

BOOK REVIEW

Redeveloping China's Villages in the Twenty-First Century: The Dilemmas of Policy Implementation

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Kristen E. Looney

Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA

Email: kl705@georgetown.edu

Redeveloping China's Villages in the Twenty-First Century addresses two related questions: first, why did government policies that aimed to reduce rural inequality fail to achieve that goal? and second, why have different approaches to rural policy implementation – whether more government-oriented or village-oriented – resulted in the same outcome of only benefitting better-off villages? Focused on village redevelopment policies of the mid-2000s and early 2010s, this new book by Lior Rosenberg argues that rural inequality was reinforced by China's hierarchical political system and local economic conditions that severely limited the discretion of rural officials charged with policy implementation. To meet higher-level targets and to finance the cost of redevelopment, local officials made rational choices to prioritize wealthier townships and villages, directing scarce resources to improve rural roads, drinking water, public areas and housing to rich villages instead of poor ones.

The book draws on interviews, field observations and local government documents to present a detailed portrait of rural inequality and policy implementation in two counties, “Beian” county in Anhui province and “Chenggu” county in Shandong province (the county names are pseudonyms). At the time of research, from 2009 to 2011, these counties shared the same population size and ethnic composition (about 700,000 people, all Han), but Chenggu was far more industrialized and prosperous than Beian. Chenggu was also designated as a national experimental county for rural community building by the central government, so village redevelopment there was more extensive and more intensively monitored by higher-level authorities. However, rather than focusing on regional, provincial or cross-county inequality, as previous studies have done, this book directs the reader's attention to inequality at the sub-county level, showing how vast differences in township and village economic conditions have shaped policy outcomes in ways that sustain inequality. The case studies and evidence are entirely original, and the author's careful and persuasive analysis makes for an outstanding work of political sociology.

Besides the strong use of empirical evidence, another strength of the book is its conceptual discussion of exemplars and demonstration villages in chapter five. Existing scholarship has long recognized the Chinese Communist Party's use of models and experimentation in the policy process. In the countryside, demonstration villages have been upheld as examples worthy of emulation and as places where local officials can obtain feedback and adjust policies before rolling them out more widely. However, in the context of village redevelopment, Chenggu county officials awarded demonstration village status to any (rich) village that could meet the criteria set by higher-level authorities, without adapting even a single target to local conditions. Rosenberg refers to this behaviour as the politics of duplication. Meanwhile in Beian, officials were less focused on meeting targets, but they still encouraged the wealthiest villages to invest in their own redevelopment, and they used subsidies as a reward and reimbursement. Poor villages without the means to self-finance were

left behind. In both counties, the demonstration villages were real places and not fake models, but as the chapter explains, it is more helpful to think of them as “key point” or “focal point” institutions, much like China’s “key schools,” which are generously supported by the state to guarantee the best conditions for academic achievement.

The problem of local discretion is another theme worth highlighting: if officials were concerned about inequality, why did they not make a different choice and change how the policy was implemented? The answer to this question appears in chapter six, which details certain governing principles or dilemmas that keep local officials “trapped in the system” of command politics and hierarchical control. These obstacles to change include, among other things, the need to introduce exemplars, quantify success and allocate subsidies after project completion. A major takeaway of this chapter, and of the book overall, is that state capacity varies depending on the level of the state. Central, provincial and prefectural authorities can effect change by prioritizing and mandating certain goals, but county and sub-county officials are constrained by on-the-ground realities. The implication is that the political system both enables policy change and thwarts its success, mainly due to the counter-productive methods used to satisfy the system’s principals, and not because of the disloyalty or corruption of the system’s agents.

The book pushes readers to reconsider the conventional view that China’s political system and its rural policies are decentralized, flexible and rooted in experimentation. Still, the author seems to have missed an opportunity to more forcefully disagree with the “experimentation under hierarchy is good” school of thought, or with other studies of the New Socialist Countryside that emphasize local “strategic modelling” and “agency” as central to its implementation. Moreover, saying that “selective policy implementation” does not apply to village redevelopment rings true enough. It is, after all, different from tax collection, birth planning or stability maintenance work both in terms of its popularity and its being a softer target. These qualities should make village redevelopment less likely to be implemented, but instead Rosenberg shows that local officials prioritize it. Even so, there remains the problem of motive, and attributing the outcomes of implementation – sustained inequality and the urbanization of already wealthy villages – to local officials’ lack of discretion is not wholly satisfactory.

As many studies have shown, the phenomenon of moving villagers from traditional housing into newly built apartment-style housing is driven in large part by local money politics or land-based revenue accumulation, even if it is done in the name of village redevelopment. This trend has engendered conflict in affected communities and surely contributed to uneven policy implementation. The book would have benefitted from a more serious engagement with this literature, as well as a discussion of the argument’s generalizability and scope conditions: do local officials always bet on the strong, or does it depend on the policy area? And how well does the argument apply to the Xi Jinping era, which has been more explicitly focused on rural poverty reduction?

Yet these minor shortcomings should not detract from the book’s achievements. *Redeveloping China’s Villages in the Twenty-First Century* provides a rare glimpse into how local policy implementation works in China and will be essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the vast changes underway in China’s countryside. The present difficulties of fieldwork notwithstanding, it is also a stellar example of locally grounded research on China.