

Shifting Strategies: The Politics of Radical Change in Provincial Development Policy in China

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Abstract

Why do provincial governments change policy, even when those policies have proven successful? This paper explores a debate regarding the determinants of provincial policy choice and the degree of discretion provinces are permitted in this area. It does so by scrutinizing the shift in Guizhou's development policy from a poverty reduction orientation to a wholehearted pursuit of economic growth, urbanization and industrialization. In contrast to those who argue that central experience, prospects for promotion or local conditions are key factors explaining policy choice, the paper concludes that Guizhou's shift in policy had more to do with the backgrounds and experiences of top provincial leaders. The result has implications for our understanding of central–local relations and local government decision making.

Keywords: Guizhou; development strategy; central–local relations; local politics; west China

Since the early days of the reform period, Chinese provincial leaders have enjoyed some discretion regarding provincial development policy. Typically, this occurs within negotiated, dynamic and unwritten boundaries delineated by the central government.¹ Accordingly, provincial and local leaders have designed and implemented distinct development strategies.² These strategies are not decided in a vacuum, but rather act on central instructions or incentives, or are shaped by the province's specific conditions. Alternatively, leadership decisions can be determined by the ideology of the provincial or local leaders, assumptions about development, or in response to the direction of a leadership clique with which the local leader is associated. On other occasions, local leaders may attempt to push the central government's boundaries, selecting development

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1 Whiting 2001; Chung 2000.

2 Segal and Thun 2001; Rithmire 2014; Jaros 2019.

strategies that although are often wrapped in the prevailing rhetoric, extend beyond the parameters set by their superiors.³

From kings to emperors, from presidents to premiers, from generalissimos to general secretaries, Chinese leaders have for millennia struggled with the “centralizing dilemma” – the imperative of balancing central control with local discretion.⁴ While not mutually exclusive, three factors – central experimentation, local leadership and regional characteristics – are unlikely to be equally influential in shaping the choices of local leaders as they design, implement and change development strategies. What determines which of these factors holds sway? How do these factors interact? The significance of these questions extends well beyond unravelling the centralizing dilemma. Understanding local decision making is important primarily because it addresses a central concern of politics: understanding who gets what, when and how, and who decides.⁵ China’s myriad local governments have implemented a range of different development policies and, like laboratories, have conducted thousands of experiments over the past two score years. These constellations of policy formulation and implementation in turn determine which groups among China’s diverse citizenry thrive, survive or perish. Particularly when these three factors push provincial leaders in opposing directions, understanding the extent to which each factor holds sway is vital.

Academics and China watchers have debated this question for decades.⁶ Members of the “central experiment camp” suggest that the degree of discretion held by local leaders is constrained. Because experimentation is typically backed by central sponsors, what appears to be discretion is instead governed by what Sebastian Heilmann calls “ultimate hierarchical control.”⁷ Academics from the “local conditions camp” argue that policy is shaped more by geography, demography or historical development.⁸ Finally, those in the “leaders’ characteristics camp” contend that particular aspects of individual local leaders – for example, their province of origin,⁹ their prospects for promotion or the faction they identify with – influence their policy choices, including development strategy. Although each academic camp contains deep divisions between individual members, it is possible to distinguish each camp by the extent to which it contends that the variations in strategy are owing to central government direction, local conditions or individual local leaders’ characteristics.

To defend their arguments, scholars have applied quantitative¹⁰ and qualitative methods to scrutinize the policies of single,¹¹ multiple¹² or large numbers of

3 Huang, Yasheng 1996; Chung 2000; 2016.

4 Chung 2000, 11.

5 Lasswell 1936.

6 For a review, see Rithmire 2014.

7 Heilmann 2008, 12. See also Tsui and Wang 2004.

8 See, e.g., Yang 1997; Wei, Yehua 2000; Lai 2006.

9 Huang, Yasheng 1996.

10 Ibid.

11 See, e.g., Goodman 1997; Fitzgerald 2002.

12 Chung 2000; Remick 2004.

provinces.¹³ Although these studies have illuminated the debate over the nature of the central–local relationship, they have yet to resolve it or identify which level of government retains the upper hand. On the contrary, this ongoing debate has generated nearly a dozen distinct theoretical models designed to understand this complex relationship.¹⁴ One approach to evaluating these camps’ expectations is to focus on provincial leaders who have fundamentally changed the orientation of provincial policy. By examining provincial leaders who switch gears – shifting from continuity to change – within a single context, it is possible to isolate the factors that explain such policy choices. Analysing this kind of sharp variation can highlight the patterns of evidence needed to evaluate each camp’s arguments, particularly when leaders shift away from policies that have enjoyed success.

The case used in the current study revolves around the best way to achieve poverty reduction. Eliminating poverty has been a shared goal of all post-1949 leaders, from Mao to Xi, even though each leader’s strategies to reduce poverty have differed radically. The developmentalist approach – that is, reducing poverty through promoting economic growth via larger-scale urbanization and industrialization – dominates the thinking of liberal¹⁵ and socialist¹⁶ thinkers alike.¹⁷ Developmentalism dominates mainstream economics: witness the World Bank economists’ report, “Growth is good for the poor,”¹⁸ and Nobel prize-winning economist Michael Spence’s *Growth Report*.¹⁹ In this regard, contemporary China is no exception, with leaders demonstrating their abiding commitment to the developmentalist approach via their policies: Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 promoted development as a hard truth, Jiang Zemin 江泽民 adopted a reform policy of “Grasping the large while letting go of the small” state-owned enterprises, while Mao Zedong’s 毛泽东 designs for industrial catch-up and extremely large-scale agriculture ended tragically.

Despite the dominance of the developmentalist approach, exceptions in economic thought abide. One such exception, dubbed the “micro-oriented state” approach, rejects the pursuit of scale and technology for its own sake in favour of smaller-scale and low-tech opportunities that present less formidable barriers to the participation of poorly educated farmers.²⁰ This type of strategy tends to generate less economic growth even as it promotes poverty reduction. Whereas the developmentalist approach enjoys the backing of most mainstream economists, the micro-oriented state approach aligns with the ideas of relatively obscure development scholars, including Robert Chambers and E.F. Schumacher, who

13 Lai 2006.

14 Donaldson 2018.

15 Rostow 1960 represents a classic example.

16 Amin 1974.

17 Escobar 1995.

18 Dollar and Kraay 2000.

19 Spence 2008.

20 Donaldson 2011.

advocate human-scale development.²¹ In China, the alternative to developmentalist policy thinking can be seen in the “economic development view” promoted by Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 – eagerly if largely ineffectually²² – and which was based on his experiences in Guizhou.²³ The household responsibility system, the creation of township and village enterprises and basic manufacturing also reflected the micro-oriented approach. Indeed, the decline of each of these occurred following the criticism of influential developmentalist thinkers.

Guizhou’s economic strategy, at least from the late 1980s to the mid-to-late 2000s, also followed a micro-oriented state approach. Guizhou’s leaders adopted a development policy that focused on town-and-country roads, rural tourism, coal mining and migration. Although each of these aspects was structured in ways that did not generate much economic growth, they did provide opportunities for Guizhou’s farmers. Following this approach, Guizhou’s leaders reduced poverty through the generation of small-scale, low-tech opportunities; it was an approach that contrasted markedly with the dominant approaches promoted by both central government and most other provincial governments. Despite the flexibility that Deng granted to provincial policymakers, most provinces, including Yunnan, stayed well within the boundaries of developmental thinking, a condition enforced in large part by the rewards and promotions tied to, among other goals, each leader’s record in promoting economic growth and development.²⁴ Despite this context, Guizhou maintained its micro-oriented state model for years, until everything changed in 2005.

Although the micro-oriented state approach was successful at reducing poverty, Guizhou’s leaders began systematically dissolving the strategy in favour of a more commonly adopted one: a developmentalist policy designed to reduce poverty by promoting economic growth, industrialization and urbanization. The Guizhou case presents a double conundrum: why did provincial leaders initially forgo the dominant developmentalist approach to adopt a micro-oriented state policy? And then, after nearly two decades, why did they choose to shift away from this model? By focusing on Guizhou as it transitioned between the two strategies, this study delves beyond why a specific economic strategy is adopted in the first place to focus on why Chinese provincial leaders change development strategies, particularly ones that have been, by some measures, successful.

The remainder of the article is organized in the following way. Next, we present a brief review of the politics behind the adoption of the micro-oriented state approach in Guizhou.²⁵ The article then focuses on the politics of the decision behind the shift in strategy, an issue we explore mainly by consulting secondary materials including leaders’ official biographies, speeches, media reports, government

21 Chambers 1978; Schumacher 1973.

22 Zheng 2007.

23 Donaldson 2011.

24 Rosen 1988; Saich 1992.

25 For a full examination of the politics behind the micro-oriented state, see Donaldson 2011.

documents and other similar materials.²⁶ By scrutinizing the abrupt changes in economic policy, we are able to explore which factors are important in shaping local officials' decision making. We selectively contrast Guizhou's experience with that of Guizhou's neighbour, Yunnan, which, as we discuss below, is similar both demographically and geographically.

Shifting Strategies

Pre-2005: Guizhou's "micro-oriented" development strategy

Under the micro-oriented state strategy, Guizhou's leaders primarily focused on small-scale, low-tech development such as village-to-town roads, small-scale mining, migration and village-based agritourism or *nongjiale* 农家乐 tourism. More specifically, Guizhou's policy towards rural tourism, which was the first in China to explicitly link tourism to poverty reduction, focused on exploiting rural, ethnic tourism in ways that allowed poor farmers to participate directly. In Yunnan, tourism development focused on building fancy hotels and restaurants, which promoted GDP growth but excluded rural residents from direct participation.²⁷ Guizhou's leadership established systems to encourage migration, including providing vocational education systems and offices in coastal cities to assist migrants from Guizhou. Migrants remitted enough funds to allow their families to purchase warmer clothing and afford better nutrition, but not enough to promote rural industry. Yunnan, with no such strategy, saw significantly lower rates of intra-provincial migration and far smaller remittances.²⁸ Guizhou's mining policy allowed farmers to organize work teams during the off-season, with approval granted by townships, the level of formal governance closest to the grassroots. In contrast, Yunnan's mines were more formally and hierarchically developed, incidentally erecting education and other barriers that barred poor farmers from work opportunities. Guizhou's leaders generally forewent expensive highways in favour of less expensive town-and-country roads that linked farmers to nearby markets. By contrast, Yunnan invested significant sums in a highway system that radiated out from Kunming, Yunnan's capital, but which also included fences, tolls and other barriers that prevented poor farmers from using it. Guizhou's policies were specifically designed for reducing poverty; by contrast, Yunnan's developmentalist leaders mainly sought to reduce poverty by growing the economy.

Initiatives such as human-scale tourism, artisanal mining, town-and-country roads and vocational education-supported migration, which are based on the

26 Regarding the impact of both the micro-oriented state and the subsequent developmentalist policies, we scrutinized official statistical data and conducted extensive fieldwork throughout Guizhou. However, in relation to the primary focus of this paper – the politics behind the changes in developmental strategies – the sources were primarily secondary.

27 Donaldson 2007.

28 Donaldson 2011.

micro-oriented approach, do not promote significant or rapid economic growth. However, they can facilitate the direct economic participation of poor people and thus work to reduce poverty. While Guizhou's economic growth rate was among China's slowest (ranking 30 out of the 31 provinces measured), its poverty rate diminished faster than its economic growth rate would predict: it raised an estimated 2.7 million rural residents out of poverty between 1991 and 1996. By comparison, although Yunnan's GDP growth rate ranked 17 of 31 provinces, according to one World Bank measure some 2.2 million rural residents joined the ranks of the impoverished.²⁹ Whereas the overall net rural income in both provinces grew at approximately the same rates, net rural incomes of Guizhou's poor counties started to exceed those of Yunnan's poor counties in 1993. By contrast, the net rural incomes of Yunnan's non-poor counties far exceeded those of Guizhou's non-poor counties.

Which scholarly approach to understanding local decision making explains why the micro-oriented state approach was adopted and endured throughout the changes in leadership during this lengthy period? The "local conditions camp" might argue that Guizhou's poverty itself drove the adoption of its micro-oriented state strategy. Without the revenue or other resources to invest in large-scale infrastructure or fixed assets, perhaps the leaders, as if by default, focused on less costly, smaller-scale alternatives. Evidence suggests this was not the case, with leaders purposefully adopting the micro-oriented strategies, rather than merely implementing more modest versions of the developmental strategy. Moreover, Guizhou and Yunnan are remarkably similar in many ways. Both are mountainous, agrarian and populated by considerable numbers (about one-in-three) of ethnic minorities. Both provinces are well endowed with natural resources, have the potential for developing rural tourism and are the leading provinces in tobacco production. However, despite facing similar conditions, the leaders of these two provinces adopted markedly different strategies, which is inconsistent with what the "local conditions camp" would expect.

The case for the "central leadership camp" is somewhat stronger, as central leaders, ranging from the transportation minister, Qian Yongchang 钱永昌, in 1992 to Premier Zhu Rongji 朱镕基 in 1996, each publicly advised Guizhou's leaders to follow development strategies that were remarkably congruent with the micro-oriented state.³⁰ As they toured south-west China, these same leaders offered nearly the opposite advice to neighbouring provinces including Yunnan.³¹ Superficially, these visits suggest that Guizhou was responding to centrally mandated experiments. In reality, Guizhou's leaders had in fact been implementing a micro-oriented strategy years before these visits. Rather than

29 The World Bank (2001) reported poverty statistics from 1991 and 1996, one of the few sources of publicly available comparable provincial-level poverty data.

30 Guizhou Yearbook Office 1988; 1994.

31 Yunnan Yearbook Office 1988; 1994.

suggesting a central experiment, these speeches represented endorsements of policies that Guizhou's leaders had adopted years earlier.³²

The final camp, which focuses on the characteristics of local leaders, is diverse, with different scholars emphasizing the importance of different aspects of individual leaders. Some scholars point to a leader's prospects for promotion as influencing policy choice.³³ Others suggest that "nativist" leaders – that is, those hailing from the province – tend to promote that province's interests, which assumes that a province's interest is indisputable.³⁴ However, as Guizhou demonstrates, a province's interests are not predetermined, but are instead politically defined. Nativist leaders of Yunnan interpreted and defined Yunnan's interests in ways that were more consistent with the developmentalist approach. By contrast, Guizhou's nativist leaders promoted the micro-oriented state strategy. In any case, some of Guizhou's leaders were local while others were not, and each leader's prospects for promotion, as well as actual fate, also varied considerably.³⁵ Yet, despite this variation, they each continued policies that did not significantly waver from those consistent with the micro-oriented strategy. Thus, the evidence from Guizhou is inconsistent with the expectations of these two strains of the "local leadership camp."

The evidence provides greater support for the school of thought that contends that local leaders promote the policy preferences of a higher-level patron. This is a contentious theory, with some scholars doubting the existence of the influence of factions or patronage.³⁶ In Guizhou's case, it is striking that most of Guizhou's leaders were demonstrably in the orbit of Hu Jintao at different stages of his political career. Indeed, the micro-oriented strategy showed a remarkable resemblance to Hu's ideas encapsulated in his "scientific development concept" (*kexue fazhan guan* 科学发展观), which formed part of Hu's vision for a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), and his policies for rural revitalization (*xinnongcun jianshe* 新农村建设). As general secretary, Hu promoted the idea that development should be measured based on more than GDP, and he attempted (never entirely successfully) to shift away from his predecessors' focus on urbanization and industrialization to instead concentrate on rural development and the promotion of agriculture.³⁷ Could Hu's successors have continued the micro-oriented state model because they were part of his faction?

Before entertaining the "patronage camp" theory further, we need to consider that Hu Jintao was at first transferred laterally, to serve as Party secretary of Tibet, and thus had little direct influence on subsequent provincial leaders. Moreover, Hu's patrons included Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦, one of the chief architects

32 Donaldson 2011.

33 See, e.g., He et al. 2019; Wang, Qingyu, et al. 2020.

34 Huang, Yasheng 1996; Choi 2006.

35 Donaldson 2011.

36 For the debate on factionalism in China's context, see Tsuo 1998; Li 2001; Li and Lye 2005.

37 See Wei, Liqun 2005 for details on the scientific development concept. For the controversial roll out, see Zheng 2007. For details on rural revitalization, see Looney 2015.

of the economic reforms that pushed provincial leaders in the 1980s to follow a developmentalist path, an approach that stood in sharp contrast to Hu Jintao's "scientific development concept."³⁸ Overall, the evidence regarding the patronage theory is mixed. Hu Jintao did not follow the ideas of his own patrons. Moreover, because he did not gain power until towards the end of the period under consideration, it is unlikely that Hu's successors in Guizhou were merely following his orders. Instead, by continuing with a micro-oriented state approach, it is more likely that these leaders were emulating his example by following their own convictions about how best to tackle rural poverty.

The evidence most clearly supports the idea that provincial leaders are motivated according to their own ideas derived from personal experiences. During each administration between 1978 and 2005, the key drivers behind the micro-oriented state were one or more top provincial leaders with direct experience of poverty. The top provincial leaders from the late 1980s and early 1990s either came from Guizhou's poorest regions or else had significant experience of working in poor rural areas in other provinces. For instance, the unusually long-standing provincial governor, Wang Chaowen 王朝文 (1978–1993), hailed from Huangping 黄平, a poor county in south-east Guizhou, while leaders from outside the province, such as former provincial secretaries Hu Jintao (1985–1988) and Liu Zhengwei 刘正威 (1988–1993), had extensive professional and personal experience of desperately poor areas of Gansu and Henan provinces respectively. Supporting these and subsequent leaders was a cadre of locally oriented vice-secretaries and vice-governors, most of whom originated from or worked in Guizhou's most impoverished areas.³⁹ These leaders' close personal contact with the inhumane effects of poverty, combined with the micro-oriented approach's successful track record and a level of central support for the micro-oriented approach, explains the continuity of the strategy.

2005–2010: a proxy battle

Despite the micro-oriented approach's notable success in tackling poverty, in 2005 the provincial development strategy began to take a gradual turn towards the more commonly adopted developmentalist approach. The five-year policy pivot occurred during a bitter battle between Guizhou's top leaders. As with a tug of war between equally pitted opponents, the incremental change in provincial development strategy did not reflect the force with which these leaders pulled in their preferred directions.⁴⁰

Leading the side tugging for the status quo was Guizhou Party secretary, Shi Zongyuan 石宗源, a seasoned official with ties to China's then-general secretary

38 Ewing (2003) refers to Hu Yaobang as Hu Jintao's "liberal mentor" (20), while Tanner (2001) calls him one of Hu Jintao's "most powerful patrons" (9). See also Tkacik 2002; Lam 2006.

39 Based on an analysis of the career trajectories of these leaders. See Donaldson 2011.

40 Yong 2013.

(and former Guizhou Party secretary), Hu Jintao. Shi's micro-oriented ideological orientation overlapped with Guizhou's previous top leaders, and his first-hand experience with rural poverty was every bit as profound. Born in 1946 (Shi was just four years younger than Hu) in Baoding 保定, Hebei province, Shi spent most of his first decade in Ya'an 雅安, Sichuan province. Too impoverished to support their five children, Shi's parents sent him to be raised by his uncle in Gansu province, which became his provincial home for all but two years of his career until 1998.⁴¹ During his time in Gansu, Shi crossed paths with Hu Jintao. Shi's experience in both the local and central Party school placed him in Hu's orbit and, like Hu, Shi rose up through the provincial government and Party administrative ranks. Shi came into direct contact with poor rural residents in Gansu during his service in the provincial Party school, the agricultural and forestry bureau, as a magistrate in the local court and then as a leader in local government.⁴² During much of his tenure, Shi worked in Hezheng 和政, a poor county outside of Lanzhou, promoting many of the aspects central to the micro-oriented strategy implemented in Guizhou: coal, tourism, agriculture and migration.⁴³

Shi's promotion to the post of Guizhou's provincial Party secretary in 2005 elevated him to the same position that Hu had held 20 years earlier. Given his background, it is unsurprising that Shi enthusiastically backed Hu's "scientific development concept" and actively spearheaded policies consistent with the micro-oriented approach. During his speech at the 2007 provincial Party representative conference, Shi criticized simple measures like GDP and stressed the importance of protecting the province's forestlands and water quality to Guizhou's long-term development and competitiveness. He also warned against "short-term behaviour" that squandered resources, such as creating "achievement projects" (*zhengji gongcheng* 政绩工程) and wasteful "image projects" (*xingxiang gongcheng* 形象工程).⁴⁴ Shi was an ardent supporter of the "food for work" (*yi gong dai zhen* 以工代赈) policy, a central pillar of Guizhou's poverty reduction efforts, which had for decades compensated self-identifying poor farmers who worked on constructing rural infrastructure.⁴⁵ Like Hu and his successors, Shi maintained preferential policies that promoted small township and village coal mines, an approach that helped to reduce rural poverty. While Shi oversaw the construction of Guizhou's highway system, which linked Guiyang with neighbouring provincial capitals, he simultaneously continued to encourage the construction of roads that linked villages to nearby marketing towns. Even as he

41 "Shi Zongyuan." *China Vitae*, http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Shi_Zongyuan%7C280. Accessed 3 November 2021.

42 Yong 2013.

43 "Shi Zongyuan." *China Vitae*, http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Shi_Zongyuan%7C280.

44 "Guizhou shengwei shuji Shi Zongyuan: baozhu lushui qingshan ye shi zhengji" (Guizhou representative Shi Zongyuan: protecting the environment is also a political achievement." *Zhongguo tongyi zhanxian* 2010(6), 10.

45 Wang, Xinhui 1993.

developed Guizhou's major tourist spots, Shi ensured that poor local residents were able to participate in grassroots, rural-based tourism in the spirit of the micro-oriented approach. While many of Shi's policies promoted large-scale projects, these grander initiatives complemented the modal micro-oriented state strategy. The economic opportunities for poor people in mining and tourism, through constructing small-scale infrastructure and promoting migration, continued. All of these micro-oriented policies reduced rural poverty in Guizhou and spurred the growth of net rural incomes, especially in poor counties, and did so to a much greater extent than could be expected, given the fact that the province's GDP growth over this period was the among the slowest in China.⁴⁶

Pulling on the opposite end of the tug-of-war rope was provincial governor, Lin Shusen 林树森. He had an abiding commitment to breakneck development based on industrialization, urbanization and rapid investment. Although just six months younger than Secretary Shi, it is not surprising that Governor Lin held diverging views. Lin was born and raised in the wealthy coastal province of Guangdong and had spent his entire career in Guangzhou, assuming the post of Guizhou governor in June 2006 directly after being the Communist Party Secretary of Guangzhou Municipality, one of the wealthiest cities in China and an early engine of China's dynamic growth.⁴⁷

Reportedly proud of his experiences and accomplishments in Guangzhou, Lin clashed with Shi in numerous arenas. For instance, one of Governor Lin's pet projects was to invest 10 billion yuan in providing 1.6 million rural residents with potable water. However, Shi's experiences in Gansu province, where the same method of tapping groundwater led to serious subsidence issues in many regions, vehemently and openly opposed this and other such policies. The bitter clashes over the policy between the two were unusually public.⁴⁸

Under such a strong-willed governor who was bent on pursuing a developmentalist course, Guizhou's micro-oriented strategy began to fray. Whereas the government work report in 2006 and 2007 listed poverty and rural development at the very top of the provincial government's priorities, by 2008 (halfway during the Shi–Lin administration in Guizhou) it had begun to de-emphasize direct poverty reduction. The word "poverty" was mentioned only once in the work report between 2008 and 2013 and was instead replaced in many places by the term "people's livelihood" (*minsheng* 民生). This term, which shifts focus from the poor in favour of promoting more generalized economic welfare, did not even receive the pride of place given to the term "poverty" in 2006 and 2007. Instead, starting in 2008, "urbanization" and "industrialization" – neither of which the government work report had listed before 2007 – emerged as the province's top priorities. Accordingly, the work report increasingly stressed transportation infrastructure, investment, agricultural restructuring and promotion of

46 Donaldson 2011.

47 Guizhou Yearbook Office 2007, 36.

48 See e.g., Yong 2013.

specialized industries.⁴⁹ This kind of mission creep reflected the experience and proclivities developed by Lin throughout his tenure in Guangzhou. Between 2010 and 2013, poverty was only mentioned once in the work report, and in a much less prominent position than before. The annual work report provides a picture of the gradual policy shift over this period. With the implementation of the developmental state strategy, Guizhou's growth rate increased, leading to a ranking of 13th out of 31 provinces; however, whereas during the micro-oriented state period the growth in per capita net rural income matched (overall) or exceeded (for poor counties) that of the more rapidly developing Yunnan, during this transition period Yunnan's net rural income grew faster than Guizhou's net rural income in both categories.

The tug-of-war between these two top leaders ultimately ended in a stalemate as the two rival leaders departed their posts the same month, August 2010. Shi, aged 64 at the time, was in any case already approaching retirement age. He spent the remaining few years before his death at the age of 67 serving as the vice-chairman of the National People's Congress Internal and Judicial Affairs Committee.⁵⁰ For his part, 63-year-old Lin was also transferred to a relatively insignificant post in Beijing. His lengthy experience in Guangzhou undoubtedly served him well in his tenure as the vice-chairman of the 11th CPPCC Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Overseas Chinese Committee.

These two leaders assumed their Guizhou positions at the same time, were part of the same hierarchy, were both non-natives and neither had prospects for promotion. Yet, their policy choices could not be more different. Both Shi and Lin were driven by their previous direct experiences of the realities of poverty and development. And while Shi successfully prevented Lin from fully implementing a Yunnan-style developmentalist state, the two leaders' successors would be able to switch to a full developmentalist strategy unimpeded.

2010–present: embracing the developmentalist approach

The slow, steady erosion of the micro-oriented state between 2005 and 2010 turned into a full landslide as a series of subsequent provincial Party secretaries wholeheartedly – and unopposed – adopted the developmentalist policies favoured by Lin. The first of these leaders, Li Zhanshu 栗战书, Party secretary between 2010 and 2012, enthusiastically embraced development policies that focused on large-scale, high-tech industrialization, agricultural commercialization, urbanization and attracting external investment. Born in 1950 in Pingshan 平山 county, Hebei province, Li's pre-2010 career was spent in coastal Hebei, central Shaanxi and, most prominently, the north-east province of Heilongjiang. While his career began in county administration, by the mid-1980s Li found himself serving in progressively larger urban areas: Shijiazhuang, Chengde 承德, Xi'an and Harbin. He thus lacked

49 Guizhou Yearbook Office various years.

50 Yong 2013; Xin 2014.

the intimate experience of rural poverty enjoyed by his predecessors. Li's career brought him into Xi Jinping's 习近平 orbit. Although both Li and Xi were members of "red families," marking them as princelings, this was not sufficient reason for a political alliance.⁵¹ More significant was the fact that Li and Xi overlapped in the early 1980s, when Li served as Party secretary of Wuji 无极 county, Hebei, while Xi (three years younger than Li) served as Party secretary in Zhengding 正定 county, just 30 kilometres away. After the 2012 disgrace of Hu Jintao's protégé, Ling Jihua 令计划, Xi naturally turned to Li to replace Ling as director of the influential general office.⁵²

During his term as Guizhou's Party secretary prior to his promotion, Li vigorously advanced a developmentalist strategy that emphasized the pursuit of GDP growth, industrialization and urbanization. He distanced himself from the micro-oriented strategy in colourful terms, claiming that "poverty alleviation without industrialization is like cooking without rice" (*wumizhichui* 无米之炊) and that "the economic development process is an industrialization process."⁵³

Although he had spent much of his career in large cities in central China, Li openly admired the strategies employed in coastal China:

Without exception, the developed eastern provinces have all quickly boosted their development through industrialization. The reason why Guizhou has lagged behind is because of the sluggish pace of industrialization. Our only choice is to promote the industrialization process so that we can exploit our natural resource endowments and promote our economy and become wealthy.⁵⁴

In line with his core beliefs, Li quickly put in place a strategy of industrialization and urbanization, as he underscored in 2011 soon after he assumed the post of Guizhou's Party secretary:

After two months' investigation, we formulated a plan for "the implementation of industry to boost economics" (*shishi gongye qiang sheng* 实施工业强省). It represents for the first time that industrialization and urbanization have been recommended as the only solutions to the 40 million people living in poverty in Guizhou province. More than 3.82 million poor people are living in deep-stone mountains, and high-cold areas that are not actually suitable for human life at all and cannot support human livelihoods. If urbanization strategies are implemented, these people can move down from the hills to cities and towns where they can hope to find both work and economic gain.⁵⁵

To be sure, Li's strategy also corresponded with the interests and expectations of China's new central leaders, who had appointed Li to Guizhou and then subsequently promoted him. At the same time, Li's background and the fervency of his criticism of the previous policies indicate that Li's belief in the developmentalist approach was also sincere and heartfelt.

Li's development policies set the stage for his successors, who enthusiastically pursued the same approach. That Li's first replacement, Zhao Kezhi 赵克志 (2012–2015), continued with Li's policies is not surprising, given that Zhao's

51 Choi 2012.

52 Mai 2016.

53 Guizhou Yearbook Office 2011, 43.

54 Guizhou Yearbook Office 2013, 37.

55 Huang, Jie 2011.

career up until then had been centred almost exclusively in wealthier coastal provinces: he had risen to the post of vice-governor in both his native Shandong province as well as in neighbouring Jiangsu province. Naturally, Zhao also looked towards economic growth as the primary mechanism to resolve Guizhou's problems. In 2013, Zhao explained that: "We should look at the poverty in Guizhou and understand our status in development stages. At the same time, it requires us to speed up our development and get out of poverty so that our province can enter wealthy society, together with other provinces."⁵⁶ Like his predecessor, Zhao wished to emulate developed coastal areas, such as Kunshan 昆山 in Jiangsu province,⁵⁷ and stressed the relevance of his experience in coastal China, and its model of development, for Guizhou:

Having worked in the east, we gained experience with restructuring, industrialization and urbanization. We learned how to deal with the environment and treat pollution. I believe that Guizhou can learn from these experiences, processes and lessons from the east. In addition, enterprises from developed eastern regions are looking forward to opportunities in the west. Therefore, we can also work as a bridge connecting the east and the west. It has been a wise decision for the centre to assign leaders from the east to the west.⁵⁸

Mirroring the manner in which central leaders supported the micro-oriented state in 1996, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang 李克强 endorsed Zhao's developmentalist efforts. Nearly 20 years after Premier Zhu Rongji's visit, Li Keqiang used his February 2015 visit to Guizhou to reiterate that "the central government is boosting the urbanization process that will soon allow migrant workers to work closer to home."⁵⁹ This process formed part of a drive to develop interior provinces, in part by relocating industries from coastal regions to the inner land. Just months after Li's visit, central leaders signalled their support of Zhao by returning him to the coast, where he became Hebei province's Party secretary for three years before being appointed as Xi Jinping's minister of public security.

Following on from Zhao's departure, China's leaders once again chose a stable succession by promoting provincial governor Chen Min'er 陈敏尔 (2015–2017).⁶⁰ Chen's long tenure in his native Zhejiang clearly connected him to Xi Jinping. While in the coastal province of Zhejiang, Chen was appointed Party secretary of Shaoxing 绍兴 county. Then, in 1997, he became the vice-mayor and deputy Party secretary of the rapidly growing coastal municipality of Ningbo 宁波. By

56 Ge 2013.

57 "Zhao Kezhi: chu dao Guizhou luocha hen da shigu beihou dou you fubai wenti" (Zhao Kezhi: corruption problems are behind the big gaps for the first time in Guizhou). *phtv.ifeng.com*, 21 May 2012. http://phtv.ifeng.com/program/wdsz/detail_2012_05/21/14690286_0.shtml. Accessed 25 September 2019.

58 Ge 2013.

59 "Zongli wei guonian fan xiang jin cheng wugong renyuan chong pao fangbianmian" (Premier Li prepared instant noodles for migrant workers returning to their hometowns at New Year). www.gov.cn, 15 February 2015. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2015-02/15/content_2819777.htm. Accessed 25 September 2019.

60 Chen Min'er's successor, Sun Zhigang, has an intriguingly different history: he came from a modest background, spent time as a sent-down youth, and worked for most of his career in Anhui, central China. He is also known as a healthcare reformer. He served as the general secretary of Guizhou for more than two years. Owing to space limitations, Sun's tenure is outside the purview of this article.

2001, he had been promoted to the provincial government, first serving as propaganda chief and then, in 2007, as provincial vice-governor. During those years, he would have worked closely with Zhejiang's Party secretary, Xi Jinping.

Throughout his career in Zhejiang, Chen was a direct witness of and active participant in the success of the developmentalist approach in promoting the province's rapid development. Therefore, once assigned to Guizhou, it is not surprising that Chen maintained the investment-led developmentalist policies with all the zeal of his predecessors, Li and Zhao. In addition to continuing their efforts in investing in urban and transportation infrastructure, he also aimed to stimulate Guizhou's high-tech industry with massive investments in big data, an initiative overtly endorsed by Xi Jinping. For 2015, his main achievements included the investment of 460 billion yuan in five key industries, including the scaling up of nearly 2,000 enterprises. He pushed for a total investment of 15 trillion yuan in urban infrastructure and aimed to urbanize three million rural residents. Chen's focus aligned with Xi Jinping's initiative on "precision poverty alleviation" (*jingzhun fupin* 精准扶贫).⁶¹ And, indeed, the term poverty began to reappear in the provincial government work report and was prominent in large sections of the provincial yearbook from 2015 onwards, the year in which Xi pledged to eradicate poverty in China by 2020. Yet, Xi's precision poverty alleviation initiative, while holding local officials personally responsible for eliminating poverty in their localities, provides local leaders with considerable latitude in deciding the route to achieving this goal. Thus, developmentalist and micro-oriented strategies alike can often fit with Xi's precision poverty reduction policy. In practice, Guizhou's provincial leaders justified their developmentalist approach by wrapping it in language consistent with Xi's poverty reduction policy. Because the economic strategies of Xi and Li Keqiang are driven by a commitment to developmentalist approaches, Guizhou's leaders during this period received nothing but support for their policies.

Meanwhile, the provincial government remained emphatic in its support of the developmental state approach throughout this period. In his 2016 work report, for instance, the governor noted that "In the past five years, Guizhou achieved the fastest rate of growth, the biggest change in infrastructure, the greatest dynamic development ... The pace of economic growth among China's provinces over the past five years ranked within the top three."⁶²

Overall, Li, Zhao and Chen – the three Party secretaries who focused almost exclusively on development and promoting economic growth – firmly believed that development equated to urbanization and industrialization based on scaling

61 The term is more commonly translated as "targeted poverty reduction," although the term "precision poverty reduction" is also used in official news translations. We believe the term "precision" is more accurate. For instance, during the campaign, Xi Jinping has emphasized the "six precisions." See, e.g., "How are the six 'precisions' of poverty alleviation applied?" *China Global Television Network*, 28 February 2019, https://news.cgtv.com/news/3d55544e3130575a306c5562684a335a764a4855/share_p.html.

62 Guizhou Yearbook Office 2016, 8.

up industries and attracting and nurturing high-tech businesses. As a result, fixed-asset investment increased rapidly. As documented below, this led to a range of long-term problems for the province. However, for the purposes of this article, a central question is the impact on the poor. The micro-oriented state model effectively reduced poverty between the late 1980s and the mid-to-late 2000s. Because provincial leaders typically legitimate the adoption of investment-led growth by couching the development approach as part of the struggle against rural poverty, it is fair to ask to what extent such policies actually improved the lives of the poor. If spending and development were focused on more impoverished areas or on areas that favoured pro-poor or at least sustainable development, the developmentalist approach could be equally or more pro-poor than the micro-oriented state policy. How have these policies affected Guizhou's lowest-income residents? The next section focuses on the volume, distribution and structure of Guizhou's post-2010 developmentalist policy, and the extent to which development in the province includes or excludes the poor.

The Fruits of Guizhou's Developmentalist Strategy

Guizhou's shift to a developmentalist strategy affected nearly every facet of the province's economy, starting with reversing course on the key aspects of the micro-oriented state strategy. Detailing the impact of the shift in strategy is beyond the scope of the current article and is in any case outlined more extensively elsewhere. Here, it is sufficient to note that Guizhou's development-led economic strategy entailed trillions of yuan of investments in large-scale infrastructure and development projects. Yet, many of the initiatives under the developmentalist strategy were ineffective as development projects, falling far short of the aspirations in terms of stimulating the economy and generating employment. More importantly, most of the projects were structured in ways that not only excluded the direct participation of poor residents but in some cases undermined their previous survival strategies.⁶³ While many of the fixed assets that were produced were wasteful and poorly targeted, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Guizhou's GDP growth rate exploded. Whereas the province's GDP growth rate ranked next-to-last during the micro-oriented state period, and 17th during the transition period (2005–2010), under the developmentalist period (2010–2016) Guizhou's GDP growth rate exceeded that of all other provinces. GDP growth in both periods averaged more than 12 per cent year-on-year.

County-level data cast doubt on the connection between the fixed-asset investments that formed part of Guizhou's developmentalist policies; county-by-county, the rate of growth in fixed-asset investment between 2010 and 2015 correlates neither with GDP growth rates (correlation of 0.103) nor with changes in net rural incomes (correlation of 0.030).⁶⁴ The maldistribution of income

63 For details on the impact of this strategy, see Donaldson et al. 2019.

64 Data sourced from *Statistical Yearbooks* of Guizhou and Yunnan, various years.

growth was so extreme that it reversed a decade-long pattern that was a manifestation of Guizhou's micro-oriented state strategy. Since 1996, the average net rural income of Guizhou's poor counties was higher than that of poor counties in its wealthier, more developed and faster-growing neighbour, Yunnan province. Under Guizhou's new strategy, this pattern reversed in 2014. The impact of Guizhou's development push on the overall economy, as well as the livelihoods of the poor, was surprising elusive.

All in all, Guizhou saw nearly 9 trillion yuan in fixed-asset investment between 2005 and 2015, most of which was sourced from public (75 per cent) and provincial (92 per cent) coffers. Provincial revenues that year (150.3 billion yuan in total) were dwarfed by public expenditures (393.9 billion yuan).⁶⁵ Consequently, Guizhou's public debt (875 billion yuan) stood at 83 per cent of its entire GDP, proportionally the highest level of provincial debt in China. Thus, while the shift in strategy to the developmentalist approach was accompanied by GDP growth, the link between the two is tenuous. Some of the investment appears to be unproductive and is in any case distributed disproportionately to non-poor areas of Guizhou. Spending on fixed-assets in Guizhou was driven by the provincial government-linked entities and conducted through leveraging the state budget. Compared to other provinces, Guizhou now has the highest public debt as a proportion to the total size of its economy. These data draw into question the sustainability and impact of Guizhou's post-2010 strategy and, by extension, China's developmentalist strategy overall.

Conclusion

Why did Guizhou adopt the micro-oriented state policy in the first place? And, despite this policy's positive impact on poverty reduction, why did subsequent leaders dismantle it? During each of the periods examined here, Guizhou's economic decisions can be largely ascribed to the backgrounds of its provincial leaders, be they life-long Guizhou residents or hailing from outside the province. The provincial leaders during the first period under study had extensive experience of poverty, both during their formative years and through constant engagement with poor people throughout their careers. Guizhou's Party secretaries and governors in the second period had previously held leadership positions in the most developed coastal provinces or well-developed municipalities. Drawing on their experiences, these leaders sought to emulate the developmental success of these areas. They promoted economic growth through rolling back the micro-oriented state policies and promoting urbanization and high-tech industrialization. In both cases, the central government played a role, endorsing both policies, although largely retrospectively.

65 The provincial debt figure does not reflect debt generated from public-private partnerships. Taking the public portion of that debt into account, economist Qian Jiwei estimates Guizhou's total debt for 2018 to be 1.4 trillion yuan, or more than 95% of the province's GDP for that year (Qian 2020). The authors thank Adam Liu and Jean Oi for pointing out Guizhou's high public debt.

Regarding the scholarly understanding of local decision making in China, and especially regarding changes in policy direction, this study suggests some amendments. First, our conclusions call into question the idea that localist leaders will promote the interests of the local people versus the interests of the country as a whole. This approach works well for issues that are not especially controversial, such as why leaders choose to promote their local economies through Keynesian-style spending versus privileging national interests by controlling inflation through austerity. Here, we observe that it is not just a leader's province of origin that influences decision making but also the types of experiences held by such leaders. Moreover, these experiences influenced not just the means to the end – the content of policy – but also helped leaders define what they saw as the ends themselves, whether it be rural development versus urbanization, promotion of agriculture versus industry, or privileging large-scale enterprises versus small-scale businesses. In this way, which interests are privileged is politically defined, and understanding why different leaders favour different interests can require a deeper understanding of their backgrounds and experiences.

While the Guizhou case is relatively rare in terms of the adoption of a micro-oriented state strategy on a provincial level and for such an extended period, we suggest this case is nonetheless comparable in a number of ways. First, Guizhou is not the only province to attempt to push the envelope and test the limits of what Beijing will allow in terms of flexibility. Second, the importance of the backgrounds and experiences of local leaders, we suggest, should be registered in a range of cases. Indeed, although not explored here, these conclusions also apply to Yunnan. To be sure, this manuscript necessarily limits its focus primarily on one province's rich and varied experience. Testing the robustness of these insights requires further research on other provinces as well as other levels of the administrative hierarchy. Indeed, to the extent that backgrounds and experiences matter, they should influence decision making throughout China's vast bureaucracy. Such a research project would help illuminate the extent and the conditions under which individual leaders' experiences shape decision making.

This manuscript also emphasizes that if policy is locally driven, central leaders can mould local policy by changing local leaders. Path dependency can maintain the status quo for a time, such as when provincial governors and vice-Party secretaries from Guizhou protected the micro-oriented policies from the short-term provincial Party secretaries who lacked experience with poverty, but these secretaries neither understood Guizhou's unique conditions nor were they much interested in changing direction. Given that Hu Jintao helped to shape Guizhou's original micro-oriented approach and then subsequently extended the strategy through his "scientific development concept," it is ironic that the death throes of the micro-oriented policy in Guizhou came in the middle of Hu's presidency. To be sure, after Hu stepped down, the Xi administration emphasized poverty reduction. Yet Xi's policies reflect a return to, or perhaps even a doubling down on, the developmentalist policies of Hu's central predecessors, with the focus on GDP, urbanization, consumption and fixed-asset investment. Accordingly, Xi appointed

to Guizhou a series of leaders with lengthy experience of coastal provinces and a track record of and commitment to applying coastal models to Guizhou's context. Thus, Xi's influence is great: although the mountains of Guizhou remain as high as ever, the emperor no longer feels so distant. However, if these provincial leaders had lacked the necessary experience of successful development based on industrialization and urbanization, it is unlikely that they would have implemented these developmentalist policies with the same zeal, irrespective of Xi's wishes.

Thus, the Xi administration's stark change in development strategy and successful concentration of power notwithstanding, the factors influencing local policy choice have remained constant throughout the reform period. The degree of policy flexibility has waxed and waned throughout the reform era. What local leaders do with that flexibility remains linked to their personal characteristics and backgrounds. Such factors influenced how each leader interpreted and defined Guizhou's interests as well as the specific policy choice that was prudent to achieving and promoting those interests. Together with central leaders' support, local leaders' direct experiences with poverty and prosperity, deprivation and development influenced Guizhou's developmental course through continuity and change. In the end, considerable investments were made in large-scale development and infrastructure projects that were justified in the name of helping the poor and retrospectively linked to Xi's precision poverty reduction policy. These policies promoted economic growth, but the benefits of that growth were poorly distributed and, so far, have done little for the poor. In some cases, these policies excluded the poor from participation; in others they undermined the survival strategy of poor rural residents. Moreover, these policies have thrust Guizhou deeper into debt. In Guizhou, as in China itself, it may not be official doctrine that the "poor ye shall always have with you," but the reality of poverty is unlikely to change, Xi's declarations aside. Regardless, Guizhou's original experiment with the micro-oriented state, which was successful in terms of poverty reduction despite its lack of economic growth, is no more, lost in the passionate pursuit of progress and development.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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摘要: 为什么省级政府会改变一些已实践成功的政策? 本文主要围绕有关省级政策决策及省级政府决策自主性的影响因素争论展开。文章详细分析了贵州省发展战略的转变——从扶贫为导向转为全面追求经济增长、城镇化、与产业化。目前许多学者认为政策转变取决于中央实验、地方官员谋求晋升、或本地条件等主导因素。本文挑战上述观点, 认为贵州省的政策转变实际上与省级高层领导人的背景与工作经验密切相关。本研究的结果将有助于增进对中央—地方关系以及地方政府决策过程的认识。

关键词: 贵州; 发展战略; 中央与地方关系; 地方政治; 中国西部

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