


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Operational Dilemmas and Cadre Education and Training at a County Party School in China

Mattias Ottervik¹, Haoyu Wang² and Zhen Li³ 

¹Center for Quality of Life and Public Policy Research, and School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, Qingdao, China, ²School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, and ³School of Political Science and Public Administration, and Institute of State Governance, Shandong University, Qingdao, China

Corresponding author: Zhen Li; Email: lizhen@email.sdu.edu.cn

Abstract

Since the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012, the Party school system has been subject to several reforms. How well these reforms have been implemented in lower-level Party schools has received little attention because access is difficult to obtain. We conducted on-site investigations, interviews with cadres and surveys of trainees at a county/district-level Party school in an economically typical city and county. Our findings show that operational dilemmas lead to the perfunctory implementation of policy that is substantively deficient. These operational dilemmas are likely to be found in varying degrees in other county/district Party schools. Our finding that cadre education and training policy is implemented in a pro forma manner suggests that cadres may not be receiving the ideological education and practical training intended for them by the centre.

摘要

自 2012 年 11 月的中共十八大以来，中国的党校系统历经了多次改革。然而，由于当前难以在地方政府及党校开展实地调查，学界很少能够对基层党校系列改革的执行情况进行系统研究。通过对一个从经济规模来看较为典型的区县的党校进行了实地调查、干部访谈和学员调查，我们填补了这一领域的研究空白。我们的研究表明，基层党校的运行困境导致了改革政策的形式化执行，从而造成政策的实际内容未被充分执行。这些运行上存在的困境在其他区县层级的地方党校也可能不同程度的出现。因此，从地方政府和党校对干部教育培训改革政策的形式化执行情况来看，地方干部并没有获得符合中央预期的意识形态教育和业务培训。

Keywords: cadre education and training; Party school system; China; Chinese Communist Party; policy implementation; pro forma implementation

关键词: 干部教育培训; 党校系统; 中国; 中国共产党; 政策执行; 形式化执行

East Asia's effective Weberian bureaucracies help to explain the region's rapid development.¹ China is no exception, and it has a bureaucracy that at the municipal level is as Weberian as that of the United States at the federal level.² The Communist Party of China (CCP) manages this bureaucracy through the *dang guan ganbu* 党管干部 (Party management of cadres) system, which encompasses the entire career of Party and state cadres. Integral to the *dang guan ganbu* system is the Party school system (PSS) that provides the cadres with ideological education and practical training.³ Since the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012, the PSS has undergone a succession of reforms. However, the distance between the central and local Party committees means that there may be a gap between central policy and local implementation. The question of how big a gap is a pressing

1 Evans and Rauch 1999; Henderson et al. 2007.

2 Boittin, Distelhorst and Fukuyama 2016.

3 Shambaugh 2008; Lee 2018; Pieke 2009, 72–75.

concern for the party-state, as how well county/district Party schools perform their function of ensuring cadres' ideological rectitude and practical competence could have far-reaching consequences.⁴

Owing to a lack of access, research on the PSS has mainly focused on the central and provincial levels rather than on the city and county/district levels where the majority of cadre education and training (CET) takes place. The limited research that exists on the county/district level is, as discussed below, concentrated on notably poor or wealthy areas.⁵ The wealth of an area is an important determinant of local Party school performance as schools are funded by local governments and through income-generating activities.⁶ Little is known about how well lower-level Party schools in areas marked neither by poverty nor wealth perform their function, especially since the 18th National Congress.

This study investigates post-18th National Congress central CET policy implementation at a Party school in an economically typical county. On-site investigations and interviews with members of the county Party committee, cadres in the county organization department and Party school, and cadres in the superior city Party school provided a comprehensive view of the county Party school as well as its operational context. China is too large a country for any one case to be nationally representative (i.e. that it has the same properties as all other cases); however, we believe that the county Party school we investigated, being located in a city and county close to the economic median, can be said to be somewhat typical (i.e. that it is similar to many other cases).⁷ In other words, the situation in the studied Party school is likely to be indicative of the situation in other typical county/district schools.

We found that CET policy implementation in the school under study was primarily perfunctory. We traced this pro forma implementation of CET policy to three operational dilemmas, which are likely to be found in varying degrees across China's lower-level governments. Our results suggest that grassroots cadres may not be receiving the ideological education and practical training intended for them by the centre.

Multilevel Government and Imperfect Policy Implementation

China's five levels of government create inherent compliance problems. An order-of-magnitude increase in administrative units at each level below the centre produces considerable "noise" and (inadvertent) "incompetence."⁸ Details of facts on the ground are omitted or lost as reports make their way up through several levels of government, creating "noise." Similarly, passing through several levels of government, policy is often imperfectly implemented – not through bungling, but rather for contingent and unique reasons, including selective implementation – leading to "incompetence." The central government is aware of and has in the past accepted varying levels of non-compliance in different policy areas.⁹

Because higher-level policy mandates are largely funded by local governments, limited local resources are a significant constraint for local implementation of higher-level policy.¹⁰ In the past, this led to selective compliance as local governments prioritized certain policies, complying with some but not with others.¹¹ To ensure an acceptable balance of compliance and non-compliance across policy areas, higher levels of government set "seemingly infeasible goals" and

4 See, e.g., Shambaugh 2008; Liu 2009; Zheng 2010, 150–175.

5 Pieke 2009; Lee 2015; 2018; Tian and Tsai 2021.

6 Pieke 2009, 132ff; see also Lee 2015; 2018.

7 The median represents the middle value of a dataset when all values are arranged from smallest to largest. The economic median is the midpoint when all local economies are sorted from the smallest to the largest.

8 Wedeman 2001.

9 Lampton 1987, 7–8.

10 Fan 2015; Van der Kamp, Lorentzen and Mattingly 2017.

11 O'Brien and Li 1999; Meng and Su 2021.

then sent complex signals to propel the lower levels to seek a balance between often conflicting policies.¹² Unpredictable punishment for not meeting goals, and a tacit understanding between higher- and lower-level officials of what level of non-compliance in any given policy area was acceptable, created cautious, balanced compliance by lower-level governments.¹³

Since 2012, the manner of non-compliance has changed from selective to pro forma implementation of policy. The proliferation of hard and soft targets whose completion is closely supervised by higher levels¹⁴ has left less room for selective implementation.¹⁵ Local governments therefore resort to pro forma implementation – an imperfect implementation that is formally compliant but substantively deficient – of lower-priority policy.¹⁶ Through a mixture of policy misinterpretation, implementation process modification, artifact production (meeting agendas, meeting photos, and so on) and red tape, local governments implement the form but not the substance of a given (part of a) policy. These tactics allow local governments to be formally compliant while still allocating limited resources to the substantive implementation of high-priority policies. Pro forma implementation allows local governments to be “super-compliant,” as they are (formally) more compliant than their resources allow.

The size of the Chinese political system makes “noise” and “incompetence” particularly pressing. The Party bureaucracy, which parallels and oversees the state bureaucracy, provides an additional means of information gathering, policy transmission and the creation of tacit understanding between higher and lower levels of government.¹⁷ These parallel bureaucracies are managed through the *dang guan ganbu* system in which the PSS plays an integral part.¹⁸

China’s Party School System

In China, the education and training of cadres is aimed at improving both political consciousness and practical skills. Party and state cadres are expected to be both “red” – that is, possess the right morals and ideology – and “expert” – that is, have the right practical skills.¹⁹ Education provides the former and training provides the latter. Since the 18th National Congress, CET has gained in importance and it is seen by the Central Committee as a means to strengthen governance.²⁰ CET occurs across a multitude of institutes and schools, but the PSS is the main platform.

The PSS has four levels: central, provincial, city and county/district.²¹ The relationship between Party schools at different levels and in different localities is primarily advisory, although efforts are being made to strengthen the vertical relationship.²² The Party school is the responsibility of the local Party committee, and the CET work of the Party school is managed by the local organization department on behalf of the committee. Resources mainly come from local finance bureaus and organization departments,²³ which means schools have to compete with many other under- or unfunded higher-level policy mandates for often limited resources.²⁴

12 See Chen 2016; Lampton 1987; Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Zhou 2010; Mei and Pearson 2014.

13 See Chen 2016; Ran 2013; O’Brien and Li 1999.

14 Interview with Trainee E, 25 July 2019; see also Edin 2003.

15 See Chung 2016; Yan and Xu 2021.

16 See Zhao, Ren and Zhou 2020; Zhang, Rosenbloom and Dong 2021.

17 For a discussion of some of this tacit understanding, see Tian and Tsai 2021.

18 See Pieke 2009.

19 See, e.g., Wang 2001.

20 Tian and Tsai 2021, 4; Xi 2019

21 Some areas have township schools. Zheng 2010; Lee 2018.

22 Tian and Tsai 2021, 22.

23 Lee 2015, 35, 42. Tian and Tsai (2021) describe how in their case the city provided assistance to the county Party school they studied, but this school was also being spotlighted by the Central Organization Department (4, 23); it is unclear how common the practice of cities providing assistance to county/district schools is.

24 Fan 2015; Tsui and Wang 2004.

Compared to the cadre management system, through which cadres are evaluated and subsequently punished or promoted,²⁵ the PSS has been the subject of comparatively little scholarly attention. Most of the research on the PSS is on the unique-in-the-system Central Party School (CPS).²⁶ The CPS plays a critical role in the PSS as, beyond teaching the next generation of leaders, it is responsible for ideological development and writing the Party school curriculum.²⁷ The position of the CPS in the PSS means that it plays a central role as a “generator of policy initiatives.” It is worth noting that Xi Jinping 习近平 is a former president of the CPS.²⁸

Studies of lower-level Party schools offer a somewhat inconsistent picture. In 2009, Frank Pieke reported that there were believable rumours that county/district schools might be abolished because of their (poor) performance.²⁹ Focusing primarily on the higher levels of the PSS, Pieke described the situation of district/county Party schools in Yunnan province in the early 2000s as characterized by “[b]udgetary constraints, leadership neglect, the ubiquity of the use of connections, tokenism in performance and even downright corruption.”³⁰ This assessment stands in contrast to both earlier and later studies. In 2003, Emilie Tran described the Shanghai Party School campus as “a paradise for Party officials.”³¹ Similarly, in 2021, Gang Tian and Wen-Hsuan Tsai, based on a study of a county Party school recognized by the Central Committee for its “outstanding performance” and located in a city “selected by the CCP to implement a number of experimental reforms,” concluded that local Party schools are “being utilized in multiple ways to bolster local governance capabilities, reinforce loyalty to the Party and Xi, and strengthen adherence to central guidelines.”³² The descriptions by Charlotte Lee of Party schools in comparatively wealthy provinces and in the very wealthy county of Zouping 邹平 more closely resemble the scenes depicted by Tran, or Tian and Tsai, rather than the picture painted by Pieke.³³

Pieke’s descriptions on the one hand, and those of Tran, Tian and Tsai, and Lee on the other, are not mutually exclusive but may reflect the different levels of economic prosperity across China’s local governments.³⁴ The size of the local economy matters to the local Party school both directly and indirectly. Directly, Party schools are financed by local governments; local governments in wealthy areas have more resources to meet their many policy obligations, of which the school is only one. Pieke, based on research in one of China’s least developed provinces,³⁵ recognized the “budgetary constraints,” while the schools studied by Tran, Tian and Tsai, and Lee are likely to be particularly well-resourced.³⁶ Indirectly, Party schools engage in income-generating activities to complement local government financing, and wealthy areas offer higher returns on these activities.³⁷ For example, Lee describes how “reaping the benefits of a vibrant local economy” through property rentals and degree programmes allowed the Zouping County Party School to invest in itself.³⁸

25 For example, Manion 1985; Edin 2003; Landry 2008.

26 Tian and Tsai 2021, 2.

27 Liu 2009; Zheng 2010, 151–175.

28 Shambaugh 2008; Zheng 2010.

29 Pieke 2009, 55.

30 *Ibid.*, 132.

31 Tran 2003, 2.

32 Tian and Tsai 2021, 25.

33 See Lee 2015; 2018; Tran 2003; Tian and Tsai 2021; Pieke 2009

34 See Pieke 2009, 134, compared with Lee 2015; 2018; Tran 2003; Tian and Tsai 2021.

35 UNDP 2019, 42.

36 Neither Shanghai (a province) nor County Z, which was designated by the CCP as a “national model for Party building” and whose economic conditions “are relatively superior” (Tian and Tsai 2021, 4), are typical in terms of resources. Lee’s (2015) research was conducted in provinces described as “economic high performers,” which possibly biased her findings “in favor of a more optimistic general assessment” (203). Lee’s (2018) case study is of Zouping county, one of the wealthiest counties in China.

37 Pieke 2009; Lee 2015; 2018.

38 Lee 2018, 195.

Local Party schools are, like most of the inner workings of the CCP, understudied because they are largely closed to outsiders.³⁹ Data collection is therefore particularly affected by “practical data collection considerations.”⁴⁰ In the case of published research on county/district Party schools, the evidence is mainly gathered from localities that are perhaps not typical but rather are notably poor or wealthy. Previous studies of local Party schools have provided important insights into the functioning of the PSS but raise the question of how local Party schools fare in more economically typical areas, especially after recent PSS reforms.

We address the gap between the negative assessment offered by Pieke and the positive assessments provided by Lee, Tran, and Tian and Tsai, by studying a county Party school in an economically more typical city and county.⁴¹ Below, we describe our case, the County S Party School.

County S Party School Fieldwork

County S is located in City A, in China’s north-eastern N province.⁴² In terms of the local economy, County S is typical, with a gross product close to the national median, in a city whose gross product is also near the national median, in a province whose overall development level is only slightly higher than the national median.⁴³ With regard to the size of the local economy, City A and County S are typical. This is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Because a small number of cities and counties/districts in China are disproportionately wealthy, the average city and county/district economies are considerably larger than the median, producing a right-skewed distribution (Figure 1).⁴⁴ Using a log10-transformation of the gross product produces a normal distribution (Figure 2).

There are clear limits to the generalizability of results from a single case study, especially in a country as large and diverse as China. However, given that the county of our case is in one critical respect – the size of the local economy, which is what funds the local Party school – close to the median, and because funding is a determinant of school performance, we believe that our results may be indicative of the situation in other schools. We return to the generalizability of our results in the concluding discussion.

Built in the early 1980s, the County S Party School covers an area of around two hectares. The modest facilities consist of an administration building, a teaching building (including one large multimedia classroom and several smaller classrooms) and an outsourced downscale canteen. The school lacks the impressive facilities found by Tran, Lee, and Tian and Tsai.⁴⁵ Annual assessments consistently rank the school in the middle of the county/district Party schools in City A.⁴⁶ Thus, it could be said that it is a typical county school in an economically typical county and city.⁴⁷

Over the past decade, cadres have become increasingly reluctant to be interviewed, and Party school teachers and trainees are no exception. Through personal connections, we were able to make initial contacts within County S and snowball from those. Data were collected between 2019 and 2021 through on-site investigation using triangular mutual verification.⁴⁸

Through attending classes and conducting interviews and surveys, we were able to gather data through different means and channels, providing mutual verification of evidence. Course and

39 Tian and Tsai 2021, 1.

40 Lee 2015, 203.

41 Pieke 2009; Lee 2015; 2018; Tran 2003; Tian and Tsai 2021.

42 County S is technically a district (*qu*), but as county/district-level Party schools are treated the same in the PSS, we refer to it as a county (*xian*) to be consistent with the language of existing research.

43 UNDP 2019.

44 Data are taken from the *China Statistical Yearbook (County Level)* (*Zhongguo zhan yu tongji nianjian*).

45 Tran 2003; Lee 2015; 2018; Tian and Tsai 2021.

46 Interview with County S Party School Staff A, 14 May 2019.

47 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre A, 14 May 2019.

48 Yin 2018.

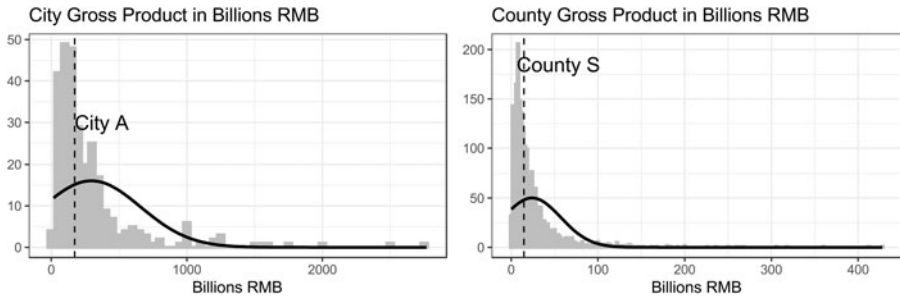


Figure 1. City A and County S Relative National Median Gross

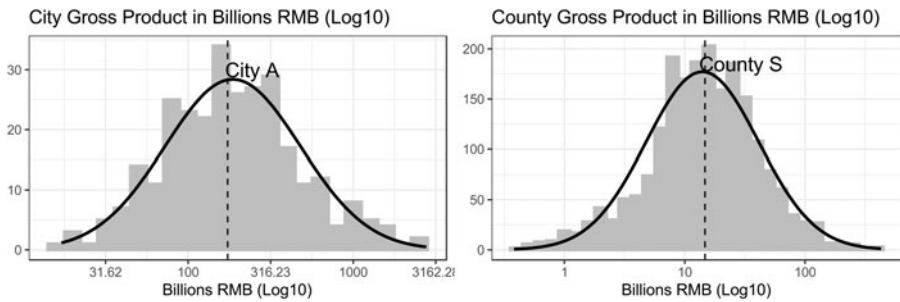


Figure 2. City A and County S Relative National Median Gross

seminar attendance provided an insight into the teaching materials, the teaching content and – along with interviews – the thinking behind the teaching. In-depth interviews were conducted with three members of the County S Party Committee, four cadres from the County S Organization Department, five leaders and five teachers from the City A and County S Party schools, and more than ten trainees. Interviews with individuals inside and outside of the Party school, and inside and outside of the county, afforded a holistic view of the school and its context. We adopted a structured interview model for trainees. For non-trainees, we adopted a semi-structured interview model, asking open questions about, for example, the current situation. We also surveyed trainees attending the most important course, which is offered to young cadres likely to receive a promotion. All 87 trainees completed the survey, a completion/recovery rate of 100 per cent. The interviewee coding table and questions and trainee survey questions can be found in the online appendix.

Pro Forma Implementation of CET Policy

We found the County S Party School’s implementation of the post-18th National Congress CET policies set by the centre to be mainly pro forma. This perfunctory implementation can be explained by three operational limitations: supervision-driven compliance, unmotivated staff and unenthusiastic trainees. Cadres inside and outside of the school were, in the words of one interviewee, conscientiously going through the motions. Although this was sufficient for the school to pass higher-level investigations, there were substantive deficits in CET policy implementation.

Such perfunctory implementation of CET policy was not the result of county leaders and cadres wilfully ignoring higher-level directives or bungling policy implementation. Rather, the operational limitations that explain the pro forma implementation of policy were products of operational dilemmas: conflicting high-level priorities led to supervision-driven compliance; insufficient resources and

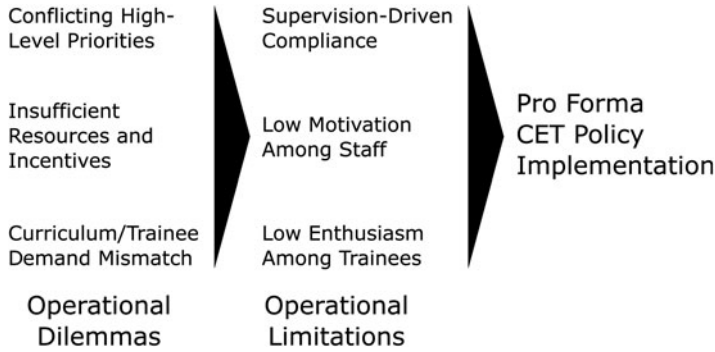


Figure 3. Framework for Explaining Pro Forma CET Policy Implementation in County S

incentives served to demotivate staff; and a mismatch between the curriculum and trainee demand sapped the trainees’ enthusiasm. These dilemmas are likely to be found to varying degrees in other counties/districts. Figure 3 shows the framework, the three operational dilemmas and the three operational limitations that explain the pro forma implementation of Central Committee CET policy.

A year after the 2012 18th National Party Congress, the Central Committee published a plan to strengthen the spirit of the CCP, enhance cadres’ morals and professional competence, and give the PSS a more significant role in the development of the Party and the nation. In 2015, the Central Committee laid out concrete reforms in a series of policy documents. Based on these documents, provincial Party committees drew up policy directives, which were communicated to the lower-level Party committees responsible for their implementation in 2016. Like other schools, the County S Party School formulated a set of plans to implement the higher-level policy directives. Through our fieldwork, we found that only one of twelve Central Committee policies for local Party schools had been substantively implemented in County S. The Central Committee formulated policies to bolster the creation of an ideologically unified administrative elite.⁴⁹ The failure by a county/district-level Party school to substantively implement these central policies, at least in our case, raises questions about the ideological guidance and practical training cadres receive.

As shown in Table 1, of the 12 policy goals stipulated in the 2018–2022 National CET Plan (*quanguo ganbu jiaoyu peixun guihua* 全国干部教育培训规划), the County S Party School only substantively achieved one: that the proportion of courses on the spirit of the CCP and basic theory should exceed 70 per cent. The pro forma implementation of CET policy allows the school to pass higher-level investigations, but this implementation is substantively deficient compared to central policy. We now turn to the operational limitations and operational dilemmas that explain this imperfect implementation.

Operational Limitations

The pro forma implementation of CET policy can be traced to three operational limitations: supervision-driven compliance, low motivation levels among staff and low enthusiasm among trainees.

First, and fundamentally, policy compliance was supervision driven. The County S Organization Department, which manages the CET work of the Party school on behalf of the Party committee, limited CET work to “the tasks and indicators strictly inspected by the higher level”; all remaining tasks were assigned to the school “to complete themselves or not fulfil at all.”⁵⁰ In our interviews,

49 See Tian and Tsai 2021, 4.

50 Interview with County S Party School Teacher B, 29 January 2020.

Table 1. Summary of CET Policy and Implementation

Central Committee CET Policy	County S Party School Implementation
One month of training per year for each teacher	Few teachers received training
Cadre courses should be at least one month	About 10% of classes longer than one month
More than 20% of lectures should be given by the leading members of the Party committee or government	Less than 20%
More guidance from higher-level schools	Little guidance from higher-level Party schools
Courses on the spirit of the CCP and theory should constitute more than 70% of the curriculum	More than 70%
Diverse and innovative courses besides those on ideology and political theory	Only courses on ideology and political theory
Multiple teaching methods	Only lectures
Online and offline teaching	No online teaching
Special Party committee meetings for Party school work	No special meetings
Development of basic theory textbooks and case database construction	Neither
Communication with external institutes	No teacher exchange, few lectures by external teachers
Continuous improvement of CET	Pro forma student evaluations

Source: The 2018–2022 National CET Plan, interview records and County S Party School annual work summaries.

this strategy was vividly described as “conscientiously going through the motions and earnestly going through the formalities” (*renren zhenzhen zouguochang, zhazha shishi gaoxingshi* 认认真真走过场, 扎扎实实搞形式).

Although formalities were earnestly observed, processes were sometimes substantively altered. For instance, “The regulations on the work of the CET” (*ganbu jiaoyu peixun gongzuo tiaoli* 干部教育培训工作条例) stipulate that “a cadre’s performance of education and training should be one important indicator for their appointment and promotion” and that “grassroots officials should receive training courses for a total of no less than 12 days or 90 hours per year.”⁵¹ In practice, CET was not a precondition for appointment and promotion. The strategy of “promoting first and making up the missed courses later” meant “taking no account of the duration of the CET in cadre assessment and promotion, and only making up the missing courses after promotion if there is an inspection.”⁵² Furthermore, there was a tacit understanding across the county government, based on organization department signals, that more easily dispensable staff should be considered “special trainees.” Many government departments therefore did not send “the young backbone” (young, high-performing cadres likely to be promoted) to receive CET,⁵³ and instead sent older, less operationally important staff.⁵⁴ These “special trainees” or “familiar faces” attended a disproportionate number of classes.

Second, the motivation level of leaders and teachers in the County S Party School was low. The executive deputy principal (who served as headmaster) was hands-off and delegated work to deputy principals. In turn, deputy principals were also disengaged from their work; one did not even attend teaching meetings.⁵⁵ Most teachers within the school were similarly unmotivated. The primary goal

51 Central Committee of the CPC 2015.

52 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre B, 25 November 2019.

53 See Smith 2010; Pieke 2009, 151.

54 Interview with County S Party School Teacher A, 20 December 2019.

55 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre B, 25 November 2019.

of teachers appeared to be completion of the heavy teaching workload.⁵⁶ There were only two or three young teachers, out of a teaching staff of 20, who were self-motivated and sought professional development.⁵⁷

Third, the level of enthusiasm of the trainees was low. Since 2015, Party schools have enacted reforms to ensure that training is taken seriously. These reforms include punishments for unauthorized dinner gatherings, for failing to uphold classroom discipline and for trainees' low performance. Previously, CET was somewhat of a break from the trainees' regular heavy workloads.⁵⁸ However, stricter trainee supervision has increased the already-high pressure on trainees.⁵⁹ In response, they have developed ways of dealing with and circumventing new rules, such as playing on their phones or daydreaming during lectures.⁶⁰ One interviewee stated that most trainees did not agree that the CET programmes positively impacted their careers.⁶¹ While none of our interviewees preferred the comparative laxity of pre-reform supervision, based on our fieldwork it seemed that the imposed strictness may, for some, be dampening rather than increasing their enthusiasm.

Operational Dilemmas of a County Party School

We now turn to the operational dilemmas that have led to the previously described operational limitations. In brief, the County S Party School was confronted with three dilemmas. First, the county leadership struggled with conflicting policy priorities. Second, the school had insufficient resources and incentives. Third, there was a mismatch between the curriculum and trainee demands.

Conflicting higher-level priorities

According to CCP regulations, CET work is an important task for Party committees and organization departments. However, in the face of numerous, conflicting priorities, Party committees and organization departments must focus on strongly emphasized and/or strictly supervised directives. As discussed, limited resources often mean that higher-level policy directives may conflict and thus lower-level governments will generally focus their attention on the top-priority policy. In the case of economically typical County S, CET was not prioritized.

Party committee secretaries at various levels are required to conduct annual investigations of local Party schools, and standing members of the Party committees responsible for CET work are required to provide an annual special lecture. However, the busy County S Party Committee had not discussed CET work as a special issue for several years, nor apparently had any special lectures been conducted.⁶² One teacher revealed, "we have not seen any [county Party committee standing members] on this campus."⁶³

Central regulations stipulate that a "cadre's performance of education and training should be one important indicator for their appointment and promotion"; in practice, however, this stipulation can be difficult to implement at the county/district level.⁶⁴ Lower-level Party and government cadres have heavy workloads, which are shifted on to their equally busy colleagues when they are away. Superiors are reluctant to allow the subordinates responsible for key performance indicators to take time off, as the indicators are closely monitored by higher levels. The cadres most likely to be promoted, and thus especially targeted for CET, are also those who can least be spared, which

56 Interview with County S Party School Teacher B, 29 January 2020.

57 Interview with County S Party School Staff A, 14 May 2019.

58 See Pieke 2009, 83–85.

59 Interview with County S Party School Teacher B, 29 January 2020.

60 Interview with County S Party School Teacher A, 20 December 2019.

61 Interview with County S Party School Teacher B, 29 January 2020.

62 Interview with County S Party School Deputy Principal B, 14 May 2019.

63 Interview with County S Party School Teacher B, 29 January 2020.

64 Interview with County S Party School Staff A, 14 May 2019.

is why the County S Organization Department adopted the strategy of “promoting first and making up for missed courses later.”⁶⁵ An interviewee in the County S Organization Department stated, “almost no cadre promoted in County S over the years was qualified according to the regulations from the centre.”⁶⁶

To overcome the issue of finding time for promoted cadres to train as well as perform their jobs, a set of processes was established in County S for cadres to make up for their missed CET courses. Promotion to a higher position is generally a break in the normal routine work for a cadre. This break creates a time window of a month or more. Because Party committees at the same level generally promote cadres in batches, the Party schools at the district/county level can organize several rounds of training programmes to compensate for the missed courses within this time window. Once cadres receive the CET necessary for their promotion, their dossiers can be amended so that they conform with regulations.⁶⁷ In County S, this practice alleviated the tension between the cadres’ heavy workloads and higher-level regulations.

CET programmes are generally designed to cater for specific positions. However, those cadres who, for various reasons, are easily spared by their organizations – the so-called “special trainees” – receive a wide range of irrelevant CET. The main courses (*zhuti banci* 主体班次) taught in Party schools are proposed by the organization department, and the lists of special subject classes for a given department, known as “classes for departments” (*bumen banci* 部门班次), are drafted by individual departments. Officials from various departments, who have a degree of authority over who can attend CET, must follow organization department requirements to take day-to-day operations into account when deciding who is to receive CET. In County S, officials tended to select older and less critical personnel for CET.⁶⁸ In some offices, workers in public service positions (*gongyixing gangwei* 公益性岗位) were listed as trainees even though they were technically not eligible for CET.⁶⁹

The challenge of accommodating cadres’ heavy workload and providing robust CET could also be seen in scheduling. In 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak and the considerable workload that accompanied its management, we identified an illustrative case. The scheduling of the special CET programme for poverty alleviation conflicted with the work on reports and forms that the poverty alleviation office assigns every town of County S to complete before higher-level inspections. The poverty alleviation office therefore asked the Party school to adjust the training programme so that cadres could continue to focus on their work. The special programme was shortened and the evening discussion classes were cancelled. This was not a unique case. The timetables for almost all CET programmes were “short, adaptable and fast” (*duanpingkuai* 短平快); few programmes lasted longer than seven days, falling far short of the mandated duration.⁷⁰

In short, conflicting higher-level priorities forced local Party organizations to concentrate implementation of CET policy on closely supervised aspects. This formal compliance concealed misinterpretation and substantial modification of policy.

Insufficient resources and incentives

The County S Party School was further hampered by insufficient resources and incentives, which led to low motivation among staff.

Compared to the higher-level City A Party School, there were significantly fewer teachers and resources per student in the County S Party School. As shown in [Table 2](#), the County S Party

65 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre B, 25 November 2019.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*

68 Interview with County S School Teacher A, 20 December 2019.

69 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre B, 25 November 2019.

70 Interview with County S Party School Teacher A, 20 December 2019.

Table 2. Comparison of City A and County S Party Schools, 2019

	No. of Staff	No. of Teachers	No. of Available Teachers	No. of Classes	No. of Trainees	Workload per Available Teacher	Budget (1,000 yuan)
City A Party School	68	30	28	67	6,724	240	19,400
County S Party School	34	20	10	33	3,941	394	800

Source: Interview records and annual work summaries from City A and County S Party schools.

School taught almost two-thirds the number of the trainees taught by City A Party School with just a third of the teaching staff and less than 5 per cent of the budget. Consequently, the County S Party School could not afford to fully implement some aspects of CET policy, such as enriching teaching methods or field instruction. One deputy principal revealed: “[W]e once organized a field-study trip to a neighbouring city for five days, which cost more than 170,000 yuan. The County S Organization Department offers about 800,000 yuan per year for all county CET programmes. We are unable to conduct more field instruction because we have to complete so many programmes each year.”⁷¹

It should be noted that various Party and government offices may apply for a portion of the CET budget because the amount is for all programmes, including those organized by other Party or government offices. We saw no evidence that County S was particularly stingy in the funding of its Party school and, as mentioned, the County S Party School was considered a median performer in its city. Rather, this resource discrepancy between City A and County S appeared to reflect the abilities of governments at different levels to fund their Party schools.

Both leadership and teaching staff at the County S Party School struggled with low motivation levels because of insufficient incentives. In recognition of the importance of CET, the principals of local Party schools have usually been the secretaries or deputy secretaries of the local Party committee. This was to signify the importance of the Party school; the actual work of running the school was performed by the executive deputy principal. Because the Party school does not have “real power” (*shiquan* 实权), assignment to its leadership can be seen as a sign that a cadre is nearing the end of his or her career.⁷² Exacerbating the sometimes demoralizing effect of this assignment is an allocation of work and rank that offers few incentives.

Prior to 2020, the position of executive deputy principal, the post with responsibility for running the school, was given the rank of deputy division head (*xianchujuzhi* 县处级副职).⁷³ The combination of high rank and low workload made the post a (sometimes unwelcome) reward for older cadres. Like the position of principal, the executive deputy principal post was largely ceremonial and the day-to-day work of running the school was passed down to the deputy principals. However, when the position of deputy principal was downgraded to the rank of section head (*zhengkeji* 正科级), a relatively high workload was combined with a relatively low status. This combination of high workload and low rank, along with little opportunity for advancement because the position of executive deputy principal was generally filled by external candidates, was demoralizing.⁷⁴ The 2020 decision by County S to downgrade the executive deputy principal to section head level further demotivated the school’s leadership.⁷⁵ With little room for advancement and little risk of termination, the leadership of the Party school appeared to struggle with motivation.

71 Interview with County S Party School Deputy Principal B, 14 May 2019.

72 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre D, 29 January 2020.

73 See Brødsgaard and Chen 2009.

74 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre A, 14 May 2019.

75 Interview with County S Organization Department Cadre B, 25 November 2019.

Teaching staff at the Party school struggled with a lack of motivation for similar organizational reasons. The County S Party School follows the annual CET plan set by the organization department. A key metric of the implementation of the plan is the number of lectures. In 2019, the organization department planned nine main training classes for, among others, secretaries of rural villages or urban community Party branches, poverty alleviation cadres and outstanding Party members.⁷⁶ That year, the number of trainees in the Party school exceeded 2,000, a considerable workload for the teachers who teach (as discussed below, not all do). Besides in-school lectures, teachers also give lectures on political theory at county Party and government offices.

Out of a total staff of 34, which included a teaching staff of 20 (ranging from assistant professors to full professors), only ten teachers gave lectures.⁷⁷ This was for several reasons. First, Party school teachers are regarded as civil servants who, unlike university teachers, have an “iron rice bowl” (*tie-fanwan* 铁饭碗). Only some of the younger teachers were motivated by academic promotional prospects. Second, morale was also affected by the teachers’ income not reflecting the teaching workload, which is also different from universities.⁷⁸ Third, although number of lectures was a key performance metric for the school, evaluation of individual teachers did not include the teaching workload.⁷⁹ In summary, teachers at the Party school had insufficient incentives to teach. The upshot was that junior staff were responsible for the CET programmes, and less than a third of the Party school staff carried out the main function of the school, which is to teach. This stood in contrast to City A Party School where, as shown in Table 2, more of the staff taught classes.

In short, insufficient resources and incentives led to low motivation levels: the lack of financial resources exacerbated the problem of low motivation as teachers at the County S Party School were offered few promotional and financial incentives.

Curriculum/student demand mismatch

CET is meant to provide both ideological education and practical training for cadres, but in our study the ratio seemed out of line with trainee demands.⁸⁰ We conducted a survey of one of the main classes for junior cadres (Table 3). The results indicate an unmet need for training on how to interpret higher-level signals and policies, a key task for Party schools.⁸¹ This is a pressing need, because, as implementers of policy, cadres need to understand them. While cadres can read documents to learn official policies, they also need help to gain the tacit understanding required to correctly implement and balance different policy directives. Surveyed trainees expressed the need for courses that foster Party spirit and provide basic theory; interviewees, on the other hand, expressed a preference for less ideological education and more practical training in the form of (as previously discussed, hard-to-afford) field instruction and practical work methods.

With regard to education, Party members are expected to study both CCP history and basic theory independently, using the *xuexi qiangguo* 学习强国 app and website (<https://www.xuexi.cn>). Teachers in Party schools are therefore teaching trainees who are often already well acquainted with both subjects. Without much access to teaching materials beyond those already available to (and read by) trainees, and with insufficient resources and incentives to develop their own, teachers often find themselves in the position of teaching trainees little beyond what they already know. Unfortunately, the insufficient resources that limit the quality of education also appears to lead to the overabundance of taught courses on certain subjects. Ideological education is inexpensive compared to practical training and so is overprovided for by the resource-strapped Party school.

76 Without access to the original organization department plan, we infer its content from school implementation.

77 Interview with County S Party School Staff A, 14 May 2019.

78 Interview with County S Party School Teacher A, 20 December 2019.

79 Interview with County S Party School Deputy Principal B, 14 May 2019.

80 Interview with County S Party School Trainee I, 20 December 2019.

81 See Tian and Tsai 2021, 16–17.

Table 3. Survey Data on the Training Programmes for the Junior Cadres in County S

Trainee Demand	Frequency	Ratio of All Options (%)	Ratio of All Respondents (%)
Fostering of the Party spirit	40	18	46
Education on basic theories	30	13	34
Disseminating policies of the Central Committee	47	22	54
Explaining policies of the Central Committee	34	16	39
Working methods	25	11	29
Field instruction	30	14	34
Others	12	6	14
Total	218	100	250

Sources: Authors.

As discussed, the only aspect of central CET policy that was fully implemented in County S was the ratio of the courses on the spirit and theory of the CCP. However, because these subjects are taught also within the main courses, most of the teaching in the school focuses on these subjects.⁸²

With regard to training, the County S Party School was missing both an online learning platform and a database of teaching materials.⁸³ The PSS has begun to adopt the case study model, and the CPS has created a case database for teachers. At the time of our fieldwork, it was not clear when (or if) this database would become available to the County S Party School. Instead, young teachers prepared lectures primarily by downloading articles from CNKI.NET (a journal article database), rather than synthesizing knowledge from the wide variety of sources that is expected by the trainees. Similarly, limited resources meant that the County S Party School could hardly afford to invite lecturers from universities or higher-level schools. Adding to the problems of insufficient resources and lack of incentives, teachers, in addition to their teaching workloads, were also responsible for the strict trainee supervision and numerous administrative tasks.⁸⁴ Consequently, teachers lacked the necessary time to properly prepare teaching, which impacted the quality of lectures.⁸⁵

In short, the mismatch between what the curriculum offered and what trainees demanded from Party schooling was exacerbated by a lack of resources, which produced a relative overprovision of education and impacted the quality of both education and training. The mismatch between the curriculum and trainee requirements, along with the above discussed strict supervision, dampened the enthusiasm of trainees, many of whom appeared to regard attendance of CET as a formality.

Concluding Discussion

We studied the implementation of central CET policy at a county Party school that, in terms of resources, is likely typical of those across China. Based on fieldwork that included lecture attendance, interviews and surveys, we found that CET policy implementation was primarily pro forma: the County S Party School only substantively implemented one of the central policy requirements, namely that courses on Party spirit and basic theory should make up more than 70 per cent of all courses. We identified three operational limitations – supervision-driven compliance, unmotivated staff and unenthusiastic trainees – that explain this imperfect implementation. We traced

82 Interview with County S Party School Deputy Principal B, 14 May 2019.

83 Interview with County S Party School Teacher D, 2 January 2020.

84 One interviewee was reduced to tears when describing the level of administrative work and how it affected teaching preparation.

85 Interview with County S Party School Staff A, 14 May 2019.

these limitations to three operational dilemmas: conflicting higher-level priorities, insufficient resources and incentives, and a mismatch between curriculum and trainee demands.

Our contribution to the literature on the PSS is threefold. First, our study is, as far as we know, the first to evaluate the size of the gap between central CET policy and implementation at a county/district Party school. Although the school passed higher-level inspections, the pro forma implementation of CET policy was substantively deficient. Second, we investigated the factors and mechanisms behind this gap and identified three operational limitations and three underlying operational dilemmas that explain the pro forma implementation of policy. The operational dilemmas are likely to be found, in varying degrees, across China's lower-level governments. This, together with reduced room for selective implementation, suggests that pro forma implementation of policy may be occurring elsewhere. Third, in our case, grassroots cadres did not receive the ideological education and practical training intended for them by the centre. The typicality of our case suggests that this may also be the situation elsewhere.

Our findings stand in contrast to the more positive descriptions by Tran, Lee and Tian and Tsai, but they are not as grim as the assessment by Pieke. Unlike the previously studied schools in notably wealthy or poor areas, our case is located in an economically typical city and county. Neither County S nor the County S Party School can be described as nationally representative, but, in terms of the resources available to it, the County S Party School is likely to be typical. This, along with the common if not universal nature of the operational dilemmas – conflicting higher-level priorities, local government resource constraints and a curriculum–trainee demand mismatch – faced by the County S Party School, suggests that in terms of CET policy implementation, many county Party schools may be closer to that in County S than those in the perhaps less typical areas of previous studies; how much closer is, however, hard to say.

That the County S Party School, despite the substantively deficient policy implementation, was assessed to be average in its city and that the operational dilemmas are unlikely to be unique for the County S Party School has two implications. The first implication is that how CET policy implementation is being measured appears to be ineffective, and it may have a distorting effect on the work of local Party and government organizations. The second implication is that cadres may not be receiving the guidance intended for them. These implications are discussed in turn below.

First, the County S implementation of CET policy was generally not up to the standards set by the Central Committee, but the county Party school was nevertheless assessed as average in its city. Performance metrics appear to fail to measure the outcomes intended by higher-level policy, which is more “red” and more “expert” cadres. We do not have access to the assessment criteria, but, because County S focused CET-work on “the tasks and indicators strictly inspected by the higher level,” we can infer that the criteria are, like the implementation, likely pro forma.⁸⁶ While, for example, the proportion of courses dedicated to subjects is easy to measure, similar pro forma performance indicators lend themselves to gaming by county/district leaders facing multiple and conflicting higher-level policy obligations. Beyond appearing to be ineffective, the performance measures may distort both the appearance and nature of the work that is done. Scholars have found CET to be predictive of promotions, but if the practice of promoting first and providing requisite CET later is widespread, this may weaken or even reverse the causal link between CET and promotion.⁸⁷ That meeting quantitative performance metrics can both distort data and distract an organization from fulfilling its function is not unique to China.⁸⁸ However, given the importance of hard targets and higher-level supervision of lower-level government in China, the impact of these performance measures needs more study.⁸⁹

A second implication of the imperfect implementation of CET policy is that young cadres, at least in the studied county, were not given the guidance they should according to the Central

86 Interview with County S Party School Deputy Principal B, 14 May 2019.

87 Lee 2013; Jia 2022.

88 Muller 2018.

89 See, e.g., Edin 2003.

Committee policy documents. Although PSS reforms have received considerable attention from the centre, at the grassroots level other priorities appear to take precedence, at least in our study. The imperfect implementation we found was not the product of bungling nor a closely held secret known only to those directly involved. Rather, it appeared that local leaders, given the numerous policy directives with which they must comply, found themselves at an acceptable level of deviation from original policy intent. In the face of multiple infeasible goals, the local county leadership had to make choices, and the imperfect implementation of CET regulations indicates that CET was not as much a priority as other goals. Clearly communicated, clearly measured and clearly rewarded/punished policy objectives are generally achieved by local-level governments (such as economic development, the maintenance of social order or, in past years, COVID Zero), so this imperfect implementation raises questions about the relative importance of county/district-level CET, at least in our county during the period of our study. Given that CET plays an important role in the *dang guan ganbu* system, and the quality of teaching and training provided to cadres can have far reaching consequences for the future governance of China, this also needs more study.

There are several future research directions that may further this study. Case studies of similarly typical schools would offer a better understanding of the general nature of CET policy implementation at the county/district level. A repetition of our fieldwork in County S would provide greater insight into the trajectory of CET policy implementation. Whether the quality of CET is deteriorating, remaining constant over time or improving cannot be determined by this study.

Acknowledgements. The authors thank Jing Zhan, Zheng Su and the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and helpful suggestions. The authors also acknowledge the funding support from National Social Sciences Fund of China (project number: 19BZZ076). The first and second authors contributed equally to this article.

Competing interests. None.

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Mattias OTTERVIK is assistant professor at the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University, China. His research explores the relationship between gender, how societies are governed, and social and economic development.

Haoyu WANG is a PhD candidate at the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University, China. His research interests include public policy process, rural development and governance, and multilevel government relations.

Zhen LI is professor at the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University, China. His research interests include elite politics, public policy process and political economy.

Cite this article: Ottervik M, Wang H, Li Z (2024). Operational Dilemmas and Cadre Education and Training at a County Party School in China. *The China Quarterly* 258, 513–528. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741023001509>