

Understanding Experimentation and Implementation

A Case Study of China's Government Transparency Policy

ABSTRACT

Studies of local governance in China often point to nimble experimentation but problematic implementation. To reconcile these competing images, it is useful to clarify the concepts of experimentation and implementation and see how they unfolded in one policy area. The history of China's Open Government Information (OGI) initiative shows that the experimentation stage sometimes proceeds well and produces new policy options, but may falter if local leaders are unwilling to carry out an experiment. And the implementation stage often poses challenges, but may improve if the Center initiates new, small-scale experiments and encourages local innovation. This suggests that the experimentation and implementation stages are not so different when officials in Beijing and the localities have diverging interests and the Center is more supportive of a measure than local officials. The ups and downs of OGI, and also village elections, can be traced to the policy goal of monitoring local cadres, the central–local divide, and the pattern of support and opposition within the state.

KEYWORDS: experimentation, implementation, transparency, policy process, local governance

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IN THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE, two competing images of Chinese local governance have coexisted for over a decade. One is generally positive: it underscores how China's distinctive "decentralized policy experimentation" (Heilmann 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), accompanied by local innovation and learning (Teets and Hurst 2015), has contributed to adaptability and the resilience of the regime (Heilmann and Perry 2011; Wang 2009). The other is more negative: it points to routine policy misimplementation, including "uneven implementation" across regions (Göbel 2011), "selective implementation" of some measures but not others (O'Brien and Li 1999), and the undermining of performance targets through "pernicious gaming" (Gao 2015) and "collusion" (Zhou 2010) by leaders at different levels. Some of the most recent studies of local governance have softened the sharp contrast between successful experimentation and unsuccessful implementation by examining "failed experiments" (Miao and Lang 2015; Yasuda 2020) on the one hand, or "effective" (Ahlers and Schubert 2015) and "enthusiastic" (Deng, O'Brien, and Chen 2018; Tsai and Liao 2020) implementation on the other hand. Still, more work is needed to add nuance to the upstream image of a central government that skillfully devises and wisely chooses among experiments, and the downstream image of much going awry when policies are executed. Taking into account what we have learned about how policies are developed and carried out, how can we bring the experimentation and implementation literatures closer together? Can conceptual clarification and analysis of one policy, from start to finish, reconcile a variety of findings and help create a single, more integrated picture of local governance?

We address these questions by exploring how the terms "experimentation" and "implementation" have been used in the China field and by recounting the history of the Open Government Information (*zhengfu xinxi gongkai*, OGI) policy. OGI is hardly uncharted territory. China scholars have examined why top leaders promoted it (Zhou 2002), how citizens have taken it up (Distelhorst 2017; Peng 2016), and its role in reducing corruption (Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017) and protecting the environment (Tan 2014). Nearer to the task at hand, some researchers have chronicled the policy's rollout through a series of experiments (Horsley 2007; Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017), while others have noted problems that have arisen in motivating local officials to carry out a reform that offers them little to gain and much to lose (Deng, Peng, and Wang 2013; Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014; Piotrowski et al. 2009; van der Kamp, Lorentzen, and

Mattingly 2017). Until now, however, OGI has not been used as a case study to illustrate how experimentation and implementation interact and to help clear up how we understand the Chinese policy process.

OGI went through two decades of experimentation from Premier Zhao Ziyang's first mention of government transparency in 1988 to the passage of national legislation in 2008, and has now been implemented nationwide for more than a decade. Its history, at least at first glance, conforms to the familiar storyline of a smooth experimentation stage and a problematic implementation one. Early experiments indeed paved the way for passage of a fairly comprehensive, practice-tested regulation by the State Council, and execution challenges did emerge in many localities after the regulation was passed. But our research suggests a more complex and revealing story. As the initiative evolved and was carried out, efforts to increase openness experienced ups and downs in *both* the experimentation and implementation stages. After "experimental points" (*shidian*) were set up in hand-picked locations, mostly before national legislation, some pioneering local leaders were quick to promote the initiative, but most lower-level officials showed little interest in enhancing transparency, and many expressed strong opposition. At the same time, during general implementation of OGI after the State Council regulation, and despite some variation by region and the disinclination of many local cadres to practice openness, considerable progress was made thanks to effective regularization, some accommodation by the Center, and creative local innovations that made open government more palatable. In other words, the response to the central government's push for OGI was a mixture of enthusiasm and reluctance from beginning to end. This pattern, we will argue, has little to do with reliably "successful" or "unsuccessful" stages in the Chinese policy process, and is more related to the central–local divide and the nature of OGI. It is a top-down initiative designed to monitor localities, and the Center has always been more eager to pursue transparency than the local officials affected by it.

In the rest of this article, we first examine the concepts of experimentation and implementation as they have been used in the literature on Chinese politics. We then introduce the OGI initiative and detail its history of experimentation and implementation. Next, we consider whether our findings apply to other policies introduced via experiments, most notably village elections. We conclude with some thoughts about how experimentation and implementation have changed (or not) in the Xi Jinping era.

DEFINING EXPERIMENTATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Chinese lower-level officials are responsible for many tasks, including taking up centrally initiated experiments and implementing national policies. These assignments are often lumped together when local governance is discussed, both in China and in studies of the policy process. For example, consider the principle of carrying out a directive “in accord with local conditions” (*yindi zhiyi*), which the leadership has advocated since Mao’s time and throughout the reform era (Chung 2000: 49). This phrase in fact refers to at least two distinct practices. In some settings, it refers to undertaking local experiments which, if successful, may be picked up by the Center and used as the basis for a national policy. More often, however, it refers to implementing a national policy with considerable leeway for local adaptation and customization. To put it simply, the interpretation of this principle depends largely on which verb is attached in front of “in accord with local conditions”: *experiment* or *implement*.

This confusion is understandable. After all, experimentation and implementation are often deeply entwined, rendering it analytically challenging to separate them and determine when one starts and the other ends. The two processes may be distinct but still overlap, for instance when an experimentation stage gives way to an implementation stage but further experimentation occurs during nationwide implementation. The terms are also common in everyday speech, and it is easy to think that one knows what they mean, or to use them interchangeably, without thinking about a precise definition and without recognizing that other scholars have used them differently in another context. Some clarification is in order, and that entails examining how the terms have been used in the literature on Chinese politics and spelling out how experimentation and implementation interact.

“Experimentation” (*shiyuan*) in the Chinese context is most commonly understood with reference to Sebastian Heilmann’s (2008a; 2008b; 2008c) influential notion of “experimentation under hierarchy.”¹ Heilmann (2008b: 3) explains:

Experimentation . . . implies a policy process in which experimenting units try out a variety of methods and processes to find imaginative solutions to pre-defined tasks or to new challenges that emerge during experimental

1. On the concept of “experimentation” beyond China, see Ansell and Bartenberger (2016), who identify six broad uses in the literature on environmental problem-solving.

activity. . . . It is a purposeful and coordinated activity geared to producing novel policy options that are injected into official policymaking and then replicated on a larger scale, or even formally incorporated into national law.

Heilmann's understanding of experimentation is broad, involving both coordination by the central government and problem-solving by local authorities, and spans the entire process of policy generation, expansion, enactment, implementation, and evaluation (10). Subsequent studies have tended to narrow the concept by reducing Heilmann's emphasis on the role of the Center. Some scholars, for instance, have put forward the idea of "experimentation under hierarchy in local conditions" (Tsai and Dean 2014) and called for acknowledging a greater role for provincial party secretaries as crucial intermediaries. Others have advocated speaking of "innovation" (*chuangxin*), suggesting that the primary task for lower-level governments is solving their own problems in response to the demands of local constituencies, without much attention to central experiments (Göbel and Heberer 2017; Husain 2015; Teets and Hurst 2015). Apart from specifying more about the actors involved, and shaving the concept down and exploring how widely it applies, more attention should be paid to demarcating the boundary between different phases in the policy process, particularly the dividing line between the experimentation stage and the implementation stage.

The literal meaning of "implementation" (*zhixing*) is "the process of putting a decision or plan into effect."² Unlike "experimentation," which scholars have worked hard to describe and delimit, "implementation" is often used more casually to mean something closer to "carrying out a directive." One way to make the term more precise and analytically useful is to understand implementation as the stage of the policy process that ensues after a plan or decision is formally enacted. This separates implementation from policymaking conceptually and helps distinguish it from experimentation, which is best seen as a part of policymaking, insofar as it aims to produce new policy options. In China, the dividing line between the two stages is typically the passage of a national law or regulation.³ So the experimentation stage comes first, and implementation follows. But since many policies in China are made, developed, and modified incrementally, as new wrinkles are added,

2. *Oxford Languages* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

3. This distinction would also hold at lower levels, with the passage of a local regulation as the dividing line.

experimenting may also be nested within the implementation stage and can occur while the broader policy is being carried out. In other words, the experimentation stage precedes the implementation stage, but experiments can also arise *during* implementation. And in a similar manner, implementation can take place during the experimentation stage, when policy options are tested and carried out in a location following the passage of a “trial” (*shixing*) or local regulation but before it is enacted (or not) nationally.

With this understanding of the two terms and the two stages, the competing images of Chinese local governance discussed above become easier to reconcile. The experimentation stage sometimes proceeds well and produces new policy options, but often is not so smooth when local leaders or their subordinates are unwilling to carry out a proposed experiment. And the implementation stage is indeed frequently problematic, but may improve when the Center initiates a new round of smaller-scale experiments and also picks up on local innovations.

The history of OGI illustrates each of these possibilities, with a clear divide between the experimentation and implementation stages, but also execution problems arising during the first two decades of experimentation and the benefits of experimentation persisting well into the implementation era.

EARLY OGI EXPERIMENTS

OGI was a top-down initiative spearheaded by Zhao Ziyang after his visit to Guangdong Province in February 1988. On a boat trip to Guishan Island, Zhao questioned the vice governor of Guangdong about smoking so many expensive cigarettes and, according to Zhao’s secretary, would not stop talking about the corruption and gift-giving by local officials that had taken off with the expansion of the market economy (Li 2015). A month later, Zhao highlighted “clean government work” (*lianzheng gongzuo*) at the Second Plenum of the Thirteenth Party Congress, explaining that “the economy should be prosperous, and Party and government organs should be clean” (*People’s Daily* 1988). An important pillar of the initiative was a “system for handling affairs openly” (*gongkai banshi zhidu*), which later evolved into OGI. The overriding goal of the reform was empowering the people so that they could monitor government officials (Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017: 33–34). The idea of “mass supervision” (*qunzhong jiandu*) to check the behavior of local cadres was rooted in the long tradition of the

mass line (33). But lingering worries about how the mass line had been distorted and had spiraled out of control during the Cultural Revolution led Zhao to caution against adopting openness too hastily or nationwide.

Meanwhile, Zhao's support of transparency and "clean government work" prompted some reform-minded local leaders to set up experimental points to try out the new program. Starting in April 1988, Beijing's Dongcheng District, Hebei's Gaocheng City, Shandong's Yantai City, Sichuan's Chengdu City, and several other places at various levels initiated Two Opens and One Supervision (*lianggongkai yijiandu*). This name referred to "openly disclosing the procedures for accessing public services and openly disclosing the results of public service delivery . . . [while] accepting public supervision" (Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017: 34–35). As with most other reforms that unfolded via pilot projects, central officials exercised final control over whether experiments would continue and spread (Heilmann 2008b). For example, Dongcheng District's efforts received Zhao's "full approval" (*chongfen kending*) by late 1988 (Li and Li 1989) and became a model for other jurisdictions (Li 2015). While keeping a close eye on the results of the local experiments, Zhao gave another boost to the initiative in his report to the Third Plenum of the Thirteenth Party Congress in September 1988.

In contrast to the enthusiasm of Zhao and some of his local supporters, efforts to curb corruption and promote transparency were met with hostility and fear by many lower-level officials, especially in locations where pilots were underway. One official in a district that had been an experimental point explained that many local cadres initially opposed the transparency initiative because they found it hasty, "unsafe" (*buwentuo*), and "too big of a step" (*buzi tai da*).⁴ Li Tielin and Li Runwu, the Party secretary and district head of Dongcheng, wrote in April 1989:

Some say that the Party and government organs are poor and honest enough. Why should we be a target? Some say that clean government is a matter for higher-ups. Administering these experimental points amounts to "the upper head catches a cold, and the lower head takes the medicine." Some suspect that this is yet another campaign to persecute people. Some worry that these

4. Interview, Dongcheng District Legal Affairs Office official, Beijing Municipality, May 2018. In addition to relying on policy documents and Chinese newspaper articles on OGI, the first author conducted 13 semi-structured interviews from February to June 2018. This included face-to-face interviews in Beijing with six professors, three government officials, and two policy experts, and two phone interviews with local officials in Shandong and Hunan Provinces.

experimental points might confuse the masses and stir up popular sentiment, alarming [*jingdong*] the Center and making it take on more responsibility than it can handle.

As seen here, frontline cadres cast their concerns in terms of suddenness, the scope of the initiative, dangers to the Center, and the possibility of social unrest. The real worry, however, seems to have been rooted in a basic execution issue, in which success in carrying out a policy “necessitates cooperation from the very actors who may be weakened” by it (Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014: 182).

OGI also experienced a serious setback when Zhao was removed from office after his perceived mishandling of the 1989 protest movement. The initiative only regained momentum when Zhu Rongji assumed the premiership in 1998 and revived Zhao’s efforts to combat corruption and promote transparency. Zhu’s approach was somewhat different than Zhao’s: he favored gradually rolling out the program from the lowest to the highest levels, starting with towns and townships. Following a Central Discipline Inspection Committee report at the 15th Party Congress, which underscored the importance of anti-corruption work, the second wave of experimentation took place. Hundreds of experimental points were established in towns and townships all around the country under the banner of Open Government Affairs (*zhengwu gongkai*) (Han 2007; Yan 1999). For example, Guizhou Province issued a notice in June 1999 instructing all prefectures to select one county for pilots and for these counties to designate two or three towns or townships to carry out the reform (General Office of the People’s Government of Guizhou 1999).

A series of successful pilot projects in Guizhou and elsewhere—including Huangzhong County, Qinghai Province (Huang 2000); Wuyuan County, Jiangxi Province (Xu 2000); and Yuanba District, Sichuan Province (Ren and Gong 1999)—led the Central Committee and State Council in 2000 to require, for the first time, promotion of Open Government Affairs in towns and townships (Central Committee and State Council 2000).⁵ But execution problems persisted and even grew in the early 2000s. Some grass-roots cadres

5. The notice also addressed Open Village Affairs (*cunwu gongkai*), which had been pursued since the enactment of the Organic Law on Village Committees in 1987 (amended 1998). In this context, openness focused on transparency in financial affairs (Horsley 2007; Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueroguiuev 2017).

treated the pressure to carry out OGI as a “wind” they could pretend to pay attention to when it blew hard but ignore as soon as it died down, while others suppressed the information of greatest interest to the public or even engaged in outright data fabrication (Deng and Xu 2002). Nevertheless, in May 2002 a research group was assembled at the Academy of Social Sciences to draw up plans for a national OGI regulation, and three months later draft guidelines were submitted to the State Council (Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012: 126). At the same time, Beijing encouraged leaders at the county level and above to explore ways to carry out OGI, and called for all provinces and relevant central departments to enact implementation measures (Central Committee and State Council 2000). Guangzhou Municipality took the lead in November 2002 by adopting the first local regulation on OGI (Horsley 2003), and the cities of Shantou and Shenzhen followed in 2003 and 2004 (Horsley 2004). One level higher in the hierarchy, Shanghai promulgated the first provincial regulation in 2004, which contained more detail than most municipal rules about how to conduct supervision and remedies for withholding information, and was accompanied by stepped-up training for lower-level leaders to ensure effective implementation (Horsley 2004). In March 2005, the Party Central Committee and the State Council further urged “day-by-day standardization by townships and counties, full implementation by prefectures, and gradual initiation by provinces,” establishing timelines for governments at each level (Central Committee and State Council 2005). Finally, in January 2007, the State Council formally adopted a nationwide measure, which took effect May 1, 2008. In most regards, the State Council Regulations on Open Government Information “followed the content of Shanghai’s OGI Provisions and defined what information should be public and how it should be made available” (Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017: 37).

In sum, OGI was rolled out gradually in several locations under different leaders and was elevated to a national policy only after several rounds of experimentation. It faced many challenges along the way, owing mainly to reluctance by local cadres to embrace openness. This opposition would not disappear in the implementation stage, though as we will see, some of the concerns of lower-level leaders were eased by small-scale experiments and innovations that bubbled up from the localities, along with the Center’s efforts to regularize disclosure and clarify what information did not have to be released. Reining in the most radical experiments and picking up on local

initiatives made public scrutiny more palatable to local cadres who had always feared it. For this reason, after a protracted and somewhat rocky 20 years of experimentation, nationwide implementation has progressed more smoothly than might have been expected.

NATIONWIDE IMPLEMENTATION

Enactment of the 2008 OGI regulation marked the transition from the experimentation to the implementation stage of the policy process. Having devoted nearly two decades to local experiments that were designed to reveal problems and suggest solutions to them, the main task for the architects of the policy became drawing on the many lessons learned and dealing with the execution hurdles that had arisen. The biggest challenge—creating incentives to disclose information (Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014; van der Kamp, Lorentzen, and Mattingly 2017)—had long been apparent, and efforts were undertaken to address it. Building largely on the experiences of Shanghai and Guangdong, the State Council promoted a set of measures to spur lower-level leaders to take OGI to heart, ranging from requiring progress reports every year (including detailed statistics on disclosure activities), to conducting periodic inspections (*kaohē*)⁶ and inaugurating “social appraisals” (*shehui pingyi*), to establishing an “accountability system” (*zeren zhuijiu zhidu*) that imposed administrative penalties and even criminal liability on cadres who violated the 2008 regulation.

In addition to reworking incentives, the State Council sought to tackle other challenges for which scattered local experiments could offer few lessons. One was maintaining a reasonable degree of uniformity in different locations. By the time the national regulation was announced in 2007, eleven provinces had already adopted their own measures, and some had started down the road toward a more liberal OGI regime than the national leadership envisioned. Shanghai’s provisions, for example, placed far fewer restrictions on disclosure of information that might involve state secrets, commercial secrets, or personal privacy (Horsley 2007). Meanwhile, the other 20 provinces lacked

6. Inspections have become more common and thorough in recent years. Under the instruction to “administer in accord with the law” (*yifa xingzheng*), OGI performance has become a crucial criterion when evaluating cadres for promotion (interviews, District Legal Affairs Office official, Beijing Municipality, May 2018; Legal Affairs Office official, Jining Municipality, Shandong Province, May 2018).

much experience in province-wide implementation of OGI, and the passage of the 2008 regulation enabled the State Council to insist that they follow the Center's guidance when rolling out the policy.⁷ One important effort to get the provinces on the same page occurred in 2012 when the State Council began to issue annual "key point" (*zhongdian/yaodian*) guidelines that outlined priority areas for proactive disclosure, such as budgets, the "three public expenses" (*sangong jingfei*), affordable housing, food safety, and environmental protection. In June 2014, the State Council further regularized reporting requirements in annual OGI work reports, attaching a table with 58 items that had to be filled out (State Council 2014). A notable aspect of this measure was that it established clear procedures for handling disclosure requests: among other indicators, the table required quantitative data on requests that the government agreed to disclose, "agreed to disclose in part" (*tongyi bufen gongkai*), or declined to disclose, and offered six specific reasons to explain why a refusal was warranted.

While regularizing OGI work, reining in provinces that had gone too far, and prodding those that were lagging behind, the State Council also continued to set up experiments. This approach to policy execution resembled what Heilmann (2008a) calls "experimentation during implementation," but it did not involve "administrative groping along . . . in advance of legislation" (3–4) because it took place after the 2008 regulation. A good example of a combination of central rule-making and supervision, local testing, and diffusion to new locations was the 2017 Notice on Carrying Out the Experimental-Point Work Plan for the Standardization and Regularization of the Grass-Roots Open Government Affairs. In this notice, the State Council designated a hundred counties in 15 provinces as experimental points and began to promote the "five opens" (*wugongkai*): transparency in "decision-making, implementation, management, service, and results." According to the notice, the aim of the effort was to generate, within two years, "experiences that could be spread, copied, and evaluated." This reform was so important that it reappeared in the State Council's key-point guidelines for three consecutive years, first to set up experimental points in 2017, then to wrap up and review work in 2018, and finally to disseminate lessons learned in 2019.

7. Indeed, implementation was progressing unevenly across regions. This was so for many reasons, including the degree of enthusiasm among provincial and lower-level officials. As one interviewee put it, the laggards had different "consciousness" (*yishi*) and "thinking" (*sikao*) about the policy (District Legal Affairs Office official, Beijing, May 2018).

Post-2008 experiments generally unfolded in a more top-down way than earlier ones had. In both the “five opens” and a 2011–12 program to encourage the use of e-government by counties, the Center kept a tight grip on administering and evaluating local OGI experiments. For the “five opens,” the State Council designated specific counties as pilot sites and assigned certain reforms to try out, including ones that enhanced transparency with respect to city planning, social assistance, and land acquisition. For the e-government initiative, the State Council set the number of experimental points that had to be established in each province and required each county to publish data on 385 categories of information. This centralized mode of experimentation entailed instructing local governments to carry out particular tasks to build up a store of successful experiences to apply nationally. It was designed mainly to suggest solutions to problems that were already well known, rather than to allow local authorities to uncover new challenges and test out solutions to them.

Despite the leadership’s concern that lower levels might go off in their own direction and “administrative efficiency” (*xingzheng xiaoneng*) would suffer, central policymakers also permitted and even encouraged local innovations to emerge and proceed. It is of course hard to determine what counts as an innovation and who initiated a change, given the difficulties in pinpointing the origins of an idea. However, one good indicator of bottom-up initiative is that some local practices, such as Sunshine Petitioning (*yangguang xinfang*), were formally recognized by the Center as reforms that started from below. Sunshine Petitioning was initiated by the Letters and Visits Office of Jiangsu’s Huai’an City and was nominated for the 2009–10 China Local Government Innovation Award (*zhongguo difang zhengfu chuangxinjiang*). It brought together a number of ways to file and respond to petitions in one portal (*People’s Daily* 2009) and was designed to increase responsiveness and make it more efficient. Sunshine Petitioning was neither devised nor executed with guidance from above. But its emphasis on transparency in handling petitions dovetailed well with OGI’s overall objective of guaranteeing the public’s right to know. Soon after it was conceived, it was put into effect throughout Huai’an City, and by 2013 it had spread beyond Jiangsu, after being discussed and promoted at a national conference on Letters and Visits work (Li et al. 2014).

Generally speaking, local innovations after 2008 fall into two categories: those developed within the penumbra of a centrally initiated experiment, and

those devised independently of ongoing experiments (see also Heilmann 2008c: 3). The first type aims to address a predetermined goal in a new way. The second type originates below, as lower-level leaders identify problems they face and find their own solutions to them (on this type of innovation, see Göbel and Heberer 2017). In recent years, centrally led experiments have become less common (Ahlers 2018; Teets and Hasmath 2020), and this has reduced the space for the first type of local innovation to arise and spread. However, innovations of the second type, like Sunshine Petitioning in the OGI context, have continued to emerge (Göbel and Heberer 2017), inasmuch as they rely primarily on the willingness and ingenuity of reform-minded local leaders who recognize and take on issues that arise in their day-to-day OGI work.

With the amendment in 2019 of the State Council Regulations on Open Government Information, new efforts have been made to further standardize procedures for responding to disclosure requests and to clarify what information should or should not be revealed (Ding 2019). By the early 2020s, OGI was more institutionalized and established than it had ever been. A combination of experiments, local innovations, and central efforts to specify the boundaries of disclosure has addressed many of the concerns lower-level leaders had. Lessons learned have spread widely, so that local officials can now respond more easily to requests for information, while increasingly fine-tuned directives lessened the burden on cadres to figure out what to disclose and how to do it. Transparency has become a part of the political landscape and a responsibility that local cadres cannot easily escape, but also one that most can live with.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

The policy dynamic described in the previous two sections does not square well with the image of a smooth experimentation stage and an implementation stage beset with problems. The first 20 years of OGI experimentation were somewhat rocky mainly because local officials were worried about public scrutiny and potential embarrassment, and thus reluctant to cooperate with central experiments. And despite the misgivings of local cadres, the implementation era has proceeded surprisingly well after (1) more experiments were conducted and higher levels accommodated local concerns, and (2) cadres innovated and came to accept the Center's clearer and less trying

demands. Rather than an account of reliably successful and unsuccessful stages of the policy process, OGI is a story of ups and downs throughout, which can be traced to the central–local divide, the nature of OGI, and its aim of promoting openness. OGI has always been a top-down effort to monitor localities that the Center was more enthusiastic about than local officials. Although efforts to take into account cadres’ concerns have narrowed the differences between the two parties and reduced opposition during the implementation era,⁸ tensions between actors who have different preferences and goals can never be completely finessed. From beginning to end, a conflict of interests has driven actions on both sides. For scholars of implementation and experimentation, this is a reminder that the central–local divide is a crucial explanatory variable that stands behind much of what they see, while for scholars of central–local relations OGI provides an example of a structural conflict that can be mitigated by accommodation, but which never disappears because officials sit at different places in the bureaucratic hierarchy.

The history of OGI shows that the experimentation and implementation stages of the policy process do not unfold so differently when the Center and localities have diverging interests and the Center is more supportive of a measure than local officials. But how common is this? Do our findings on OGI apply to other policies introduced via experiments and later implemented nationally? Consider another effort to monitor local officials and increase mass supervision: the introduction of “village elections” (*cunmin weiyuanhui xuanju*). We know that central leaders such as Peng Zhen pushed “self-government” (*zizhi*),⁹ and early experiments with “open-sea nominations” (*haixuan*),¹⁰ primaries, multicandidate elections, village representative

8. In addition to accommodations by both local and central leaders during the implementation stage, the central–local divide narrowed when Beijing lost interest in the policy, as happened with OGI when the Center put a hold on reforms and public supervision fell out of favor after the 1989 protest movement, or when midlevel participants in local experiments and implementation took up the cause of transparency (in hopes of career advancement, for example). One interviewee suggested that Zhou Qiang, the former governor (2007–10) and Party secretary (2010–13) of Hunan Province, promoted OGI to distinguish himself from his peers in the competition for promotion (professor, Beijing Municipality, April 2018). Beyond OGI, scholars have explained that local “pioneers” are often motivated by personal conviction or clientelist considerations (Chung 2000), or rewards and hopes for a higher position (Göbel 2011).

9. One important difference from OGI is that village elections originated in two Guangxi counties (O’Brien and Li 2000), and local innovations played a larger role before (and after) self-government was endorsed by the Center.

10. In “haixuan” elections, every voter is entitled to nominate primary candidates.

assemblies, and secret balloting succeeded and spread widely (O'Brien and Han 2009; Wang 2003: 73–76), while others involving extensive campaigning and fully competitive elections floundered. Experiments initiated after the barebones (Trial) Organic Law of Village Committees was passed in 1987 and before the full law came into effect in 1998 faced familiar execution problems, including opposition from village cadres and interference by township and county leaders (Kelliher 1997: 78–84; O'Brien and Li 2000: 478–81; Wang 2003: 62–68). But careful selection of “demonstration villages” (*shifancun*) by midlevel officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, along with a willingness to tolerate less than free and fair elections and back down from the most thoroughgoing reforms (Shi 1999), brought the final law across the finish line and enabled village elections to become the norm nationwide by the early 2000s.

As with OGI, an initiative was elevated to a national policy after years of experiments, some successful, some not. Also like OGI, after the 1998 law was passed, small-scale innovations by county and township leaders were permitted to unfold and spread, in an effort to dispel concerns that had emerged in the experimentation stage. Some implementation-era experiments enhanced participation, such as the Heyang Model for increasing the number of women who serve as village leaders (Gao 2010). But more of them facilitated manipulating or marginalizing elections over promoting accountability (Kennedy and Chen 2015). The first attempts to extend village elections to townships, for example, were shut down by 2001 (Li 2007; Saich and Yang 2003), but within a few years “open recommendation and selection” and “public nomination and direct election” of township heads were re-emerging in a more palatable form—that is, with more room for Party involvement (Kennedy and Chen 2015; Tsai and Dean 2014).

At the village level, “the separation of election and employment” has made it easier for township leaders to bypass elected cadres and work with loyalists they appoint (Han, Chen, and Wang 2019), and Party secretaries have been encouraged to run for speaker of the village representative assembly and head of the village committee (Liu 2009). All these experiments were designed to allay fears that elections might spin out of control, and even if they disappointed those who had bigger democratic hopes and instead “strengthen grassroots party organization” (Kennedy and Chen 2015: 154), they kept the policy alive and evolving and pointed the way toward a settlement that local officials and the Center could accept. In this way, “tamed” (Wang 2014)

grass-roots elections have become a feature of the environment that local actors must operate within, much as cadres have learned to live with the demands of OGI, and citizens the opportunities it offers, however limited.¹¹

OGI and village elections are both political reforms. Do our findings also offer insights into the development of economic policies, where many of the most celebrated experiments have taken place? Experiments in China are sometimes distinguished by whether they were launched by officials (e.g., restructuring state-owned enterprises, liberalizing foreign investment and trade, developing the private sector, constructing stock markets) or societal demands played a significant role in bringing them to the national agenda (e.g., decollectivization, rural health reform, land management policy).¹² Our way of understanding experimentation and implementation suggests an alternative approach: focus less on who initiated a reform and more on the central–local divide and the pattern of support and opposition within the state. This would take us into the push and pull between the Center and the localities, and how preferences change over time. The most important difference between experiments, in this way of thinking, might not hinge on whether societal forces have a part to play, but whether, as with OGI and village elections, the Center supports an experiment and localities have reservations about it (e.g., the modern company system, rural tax-for-fee reform), or local leaders are behind it and the central government has concerns (e.g., privatization of state-owned enterprises, decollectivization).

Finally, what can we say about experimentation and implementation in the Xi Jinping era? OGI, and most of the other policies noted above, began as experiments before Xi's rise and were well into nationwide implementation by the time he became General Secretary in 2012. Under Xi, experimentation has declined, in part owing to the effects of the anti-corruption campaign on “the appetite for boldness and risk among local officials” (Farid 2019: 537), and in part owing to a recentralization of political power (Teets and Hasmath 2020) and a focus on “top-level design” (*dingceng sheji*) (Ahlers 2018; Schubert and Alpermann 2019) that involves “a substantial hardening and narrowing of previously much more flexible and exploratory policy processes” (Ahlers and

ii. Self-government differs from OGI in that the Center's interest in village elections has flagged since the mid-2000s, meaning that “experiments during implementation” are pushing on an open door: they are narrowing an increasingly small gap between central and local preferences.

12. See Heilmann (2008b: 10, 19) for this distinction, which he also questions.

Stepan 2016: 9). John Yasuda (2020) has gone a step farther in arguing that China's "experimentalist policy style" is breaking down in the post-reform era, at a time when the policy context is characterized by extreme complexity and ambiguity, and consistency and standardization are the tasks at hand. But despite fewer and less effective experiments, "pockets of policy experimentation" (Teets and Hasmath 2020) continue to appear in areas such as government-NGO collaboration (Farid 2019), elder care (Teets 2016), environmental governance (Shen and Ahlers 2018), public bicycle programs (Ma 2017), and e-government (Schlæger and Stepan 2017). These experiments are likely to experience the ups and downs we have seen in the past. Conflict may be more hidden than it was before Xi's ascent, but disagreements within the state have not gone away. When thinking about local governance and new initiatives, the central-local divide and the goals, interests, and preferences of leaders at different levels are good places to start.

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