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China: an actor-oriented perspective**

**Kunpeng Na, Terry Marsden and
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The implementation of agricultural policy in China: an actor-oriented perspective

Kunpeng Na¹, Terry Marsden, Jingzhong Ye²

Abstract

To date, most studies on policy implementation have been conducted from either a top-down or bottom-up perspective. Both approaches have limitations for analyzing policy process, especially in complex, multi-actor or networked circumstances (O'Toole, 2004). To better reflect the changing process of policy implementation, and reveal the interaction of different interest groups, this study uses an actor-oriented perspective to analyze a state-led agricultural policy initiative in the Qinglin County of Hebei Province, China. We conclude that policy implementation is a social process which is constantly being negotiated. Power shifts and re-distribution of policy resources emerge stemming from the strategies and practices devised by different social actors. Based on these findings, we suggest that for a given policy, policy design only plays a limited role towards the desired goal, so do the policy implementation rules. As an important complement, monitoring and supervising mechanism should be introduced into policy implementation process, whereby the actions taken by various social actors at the local level can be responded duly under the supervision. Thus, the uncertainty of policy will be dealt with targeted and timely rather than being set aside until to the end, which is too late.

KEY WORD: policy implementation; actor-oriented perspective, China agricultural policy

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1. Introduction

Pressman and Wildavsky's analysis of an Economic Development Agency in Oakland, California, 1973, found that the implementation of an urban regeneration project failed due to a lack of coordination between the multi-agencies involved in it. Following this, policy implementation studies subsequently entered a boom period. Fruitful work emerged during this period and policy implementation moved to the fore (Linder and Peters, 1987). To date, the research on policy implementation has not faded away. Instead, researchers have shown a tendency to expand the research field to public administration, general management and political science. Nevertheless, with most of these studies limited to the United States and European countries, questions remain as to whether the approach developed in these contexts can be adapted in other settings (O' Toole, 2000). Thus, it is necessary for researchers to address this gap in other parts of the world. Furthermore, around this time policy researchers seemed to have a preference for the areas of medical care, education, public health, housing and finance, and have neglected other policy areas, such as agriculture.

This paper focuses upon the case of state-led agricultural policy in China, as a direct response to the lack of empirical policy implementation studies outside the United States and Western countries, and to relatively marginalized policy areas such as agriculture. The data on which the paper draws, is taken from a large programme of work focused on *Civil Participation in county level development planning* (March 2007 – March 2010). The team consisted of researchers (Professors, lecturers and PhD students) from the college of Humanities and Development of China Agricultural University, Beijing. Based on the implementation process of a state-led agricultural policy in Qinglin County, Hebei Province, we aim to reveal: **1. How policy implementers carry out the policy; 2. How the target group and stakeholders respond; and 3. How their interactions produce policy outcomes.** Observation and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the empirical data on which this paper draws. In addition, relevant policy documents were reviewed in order to better

understand the overall policy context.

Based on the brief review of the traditional analytical perspectives on policy implementation, we propose using an actor-oriented approach to analyze the dynamic changing process of policy implementation. We then describe the relevant knowledge of state-led improved maize seed varieties subsidy policy and the policy implementation process within Qinglin County, Hebei Province. In the remainder of the paper we analyze and discuss the motivations, strategies and actions taken by various social actors, before reaching some preliminary conclusions.

The names of individuals and organizations referred to in this paper have been changed in order to maintain the anonymity of the parties involved in the research.

2. Analytical perspectives on policy implementation

In the field of policy implementation research, two schools of thought have dominated the debate as the most effective method for studying and describing policy implementation: top-down and bottom-up (Matland, 1995). 'Top-downers' hold that policy can be implemented as it is designed through strict management control at the central level (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983; Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980; Berman, 1980). 'Bottom-uppers' argue that the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats at the local level influence the implementation process to a great extent (Lipsky, 1971 and 1980; Hull and Hjern, 1983).

Top-down perspective

The process of policy implementation can be described as the carrying out of decision-making by government. To highlight its official and executive nature, Mazmanian and Sabatie (1983:20) describe it as the "carrying out of a basic policy decision, usually incorporated in a statute, but which can also take the form of important executive orders or court decisions". Top-downers begin from this point and place heavy emphasis on the authoritative decision-making nature of government.

In their opinion, social actors can be manipulated by authoritative measures to reach the desired goal. Hence, in top-down models, decision makers are regarded as the key persons upon whom the success or failure of policy implementation depends. This is also why top-downers have a strong desire to propose policy recommendations. Some common functions of top-downers were summarized by Matland (1995: 147) as follows: “Make policy goals clear and consistent; minimize the number of actors; limit the extent of change necessary; and place implementation responsibility in an agency sympathetic with the policy goals”.

As top-downers take the statutory rules³ in place as their starting point, they often fall into the trap of placing too much emphasis on the formulation of statutory rules and regulations to guarantee and secure the desired goals. Statutory rules, to some extent, are the consequences of earlier decision-making. They are influenced, of course, by the initial stages of the policy-making process as well as the broader policy context. Top-downers’ focus on statutory rules and executive orders overlooks the earlier steps and relevant broader policy environment. Second, from many scholars’ point of view (including Berman, 1978; Hoppe et al, 1985; Baier et al, 1994), top-downers regard the task of implementation as a purely administrative process (Matland, 1995). The pre-occupation of top-downers with statutory rules and regulations serves to perpetuate a one-sided view that ignores the link between policy design and policy implementation. For example, Matland (1995) notes the top-downer’s emphasis on ‘statute framers⁴’ is untenable. Some scholars, particularly the bottom-uppers, point out statute framers at high levels of decision-making are not as knowledgeable as street-level bureaucrats on the ground. Moreover, some local actors are skilled at maneuvering and negotiating rules or regulations. Local actors always have various strategies and actions to bypass rules or orders, making the rules ineffective. In this sense, bottom-uppers take street-level deliverers’ discretion into account and regard it as a core component of a bottom-up perspective.

³ The term ‘statutory rules’ is used here to refer to the legislations set up officially by the government to assure the policy is implemented as intended.

⁴ In Matland (1995)’s article, the “statute former” is referring to the person who formulates the statutory rules.

Bottom-up perspective

In contrast to the top-downers, bottom-uppers focus on the policy implementation process at the micro level. Elmore, one of the pioneers of this approach, used the term “backward mapping⁵” to explore what takes place at the local level during the policy implementation process and why (Elmore, 1980). Following this, more scholars began to explore the discretionary power of the street-level bureaucrats at the micro level (Hjern and Porter, 1981; Hjern, 1982; Smith and Cantley, 1985; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Supporters of the bottom-up approach have explored the role of target groups and the street-level bureaucrats by focusing on organizational behaviors from the power bargaining angle and disclosing the gap between the policy design and the actual implementation setting. These contributions have shifted the focus from the macro level to the micro level by focusing on the actions and roles of local actors, particularly front-line bureaucrats. At the same time, these efforts challenge the view of top-downers that policy can be implemented as planned in the rule-bound environment.

Even if the bottom-uppers recognize the limited role statutory rules played at the micro level and the discretionary power of local actors, two points are at least worthwhile exploring. First, some bottom-uppers consider that many policies initiated by central government are poorly adapted to local conditions. Policy success relies on the capacity of street-level bureaucrats (Hjern, 1982). Thus, if local level implementers are not given the freedom to adapt the policy to local conditions, the policy is more likely to fail (Palumbo et al, 1984). This point seems to over-emphasize the necessity of local flexibility and autonomy (i.e. it overemphasizes

⁵ Elmore (1979) uses the terms “forward mapping” and “backward mapping” to refer to the top-down and bottom-up implementation analysis approach. According to his view, forward mapping begins at the top of the policy implementation process, with a clear statement of policy rules and even more specific steps of implementation process, leading the implementers to carry out the policy at each level. He also highlights the drawbacks of forward mapping and made the case for using backward mapping approach. Backward mapping, from the bottom of the process, takes variations at each level into account. Numerous variations may happen during the implementation process so that it is impossible for policy-makers to control all aspects of policy implementation process. Hence, in contrast to the emphasis on the role of policy-makers at the top, the backward mapping approach focuses upon actions taking place on the ground. In other words, it looks at the policy implementation process.

the agency of local actors). In some cases, street-level bureaucrats are successful in adapting central policy to the local level. In other cases, they can take advantage of the local flexibility for their own interests and induce policy failure. Second, even though the policy may be implemented as intended, its failure to adapt to the local context makes it difficult to evaluate. Although bottom up perspectives are criticized for failing to provide effective policy recommendations; they do provide an important micro perspective concerning the differences at the local level and the discretion of street-level bureaucrats.

Both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' perspectives have their advantages and disadvantages. Relatively speaking, top-down models are more useful for analysis at the macro level focusing on the formulation of policy decision-making and legislations; while bottom-up models are more often applied at the micro level to explore the discretionary power of local bureaucrats. However, when facing a complex policy implementation process involving multi-actors across multi-levels, both top-down and bottom-up models appear to be weak in linking multi-actors through multi-levels organically since either of them is only suitable to the single level (either at the top or at the bottom). One approach that is able to explore these linkages at different levels and illustrate the complexity of policy implementation with multi-actors and multi-levels includes the actor-oriented approach.

An actor-oriented approach

The actor-oriented analysis approach is an important analytical method in the field of development sociology pioneered by Norman Long. Its main task is to identify and characterize: differing actor practices, strategies and rationales, the conditions under which they arise, how they interlock, their viability or effectiveness for solving specific problems, and their wider social ramifications. This approach centres upon the notion of human agency, since it locates individuals in the specific life worlds in which they manage their everyday affairs. Even within the limits of the information and resources they have and the uncertainties they face, individuals and social groups

can devise ways of solving or avoiding the unfavorable situations, and thus actively engage in constructing their own social worlds (Norman Long, 2001:20-24).

Empirical research using this perspective has provided important insights for our research. Biggs (2004) explored the use of an actor-oriented approach in the case of natural resources management in Nepal and Bangladesh. This study showed that actor-oriented tools had an important role in analyzing, monitoring and documenting the intervention activities. Arce (1992) presented the complex set of relationships existing between peasants and bureaucrats in Mexico, and further discussed the interplay of different life-worlds and bodies of knowledge. The most renowned research is Long's experience in Zambia and Peru, which found that farmers and their households organize themselves individually and collectively in a variety of ways when faced with planned intervention by government and other outside bodies. He pointed out: "One should also not assume a top-down process as is usually implied, since initiatives may come from 'below' as much as they do from 'above'" (Long, 2001: 26). All these findings suggest that much attention should be given to the differences, conflicts and negotiations between different social actors can drive policy change.

Our interest with the policy implementation process began in March 2008 when the project field research took place in Qinglin County, Hebei Province. From March to the end of May, 2008, our researchers worked as interns in the different Bureaus in Qinglin County, including the Development and Reform Bureau, Finance Bureau and Agriculture Bureau. During this period, we found that every Bureau was engaged in the application and implementation of projects initiated from central government or higher level government. Moreover, our research revealed that in many instances, local bureaucrats added new content to the policy documents, or alternatively, deleted some original wording in the process of implementation. In many cases, this kind of behavior had a direct impact on policy implementation. As a result, we were intrigued to find out more about the actual process of policy implementation. In particular, we

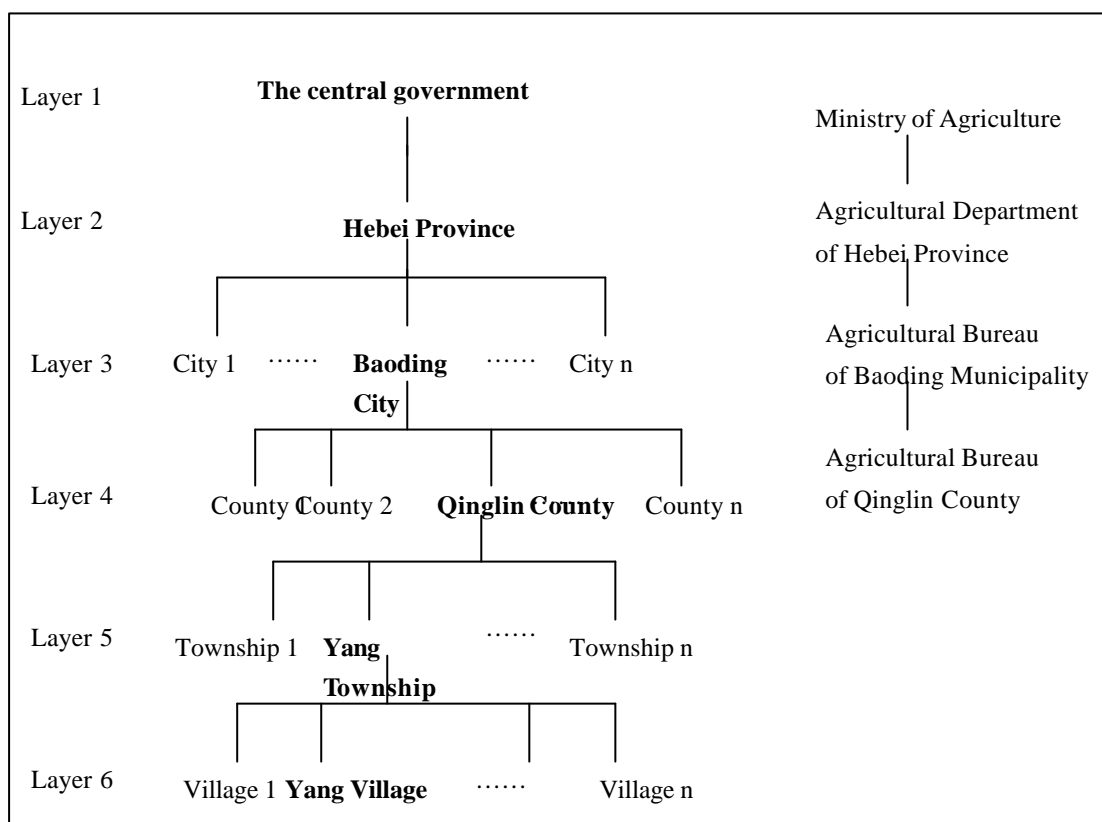
sought to understand the extent to which such changes occur during this process and why it happens. To address these questions, we focused upon an ongoing central government policy --- improved maize seed varieties subsidy policy --- as the research case and explored its dynamic changing implementation process. After collecting first hand information and relevant policy documents at the county level, we focused our analysis on the micro-level implementation of the policy within Yang Township to gather more details at the grass-roots level. From April 2008 to March 2009, we visited Yang Township seven times to collect data.

In order to protect the identity of places and individuals, pseudonyms have been used in replace of the name of the County, Township, Village, and also all officials interviewed during the research.

3. Implementation: state-led improved maize seed varieties subsidy policy

Before going into the state-led policy delivery process, it is necessary to understand China's unique administrative hierarchy. China has a multilevel political system in which the major territorial levels include: the Center, covering the entire country; thirty-one provinces; more than six hundred cities; over two thousand counties; nearly one hundred thousand townships; and close to one million villages. Chart 1 takes our research sites (Qinglin County, Yang Township and Yang Village) as an example to illustrate this distinction within the territorial layers in China.

Chart 1: Territorial Layers in China



Generally, there are six layers of governance from the central government down to the grassroots as shown in Chart 1. Every administration of a different function extends its bureaucracy from the central level down through provinces, and cities, to the county level. Take the Agriculture Administration System as an example. The Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) is at the top of its hierarchy and its headquarters are located in Beijing (As shown in Chart 1); the Agriculture Department at Hebei provincial level is one step down; the Agriculture Bureau at Baoding municipal level is in the third rank of its functional sphere; while the Agriculture Bureau at Qinglin county level is at the bottom of the authoritative agriculture administration system. Chart 1 also showcases the extension of Agricultural system from the central level down to the Qinglin County. Typically, all communications go up and down the national hierarchy level by level. Skipping levels - by, for example, having MOA communicate directly with an Agricultural Bureau at a county - is not the norm (Lieberthal, 1998).

It is important to clarify that although each functional administration system does not extend to the township and village level, it does not mean administrative work can not be carried out below the county level. Rather, at the township level, all the administrative work will be distributed to different township officials. In most cases, these officials are the chief head or deputy heads of the township government. As is the case with other territorial units (for example, county, city, province and even the central level) in China, there is one chief and several deputy heads at township level. Each of them has formal responsibility for a specific array of functions. At the village level, all village cadres share the tasks assigned by the township government. In China, village cadres refer to the members of Villagers' Committee and the secretary of Village Communist Party Branch. The members of Villagers' Committee are elected by the villagers under the guideline of the *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees*⁶. The secretary of Village Communist Party Branch is elected by members of the Village Communist Party. Since both the township officials and village cadres have the responsibility to carry out the administrative work on the ground, they are considered as key implementers for a given central policy or project.

Building on this basic information of policy implementation procedures in China, we now move forward to the policy background of improved maize seed varieties subsidy.

The subsidy policy for farmers using improved varieties was first released by China Central Government in 2002. Its aim was to encourage farmers to purchase and use improved crop varieties in order to enhance the productivity of main grain production areas, to improve yield, quality and efficiency and further guarantee national food security. In its first year, only soybean was supported as an experiment. After receiving positive feedback, the central government expanded the range to include

⁶ The Organic Law of Villagers' Committee was adopted in 1998 by the National People's Congress of China. The purpose of the law is to provide the legal backing for villagers to realize self-governance and self-service. Under the frame of the law, the members of villagers' committee are elected by villagers every three years.

wheat, maize and rice. Due to the diversity of distinct natural conditions that determine the suitability of certain agricultural crops, supporting crop variety subsidies distributed by center government vary from one province to another. In Hebei province, the Center supports subsidy varieties for wheat, maize and rice. In this paper we only consider the example of improved maize seed varieties.

Generally speaking, all the arrangements for the next year from central government should be released in the current year in order to ensure sufficient time for the lower administrative levels to set down their detailed implementation plan. This also applies to the implementation of improved maize seed subsidy. In 2007, central government announced the 2008 improved maize seed varieties subsidy arrangement⁷. The main points in this document of relevance to maize seeds subsidy in Hebei province are: 1. the subsidy area of Hebei Province was 2,500,000 mu⁸; 2. the subsidy standard was 10 yuan/mu⁹; 3. a recommended list of improved seed varieties according to local conditions had to be designated at the provincial level, which should be regarded as the optional seeds varieties for the cities and counties under its jurisdiction; 4. The official process of subsidization for each county involved in the project required the designation of a supplier by the municipal Agricultural Bureau through open bidding, then the designated supplier had to sell the improved seed varieties to farmers at a lower subsidized price and later the central government would subsidize the supplier to fill the price gap. In other words, selling the improved seeds to farmers at a lower price was the key strategy for subsidizing farmers for using improved maize seed varieties. At the time of the research (Early March, 2008), the Agriculture Department of Hebei Province allocated 400,000 mu to Baoding City as a subsidy area. Due to the limited subsidy area, the Agriculture Bureau of Baoding allocated the area to the top four highest maize producing counties. Qinglin County was not included since its maize production is not as high as those four counties.

⁷ This is an authoritative document issued by Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Finance on the details of improved seeds subsidy policy implementation in 2008. In Chinese, it is called 2008 nian guojia liangzhong tuiguang butie xiangmu shishi fangan de tongzhi.

⁸ Mu is a unit of area. 1 mu = 0.0667 hectares.

⁹ Subsidy standard for improve maize seed varieties are the same for the whole country.

But in late March 2008, the central government made a sudden change to the policy by further extending the subsidy area across the whole country in order to promote the use of all improved varieties (including soybean, wheat, maize and rice) and ensure crop supply. However, in this paper our analysis focuses on the maize seeds subsidy. Of particular relevance to this research was that the subsidy area of Hebei was extended from 2,500,000mu to 21,000,000mu. Such a large increase in turn forced the Hebei Agriculture Department to re-assign the subsidy area of each city under its jurisdiction, and to make some changes to the project county selection criteria so that more counties could participate. After the second distribution, Baoding city received a further 2,950,000mu (in addition to the earlier 400,000mu, together totaling was 3,350,000mu). In addition to the expansion of the subsidy area, another big change was made by the central government regarding the process of subsidization. Instead of subsidizing the seeds supplier who won the tender with a lower market price, the central government will subsidize the farmers directly as the supplier can sell the seed to farmers at the market price rather than the lower subsidized price. Although these two main changes to the policy implementation were intended to bring benefits to farmers and promote the use improved maize varieties, the quick changes caused major difficulties and rent-seeking. In the following section, we highlight these difficulties with our focus on the detailed policy implementation process within Qinglin County, Hebei Province.

4. Policy Implementation at the County Level

Qinglin County is one of 23 counties under the jurisdiction of Baoding City. It covers 2,358 km² and has jurisdiction over 27 townships. Although Qinglin County is an agricultural county, only 7% is plain; 37% is hilly, and the rest (56%) is mountainous with rivers. Its main grain crops consist of maize and wheat. The total area of maize planting covers 296,000mu, and the wheat planting areas covers 195,000mu. Potatoes, peanuts, sweat potatoes, walnuts are also the important cash crops.

Following the central government's alterations to the improved maize seed subsidy policy, further policy adjustments were made both at the province level and municipal level in Hebei Province. This resulted in Qinglin County gaining access to the maize subsidy project. In this section, we describe the policy implementation process in Qinglin County in detail. We tell the story chronologically, focusing on a series of changes that occurred one after another and had a deep impact on the actual policy implementation process. This includes the change from open bidding to direct designation of seed supplier by the Agriculture Bureau of Qinglin County (ABOQ); the downsizing of the fixed improved varieties at the township level; policy internalization by small traders and farmers; the compromise of ABOQ and new difficulties triggered by ABOQ's compromise.

The shift from open bidding to designation at county level (Late-March to Mid-April, 2008)

Immediately, after the State Council's television and telephone conference about strengthening agriculture and food production held on 27th March, the Agriculture Bureau of Qinglin County (ABOQ) received the copy of the conference documents on 31st March. Li Ming, the director of the ABOQ, underlined the phrase "the areas of improved maize seeds subsidy are going to reach 2 thousand million mu as compared to 30 million mu in 2008" in red color in the copy. On that day (31st March, 2008), Li said that he had been informed through informal channels from the Agriculture Bureau of Baoding Municipality that ABOQ might be allocated approximately 200,000 mu for the improved maize seeds subsidy program. In addition, he casually mentioned that a seed trader businessman by the name of Tong came into his office earlier regarding the same matter.

On 1st April, 2008, the Agriculture Department of Hebei Province issued a formal notice about re-applying for the improved maize seed subsidy. Qinglin County got the copy faxed from the Agriculture Bureau of Baoding Municipal on the same day. In the

notice, it said that the central government allocated 210 million yuan (1 British Pound = 10.6 Yuan) in subsidy to Hebei with which to fund the planting of 21 million mu with improved maize seeds. Every farmer would receive 10 yuan subsidy for every mu planted. The notice stated that the Provincial Agriculture Department had designated the south of Hebei as a project area since it is already the major maize producing area of Hebei province. Basic requirements for application for the subsidy included in the notice also indicated: any county that wants to apply for this program must have a project area of more than 200,000 mu, and the application papers should be handed in before 9th April.

At that time, the staff, working at ABOQ, were busy preparing for project application, so were some seeds suppliers. Two businessmen who were brothers and have the family name of Tong invited Li for lunch. During the two-hour lunch, the brothers expressed their full support of Li's work, and how they appreciated the respect Li showed their father (The two brothers' father is the former supervisor of Li). Later, they talked about their common hobby of playing mahjong. After lunch, they gave a gift to Li and left. Shortly after, a former driver of ABOQ by the name of Zuo, who had recently become a seed supplier, also visited Li at his office. He expressed a strong desire to be the official supplier. Li did not promise him, but Li said he would help as much as he can.

Meanwhile, several officials from the Hebei Provincial Government visited Qinglin County to inspect safety matters. After Li received the news that one of the officials was in charge of the improved maize seeds subsidy program, he left for Qinglin County Government immediately to accompany the higher officials. This action paid off. Li received insider information from the provincial government official where he found that it was possible to designate the improved maize seeds supplier by the local Agriculture Bureau directly instead of being settled through public tender at the municipal level. This adjustment was made in recognition of the fact that it was already time for farmers to buy maize seeds and open bidding would take several days.

Any delay would mean that more farmers would not benefit from this project as they will have purchased maize seeds already. Moreover, because it was the first year of implementing the project, it was noted that farmers might not yet have heard about the improved maize seeds subsidy. As a result, it would not be a major problem to appoint a seed company on this occasion as opposed to the intended process of selection through open bidding.

Before handing in the application materials to Agriculture Bureau of Baoding Municipal, heads (director and other deputy directors) of the ABOQ had a discussion regarding some of the main points. Although gained through unofficial channels, Li confirmed that the Bureau could appoint the seed company supplier directly. He argued that it was important to have two seed companies instead of one supplier in order to avoid monopoly. Li proposed the aforementioned Tong's and Zuo's companies as the two suppliers. Other deputy directors agreed to this decision and made suggestions on the selection of the local improved varieties. It was agreed that it might be better to select a few varieties of improved maize seeds in order to avoid problems with registering and distributing hundreds of combinations of seeds and the planting of seeds unfit for local growing conditions. Under this principal, nine improved varieties were identified after discussion. They also decided that based on the allocated subsidy areas in Qinglin County totaling 200,000mu and involving nine townships, the total amount of subsidy needed was 2 million yuan.

By mid April, the ABOQ received the approval from Agriculture Bureau of Baoding Municipality. With the exception of the removal of one variety all other varieties were agreed; reducing the total of approved maize varieties to eight. This meant the decision to designate local suppliers directly opposed to the open bidding process was agreed. As a result, Tong's and Zuo's companies were both appointed as official suppliers. Following this, the ABOQ proceed to implement the improved maize seed varieties subsidy program within the participating townships.

The downsizing of the fixed improved varieties at the township level (Mid-April, 2008)

We now focus on Yang Township to illustrate the implementation process at grass-roots level in practice. There are 23 villages in Yang Township. In principle, according to the approved implementation plan, farmers in each village can buy any combination of the eight selected improved maize seeds varieties. Under this situation, the collection of farmers' purchase information would be undertaken by the following way:-

1. Village accountant (a member of villagers' committee) would collect the purchase information of his village. The accountants compiling work could be more arduous and time consuming when farmers expressed the desire to buy more than one variety of improved seeds in order to avoid the risk of single cropping
2. Village accountant hands in the purchase information to the township accountant after finishing the data collection in the village.
3. After collecting the whole town's purchase information, the township accountant would hand the information to ABOQ.
4. Once the purchase information of all project townships is gathered, ABOQ would inform the supplier to prepare the different improved seeds varieties according to the final purchase information.
5. Accordingly, the supplier would send a shipment of all the seeds to ABOQ. ABOQ distributes the seeds to every project township, then the township accountant allocates the combination of eight varieties to the village, and village cadres take responsibility of allocating the seeds to the individual farmers.

Although ABOQ had already made changes to the policy by limiting the number of available seeds to eight in order to reduce workload and improve work efficiency, further changes were made by the officials of Yang Township. They linked the

subsidy to ‘One Village One Product’. It was envisaged that this would simplify the collection of information and distribution of improved seeds in light of the original intended pathway highlighted above.

The ‘One Village One Product’ was central government’s policy to have each village, or region, develop one specific product, according to the market demands, in order to enable large scale production, product branding and open market access. Through this policy, any village would have a main high value added product with considerable market potential and regional characteristics. It was envisaged that this policy would enhance the overall rural economy and improve product competition. In the case of the maize seeds subsidy program, the township officials strategically used the phrase ‘One Village One Product’, known by farmers through previous experience, to state that each village could only have two varieties of maize seeds. They manipulated farmers by using the term to make farmers think that it was based on government policy. Although this made the work of township officials and village leaders considerably easier, it completely ignored farmers’ needs and the local environment. Monoculture leads to disaster when one maize variety is affected by pests and would make more farmers vulnerable due to a lack of choice in seed variety. Regardless, the township officials ended up prescribing two improved maize seeds varieties for each village.

Policy internalization by small traders and farmers (Mid-May, 2008)

By now it was nearly mid-May, and during this time many farmers have already purchased non-subsidized maize seeds. Many difficulties emerged when the improved maize seed varieties subsidy program was introduced at the village level. In response, small traders and farmers developed strategies to respond to the policy implementation process; thus illustrating different ways in which different actors internalize policy. Farmers who have already purchased their seeds complained that the program was too late and unfair. These farmers wanted to return the seeds they

purchased and buy the improved maize seeds through the villagers' committee¹⁰ in order to apply for subsidies.

The small traders from where these farmers bought their maize seeds and fertilizers do not want the seeds to be returned. To reassure farmers, some of them said “We have reliable information from people inside the ABOQ that wherever you purchased your seeds, as long as the variety belonged to the designated improved varieties you can get the subsidy money”. Soon other traders started giving the same explanation to the worried and angry farmers. Farmers who were unlucky enough to have purchased varieties that were not among the selected varieties seldom managed to get their money back.

Regardless of the traders' insistence that their information was reliable, farmers who had purchased the approved improved seeds varieties prior to the subsidy introduction from small traders were skeptical about the explanation given to them. At the same time, those farmers who had already purchased their non-approved maize seeds from small traders were unhappy with their unfair treatment. After all, since farmers purchased their seeds no earlier than any other year, it was definitely not their own fault but rather the lateness of the program implementation which deprived them of entitled benefits. While the former group responded by going to the ABOQ to enquire whether or not they can receive subsidies as long as they bought the improved varieties regardless of where they were purchased, the latter group went directly to the County Government to lodge a complaint against the ABOQ for depriving them of their benefits as they were not informed about the approved maize seeds beforehand. Similar complaints were also filed by both farmers who had purchased approved and non-approved seeds from small traders in other villages and towns.

Meanwhile, farmers came up with innovative strategies to respond to the policy

¹⁰ If farmers wanted to buy the improved maize seed varieties from the appointed supplier, the village committee was the transfer station. Village cadres first collected the detailed purchase information and money for the suppliers, and then distributed the varieties to the farmers when receiving the improved varieties.

implementation process. Apart from the farmers who wanted to buy the improved seeds from Villagers' Committee but had already bought seeds from small traders, there are some farmers who did not want to purchase the seeds from Villagers' Committee. Take Yang Village for example, seed variety 'A' and 'B' were the two choices available to farmers after downsizing by township officials. Anyone who wants to buy A or B should inform the village accountant how much of which variety he/she would like to purchase, and pay the market price. After the seeds have been distributed, farmers will receive a subsidy of 10 yuan per mu. However, there are farmers who did not want to buy variety A or B. One reason was that neither A nor B is their favorite variety. In that case a farmer who wants to buy the C variety will try to buy the C variety from another village, since every village potentially has a different allocation of two varieties. As C happens to be the approved improved variety of the neighboring village, the farmer will ask his/her friends or relatives who live there to buy the seeds for him/her. Another reason farmers avoided purchasing designated seeds was that some farmers were not convinced by the value of approved improved varieties based on past experience. A farmer might have bought improved wheat seeds from the village office as part of another subsidy program before only to find out that the wheat didn't grow well, and now they would rather buy the seeds from a small trader they trust.

The compromise of ABOQ (Late-May, 2008)

In response to farmers' complaints above, the ABOQ held an immediate emergency meeting. In addition to the staff of ABOQ, Tong and Zuo (the appointed improved seeds suppliers) also attended the meeting. Li, the director of ABOQ, was furious as illustrated below:

“We have only applied for improved wheat seeds subsidy this year and didn't even consider a maize subsidy until the central government broadened the subsidy areas later in March, now we are in the process of collecting the purchase list. We didn't waste a second. After our application was approved at the city level, we arranged our work without delay. However,

while the purchase statistics of approved improved maize seeds were only just starting to come in at the township level we already received numerous complaints by telephone from farmers concerning false information spread by small traders, much of which is at odds with the policy.”

“Never before have we experienced how badly fraud can obstruct our efforts. Unexpectedly, these people are family members or relatives of our own staff (Li became angrier and angrier, and everyone hung his/her head down out of shame). Only for a little profit, you created chaos and even sacrificed the policy outcome. I am so disappointed that as civil servants, instead of explaining the policy content to farmers correctly, you did the opposite by hiding the facts and creating such a big problem!”

“Considering most of the small traders are family members or relatives of our staff, we will indeed give subsidy to those farmers who bought the approved improved maize seeds from you. But is making a profit for yourself more important than implementing state policy correctly? If so, you will be responsible for losing this program next year on account of your behavior. We will let bygones be bygones, but if anyone continues this way, he/she will be sternly dealt with. All our staff should read the policy documents of improved maize seeds subsidy carefully and interpret policy to farmers patiently. In addition, the suppliers must ensure the quality of the improved maize seeds. No problems will be allowed any more.”

Although Li’s comments chastised ‘those who spread rumors’, this account demonstrates how he attempted to make a compromise between the interests of his staff (many of whom were relatives of the traders who spread the false information) as well as addressing the concerns of the farmers. As a result, he agreed to the allocation of subsidies to farmers who had brought approved seeds from non approved suppliers. In order to achieve this, he would need to ‘revise’ the subsidy regulations within the policy..

New difficulties triggered by ABOQ’s compromise (Late May, 2008)

After the new decision on the subsidy program was made by ABOQ, every village and township had to restart collecting statistics on the sales of approved improved maize seeds in accordance with the new rules. In turn, it led to the creation of completely new problems. Before we do this, it is necessary to revisit the process of how subsidy money is delivered from central government to the local level.

Usually, subsidy money is allocated by Ministry of Finance at the Center level. Through the Finance Department of Hebei province and Finance Bureau of Baoding Municipal, the money reaches the Finance Bureau of Qinglin County. As mentioned earlier, in the past, the subsidy was paid to seed suppliers at the county level because they sold the improved seeds to farmers below the market price. However, this year, the Finance Bureau of Qinglin County had to pay the subsidy directly to the farmers who bought the approved seeds. In light of this procedure, we begin to see how Li's proposed 'compromise' might trigger account troubles.

The 'revised version' of the subsidy regulations drawn up by ABOQ violated the original policy rules which restricted subsidies to those farmers who purchased the approved improved seeds from the appointed supplier. This created a problem for policy implementers who were not allowed to revise the policy to begin with. To avoid revealing they implemented their 'revised version', the implementation procedure was changed so that those who purchased the approved improved seeds from non-approved suppliers needed to show a receipt to the village accountant, register and then pay seeds fees once again. Through this procedure the Bureau created the false impression that all farmers had purchased the seeds from the appointed suppliers, making them eligible to receive subsidies issued by Finance Bureau of Qinglin County. After the Finance Bureau had audited and confirmed the account, the money farmers paid to the Finance Bureau would be paid back to them accordingly. In other words, they put on an elaborate show to fix the problems created by the small traders who had misinformed the farmers that they were eligible for subsidies from non-approved suppliers if they purchased the approved seeds.

However, this approach made the farmers even more confused. Also, it is important to reassert that farmers were still completely unclear about the actual content and regulations of this government policy, mainly because village leaders, township officials and agriculture Bureau staff neglected to explain the policy in depth. In the eyes of the farmers, the policy was perceived as an immediate attempt to benefit all farmers. They did not understand that it was only farmers that purchased improved seed varieties from approved suppliers that were eligible for the subsidy. Small traders were able to take advantage of farmers' lack of awareness of the policy by misleading farmers into believing that a subsidy would be paid regardless of where they bought the approved improved maize seeds. Some were even made to believe that the cultivation of non-approved maize seeds would be subsidized, since the fundamental purpose of the central government was for the policy to benefit farmers. Farmers became more confused when local government distorted subsidy rules to pay money first to the Finance Bureau of Qinglin County before getting their money back some time later for no clear reason.

The village leaders and township officials experienced difficulties explaining to the farmers who bought the seeds from non-approved suppliers why they needed to pay money for nothing in order to access subsidies. For example, in Yang Township, Qi Xiaobo, who was the township official taking responsibility of agricultural affairs, said, "To be honest, this behavior can be regarded as stealing money from the state. But, our original purpose was to let the farmers benefit." Whilst collecting money from those farmers who bought the seeds from local small traders, the village leaders also had no idea how explain their actions. The Yang Village leaders came up with a creative solution to tell farmers that this money was needed as a deposit for receiving the subsidy. This made farmers suspect that there might be some fraud taking place and made them worry about whether they would ever see their money back again. During our field research, many villagers complained, saying "since it is the policy of the central government, why should we pay a deposit first? We don't even know when

our money will be returned or whether the subsidy will actually be realized”.

Finally, after nearly two months of worrying about their money, all farmers got their deposit back along with the promised subsidy of 10 yuan/mu¹¹. Although in the end, the ABOQ completed their policy task, it is clear that from the very beginning until the very end, farmers in Qinglin County have been left in the dark concerning the content and regulations of the improved maize seeds varieties subsidy policy. Small farmers in Qinglin County were fortunate to be able to take part in this new subsidy program this year, but whether the ABOQ will be eligible to receive a subsidy again under this program next year remains to be seen.

5. Understanding the policy implementation process

The rapidly changing process of the improved maize seed varieties subsidy implementation in Qinglin County highlights the complexity and dynamic nature of policy implementation. In this case, all the changes (including the change from open bidding to designating seeds supplier at county level, from eight improved varieties to two improved varieties at township level) occurred during the implementation process as a result of the competing interests of different actors. The main task of this section is to explore and unpack the different strategies, actions and rationales of the actors and understand the conditions under which they arise, how they interact, negotiate and compromise, and their effectiveness for solving specific problems.

Our research identified the following social actors as playing key role in policy implementation: Agriculture Bureau of Qinglin County, appointed suppliers, township officials, small traders, village cadres, target farmers, and non-target farmers. Here, target farmers refer to the farmers who did not purchase the maize seeds prior to the policy implementation and consequently had the choice of whether to purchase the improved varieties from the appointed suppliers or not. Non-target farmers are those

¹¹ In Yang village, the average planting area of each household is around 4 mu.

who had already purchased maize seeds in advance of the policy implementation. Chart 2 below illustrates the interaction between the various actors and their roles are further explored below.

Chart 2: The implementation of improved maize seed subsidy policy at Qinglin County

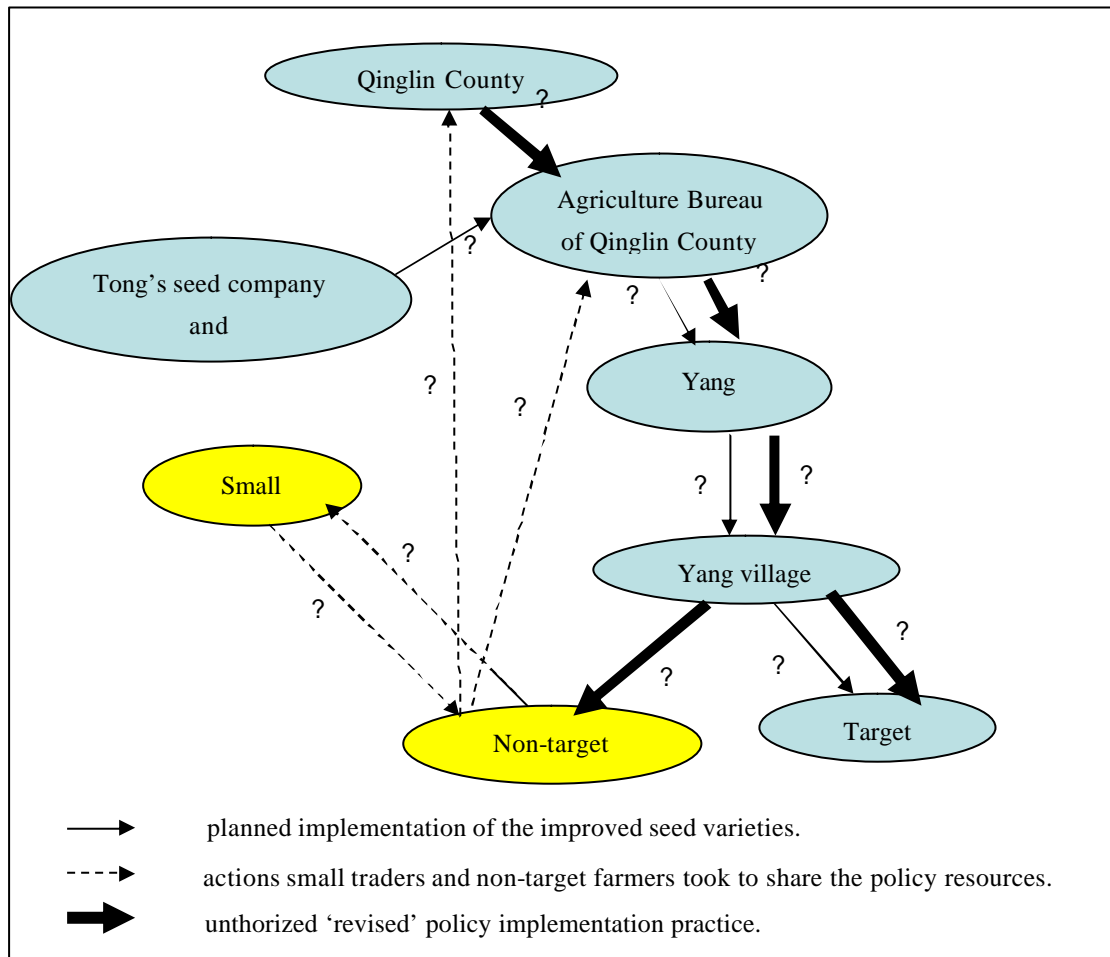


Chart 2 illustrates the planned implementation of the improved seed varieties as well as the unauthorized or 'revised' policy implementation process in terms of how it took place in practice. The various significant exchanges of either seeds, information or complaints are illustrated through the following numbers:

1. The flows of improved maize seed varieties from the approved suppliers to target farmers via Agricultural Bureau of Qinglin County (ABOQ), Yang Township and Yang Villagers' Committee.

2. Non-target farmers wanted to return the seeds they bought from the small traders in order to buy the subsidized seeds.
3. Small traders gave false information to the non-target farmers (i.e. as long as they purchased approved seeds, they would still receive the subsidy) just to protect their vested interests.
4. Some of the non-target farmers went to the ABOQ to enquire whether they were eligible for subsidy if the purchased seeds were not of the approved variety.
5. Some of the non-target farmers went directly to the County Government to lodge a complaint against the Agricultural Bureau.
6. The County Government issued an order to the ABOQ to resolve the miscommunication and problems as soon as possible.
7. In response to direct order at County Government, the ABOQ revised policy and made a compromise to let non-target farmers who had purchased approved seed from non-approved suppliers be subsidized. In other words, ABOQ changed the original policy implementation rules at the local level without permission.
8. The subsidized money went to both target farmers and non-target farmers.

We now explore the significance of these pathways of exchanges illustrated in Chart 2 by focusing on the role of various actors.

Agriculture Bureau of Qinglin county: powerful & powerless

It is important to note that typically in China, the director of a Bureau is the person who takes charge of everything and makes decisions. As highlighted earlier, Mr. Li, the director of Agriculture Bureau at the county level, played a key role, and accordingly, is explored here.

As the formal administrative management institution, ABOQ has an important administrative role in implementing state policy or programmes at the local level. In our case, Mr. Li had a key role in selecting project townships, improved varieties suitable to local conditions and providing instructions to township officials. His roles

are reflections of ABOQ's administrative power within the policy making machinery. However, as we have illustrated, this administrative power appeared to extend beyond the authority of members of ABOQ. The shift from fixing the improved varieties supplier through open bidding to designating the supplier itself is a clear demonstration of both its power and ability to manipulate the delay in policy implementation to its advantage. The rapid changes to policy meant that the time for implementation was much tighter in comparison to 'normal practice'. As a result, the director of ABOQ proposed designating the suppliers directly to save time; this was approved by the Agriculture Bureau of Baoding Municipality. Furthermore, the informal channels through which Li received information made it easier for him to appoint a supplier. This informal interaction (e.g. accompanying provincial officials to receive insider information) also reflects the relationships which extend beyond the pure work relationships between higher and lower officials. For the lower level officials, 'friendship' type relationships can be interpreted as a form of informal power that can be used to manipulate. The fact that ABOQ was able to change the content of policy without authorization by producing its 'revised version' is a clear demonstration of its power and ability to maneuver the policy landscape. Ironically, this approach backfired due to the way that seemingly 'powerless' groups (i.e. non-target farmers and small traders) interpreted and negotiated the policy.

Mr. Li was faced with making a compromise between 'internal' and 'external' constraints. Internal constraints include the fact that many of the small traders (some of whom are family members or relatives of Mr. Li's staff) who sold farmers the improved varieties spread false information concerning the policy. 'External constraints' refer to the fact that farmers were prepared to take their complaints to ABOQ and Qinglin County Government. On the one hand, Mr. Li had to consider the Bureau's reputation for the future. As the number of farmers who bought the improved varieties from the small traders was not small, if their complaints upgraded

to *shangfang*¹² (a form of the petition system in China), the Bureau would be accused of seizing farmers' rights and could even be punished. Moreover, the 200,000mu subsidy area would not be completed if the farmers who had already bought seeds outside were not accounted for. Yet, at the same time the functioning of the Bureau relied upon its staff and Mr. Li felt that he needed to take their feelings and interests into account. Considering all these reasons, he had to give in to the small traders' behavior and placate the non-target farmers. Although such a compromise ignored the policy rules, it did facilitate the participation of small traders and non-target farmers..

Designated suppliers: the consequences of guanxi

Guanxi, is a Chinese term referring to interpersonal connections. According to Bian (1994), the guanxi can be divided into three forms: a) direct ties between two persons; b) indirect connection between two persons; c) a contact person with little direct interaction (Bian,1994). However, in most cases, guanxi is commonly viewed as special relationships between two persons (Jacobs, 1979; Alston, 1989; Osland, 1990). These special relationships sometimes can be interpreted as friendship (Pye, 1982), sometimes as reciprocal exchange (Hwang, 1987; Yan, 1996), and also as social capital (Butterfield, 1982). No matter what different perspectives different scholars take, the essence of guanxi between two people is that one is able to prevail upon another to perform a favor or service, or be prevailed upon. The two people need not be of equal social status. Because of this reason, guanxi is identified as a key factor in Chinese culture (Fan, 2002). Whenever searching a job, running business, or making a position promotion, guanxi plays a very important role, sometimes, is the decisive factor (Bian, 1994 and 1997; Yeung and Tung, 1996; Law et al, 2000).

Guanxi's effects are of key importance to our illustration of the policy implementation

12 In China, the petition system is a way for individuals to lodge complaints against corrupt government officials or corrupt governmental process to higher authorities. Shangfang, it's an important form of extrajudicial action that can trace its origins to imperial days. If an individual believes that a judicial case was decided not in accordance to law or local government officials illegally violated his rights, he can complain to officials in a higher level of government to hear his case, re-decide it and punish the lower level officials. In addition, the petitioning system different in China is a formal process. (China Law & policy, Movie Review: Zhao Liang's "Petition: Court of Complaints", Elizabeth M. Lynch, February 8, 2010)

process. Here, we return to the case of the designation of the two seed suppliers (Tong's company and Zuo's company). As mentioned earlier, the original policy required the designation of only one supplier through an open bidding process. However, in Mr. Li's words (the director of ABOQ), designating two suppliers prevents monopoly and guarantees seed quality. But in reality, it was the strategy the director took to balance the competition between his *guanxi* with the two suppliers.

The success of Tong's company is due to the close *guanxi* with Li, the director of ABOQ. The nature of their interaction highlighted earlier reveals high levels of *quanxi*. Firstly, the discussions that took place between Mr. Li and the Tong brothers over lunch and also whilst playing mahjong highlight their familiarity with each other and have a relatively close relationship. Secondly, the fact the brothers entertained Li for lunch without saying a word about applying to be the seed supplier, and the fact that Li accepted their gift after lunch suggests an unusual level of *guanxi*. According to Chinese culture, when A asks B to do something, if B accepts A's gift, it implies that B confirms their *guanxi* and will help A in all probability. If B does not accept, it indicates that B does not want to get involved or is not sure about the success of the proposal. Last but not least, the brothers' father, who is a well respected and former mentor of Li, treats Li very well. The latter is important *guanxi* that Li needs to consider and indicates that he should give priority to Tong's company, otherwise people will say he is ungrateful and has no human kindness.

Guanxi is a key element of the cultural background of China as exhibited above. Chinese people like to bring *guanxi* in dealing with any things and want to things reasonable under the *guanxi* (Shuming, 1987; Lin, 2006; Hwang, 1987). As Lin Yutang said, 'For Westerners, a point can be recognized broadly as long as it makes sense logically. While for Chinese, even if a point is logically correct, it should still be culturally appropriate. Yet, in fact, cultural correctness takes priority over the logical.' This is why Li was obliged to consider Tong's company as one of the improved varieties supplier. Hence, *guanxi* is a crucial factor that has to be considered when

actors make decisions and can take priority over the principles of formal work. The guanxi between Li and Tong brothers is based on Li's obligation to Tongs' father.

Although different, Li regards his guanxi with Zuo as a kind of obligation. It is mainly due to the complex background of Zuo's links with ABOQ. As mentioned previously, Zuo was the driver of ABOQ many years ago. More recently, he was later contracted by ABOQ's subordinate seeds company in 2002 through national institutional reform. Before 2001, it was a common phenomenon that most of Agriculture Bureaus at county level had its own subordinate seeds company. These companies are state-owned and their employees are members of the local Agriculture Bureau. During that period, these seeds companies had an easy time. As is the case with the protection of state administration, they were the main seeds producers and dealers at the local level. Following the operation of "Seed Law", the seed market was completely liberalized, and resulted in the state-owned seed companies to suddenly lose their monopoly. Approximately two thirds of the state-owned seed companies faced bankruptcy and sustained difficulties. So in 2002, many local agricultural Bureaus underwent institutional reform and encouraged their own staff to contract the subordinate seeds company to be a separate private company. Under these circumstances, Zuo, the former driver of Qinglin County Agriculture Bureau took over the subordinate seed company. Although Zuo's seed company is private, there remains important invisible links with its original institution (Zuo and his employees are all former members of ABOQ).

In fact, this national institutional reform did not change the essence of the relationship between the former subordinate seeds company and the Agriculture Bureau. This incomplete institutional reform still bound them closely together, and forced Li to take the guanxi between them into account and make Zuo's company become the supplier. He defended his decision by arguing that "the competition between these two companies will improve their service quality instead of appointing only one company".

Township officials: taking advantage of existing policy discourse

To alleviate their own burdens and ‘improve work efficiency’, township officials took advantage of the other policy discourse ‘One Village One Product’. Township officials manipulated the original meaning¹³ of the policy to legitimize their decision to restrict each village to two varieties of improved maize as opposed to the eight as specified in the original policy. It’s important to note how the township officials strategically used the phrase ‘One Village One Product’, known by farmers through previous experience. In effect, their actions can be considered as ‘hijacking’ the original policy in order to secure large scale production. The end result was that it created a further set-back for the implementation of the improved variety seed policy.

Our research highlighted how the seed traders spread false rumors by claiming they were insiders within Qinglin County Agriculture Bureau in order to avoid farmers returning seeds and suffering losses. This behavior induced two different responses among the farmers who had already purchased maize seeds. Those who bought the approved superior maize seeds were skeptical of this explanation; while the others who bought the non-superior maize seeds were angry. As a result, they began to request information on the policy directly from the Agriculture Bureau so that they could relay their complaints to the County Government. This resulted in an urgent ABOQ internal meeting to revise the subsidy rules in the Agriculture Bureau. Finally, after taking the interests of their staff’s family members or relatives into account as well as the future work, the director of Agriculture Bureau made a compromise to allow the non-approved traders become suppliers. The reason for this stemmed from the unexpected changes to subsidy regulations, which resulted in the Agriculture Bureau not being directly involved in the subsidy distribution any more. The Bureau, therefore, didn’t care who shared the policy resources. As a result, unsurprisingly, these traders successfully found another way to maneuver the policy landscape and

¹³ Originally, ‘One Village One Product’ was the central government’s policy to have each village, or region, develop one specific product, according to the market demands, in order to make possible large scale production, product branding and open market access.

reap benefits by ‘spreading rumors’.

Small traders: saboteurs

When the farmers attempted to return the seeds they purchased beforehand from the small traders, the latter sabotaged the policy implementation by spreading rumors that “wherever you purchased your seeds, as long as the variety is one of the eight selected varieties you can get the subsidy money.” Knowing that the information was false, and contradicted the policy contents, the small traders continued this strategy to maintain their vested interests. By taking advantage of farmers’ lack of clarity concerning the policy and their own ‘special identities’¹⁴, the traders made the farmers negotiate with ABOQ in the front and they acted subtly in the backstage. In the end, the traders succeeded and took advantage of policy resource distribution.

Non-target farmers: high-profile actions

Non target farmers in Qinglin County were left in the weakest position by being left in the dark about the content and regulations of the improved maize seeds subsidy policy and being manipulated by traders,. Nevertheless, non-target farmers developed their own strategies to deal with these constraints. They fought for their rights, by enquiring ABOQ and lodging complaints against ABOQ to Qinglin County Government. In China, lodging complaints is an important element of maintaining social stability, and is consequently always paid much attention. If this behavior is upgraded to Shangfang, relevant local officials and even the local director would experience political punishment. This ‘extreme action’ proved extremely effective and in some instances converted them from non-target farmers to the target audience.

Target farmers: low-profile strategies

The target farmers in our research site also faced constraints. As is the case with the non-target group, they also had little detail about improved maize seeds varieties

¹⁴ Here, special identities referred to the small traders’ double identities. On the one hand, they were the businessmen with the interest of making money; on the other hand, they were family members or relatives of staff working at ABOY. In our case, the small traders took advantage of their letter identities for business profit.

subsidy policy. Their decision to purchase improved varieties was restricted by the decision by township officials to use the discourse of 'One Village One Product'. The only advantage for target farmers was that as long as they purchased the improved varieties they could access to the subsidy. For this reason, there was no need for target farmers to take any extreme action against the Bureau. Rather, it was more appropriate to use softer strategies to protect themselves and create extra benefits. For instance, purchasing their own choice of the eight approved varieties from other villages¹⁵ to access subsidy money; exaggerating the areas the seeds they bought can be planted and forging fake receipt with the small traders to gain more subsidies.

Dilemma of village cadres

Village cadres were in a dilemma as to how to balance the behaviour and different needs of township officials and villagers. On the one hand, they were obliged to follow township officials' decision although they knew it was not reasonable to farmers. On the one hand, in some cases, even if they knew what farmers were doing were against the policy regulation, they still went along with their actions. When the township officials used the existing policy discourse (One Village One Product) to reduce the complexity of the policy delivery, the village cadres followed their wishes. From their perspective, accepting this policy discourse would lighten their work burden as well as defend township officials' decision, and maintain good guanxi with township officials. Even if the villagers did not agree with the measure they carried out their leaders' decision.

However, the farmers were not the passive actors who only accepted the orders. They developed their own strategies to protect themselves. To gain more policy subsidy, some farmers deliberately exaggerated their planting areas, because the policy subsidy standard is based on the planting areas (10yuan/mu). For example, the seeds a farmer bought just met the demands over one mu but is insufficient for two mu, but the

¹⁵ As I mentioned before, a target farmer wanted to buy was not in the allocated ones in his/her village, but was belong to other village's allocated varieties, he/she would ask his/her relatives or friends lived in that village buy it there, and get the policy subsidy.

farmer insisted on saying the seeds were for two mu. Farmers who purchased the un-approved improved seeds before the policy announced also had strategies to access policy recourses. They asked for a fake receipt (In china, the receipt is informal and without any legal effect; only the invoice is the formal proof of purchasing goods) from small traders which said they bought the approved improved seeds, so they can share the policy subsidy as long as they hand in the 'deposit' to village committee. In fact, village cadres were fully aware of the farmers' intention, but due to the nature of rural acquaintance society¹⁶ and the Agriculture Bureau's mismanagement of policy on this matter, they did not penalize the farmers.

Some interests groups' collusion in the backstage

Mainly to deal with the inspection taken by the higher level policy supervisor, Qinglin county Agriculture Bureau, Qinglin county Finance Bureau, township officials and village cadres formulated a performance team¹⁷ after Mr. Li made revision. They plotted a performance of 'farmers purchasing the approved improved maize seeds actively from the appointed companies'. In this show, these four actors were the team-mates in the background that maneuvered together and performed before the audience (farmers and upper level policy supervisors). Policy supervisors only focused on the visible work. The performers successfully set up the impression they wanted to show ---- most of farmers in the project area purchased the approved improved maize seeds actively. Their account also matched with the sold seeds; all these appeared that the policy was implemented smoothly. Although the process of collecting deposit made farmers suspicious that something 'forbidden' was going on, but they were not able to figure it out on account of lacking knowledge of the 'show background (the policy contents)'.

¹⁶ In China, the rural areas almost invariably linked with an acquaintance society. From generation to generation among the villagers and the villagers adjacent to each other are familiar with. Fei Xiaotong's point of view in the "Rural China" was that, than the unfamiliar society, acquaintances society is a relatively conservative society with a complex network. Fei Xiaotong, Rural Chinese Fertility System [M], Peking University Press, 2004,4. P51.

¹⁷ According to Goffman (1978: 34), here I use the term 'performance team' or, in short, 'team' to refer to any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine.

In summary, different interest groups took chains of strategies and actions, among which some are high-profile, some are low-profile, some are corrosive and even some are corrupt, to make the policy translated in accordance with their own group's projects. Administrative power, guanxi, defective institutional reform, uninformed information, specific identities, and even extrajudicial action (lodging complaints in our case) can be used as effective strategies by different groups to pursue their respective interest and desires. Moreover, the practices and actions different interest groups developed not only constrain and influence one another, but also constantly re-shaped the policy, producing something very different from the original policy contents.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Based on a case study of state-led agriculture policy carried out at county level from Hebei Province, this paper reflects upon the constantly re-shaped implementation process which displays a constant process of interaction, negotiation and compromise between different social actors. The key findings of our study can be summarized as follows. The first is that policy intervention entered into social actors' life worlds, and triggered a battle around scrambling policy resources. From this point, policy intervention does influence social actors' every life by making them create un-routine practices and actions. In turn, the chains of strategies they formulated and series of actions they developed re-shape the policy intervention constantly. In our case, the introduction of the improved maize seed policy in Qinglin County triggered various actions taken by different actors in order to pursue their own purpose. The director of ABOQ, the seeds suppliers, small traders, township officials, village cadres and farmers all devised different strategies during different periods of the policy implementation, which made significant changes to policy. Hence, as it noted by Long (2001:17), policy intervention has "both a constraining and an enabling effecting on social behaviors". As Giddens argues:

“In following routines of my day-to-day life I help reproduce social institutions that I played no part in bringing to being. They are more than merely the environment of my action since, as I have stressed previously, they enter constitutively into what it is I do as agent” (Giddens, 1987: 11).

Second, every social actor possesses some kind of ‘power’ and resources to maneuver the policy landscape, even those in highly subordinate positions (Long, 2001:17). Farmers and small traders, in our case, appear to be the groups with little power, but their action nevertheless made the powerful policy implementers powerless. Power is never at a standstill, and is changed by the interactions of various social practices taken by different social actors over time. In other words, the powerful can become powerless, and those who are powerless sometimes can even become powerful. This flow of power increases the complexity and uncertainty of the policy implementation process, which was quite often neglected by both top-downers and bottom-uppers. The dynamic nature of the flows of power further reinforces how policy implementation can not be controlled through setting up rigorous regulations or rules at the Centre government as the top-downers suggest, nor can it be enslaved by street-level bureaucrats (in our case, they are the policy implementers) as noted by bottom-uppers. Rather, our research illustrates that all the actors involved in the policy implementation can manipulate the situation at some moment due to fluctuating features of power.

The third point is that social actors, must not be depicted as simply disembodied social categories or passive recipients of intervention, but as active participants who process information and strategies in their dealings with various local actors as well as with outside institutions and personnel (Long, 2001:13). In the aforementioned case, Agriculture Bureau of Qinglin County improved maize seeds varieties suppliers, township officials, village cadres, small traders, target farmers and even non-target farmers carried out actions that were not expected and produced various actions to realize their separate goals. These actions exemplify the notion of ‘human agency’ as noted by Giddens. He argues that social actors possess ‘knowledgeability’ and

‘capability’ and with these two specific kinds of human agency social actors can learn from surroundings and can deal with their lives even when faced with unfavorable conditions (Giddens,1987). Human agency, the core of actor-oriented approach, provides strong explanation regarding interactions, negotiations and comprises taken by different social actors. It also challenges both top-down and bottom-up models on explaining the uncertainty of policy implementation process. Top-down perspective, focusing on setting statutory rules and regulations at the top, makes a fatal mistake to set aside the policy implementation process per se. Bottom-up perspective, attribute the failure of policy implantation to the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats, neglects other relevant social actors’ human agency. Since each human agency is a part of social actors themselves, we argue that actor-oriented approach is more suitable than either top-down or bottom-up perspective on comprehensively exhibit and analyze the policy implementation process.

Last but not least, structure, comes hand in hand with human agency and plays an extremely important role in our case. As shown earlier in this paper, two kinds of main structures should be taken into account. One is the ‘formal’ administrative functional structure referring to the multi-level policy implementation system, the other is the informal structure, of guanxi. The formal structure regulates the behaviors of actors involving in the policy implementation process. However, complicated conditions and the discretionary power of bureaucrats create problems for policy implementation. Of particular significance is the informal structure of guanxi, deeply rooted in Chinese cultural context, and its role as a network connecting different people with different background. As shown in our case, the actions (outside performance of human agency) taken by various social actors originated more from the informal structure (guanxi) than the formal structure. Moreover, these actions enhanced the informal structure and undermined the formal structure. In return, the shaped structures would drive the convergence of social actors’ action logic – guanxi rent-seeking. It is this kind of interaction between structures and human agency results in the corruption of formal regulations and expansion of guanxi.

Given the above conclusions, policy intervention can not be regarded as a process which can be well-designed beforehand. To pursue the interests and realize the goals, various social actors' responses and actions create too many uncertainties, making the implementation process too complex and changeable to be in control. As a result, policy implementation in practice is continuously being shaped and re-shaped. Even setting up a series of rigorous implementation rules can only promote but not guarantee securing policy desired goals. However, as the regulations to standardize the street-level bureaucrats' behaviors, implementing rules are exceedingly necessary. At the same time, monitoring and supervising should be established during the policy implementation process so as to identify potential problem areas and resolve them under the supervision in time. It may also become an effective way to observe the actions taken by various social actors at the local level.

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