

Strategic Modelling: “Building a New Socialist Countryside” in Three Chinese Counties*

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Abstract

Models, pilots and experiments are considered distinctive features of the Chinese policy process. However, empirical studies on local modelling practices are rare. This article analyses the ways in which three rural counties in three different provinces engage in strategies of modelling and piloting to implement the central government’s “Building a New Socialist Countryside” (*shehuizhuyi xinnongcun jianshe*) programme. It explains how county and township governments apply these strategies and to what effect. It also highlights the scope and limitations of local models and pilots as useful mechanisms for spurring national development. The authors plead for a fresh look at local modelling practices, arguing that these can tell us much about the realities of governance in rural China today.

Keywords: Building a New Socialist Countryside; model villages; modelling strategies; local policy implementation; local governance; local agency; rural China

The Chinese countryside has always been subject to extensive campaigning, experimenting and modelling. The larger experimentation projects and piloting in the run-up to the rural tax-for-fee reform (RTFR), new rural cooperative medical insurance and new modes of land rights management (for example, *tudi liuzhuan* 土地流转) have been extensively investigated. However, perhaps owing to the well-founded scepticism that is shown towards models of any kind in the Chinese countryside,¹ the everyday, small-scale piloting and modelling practices that comprise distinctive local government tasks in rural China have not, up to now, drawn much scholarly attention.

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¹ See, e.g., Bennett 1976; Brown 2006; Ross 1987; O’Brien and Li 1999a.

It is only recently that campaigning, models and policy experimentation have once more become the focus of Western-language research on the Chinese political system in general,² and rural China in particular.³ Most of these studies argue that “experimentation” and/or “managed campaigns” could be viewed as innovative and highly effective features of the Chinese policy process.⁴ However, this perspective clashes with other scholarship on rural governance, which finds that local policy implementation and, more specifically, experimentation and modelling are ineffective at best, and systemically dysfunctional at worst.⁵ This article looks at the issue from a different angle and argues that taking models and modelling practices seriously can tell us much about the operating modes of local governance in contemporary rural China.⁶ By drawing on empirical research conducted in three rural counties located in Jiangxi, Shaanxi and Zhejiang provinces, this study intends to complement, if not to qualify, the above cited macro-level assessments of modelling and experimentation as genuinely innovative features of the Chinese policy process which may strengthen overall governance capacity and system adaptiveness. In this context, we find that piloting and modelling are part and parcel of local development strategies that must respond to the requirements of upper levels to do just that. At the same time, they serve as important tools for local cadres to safeguard their autonomy in the administrative hierarchy, ensure positive evaluations by upper levels and, arguably, attain a degree of implementation effectiveness that shields them from criticism and open resistance offered by villagers.⁷ Modelling in the Chinese policy process, therefore, does not necessarily mean the identification of innovation and best practices to be integrated in the system, bottom-up, by systematic feedback processes; it foremost includes the enforcement of effective local policy implementation by upper levels and, we further argue, a pragmatic strategy of resource allocation under conditions of financial scarcity.

Our study focuses on modelling in the context of the central state’s latest rural policy initiative for “Building a New Socialist Countryside” (*shehuizhuyi xinnongcun jianshe* 社会主义新农村建设, hereafter XNCJS). Officially promulgated

2 See, e.g., Heilmann 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011; Wang Shaoguang 2009.

3 See, e.g., Thøgersen 2011.

4 See especially Heilmann 2011 and Perry 2011.

5 See, e.g., Cai 2004; Chen 2004; Donaldson 2009; Hillman 2010; Smith 2009, 2010; Zhou 2010; Le Mons Walker 2006.

6 In Chinese, there are various terms that can be translated as “model,” such as *shifan*, *shidian*, *mofan* and *yangban*. These terms are basically used interchangeably but may bear different meanings in different localities, or at different levels of government. Based on our field experience, we distinguish between test, pilot or experimental sites (*shidian*), demonstration villages (*shifancun*) and emulation villages (*yangbancun*, *mofancun*). We further distinguish between “modelling” as a specific strategy of local policy implementation, and “models” as showcases of best practice solutions.

7 By effectiveness, we mean 1) that cadres take local development blueprints seriously, and 2) that policy implementation creates win-win situations for all parties concerned: county and township cadres, upper government levels and villagers. Hence, effective policy implementation is not measured against “objective” benchmarks of what would be the best (or most efficient) solutions for the Chinese countryside. See Schubert and Ahlers 2012.

in the 11th Five-Year Plan in 2006,⁸ XNCJS aims to emulate the rural development and transformation showcased, for example, in South Korea and Taiwan. State policies during recent decades have been merged into a new policy framework, a “mission” even, to spur rural development. Annually increasing transfer funds stemming from central state coffers have been channelled to local governments in order to initiate agricultural modernization (linked to ecological sustainability), strengthen the provision of public goods (most notably, social welfare and basic education), relocate peasants to new villages or urban neighbourhoods, expand vocational training and create new job opportunities.⁹ As the centre’s XNCJS guidelines are unspecific, the programme has to be adapted for local implementation. Theoretically, each level of government must come up with its own XNCJS strategy and coordinate the implementation of projects across local government bureaucracies. This means that while the centre defines the general parameters of XNCJS implementation, considerable leeway is allowed for local adaptation, experimentation and policy innovation, most notably at county level and below. County governments play a crucial role in adapting XNCJS to fit local circumstances and in finalizing the implementation of the different policy measures. One specific task in this context is the definition, selection and maintenance of policy pilots, experimentation sites and model villages.

Modelling and Local Agency in XNCJS Implementation

Field sites and methodology

Data for this article were gathered during consecutive field trips in the summers of 2008–2011, comprising three visits to Qingyuan county 庆元县 in Zhejiang province (2008–2011), two visits to Mizhi county 米脂县 in Shaanxi province (2008 and 2009), and one longer trip to Dingnan county 定南县 in Jiangxi province (2010). Whereas Mizhi figures as a national poverty county (*guojia pinkun xian* 国家贫困县), Qingyuan and Dingnan are moderately developed. Although this results in different compositions of XNCJS funding and organization, XNCJS is highly important in all three counties for the promotion of (rural) development within their jurisdictions. In each year, we conducted semi-standardized interviews with numerous local officials at city/prefectural, county, township and village level, asking them questions on their general knowledge and understanding of XNCJS, the process of XNCJS implementation within their respective jurisdictions, and the overall financial conditions and internal evaluation of XNCJS

8 XNCJS has been officially defined as five overarching objectives summarized in 20 characters (*ershi zi mubiao*) that are meant to guide the formulation of specific project initiatives: advanced production (*shengchan fazhan*), rich livelihood (*shenghuo kuanyu*), civilized rural lifestyle (*xiangfeng wenming*), clean and tidy villages (*cunrong zhengjie*), and democratic management (*guanli minzhu*). For the official policy outline, see State Council 2006. See also Ahlers and Schubert 2009. Among the myriad Chinese publications dealing with XNCJS, see, e.g., Ju, Li and Wang 2006; Pan and He 2006; Qi, Cui and Zhao 2008.

9 See Ahlers and Schubert 2009.

projects. We conducted 141 interviews with local officials, villagers and academics, collected many official (and often internal) documents, such as working reports by government and Party units, statistics, evaluation guidelines, and screened them for references to modelling and experimentation strategies in the context of XNCJS.

XNCJS Piloting and Modelling in Practice

XNCJS was found to be of considerable importance in all three localities. The organizational setting of XNCJS differed in each county. Although they had all established a XNCJS leadership small group (*xinnongcun jianshe lingdao xiaozu* 新农村建设领导小组), the operational core of XNCJS implementation below this ad hoc body varied considerably, from an omnipotent XNCJS bureau under the department of rural work (*nonggongbu* 农工部), a Party organ in Dingnan, to a much more loosely organized mode of departmental cooperation in Qingyuan.¹⁰

Terminology, Concepts and Strategies of Piloting and Modelling XNCJS in Three Counties

Following the usual trajectory of policymaking in the PRC, XNCJS programmes become more and more specific the further down in the governmental hierarchy that they are issued. This also holds true for the instructions and requirements for piloting and modelling. However, we did not find a uniform mode conceptualizing these practices in our three cases, but rather two different grand schemes.

In the case of Mizhi, promoting model villages is still the dominant strategy for XNCJS implementation. Higher up, Shaanxi province and Yulin 榆林 city strongly support the promotion of pilots and models in their respective XNCJS strategies, and interviewees at both levels confirmed that they constitute the focal points of rural development. This also applies to Mizhi county, where a leading cadre of the county's department of rural work described the establishing of model villages as "the essence of XNCJS."¹¹ On our first visit to Mizhi back in 2008, it was impossible for us to avoid being driven to Huihuang village¹² which enjoys province-wide fame as a showcase for successful rural development. A proud township Party secretary, whose sphere of administrative jurisdiction included Huihuang, recounted the history of the village while showing us the neatly laid out date plantations and reforested terraces stretching around the place, the refurbished houses, solid village roads and, last but certainly not least, the cultural centre of Huihuang with its own small library and museum. Huihuang was described to us as the embodiment of Mizhi's XNCJS spirit, a model that would lead and inspire the other villages in their efforts to implement

10 As this is only marginally important for the present topic, we will not go into further detail here. More information, however, can be found in Ahlers and Schubert 2009.

11 Interview with a leading cadre of the county-level department of rural work, Mizhi county, August 2009.

12 This is a pseudonym.

the “20 character objective” passed down from the centre. The county Party secretary later “encouraged” us to leave aside the poor townships and villages in the county and focus our research solely on Huihuang village, because it showed the way that Mizhi county was going to go.¹³ The promotion of model villages has been much more prominent in Mizhi than in the other two counties we visited.

Mizhi started with 17 county-level XNCJS model villages in 2006. Their total number increased to 30 in 2009. These villages received 50,000 yuan per year. A number of city-level “demonstration” or “model” villages partially overlapped with those that already enjoyed model status at county level. Of the 168 *shifancun* 示范村 (demonstration villages) that Yulin city supported at the time of our visits, 16 were located in Mizhi county.¹⁴ Each of these villages received 500,000 yuan per year. The higher the administrative level that the “model village” belongs to, the higher the subsidies. This means that in Mizhi, city-level demonstration villages receive about 450,000 yuan more than normal villages.¹⁵ Under a programme called “one red flag (five stars) and ten flowers” (*yi mian hongqi shiduohua* 一面红旗十朵花, which was later changed to *yi mian hongqi wuxing shiduohua* 一面红旗五星十朵花), Mizhi set up a special modelling scheme according to which one model village would serve as a blueprint for more model villages. However, these “premium” model villages were the result of substantial comparative advantages pertaining to geographic conditions that had enabled them, over a long period of time, to develop at a faster pace than the other villages in the area (such as Huihuang). Most of them, therefore, existed long before XNCJS came into being and are now, complemented by some new measures introduced under the umbrella of XNCJS, propagated by local officials as prime examples of “new socialist villages.”

In interviews as well as in official documents, the term *shidiancun* 试点村 is somewhat ambiguously merged with the term *shifan* 示范 when used to refer to model villages, but *shidian* can also refer to the implementation of “new” XNCJS projects within a village and thus carries a more limited meaning than *shifancun*. At the time of our last visit in 2009, specific XNCJS *shidian* projects comprised 106 villages out of a total number of 396 villages in Mizhi. As a first step, only 30 *shidiancun* were selected for these projects. Depending on the results, the measures were then extended to 76 other villages later on. Local officials explained that the usual life-span of a *shidian* is three to five years. *Shidian* in

13 Interview with the Party secretary of Mizhi county, September 2008. However, he was not opposed to our travelling to those other places which were indeed much less developed than Huihuang. In government documents from Yulin City to Mizhi county, we found a whole range of terms for pilot and model villages: *shidian*, *shifan*, *yangban* and *mofan -cun*. Although these documents suggested a fairly complex system, cadres at both levels had some difficulty in explaining the different contexts of this terminology.

14 Yulin city runs a scheme called “ten model villages, one hundred demonstration villages, one thousand advanced villages” (*shicun yangban, baicun shifan, qiancun tuijin*). While each county is required to have one *yangbancun* (in Mizhi county, this is Huihuang village), the number of *shifancun* (or *shidiancun* respectively, see below) is more flexible and depends on local conditions.

15 In addition, city and county governments – depending on their budgetary conditions – can decide on additional subsidies for “demonstration villages” (see below). Interview with a leading cadre of the city-level department of rural work, Yulin city, September 2008.

this sense pertains to a pilot that experiments by carrying out specific development projects within a village, although this usage was often blurred by equating the term *shidian* with *shifan*, as mentioned above. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the two cases and determine the precise numerical relation between models and pilots in Mizhi. However, the crucial fact is that, in Mizhi, XNCJS is primarily seen as an effort to create an increasing number of template or model villages, and every new measure that is launched offers privileges to those villages that are already on the road towards achieving this status.

Qingyuan and Dingnan follow a different trajectory. Although they also employ modelling strategies, these are clearly not the focal points of overall XNCJS implementation. Officially, Zhejiang province had begun to abolish the practice of establishing model villages in 2008. This means that the *yangban-cun* 样板村 or *mofancun* 模范村 categories have vanished from official usage. However, the term *shifancun* still appears here and there in city and county-level documents, mostly with regard to villages that figure as models with respect to specific policies or projects. In each case, we only identified the existence of “key-point villages” (*zhongdiancun* 重点村)¹⁶ which receive special funding and incentive structures because they are classified as disproportionately poor;¹⁷ however, these measures run under specific poverty alleviation schemes and must therefore be distinguished from XNCJS-related projects. In fact, the main XNCJS modelling in both counties is based on what we would call a project-based strategy according to which specific projects (*xiangmu* 项目) are spread over a couple of villages to spur homogeneous spatial development.

On the basis of this general approach, Dingnan county features a project-site (*dian* 点) strategy that differs significantly from the strategy of establishing model villages as in the Mizhi case. In Dingnan, a project is linked to as many sites as possible, conditioned by the amount of distributable money and villagers’ support. One site can apply for as many projects as are laid out in the village development plan and are affordable through the matching funds allocated among the relevant segment of the population. A *dian* usually comprises a natural village (*ziran cun* 自然村), or one or more village small groups (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组), that is, at least 30 households. According to Jiangxi province guidelines, each selected *dian* receives the fixed amount of 160,000 yuan for XNCJS projects.¹⁸

16 Interestingly enough, in Mizhi, the term “keypoint village” was also used by department of health insurance officials with respect to the implementation of the new cooperative health insurance system. However, it was not part of the official XNCJS terminology or strategy in the county.

17 At least in Zhejiang province, the official category of designated poor villages, townships or counties has been abolished. However, 222 out of a total of 345 villages in Qingyuan county had received extra funding by the time of our visit in 2008 – a programme that was mentioned during the following visits as well, but then without a clear indication of the number of receiving villages. The main criterion to qualify for this special assistance is that more than 40% of the village population must have an average income of below 2,500 yuan (figures applicable for 2008). We could not determine the exact subsidies for each village, but in Dingnan county 17 *zhongdiancun* each received 100,000–120,000 yuan annually for infrastructural construction, according to our interviews in 2010.

18 There are provincial and county-level *dian*. For the first, which make up the bulk of the project sites (ca. 75%), the total sum of 160,000 yuan is composed of provincial (ca. 60%), city (ca. 5–10%) and county

Thus, one village can have about 20 *dian*. Initially, the village must set up a so-called village XNCJS administration council (*cunmin xinrongcun jianshe lishihui* 村民新农村建设理事会) (hereafter VAC) that is responsible for a specific project.

The VAC consists of three to five of the most influential individuals in a village, excluding the heads of the formal village leadership, i.e. the Party secretary (*cunzhibu shuji* 村支部书记) and the village director (*cunzhuren* 村主任). It applies for XNCJS project funds and is later responsible for implementing the XNCJS-related measure in the selected *dian*. VAC members communicate closely with the county and township officials in the relevant government departments who are responsible for ensuring that the project is realized within a one-year period. For example, a county-wide XNCJS-related initiative to install flush toilets and pipe systems for potable water targets all villages and must be successfully accomplished in a number of villages each year according to the county's development plan. A further example is the construction of new houses for peasants in so-called "new communities," another XNCJS project in Dingnan which enjoys high priority. Construction is subsidized for any village households that are ready to tear down their old dwellings and move out, although this process is supposed to be incremental since the limited government funding means that the building of new communities can only be carried out consecutively in the county. In addition, each government department also tutors one *dian* for full-fledged XNCJS implementation. By 2010, Dingnan county had 481 *dian*. In 2010 alone, there were 77 newly identified *dian* at province level and 22 at county level.

In Qingyuan county, XNCJS implementation generally applies the same strategy as in Dingnan, although the selection and distribution of XNCJS projects is not primarily connected to specific sites. Rather, Qingyuan follows a "project management model" (*xiangmu guanli de moshi* 项目管理的模式) logic. A preference for the construction of basic infrastructure guides the decision on each project. Villages are categorized according to their needs and financial capacities. Different village categories receive different amounts of financial support to realize projects under the heading of XNCJS according to pre-set standards. Moreover, special projects set up to refer more directly to the *ershi zi mubiao* 二十字目标 (objectives summarized in 20 characters) are spread over a number of villages in the county, promoting, for example, "village remediation" (*zhengzhi cunzhuang* 整治村庄). Another programme, called "ten demonstration villages and one hundred renovated villages" (*shi cun shifan, bai cun zhengzhi* 十村示范, 百村整治), has been launched in response to a province-wide initiative for village hygiene and greening. It aims to renovate 200 villages within a

footnote continued

level (ca. 30–35%) allotments. County-level *dian* are funded out of the county's budget alone. Roundtable interview with leading cadres of relevant county-level departments, Dingnan county, September 2010.

four-year period between 2008 and 2012. These villages will then become sites for selected projects coordinated by the involved county-level departments and the township governments.¹⁹ County cadres from various departments stressed that eligible project sites are selected on the basis of “sustainability,” meaning that villages should be able to run these projects themselves after the period of official sponsoring and supervision has ended so that governmental support does not have to be constant and can move on to other sites. In contrast to Dingnan, Qingyuan’s modelling strategy does not come with the establishment of new participatory and coordinating bodies like the VACs, but is generally conferred on existing institutions, most notably the village committees.

Mizhi’s modelling of XNCJS is most typical of those cases that have aroused much scepticism among domestic and foreign observers in the past: overly beautiful villages and seemingly content peasants in an environment that is much less beautiful and developed. Our interview partners in Mizhi stressed repeatedly that the major goal of the county government is to “stimulate driving forces for rural development by promoting trial sites (*shidian*).”²⁰ However, they found it difficult to explain exactly how selected villages would successfully create “best practices” and how these would be emulated by other villages later on, given the differences in natural conditions, historical trajectories and economic development between the privileged few and all the other villages in the county. It was impossible to identify any linkage effect between the model villages, most notably Huihuang, and their surroundings. Even the Party secretary could say little more than that Mizhi’s model villages represented a new spirit that other villages would (have to) assume in order to progress.²¹ This, however, seemed to be wishful thinking at best. To implement XNCJS by strategically setting up model villages served the objective, first and foremost, of stimulating competition between townships and villages for the scarce funding.²² County leaders noted that well performing *shidian* could develop into *shifan* villages, thus becoming eligible for more subsidies. The criteria applied to decide on the distribution of these funds, however, were more oriented towards the given stability of villages and good working relations between county, township and village leaders than towards a village’s objective success in creating or emulating “best practices.”

In Dingnan and Qingyuan, as discussed above, county and township cadres do not focus on “traditional” modelling, that is, on selecting single villages as XNCJS showcases, but on the effective implementation of one project or different measures in many villages. Qingyuan has also embarked on what can be called complementary site implementation, according to which different villages located in adjacent vicinities are strategically linked by one specific project – for instance, the planting of particular crops. After one village is seen to receive

19 See Qingyuan County Government 2008.

20 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of finance, Mizhi county, September 2008.

21 Interviews with the Party secretary of Mizhi county, September 2008 and August 2009.

22 This rationale for county leaders was confirmed in our interviews with township officials and village leaders.

preferential treatment for developing and marketing a certain crop, other villages are supposed to join in (and are subsidized) once market success becomes visible, resulting in agricultural intensification and economic gains for all villagers in the wider territory. In Dingnan, as in the whole province of Jiangxi, the *dian* strategy is considered a “preferential system” (*puhui* 普惠) in the sense that those sites which have already successfully implemented XNCJS projects can apply for more projects and funding than others.²³

It is controversial in the development literature if development is best pursued by concentrating resources versus spreading them more thinly over wider areas.²⁴ Closer to the later variant, Dingnan and Qingyuan are clearly aiming at systematically linking up their different XNCJS projects, particularly in the realm of agricultural modernization and village reconstruction. Moreover, latecomers may become eligible for government XNCJS funding as well. Whereas in Mizhi formerly successful villages have simply been affixed with a new label and now figure as XNCJS *shidian* or *shifan* villages, Dingnan and Qingyuan have at least tested new initiatives or creatively modified existing projects, bringing about a number of innovative “best practices” (most notably in the realm of land management, rural cooperatives, township administration and local urbanization schemes). These initiatives were steered by the county government in close cooperation with the townships and villages. The experimentation was not initiated at immediate grassroots level. Furthermore, we did not see any evidence that the county governments had lobbied for their “implementation models” or “innovations” at higher levels, as described by Heilmann.²⁵

Interestingly, our respondents in all three counties disagreed on the more abstract question of whether “model tourism” was helpful to rural development. Almost all of them had taken part at least once in a trip organized by either Party schools or departments to a model village somewhere either nearby or in a different province, sometimes even as far away as South Korea and Taiwan. While many cadres praised these “inspirations,” the extent to which they affected local policy implementation back home remained unclear. Many cadres openly doubted the value of model emulation – at least in technical terms. Others voiced the opinion that it was important for maintaining an “innovative spirit” and “competition” among cadres; some simply stated that nowadays model emulation is *kexue* 科学 (scientific) and must therefore be taken seriously.

Altogether, we found that county and township cadres in the counties we studied entertained very different ideas and concepts concerning experimentation and modelling. They were certainly ordered to apply specific strategies by upper-level guidelines and thus did not have sole discretion on what form these

23 Interview with leading cadres in the XNCJS bureau of Jiangxi province, Nanchang, September 2010.

24 See the manifold contributions in the relevant journals, e.g. *Journal of Agrarian Change* (Wiley), *Journal of Development Economics* (Elsevier), *Journal of Development Studies* (Taylor & Francis), *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Taylor & Francis), *Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning* (WIT Press Journal).

25 See Heilmann 2008b, 9–12.

strategies would take. However, at the same time county governments were still allowed substantial leeway when following these guidelines and were able to enrich them through local experimentation and modelling strategies. They also had specific resources and the means to implement them.

Implementation Features of XNCJS Piloting and Modelling

XNCJS policymaking at and below county level is very much agency-driven and quite autonomous from upper-level interference, as was confirmed by one township Party secretary in Mizhi county: “At the stage of formulation, the state’s (project) policy [XNCJS] is not biased. But when implementing it, we have to consider some other factors.”²⁶ A clear picture of these “other factors” can be gained by looking at the way that XNCJS modelling is executed at grassroots level. At least in the counties that we investigated, it was not bottom-up experimentation in villages that later inspired and informed township or county-wide implementation, but counties that determined sites where specific XNCJS measures – and sometimes a whole array of them – were to be implemented.

How has local XNCJS implementation been sequenced in our field sites? According to the given procedure, villages apply for XNCJS project funds annually. The township screens these applications and then passes them to the county government which has the final say in project selection and funding allocation, usually made on the basis of some 20 criteria (including population size, developmental capacity, etc.). In Mizhi, our respondents were divided on the issue of the selection criteria. For instance, some leading cadres emphasized the fact that a village’s economic development or capacity was not of major importance,²⁷ but others claimed that just this was the case.²⁸ Some interviewees declared that city government officials and Mizhi county’s department of rural work cooperatively selected *shidian*, while other county departments did not participate in this selection, suggesting a rather hierarchical process which is arguably less “scientific.”²⁹

Selection criteria in Qingyuan and Dingnan were described to us as based on strictly objective standards. County officials emphasized that the selection of

26 Interview with a township Party secretary, Mizhi county, August 2009.

27 A leading cadre in the county’s department of rural work explained that the main criteria were not necessarily the village’s economic capacity, but first and foremost the organizational skills of village leaders and villagers’ enthusiasm. Interview, September 2008. However, the same person declared one year later that the average rural per capita income must range between 8,000 and 10,000 yuan a year before a village can become a model (actually pilot), or “red flower village” (*honghuacun*). Interview, August 2009.

28 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of agriculture, Mizhi county, September 2008. This would also be consistent with Yulin city regulations. The requirements for obtaining city-level demonstration village status, as laid out in official documents, were: 1) an average per capita income of more than 2,000 yuan per person; 2) a population of more than 500 people; 3) a certain scale of industrial development; 4) the relatively strong organizational capacity of the village leadership; and 5) proximity to traffic routes. See Yulin City Government 2006.

29 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of health, Mizhi county, September 2008.

projects and project sites was horizontally coordinated between the relevant government departments at all stages of the process, in full accordance, we were told, with the requirements of scientific (*kexue*) procedures and homogenous development over the whole county. This was particularly emphasized in Qingyuan, where the nomination of model villages had officially been abolished in the whole province of Zhejiang in 2008. In Jiangxi, where *shifancun* still have some – at least symbolic – importance, the selection of project sites was tied to giving preference to “favourable conditions” which would strengthen the site’s future *shifan* potential.

In addition to the sustainability of a project, the capability of village leaders and the enthusiasm of village residents in supporting XNCJS, our respondents named other, more specific criteria which confirm *strategic* modelling by county governments. Funding decisions, for instance, depend substantially on the degree of “peaceful” cooperation or “solidarity” (*tuanjie* 团结) within a village, between the village and Party committees, and on the quality of communication between the cadre bureaucracies at village, township and county level. This translates into a clear advantage for villages and townships that have established a good working relationship with the county departments and the county *lingdao banzi* 领导班子 (leadership team).³⁰

Generally speaking, all XNCJS funding at county level is organized differently in each case, as is the overall coordination of XNCJS. In Mizhi, XNCJS funds were passed down from city level as a lump sum and allocated to the relevant departments under the supervision of the county’s XNCJS leadership small group, while the department of rural work was responsible for all further coordination. In Dingnan, parts of these funds were shifted directly to the project sites which had their own “accounts” (*zhanghu* 账户), with the remainder being allocated to the county departments which included them in their annual operating budgets. Qingyuan did not receive specifically marked XNCJS transfers, but annually increasing earmarked funds for each government department (to be used for their respective projects) were given an XNCJS label in accordance with the county’s XNCJS blueprint.

In relative terms, Mizhi’s defined model villages apparently received the largest portion of XNCJS funds passed down to the county. In order to achieve quick results and induce other townships and villages to strive for *shifan*-status themselves, payments were made in instalments, depending on a project’s implementation progress.³¹ A leading cadre in Mizhi’s department of finance stated that annual investment for one *shidiancun* was about 450,000 yuan per year, compared to approximately 100,000 yuan for “normal” villages.³² In Dingnan, *shifan*

30 Sound cooperation and communication also play important roles with regard to a county’s application for extra funding from higher levels. City or provincial cadres being familiar with the conditions in one county can very much facilitate a county’s XNCJS funding. Interview with a township-level cadre in Mizhi county, August 2009.

31 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of rural work, Mizhi county, September 2008.

32 Interview with a leading cadre of the county-level department of finance, 2008.

support usually “only” involved minor awards and was thus said to be more symbolic in nature. Project *dian* received 160,000 yuan (see above), but “selection supremacy” was ensured by the fact that the county could decide to give several *dian* to a certain village and none to others. Zhejiang province, as has been mentioned, no longer engages in traditional modelling. Despite this fact, however, a kind of sub-provincial *model category* seems to have been maintained in order to create incentives for effective policy implementation. Cadres of the Lishui 丽水 city bureau of rural work inferred that they would “award” (*yi jiang dai bu* 以奖代补) an extra amount of 50,000 yuan to villages on the basis of good evaluation results in XNCJS implementation.³³ In Qingyuan, leading county cadres also made it clear that although the official use of “models” had been officially terminated, policy implementation on the ground still required “some kind of *shifan* work.”³⁴ Thus, in all three counties, there was some funding of models that bypassed regular budget channels and was sometimes directly disbursed to the model unit itself or to the responsible government one level up. External observers, however, do not have access to information on the exact figures involved.

County governments certainly dominate the process of XNCJS implementation, but they still depend on the township authorities in many ways. In Mizhi, county officials ascribed townships a “missing link” or nexus function (*chengshang qixia* 承上启下) between the county and village levels. According to a leading cadre of the county’s department of rural work, because the villagers and village cadres’ *suzhi* 素质 (personal/educational quality) is relatively low, township officials must strongly support project work in the villages:

Their relationship with villagers has undergone great changes since the abolition of taxes, and as their wages are paid out of the county’s pockets now, there’s not much contention left. Furthermore, *shidiancun* themselves are administered directly by government departments at county level.³⁵

Although they are in a subordinate position to the counties, township governments have a say when it comes to project adjustment (*xiangmu tiaozheng jianyi* 项目调整建议) or proposals for eligible new *shifancun*.³⁶ In Qingyuan and Dingnan, however, differentiation was often even more clear-cut, downgrading the townships to a kind of “cooperating unit” instructed to assist villages through the application process, but without any say in the later prioritization of these applications at county level. Apart from this formal division of responsibilities, county and township officials cooperate closely with village leaders to ensure smooth project implementation and are on high alert to avoid any problems that might lead to social instability (*shehui bu wending* 社会不稳定), since

33 Interview with leading cadres of the city-level department of rural work, Lishui city, September 2009.

34 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of rural work, Qingyuan county, September 2009.

35 Interviews with a leading cadre of the county-level department of rural work, September 2008.

36 This was mentioned during several interviews with leading county cadres in Mizhi county in 2008 and 2009.

maintaining social stability is crucial for the positive evaluation of any government department or individual cadre.

The often mentioned positive reaction (*jijixing* 积极性) of villagers to XNCJS projects remained rather abstract to us. As far as direct participation was concerned, we were not able to confirm any meaningful contribution on the part of the villagers to project application and design in Mizhi. In Qingyuan, we were told that more than half of the members of the village assembly had to vote for a project before it could be inserted in the village's annual development plan. In Dingnan, new VACs had been set up to institutionalize villager participation in the XNCJS process. One of their major tasks is to ensure an 85 per cent threshold support in the village assembly for the village's XNCJS blueprint. Moreover, VACs assist village officials and the township government to meet project targets and overcome any potential obstacles. From this perspective, VACs act as the long arm of county, township and village officials, helping local governments to make XNCJS happen on the ground. From a different perspective, a VAC can also be seen as an elected body that takes care of villagers' specific demands concerning XNCJS project implementation and serves as an important feedback mechanism for county and township governments to minimize possible resistance at grassroots level. VACs in Dingnan (and the whole of Jiangxi province) can therefore be seen as both a steering instrument for county and township cadres and as an institution for strengthening the bottom-up participation of villagers in defining and implementing XNCJS projects. Since village residents often have to help finance XNCJS projects by either bringing in complementary funds (*peitao zijin* 配套资金) or by providing voluntary labour, VACs can be a crucial means of local cadres' strategic implementation as they ensure some degree of functional participation and, arguably, legitimacy in the implementation process.³⁷

Our interviewees were quite sensitive to the underlying question of "distributive fairness" concerning the different modelling strategies of XNCJS implementation. In Mizhi, where project distribution was very selective and clearly favoured *shifan* and *shidian* villages, local officials underlined the fact that the county government would not neglect the other villages and would pursue a strategy of homogeneous spatial development: *shidiancun* would "receive some extra XNCJS subsidies, but other villages can still receive funding, for example, for road building projects."³⁸ However, it was admitted that the model villages also have an advantage when it comes to applying for "regular" project money, since their performance sheets are usually far better than those of the other villages.³⁹ For Mizhi's officials at county and township level, identifying

37 In Mizhi and Qingyuan, the *peitao* was quite small and often not even necessary owing to the poverty status of most villages and townships. In Dingnan, the villagers' share sometimes makes up almost half of a project's (or a *dian*'s) budget.

38 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of agriculture, 2008.

39 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of construction, Mizhi county, September 2008.

early developers and latecomers was legitimized, at least rhetorically, by the emulation effect that outstanding villages were supposed to have on the other villages, helping their economic and social development.⁴⁰

In Qingyuan and Dingnan, where projects were more broadly spread but still prioritized spatially, all cadres justified this procedure by referring to strong funding constraints and assured us that all villages in the county would be covered within a reasonable period of time. In Qingyuan, one leading official in the department of rural work stated:

Our current financial capacity only allows us to select a part of all villages. If we took RMB 30,000 out of RMB 10 million for each of our 345 villages, nothing could be done with this. Giving RMB 200,000 to 40 villages will at least enable us to provide for paved roads, public garbage containers and reforestation. We must proceed step by step.⁴¹

Selective implementation, especially via modelling, is often said to result from China's excessive target, project and cadre evaluation systems which set the wrong incentives and work against effective policy implementation.⁴² Particularly in Mizhi, it was quite obvious that model villages served as show-cases for successful policy implementation which would boost the cadres' evaluation record. The same was true for a number of "beacon-like" project sites in Dingnan and Qingyuan. Given the set targets for XNCJS pilots and model sites that can be found in official documents,⁴³ we asked our respondents at all levels about their perception and understanding of the evaluation process. Although most of the respondents complained that the evaluations constituted a heavy burden for them, some noted that local policy implementation would not work without this kind of pressure and control. Upper-level monitoring of project budgets was reported to have become increasingly strict over the years and the bulk of XNCJS funding came down to the counties as highly regulated, earmarked funds or transfer payments. Diversion of funds had been made an absolute "one vote veto" (*yipiao foujue* 一票否决) criterion in Jiangxi's XNCJS evaluation, from province level down to *dian* level.⁴⁴

Some respondents mentioned that the county evaluation of the townships would be much stricter than the evaluation of the county by higher levels.⁴⁵ At the same time, some cadres hinted that county and township governments "cooperated" informally to work through an evaluation.⁴⁶ For instance, some township officials in Dingnan indicated that they are able to negotiate the

40 Interestingly enough, one official in the department of education, when asked to explain the *shidian* logic of his working unit, answered: "We do not engage in piloting; education is basically adhering to balanced development." Interview, September 2008.

41 Interview with a leading official in the county-level department of rural work, 2009.

42 See, e.g., Cai 2004; O'Brien and Li 1999b; Whiting 2004.

43 See Qingyuan County Government 2008.

44 In both Dingnan and Qingyuan, XNCJS-related subsidies are directly disbursed to villager committees or even to households. As these are standard sums that are publicized regularly by the county government, diverting money at any government level, we were told, is impossible. However, clear documentary evidence exists to show that this still occurs and we were not able to check the budget figures.

45 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of rural work, Mizhi county, August 2009.

46 Zhou Xueguang (2010) has called this "collusion;" see also similar reports by Zhao 2006a, 2006b.

eventual assessment of target fulfilment with the county government if they encounter certain unforeseeable hardships (for example, natural disasters or a financial crisis, as in 2008/2009) during the evaluation period. Others said that suboptimal results in one project area could be outweighed by an excellent performance in others. Friction between counties and townships could thus be avoided, whereas the pressure exerted by both tiers on village leaders remained high to ensure smooth project implementation even under disadvantageous conditions and to prevent villages developing any wrong ideas about a possible negotiation space when dealing with higher levels. In the words of one township cadre in Dingnan, “The method of evaluating villages [by the township] differs from the way the county evaluates us. If the result of the evaluation is very bad, we will certainly punish the village cadres.”⁴⁷

Confirming the criticism found in much of the cited literature on policy implementation in the local state, quality, at first sight, *seems* to have been compromised in the evaluation of pilots and models. For example, in Mizhi, one leading county cadre said quite bluntly that although the city level was imposing a huge workload on county officials as a result of its continuous demand for evaluation, the pressure was still tolerable, as “their [higher-level governments’] main concern is a fair number of XNCJS model villages.”⁴⁸ A look into official documents does not reveal much about possible sanctions in cases where modelling was unsuccessful. This confirms the generally negative opinion of many China scholars of the evaluation system. During our interviews, cadres reported that sanctions ranged from individual career setbacks and salary cuts to the reduction of bureau funds and a simple, but hurtful, “loss of face.” We would thus argue that project evaluation, which extends to models and pilots as well, is as much a top-down instrument that places severe constraints on the autonomy of local cadres as it is a useful means for county governments to a) ensure compliance throughout the bureaucratic hierarchy down to village level, and b) ensure horizontal and vertical cooperation between county and township cadres.

Assessing the Results of “Strategic Modelling”

Since we focused on aspects of political agency in the context of “strategic modelling,” we did not undertake a thorough investigation of XNCJS outcomes in our three field sites. Nevertheless, some observations concerning the results of piloting and modelling should be reported at this point. As has been noted above, model villages in Mizhi county enjoyed considerable advantages when it came to the distribution of scarce government funds and were the main destinations of the regular inspection teams sent down by the county, city and even provincial government. XNCJS measures thus strengthened the privileged economic position and showcase functions which these villages already enjoyed, but

47 Interview with a township commissioner, Dingnan county, September 2010.

48 Interview with a leading cadre in the county-level department of rural work, September 2008.

did not display any visible linkage effect on the development of adjacent (non-model) villages. Mizhi county officials, certainly aware that their strategy left them open to criticism, were quick to assure us that the county government takes care of Mizhi's overall development and does not just focus on model villages. We found sufficient reasons to believe that this was true, at least with respect to the construction of roads, irrigation systems and water reservoirs all over the county. Looking at specific measures for the purpose of spurring agricultural intensification and modernization, Mizhi is still a county of a few better-off islands in a sea of rural poverty, and the way that modelling is undertaken there does at least create some doubt as to whether the county has left the conventional trajectory of image-building.

XNCJS modelling in Dingnan and Qingyuan follows a strategy of spatial development via selective project site implementation. This strategy, we would argue, is more complex and demanding in terms of coordinating and assessing XNCJS than that of promoting model villages which should then take the lead. More villages play a part in the selection and implementation process, as model enclaves do not figure particularly prominently in the local development strategy and are intentionally avoided. Consequently, XNCJS projects can be found all over the counties and most villages have seen at least one or two projects implemented during recent years. Against this background, we hypothesize that Dingnan and Qingyuan have been more effective in implementing XNCJS over a wider territory than Mizhi has so far. We would also argue that this is not only related to very different points of departure in terms of economic development and geographical advantage, but also to the greater developmental spirit displayed by officials in those southern counties in comparison with their counterparts in north-western Mizhi. However, further research is necessary to substantiate these assumptions.⁴⁹

Conclusion

A thorough look at piloting and modelling in three rural counties in Shaanxi, Jiangxi and Zhejiang provinces shows how institutional constraints (scarce financial resources, tight fiscal regulations and oversight, performance evaluation) and collective agency on the part of county and township cadres have shaped local policy experimentation and modelling. Although we are fully aware that much more research needs to be carried out in order to gain a full picture of the modelling practices in the local state, the following preliminary findings (and hypotheses) concerning the issues raised at the beginning of this article may be put forward.

First, pilots and models are important components of local XNCJS implementation and a manifestation of strategic agency on the part of leading county and

49 As has been emphasized by other scholars, (strategic) agency on the part of local leaders makes the difference in China's vast countryside, where the institutional environment is often the same. See, e.g., Donaldson 2009.

township cadres to safeguard their autonomy from upper-level interference and pressure. Moreover, modelling *can* serve as a useful means of ensuring the support of the rural populace, particularly if it is combined with new modes of functional participation in the process of selecting and implementing projects.

Second, modelling practices are embedded in local development strategies that concretize XNCJS guidelines passed down from higher levels, often based on a local “thinking” that gives special legitimation to modelling strategies by functioning as an ideological “unifier” among the local bureaucracy.

We found that strategic modelling in the local state is related to the “experimentation-under-hierarchy rationale” inherent in the logic of the Chinese policy process, as explained by Heilmann.⁵⁰ County and township governments are encouraged, sometimes even obliged, by upper levels to engage in setting up models and pilots, but they also develop their own modelling strategies in order to respond to, complement or innovatively expand guidelines from above, concentrate resources in some villages to create emulation effects in neighbouring villages, or even only distribute scarce resources as equally as possible among their jurisdictions, without any aim of initiating emulation by other localities at all.

Finally, strategic modelling can be successful in spawning local development, although this depends greatly on the development outlook and professionalism of local cadres. Whereas in some localities, these cadres are satisfied with overall limited results mostly generated in model villages, in other places they pursue ambitious goals of spatial development, most often connected with more horizontally structured approaches to local policy implementation (model villages versus project sites)

Strategic modelling, as understood from our experience in three rural counties, may be both beneficial and detrimental to local policy implementation, and much can be learned about the developmental spirit of local cadres when investigating the process of setting up models and pilots. This suggests that China scholars should not only employ a more open-minded approach towards the study of models in the local state, but should even seek to focus attention on them in the future.

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⁵⁰ Heilmann 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011.

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