder how exactly the Chinese grassroots bureaucracy compares to their counterparts in other countries. While situating China in a broader comparative perspective is certainly worthy of pursuit in the next step, the modest goal in this study is not to demonstrate that Chinese street-level bureaucrats have one of the toughest public sector jobs in the world. Rather, the aim is to highlight the increased difficulty of grassroots-level work and the greater adversity faced by grassroots cadres compared to their superiors at higher levels within the Chinese context.

Another limitation of this study is the inadequate discussion and theorization of grassroots bureaucrats' coping behavior or "counterstrategies" against overload situations. While shielding themselves behind formalities and adopting deceptive tactics such as fabricating materials and numbers are common coping mechanisms I have observed, what other strategies might local cadres use to address supply-and-demand imbalances? Would they be more likely to engage in selective implementation, and if so, what do they prioritize? Additionally, why do some officials demonstrate bureaucratic slack and inaction while others overcomply or overperform, especially in a more politicized working environment with higher risk and intensified accountability? Is the difference in behavior driven by the incentives bureaucrats face in different positions or career stages? Finally, what is the impact of different coping strategies on substantive governance outcomes? And which threaten regime resilience more? These important questions require further in-depth field research to answer.

Looking to the future, my dissertation research can be expanded from several aspects.

Though this project focuses on temporal variation in grassroots governance in China and examines structural changes under Xi's leadership that have given rise to bureaucratic overload,

it has not been sufficiently attentive to variations at the individual level, as the street-level bureaucracy is not monolithic. The workload is unevenly distributed among grassroots cadres, and some are more burdened than others. How do workload, stress, motivation, and coping behavior of grassroots cadres vary across age, ranks, positions, different types, and other personal attributes? What are the key factors explaining individual variations? Extended participant observation and ethnographic study of grassroots governing units, supplemented by fine-grained analysis of more comprehensive survey data, can help to tackle these questions.

Empirical evidence shows that grassroots overload is a national phenomenon and subnational variation, though it might exist, is not salient in this case. Street-level bureaucrats in coastal and more developed regions with greater fiscal strength are certainly better paid, but it does not mean they are less pressured by the totalistic state than their colleagues in interior regions. Nevertheless, future research should explore more spatial differences in grassroots governance, as some localities with more inclusive governmentality might be more likely to outsource some governance burdens to societal and market actors than other places. In addition, the severity of red tape, or the extent of formalism might vary across different policy areas and different clusters of the bureaucracy. Investigation of possible variations could deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of red tape production.

It would also be worthwhile to further investigate the interplay between the bureaucratic system and the political regime. Whereas my dissertation focuses on contemporary China, in future work I want to bring in historical and comparative perspectives to analyze how bureaucratic pathologies have evolved under Communist rule. In the chapter on official remedies, I touched upon the puzzle of why some problems, such as “bureaucratism” and “formalism,” have recurred and endured despite the periodic battles waged against them by

leaders from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. China is not alone in terms of persistent “bureaupathology.” Soviet authorities occasionally launched ad hoc attacks against the government’s growing inefficiency and alienation as a result of the mounting paperwork.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, for the Cuban Communist leadership, the war on bureaucracy to reduce red tape and streamline the workforce never seemed to achieve victory.<sup>12</sup> The similarity of experiences across Communist states begs the question of how the institutional environment of a single-party regime interacts with the issues inherent in bureaucracy as an organizational form: What are the fundamental challenges for single-party political oversight of the bureaucracy? A comparative study of how local bureaucracies operate under different political regime types can shed light on the ways in which political institutions amplify or diminish problems of bureaucratic governance. I believe this research agenda will facilitate a meaningful dialogue between the fields of political regimes and bureaucratic politics.

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<sup>11</sup> Marc Holzer et. al., *Red Tape from Red Square: Bureaucratic Commentary in Soviet Graphic Satirical Art*, (Newark: School of Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers University, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> “Cuban Bureaucracy Assailed by Castro,” *the New York Times*, Feb.21, 1967; “Cuban Red Tape Tops Books,” *the New York Times*, May 3, 1967; “Cuban Communist Party is Moving to Slash Its Bureaucracy by Half,” *the New York Times*, Oct 7, 1990.

## *Appendix*

### *The Chinese Grassroots Cadres Survey*

To have a better sense of the overall circumstances of the grassroots bureaucracy in China, I conducted a survey about Chinese local officials and grassroots governance. The questionnaire is structured in five modules, including 63 questions in total. The first part collects information about personal attributes from cadre respondents. The second part gauges grassroots overburden by measuring cadres' workload, job stress, and time allocation, among other things. The third part explores factors that might contribute to overload in grassroots governance. Part four assesses the consequences of bureaucratic overload at both individual and collective levels. And the last part evaluates the effectiveness of the official measures of "burden alleviation." Before dissemination, the questionnaire was pretested by a small group of local cadres and then carefully revised based on their feedback to minimize misunderstandings and maximize the response rate.

The survey was implemented in November 2021, using the snowball sampling method, namely disseminating the online anonymous questionnaires via WeChat, the largest and most prevalent instant messaging app in China. Though random sampling fits a general population, snowball sampling is deemed appropriate and efficient in reaching a target population, Chinese local bureaucrats in the case. To circumvent the powerful Chinese apparatus of Internet censorship and to secure data collection, I use the US-based professional survey platform *Qualtrics* for the research. In total, I have collected 479 valid responses from local cadres at

different levels of government across China. To ensure anonymity I did not ask respondents to reveal their location, but the mapping of the respondents' IP addresses (automatically recorded by the platform) indicates that the sample has some degree of national representativeness. The sample contains substantial numbers of observations in both coastal and inland, and northern and southern regions of China (see *Figure 7.1*).

*Figure 7.1 The Geographic Distribution of the Responses*



*Table 7.1* summarizes the information about the personal covariates of the survey respondents.

Table 7.1 Summary Statistics of the Respondents' Attributes

Attributes	Categories	(%)
Gender	Male	58.9
	Female	41.1
Age	20-30	29.8
	31-40	36.5
	41-50	27.1
	>50	6.7
CCP Membership	Yes	84.4
Education	High School or below	4.0
	College	65.8
	Graduate School	30.3
Work Unit	Village/Neighborhood	10.6
	Township/Street-level office	47.3
	County/District	28.1
	Municipal and above	12.3
	Work Team	1.7
Rank	Village/Neighborhood Cadre	10.5
	Clerk ( <i>keyuan</i> )	38.8
	Deputy-Section Level ( <i>fuke</i> )	23.1
	Section Level ( <i>zhengke</i> )	13.9
	Deputy-Division Level ( <i>fuchu</i> )	5.2
	Division Level ( <i>zhengchu</i> ) and above	8.5
Job Type	Xingzheng Bian (civil servant)	65.4
	Shiye Bian	20.5
	Without Bianzhi ( <i>bianwai</i> )	14.1
Position	Leadership	35.9
	Rank-and-File	64.1

*Table 7.1 Summary Statistics of the Respondents' Attributes (Continued)*

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Grassroots Working Experience	Less than 3 yrs	25.3
	4-6 yrs	21.1
	7-10 yrs	16.9
	More than 10 yrs	36.6
Income (yuan/month)	<2000	1.3
	2000-4000	25.9
	4000-6000	31.2
	6000-8000	12.6
	8000-10000	7.9
	> 10000	21.1

*Table 7.2 Length of Work and Overtime of Local Cadres*

<b>Hours worked per Day</b>	<b>8 hrs and less</b>	<b>9-10 hrs</b>	<b>11-13 hrs</b>	<b>More than 13 hrs</b>	
<i>% of Respondents</i>	25%	43%	23%	9%	
<b>Overtime per Week</b>	<b>0 day</b>	<b>1-2 days</b>	<b>3-4 days</b>	<b>5-6 days</b>	<b>7 days</b>
<i>% of Respondents</i>	7%	36%	29%	17%	10%



### **Complementary Results from the Regression Analysis:**

Key findings are summarized as follows, and the detailed regression results are presented in the tables in the appendix.

1. Burnout, self-efficacy (or the sense of achievement), and job satisfaction are all significant predictors of turnover intention. Specifically, those who have a higher level of burnout and lower levels of self-efficacy at work and job satisfaction are more likely to have the intention to leave the job (see Model 1 in Table A).
2. Local cadres' perceived level of red tape, reversely measured by the value and necessity of meetings, forms, and documentation, is significantly correlated with their valuation of jobs. Those who perceive a higher level of red tape (namely, a larger proportion of meetings and forms with no value and necessity) are more likely to feel burned out, have a lower level of self-efficacy, and have greater turnover intention. In other words, the result empirically demonstrates that red tape tends to dissolve the sense of meaning, purpose, and accomplishment for public service positions at the grassroots (see Model 3 in Table A and Models 1, 2, 3, 5 in Table B).
3. Local cadres' opinion about the supervision and appraisal system, the time pressure they feel at work, and the prevalence of the mismatch between authority and accountability also affect their turnover intention. Those who are more likely to consider quitting the job are the officials who believe that (1) the inspections and performance evaluations are too frequent; (2) the mismatch between authority and accountability is more epidemic in grassroots governance; and (3) the greater time constraint grassroots units must bear at work (see Models 4 and 5 in Table A).

4. For grassroots overload, the results presented in Table C can help us identify the significant predictors of the general grassroots burden assessed by the survey takers based on their own experience at work: (a) the prevalence of the mismatch between authority and accountability in grassroots governance, (b) the harshness of the accountability system, (c) the frequency of inspections and evaluations, (d) the insufficiency of the personnel capacity of grassroots work units, and (e) the degree of time constraint. At least based on the subjective assessment by local cadres, we can assert that the more prevalent the authority-accountability imbalance, the harsher the punishment system, the more frequent the inspections, the weaker the personnel capacity, and the bigger the time pressure, the heavier the burden felt by the grassroots bureaucracy in general (see Models 3 and 4 in Table C).
5. As for workload and job stress at the individual level, the situation is very similar to the general grassroots burden. Though the frequency of inspections becomes insignificant, the prevalence of the bureaucratic pathologies (i.e., formalism and bureaucratism) is significantly and positively associated with the stress level of local cadres (see Models 1 and 2 in Table C).

**Table A: Predictors of Turnover Intention (*Ordered Logit Models*)**

<b>DV: Turnover Intention</b>					
<b>IVs:</b>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Burnout</b>	0.5748 *** (0.1135)		0.8665 *** (0.1081)	0.7946 *** (0.1111)	
<b>Self-Efficacy</b>	-0.4294 ** (0.1354)				
<b>Job Satisfaction</b>	-1.0673*** (0.1680)				
<b>Workload</b>		0.0981 (0.1961)			
<b>Stress</b>		0.4668 ** (0.1820)			
<b>Overtime</b>		0.1149 (0.1041)			
<b>Work Length</b>		0.0433 (0.1098)			
<b>Red Tape 1<sup>1</sup></b> (Meetings)			-0.3441 ** (0.1262)		
<b>Red Tape 2</b> (Paperwork)			-0.3027 * (0.1388)		
<b>Red Tape 3</b> (Documentation)			-0.1309 (0.1063)		
<b>Fiscal Capacity</b>				-0.3957 (0.2496)	
<b>Personnel Capacity</b>				-0.2603 (0.2909)	
<b>Autonomy</b>				-0.1479 (0.1578)	-0.1156 (0.1559)
<b>Accountability</b>				-0.2892 (0.1662)	-0.2808 (0.1629)
<b>Inspection</b>				0.2954 (0.1995)	0.4467 * (0.1922)
<b>Time Pressure<sup>2</sup></b>				-0.2753 (0.1610)	-0.4714 ** (0.1581)
<b>Mismatch</b>				0.3633 * (0.1848)	0.5591 ** (0.1835)

<sup>1</sup> Note the perceived level of red tape (the three indicators: the utility of meetings, paperwork, and documentation) is coded reversely in the survey data, namely bigger score means less severity of red tape.

<sup>2</sup> Note time pressure is coded reversely in the survey data, namely bigger score represents smaller time pressure in the five-point scale.

**Table A: Predictors of Turnover Intention (Continued)**

Covariates	√	√	√	√	√
Observations	402	401	402	400	401
R <sup>2</sup>	0.452	0.143	0.338	0.312	0.187
Likelihood Ratio (LR chi <sup>2</sup> )	225.75	58.46	156.25	141.08	78.49

Note:  $p$ -value < 0.05 \*  $p$  < 0.01 \*\*  $p$  < 0.001 \*\*\*

Covariates, namely individual attributes, include gender, age, CCP membership, administrative level of one's work unit, leadership position, rank, job type, education, grassroots-level work experience, and income.

Standard Deviations (S.E.) are in parentheses under each coefficient.

**Table B: Predictors of Burnout and Self-Efficacy (Ordered Logit Models)**

DV: Burnout					DV: Self-Efficacy	
IVs:	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Workload	0.1204 (0.2022)	0.0070 (0.1772)	0.6709 *** (0.1062)		0.0395 (0.1891)	0.0404 (0.1925)
Stress	0.8264 *** (0.1911)	0.6999 *** (0.1663)		0.6816 *** (0.1476)	-0.3085 * (0.1722)	-0.1504 (0.1739)
Overtime	0.0482 (0.1075)	0.0792 (0.0922)	0.0867 (0.1062)			
Work Length	0.0199 (0.1106)	0.0196 (0.1010)	0.1091 (0.1088)			
Red Tape 1	-0.4467 *** (0.1294)	-0.4372 *** (0.1124)	-0.3952 ** (0.1283)		0.4810 *** (0.1319)	
Red Tape 2	-0.1084 (0.1436)	-0.1778 (0.1242)	-0.1952 (0.1414)		0.3106 * (0.1419)	
Red Tape 3	-0.0307 (0.1106)	-0.0101 (0.0995)	0.0040 (0.1083)		0.1296 (0.1126)	
Fiscal Capacity				-0.3289 (0.2527)		
Personnel Capacity				-0.2912 (0.3104)		
Autonomy				0.1501 (0.1618)		0.0523 (0.1643)
Accountability				-0.1177 (0.1730)		0.1404 (0.1662)
Inspection				0.4419 * (0.2035)		-0.1905 (0.1947)
Time Pressure				-0.5117 ** (0.1639)		0.4794 ** (0.1643)
Mismatch				0.1589 (0.1888)		-0.3310 (0.1809)

**Table B: Predictors of Burnout and Self-Efficacy (Continued)**

Covariates	√	X	√	√	√	√
Observations	401	474	401	400	402	401
R <sup>2</sup>	0.257	0.184	0.217	0.264	0.252	0.178
Likelihood Ratio (LR chi <sup>2</sup> )	110.81	89.61	91.19	113.96	108.62	73.27

Note:  $p$ -value < 0.05 \*  $p$  < 0.01 \*\*  $p$  < 0.001 \*\*\*

**Table C: Predictors of Individual Stress, Workload, and General Grassroots Burden (Ordered Logit Models)**

DV:	Job Stress (Individual)	Workload (Individual)	Grassroots Burden (General)	
IVs:	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Autonomy	0.0767 (0.1728)	0.2558 (0.1805)	0.0001 (0.1922)	-0.0998 (0.1659)
Fiscal Capacity	-0.4249 (0.2791)	-0.0566 (0.2944)	-0.0054 (0.2990)	-0.0262 (0.2492)
Personnel Capacity	-0.7417 * (0.3245)	-1.1343 *** (0.3353)	-0.7221 * (0.3503)	-0.7440 * (0.3018)
Accountability	0.3614 * (0.1803)	0.6797 *** (0.1905)	0.3998 * (0.1939)	0.5442 *** (0.1634)
Inspection	0.2563 (0.2182)	-0.0486 (0.2294)	0.6431 ** (0.2325)	0.6440 *** (0.1891)
Time Pressure	-0.5546 ** (0.1806)	-0.5152 ** (0.1888)	-0.7576 *** (0.1983)	-0.4857 ** (0.1626)
Mismatch	0.3715 (0.2018)	0.4777 * (0.2097)	0.8076 *** (0.2231)	0.7919 *** (0.1868)
Top-Down Trust	0.1002 (0.1360)	0.2933 * (0.1411)	-0.0743 (0.1540)	-0.1389 (0.1334)
State Control	-0.0020 (0.1232)	-0.1195 (0.1297)	0.0455 (0.1387)	0.0213 (0.1207)
Public Participation	0.0084 (0.1303)	-0.0194 (0.1373)	-0.0289 (0.1485)	0.0671 (0.1296)
Formalism	0.2476 * (0.1217)	0.1742 (0.1267)	0.2746 * (0.1331)	0.1809 (0.1139)
Covariates	√	√	√	X
Observations	399	399	399	473
R <sup>2</sup>	0.376	0.350	0.481	0.437
Model Likelihood Ratio (LR chi <sup>2</sup> )	159.62	144.13	221.90	224.27

Note:  $p$ -value < 0.05 \*  $p$  < 0.01 \*\*  $p$  < 0.001 \*\*\*

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