

Titel: Co-producing Development: Behavioural and institutional agency in China's poverty alleviation

This dissertation examines how policy adoption and implementation are shaped by bounded agency across levels within China's hierarchical poverty alleviation and rural development governance system. China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign is often explained through state capacity, top-down mobilisation, target responsibility systems, and campaign-style implementation. These features were central to the campaign, through which China officially lifted 98.99 million people out of extreme rural poverty between 2013 and 2021. Yet a purely top-down account cannot fully explain how policy models were developed, adapted, accepted, or sustained across diverse rural settings. Centrally defined policies do not enter a social vacuum. They are interpreted through organisational routines, local expectations, household experiences, and frontline understandings of responsibility.

The dissertation asks: How do institutional intermediaries, frontline officials, and community members exercise agency in shaping policy adoption, implementation, and continuation under China's poverty alleviation and post-poverty rural development governance?

The central argument is that China's poverty alleviation governance is best understood as a multi-level process of policy co-production under hierarchy. Agency in this setting does not primarily take the form of open resistance, autonomy from the state, or deviation from central objectives. Instead, it operates within constraint. Organisational intermediaries align innovation with shifting political priorities; frontline officials respond to policy narratives that define who acts, who leads, and who bears responsibility; and community members interpret collective provision through responsibility beliefs shaped by norms, village life, and long-term state intervention. These forms of agency are politically bounded and uneven, but consequential. They shape whether policy ideas become adoptable, whether initiative-taking appears legitimate or risky, and whether collective welfare services can be co-provided and sustained.

Methodologically, the dissertation adopts a multi-level and multi-method design. It combines qualitative policy-process analysis, a survey experiment with village cadres, and a lab-in-the-field experiment with rural villagers. The three empirical chapters examine connected sites of intermediation: organisational intermediaries, frontline officials, and community members.

The first empirical study (Chapter 4) analyses organisational agency through the case of a state-affiliated government-organised non-governmental organisation and its development of the Britevilla poverty alleviation model. Drawing on the Multiple Streams Framework, the chapter shows how the organisation acted as a policy entrepreneur by coupling problem, policy, and political streams across two major policy windows: post-disaster reconstruction

after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and the formal institutionalisation of Targeted Poverty Alleviation after 2015. The organisation's success did not derive from autonomy from the state, but from its hybrid position: it combined political trust, policy-network access, field-level experience, and operational flexibility. Britevilla became adoptable when it was framed as a politically safe, technically workable, and locally useful solution for governments under performance pressure. The chapter identifies a mechanism of brokered innovation: politically trusted intermediaries can package field-tested models for uptake by local governments and wider diffusion in a centralised system.

The second empirical study (Chapter 5) examines village cadres as frontline interpreters of policy responsibility. Using a survey experiment grounded in the Narrative Policy Framework, the chapter tests whether different poverty alleviation narratives influence cadres' risk preferences. Risk preference is treated not simply as a personal economic trait, but as a behavioural proxy for willingness to act under uncertainty, a core condition of implementation agency. In a video-based priming experiment embedded in a national survey of village officials, respondents were randomly exposed to either a state-centric narrative portraying the government as the heroic agent of poverty alleviation, an individual-agency narrative emphasising self-reliance and personal initiative, or no video. The results show that cadres exposed to the individual-agency narrative displayed significantly higher risk preferences than those exposed to the state-centric narrative. The chapter argues that narratives do not merely communicate policy achievements; they configure implementation agency by shaping how cadres perceive responsibility, discretion, and legitimate initiative.

The third empirical study (Chapter 6) examines community-level agency through the co-provision of rural eldercare. In ageing rural China, eldercare is a central post-poverty governance problem because older people constitute a large share of the remaining village population and because rural vulnerability increasingly concerns welfare sustainability rather than only income poverty. The chapter studies villagers' willingness to contribute money and volunteer time to collective eldercare services such as village canteens and day-care centres. It asks whether cues about anticipated government support and community responsibility shape willingness to co-provide eldercare, and whether these effects depend on pre-existing responsibility beliefs. The field experiment was conducted with 541 villagers in 14 rural communities. Participants received either a neutral description, a government-support cue, or a community-responsibility cue, and then reconsidered their choices in a second round, with the government-support group facing an explicit subsidy-withdrawal scenario.

The findings show limited average cue effects in the first round, suggesting that one-off messages do not uniformly shift cooperation in a heterogeneous rural population. More importantly, monetary contributions declined when anticipated government subsidies were explicitly withdrawn, indicating that financial willingness to co-provide eldercare is sensitive to the credibility and stability of public-support signals. Latent profile analysis identifies three responsibility orientations: family-oriented, state-oriented, and mixed. State-oriented respondents contributed more than mixed-orientation respondents in the neutral condition, while cue responsiveness was clearest among respondents with mixed responsibility

beliefs, especially under the community-responsibility cue. These findings revise a simple crowding-out interpretation. State support does not necessarily suppress community participation; rather, villagers respond to eldercare as a shared-responsibility domain in which family, village, and state roles coexist.

Taken together, the empirical chapters show that policy adoption and implementation in China's poverty alleviation and rural development governance depends on alignment among institutional signals, narrative meanings, and normative beliefs. The first study demonstrates how intermediary organisations help policy models become adoptable by aligning innovation with political priorities and local implementation needs. The second shows how frontline officials interpret responsibility and discretionary space under competing narratives. The third shows how rural residents determine whether collective welfare services can be co-provided through layered responsibility beliefs and credible public-support signals. Across the three studies, policy ideas are rendered workable, interpreted in practice, and sustained through local participation.

The dissertation makes four main contributions. First, it extends implementation theory by showing that autocracy does not eliminate agency: even under strong central control, implementation involves interpretation, alignment, and behavioural response. Second, it contributes to the study of Chinese governance by showing how intermediaries, cadres, and villagers participate in the practical production of policy outcomes without necessarily challenging state authority. Third, it advances behavioural public policy by situating narrative framing, responsibility beliefs, subsidy credibility, and cue effects within an institutional context marked by long-term state intervention. Fourth, it refines the concept of co-production for centralised systems. Co-production here does not imply equal partnership between state and society. It refers instead to a politically asymmetric process in which state authority depends on organisational mediation, frontline interpretation, and community participation.

Overall, the dissertation argues that China's poverty alleviation outcomes were not produced by central command alone. They emerged through a layered process in which organisational actors, frontline cadres, and rural residents interpreted and enacted policy under constraint. These actors did not stand outside the state-led campaign, but they helped make it workable. By tracing organisational, narrative-susceptible, and behavioural-normative forms of agency, the dissertation offers a more nuanced account of how development policy is adopted, implemented, and co-provided in an autocratic governance system.