The Campaign Rolls On: Rural Governance in China under Xi Jinping and the War on Poverty

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<ABSTRACT>
The broad aim of this article is to analyse the institutions of China’s rural local governments in their own right, and thus further our understanding of the political and social mechanisms that maintain and support them. What changes do rural officials’ evolving notions of “development” and “modernisation” under Xi Jinping bring? What shifts can we detect? The article focuses on two developments under Xi: the increased role of the Party-led “leading small groups” in Chinese local governments, and Xi’s “war on poverty”, which aims to lift all Chinese citizens out of poverty by 2020 through a mixture of targeted fiscal support and compulsory resettlement of millions of rural residents. Examining these developments in fact sheds some insights into Xi’s efforts to remodel the Chinese polity and society. Do they represent a real break with past practice, or do they provide evidence of continuity with previous trends in China’s institutions of rural governance?

INTRODUCTION

When the Communist Party of China (CPC) officially shifted from a revolutionary to a ruling party in 2005, it seemed to be a signal that it was moving away from its traditional reliance on campaign-style governance, and committing to a more

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managerial and technocratic approach to governance. Xi Jinping’s (or rather, Lou Jiwei’s) fiscal reforms of 2014 potentially represent the most significant change to central–local relations since 1994, with significant centralisation of service provision—particularly in health, social security and education. Reforms to value-added tax and mining taxes, and the passage of the Budget Law are significant achievements, even though the introduction of comprehensive taxes on property and capital look to be a bridge too far. This article argues that 11 years later, old habits persist: the CPC at the local level is still a party addicted to campaign-style mobilisation.

James Ferguson notes in his critique of the international development industry in Lesotho that “development” refers to at least two separate things. One usage of the word refers to a transition towards a modern, capitalist, industrial economy and implies historical processes. The second usage of the word carries a moral tone, and defines itself in terms of “standard of living” and the alleviation of poverty. Ferguson notes that the two usages tend to be conflated in international development discourse, with transition to commercialised modernisation implicitly linked to the alleviation of poverty and the improvement of the “quality of life”. Several scholars have traced the evolution of the moral imperative of development to Truman’s Point Four speech of 29 January 1949.

A common thread of most of these arguments is that poverty is seen as a failing of or as a lack of certain attributes, and the development discourse serves to decouple poverty from historical and political factors, presenting modernity as an apolitical and inevitable choice for the rulers of developing countries to better their citizens livelihoods if they are to be legitimate governments. Deng Xiaopeng’s still ubiquitous maxim, “development is the only path” (fazhan shi ying daoli), is one of

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the more forceful expressions of this ideology. While scholars, such as Ferguson, are largely concerned with the international development industry and their critiques do not pose a serious threat to the international belief in the value of development, this article will take a similarly critical approach to rural development programmes in China, with a particular focus on Xi Jinping’s reforms in poverty alleviation and rural governance. The “collective certainty” over the need to develop a “backward” \(^5\) (luohou) rural China is stronger within China’s ruling elite than it is among the international development community. Development (fazhan) meaning historical processes and development as a moral imperative are not just conflated in Chinese language; rather, the distinction is simply not made.

My concern is not to condemn China’s past and present rural development programme for what it has failed to achieve. Rather, my aim is to analyse them as institutions in their own right, and thus explore the political and social mechanisms that maintain and support them. What changes do rural officials’ evolving notions of

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4 Stuart Corbridge, “The (Im)possibility of Development Studies”, *Economy and Society* 36 no. 2 (2007): 179–211. Corbridge outlines the weaknesses of five separate theses that critique the international development industry and questions the validity of development studies as a discipline.


“development” and “modernisation” bring, and what shifts can we detect under the rule of Xi Jinping? Again, my concern is not primarily with the truth or falsehood of the arguments, but rather what consequences these attitudes have for policymaking and implementation, and how such ideas feed back into wider political and social processes.

Rural development in China relies on many state agencies, such as those concerned with providing services such as credit, land registration and irrigation. This article will, however, focus on changes to the poverty alleviation system and the role of agribusiness in rural Anhui, because these are policy areas where Xi Jinping’s regime has made a sharp break with past practice. In the case of poverty alleviation, the target of poverty has shifted over time from the county to the village, and finally under Xi, to the individual and the household. The poorest rural citizens are to be targeted by local governments as a whole, in a campaign imbued with militaristic language.

In a related push, individual farmers are to be vertically integrated by local agribusinesses, sometimes referred to as “dragonhead enterprises”. It has been argued that agricultural development in areas such as rural Anhui involves a homogenising “high modernist” logic of transforming “farmers into ‘standard’ farmers growing the required genotype [of crop] on similar soils and leveled fields and according to the instructions printed right on the seed packages, applying the same fertilizers, pesticides, and amounts of water. It is a logic of homogenization and the virtual elimination of local knowledge”.  

Scott and other authors8 note that the process of persuading farmers to adopt new technologies and to fit into larger business structures is not straightforward. Farmers tend to be polytheists with respect to agricultural knowledge, selectively adopting only what seems useful from scientific agriculture. Traditional and modern agricultural knowledge systems are constantly hybridised and synthesised. Moreover, as Edmund Oasa has argued, the

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system of agricultural extension developed during the Green Revolution tended to promote an attitude to agricultural development which gave precedence to technologies that offered “high pay-off, quick returns, visible results, and demonstrability”. Has a mindset favouring rapid, visible, and quantifiable results been promoted by officials in rural Anhui? If so, to what extent and in what forms has this mindset been taken on by different groups of farmers and grassroots cadres? Does this persist in the DNA of the CPC, even though it now proclaims itself to be a governing party? The following section examines the rise of leading small groups in Benghai county and studies the evolution of rural governance under Xi Jinping.

**THE RISE OF SMALL GROUPS**

A feature of the Xi Jinping era and of his predecessor is the primacy of Party committees over government agencies, in particular the strengthened role of Party-led small groups. At the national level, leading small groups were originally construed as a mechanism for high-ranking officials to resolve conflicts between government agencies, other organisations and the localities. Johnson and Kennedy argue in an article that the increasing assertiveness of these leading small groups provides evidence of a shift of power from the government to the Party. At the local level, however, this is not a new phenomenon. Such a shift already occurred before the Xi Jinping era at the township and county levels. By the mid 2000s in Benghai, every conceivable aspect of township work was covered by one leading work group or another. A similar pattern could be seen at the county and prefectural levels. The conflict resolution aspect was still present—particularly important for agencies such as forestry and agriculture, whose higher levels were forever waging “document wars” to expand their bailiwicks.

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More importantly these groups were an indication to township government workers as to which tasks the township Party secretary had given top priority, and acted as formal cover for the campaign-style mobilisation of government staff. This had long been a characteristic of “core tasks” for under-strength township governments. Whether the task pertained to collecting taxes, enforcing family planning regulations or attracting investment, township governments would adopt an “all hands on deck” approach to overcome shortfalls in staffing and material resources. The significance of the emergence of leading small groups in local government is that they formalise what was formerly an informal institutional arrangement. Thus, while much was done in the late 2000s to clarify the role of staff (particularly in service units) within township governments, the creation of these groups—with the blessing of higher levels of government—provides formal cover for township Party leaders to direct township staff away from their posts to the task of the day. Agricultural extension agents may have a precisely defined workspace and a neatly framed list that outlines their professional duties, but they can still be dragged into family planning tasks or township beautification campaigns on any given day. Weberian bureaucracies may like to govern, but parties like to campaign. The top 10 leading work groups for one of Benghai’s more populous and prosperous agricultural townships are listed in the order that they appeared in 2008 (Table 1).

**TABLE 1 Top 10 Leading Work Groups for Mingjia Town, 2008**

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<th>1. Industrial private economy and attracting investment</th>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Industrial zone project construction</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Safe production</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Intra-county business recruitment</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Family planning projects</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Building office efficiencies</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Comprehensive management of social stability</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Building a peaceful township</td>
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Altogether, 30 groups were established, and the township Party secretary chaired 16 of these groups, including 13 of the 14 top-ranked groups, a commitment to centralisation that even Xi Jinping—who is currently in charge of 13 leading small groups—might baulk at. Examining the composition of the groups, it is remarkable that they are neither leading nor small. The groups effectively draw in all of the township government staff, as well as the leading cadres. Their purpose is to signal to all township government staff the priorities of the local Party leaders, particularly the township Party secretary. More competent staff will be assigned to high-priority groups, while the township government’s lesser lights will find themselves attending to lower-priority tasks, such as religious work or building rural grassroots organisations.

While the majority of the township’s residents rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, it is noteworthy that not a single leading group in the top 10 (and only one overall) takes an interest in agriculture. For Benghai, this demonstrates the extremely low priority of agriculture for the Party at the county level and also the township Party secretary’s preferences, which were extreme, even among Benghai’s decidedly pro-urbanisation officials. Only one of the 11 staff in the township agricultural extension station, i.e. the station head, was actually working in their original job. The others had been drafted to work in other agencies. As of 2016 the station head is concurrently running the township’s construction planning and law enforcement bureau, leaving little or no time for extension work.

The governance logic of the small groups, although it may stem from the aspiration to better coordinate local government activities in priority areas, puts the CPC in rural China on a permanently campaign-ready footing. If any of the four layers of government above the township level decide that an issue is worth pursuing in a whole-of-government manner, the township leaders will respond by forming a new small group. Similar patterns are observed at the county level. Many researchers
within China are critical of the campaign-style approach, most notably Zhao Shukai\(^{11}\) from the State Council’s Development Research Center, who argued:

A feature of these “campaigns” is that they do not harness civil society; the state employs the administrative force to create a “government movement”. Leading cadres use inspections, assessments and competition between officials; there is a lot of colour and movement as propaganda starts up; and the results are announced with fanfare. At the end of the campaign, everything is wonderful on the surface, with lessons learned and breakthroughs achieved…

However, there is an interesting possibility: the formalisation of small groups and their primacy over government functions may mean that county and township governance becomes less chaotic than it has been in the past. If a campaign is formalised, and there is no guarantee that it will just fade away Under Hu Jintao, rural officials faced with tasks that they were not enamoured with would console themselves with the phrase “this breeze will pass”. When Xi’s anti-corruption campaign was first launched, many recognised that the rhetoric was identical to the campaign launched when Hu took office. It was widely assumed that Xi’s campaign would also fade after a year or so. But what if the breeze is formalised in the Party-led leading small groups, and there is no set date when it will pass or even certainty that it will pass? Is this still considered campaign-style governance? Or is this the new normal, as others have argued?\(^{12}\) This is particularly salient when a campaign is launched that devolves 80 per cent of funding to the county level and encourages local officials to come up with innovative solutions to alleviate poverty. However, before discussing Xi Jinping’s war on poverty, I investigate further the logic behind CPC-led mobilisation in rural China in the next section.


\(^{12}\) David Kurt Herold, “Xi’s Internet: China’s New Normal Online Reality”, University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute, at <https://cpianalysis.org/2016/05/18/xis-internet-chinas-new-normal-online-reality/#.Vzwn6CrKJ5o.twitter> [17 August 2016].
THE CAMPAIGN LOGIC

Since the mid 2000s, there has been a return to traditional techniques of mass mobilisation, although these techniques now target local government workers, rather than workers and peasants. Xi’s approach should mesh with this, even though his focus on anti-corruption may not. As one county official put it to me in 2013, just as Xi’s anti-corruption campaign was beginning to have an impact on the leisure habits of Benghai’s elite, “We are already despised for being cadres, and now we cannot benefit from it? Who would do this job?” survey evidence suggests that this campaign, despite its unpopularity among cadres and the owners of restaurants and hotels, is likely to enhance the legitimacy of the Party—at least at the national level—in the eyes of ordinary citizens.13

Recent media reports have directly linked the anti-corruption campaign to Xi’s war on poverty. Xinhua reported, “China launched a five-year campaign to crack down on corruption by officials engaged in poverty relief work, which kicked off at the beginning of 2016. Meanwhile, 4,775 officials in charge of agriculture or rural areas were investigated for alleged duty crimes in the first five months, with 2,640 involved in abuse of finances”.14

Hu Jintao’s reluctance to deploy the word “campaign” has been set aside under Xi Jinping.

13 Tony Saich, “How China’s Citizens View the Quality of Governance under Xi Jinping”, *Journal of Chinese Governance* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–20. Whether petty corruption and waste can be fully reined in at the local level is doubtful. On a visit to Benghai in 2013, just after the announcement of the “four dishes one soup” edict, I saw cadres falling out of a homestead on the outskirts of the county seat in the early afternoon, red-faced and almost unable to speak. However, that they now perform these rituals out of view of rural citizens is perhaps a shift in behaviour.

Attempts to separate the Party from the government, launched in the 1980s, have long since been abandoned in rural China. In the case of Benghai, older officials recalled that the attempts were never taken up enthusiastically at the time. The Party is firmly in charge, and this tendency looks to have strengthened in the Xi Jinping era, but I would argue that this is a continuation of trends that were apparent during the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao era, rather than a radical departure. Xi’s reforms to give pre-eminence to the Party and to make use of leading small groups to coordinate government work are simply catching up with the reality on the ground in rural China. This section examines the logic behind the persistence of mobilisation and its implications for Xi’s reform agenda in rural China.

The launch of the first No. 1 Document and the “Building the New Socialist Countryside” movement marked a change in the rhetoric and practice of local governments. In Benghai, while many mid-level cadres evinced scepticism about the campaign-style language that Hu and Wen used in their speeches, there was little resistance to the return of revolutionary style of rhetoric, albeit in a more turgid, managerial form. These are but two of the “nine actions and three strategies” launched the year after the CPC formally moved from being a revolutionary to a governing party:

**Implement Building the New Socialist Countryside Model Construction Action.** Vigorously develop modern agriculture and promote rural infrastructure construction, make efforts to cultivate new farmers, strengthen grassroots democracy and promote rural public utilities.

**Implement Comprehensive Grain Production Capacity Enhancement Action.** Strive to attain the “11th Five-Year” average grain yield of 650 kilogrammes. Overall grain production capacity will reach 10 billion tonnes. In 2006 strive to achieve stable development of grain production and increase quality by five per cent.

Looking beyond the stilted language, it is striking how little the goal of mobilisation has shifted since previous rural campaigns. For all the mockery that the sudden appearance of inflatable memorial arches (*pailou*) and travelling loudspeaker vans brought to Benghai, there was general acceptance of a more campaign-style approach, even if the word “campaign” was carefully avoided in favour of more neutral terms such as “action”. In Benghai, relying on mobilisation tactics had long
been a rational response on the part of local officials to the declining commitment of township staff and to the lack of bodies to carry out the ever-increasing number of tasks handed down by higher-levels of government. Thus, Xi’s approach to rural development, while more forceful in its rhetoric, is in many respects a continuation of trends observed under Hu Jintao and his predecessors.

One of the most successful projects launched under Mao and continued under Deng was the promotion of hybrid rice varieties in the 1960s through to the 1980s. I shall briefly examine this project, as it has many similarities with Xi’s war on poverty, in terms of the whole-of-government approach and the focus on visible results. A former village accountant described the logic of this campaign to me in these terms:

> From 1982 onwards hybrid rice seeds were provided to the brigades, and the brigades would pass on the responsibility to the production teams. Everyone had to be involved. It was an administrative task and you had to complete it. Those cadres who persuaded their team to adopt hybrid rice would be publicly praised at a village meeting, while those who failed would be subject to criticism. Unfortunately the first varieties promoted were not very good, and often the grain would not emerge from the bud. There was quite a lot of resistance from some farmers.

While farmers were initially resistant to the adoption of hybrid varieties—largely on the grounds of their waxy taste—over time they came to internalise the modernist logic presented to them by agricultural extension officers and other cadres who were mobilised in this door-to-door campaign. All rural officials were called upon, and a great deal of the campaign was focused on “thought work”, praising the aesthetic of the deep-green compact hybrid rice plants while stigmatising larger conventional rice plants as the fruit of “stupid seeds” (ben zhongzi), a term which farmers still commonly use when referring to conventional rice. Ironically, this made it difficult for the state to promote the labour-saving direct-seeding (paoyang) method to the same farmers in the 1990s and 2000s. The technique, which requires seedlings to be dispersed rather than painstakingly planted by hand (chayang), was resisted by farmers largely on the grounds that it failed to live up to their image of the modernist ideal. As one farmer put it, “Directly-seeded fields are a mess, very uneven. They do not look as neat transplanted fields.” A seed vendor, who was
puzzled over why farmers refused to adopt a technique that would save them time and lead to higher yields, drew the following conclusion:

Lots of farmers are averse to it, a big clump here, a bald patch there; it is not very well distributed (junyun). Also, most farmers around here harvest their crop by hand, and in fields that have been direct-seeded, there is no gap between the rows to place your rice bundle (dao kun)...And it looks ugly.

The other main shortcoming of the direct-seeding method is that it was unsuited to campaign-style dissemination and coercion that had underpinned the promotion of hybrid rice varieties. Technical knowledge was required to spread the technique and a cadre from the taxation bureau could not credibly teach it to the farmers. Nor was there an obvious stick available to the local state. In the case of hybrid rice, one of the most powerful incentives to abandon conventional rice varieties, other than for personal consumption, was the refusal by grain stations to purchase non-hybrid grain.

Workers in local government agencies, when asked to look back over bureau’s achievements, would often observe that the successful policy outcomes were those where there was heavy involvement by the township and village Party organs, and a campaign-style approach.15 This approach draws upon cultural norms of governance and language, which villagers, activists and government officials are familiar with. It plays to the strengths of the Party’s organisational structure—vertical rather than horizontal linkages—and can be tailored to fit with the agricultural cycle, crucial in a county with high levels of outmigration.16 The latest priority of county and township governments—Xi Jinping’s war on poverty—relies heavily on this approach, as discussed in the next section.

<XH1>XI JINPING’S WAR ON POVERTY</XH1>

16 Estimates of the population in Benghai vary by up to 25 per cent, depending on whether residency is based on household registration or long-term residence.
The language and the ambition in recent documents promoting a new approach to poverty alleviation embody a campaign-style approach. The central government stated its goal to lift all rural residents out of poverty by 2020. This directive affects 22 provinces with 592 counties that are designated as “poor” and more than 70 million rural residents who are categorised as “impoverished” by official definition. While poor counties and villages were targeted in the past, poor individuals are currently the targets of a whole-of-government effort to eradicate poverty. The radical shift in focus can be attributed to the difficulty in trusting local governments to define poverty; an investigation conducted in Jiajiang county, Sichuan, found thousands of “fake” poor.

From the perspective of county and township governments, this finding is not entirely surprising. As detailed in a previous study,17 Benghai county went to great lengths to retrieve the poverty “hat” it secured in 1986 after a county Party secretary made poverty elimination part of his promotion plans in the 1990s. The county was successful in reclaiming its poverty status and the accompanying financial support. As a former county Party secretary recalled in the wake of the 8-7 National Plan for Poverty Reduction, which focused on subsidised loans, food-for-work and government budgetary grants, “A lot of concessional policies only flowed to the nationally-designated poverty counties, we said that we’d won a place on the ‘national team’.” Another county leader from the north-east recalled, “In our county, we had quite a lot of arable land, and farmers had a fairly wide range of income sources, so the other counties were always saying that we wore a fake poverty hat. The provincial deputy responsible for agriculture came to see me about lifting the county out of poverty, and ran the figures past me. But we were quite capable of coming up with our own figures, so we held onto that hat.”18 It is remarkable that the number of officially poor counties has remained fixed at 592 (with 14 “contiguous”

poor regions) since 1994, even as China has undergone a spectacular economic transformation.

The focus shifted to villages (148,000 were designated) in 2001, but the reforms, announced in 2015, placed poverty alleviation work on a different footing for rural officials. The leaders of 22 provinces in central and western China were required to take a “military pledge” (junling zhuang) to complete the task, and thus held directly responsible for meeting the target of lifting all rural residents out of poverty by 2020. Given the stock trope of “military pledge”—which literally means an officer will face harsh disciplinary action should he fail to complete an undertaking given by his superior or fulfill a heroic mission—is recurrent in old novels and potboiler historical dramas, Xi Jinping felt compelled to state in a speech to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection that “the military pledge is not something that is casually laid down, we will do what we say” (bushi suibian li de, women shuo de dao jiu zuo de dao). The language around the war on poverty is a break with the Hu Jintao era, invoking the “storming of fortifications” (gongjianzhan), but not the added weight given to the war on poverty in rural cadre annual assessments. As early as 2010, success in reducing the number of impoverished households accounted for up to 70 per cent of the kaohe (annual performance assessment) for Party secretaries in designated poverty counties, displacing traditional “core tasks” such as family planning, social stability and attracting investment. While such a dramatic shift contradicts Weberian ideals of predictable government, there is evidence to suggest that placing responsibility directly on the county party secretary has been crucial to the surprising success of several initiatives, such as promoting the rural medical insurance scheme.

The mobilisation flavour of the language around this ambitious programme is clear. Launching the new approach in October 2015, Hong Tianyun, deputy director of Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development framed it as a project that would mobilise not only the whole of government, but also Chinese society:

We hope to encourage all sectors of society to participate in the endeavour, to lift all rural population out of poverty by 2020. We will come up with a string of more effective and targeted measures to achieve the goal, including launching education campaigns, encouraging financial support and building public platforms to mobilise more people to join the fight.21

An interesting feature of the war on poverty is that, as in many other policy areas, it is driven by Xi’s speeches, rather than drafting legislation to supplant existing documents. The highest-ranking document on poverty alleviation, even though Xi is implementing a radical new approach, remains to be the 1999 joint resolution “The CPC Central Committee and State Council on Further Strengthening the Work of Poverty Alleviation and Development”. The lead documents issued by the Anhui provincial authorities were promulgated in 2009, during Hu Jintao’s second term.

The byword of the campaign is “precision poverty alleviation” (jingzhun fupin), meaning accurate targeting of the individuals who are identified as poor at the village level, with ratification—and public promulgation of their impoverished status—at the village, township and county levels.22 Of the 70 million impoverished citizens (as at the end of 2015), 50 million are to be assisted by support for industry, education, employment and medical care, while the remaining 20 million will be lifted over the official poverty line (2,300 yuan at 2010 prices) by direct assistance through a long-running programme to support the “five protected households” (wu bao hu),

21 [To provide source of citation] Xinhua, “Wo guo shangyou 7 qianwan pinkun renkou 6 nian nei xu quanbu tuopin” (China has 70 million impoverished citizens. Within six years they will all have escaped poverty) at http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/13/c_128310650.htm [13 October 2015].

22 Tan Chang and He Yan, “Zhongguo fupin 30 nian yanjiang shi: Jingzhun fupin weishenme?” (China’s 30-Year History of Poverty Alleviation: Why Does Precision Matter?), Nanfang zhounuo (Southern Weekend), at <http://www.infzm.com/content/115466> [7 July 2016].
primarily those unable to make a living, such as elderly and disabled people with no family support. In Benghai county, the most immediate impact of the new directives from Beijing was a bureaucratic realignment. In August 2015, the Poverty Alleviation Office was merged with the Reservoir Resettlement Bureau to create a new entity known as the Poverty Alleviation, Relocation and Development Bureau (fupin yimin kaifa ju), the first county in the prefecture to do so. The county to the north, its main historical rival (due to a grudge dating back to a purge within the CPC in the 1930s) followed suit in November 2015. Other counties line up with the lead set by the prefectural leading group for poverty alleviation and development. The bureaucratic logic of bureau formation reveals much about county-level responses to central government initiatives under Xi.

In the case of Benghai, the merger was led by the more powerful Reservoir Resettlement Bureau, which was set up several years earlier to oversee the expansion of Benghai’s main dam. At the time, it was among the county’s most desirable bureaus to join, as the construction contracts awarded proved to be extremely lucrative. Xi’s war on poverty provided an opportunity for both the resettlement and the poverty alleviation agencies to access new revenue streams. Ironically, the expanding housing development required the demolition of the Resettlement Bureau’s office. The significance of the merger is in the signal that it sends to local officials and rural residents about development priorities: resettlement is now directly equated with poverty alleviation, not as the last resort for impoverished households, but as the first consideration.

Moreover, Benghai’s county Party secretary set up the new bureau as a service unit under the direct control of Benghai county government (xian zhengfu zhishu

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23 In Benghai, the *wu bao hu* scheme was notorious for not reaching out to villagers who needed it. In villages where cadres were less inclined to divert funds to their relatives, this support would often be rotated among households, as there were more poor households in the village than the quota allowed for. Compare with An Chen, *The Transformation of Governance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 163.
shiye danwei), giving them a degree of autonomy from higher levels. This is in keeping with the war on poverty’s emphasis on devolution of authority and local innovation. This is worrying for rural residents, particularly in Benghai, where the venality of the Resettlement Bureau is a source of consternation even among county government officials. Their notoriety largely arose from their willingness to both collude with and squeeze construction companies at the bidding and procurement stages of reservoir resettlement. The inflated costs were in part passed on to resettled communities. They probably will not change their practices now that their new mandate is poverty alleviation resettlement. As previous researchers have noted, “resettlement allowances are low compared to the cost of new housing, meaning that all resettled households are servicing major debts”.24

Recent research on resettlement for poverty relief in China and elsewhere25 suggests that resettlement should only be undertaken as a last resort, be led by the resettled communities and be undertaken gradually. The current guidelines on poverty alleviation do not offer grounds for optimism on any of these fronts. While voluntary resettlement gained gradual acceptance as the mainstream approach under Hu Jintao, poverty resettlement under the current campaign is involuntary, and proceeds according to a timetable set by the national and county governments. In its zeal, and to one-up its rival county to the north,26 the Benghai county government is

26 As with many counties in China, politics in Benghai is driven not just by the ambition of individual cadres, but also by bitter rivalries with its neighbours, i.e. counties to its north and east. The historical rivalry dates back to schisms that emerged in the CPC during the 1930s—Benghai’s more moderate Party leaders were the losers in a bloody purge by Mao’s loyalists; its neighbours were beneficiaries. Party leaders, who were rotated in from these counties under the rule
determined to achieve the “no households in poverty” target by 2018, two years ahead of the national deadline.

Poverty alleviation in Anhui is directed by the Provincial Leading Group for Poverty Alleviation, a body chaired by the provincial Party secretary and the head of the Provincial Poverty Alleviation Office. This body is mirrored at the city level. While the new agency in Benghai deviates from the bureaucratic structures above it, the structure of this bureau is not without precedent elsewhere in China. Sichuan established a Poverty Alleviation and Relocation Bureau in 2009. However, this was precipitated largely by the massive resettlement programme associated with the Three Gorges Dam, not by resettlement for poverty alleviation.

The strategies favoured by the county leaders for lifting Benghai’s peasants out of poverty by 2018 are largely adaptations of strategies that existed from the Hu Jintao era: support for “red” and rural (nongjia le) tourism; funding for road construction; promotion and marketing of the county’s specialty agricultural products; vocational training under the “rain scheme” (yulu jihua) to improve the quality and off-farm prospects of peasants; and the integration of peasants into rural cooperatives and dragonhead enterprises. All of these have been central to poverty alleviation efforts in Benghai for over a decade. The only new practical aspect is the promotion of e-commerce, which in many ways acknowledges an innovation driven by urban-based consumers and the children and grandchildren of Benghai’s farmers. Also new to Benghai are the centrality of resettlement to poverty alleviation; the speed and force with which it is being conducted; the focus on individual rural households and residents; the campaign-style rhetoric; and the number of other agencies involved in the campaign. The campaign also embodies an ethnic focus captured in Xi Jinping’s words: “no minority shall be left behind”. This aspect cannot be examined in Benghai, where the only hint of ethnic diversity is a Lanzhou noodles eatery in the county seat. Other researchers suggest this aspect of the campaign will of avoidance struggle to gain traction in Benghai, and local officials talked darkly of “cliques” centred on the rival counties in the prefectural and provincial governments.
be used to depopulate border areas where the national loyalties of ethnic minorities are suspect.\textsuperscript{27}

An examination of budget documents for Benghai’s Poverty Alleviation and Resettlement Bureau reveals its relatively minor role in directly disbursing funds. The largest planned items of expenditure for 2016 were individual and family benefits, basic wages, and subsidies and allowances. Expenditure on projects accounted for less than five per cent of the bureau’s budget, a figure that only just exceeded their reported outlays on cars and entertainment (although the latter item was considerably reduced from the mid 2000s onwards, the bureau effectively supported the operation of its own restaurant, conveniently located next to the bureau and run by the family of an agricultural official). In 2015, other county agencies spent nearly 200 times more than the 100,000 yuan which the bureau allocated for infrastructure projects such as roads, irrigation, agriculture, housing, environmental improvement and other projects targeting Benghai’s designated poverty villages.

Instead of channelling funds directly, the bureau attempts to coordinate the vast amounts of money and personnel that are being thrown at Xi’s war on poverty, and often finds itself overrun by the sheer volume of activities carried out by other agencies. In Benghai, three individuals effectively run Xi’s war on poverty: the county Party secretary, the deputy county head in charge of poverty alleviation and resettlement, and the head of the organisation bureau. The dominance of the Party is both recognition of the importance of the war on poverty, and a signal to local officials that mobilization techniques are the order of the day. The bureaucratic achievement is significant: every household and resident deemed poor or targeted for resettlement (there are currently nearly equal numbers of both in Benghai) has been issued with a card. In the past, cadres at the township and county level would “sponsor” or be sent down to a particular village, they are now required to sponsor an individual household. A cadre—regardless of his or her work unit, be it the

County Tourism Bureau, the Party History Office or the Benghai branch of the Bank of China—is required to adopt an impoverished household, and his or her work unit is also required to sponsor a village. Given the different financial resources of Benghai’s different agencies and companies, there will be clear winners and losers.

Another familiar mobilisation tactic is sending county-level cadres to serve as village Party secretaries. In villages that are deemed to have intractable problems, poverty alleviation “teams” will be despatched. This strategy has clear bureaucratic logic: first, the county government has first-hand knowledge of the situation in the villages, thus bypassing unreliable township governments; second village cadres have an insight into the type of projects and funding available at the county level. Since 80 per cent of the funding for the war on poverty has been devolved to the county level, old-fashioned personnel secondment seemed to be the natural approach to revitalise poverty alleviation efforts. Nevertheless, as is the case in Benghai, the troops are there, but they are not keen to go to war. Sending cadres down has long been a tactic used to address the overstaffing issue which is rife at the county level, but few of these comfortably idle soldiers want to travel far away from their families in the county seat where they are usually focused on supporting their children’s education.

Despite the requirement for “precision” in Xi’s war on poverty, local lobbying and adaptation still reign. Although county documents are peppered with references to the need to focus on “remote, mountainous and dam-affected areas”, all of Benghai’s townships—even those that house the county seat—were expected to have at least one poverty village. Many of the designated villages in wealthier townships are on the plains and boast excellent transport links, making them far wealthier than villages in more remote, mountainous townships, which were usually overlooked. Officials in these townships are, however, generally on a more secure promotion track than those posted to genuinely impoverished townships. Another contradiction with the use of the term “precision” is that the metric used to measure success remains the same, i.e. how many households are lifted out of poverty. This crude metric is as easy to fudge as it was in the past, and Party secretaries will be doing whatever they can to make their achievements visible to their superiors. With the county firmly in charge of the war on poverty, the officials who faked poverty
alleviation numbers in the past are the same personnel in charge of “precision”
poverty alleviation. The need for visible development outcomes and quantifiable
achievements makes it probable that poverty alleviation resettlement will be given
priority over smaller, more affordable investments to reduce poverty. While this is
not a new issue in China, now that the metric is linked to the promotion prospects
of everyone from the poorest township party secretary to the Anhui provincial party
boss, faking it until you make it looks inevitable in Xi’s war on poverty.

The campaign will undoubtedly leave deep scars on the poorest residents of
Benghai, who are targets of complaints by township officials for their “backwardness”
and also targets of a forcible relocation campaign that promises to enrich these cadres
and their associates in the “shadow state”. As has been the case at other stages in
Chinese history, a cause for concern is that cadres who are posted to the more remote
townships and villages will push even harder than those on a safe promotion track,
who are typically rewarded with a township or a village close to the county seat. In
a bid to attract favour of their superiors, ambitious cadres in these backwaters are
likely to take Xi’s militaristic language to heart. In Benghai, as was the case with the
promotion of hybrid rice, a great deal of emphasis is being placed on old-fashioned
“thought work” to convince impoverished households that relocation is in their best
interests. Perhaps the best the local state can hope for is that, as was the case for
hybrid rice, rural citizens will eventually internalise the state’s narrative of
development and embrace their resettlement as an inevitable part of China’s
modernisation. As with the promotion of hybrid rice, it is clear that rural residents
do not have a choice.

Given Lou Jiwei’s sensible moves towards fiscal reform, “bonsai” poverty
alleviation projects are becoming a target for ridicule in the state media.

Developmental Strategies? A Study of Two Puzzling Chinese Provinces”,
29 Graeme Smith, “Measurement, Promotions and Patterns of
Behavior in Chinese Local Government”, Journal of Peasant Studies 40,
no. 6 (2013): 1027–50.
30 Zhang Zhifeng, “Dujue ‘zao penjing shi’ de zuoxiu fupin: ruhe
saochu ‘tuopin gongjianzhan’ zhang’ai” (Putting an End to “Bonsai
highlighting the concern that bigger is better. At a time when parts of the Chinese government are attempting to move from a wasteful, infrastructure- and GDP-driven model of local government, Xi’s war on poverty seems to be pulling in a different direction. This is perhaps the inevitable consequence of formalising Party control of local government through leading small groups. Old habits die hard in rural Party branches, and the informal institutions and norms that reside there may prove more than a match for Lou’s efforts at fiscal reform. An intriguing possibility, however, is that the primacy of leading small groups may ultimately lead to more stable rural governance, particularly at the township and county level. At the township level (Table 1), one of its first responses to the war on poverty was to set up the Mingjia Town Precision Poverty Alleviation Employment Leading Small Group (jingzhun fupin jiuye zhidao xiaozu). By formalising the practice of diverting government personnel to Party-driven tasks such as the war on poverty, Xi may have established a new normal for the practice of rural governance, one that is broadly accepted by rural cadres and to some extent by rural residents.

While it is interesting to note that in the county most proximate to Benghai that is not considered an official poverty county (the discussion is beyond the scope of this article), there are remarkably continuities in governance style. There is meticulous documentation of which households have been led out of poverty and how, down to how many chickens, ducks or pigs have been provided to lead the way to prosperity, the date they were delivered, how much they cost, and which agency supplied them. Party-led small groups still dominate governance. A campaign-style approach is still evident, but it is less frenzied and focused on tasks less suited to an “all hands on deck” approach, such as improving industrial safety.

Style” Showcase Poverty Relief: How to Eliminate Obstacles to the War on Poverty), Renmin ribao (People’s Daily), at <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2015/1211/c1003-27913417.html> [18 August 2016]. Much of the bonsai critique—cadres creating showcase projects close to main roads to please their superiors and score well in the annual assessments while neglecting remote villages—is legitimate. Yet the imagery is unfortunate: smaller, more targeted efforts are more effective in the long term.
Institutionalisation of Party dominance may not be “neo-socialism”, but it might provide the basis for a more coherent Party-state in rural China. It will be fascinating to see what direction rural governance will take after 2020, after victory is declared in the war on poverty and a thousand of photo opportunities bloom. When the twin campaigns against graft and poverty wind down, will the campaign roll on in with new targets and goals, or will there be an attempt to regularise rural governance? It will also be interesting to observe whether China’s new approach to poverty alleviation domestically will affect the way China provides aid internationally, a link that the state media has recently started to make.31