

Individual and Institution:

The First Secretary Embedded in Rural Governance*

Haixia Wang

China Academy of Social Management / School of Sociology, Beijing Normal University
wwahixia@163.com

Zhouyang Zhao

School of Government, Peking University
zhaozy_66@sina.cn

Luyi Yuan

China Academy of Social Management / School of Sociology, Beijing Normal University
yuanluyi9561@163.com

个体与制度：第一书记嵌入乡村治理体系的实践分析

王海侠

北京师范大学中国社会管理研究院社会学院

赵洲洋

北京大学政府管理学院

袁陆仪

北京师范大学中国社会管理研究院社会学院

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Abstract

Since 2015, the appointment of a special “first secretary” (for the village party branch 村党支部) has become an important method for reinforcing rural party building and attacking rural poverty. On the obvious level, the first secretary can enhance access to redirected resources and solve the problems of insufficiency and uneven distribution in rural areas. On a deeper level, the first secretary institution can play a role in overcoming problems in bureaucratic governance and optimizing the rural governance structure. Based on an analysis of the actual practices of first secretaries, this article highlights the operational mode, institutional characteristics, and governance effectiveness of the first secretary institution. It points out that the most prominent characteristics of the first secretary institution are non-bureaucratic governance, flexibility, and resource reallocation, thus reflecting the duality of comprehensive party leadership and bureaucratic governance by the government. However, there are still some institutional paradoxes: the first secretary institution retains some characteristics of campaign-style governance, at least to a certain extent, and its social embeddedness is dependent on individual accesses to resources and particular operational strategies, resulting in practical effects that vary across regions and individuals. Nevertheless, the first secretary institution still has a governance ability and effectiveness that are different from conventional governance and conform to the goal of both establishing links between internal and external resources in rural reconstruction and satisfying the mass line requirement of the party’s rural work in the new era. It will be

worthwhile to further study the implications of the first secretary institution for governance in general.

Keywords

first secretary, institution, practice, rural governance

摘要

驻村第一书记制度自 2015 年后成为农村加强基层组织建设和脱贫攻坚的重要抓手。第一书记从浅层上看可通过资源反哺增强农村资源供给，扭转农村分配不足和分配不均的状况；而从深层看，第一书记制度可以成为克服现有科层制治理不足、优化乡村治理结构的作用。本文基于对第一书记的实践分析，总结和提炼出第一书记制度的运作模式、制度特征及治理成效，指出第一书记制度最大的特点是非科层性、灵活性与资源联动性，体现了党的综合治理与科层治理的双重治理特质。但第一书记制度亦存在制度性悖论，第一书记制度带有一定程度的运动式治理特征，其社会嵌入性亦与个体的资源禀赋、行动策略相关，实践效果因人因地而异。尽管如此，第一书记制度显示出与常规治理不同的治理效力，契合新时期乡村治理体系建设的内外资源互动指向和新时代党的农村工作的群众路线要求，第一书记制度所承载的治理内涵值得深入研究。

关键词

第一书记、制度、实践、治理

In April 2015, the Notice on Appointing Outstanding Cadres as First Party Secretaries of Villages (hereafter, "Notice") was jointly issued by the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the Central Leading Group for Rural Work, and the State Council Leading Group Office for Poverty Alleviation and Development. The Notice

calls for assigning first party secretaries (“first secretaries”) to two kinds of villages: poor villages and villages where the party organization is weak. The main objectives of this policy are to improve the construction of rural grassroots organizations, to improve the effectiveness of rural governance within a short time, and to facilitate the task of poverty alleviation. At the same time, the policy contributes to the fair distribution of resources and cadres. From the perspective of policy implementation, the first secretary institution attempts to resolve the current predicaments in targeted poverty alleviation 精准扶贫 and rural development by sending personnel from outside into the village to promote the reform and overall development of rural areas. Moreover, from the perspective of optimizing the rural governance system, the first secretary institution aims to reform the rural governance structure and connect state power with villagers’ self-governance.

Literature Review

The Notice contained basic provisions related to first secretaries, including how they are to be recruited, the length of time they must work and live in the village, and their personnel and party affiliations. First secretaries are mainly selected from among outstanding young cadres 年轻干部 and “reserve cadres” 后备干部 in various levels of government, outstanding personnel in state-owned enterprises 国有企业 and public service units 事业单位, and cadres who have been relieved of leadership positions due to their age but have not yet retired. Priority is given to those who have rural work experience or expertise in agriculture. First secretaries are generally appointed for a period of one to three years. They do not occupy positions in the “two committees” 村两委 of the village (the village party committee 村党支部委员会 and the villagers’ self-government committee 村民自治委员会) nor do they participate in village

elections. However, they should live in the village during their term of office. In principle, they do not do the sort of work they did in the sending unit, or *danwei*. Their personnel connections 人事关系, salaries, and benefits remain unchanged, but their party organizational affiliation 党组织关系 is transferred to the village.

The first secretary system is similar to the historical “resident system” 驻村制 or the “*bao* village system” 包村制. It is a working mechanism by which higher-level government sends full-time cadres to administer villages 行政村 for the purpose of promoting the implementation of relevant central policies at the grassroots level (Xu and Li, 2017). This mechanism is still commonly referred to as “dispatching cadres” (teams) 下派干部 and “the government sector taking full care of the villages” 部门包村 (Liu, 2012). Before the Notice was issued, the practice of dispatching first secretaries had already existed in various places. The best-known first secretary is Shen Hao, the first secretary of Xiaogang village in Anhui. In 2013, the center placed the historic mission of “completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all aspects” on the national agenda. To carry out this mission the most challenging tasks are in rural areas, especially in poverty-stricken areas. As a result, the strategy to alleviate poverty in China has shifted from regional development to targeted poverty alleviation. As the ultimate destination of policy implementation, the grassroots play an important strategic role, which has a direct impact on the effects of the policy and the achievement of its governance goals (Zhao, 2006). In this new social context, the appointment of first secretaries is linked to poverty alleviation. At this stage, poverty alleviation involves not only a “technical” increase in household income through the setting of clear goals and use of clear tools, but also something that must be embedded in the agrarian development and governance of rural communities. Therefore, the first secretary is involved in poverty alleviation, party building, and rural governance.

However, because the policy has been broadly implemented for only a short time, there have been few studies on the first secretaries, and most of those studies were conducted after the Notice was issued in 2015. The focus in such studies is on the correlation between the performance of the first secretary and the improvement of rural governance. Such performance-related studies primarily address the traits of first secretaries and their duties. Governance-related studies, on the other hand, primarily explore the functions of the first secretary as an external actor intervening in improving rural governance. Specifically, performance-related studies explore two topics: the first is the selection of the first secretaries. Yang Fang (2016) focuses on the process of selecting first secretaries, pointing out that four standards should be required: political reliability, good conduct, integrity, and ability. Wu Xiaolin (2015) discusses the desired capabilities and qualities of the first secretary, including a firm belief in Communism, a clear sense of responsibility, a down-to-earth working style, and the ability to organize rural cadres and communicate with and humbly learn from the peasants. In addition to analyses that focus on the individual, Shi Liuyuan's (2016) study shows that the combination of "individual ability plus organizational backing" has an impact on the effectiveness of the first secretary's work; that is, individual first secretaries need the support of both the danwei that dispatched them 原单位 and other administrative danwei of different ranks. This suggests that the selection of first secretaries and the fulfillment of their obligations require that individuals and organizations be linked. The second aspect concerns the duties and work methods of first secretaries. Lei Li (2016) argues that the assistance first secretaries provide to villages is not limited to money and goods but also involves drawing in all kinds of resources based on the actual circumstances of the villages. First secretaries can maximize the advantages of funds, projects, human resources, and information by gaining the support of their danwei and helping both local cadres and villagers to stimulate

entrepreneurism, clarify thinking about development, and solve the problems involved in development.

For example, choosing the right persons and strengthening the village's leadership, accelerating the adjustment of the rural industrial structure, and establishing and improving the local "first secretary and party organization forum in poor villages" 贫困村党组织第一书记座谈会 mechanism can help create a better understanding of the work to be done, the problems and difficulties to be solved, and who is in need of support from higher-level work units (Lei, 2016).

Governance-related studies of first secretaries primarily take either an individual or an institutional perspective. The individual perspective regards the first secretary as an individual actor and discusses the impact he or she can have on the village. Wang Yahua and Shu Quanfeng (2017) proceed from the influence of the first secretary on the village power structure and governance, pointing out that the essential reason for stationing first secretaries in the villages is to increase the supply of rural leadership resources as a way of achieving "good governance." Therefore, the first secretary can be an important means of improving rural leadership. However, the institutional perspective considers these issues in terms of changes in the governance structure. Xie Xiaoqin (2016) proposes the concepts of "junction governance" 接点治理 and "dual-track governance" 双轨治理, which essentially refer to a relationship between state power and grassroots rural society at the village organization interface. Here the first secretary acts as a bridge between the two. Although the first secretary is an individual, he or she has a profound impact on the governance structure. Similarly, Lin Guohua and Fan Pan (2016) maintain that the first secretary institution should be viewed as a top-level design 顶层设计 and understood in terms of value, selection of personnel, assessment of management, performance evaluation, and

problem-solving measures. Thus it is necessary to explore the meanings and mechanisms of the first secretary from an institutional angle. This kind of research attempts to clarify the functions of the first secretary in the governance structure.

Still another research tack involves analyzing the integration of internal and external forces involved when the first secretary intervenes in the village as an external force, the attributes of the first secretary after becoming the leading figure in village governance, and the first secretary's long-and short-term influence on the village. Li Qunfeng (2017) points out that the first secretary is an important embedded supporting force who can use political resources to obtain support from higher levels of government and use social resources to obtain economic support. He believes that a first secretary, as an external actor, can establish a resource allocation mechanism and a rural working method, especially in targeted poverty alleviation, which substantially increase the resources available to the village.

Other studies do not regard the first secretary as merely an external actor, but instead investigate the participatory dimension of first secretaries. Han Shangwen and Li Yuanyuan (2013) suggest that only through “participatory poverty alleviation” 参与式扶贫 can the first secretary “stimulate the self-development awareness of poor people and overcome the short-term effects of the traditional poverty alleviation model of [material] charity.” Han and Li's emphasis on the participatory dimension is a reflection of the fact that the first secretaries initially relied too much on resource inputs. The authors also argue that the first secretaries should be embedded in the village rather than being external actors. First secretaries appointed to villages should prompt the transition of the village's social economic structure from “endogenous governance” 内生型治理, which primarily relies on villagers, to “embedded governance” 嵌入型治理, which integrates external forces. To achieve better governance, first secretaries should play a

dual role as both “state agents” and “village agents,” and in the process take into account both state power and villagers’ self-governance in order to achieve better governance. To realize this goal, villagers should be encouraged to ensure that a capable leading group can guarantee that the village will continue to make progress well after the first secretary’s departure (Yang, 2016).

All these studies have provided useful analyses from both the individual and the institutional perspectives, and have identified the institutional implications of the first secretary’s individual behavior. Lü Zhong (2017) further raises the issue of institutional logic—that is, “why does the party and the government select and dispatch so many first secretaries to rural areas?” He points out that the “fragmented situation in rural politics” and “potential systemic risks in rural areas” have prompted the state to reconsider the importance of rural governance to the state’s governance system and capacity. To optimize rural governance, the party and the government have launched the practice of installing first secretaries in the villages, but this practice retains the features of campaign-style governance 运动式治理. He further points out that “the reality of China’s political system is that the party is the core. This is crucial to the solution of many problems and can affect the political and social order. The reshaping of rural governance must start with the reorganization of the rural political regime and parties.” Lü refocuses the issue back on China’s unique political regime: “the party and administration.” There has not been a major breakthrough in the research on the relationship between rural party building 农村党建 and rural governance. Instead, studies have tended to treat rural party building and rural governance as unconnected.

However, considering the widespread dispatch of first secretaries, the proposal of “three integrated governances” 三治融, including “self-government, rule by virtue, and rule by law” 自治、德治、法治 raised in the 2018 No. 1 Document of the Central Committee, and the

promulgation of “Regulations on Rural Work of the Communist Party of China” 中国共产党农村工作条例, there is an obvious need to examine party building in the countryside. In recent years, there have been many papers on the first secretary and rural party building. For example, Tao Zhengfu and Li Fangyun (2016) have pointed out that the first secretary can boost both rural party building and public services. The practice of appointing first secretaries is also conducive to both village party building and poverty alleviation. However, although this kind of research represents a large proportion of studies of rural governance, it is mainly confined to exploring the party’s own building and lacks a broader perspective on the regime. Therefore, that literature is not discussed here.

Although current research has attempted to address the improvements in the rural governance system in the new era from the perspective of the first secretary institution, so far there have been no theoretical breakthroughs. In addition, the study of the first secretary remains far from perfect. Many scholars have evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of the institution through its workings in particular localities or by looking at only one or a few first secretaries. At the same time, they regard the first secretary institution as only a short-term policy tool and do not have a dynamic understanding of the structural meaning of the institution in terms of elastic governance. These studies often confuse the first secretary as an individual with the first secretary institution. As Karl Popper (1962: 343) notes, “what we need is not so much good men as good institutions.” The first secretary is both an individual and an institution that has profound implications for governance. On the one hand, the first secretary institution reflects the inertia of campaign-style governance of the Communist Party of China (CPC). On the other hand, it bears the dual characteristics of all-around governance by the CPC and bureaucratic administration.

Our team has conducted fieldwork in Zhongning county, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, on the work of first secretaries four times in the past two years. We obtained many relevant materials, including “Zhongning County Poverty Alleviation and Development Team Stationed in Villages and Key Poverty Alleviation Tasks List” 中宁县扶贫开发驻村工作队及扶贫重点任务一览表 and “Evaluation Report of the First Secretaries Stationed in Villages” 驻村第一书记任期考核汇报, and interviewed many departments and persons, including the Organization Department of the Zhongning County Committee 中宁县委组织部, fifteen first secretaries, township leaders, village cadres, and villagers. Our team obtained a large amount of information from both interviews and written materials. Using data on more than one hundred first secretaries in the county since the institution was launched in 2012, we have performed a typological analysis. We conclude that the “resource attributes,” “work motivation,” and “action strategy” of first secretaries are closely related to the rural situation, the operation of the project system 项目制, and bureaucratic administration. This article will go beyond a simple evaluation of institutional performance to conduct a detailed analysis of the operations of the institution, thus providing an overview of the mechanisms and strategies of the first secretary from the perspective of institutional analysis while revealing the role of individual initiative and the choice of working strategies in the first secretary institution. We explore how this institution addresses the relations between the internal and the external and the upper and lower levels of rural governance, its impact on the effectiveness of governance, and its institutional significance.

The Institutional Background of the First Secretary System

The Premise of the First Secretary Institution

The legitimacy and effectiveness of the first secretary institution depend on two major factors. At the macro level, the first secretary operates within China's "party and government system" 党政体制 and must follow the dual governance paradigm of bureaucratic administration and all-around governance by the CPC. Both the party and the government are hierarchical organizations, but the government administration is based more on the principles of bureaucracy, while the party's governance is more flexible. At the micro level, first secretaries must be embedded in the villages in order to carry out their work effectively. In other words, the manner in which they carry out their work should conform to the basic forms and features of rural governance. First secretaries are dispatched and assessed by the townships to which they have been appointed. We can consider this pattern as a form of local governance. This is why first secretaries are subject to dual management: by the party and by the township government.

In its practice of governance, China has formed two sets of independent but compatible hierarchical systems between the government and the party. As Jing Yuejin, Chen Mingming, and Xiao Bin (2016: 3–6) observe, "The CPC is key to understanding China's government and politics. The 'party and government system' is a critical variable in explaining China's government and politics." The basic characteristics of the hierarchical organization are clear power relations and ordered hierarchical levels. The organization issues top-down instructions to improve problem solving with specialized personnel and formal regulations. This corresponds to Max Weber's hierarchical governance model, namely bureaucracy 科层制. The main features of bureaucracy are an emphasis on centralization and the principles of precision, stability, discipline, and reliability. Collective action is taken through the authority vested in the hierarchical structure, within the constraints established by laws and rules (Weber, 1978: 217–25).

Rural governance involves not only a typical bureaucracy in terms of organizational structure but also the so-called pressure system 压力型体制—that is, the vertical structure by which performance targets are set for lower-level cadres and which cadres must meet in order to be eligible for promotion. The governance pattern of township administration and village governance 乡政村治 (Xu, 1997) at and below the township level is a combination of bureaucracy and the pressure system. While it may seem that the village is co-governed by the village party committee and the villagers' self-government committee 村民自治委员会, in terms of the actual exercise of power, the village party committee plays the core role in the rural party + government 党+政 pattern under the leadership of the township. Essentially, the villagers' self-government committee is a mass organization for governing the village; the village party committee, however, is the core of rural power. Therefore, when analyzing issues surrounding village governance, one must address the process through which the party takes action and the process of party building. In analyzing party building, one should look not so much at the relationship and contradictions between the village party committee and villagers' self-government committee, but rather the construction and development of grassroots party branches themselves and the role they play in rural governance. Under the pressure system, although village-level organizations are theoretically separated into the village party committee and the villagers' self-government committee, in the political contract system 政治承包制 between township and village, they are treated as a whole. Because the party is in the leading position in China's party-and-government system, grassroots party organizations, especially the village party committee, play the most important role in the process of rural self-governance.

The role of the party committee in rural governance is by no means limited to party-relevant work. Recruiting of party members and managing them on a daily basis, enhancing the

party's work style, and promoting spiritual civilization are, of course, important tasks of the village party committee. However, as the core of rural governance, the village party committee inevitably is responsible for all aspects of economic and social development. The division between “politics” 政治 and “administration” 行政 only exists in the relatively higher levels of the regime. Township and village cadres routinely perform many tasks on a daily basis, but they rarely deal with “political affairs.” Thus, it is unrealistic to expect that village party committees would be responsible only for “political leadership” without “intervening in” village affairs. In fact, they are responsible for all village affairs, which is an inevitable outcome of the pressure system. The core leadership role of the village party committee in rural governance is to “lead” the village to achieve economic and social development.

The main content—even the “crucial” task in the eyes of the CPC—of party building in rural areas consists of promoting local economic and social development. Thus rural party building is “development-oriented” and consistent with the inherent logic of the pressure system. Under this system, the development of the local economy and society can be enhanced by strengthening the leadership status and capacity of the village party committee.

As a member of the staff from higher-level government, the first secretary appointed to the village not only handles administration in the village but also helps restructure resources and builds the leadership of the village party committee. The first secretary of a village acts as the liaison between the higher-level government and the village. Because the township government assesses the first secretary and village cadres together, the former intervenes in the administrative tasks assigned by the township government, supervising and assisting the village cadres in their implementation. It can be said that first secretaries, being cadres dispatched by township government, are representatives of the township government. As public officials of the township

government, they have a good understanding of the village's administrative situation. They also implement the township government's agenda in the process of urging and assisting village cadres to complete administrative tasks.

The Organizing Process and Operational Mechanism of the First Secretary Institution

The first secretary institution is a specialized organizational arrangement equipped with dedicated resources for given governance goals. Unlike the general project system, it does not allocate policies, funds, materials, and other resources through existing bureaucratic organizations, but reorganizes human resources and ensures the sustainable and effective use of resources through organizational restructuring. However, the mechanism of the first secretary remains subject to the basic norms of the project system. As Chen Jiajian (2017: 150) has argued, "In implementation, the project system will transform the organizational form of the distribution of authority and responsibilities between superior and subordinate governments in the four aspects of goal setting 目标设置, resource allocation 资源分配, implementation 组织实施, and inspection and evaluation 检查验收. Different project management methods have an important impact on how local government carries out projects. These methods can include proceduralized execution 程序化执行, excessive execution 过度执行, passive execution 消极执行, and other phenomena, which undermine the effectiveness of local projects."

Referring to existing explanations and investigations of the mechanism of the first secretary, we can classify the organizing process of the first secretary institution into four basic categories: goal setting, resource allocation, implementation, and checking and evaluation 验收核查. The danwei and organizational department which dispatch the first secretary constitute the principal 委托方, and the first secretary the agent 代理方.

1. Goal setting refers to the quality and quantity of the work to be carried out. From the perspective of superiors and subordinates, those charged with the work can participate in goal setting in either a formal or an informal way. Formal participation can make it easier to define project rules, while informal participation can make it easier to make modifications during the implementation process. Compared with the bureaucratic system, goal setting in the project system is usually clearer and the principal exercises more influence (Qu, 2012). Each of the first secretaries has specific mandates, such as building a certain number of roads, setting up a certain number of cooperatives, and raising a certain number of households out of poverty. At the same time, the principles behind some goals may not be clear, such as the closeness of the relationship between cadres and villagers and the settlement of disputes and conflicts. These goals are not set but instead are associated with the work of first secretaries.

2. Resource allocation refers to how special purpose materials and funds 专项物资与资金 required by the project are obtained. Since the goal of the first secretary as an institution is to systematically develop rural areas, an allocation of resources for each particular project is needed. This is the responsibility of the originating danwei and its counterparts 原单位与对口单位. Resources are usually allocated by the principal, but in some cases the agent has to acquire them (Di, 2015). Obtaining resources is based on both organizational structure and individual agency. The originating danwei of the first secretaries are expected to provide strong support to their first secretaries, which is a basic requirement of the first secretaries' working institution as enshrined in the document "Implementation Plan for the Selecting and Dispatching Cadres for a New Round of Poverty Alleviation and Development in the Villages" 关于做好新一轮扶贫开

发驻村工作队干部选派和管理工作的实施方案。However, the organizational support required by the document may not necessarily be forthcoming in practice. In our case study, the support that first secretaries can obtain from their own danwei varies substantially. Zhou Xueguang and Lian Hong (2012) have also noted that resource allocation is an area that should be further explored.

3. Implementation refers to the construction of organizations and the mode of execution in the concrete process of carrying out a project. The principal directly controls some aspects, such as making rules, organizing human resources, and controlling the pace of the work (Chen, 2017), while the organization and execution of other aspects are in the hands of the agent. Superiors evaluate the results, regardless of the process (Li, 2015). First secretaries combine these two working approaches by organically integrating regulations and individual initiative.

4. Checking and evaluation refers to the assessment of the results of the project and rewards or punishments based on that assessment. This process can be either unilaterally evaluated by the superior of the principal or jointly by the principal and the agent. In general, the first secretary should live in the village to which he or she has been assigned for two years and should be decoupled from his/her originating danwei. During this period, the first secretary's party organizational affiliation should be transferred to the village party branch. At the end of the term, the superior danwei and the township government will evaluate the first secretary's performance. The evaluation is based on the requirements of both the county CPC organizational department 县组织部 and the township government.

The operations of the first secretary are supposed to follow the management mode of the project system, but in practice this is different from the bureaucratic project system 科层项目制.

According to the distribution of authority and duties between the principal and the agent as described above, this article discusses three types of management mechanisms: the direct delivery type 传达式, the contracted responsibility type 包干式, and the joint liability type 连带式. These three summarize both the relationship between superiors and subordinates and the institutional features of the first secretary (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Organizational Forms and Interaction Mechanisms of the First Secretary Institution

Interaction mechanism	Basic elements	Goal setting	Resource allocation	Implementation	Checking and evaluation
Direct delivery		By superiors	By superiors	By superiors	By superiors
Contracted responsibility		By superiors and first secretaries	By superiors and first secretaries, but mainly the latter	By first secretaries	By superiors and first secretaries, but mainly the former
Joint liability		By superiors and reinterpreted by the first secretaries	Mainly by first secretaries	By superiors and first secretaries, but mainly the latter	By superiors

The direct delivery interaction mechanism, which is always in the hands of the superior, mainly consists of the transmission of information, resources, and other things from the higher to

the lower level. This is a basic task that does not reflect individual initiative and in particular does not involve individual social resources and social capital in resource allocation. By controlling governance goals, the implementation process, evaluating principles, and resources, the principals better ensure that the first secretaries satisfy their requirements. However, this mode is relatively rigid and its effects are only institutional results.

The core feature of the contracted responsibility mechanism is it provides the executing party with a large operating space and strong incentives (Williamson, 1975). In the process of governance, the superiors provide funds for a specific purpose 专项经费 and give the executive freedom in goal setting, implementation, and evaluation, thus allowing subordinates to implement projects more flexibly. After ensuring the superiors' governance goals are met, subordinates can strive to serve greater interests. This is the typical administrative contract system 行政发包制. Zhou Li'an (2014: 6) has pointed out that "the administrative contract system refers to the contracting relation inside the government system. As an ideal type, it represents a hybrid governance structure between bureaucracy in the Weberian sense and pure contracting, which occurs among independent entities without any hierarchical relationship." In the process of implementation, the subordinates can get around the special management rules and gain greater autonomy and space for innovation. To some extent, first secretaries enjoy autonomy of action and resource allocation in this relationship and can even participate in the checking and evaluation process, reflecting a certain degree of interaction between superiors and subordinates. At present, this mode is the most common among first secretaries.

The joint liability mechanism is an extremely powerful device for controlling the behavior of subordinates. Its core goal is to make the project executive assume the main responsibility. The agent executives must allocate part of the project resources, solve problems arising from the

implementation of the project in nonstandard ways, and take risks (Chen, 2017). The superior officers can control their subordinates through the imposition of external norms such as supervision of the checking process, the evaluation of the results, and the legitimacy of the subordinates' actions.

In general, we distinguish three mechanisms involving first secretaries that shape the relationship between superiors and subordinates by classifying the different assignments of authorities and responsibilities in the four steps of goal setting, resource allocation, implementation, and checking and evaluation. Each of the three mechanisms has its own advantages and disadvantages that might change the behavior and effectiveness in governance of first secretaries when the principals change their intentions and regulations.

Responsibilities, Strategies, and Patterns: The First Secretary Institution in Practice

Resource Attributes of the First Secretary

Different sources of resources will lead to differences in rural development patterns, and development itself can, of course, provide various resources necessary for the operation of the system. At the same time, the path dependence of development can be determined by the source of resources. The biggest feature of the first secretary system is the funneling of resources to the villages. The resources that the first secretary can acquire can be divided into administrative resources within the bureaucracy and social resources outside the bureaucracy. The first are provided by the bureaucratic departments, but in addition to the support from the first secretary's originating danwei, administrative resources of other departments may be needed, and the first secretary him/herself must locate and acquire those. Social resources are acquired by the first secretary outside the administrative system. The extent to which these resources, such as extra

capital, specific policies, projects, and information technology, can be obtained depends on the first secretary's personal capabilities and administrative position.

Most first secretaries initially tend to make full use of administrative resources, taking advantage of their experience working in the government and their familiarity with the government to obtain various resources most needed in their villages from relevant departments. For example, when Ma Jun, who originally worked in the Zhongning county procuratorate and later was appointed first secretary of Shiqiao village, found that the urgent problems in the village were hardening the muddy roads and ensuring a supply of drinking water, he turned to his originating danwei for a solution:

During my stay in the village, I visited the families almost every day. The village cadres had done a bad job in the past and left many problems to be solved. The road into the village is not good. When it rains, there is mud everywhere and a lot of water accumulates under the bridge, hindering normal traffic. The road is not passable, so it's impossible to leave the village. Moreover, when building houses for immigrants in those days, time was limited and the engineering was not careful; there were problems in both the design and engineering. Some houses sit on high terrain and some on low, and the water pump pressure is now insufficient, so farmers on high terrain have no tap water for ten days a month. The villagers were very dissatisfied with this situation. (Interview, May 3, 2017)

To solve these problems, Ma Jun went to the county's Land and Resources Bureau, the Transportation Bureau, and the Poverty Alleviation Office many times to ask for special funds to harden the village's roads and replace the water supply equipment. In a project system

governance model, obtaining funds and departmental support requires competence and skill. Village cadres who are adept at managing social capital and maintaining good relations with officials can gain more funds to improve the village infrastructure. However, other village cadres, with poorer personal abilities or who are not skilled in public relations, have a hard time finding funds. To some extent, the appointment of a first secretary can change the uneven distribution of projects. Although the first secretary is an individual, he or she deals with affairs involving the development of the village on behalf of the administration and the party, and therefore he or she plays an important role in obtaining and balancing the distribution of village resources. Compared with villages without a first secretary, those with a first secretary obviously have greater resources for road building, education, industry, and so on.

In general, a first secretary from a more important danwei or of a higher rank can mobilize more administrative and social resources. A first secretary from a less important danwei or of a lower rank, on the other hand, has to exploit other types of resources in addition to “hard currency” (capital). For example, Li Dong originally worked in another town as a new recruit and tended to rely on external resources.

Li Dong was appointed to Huacun village, just a few kilometers from the Zhongning county seat. Raising and processing the Chinese wolfberry is the main industry in Huacun, but in recent years the price of wolfberries has fallen and the local economy has suffered. The villagers have begun to grow maize instead of wolfberry. After learning about this situation, Li Dong worked out a development plan, established a wolfberry cooperative, and attempted to sell wolfberry via e-commerce. In an interview, Li Dong described his actions to us:

After getting to know the circumstances of the village, I talked with the main personnel in the village about establishing a wolfberry cooperative that could improve the collective economy. First, I found a few college students in the village to create an Entrepreneur's Home 创客之家, and then we opened an online store on the portal Taobao 淘宝网. In 2017, I also used Taobao to do crowdfunding and achieved a sales volume of 138,000 yuan in ten days, making a profit of tens of thousands of yuan. The villagers thought it was incredible to make so much money in so few days. Next, I worked with Tencent's WeCounty to increase the market for wolfberry.¹ Now Huacun is a practice base for Ningxia University. I'm eager to bring various resources into this village and promote its development. (Interview, April 28, 2017)

Young cadres without stable administrative resources generally tend to use social resources outside the bureaucracy, including social capital, information resources, and technical resources. Social resources are more enduring and fundamental than administrative resources, but to take advantage of them requires building and improving the village's capacity for collective action.

The First Secretary's Role in Governance

¹ WeCounty 为村 is an open platform that uses the mobile internet to help people discover the value of the countryside. With the slogan of "connecting for the countryside" and the model of "internet + countryside," WeCounty connects emotions, information, and wealth for the villages.

By analyzing how the first secretary drives development in the villages, we can see that different mechanisms involving the superior and subordinate will affect the behavior of the first secretary in governance. Taking the motivation of the first secretary into consideration, we summarize the types of roles the first secretary plays in rural governance in Table 2.

Table 2. Coupling Analysis of the Motivation and Resource Attributes of First Secretaries

Resource attributes	Motivation	Administrative resources	Social resources
Type of work			
Promotion motivation	Active	Opportunity catcher	Performance seeker
Institution adaptation	Active	Governance representative	Innovative developer
Task undertaking	Passive	Middleman in resource allocation	Pressure bearer

The promotion motivation type consists of cadres who have volunteered to be a first secretary because of a strong desire to be promoted. They regard working as a first secretary an opportunity to train themselves, to gain experience at the grassroots level, and to build up a political track record 政绩. Although they are assessed, they are self-motivated and they are determined to act. They try their best to use administrative resources available to them and therefore they are opportunity catchers. But because they also actively pursue social resources, they are performance seekers.

The institutional adaptation type of first secretaries also volunteered, but do not have a strong desire for promotion. They generally have an administrative position, but are older and less likely to be promoted. Nevertheless, they are eager to make a difference during their term as first secretary and contribute to the development of the village regardless of whether they are motivated by institutional requirements or personal drive. In our survey, a first secretary from the

Land Bureau and one from the Science and Technology Bureau were of this type. They were over forty years old and were still ordinary staff members or cadres at the deputy-section-head level 普通科员或副科级干部. They said, “I have certain resources and I hope that I can use these resources to do something for the village.” This type of first secretary can be treated as a governance representative and innovative developer in terms of his/her resource attributes (see Table 2).

The last category is the task undertaking type. Such individuals do not want to serve as first secretaries. They regard their appointment as an unavoidable task assigned by the party and their departments. Objectively, they have little opportunity to be promoted; subjectively, they are unwilling to do what it takes to be promoted. They want to continue working in their originating departments and familiar jobs and do not want to move to a remote village. As noted earlier, a first secretary is required to leave his/her originating department and stay for two years in the village to which he/she is assigned. Although cadres of this type are reluctant about being a first secretary, they can still satisfactorily complete their assignment owing to procedural work requirements and institutional support. The resource attributes of such first secretaries are as a middleman in resource allocation and a pressure bearer. In our survey, a first secretary from the Political and Legal Committee is of this type. It was not expected that he would be promoted, even if he was talented and did a good job, because of the disadvantage of his age. This shows that the appointment and promotion of first secretaries mainly depend on the requirements of the job and individual performance, which are not necessarily related to one’s subjective drive.

Operational Strategies of the First Secretary

First secretaries come from different organizations and have different titles, life experiences, and social relationships, and thus there are significant differences in their knowledge and ability. Because of these different personal characteristics, each first secretary has unique resource attributes and each may command a different level of authority. Moreover, different types of first secretaries are involved in village affairs in different ways. However, although their operational strategies vary, they can be typologically classified to some extent using indicators of the operational strategies they wield in handling village affairs. These strategies can be roughly divided into semi-embedded strategies and fully embedded strategies, and the latter can be further divided into elite style and mass line style (see Table 3).²

Table 3. Operational Strategies of First Secretaries

Degree of Embeddedness	Semi-embedded	Fully embedded
Direction of integration		
Top-down	Semi-embedded strategy	Elite strategy
Bottom-up	--	Mass line strategy

First secretaries who adopt a semi-embedded strategy generally will not try to influence the social relations and governance structure of the village, but simply act as a middleman in resource allocation. For example, a first secretary, who had been a deputy division chief, said:

² “Mass line” 群众路线 refers to the CPC’s basic principle that the interests of the people must be prioritized and power must be exercised on their behalf.

I'm in charge of certain work in our department; even though I was asked to disconnect from my department, I'm still needed to perform a great deal of work, so it's difficult for me to get involved in village affairs. I brought computers, funds, etc. to the village. . . . Some poor households ask me for help all the time. If you've repaired the house for them, they'll want you to help repair the windows.

Gradually, I stopped going very often and asked a young comrade in our office to go on my behalf. (Interview, August 1, 2017)

A first secretary who follows the fully embedded strategy will generally be involved in village affairs and will have some impact on the development of the village. However, there are two styles of this kind of embeddedness. One style involves forming an alliance with the village elites and governing the village by collaborating with the village elites and attempting to acquire external resources. The elite groups are generally either members of the village party committee and the villager's self-government committee or the village's rich households. A first secretary in this style mainly brings resources into the village. We conceptualize this work approach as the elite strategy. An example of this type of first secretary is Bureau Director Xu:

The main reason I can work effectively in the village is because of two methods. One method is to identify the crucial persons in the village. Most of the villagers in the village where I'm posted are from the Hui minority. Therefore, when I first came to this village, I often visited the imam and helped him repair the mosque. As long as the imam approves of you, it will be easier to work in the village in the future. In addition, if you want the villagers to comply with the party's policy, you have to bring resources to the village. It's easy for me to get resources

because of my position in the bureau. Some companies are willing to help the poor, but they don't know who to help or how to help. I can introduce them to the village and help the poor households. Thanks to entrepreneurs' donations, it's very easy to raise tens of thousands of yuan. Then we can build roads or fund poor college students in our villages. (Interview, August 2, 2018)

Although the first secretary can bring in many resources and projects that will improve the village, the issue of how to complete these projects and the related issue of project contracting and payment remains a tricky business.

Since all of the interest groups or clans in the village want project contracts, it is a challenge for the first secretary to decide whether to assign these projects to powerful groups or to ordinary villagers. To some extent, the injection of new projects in the villages brings with it conflicts and clashes. A first secretary who follows an elite strategy is usually path-dependent in allocating new resources, which will result in elite capture 精英俘获. However, the degree of capturing is less than in the existing distribution pattern. As an external administrator, a first secretary can act as a fair and even-handed arbitrator who brings more institutional and mass-supervision pressure to bear.

In contrast to the elite strategy, the other operational strategy is the mass line strategy. A first secretary who follows this strategy changes the way the village is governed by visiting peasants, getting to know the village, mediating conflicts, and providing villagers with various information and resources. Such first secretaries gain the trust and support of the masses through close contact.

In the past, the government also assigned cadres to the countryside to help the villagers, but the villagers felt that those cadres just did their jobs perfunctorily 走过场. They came to the villages to “gild themselves” 镀金 and didn’t bring substantial changes. I think that the best way to gain the approval of the masses is to serve the people with my heart and soul. When I’m in the village, I go from house to house to learn about their situation. For poor households, I make a targeted poverty alleviation plan with the village cadres. I also knew an old petitioner, advised him not to petition, and made him the supervisor of the village cooperative so that he could play a supervising role! (Interview, July 27, 2018)

Some first secretaries define their work from the perspective of an ethics of responsibility, believing that their task must be to benefit the masses, especially poor households. Therefore, when introducing projects, they will prioritize ordinary people, especially members of poor households. For example, one first secretary got villagers to participate in road-hardening construction by paying them 100 yuan a day instead of granting the project to an engineering team connected with the village cadres. Another example is a project of reconstructing the barns in a village. The first secretary resisted the village cadres who intended to have things their way and saw to it that each household shared in the project. However, first secretaries who act in this way may have a tense relationship with the village cadres. In addition, the situation may deteriorate if work styles are not fully developed and relationships are not skillfully handled. As a result, some first secretaries can face intimidation and even physical threats. A village cadre commented about a first secretary: “Why does he always go to the farmers’ homes? He shouldn’t be doing that but instead should be asking for more resources and projects.” In general, the

village cadres' expectation of their first secretary is that he or she will bring in resources through his/her social network and government ties. They do not want him/her to get involved in the village's affairs and the distribution of benefits.

In view of the current organizational pressure and level of personal commitment, the proportion of the semi-embedded first secretaries is relatively small. According to our fieldwork, they account for fewer than a tenth of the total. Although the vast majority of first secretaries want to contribute to the village where they are appointed, about 70 percent of fully embedded first secretaries adopt the elite strategy and are reluctant to get involved in village affairs and conflicts. Their main task is to assist the village cadres in getting the work done. Even so, because first secretaries are outsiders and can remain somewhat detached from the interests of the village, in resource allocation they are sometimes subject to the "profit-capturing mechanism" or "path dependence" (Wen and Yang, 2012) that has been in place in the village for many years. Nonetheless, nearly a third of the fully embedded first secretaries in our sample have a strong sense of public welfare. They believe that although they need to assist and cooperate in the work of the village cadres, they must oversee the development of the village and play an important role in resource allocation. They have a greater impact on village affairs than those who adopt the elite strategy. This kind of typological division is not absolute, but it does illustrate the main groups and forces on which first secretaries rely in their work. Moreover, we can see the operational strategy of the first secretary from the interaction structure, which is not entirely the result of subjective choice but is also affected by resource attributes and the level of authority.

The choice of operational strategies is based on the first secretary's level of commitment and faith in the system along with objective factors. In general, first secretaries who have fewer

administrative resources tend to be fully embedded in the village so that they can gain approval and authority from the masses, while first secretaries who have more administrative resources at their disposal tend to be semi-embedded in the village and gain power and authority through projects and capital. However, there is an initiative paradox in the operational strategies of the first secretary. As mentioned above, a first secretary with administrative resources can greatly improve the material circumstances, or “hardware,” of the village and does not need to focus on the question of motivation.

A first secretary who has few administrative resources, on the other hand, tends to adopt the fully embedded strategy and is actively involved in the village, for example, by trying to motivate the collective, mediating disputes, strengthening the village leadership team, and introducing market information and other things from the “software” side to help with the village’s development. Balancing the “content” 里子 and “appearance” 面子 in the first secretary’s work in order to achieve both “software and hardware” for village development is an important issue.

The Performance Patterns of the First Secretary

With respect to the first secretary’s responsibilities, the Notice clearly stipulates that the first secretary not only should ensure the implementation of the party’s principles and policies but should also play a leading role in all of the village’s public affairs. Specifically, he/she should:

- (1) Lead the village party branch in presiding over major affairs in the village and guarantee the villagers’ rights to know, to participate, to make decisions, and to supervise.
- (2) Convey the intentions of the superior party committee to the village. The first secretary should promote rural economic development by leading villagers to adjust the industrial structure and cultivate major

industries and help the villagers increase their wealth. (3) Strengthen the leadership in other village organizations and improve their work so as to promote the functioning of various organizations in rural governance.

In the personalized context of rural political organizations in China, villagers tend to equate the person in the leading position with the organization or institution. Therefore, the first secretary is naturally regarded as a symbol of the party, especially as a symbol of the superior party organization, and therefore should be the core of the village governance structure. Indeed, as an outsider, the first secretary has social relationship networks and interest orientations that differ from those of insiders. The first secretary's method of intervention combined with institutional norms can be boiled down to three patterns of performance (see Table 4).

Table 4. Performance Patterns of First Secretaries

Interaction mode	Constraints	Incentives	Performance patterns
Direct delivery	Strong	Strong	Programmatic execution
Contracted responsibility	Weak	Strong	Active / over-execution
Joint liability	Strong	Weak	Passive / negative execution

Institutional norms are expressed as rewards and punishments for the first secretary in the bureaucracy. In the bureaucratic system, the incentives that guide departmental actions include economic incentives and political incentives—both involve rewards and punishments (Dixit, 2002). Constraints are manifested as restrictions imposed by the rules that govern bureaucratic departments in specific actions. The applicability of incentives and constraints is different and can be divided into two dimensions: strength and weakness. As noted earlier, in the direct

delivery mode the principal delegates few powers and responsibilities to the agent. The agent mainly acts in accordance with the instructions of the superior government and procedurally implements the governance objectives of the superior. Therefore, the general pattern of execution adopted by the first secretary under direct delivery is to follow routine procedures to complete the tasks given by the superior. In contrast, in the contracted responsibility mode the first secretary is given more freedom of operation. The management mechanism in this case is characterized by weak constraints and strong incentives. In the contracted responsibility mode, first secretaries can flexibly respond to the environment and the tasks and pursue personal goals, increasing their incentives to complete their duties but also leaving them prone to over-execution problems—that is, the content and methods of work go beyond the usual working norms and requirements.

The joint liability mode restricts the free operating space of the executive by imposing a rigid responsibility for resource allocation and risk taking. It is characterized by strong constraints and weak incentives. Under this mode, projects are implemented in a passive and negative manner. A first secretary operating under the joint liability mode is usually forced to carry out his/her job in a passive/negative way because he or she generally must act within a large, non-autonomous working space and it makes little difference whether he or she does well or not.

To some extent, the division of these three performance patterns resembles an ideal type. In practice, however, the first secretary might find him/herself in an intermediate state between two patterns. In general, from the perspective of whether a first secretary can exert his/her own will, the performance patterns of the first secretary include programmatic execution, active/over-execution, and passive/negative execution. These performance patterns are highly correlated with

the allocation of power and responsibility in the institutional environment and the nature of the management mechanism. In short, the arrangement of power and responsibility has a strong impact on how the first secretary carries out his/her job.

Conclusion and Discussion

A New Governance Outlook and New Opportunities

For a long time, especially in its pursuit of the goal of securing a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects 全面建成小康社会, China has strived to alleviate poverty and boost development, both of which require catch-up development in poor areas. Consistent with this initiative, it has been necessary to establish a political system with a high degree of power concentration to ensure efficient, intensive, and speedy development. In reality, China's political system is based on "the leadership of the party" in socialist democratic politics with Chinese characteristics 中国特色社会主义民主政治制度 (Fang, 2013). In this sense, rural governance follows the same logic under the pressure system. Therefore, developing rural governance requires the constant strengthening of the party's leadership. The village party committee is empowered by the party to lead the villagers' self-government committee and other villagers' autonomous organizations. But since the village party committee lacks sufficient organizational capacity to do a good job in leading economic development, it cannot assume the responsibility and power of "leadership." Thus the need for the first secretary: an external resource carrier and task bearer who goes deep into rural society, plays the dual roles of leading and assisting the village party committee, and ideally can reinvent development and governance of the village. In other words, the first secretary is both the bearer of the institutional identity and the concretization 具像化 of the party and has interests and orientations different from those of

the preexisting, inert rural governance structure. The first secretary can achieve development and alleviate poverty in the village based on the institutional setting and organizational goals. The first secretary's drive to promote development is thus relatively detached from the existing interests in the village.

At the same time, the pressure system in the interaction between the upper and the lower levels can be thought of as a "political contract system." Its specific method is to transmit the goals that have been decided on and the associated tasks to the grassroots level through the so-called responsibility system 责任制 (Rong, 1998). The responsibility system stipulates both the tasks and indicators to be completed and the corresponding rewards and punishments, especially at the local and grassroots levels. A first secretary who works as a dispatched "organization" operates like a "folded" administrative bureaucracy 折叠行政科层, which more clearly reflects the role of fulfilling the given governance tasks assigned by the superior. This is intended to strengthen the drive, motivation, and capacity of village party branches to promote rural economic and social development. On the other hand, the first secretary's work strengthens the leadership and administrative capacity of the higher-level party organizations and governments throughout the countryside. Strengthening the governance of rural society through the party branches is a natural extension of the logic of continuously strengthening the status and role of the party under the pressure system.

In sum, the first secretary is the personalization of the power that reshapes governance. The first secretary undertakes assigned governance goals and activities; however, the resource attributes of each first secretary, including information, human resources, capital, and administrative authority, are different, and thus their operational strategies will be different. In terms of how first secretaries operate, the governance structure can be divided into a task-based

type and a motivation-based type, and motivations can be subdivided into the motivation to achieve institutional goals and the motivation to be promoted. From the perspective of resource attributes, resources can be divided into administrative resources and social resources. Different motivations, resource endowments, and ways of obtaining resources will influence the operational strategies of first secretaries, which can be broadly divided into a semi-embedded strategy and a fully embedded strategy, with the latter subdivided into an elite strategy and a mass line strategy.

Equipped with resources and authority, a first secretary adopting a semi-embedded strategy and elite strategy can help fight poverty from the top down, but might easily tend toward technical complexity in operations and arbitrariness in practice and therefore neglect or even ignore the special conditions and capacities of localities and the grassroots.

Especially in the construction of infrastructure and in social security, project plans with a simple approach to inputs require both uniform standards and uniform progress. This makes the plans easy to manage, but runs the risk of ignoring what happens to the recipients. The actual demands and differences in conditions along with the projects' real utility can be neglected and, in particular, the beneficiaries can be denied autonomy or space to participate. Passive benefits might enable the project to become a kind of "hegemony," leading to an embarrassing situation: on the one hand, the goal of poverty alleviation will have been achieved in line with national policy, but the details such as how to use resources and projects already invested and use them sustainably may become problematic. On the other hand, the amount of resources will have been increased, but the social organism will at the same time have been damaged and community order will have been undercut.

A first secretary who adopts the mass line strategy must face all of the issues of the village, including its existing problems, and consider the interests of all parties. However, the goal of the endogenous development of the village lengthens the cycle of resource mobilization and policy implementation, which is objectively unfavorable to problem solving and task completion (Wang and Yu, 2019). The fact that the first secretary has a limited term in office makes village development and problem solving a matter of urgency. In addition, because of their relatively weak authority and weak ability to mobilize resources, first secretaries who adopt a mass line strategy also face particular problems such as ensuring the sustainability of resources. However, in the long run, adopting a mass line strategy is the best combination of party building and the mass line 群众路线 in the new era, and will lead rural party building to merge into society and the people in terms of public affairs and development that transcends existing interests. This has special significance for balancing rural development (at least to a certain extent), overcoming rural social differentiation, and leading villages to prosperity for all.

Applying a rural vitalization strategy 乡村振兴战略 always faces the problem of inertia and the inequitable distribution of benefits left over from the previous process of “projects going down to the countryside” 项目下乡 (Tan, 2018). To break through the systemically inequitable distribution of benefits in the field of rural governance, it is necessary to coordinate different policy tools and blaze different paths to combining resources to form new approaches to injecting resources. The first secretary institution plays this role, at least to some extent.

When a first secretary reorganizes the resources of the villages, especially poor villages, this can help the village community link administrative resources at the upper and lower levels and social resources inside and outside the village, with a relatively strong comovement of resources 资源联动性. At the same time, the first secretary has an external attribute, which can

be conducive to a more equitable method of resource redistribution and can to a certain degree overcome the rural interest “profit-capturing mechanism”: path dependence in resource distribution and elite capturing in resource aggregation (Cheng and Wu, 2008). The first secretary’s interest externality, resource attributes, and attention to serving the mass are important methods and opportunities to promote rural development and reshape rural governance.

The Paradox of Institutional Initiative

In recent years, Wu Xinye (2016) and other scholars have begun to discuss the “defects of the bureaucratic governance paradigm,” pointing out that it is not conducive to timely progress and effective rural governance. We can see a great deal of “anti-bureaucracy” 反科层制 governance throughout China’s history. Ding Yi (2016) has analyzed China’s experience in that regard and has defined “anti-bureaucracy governance” as a kind of governance that relies on conventional bureaucratic organization but is opposed to the mechanism and operational logic of hierarchical governance, and instead favors the benign violation of the constitution 良性违宪, the petition system 信访制度, and campaign-style governance 运动式治理. However, although this kind of analysis points to various institutional traces that are different from bureaucracy, it is inappropriate to use the term “anti-bureaucracy.” As Ding Yi has pointed out, since this kind of governance also relies on conventional bureaucratic organization, it is more accurate to conceptualize it as “non-bureaucratic” governance.

Based on the above illustration, we can refer to the working characteristics of the first secretary as “non-bureaucratic.” First secretaries as individuals are not only government officials but also party members. They must be decoupled from their originating department and work

and stay in the village, where their actions are affected by the bureaucracy, but they are no longer bureaucratic because they do not have administrative power. First secretaries play the role of “party representative” in the village whose real authoritative source is the power delegated to them by superior party committees.

Therefore, this identity can be regarded as the non-bureaucratic nature of the first secretary. In a broader sense, the first secretary is a kind of agent of external governance and because of rushed work caused by the secretary’s limited tenure and urgent tasks, such governance has a campaign-style nature. In these two respects, the first secretary institution bears the dual characteristics of non-bureaucratic governance and campaign-style governance. However, aside from the question of its effectiveness, the first secretary institution in practice is paradoxical: it combines non-bureaucratic and campaign-style governance with its opposite, bureaucratic and conventional governance.

On the one hand, the social embeddedness of the first secretary is subject to the individual’s resource endowment and operational strategies, and the governance effect mainly resides in the resources that are fed into the village and varies from person to person. On the other hand, the village has its own developmental logic. Village cadres and villagers have already seen that once the task of poverty alleviation is completed and external intervention ends, rural construction will fade away (Zhe and Chen, 2011). The villagers will eventually have to rely on themselves, and the village will return to its original development path. This creates an institutional dilemma for those who try to boost rural development through institutional construction and governance reform. When conventional governance methods are insufficient, there is bound to be an attempt to combine it with campaign-style governance, but the combination of the two will result in an institutional gap.

As James R. Townsend and Brantley Womack (2006: 174) have noted, “Since Mao’s death there has been a paradox of institutionalizing campaigns in which reforms meant to regularize life in China are pushed in a mobilizational style.” Yang Zhijun (2015: 47–48) describes this “paradox of institutionalizing campaigns” as a “campaign-style governance paradox,” that is, “reform requires the regularization of state governance, but in many cases, state governance is carried out in a campaign-style way.” This is true of the first secretary institution, which in the process of pursuing the state’s governance goals can rush its work—that is, follow a campaign-style of work—with the result being the “paradox of institutionalizing campaigns” pointed out by Townsend and Womack and the “campaign-style governance paradox” of Yang Zhijun.

In institutional theory, institutions are a structural constraint. It is precisely due to this institutional constraint that the behavior of the actor is free of uncertainty and is stable and regular. In other words, “It is the institution that makes behaviors and interactions between individuals less arbitrary, more predictable, and follow specific patterns” (Ha, 2014: 5). The institution means stability, regularity, and order. The paradox of the campaign-style institution is prominently reflected in the fact that it pursues the goal of institutionalized and normalized governance by using a non-institutionalized and non-normalized approach.

Regardless of the motivation and strategy of the first secretary, he or she may face a sustainability dilemma. The construction of a rural system is a systemic issue; the success or failure of such a system depends not only on internal factors but also on factors involving other basic institutions. If the conditions necessary for success are absent, it is immaterial whether one relies on individuals or institutions to reconstruct the rural areas—in either case, if the necessary conditions are lacking, success cannot be assumed. The issue of bureaucratic administration and the party’s leadership, which entails bureaucratic governance and non-bureaucratic governance

or campaign-style governance, once again is reflected in the first secretary institution. The combination of the party and the government makes for a strong institution, and one that can generally achieve specific goals quickly, but in the long run many problems will remain. How best to build a governance structure and capacity in rural China is a subject for further research.

In any case, the first secretary institution has governance characteristics that differ from those of conventional governance and is an attempt to combine different governance methods. In particular, the appointment of first secretaries has strengthened the party's leadership of rural work. For a rural society that is constantly facing divisions, the involvement of external forces led by the party and government can bring new resources, including institutional resources, for village development. The first secretary institution is compatible with the rural revitalization strategy of combining internal and external resources and with the mass line requirements of rural governance in the new era. Although the performance of the first secretary is affected by conditions over which he or she may have little control as well by individual initiative, the institution provides an opportunity for the emergence of a new paradigm of rural governance that takes advantage of two major governance traditions and connects external and internal resources in the period of constructing "three integrated governances" (self-government, rule by virtue, and rule by law). The first secretary institution, in sum, warrants further attention and in-depth study.

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Haixia Wang (PhD, Renmin University of China) is an assistant professor in the Chinese Academy of Social Management / School of Sociology, Beijing Normal University. She is currently conducting research on rural governance in China, with a focus on the political party system and public affairs.

Zhouyang Zhao is a PhD candidate in the School of Government, Peking University. He is currently conducting research on state capacity and governance.

Luyi Yuan is a postgraduate in the Chinese Academy of Social Management / School of Sociology, Beijing Normal University. Her research interests focus on rural sociology.