

FROM THE EDITORS

Governing Transformation in China: Institutions, Technology, and Global Collaboration

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The context in which public policy is made has become increasingly complex, shaped by rapid changes in institutions, technologies, and social and economic relationships. In this changing environment, understanding public policy requires us to look beyond how governments design and implement policy. We also need to ask how authority is being reorganized, how new technologies are changing professional judgment and market behavior, who benefits from policy change, and how knowledge travels across national and disciplinary boundaries. China provides a particularly rich context for examining these questions. Its enormous scale, multilevel system of government, regional diversity, and rapid socioeconomic transformation make many of the opportunities and challenges of policy change particularly visible.

The value of policy research on China lies not in presenting China as either an exception to broader patterns or a model to be readily emulated elsewhere. Rather, it lies in using close knowledge of Chinese institutions and policy practice to identify mechanisms, test the limits of existing theories, and bring locally grounded policy insights into conversation with global scholarship. Doing so requires attention to both policy achievements and trade-offs or unintended consequences that may accompany them. Reforms can shift bargaining power in unexpected ways; targeted interventions may improve some aspects of well-being more than others; technologies that appear neutral on the surface can how discretion is excised, how professional judgments are made, and who has access to information. The most valuable China policy research helps us see these processes more clearly and, in doing so, deepens not only our understanding of China, but also of policy change more broadly.

The five articles in this issue of *China Policy Journal* explore these broader questions from a range of perspectives. Together, they examine multidimensional poverty, the informational foundations of carbon markets, artificial intelligence in frontline public services, intergovernmental relations, and the international production of policy knowledge. They also bring together a broad range of methods: longitudinal household data and quasi-experimental designs, city-level policy evaluation, in-depth interviews, county-level survival analysis, and bibliometric and social network analysis. Although the topics and methods vary, the articles share an important insight: policy change does not translate automatically into

policy outcomes; its effects depend on institutions, incentives, information, professional agency, and the relationships through which policy is interpreted and enacted.

The issue opens with Wenguang Zhang, Yifang Zhou, Wenjing Han, and Yu Pang's article, "Towards Multidimensional Poverty Reduction: An Empirical Assessment on the Effectiveness of China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation Strategy." Rather than measuring poverty through income alone, the authors construct a rural multidimensional poverty index based on the Food and Agriculture Organization's 2021 Rural Multidimensional Poverty Index framework. They analyze four waves of the National Rural Fixed Observation Point survey, from 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2020, using ordinary least squares and a propensity-score-matched difference-in-differences design to assess the effects of Targeted Poverty Alleviation, with particular attention to households in officially designated poor villages.

By applying the multidimensional method developed by Alkire and Foster (2011) to longitudinal rural data, Zhang and colleagues make it possible to see where a national poverty-reduction strategy has been most effective and where deprivation endures. They find a significant reduction in multidimensional poverty, with especially marked gains in household income and living standards. Yet deprivation persists in food security, nutrition, access to resources, and the sustainability of rural livelihoods. The findings treat the elimination of absolute income poverty as a foundation for a broader welfare agenda, not as its completion. The study thus speaks to a wider challenge in development policy—how to turn time-bound, target-driven interventions into durable capabilities and resilience.

The second article turns from rural households to the informational architecture of environmental markets. Jianxian Wu, Hui Jin, and Yaping Luo address this theme in "Smarter Market Signals: Artificial Intelligence as a Policy Signal Accelerator for Carbon Market Decarbonization in China." Drawing on signaling theory and market microstructure research, they conceptualize AI as a policy signal accelerator—an information-processing layer that can reduce the delay and distortion between the production of a regulatory signal and its incorporation into market prices. They identify two pathways, faster translation of overnight policy information into opening prices and more effective filtering of non-informational noise from intraday movements.

The article gives an institutional application to a classic problem in market theory. If price informativeness depends on the costs and incentives involved in acquiring and processing information (Grossman & Stiglitz, 1980), AI matters insofar as it changes those costs. Wu, Jin, and Luo test this proposition by exploiting the staggered introduction of China's carbon trading pilots across 288 cities. Their triple-difference analysis indicates that AI amplifies the emissions-reduction effect of carbon trading by about 2.1 percentage points, while the mechanism analysis points to an improvement in the price efficiency ratio. Digital capacity, on this

account, matters not only because it automates production or enforcement, but because it changes how policy information is processed. The authors are careful not to substitute technology for institutional design— AI may transmit a coherent signal more effectively, but it cannot repair ambiguous rules or inconsistent commitments.

The third article examines artificial intelligence not as an abstract technological force, but as an intervention in organizational and informational relationships. Junwei Lin, Zihan Zhang, Zinuo Meng, and Huan Zhang’s article titled “Understanding the Agitation Adopting Artificial Intelligence in Frontline Public Service Delivery: A Context-Value-Behavior Framework” starts from an observation often lost in accounts of seamless digital transformation—frontline adoption can remain unsettled, selective, and subject to continuing negotiation. Based on 19 in-depth interviews with frontline public service providers in social-service settings across five Chinese cities, the authors use “agitation” to describe an enduring condition of uncertainty and adjustment that cannot be reduced to either acceptance or resistance.

Lin and colleagues bring a long-standing challenge in digital administration into sharper focus—new technologies may relocate administrative discretion rather than remove it (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Bullock, 2019). Their Context-Value-Behavior framework shows how resource disparities, organizational pressures, and regulatory uncertainty shape frontline judgments of AI, activating trade-offs among efficiency, professional discretion, equity, accountability, and human-centered service. Workers respond through deep integration, instrumental limitation, or deliberate disengagement; those responses, in turn, reshape the conditions of use. By treating adoption as a recursive process of human-technology co-evolution, the study restores professional agency to the analysis of digital governance and offers a more realistic basis for designing public-sector AI reforms.

Christopher Heurlin’s “Province Administers County Reforms and Administrative Urbanization in China” turns from frontline public services to the territorial organization of the state. It examines the conversion of counties and county-level cities into urban districts, a change that does far more than altering an administrative label. Conversion redistributes fiscal authority, land control, and political leverage among provinces, prefectural cities, and counties. Using an original county-level dataset for 2000–2019 and survival analysis, Heurlin asks why conversions occur and why some counties are more exposed than others. He places the Province Administers County reforms at the center of the explanation, linking administrative division adjustment to changes in China’s intergovernmental fiscal relations.

Research on China’s Province-Administers-County reform has shown that reducing hierarchical layers can ease delays and expropriation in fiscal transfers while also weakening upper-level coordination and overall county economic per-

formance (Li et al., 2016). Heurlin demonstrates that the same reordering of inter-governmental relations also changes counties' exposure to administrative incorporation. Whether a county is itself included in the reform does not, on average, alter its probability of conversion. Once a province has launched the reform, however, fiscally weaker counties become more likely to be converted into districts, while stronger counties become less likely to be converted. Fiscal decentralization therefore changes the bargaining positions of local governments with different resource endowments rather than simply transferring authority upward or downward. The analysis connects administrative urbanization, intergovernmental finance, and local political bargaining, and shows how a common institutional reform can generate uneven and partly unintended consequences.

The final article broadens the discussion by examining the evolution of China policy research as an increasingly international field of inquiry. Yu Xiao, Aaron Ley, and Ping Xu's "The Rise of Global Collaboration in China Policy Research: Evidence from Bibliometric Network Analyses, 2000–2025" traces the movement of China policy scholarship from predominantly external observation toward the international co-production of knowledge. Drawing on 326 articles published in 20 high-impact political science journals, the authors use bibliometric and social network analysis to map changes in research topics and collaboration over a quarter century. They identify a shift from a fragmented network centered largely on Western institutions to a dual-hub structure anchored in Mainland China and the United States. Major universities in Mainland China now take central positions in the collaboration network, while institutions in Hong Kong serve as important bridges for international collaboration.

Xiao, Ley, and Xu place China policy studies within the broader movement toward more networked and globally distributed science (Adams, 2013; Wagner et al., 2017). In their account, co-authorship is more than an output measure. It is part of the field's intellectual infrastructure, linking contextual access, theoretical perspectives, methodological expertise, and publication networks. Their article also reveals the value of conferences, professional associations, journals, and durable university partnerships at a time when geopolitical tensions place scholarly exchange under strain. The international relevance of China policy research depends not only on work about China, but also on the relationships through which that work is jointly produced.

Taken together, the five articles in this issue trace policy transformation across a diverse range of settings: from rural households and carbon markets to frontline organizations, government jurisdictions, and scholarly institutions. Rather than treating policy inputs as self-executing, they show how overlapping deprivations, information processing, professional value conflicts, intergovernmental bargain-

ing, and collaboration networks mediate outcomes. The methodological diversity of these studies is equally valuable: large-scale data and quasi-experimental designs help us identify policy effects, while interviews and network analysis reveal relationships, perceptions, and institutional dynamics that may be difficult to capture through aggregate measures alone. Together, these approaches reflect the kind of scholarship *China Policy Journal* seeks to promote research that is grounded in the Chinese context, attentive to the mechanisms that shape policy outcomes, transparent in its empirical analysis, and connected to broader conversations in global public policy scholarship.

We are pleased to present these articles to our readers and hope they will inspire further research and discussion on institutional change, technological governance, and the international production of policy knowledge. We are grateful to the authors for entrusting their work to our journal, to our reviewers for their thoughtful and careful assessments, and to our editorial board for their continued guidance and support. As *China Policy Journal* continues to grow, we remain committed to providing an open forum for rigorous scholarship that connects the study of China with the broader theoretical and practical questions shaping public policy around the world.

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