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National Policy: The Origins of
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FROM LOCAL EXPERIMENTS TO NATIONAL POLICY: THE ORIGINS OF CHINA'S DISTINCTIVE POLICY PROCESS

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To explain the capability of China's Party-state to generate institutional and policy innovations for economic reform and to adapt to a rapidly changing economic environment, many studies point to the crucial role of decentralized experimentation.¹ This policy process, in which central policy-makers encourage local officials to try out new ways of problem-solving and then feed the local experiences back into national policy formulation, has been a pervasive feature in China's economic transformation. It has decisively shaped the making of policies in domains as diverse as rural decollectivization, foreign economic opening, the promotion of private business, state-sector restructuring and stock market regulation.² In some intensely disputed policy areas, such as state-sector

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¹ Thomas G. Rawski, "Implications of China's Reform Experience", *The China Quarterly*, No. 144 (December 1995), pp. 1150-73; Gérard Roland, *Transition and Economics: Politics, Markets, and Firms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 63-65; Justin Yifu Lin, Fang Cai and Zhou Li, *The China Miracle: Development Strategy and Economic Reform* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003), pp. 321-25; Sharun W. Mukand and Dani Rodrik, "In Search of the Holy Grail: Policy Convergence, Experimentation, and Economic Performance", *American Economic Review*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2005), pp. 374-83.

² For analyses of the extensive experimentation undertaken in these policy areas, see Jae Ho Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation During Post-Mao Decollectivization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Zweig, *Internationalizing China: Domestic Interests and Global Linkages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Susan Young, *Private Business and Economic Reform in China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); Jean C. Oi and Han Chao-hua, "Political and Institutional Complementarities: The Evolution of Corporate Restructuring in China", in Jean C. Oi,

bankruptcy, experimental programs with varying priorities came and went for more than twenty years until a finalized national law was eventually issued.³ Over and over again, those national policy-makers who wished to change the way the economy was run used the results of experimental programs to overcome opposition from rival policy-makers who tried to defend the old rules of the game.⁴

The existence of a sophisticated indigenous policy-making methodology of “proceeding from point to surface” (*youdian daomian* 由点到面) suggests an entrenched legitimacy of decentralized experimentation that goes far beyond the sporadic and unconnected local experiments that were carried out in other authoritarian polities or in the paradigmatic Party-state of the Soviet Union.⁵ The Chinese point-to-surface approach entails a policy process that is initiated from individual “experimental points” (*shidian* 试点) and driven by local initiative with the formal or informal backing of higher-level policy-makers. If judged to be conducive to current priorities by Party and government leaders, “model experiences” (*dianxing jingyan* 典型经验) extracted from the initial experiments are disseminated through extensive media coverage, high-profile conferences, intervisitation programs and appeals for emulation to more and more regions. This expansion process requires progressive policy refinement and effects a search for generalizable policy solutions. The tried-and-tested novel approaches emerging from this process are integrated into national policies after further revision. Thus, the point-to-surface technique gives room to local officials to develop models on their own, while ultimate control over confirming, revising, terminating and spreading model experiments rests with top-level decision-makers. Importantly, the mode of experimentation practiced in the PRC is

Jennifer A. Amyx and Byung-Kook Kim (eds), *System Restructuring in East Asia* (forthcoming); Carl E. Walter and Fraser J. T. Howie, *Privatizing China: Inside China's Stock Markets* (2nd edition, Singapore: Wiley, 2006).

³ On extended experimental regulation in this policy domain, see Charles D. Booth, “Drafting Bankruptcy Laws in Socialist Market Economies: Recent Developments in China and Vietnam”, *Columbia Journal of Asian Law*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Fall 2004), pp. 94-147.

⁴ For a systematic analysis of the patterns, dynamics and effects of post-Mao experimentation, see Sebastian Heilmann, “Policy Experimentation in China's Economic Rise”, *Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID)*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (January 2008).

⁵ Although there is a lot of evidence of factory-level experimental problem-solving in the Soviet Union, local experimentation was never systematically embraced by Soviet national policy-makers. Starting from the Stalin era, policy-makers and planners grudgingly came to tolerate local extralegal practices as a necessary evil to plug the gaps in the economy, but did not take them up as a positive impulse to reform the general workings of the system. For detailed evidence, see Paul R. Gregory, *The Political Economy of Stalinism: Evidence from the Soviet Secret Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

focussed on finding innovative policy *instruments*, rather than defining policy *objectives*, which remains the prerogative of the Party leadership.⁶

Though most scholars accept that experimentation is crucial to PRC policy formation,⁷ the origins of this policy process remain unexplained. Scholars have examined factors that encouraged policy experimentation in the post-Mao period. For example, Sachs and Woo argue that Maoist China's cellular economic structure, smaller state industry and less comprehensive central planning explain why China had the potential to introduce market competition with less disruption than the former socialist economies of Eastern Europe.⁸ Others see China's economic rise in the post-Mao era as being characterized by extensive administrative decentralization that allowed local jurisdictions to launch economic policy innovation on their own.⁹ Cai and Treisman argue that it was not decentralization but rather factional competition at the national level that gave rise to local experimentation through patron–client networks reaching from central policy-makers down to local administrators.¹⁰ These arguments, however, do not explain how the Chinese pattern of policy experimentation took shape and became entrenched. To make decentralized experimentation work in a centralized Party-state, there must be a special mechanism that legitimizes local initiative while leaving hierarchical control intact. Even if factional competition constitutes a driving force behind policy-making, it does not help explain the distinctive historical and ideological foundations and the concrete patterns of experiment-based policy-making in China.

The methods and the terminology used in experimental programs in China are so idiosyncratic that an exploration of their political origins is necessary. In the first section of this article, I elaborate on the Chinese Communists' revolutionary experiences with experimentation. In the second, I turn to the non-Communist intellectual context and administrative practices in which the concepts of policy

⁶ A basic model of China's contemporary experimentation-based policy cycle is given in Sebastian Heilmann, "Policy Experimentation".

⁷ An exception is Wing Thye Woo, "The Real Reasons for China's Growth", *The China Journal*, No. 41 (January 1999), pp. 115-37. His analysis, however, is focused on a deterministic interpretation of the *results* of economic transition (inevitable convergence with market economics) and underrates the importance of experimental *processes* that facilitate policy changes in the first place.

⁸ For an influential analysis along these lines, see Jeffrey Sachs and Wing Thye Woo, "Structural Factors in the Economic Reforms of China, Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union", *Economic Policy*, Vol. 18 (April 1994), pp. 102-45.

⁹ Gabriella Montinola, Yingyi Qian and Barry Weingast, "Federalism, Chinese Style: The Political Basis for Economic Success in China", *World Politics*, Vol. 48 (October 1995), pp. 50-81; Yuanzheng Cao, Yingyi Qian and Barry Weingast, "From Federalism, Chinese Style to Privatization, Chinese Style", *Economics of Transition*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March 1999), pp. 103-31.

¹⁰ Hongbin Cai and Daniel Treisman, "Did Government Decentralization Cause China's Economic Miracle?", *World Politics*, Vol. 58 (July 2006), pp. 505-35.

experimentation were pioneered in China. In the third section, I explain the core features of China's contemporary policy process through the particular revolution-era repertoire that policy-makers could draw on in their search for new policy instruments to facilitate rapid economic modernization. Core (technical) terms of experimentation, such as "experimental points" or "proceeding from point to surface", serve as identifiers in my search for the origins of China's experiment-based policy process.

Revolutionary Antecedents of Experiment-Based Policy-making

The methodology and terminology of policy experimentation used by contemporary Chinese policy-makers date from the revolutionary experience of the CCP. They are not inventions of reform-era leaders who after 1978 made energetic pleas for "vigorous" (Deng Xiaoping) or more "cautious" (Chen Yun) experimentation, even though many contemporary officials ascribe the emergence of the "experimental point method" to Deng Xiaoping and the pursuit of administrative pragmatism.¹¹

Experimenting for Survival (1928–43)

An elaborate mode of local policy experimentation under central guidance was developed in the context of experiments with land reform in the Communist base areas before the founding of the PRC in 1949. Due to the strict commandism and centralization of Stalin's Soviet Union, the Chinese Communists could not look to Soviet models of decentralized experimentation in rural revolution.¹² The Chinese Communists took over elements of the Soviet Stakhanovite movement in propagandizing "model units" and conducting emulation campaigns,¹³ but indigenous Chinese experiences provided the pattern for decentralized experimentation to reorganize rural society and agricultural production.

The experiments with alternative approaches to land reform that were undertaken by Mao Zedong in Jinggangshan and by Deng Zihui in Minxi in 1928 constituted a pioneering experience for later Communist land policy.¹⁴ While Mao

¹¹ The background interviews conducted for this research project revealed that even senior officials in charge of designing and supervising "experimental point work" over the last three decades (cadres up to vice-ministerial rank were among the interviewees) are not aware of a historical trajectory behind reform-era experimentation.

¹² For Stalin's consistent radical rejection of spontaneous economic activity, decentralized administration and policy-making, see Robert Himmer, "The Transition from War Communism to the New Economic Policy: An Analysis of Stalin's Views", *Russian Review*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (October 1994), pp. 515-29.

¹³ For the Stakhanovite movement of labor model emulation, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Stephen Averill, *Revolution in the Highlands: China's Jinggangshan Base Area* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 241-49; Yu Boliu, *Zhongyang suqu shi* (History of the Central Soviet Area) (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 2001), pp. 245-46, 252-53.

has been given most of the attention and credit for shaping the CCP's methods of land reform in official Party historiography, recent research by Chinese historians and recollections of Party cadres involved in early land reform work suggest that Deng Zihui, not Mao, was the first to initiate the point-to-surface type of controlled experimentation based on establishment of "model villages", dissemination of "model experiences" and progressive refinement of policies in the course of expansion.¹⁵ Due to constant military threats and shaky political support, Mao's attempts at land redistribution in Jinggangshan were confined to isolated places and short-lived efforts. The Minxi area provided more opportunity and time for systematic reforms. There, Deng Zihui made a serious effort to develop novel policies from the bottom up by consulting the local populace and absorbing their suggestions on practicable measures, while reserving the decision on policy acceptability and expansion for Party bodies. Already in 1930, the Minxi experiences were made widely known in Communist publications and served as an important reference for land policies applied in the Jiangxi Soviet from 1931 to 1934. Moreover, the Minxi methods were later summarized in an official report that circulated in Yan'an from February 1943¹⁶ at a time when the point-to-surface methodology was intensively discussed and eventually elevated to an official leadership technique in the Communist Party. Though Deng Zihui apparently did not coin the point-to-surface terminology, his consistent efforts at bottom-up experimentation, gradual model dissemination and constant revision of policy instruments certainly influenced the intra-Party debate on policy-making approaches and more directly the views of Mao, who maintained a close working relationship with Deng Zihui in rural matters until the mid-1950s.¹⁷

During the Communist Party's Jiangxi Soviet period (1931–34), implementation of agrarian policies varied considerably from place to place. The Party leadership, internally divided and insecure about concrete ways to make revolution in the countryside, came to accept the stark variations in policy implementation, encouraging Party organs at each level to experiment with unconventional measures and to produce diverse models for emulation by other localities. On this basis, Mao Zedong drafted detailed reports on "model Soviet governments" that contained long sections on organizational techniques and their

¹⁵ Jiang Boying, *Deng Zihui yu Zhongguo nongcun biange* (Deng Zihui and the Transformation of China's Countryside) (Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe, 2004), pp. 44-64, 210-25; Li Jianzhen, "Deng Zihui tongzhi yu tugai shiyan" (Comrade Deng Zihui and Experiments in Land Reform), in *Huiyi Deng Zihui* (Remembering Deng Zihui) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1996), pp. 233-38.

¹⁶ The 1943 report was published as Zhang Dingcheng, *Zhongguo Gongchandang chuanguan Minxi geming genjudi* (The Founding of the Minxi Revolutionary Base Area by the CCP) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1982); cf. Yu Boliu, *Zhongyang suqu shi*, p. 246.

¹⁷ See Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun (eds), *The Politics of Agricultural Cooperativization in China: Mao, Deng Zihui, and the 'High Tide' of 1955* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 7.

applicability to other locations.¹⁸ The “Xingguo Model” (*mofan Xingguo* 模范兴国), describing a county in the Jiangxi Soviet area that was praised by Mao in 1934 for its pioneering achievements in organizational, educational and land-reform work, became a reference for many other experimental sites in the late 1930s and 1940s.¹⁹ Yet the proliferation of emulation campaigns undertaken in the Jiangxi Soviet did not result in systematic and uniform policy-making. There were myriads of model experiments, but the expansion of novel local approaches to larger areas remained patchy and piecemeal. In spite of these constraints, Mao refined an organizational technique during his Jiangxi years that later became a principal revolutionary method: dispatching work teams consisting of “strong cadres” to selected sites to test and demonstrate methods of land reform in one small spot; training Party activists and potential new cadres in this spot; bringing the “masses” from other places to the model demonstration site; sending cadres and activists from the model spot to adjacent areas, thereby spreading those practices that had been identified by top leaders as conducive to current Party priorities. One of Mao’s collaborators during these early land-reform endeavors retrospectively depicted this technique as “experimental point” work.²⁰ Yet the experimentalist terminology that would emerge in the 1940s was not used in the Jiangxi Soviet.

After the central leaders of the Communist Party established their headquarters in Yan’an, and with the intensification of the Japanese military campaigns, the many scattered guerrilla bases behind Japanese lines (mainly in North China) became centers of the Communist Party-led peasant movement and sites of a large variety of mass mobilization and land-reform experiments. One major center of revolutionary experimentation was the Taihang Base Area (at the border of Shanxi and Henan provinces). This base area operated under constant military threats and political uncertainty inflicted by Japanese attacks, an erratic provincial warlord (Yan Xishan) and KMT forces. In autumn 1939, taking the 1934 Xingguo Model as a reference, two “experimental counties” (*shiyan xian* 实验县) reporting directly to the base area Party committee were expected to provide a “model demonstration” (*dianxing shifan* 典型示范) to guide the entire area to introduce new methods of mass mobilization and to recruit Party activists. The experimental sites were required to test a new “bottom-up work-style” based

¹⁸ Ilpyong J. Kim, *The Politics of Chinese Communism: Kiangsi under the Soviets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 114-15, 146, 173-74.

¹⁹ On Xingguo, see “Suqu jiaoyu gongzuo de mofan: Xingguo” (A Model for Educational Work in the Central Soviet: Xingguo), *Jiangxi jiaoyu* (Jiangxi Education), No. 10 (2004), p. 44. As recently as 2004, Xingguo was still presented as a model of a mass-based work-style to leading cadres of the CCP; see *Renmin ribao* (People’s Daily, hereafter *RMRB*), 30 August 2004, p. 4.

²⁰ See “Wang Guanlan: Guanzhu ‘sannong’ diyi ren” (Wang Guanlan: A Pioneer in Paying Attention to the ‘Agriculture-Village-Farmer’ Issue), *Dangshi zongheng* (All About Party History), No. 9 (2006), pp. 15-20.

on consultation with the populace. “Contests in experimental work” were held among different Party branches. Less successful branches were required to visit and to learn from the successful branches. Local Party activists were expected to become “labor heroes in creating experiments”. To achieve the goal of strengthening the Communist Party’s local mass base, the envisaged experimental period of six months was subdivided into two-month phases, each with clearly stated work objectives.²¹ Because Deng Xiaoping was a prominent leader in this base area, it is very likely that the opportunistic but active experimentation in Taihang may have exerted considerable influence on his reform era approach to policy-making.²²

Elevating Experimentation to a Method of Political Leadership (1943–53)

The Chinese Communists’ experiments in the many administratively autonomous and, with regard to their land reform approaches and successes, widely differing base areas decisively shaped revolutionary strategy and theory.²³ That policies had to be implemented “in accordance with local conditions” (*yindi zhiyi* 因地制宜) became a core revolutionary tactic that created inevitable tensions with the principle of hierarchical discipline.²⁴ During the 1942–43 Rectification Movement, which resulted in major restatements of revolutionary leadership and strategy, decentralized policy experimentation was confirmed as a standard method of “creating model experiments” and “proceeding from point to surface”. An authoritative yet vague guideline on this method was published under the

²¹ For archival documents dealing with the establishment and performance of the two “experimental counties”, see *Taihang dangshi ziliao huibian, di san juan, 1940.1-1940.12* (Compilation of Material on Party History in Taihang, Vol. 3) (Taiyuan: Shanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1994), pp. 260-81, 513-15. A rather hazy explanation for why the term “experimental county” was used instead of the more orthodox term “model county” is given in the otherwise insightful memoir *Li Xuefeng huiyilu (shang): Taihang shinian* (The Memoirs of Li Xuefeng [Vol. 1]: The Ten Taihang Years) (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi Chubanshe, 1998), pp. 105-08. For a comprehensive history of the Taihang Base Area that suggests its special importance as a formative experience for many major CCP policy-makers, see David S. G. Goodman, *Social and Political Change in Revolutionary China: The Taihang Base Area in the War of Resistance to Japan, 1937-1945* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). An instructive review of this book, presenting additional data and insights, is written by Odoric Wou in *China Review International*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 320-43.

²² This argument is put forward by David Goodman, *Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Revolution: A Political Biography* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 41-45, who points to “interesting similarities (of policies tried out at Taihang) with the economic policies of the post-Cultural Revolution period”.

²³ Carl E. Dorris, “Peasant Mobilization in North China and the Origins of Yanan Communism”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 68 (December 1976), pp. 687, 698, 700; Yu Boliu, *Zhongyang suqu shi*, pp. 259-61.

²⁴ Jae Ho Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion*, p. 49.

name of Mao in June 1943.²⁵ In a general statement on “methods of leadership”, Mao stressed that, for any task, Party cadres must “make a breakthrough at some single point, gain experience, and use this experience for guiding other units”.²⁶ In successive statements on this leadership method, Mao made it clear that it was not meant to justify unfettered trial and error but had to be geared to the creation of “model experiments” that demonstrated effective and novel ways for realizing the policy objectives set by the Party leadership.²⁷ In line with his practice-based epistemology, Mao held that policy implementation, not policy debate, provided the crucial device for learning and innovation.²⁸ In a 1948 directive to the Party, he went so far as to proclaim that the “model experiences” produced by several Communist-controlled base areas were “much closer to reality and richer than the decisions and directives issued by our leadership organs” and should serve as an antidote against tendencies toward “commandism” within the Party.²⁹

That designing methods of effective implementation was largely left to local initiative was one of the practical lessons derived from the Communists’ protracted land-reform efforts. In the face of a highly fragmented and heterogeneous revolutionary process, the Party leadership refrained from issuing standard implementation procedures that had already all-too-often proven to be

²⁵ For Chinese works ascribing the “experimental point” method to Mao Zedong, see Zhang Tie (ed.), *Dangde zuzhi gongzuo cidian* (Dictionary of the Party’s Organizational Work) (Beijing: Zhongguo Zhanwang Chubanshe, 1987), p. 128; Deng Zhaoming, “Shilun Mao Zedong de diaocha yanjiu lilun” (On Mao Zedong’s Theory of Investigation and Research), in *Mao Zedong baizhounian jinian* (Commemorating Mao Zedong’s One Hundredth Birthday) (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1994), Vol. 1, pp. 196-97; see also Hu Xiangming, “Difang zhengce zhixing: Moshi yu xiaoguo” (Local Policy Implementation: Modes and Effects), *Jingji yanjiu cankao* (Reference Material for Economic Research), No. 6 (1996), pp. 39-42.

²⁶ “Guanyu lingdao fangfa ruogan wenti” (On Certain Issues of Leadership Methods), in *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected Works of Mao Zedong) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1966), Vol. 3, p. 855.

²⁷ See a selection of Mao statements on the function of “models” in *Mao Zedong zhuzuo zhuanti zhaibian* (Thematic Excerpts from Mao Zedong’s Works) (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2003), pp. 238-9, 325-36. CCP propaganda brochures introducing local cases of a “model experience” were widely distributed after 1945; see for example *Laodong huzhu de dianxing lizi he jingyan* (Model Examples and Experience of Mutual-Aid Labor) (n.p., 1945). See also the Politburo decision of 28 February 1951 that Mao personally drafted, as given in *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Selected Works of Mao Zedong), Vol. 5 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1977), pp. 34-38.

²⁸ Mao Zedong, “Zhengce he jingyan de guanxi” (On the Relation between Policy and Experience), 6 March 1948, *Mao Zedong wenji* (Collected Writings of Mao Zedong), Vol. 5 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1993), p. 74.

²⁹ Mao’s comments were first published in *RMRB*, 24 March 1948. A reprint of the comments is contained in a widely disseminated CCP brochure: Liu Shaoqi *et al.*, *Tugai zhengdang dianxing jingyan* (Model Experiences in Land Reform and Party Rectification) (Hong Kong: Zhongguo Chubanshe, 1948).

impracticable. Broad discretionary powers were given to basic-level Party organs to experiment with diverse measures of rural transformation, ranging from brutally repressive to more conciliatory.³⁰ Even on the eve of the civil war victory, Mao stressed that land reform could not be achieved in just a few months and by one-size-fits-all measures. Instead, it still needed to be based on a carefully designed point-to-surface approach, first by obtaining experience on the ground in a small number of selected sites and then by spreading the experience in a succession of increasingly broad and strong wave-like movements.³¹ During this time, as Vivienne Shue states, the point-to-surface method emerged as “one of the standard devices of the Party and the government for implementing important rural policies” in a “consciously experimental” but carefully controlled manner.³²

Of course, the Party Center always reserved, and regularly exercised, the power to annul local experiments or to make them into a national model. The pursuit of an experiment-based policy approach resulted from necessity. The CCP did not have a sufficient number of well-trained rural cadres to dispatch to hundreds of thousands of villages, and since the revolutionary process was driven from scattered base areas, the Party lacked an integrated apparatus and capacity for standardized policy implementation.³³ Model villages and other basic-level model units were designated, supervised and propagandized by higher-level Party bodies that often did not have the means to give consistent material support. Thus model units were forced to support themselves.³⁴ A lack of resources and personnel compelled the Party Center to give room to local initiative and even to tolerate ideological deviations as long as they strengthened overall Communist Party control in the localities.

CCP-controlled experimentation was elevated to a general method of leadership by Mao’s statements, but the concrete techniques and terms were specified by other Party leaders. Over the 1940s, veteran rural revolutionary Deng Zihui refined the technique of spreading local experience to larger areas by

³⁰ On the inconsistencies and tactical compromises that characterized the CCP’s land reform policies in the 1940s, see Luo Pinghan, “‘Wusi zhishi’ jiqi ‘bu chedixing’ zai pingjia” (Reassessing the ‘May Fourth Directive’ and Its ‘Lack of Thoroughness’), *Qiusuo* (Quest), No. 5 (2005), pp. 172-75.

³¹ See the central party directive that was drafted by Mao personally: “Xin jiefangqu tudi gaige yaodian” (Essentials of Land Reform in the Newly Liberated Areas), 15 February 1948, *Mao Zedong xuanji*, Vol. 4 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1991), pp. 1283-84.

³² Vivienne Shue, *Peasant China in Transition: The Dynamics of Development Toward Socialism, 1949–1956*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 69 and pp. 322-23, respectively.

³³ Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), pp. 148-57; Vivienne Shue, *Peasant China in Transition*, p. 6.

³⁴ Pauline B. Keating, *Two Revolutions: Village Reconstruction and the Cooperative Movement in Northern Shaanxi, 1934–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 239-40.

reassigning work teams and local activists in a systematic way. Various “experimental zones for land reform” were in place beginning in 1947.³⁵ Between 1946 and 1948, both Chen Yun (in the Northeast) and Deng Xiaoping (in the Southwest) issued guidelines on implementing land reform that made full use of the point-to-surface methodology.³⁶ In 1950, CCP directives instructed top cadres to take the lead personally in implementing land reform experiments.³⁷ In East China, Rao Shushi supervised a total of 370 “model experiment townships” designed to find effective ways to prepare for full-scale land redistribution. The experimental process was supposed to last up to three months and Rao made it clear that, as in guerrilla war, “drastic” violent measures had to be taken at certain points to overcome resistance and to “achieve breakthroughs”.³⁸ By 1951, the Party’s guidelines for land reform had been consolidated into six steps, of which steps 2 to 6 are crucial to Chinese-style policy experimentation to the present day: (1) train work team cadres and send them down to the localities; (2) carry out model experiments; (3) accomplish breakthroughs in a key point; (4) broaden the campaign from point to surface; (5) integrate point and surface with regard to the applied measures; (6) unfold the campaign in steady steps.³⁹

By the early 1950s, the terms “model experiment” (*dianxing shiyan* 典型实验) and “experimental point” (*shidian*), as well as “model demonstration” (*dianxing shifan*), “proceeding from point to surface” (*youdian daomian* or *yidian daimian* 以点带面) and “integrating point and surface” (*dianmian jiehe* 点面结合) had emerged as key terms in the Chinese Communists’ repertoire of policy experimentation.⁴⁰ All these terms are still widely used in official language today,

³⁵ Cf. *Zhongguo tudi gaige shiliao xuanbian* (Selection of Historical Materials on Land Reform) (Beijing: Guofang Daxue Chubanshe, 1988), pp. 292-98; Li Jianzhen, “Deng Zihui”.

³⁶ Deng Xiaoping, “Guanche zhixing Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu tugai yu zhengdang gongzuo de zhishi” (Carry Out the CCP Central Committee’s Directive on the Work of Land Reform and Party Rectification), 6 June 1948, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping), 1938–1965 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1989), pp. 109-24. The document was endorsed by Mao Zedong and disseminated as a guideline to the entire party leadership in June, 1948. For Chen Yun’s applications of the point-to-surface method, see Yu Jianting, *Chen Yun yu Dongbei de jiefang* (Chen Yun and the Liberation of the Northeast) (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1998), pp. 246-49.

³⁷ *RMRB*, 23 March 1950, p. 2.

³⁸ On experimental sites in Shandong see *RMRB*, 30 August 1950, p. 2; “Rao Shushi tongzhi guanyu Huadong tudi gaige gongzuo de baogao (zhaiyao)” (Comrade Rao Shushi’s Report on Land Reform Work in East China [abstract]), November 1950, in *Zhongguo tudi gaige shiliao xuanbian*, p. 696.

³⁹ Based on Zhou Enlai’s report to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference as given in *RMRB*, 3 November 1951, p. 1.

⁴⁰ For official definitions of “typical models” (*dianxing*) and their use in guiding general policy, see *Renmin xuexi cidian* (Dictionary for Popular Learning) (Shanghai: Guangyi Book Store, 1953), p. 182.

especially “experimental point”. Beginning in the 1950s, the term “experimental point” was used as a synonym for the more formal term “model experiment”, both of which have the meaning of obtaining experience through concrete work at one spot so as to guide general policy.⁴¹

In contrast to the many other modern political terms that Chinese borrowed from Japanese or Russian, “experimental point” is an indigenous neologism introduced by the Chinese Communists. The term spread in the Northeastern regions in the late 1940s, and then, in the early 1950s, to the whole country.⁴² According to a 1953 cadre education journal, one of the core purposes of “experimental points” was to “bring welfare to society by making use of scientific patterns that have been discovered through practice ... to be a reflection of objective processes”. The strengths of the “experimental point” method were defined to be preventing the “blind” implementation of unfamiliar policies, giving cadres an opportunity to learn and overcome old habits by trying out new solutions on a small scale first; “educating the masses” and winning their support for new policies through active participation in local experiments; and saving resources, manpower and time in carrying out new policies. At the same time, it was emphasized that the success of “experimental point” work depended on appropriate preparation and timing (premature establishment would lead to failure), the selection of “typical” experimental sites that could teach credible lessons to “the masses” in other sites, a contingent of strong cadres and activists at the test spots, and sophisticated analysis to extract generalizable lessons.⁴³

The point-to-surface technique became a cornerstone of Maoist policy-making theory that resurfaced over and over again in post-1949 Mao statements.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Wang Ruoshui, “Qunzhong luxian he renshilun” (Mass Line and Epistemology), *RMRB*, 20 September 1959, p. 11.

⁴² This is based on an electronic search of the digital archive of *RMRB* for 1946–53. From 1946 to 1948, the term *shidian* was not mentioned at all; from 1949 to 1950 it was used in 21 articles with a clear geographical concentration in the Northeast region that was designated by the Party Center to carry out experiments, especially in industrial reorganization. From 1951 to 1953, after Zhou Enlai used it in some speeches, the term became fashionable and was used in more than 1,000 articles dealing with all sorts of subjects from land reform to education and marriage regulation. Mao used the term *shidian* only late in life and even then rarely. For a prominent use of the term *shidian* by Mao, see “Dui Hubei shengwei guanyu zhubu shixian nongye jixiehua shexiang piyu” (Comments on Hubei Provincial Party Committee’s Tentative Plan of Step-by-Step Implementation of Agricultural Mechanization), 19 February 1966, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC) (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1998), Vol. 12 (January 1966–December 1968), pp. 12–14.

⁴³ *Xuexi* (Learning), No. 10 (October 1953), pp. 10–11.

⁴⁴ Mao frequently referred to the point-to-surface method by way of metaphors, such as “dissecting the sparrow” (*jiēpou māquē*, 1956) or “squatting on one point” (*dūndiān*, 1962). Cf. *Mao Zedong dacidian* (Mao Dictionary) (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), pp. 879–82. The point-to-surface method is stressed as a systematic component of the Chinese Communists’s campaign style by Gordon Bennett, *Yundong*:

As a method of revolutionary transformation, it was not only used in China but also exported to Vietnam. In the context of extensive Chinese support to the Vietminh forces, the 1953–56 land reform in North Vietnam was designed by a team of experienced Chinese cadres and initiated by small-scale “experimental waves”, including the initial establishment of “experimental points” (*thí điếm*, that is *shidian*) and “typical models” (*điển hình*, that is *dianxing*) before scaling up the reforms in a phased manner, depending on the success of the experimental units and local circumstances.⁴⁵

In sum, the “experimental point” and point-to-surface methodologies were firmly established through a series of statements by top Communist Party leaders, and refined and re-defined by practical application over the 1943–53 period. Although these methodologies were the product of the distinctive historical context of revolutionary struggle, at the beginning of the economic reforms in the 1980s they came to be seen as the “concretization” of the CCP’s best traditions of “seeking truth from facts”.⁴⁶ Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun and other powerful veterans, though holding differing views on the desirable extent, direction and speed of economic reform, were in agreement that the successes of the large-scale experimentation in the 1943–53 period provided valuable lessons about flexible and risk-minimizing methods of policy innovation that could be employed to modernize the country. This is why the terminology of experimentation and the slogan “crossing the river by groping for the stones”⁴⁷ were taken from their revolutionary contexts and made to serve the purpose of reforming the Chinese economy.

Mass Campaigns in Chinese Communist Leadership (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, 1976), p. 39.

⁴⁵ Vietnamese policy-makers have again made extensive use of the experimental point methodology since the 1980s, this time for promoting economic reform; cf. *National Ownership in an Emerging Partnership: Review of Technical Cooperation in Viet Nam* (Hanoi: UNDP, October 2000). To my knowledge, the Maoist origins of the Vietnamese approach to policy experimentation have not yet been the subject of Western research. Chinese involvement in Vietminh “experimental point work” is mentioned in *RMRB*, 28 May 1954; 28 and 30 June 1954. For clues about Chinese involvement in Vietminh land reform, see Joseph J. Zasloff, *The Role of the Sanctuary in Insurgency: Communist China’s Support to the Vietminh, 1946-1954* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1967), pp. 43-48; Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), pp. 170-91; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 13-17, 38-42, 75-76.

⁴⁶ Yang Luo, “Lun shidian fangfa de renshilun yiyi” (On the Epistemological Significance of the Experimental Point Method), *Zhexue yanjiu* (Philosophical Research), No. 1 (1984), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁷ This slogan originally stems from the Yan’an era. See “‘Mo shizi guohe’ de zaiyi” (Reconsidering ‘Crossing the River by Groping for the Stones’), *Fangfa* (Method), No. 3 (1993), pp. 17-18. See also Chen Xiankui, *Deng Xiaoping zhiguo lun* (Deng’s Theory of Managing State Affairs) (Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe, 1997), pp. 174-78.

From Decentralized Experimentation to Centrally Imposed Model Emulation

During the mid-1950s, the consolidation of the CCP's power, the gradual introduction of economic planning and an ideological hardening in Mao's stance led to marked shifts in the pattern of policy-making.⁴⁸ Though central control over many sectors of the economy remained patchy, the proliferation of central decrees, investment plans and production quotas weakened the correcting mechanisms inherent in the "experimental point" approach. "Experimental point work" undertaken in agriculture and industry over the 1953–57 period was designed to contribute to cooperativization, plan fulfillment and overall technical and organizational innovation by producing "advanced units" for national popularization under central guidelines.⁴⁹ The political leeway for generating new policy approaches through decentralized experimentation became substantially circumscribed.

With the "Great Leap Forward" (GLF, 1958–60), bureaucratic centralization was pushed back and local initiative and experimentation were again encouraged. But the ideological and political contexts of experimentation were fundamentally different from those in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The experiences of the GLF and the "Cultural Revolution" (CR) demonstrate the dialectic that is inherent in the point-to-surface technique: it can be a bottom-up or a top-down affair, depending on the overall political and ideological constellation. The severe political risks stemming from this ambiguity had already come to the fore with the campaign against "rightist" tendencies in the summer of 1957. There was much talk about local experimentation and the lessons to be learned from such experiments, but in reality there was no political room for experiments that contradicted the ideological directives coming from Mao himself. In the second half of the 1950s, the core principles of the Chinese Communists' revolutionary experience, such as "implementing policies in accordance with local conditions" and "proceeding from point to surface", increasingly became empty slogans. Standardized implementation and swift total compliance became inevitable as a manifestation of political reliability and loyalty to Mao Zedong: "Once the centre

⁴⁸ On the far-reaching changes in policy-making brought about by the forceful dissemination of "planning consciousness" and new administrative institutions, see Ezra F. Vogel, *Canton Under Communism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980 [1969]), pp. 127–33. For the impact of economic planning on the PRC's political institutions, see Bai Guiyi, "Dui guodu shiqi woguo dang zheng guanxi de yanbian he fazhan" (The Evolution and Development of Party–Government Relations in Our Country During the Transition Period), *Henan daxue xuebao (shekeban)* (Journal of Henan University [Social Science Edition]), No. 5 (1998).

⁴⁹ On the gradual introduction of central planning in China, see Thomas G. Rawski, *China's Transition to Industrialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), pp. 29–48; on the role of "advanced units" see pp. 46–47. For prominent examples of centrally sponsored "experimental point work" in agriculture and industry over the 1953–57 period, see *RMRB*, 5 and 18 January 1954, 24 December 1956 (agriculture); 29 May 1953 and 22 November 1955 (steel industry).

(usually Mao) sent out a signal, a few model units were selected, increasingly higher targets disseminated, target over-fulfilment reported from below, and the task completed swiftly in a highly standardized manner”.⁵⁰ Those who used methods of implementation that were judged as deviant were classified as people who had committed errors in “political line”. Experiments in implementing Party policy were regularly made into an issue of class and line struggle, although leading policy-makers such as Chen Yun continued to plead for cautious experimentation in economic administration.⁵¹

An instructive case of how drastically the political climate for experimentation changed in 1957–58 is the “experimental points” of the Wenzhou District (Zhejiang Province). In an effort to counter a downslide in agricultural production that resulted from the collectivization policies, in the spring of 1956, the Party committee of Yongjia County initiated experiments with new incentives for peasant households, after having obtained the informal consent of the district Party committee. The experiments proved to be so popular and successful that they were rapidly extended from point to surface in the county. However, as soon as the political winds changed with the advent of the “anti-rightist campaign”, the experiments and the experimenters were severely attacked and crushed as “anti-socialist”. Many local cadres were expelled from the Party and some were sent to labor camps, along with those peasants who had been the most enthusiastic supporters of the experiments. Repression was carried out by the same district-level leaders who had benevolently tolerated the experiments a few months earlier.⁵²

In such a feverish ideological context, there was no room for open experimentation, and only room for “working toward” the erratic Party chairman.⁵³ Significantly, the time horizon became ever narrower. Whereas the establishment of “model experiments” was expected to take several months

⁵⁰ Jae Ho Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion*, pp. 31, 34–36, with carefully analyzed examples from the GLF and CR periods, demonstrates how hollow official decentralization slogans had become in actual policy implementation.

⁵¹ Cf. Frederick C. Teiwes, *China’s Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians, and Provincial Leaders in the Unfolding of the Great Leap Forward, 1955–1959* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1999); Alfred L. Chan, *Mao’s Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China’s Great Leap Forward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Chen Yun made a prominent plea for cautious experimentation to promote full socialization of trade and industry at the 8th CCP Congress; see *RMRB*, 21 September 1956, p. 1.

⁵² The story of these experiments and the tragic fate of the main protagonists is told by Gao Huamin, “1957: ‘Baochan daohu’ zai yaolan zhong bei e’sha” (1957: ‘Household-Based Production Quotas’ Strangled in the Cradle), *Yanhuang chunqiu* (China Through the Ages), No. 7 (2000), pp. 14–19.

⁵³ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), Chapter 2, use this concept that plays a key role in Ian Kershaw’s *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (New York: Norton, 1998) to characterize the logic of leadership relations under Mao after 1957.

during the land reform era, no time was allowed to prove the results of the policy experiments during the Great Leap. In addition, the criticism of experimental failures that was remarkable for the land reform era⁵⁴ was not welcome anymore.

The GLF was identified by contemporaries as a deviation from the experiment-based policy process that had proven to be so useful to the CCP's rise to power. Critics complained that the People's Communes were established "too rapidly" without sufficient experience through prior experimentation. In 1960, the official press made a serious effort to dilute this criticism by pointing to a series of "experimental point-like communes" that had been set up at the start of the national movement.⁵⁵ The post-Mao leadership, however, sided with the early critics and held that the GLF had led to disaster because "serious investigations and experimental point work" had not been undertaken and policy implementation had been based on blind and subjectivist political enthusiasm.⁵⁶

This is not the place to go into the details of the feverish emulation campaigns that were commonplace in the 1957–78 period. Yet, some remarkable shifts in terminology indicate the differences between experimentation and emulation. During the GLF, the principle of "taking action in accordance with local circumstances" was superseded by the new slogan to treat "the whole country as one chessboard" (*quanguo yipanqi* 全国一盘棋). All local efforts were to be unified in executing every new policy or ideological clue that came from the Party Center.⁵⁷ During the Cultural Revolution, the construction of national "templates" (*yangban* 样板) according to orders from above was seen as an effective instrument in standardizing policy implementation: "Put templates to use, push forward across the board" (*yunyong yangban, tuidong quanpan* 运用样板, 推动全盘).⁵⁸ Consequently, the rural and industrial model sites of Dazhai and Daqing were not called "experimental points" but rather were presented as "templates" and "models for achieving greater, faster, better, and more economic results".⁵⁹

⁵⁴ See, for example, the detailed report written by Deng Zihui (reprinted in *Zhongguo tudi gaige shiliao xuanbian*, pp. 292-98) who carefully analyzes the negative lessons of prior work and proposes new policy approaches based on this experience.

⁵⁵ *RMRB*, 17 January 1960, p. 7. For the sequence of "experimental points", "key points", "point-to-surface" expansion and policy generalization in the People's Communes movement see Gordon Bennett, *Yundong*, pp. 55-56, who ascribes the reorganization of 125 million peasants into communes within less than four months (September through December 1958) to a combination of "outright pressures" with "intense salesmanship".

⁵⁶ *RMRB*, 14 July 1981, p. 5.

⁵⁷ *Hongqi* (Red Flag), 16 February 1959, pp. 9-12.

⁵⁸ *RMRB*, 5 April 1965, p. 5; 28 January 1966, p. 5.

⁵⁹ For portrayals of decision-making surrounding the Daqing and Dazhai models, written from the standpoint of the post-Mao official interpretation of Party history, see CCP Central Committee Documents Research Office (ed.), *Gongheguo zhongda juece he shijian shushi* (A Factual Review of Major Decisions and Events in the PRC) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2005), pp. 289-303.

Thus, not even the official terminology claimed that these two creations of top-level policy pushes could be treated as cases of experimentation. These were national projects imposed and supported by central leaders. Instant implementation and instant results were required. Neither time nor operative and ideological leeway for experimentation was allowed. Consequently, a number of notorious instant models, promoted by top-level initiative and Mao's personal attention, faded as suddenly as they sprang up. Xushui County, for example, whose goal was supposed to establish Communism in one huge-and-quick leap in 1958, had to announce the termination of its ambitious experiment only four months after starting it.⁶⁰

In studying the historical development of policy experimentation under CCP leadership, it is thus appropriate to distinguish between experimentation that is open-ended in generating novel policy instruments, on the one hand, and pre-conceived, centrally imposed model emulation, on the other. Most models of the GLF and CR eras, including Dazhai and Daqing, clearly belong to the latter category. They were products of centralized sponsorship and served to demonstrate the vision and wisdom of the top leaders.⁶¹

To do justice to the ambiguities of the GLF and CR periods, it should be mentioned that policy experimentation was not suffocated in all policy domains all of the time. The "experimental point" method was never formally abolished and it was always cherished as part of the mythical revolutionary tradition. It could still serve to legitimate decentralized initiative under the condition that high-level patrons and advocates were supportive and the policy domains in which the experiments were undertaken temporarily lay on the margins of the ideological battlefield. Certain programs of the 1960s and 1970s allowed meaningful experimentation to find new policy instruments when the policy context was more relaxed and top-level backing was present. These include experiments with household-based agricultural production (1957, 1961), family planning (1964), the formation of industrial trusts (1964–65), rural cooperative health care (1966), and rural industry and trade (1969–70). Though these experimental programs, with the exception of rural cooperative health care, were subject to intense political–ideological strife and were terminated at an early

⁶⁰ For a detailed analysis of this case which illustrates the disastrous role of ideologically charged, utopian fevers in experimentation, see Zhang Weiliang, "Xushui 'gongchan zhuyi' shiyan de shibai jiqi jiaoxun" (The Failure of the Xushui Experiment in 'Communism' and Its Lessons), *Qinghua daxue xuebao* (Journal of Tsinghua University), Vol. 14, No. 3 (1999), pp. 42-47. An analogous case with even more disastrous human consequences is analyzed by Liang Zhiyuan, "Haixian nongye 'weixing' jingyan huiji guanxiu ji" (Recording the Official Drafting of the Compilation of Hao County's Agricultural 'Sputnik' Experience), *Yanhuang chunqiu*, No. 1 (2003), pp. 22-25.

⁶¹ Cf. Tang Tsou, Marc Blecher and Mitch Meisner, "National Agricultural Policy: The Dazhai Model and Local Change in the Post-Mao Era", in Mark Selden and Victor Lippit (eds), *The Transition to Socialism in China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1982), pp. 266-99.

stage, they provided precedents and experience that policy-makers drew upon after 1978.

Embedded Revolutionaries: Non-Communist Sources of Policy Experimentation

As Donald Munro states, the point-to-surface technique “differs fundamentally from Soviet socialist emulation theory” in terms of its decentralized and informal character.⁶² Strikingly, experimentation is a blind spot in Marxist-Leninist ideology. Developing methods of revolution through experiments was neither debated nor proposed by Marx, Lenin or Stalin.⁶³ In Lenin’s entire collected works, the need for experimentation to find new policy solutions is only mentioned once and in a very specific context.⁶⁴ Stalin was vehemently hostile to “spontaneous” and “blind” local initiative.⁶⁵ A commandist top-down approach to policy generation and implementation represented the legitimate revolutionary strategy and administrative practice in the Soviet Union. Since revolution meant putting the laws of history into reality, revolutionaries knew what to do in advance of implementing policy and were not supposed to be distracted by experimentation.

Nevertheless, many Chinese intellectuals and activists perceived the Russian revolution as a huge experiment and Qu Qiubai, a prominent figure in the early Chinese Communist movement, characterized Soviet Russia as “a laboratory of communism” in which Bolshevik “chemists” remolded the Russian people in the “test tubes” of the Soviets and produced new “socialist compounds”.⁶⁶ Soviet Russia’s New Economic Policy (NEP) attracted much interest among Chinese Communists. However, the books that introduced the NEP to the Chinese public

⁶² Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man*, pp. 149-50.

⁶³ Yang Luo, “Lun shidian fangfa”, puts a lot of effort into finding references in Chinese translations of the Marxist-Leninist classics that might point to the usefulness of policy experiments. However, he comes to the conclusion that experimentation as an instrument for revolutionary transformation or policy-making is not raised in the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin or Stalin and that the experimental point method really is “Comrade Mao Zedong’s creation”.

⁶⁴ To my knowledge, the political use of experimentation is mentioned in the Chinese translations of Lenin’s works only in the context of transforming capitalist economic and technical expertise into a resource that serves the proletariat. See *Liening quanji* (The Complete Works of Lenin), Vol. 27 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1958), p. 386. Ji Weidong, “Lun falü shixing de fansi jizhi” (On the Feedback Mechanism of Legal Experimentation), *Shehuixue yanjiu* (Sociological Research), No. 5 (1989), p. 83, points to this rather isolated reference that is not further developed in other works or directives by Lenin.

⁶⁵ Cf. Robert Himmer, “The Transition from War Communism”.

⁶⁶ Qu Qiubai, as quoted by Yuan Jingyu, “Qu Qiubai bixia de xin jingji zhengce” (The NEP as Depicted by Qu Qiubai), *Shenyang jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Shenyang College of Education), Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2002), pp. 8-10.

did not mention experimentation as a key element in Soviet governance.⁶⁷ In fact, the NEP was never conceived of as an experiment for developing policy tools in an open-ended manner. Rather, it was seen by Lenin as a package of emergency measures for economic survival and crisis management that was to be terminated as soon as Communist power was consolidated. Against this background of Marxist-Leninist ignorance or rejection of revolutionary experimentation, it is even more remarkable that the Chinese Communists turned to an experimental point-to-surface approach in their efforts to transform China. In fact, the positive attitude of the Chinese Communists towards experiments reflected a wider social phenomenon prevalent during China's Republican era.

The Deweyan Imprint on Mao's Experimental Approach

The impact of John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy on political debate in China during the 1920s has been the subject of numerous scholarly works. The series of lectures that Dewey gave at major Chinese cities and universities in 1919 and 1920 influenced the thinking of a generation of political intellectuals and activists, including the founders of the Communist Party and Mao Zedong. One core theme of Dewey's lectures was the experimental method that he presented as the central innovative feature of modern science and the most important method for obtaining scientific knowledge. Chinese political activists eagerly picked up his statements on experimentation which, according to Dewey, "is guided by intentional anticipation instead of being blind trial and error ... it is experience marked by the intent to act upon the idea". Dewey contrasted classical philosophies that tended to be "isolated from the cold, hard facts of human experience" with modern approaches that stressed that ideas and theories had to be tested through practical application and experimentation: "There can be no true knowledge without doing. It is only doing that enables us to revise our outlook, to organize our facts in a systematic way, and to discover new facts".⁶⁸ Dewey's Chinese followers presented experimentation as the core of the Deweyan approach to social reform and they even translated "pragmatism" as *shiyang zhuyi* (实验主义), a term that in a literal translation means "experimentalism".⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Cf. Zhu Zhenxin, *Laonong Eguo zhi kaocha* (An Investigation Tour of Worker and Peasant Russia) (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1923); Zhang Yunfu (ed.), *Eguo xin jingji zhengce* (Russia's NEP) (Shanghai: Xin Jianshe Shudian, 1929); Duo Bu [Maurice Dobb], *Sulian de xin jingji zhengce* (The Soviet Union's NEP) (Shanghai: Haiyan Shudian, 1951); Makaluowa [Makarova], *Sulian xin jingji zhengce cankao wenku* (Reference Texts on the Soviet Union's NEP) (Changchun: Dongbei Caijing Chubanshe, 1953).

⁶⁸ John Dewey, *Lectures in China, 1919–1920*, translated from the Chinese and edited by R. W. Clopton and T.-C. Ou (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973), pp. 248, 58, 247, respectively.

⁶⁹ Gu Hongliang, *Shiyang zhuyi de wudu: Duwei zhexue dui Zhongguo jinxiandai zhexue zhi yingxiang* (The Misreading of Pragmatism: The Influence of Dewey's Philosophy on Modern Chinese Philosophy) (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan Daxue, 2000), p. 105.

Dewey's influence on Mao Zedong's epistemology, with its emphasis on learning through direct practical experience, has been noted in a number of academic works. With regard to Mao's article "On Practice", Herbert Marcuse holds that "there is more Dewey than Marx in all this".⁷⁰ Certain formulations and arguments appearing in "On Practice" are strikingly similar to what Dewey stated during his China lectures.⁷¹ Recent research has revealed that Mao attended one of Dewey's Shanghai lectures in spring 1920, and had read and recommended the Chinese edition of Dewey's *Five Major Lectures* and stocked this book when he opened a bookstore that year.⁷² Dewey's 1920 dictum on modern science, "everything through experimentation" (translated by his disciples into Chinese as *yiqie dou cong shiyan xiashou* 一切都从实验下手)⁷³ was echoed in a 1958 directive by Mao that stated "everything through experimentation" (*yiqie jingguo shiyan* 一切经过试验).⁷⁴

Along with Mao, most other founding members of the CCP were deeply attracted to Dewey's epistemology which conveyed that obtaining knowledge about the world and bringing change to the world could be achieved through a well-conceived process of practical experimentation.⁷⁵ In the early version of Chinese Communism, "experimentalism both as a philosophy and as a scientific method, had ... an upper hand over dialectic materialism". Even the idea of class struggle was initially rejected by most early Communist protagonists.⁷⁶ Dewey's "emphasis on methodology, logic, and practicality made it irresistibly attractive to

⁷⁰ Quoted from Stuart R. Schram, "Mao Studies: Retrospect and Prospect", *The China Quarterly*, No. 97 (March 1984), pp. 105-06. Analogies between Dewey's and Mao's epistemologies are also pointed to in John Bryan Starr, *Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 70-71. Dewey's influence is striking in Mao's statements on the relationship between "direct" and "indirect" human and social experience. Cf. *Mao Zedong dacidian*, pp. 850-51, which, however, does not mention Dewey and presents Mao as the originator of this thought.

⁷¹ Di Xu, *A Comparison of the Educational Ideas and Practices of John Dewey and Mao Zedong in China* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), p. 73.

⁷² Di Xu, *Comparison*, p. 111.

⁷³ *Duwei wu da jiangyan* (Dewey's Five Major Lectures) (Beijing: Chenbaoshe, 1920), pp. 125, 137-38, quoted in Gu Hongliang, *Shiyong zhuyi de wudu*, p. 102.

⁷⁴ "Gongzuo fangfa liushitiao (caoan)" (Sixty Articles on Work Methods [Draft]), drafted by Mao in January 1958, in *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1992), Vol. 7 (1958), pp. 45-65; method No. 13 states: "Unleash and mobilize the masses. Everything through experimentation".

⁷⁵ An instructive analysis of how Dewey's experimental methodology was taken up by Chinese thinkers of the May Fourth period can be found in Gu Hongliang, *Shiyong zhuyi de wudu*, pp. 101-20.

⁷⁶ Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 176.

the leaders of the intellectual revolution ... and highly useful in promoting social, ethical, and economic reforms”.⁷⁷

According to Munro, Dewey’s idea of learning through practical experience goes together well with the importance of teaching by example and learning through role models in the Chinese educational and administrative traditions. Cultivating, propagandizing and emulating concrete models, instead of abiding by abstract moral or legal principles, doubtless have strong roots in pre-modern Chinese philosophy. From the late 1920s, these traditions were reinvigorated by Soviet-inspired movements that propagandized “labor heroes”, “model factories” and “socialist competition” among all kinds of model units. Thus, the emulation of models could build on both Chinese tradition and Soviet campaign methods.⁷⁸ However, the experimentation that became part and parcel of the Chinese Communists’ point-to-surface technique sprang from efforts at social reform that were inspired more by Deweyan thinking than by traditional Chinese or Soviet governance practices.

Experimental Sites in the Rural Reconstruction Movement

During the May Fourth era, as a result of Dewey’s 1919–20 pleas for social experimentation and his disciples’ vigorous efforts at application, numerous experimental sites were established all over China, with a focus on schools, agriculture, health care and local administration. According to KMT government statistics, in the 1930s about 600 different para-governmental and non-governmental organizations (many supported by foreign funds) were involved in rural reform efforts in more than 1,000 experimental sites that were scattered all over the country. In addition to small experimental sites such as schools, agricultural stations or health centers, about twenty full-scale, though mostly failing and short-lived, experimental counties were officially recognized by the central government prior to 1937.⁷⁹

US-funded agricultural reformers were pioneers in introducing the idea and practice of experimentation to Chinese administrators. The American system of establishing one agricultural experiment station in every state was transferred to provincial-level units in China. Although American advisers raised serious doubts about the success of China’s experiment stations in trying out new agricultural methods and varieties,⁸⁰ the general approach of setting up one experimental unit

⁷⁷ John Dewey, *Lectures in China*, introduction by the editors, p. 13.

⁷⁸ Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man*, pp. 135-36.

⁷⁹ Liu Haixi, “30 niandai guomin zhengfu tuixing xianzheng jianshe yuanyin tanxi” (Some Findings on Why the Nationalist Government Carried out County Administrative Reconstruction in the 1930s), *Minguo dang’an* (Archives of the Republican Period), No. 1 (2001), p. 80.

⁸⁰ Randall E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 123-24, 145, 185, quotes American

per province was taken up in the experimental county program of the 1930s. Moreover, the Chinese terminology of experimentation was introduced in the 1910s and 1920s by agricultural experimenters who popularized terms such as “experimental extension” (*shixing tuiguang* 试行推广) which is still used today.⁸¹

The most prominent social experimenters of the Republican era emerged from the Mass Education movement (MEM) and the Rural Reconstruction movement (RRM). Already in June 1925, the Yale-educated Chinese founder of the MEM, Yan Yangchu (James Yen), laid out the basic principles of what later would become essential elements in the Communists’ point-to-surface technique:

The general plan of the [Mass Education] Movement is to select one or two typical rural districts in north, south, east, west and central China, respectively, for intensive and extensive experimentations ... to make it a model district in education and in general social and economic improvement, so that it may be used as a demonstration and training center for other districts. While intensive experiments of this kind are being undertaken in the chosen areas, the Movement promotes its program extensively to as many villages as possible and as rapidly as possible.⁸²

As early as the late 1920s, the terms “experimental county” and “experimental zone” were already employed by MEM/RRM leaders and other social reformers then active in rural China.⁸³ The experimental sites managed by the MEM and RRM exerted considerable influence on the Communists for a number of reasons not readily conceded by official Party historiography. From the very beginning of MEM activities, there existed close personal relationships that crossed the boundaries between the Communist Party and the non-Communist MEM. An MEM co-founder and close collaborator of James Yen from the 1920s to 1949 was an uncle of one of the most eminent Communist Party leaders of the 1920s, Qu Qiubai.⁸⁴ More importantly in terms of experimental practice, local MEM and RRM associations were systematically used as cover organizations by underground branches of the Communist Party in the 1930s. When rural reconstruction experiments reached their climax in the mid-1930s, the CCP was at a low point in its influence. At that time, the MEM and RRM had become big players in rural reform and were seen by CCP leaders as attractive partners. In

advisers who complained about the “show and museum effect” of experimental station work that seemed to them to be a futile “attempt to rediscover common facts already known”.

⁸¹ These terms were used, for example, in a May 1924 article published in the national journal *Nongxue* (Agricultural Studies); cf. Randall E. Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, p. 258.

⁸² James Y. C. Yen, *The Mass Education Movement in China* (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1925), pp. 17-18.

⁸³ Cf. Guy S. Alitto, “Rural Reconstruction during the Nanking Decade: Confucian Collectivism in Shantung”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 66 (June 1976), pp. 213-46.

⁸⁴ See “Xiangcun jianshe shiyanjia Qu Junong” (Qu Junong, an Experimenter in Rural Reconstruction), *Yanhuang chungiu*, No. 8 (1998), pp. 36-9.

May 1937, CCP strategist Liu Shaoqi encouraged Party organs that operated in areas controlled by the Japanese or the KMT to take an active part in MEM and RRM rural work. Numerous CCP cadres became MEM activists who worked for the non-Communist rural reform movement during the day and held meetings with their CCP underground comrades during the evening.⁸⁵

At the leadership level, MEM and RRM leaders visited Mao Zedong for political exchanges in Yan'an several times. When Mao received a delegation in 1938, he spoke of the MEM as the Communist Party's "friends" and, certainly for tactical reasons, expressed his appreciation of their endeavors.⁸⁶ In the same year, Mao met for several days of lively chat with Liang Shuming, the RRM leader, and held Liang in high regard at the time.⁸⁷ Several Communist delegations visited Ding experimental county and studied the social programs initiated there, and Mao certainly was well informed about the basic ideas and diverse experiments conducted by the RRM and MEM. In their search for policies that might generate mass support, Communist leaders used the MEM/RRM efforts at reorganizing rural production, education and health care as instructive references and in some cases appeared to copy directly social programs that had originally been developed in Ding experimental county.⁸⁸ In utilizing novel policies,

⁸⁵ For official CCP policy see Liu Shaoqi, "Guanyu baiqu de dang yu qunzhong gongzuo" (On Party and Mass Work in the White Areas) (May 1937), *Liu Shaoqi xuanji* (Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1981), Vol. 1, pp. 61-64. For reports on CCP and NGO "double activists", or close personal interaction between NGO leaders, non-Communist experimental county heads and CCP cadres (sometimes based on old alumni connections), see "Zhang Donghui zai Dingzhou de suiye" (Zhang Donghui's Time in Ding District), *Dangshi bocai* (Party History Recollections), No. 12 (2002), pp. 42-43; "Jinian Sun Fuyuan xiansheng" (Commemorating Mr. Sun Fuyuan), *RMRB*, 18 September 1987, p. 8; Li Guozhong, "Suweiai yundong, xiangcun jianshe yundong yu Zhongguo nongcun de shehui bianqian bijiao" (A Comparison of the Soviet Movement and the RRM in China's Rural Social Transformation), *Gannan shifan xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Gannan Normal College), No. 5 (October 2002), p. 30.

⁸⁶ Li Guozhong, "Suweiai yundong", pp. 28-32.

⁸⁷ On Mao's talks with Liang Shuming in Yan'an, see Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 283-92.

⁸⁸ Cf. Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 202-03, 213, 222-23. After assuming national power, the Communists officially distanced themselves from the MEM/RRM and other earlier reform movements and negated any influence coming from them. The key critique that had already been articulated by individual Communist ideologues in the 1930s was that the reformist approach taken by the MEM/RRM represented a futile attempt to delay the revolution that was seen by the Communists as inevitable for the transformation of rural society. For a detailed analysis of Communist criticism of the MEM/RRM, see Klaus Birk, *Die ländliche Aufbaubewegung in China, 1926-1948* (The Rural Reconstruction Movement in China) (Bochum: Projekt Verlag, 1998), pp. 197-203. Starting in the 1980s, the contributions of James Yen and Liang Shuming to rural reform were officially acknowledged again by CCP media; cf. "Liang Shuming zouwan jin bainian rensheng

recruiting political activists and addressing the most pressing needs of the peasants, there was clearly a lot to learn from the non-Communist experimenters.⁸⁹

Enemy Reformists: KMT-Sponsored Experimental Counties

During the 1930s, RRM and MEM leaders Liang Shuming and James Yen were courted by both the KMT and the Communists and were invited for talks not only with Mao Zedong but also with Chiang Kai-shek. Scores of KMT politicians and administrators visited and inspected the experimental sites managed by the RRM and MEM as part of a policy tourism in search of new organizational models for China's countryside.⁹⁰ Remarkably, it was not only the Communists who were inspired by the MEM and RRM experimental sites; the KMT government also undertook some prominent efforts to test new ways of governing the countryside between 1932 and 1937. Although the objectives and policies involved in the KMT-led effort at county administrative reconstruction met with a lot of distrust,⁹¹ at least two experimental counties (of altogether twenty counties in eleven provinces) set up by the KMT, Jiangning in Jiangsu Province and Lanxi in Zhejiang Province, were promoted by determined county leaders with high-level backing.⁹² These two government-sponsored rural reform efforts "from above" were seen as producing much useful experience. But since these experiments relied on very generous subsidies and had to be terminated in the face of the Japanese invasion, they could not serve as models for other jurisdictions.⁹³

After the Japanese defeat, individual KMT policy-makers made efforts to re-launch a program of experimental counties, but the Communists were advancing rapidly and proudly announced that they had managed to nip the 1947 KMT experiments in the bud in northern Jiangsu.⁹⁴ However, non-Communist

lücheng" (Liang Shuming Concludes the Almost Century-Long Journey of his Life), *RMRB*, 8 July 1988, p. 3.

⁸⁹ Pauline Keating, *Two Revolutions*, p. 189, argues that many of the rural reforms initiated in the Communist base areas, in particular the cooperative movement, drew on models that had originally been sponsored by non-Communist reformers (including the KMT) and funded by Western missionary or philanthropic organizations.

⁹⁰ Wang Xianming and Li Weizhong, "20 shiji 30 niandai de xianzheng jianshe yundong yu xiangcun shehui bianqian" (The Movement for County Administrative Reconstruction in the 1930s and Rural Social Change), *Shixue yuekan* (Historical Monthly), No. 4 (2003), pp. 90-104.

⁹¹ For an explanation of the experimental county project from the perspective of a leading experimenter, see Hu Changqing (alias Hu Ciwei), "Shenmo jiaozuo shiyanxian?" (What Do We Mean by Experimental County?), *Shidai gonglun* (Public Opinion of the Times), No. 140 (30 November 1934), pp. 7-15.

⁹² Liu Haixi, "30 niandai", pp. 77-81.

⁹³ Jia Shijian, "Qianxi Nanjing guomin zhengfu de xianzheng shiyan" (A Sketchy Study of the Nanjing Nationalist Government's Experiments in County Administration), *Tianzhong xuekan* (Journal of Tianzhong), Vol. 18, No. 1 (February 2003), pp. 84-7.

⁹⁴ See *RMRB*, 21 June 1947, p. 1.

experimentation, due to James Yen's successful fund-raising and lobbying efforts in Washington in 1948, was taken up again under the auspices of the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR). After the KMT's defeat in the civil war, this commission came to act as a shadow ministry of agriculture in Taiwan, contributing greatly to land reform and rural modernization and moreover launching one of the most sophisticated and best documented experimental family planning programs of the twentieth century in Taichung in 1963.⁹⁵ The experience and legacy of the rural reconstruction experiments of the pre-1949 era were thereby transferred to Taiwan and made part of official KMT policy-making.

Lessons of Widespread Experimentation in China's Republican Era

Seen from the perspective of the widespread experimental programs in Republican China, it might be stated that the Communists merely joined the strong trend of experimentation that had gained momentum since the May Fourth era. The Communists, however, learned from these other experimental efforts for tactical reasons only and were determined to redirect rural experimentation toward their revolutionary goals. From the Communist point of view, the experiments of the Deweyans, liberal reformers and Republicans had failed because they had ignored the issue of political power and had tried to work from within an inimical political environment.⁹⁶ The reformists never had the authority to transform their experimental projects into general operational programmes for a larger jurisdiction. Even if individual non-Communist experiments appeared to work and were widely judged to be successful, they remained isolated and confined to one small area.

In the course of the 1940s, the Communists gained power to proceed in policy implementation from one experimental spot to the entire area they controlled and thereby obtained a crucial capacity never enjoyed by the reformists of the 1930s. Communist leaders made it clear that they did not see any meaning in experiments unless the Communist Party was in control of the overall experimental process. Thus, although the CCP's unorthodox experimental terminology as well as individual policies dealing with land reform, rural education and health care may have been influenced by non-Communist experience, the point-to-surface technique of controlled experimentation by way

⁹⁵ See Zhou Xiuhuan (ed.), *Nongfuhui shiliao* (Material on the History of the JCRR) (Taipei: Guoshiguan, 1995). For experimental sites supported by the JCRR on the mainland in 1948–49, see “Xiangcun jianshe shiyanjia Qu Junong”. For JCRR-sponsored large-scale experimentation on Taiwan, see Ronald Freedman and Yuzuru Takeshita, *Family Planning in Taiwan: An Experiment in Social Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

⁹⁶ An astute analysis of why Deweyan reformers failed can be found in Barry Keenan, *The Dewey Experiment in China: Educational Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

of sent-down cadre teams, mass mobilization, struggle sessions and wave-like extension to neighboring areas constitutes a thoroughly Maoist creation.

Mao held that effective social experimentation could not be carried out as “blind” trial and error but had to be a planned, controlled activity so as to obtain systematic knowledge about feasible ways to achieve the goals of the Communist Party. In the Communists’ conception, experimentation was about finding innovative policy *instruments*, not about defining the policy *objectives* which had to remain the exclusive job of the Party leadership. A revealing internal directive, dating from 1940, on one Communist “experimental county” in the Taihang Base Area (then under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping) frankly stated that “this experimental county was not established for experimenting” *per se* but for becoming an exemplar that generates and demonstrates successful leadership methods and policies.⁹⁷ Cadres in charge of model experiments were allowed to try out various ways and means to realize the policy goals set by the CCP leadership, but they were not authorized to redefine policy objectives themselves, and their experiments could be subject to termination, curtailment or revision by higher-level Party organs at any time.

Maoist Methods of Revolution and Post-Mao Reform

Taking the formative historical experience of CCP leaders and their methods of rule seriously, it becomes clear that experimenting with local policy alternatives in post-Mao China was not an issue of random choice by enlightened leaders. When searching for new policy approaches to facilitate economic modernization in the late 1970s, China’s veteran leaders shared the knowledge and appreciation of the “experimental point” method. They redefined the main mission of the Party (from achieving Communism to achieving rapid economic growth) and reactivated a repertoire of policy experimentation that had been reduced to model emulation campaigns for most of the period between 1958 and 1978.

Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun became the most prominent advocates for applying the point-to-surface technique to economic modernization, even though they came to differ substantially with regard to the speed and extent of change. From 1978 to 1992, Deng repeatedly characterized reform and opening as a “large-scale experiment” that could not be carried out with textbook knowledge but instead required vigorous “experimenting in practice”.⁹⁸ Chen Yun propagandized the “experimental point” technique as a way of controlled and cautious policy innovation.⁹⁹ However, in contrast to Deng, Chen took a very sceptical stance

⁹⁷ *Taihang Dangshi ziliao huibian, di san juan*, pp. 260-62.

⁹⁸ For important Deng statements on experimentation, see *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan, 1975-1982* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1983), p. 140; *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan, disan juan*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1993), pp. 78, 130, 373.

⁹⁹ For a collection of Chen Yun quotes regarding experimentation in economic policy-making, see Wang Jiayun, “Chen Yun jingji juece de shi da yuanze” (Ten Major Principles Pursued by Chen Yun in Economic Decision-making), *Huaiyang shifan*

toward the introduction of non-socialist special economic zones whose creation Deng Xiaoping justified as an “experiment”, pointing to the pre-1949 Communist base areas as a precedent.¹⁰⁰ Deng was an impatient advocate of rapid economic growth. Contrary to the common perception, however, Deng personally never cited the gradualist slogan “crossing the river by groping for the stones” to describe the logic of reform. In actuality, this formula was introduced by Chen Yun in December 1980 as an antidote to what he saw as reform exuberance, and the slogan then became a popular characterization of the Chinese reform approach.¹⁰¹

In its 1981 decision on Party history, China’s post-Mao leadership identified certain Maoist methods as lasting and indispensable elements of official doctrine. The point-to-surface technique was paraphrased, as in Mao’s 1943 article on leadership methods, as the combination of guidance through concrete work on individual issues (*gebie zhidao* 个别指导) with the making of general policy appeals (*yiban haozhao* 一般号召).¹⁰² In the 1980s and 1990s, individual Party theoreticians made efforts to establish experimentation as an original Chinese contribution to Marxist theory and argued that “a scientific socialist viewpoint can be established only through social experiments”.¹⁰³ Others identified experimental points as “social science laboratories” and as powerful scientific instruments for linking the processes of obtaining knowledge and implementing policy.¹⁰⁴ In 1992, the importance of experimentation was even inserted into the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party, stipulating that the whole Party “must boldly

xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Huaiyang Normal College), No. 3 (1998), p. 33. Chen Yun had stressed the importance of prudent experimentation consistently since his time as chief economic policymaker in the Northeast prior to the founding of the PRC.

¹⁰⁰ *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingji dashidian 1959.10–1987.1* (A Dictionary of Major Economic Events in the PRC, October 1959–January 1987) (Changchun: Jilin Renmin Chubanshe, 1987), p. 453.

¹⁰¹ Belonging to the folklore of China experts, the “groping for the stones” formula is frequently, yet incorrectly, attributed to Deng Xiaoping who apparently abstained from using it. This point is made by Chen Xiankui, *Deng Xiaoping zhiguo lun*, p. 177. By double-checking Deng’s works, I could find no reference to the “groping” formula. It clearly was Chen Yun’s creation. See *Chen Yun wenxuan* (Chen Yun’s Selected Works) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), Vol. 3, p. 279.

¹⁰² CCP Central Committee Documents Research Office (ed.), *Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi zhushiben* (Annotated Edition of the Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the PRC) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1983), p. 57.

¹⁰³ Lei Meitian, “Jianli Makeshi zhuyi shehui shiyan de xin guandian” (Establishing a New Standpoint on Marxist Social Experimentation), *Nanjing zhengzhi xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of the Nanjing College of Politics), No. 6 (1994), pp. 38–41.

¹⁰⁴ Yang Luo, “Lun shidian fangfa”, pp. 3, 5.

experiment with new methods, ... review new experience and solve new problems, and enrich and develop Marxism in practice”.¹⁰⁵

China’s post-Mao leadership removed the point-to-surface technique of policy experimentation from its original mass campaign context and integrated it into the administrative and entrepreneurial state context of the post-Mao period. The paramount objective of policy-making was radically redefined from a utopian qualitative goal (completing socialist transformation) into a worldly quantitative goal (“quadrupling China’s GDP from 1980 to 2000”). Thus the context and the objectives of experimentation in the post-Mao era became fundamentally different from the Maoist mass mobilization approach.

However, with respect to the central role of “model experiments” and “proceeding from point to surface” in policy generation and implementation, there was no systemic shift between the Mao and Deng eras. Though the approaches to policy experimentation differ in important individual features (the role of outside work teams, local cadres, and legislation), overall continuities can be observed in nine of the twelve typical steps of experiment-based policy formation (see Figure 1). Drawing lessons from what went wrong in the earlier decades, the post-Mao leadership accomplished an overall radical turn away from ideological fever and single models for emulation. Instead it acknowledged regional variation, and promoted concurrent experiments and multiple models.¹⁰⁶ Locally produced institutional and policy innovations were taken up by reformist policy-makers eager to bolster their political standing and to keep rivals at bay by godfathering “model experiments” that could demonstrate the success and superiority of their policy preferences. If experiments went wrong in the eyes of their advocates, they were typically phased out and brought to a stop silently. In the background interviews conducted for this study, Chinese officials in charge of “experimental point work” unanimously stated that failing experiments are typically not terminated in a clear-cut way by a formal administrative decision or document. Instead, administrators should read the subtle signals from above and tacitly stop working on those projects that have lost the attention and support of policy-makers. Only in very rare cases did failing “models” come under public scrutiny, typically in the context of criminal or corruption investigations that did not

¹⁰⁵ *Constitution of the Communist Party of China*, bilingual Chinese–English edition (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2003), pp. 26-27. On the insertion of the experimentation paragraph in 1992, see the brief comments in *Zhongguo gongchandang lici dangzhang huibian (1921–2002)* (A Compilation of All Previous Constitutions of the CCP) (Beijing: Zhongguo Fangzheng Chubanshe, 2006), p. 389. The first post-Mao Party Constitution of 1982 did not mention experimentation, nor did any of the previous Party constitutions.

¹⁰⁶ Jae Ho Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion*, pp. 14, 43-44.

implicate top policy-makers but were targeted at local or corporate misconduct as the root cause of failure.¹⁰⁷

**Figure 1: Establishing “Model Experiments”:
A Comparison of Maoist and Dengist Approaches**

		Maoist Mass Mobilization Approach ([1928–]1943–1976)	Dengist Administrative Approach (1979–)
Steps in establishing “model experiments”	1	Make a thorough investigation of several locations	
	2	Select a location conducive to successful experimentation	
	3	Dispatch cadre “work team”	<i>Rely on local cadres</i>
	4	Nurture new activists and cadres in the location	
	5	Report regularly to higher-level Party organs	
Steps in “proceeding from point to surface”	6	Send in investigation teams from higher-level authorities	
	7	Confirm/revise/terminate local model experiment	
	8	Reassign original work team and local activists to surrounding locations	<i>[No work teams used]</i>
	9	Promote local model leaders to leading provincial or national positions	
	10	Launch an emulation campaign and intervisitation program	
	11	Give speeches, issue documents to spread the model experience	
	12	<i>[Formal legislation rarely enacted, 1957–78]</i>	<i>Enact national regulation/legislation</i>

Clearly, Chinese-style experimentation must not be mistaken as an attempt at “scientific”, “evidence-based” policy selection. At every stage, from setting policy objectives to selecting model experiments and identifying generalizable policy options, “proceeding from point to surface” has always been an intensely politicized process driven by competing interests, ideological frictions, personal rivalries, tactical opportunism or ad hoc policy compromises. In a volatile policy-making context, the “experimental point” method helped to release broad-based

¹⁰⁷ For two celebrated economic models of the 1980s that fell from grace in the 1990s, Daqiu (rural industrialization) and Shougang (profit contracts in state industry), see “Daqiu zhuang xingshuai” (The Rise and Fall of Daqiu Village), *Nanfengchuang* (Southern Window), No. 6 (2002), pp. 50-52; Edward S. Steinfeld, *Forging Reform in China: The Fate of State-Owned Industry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 165-224.

policy entrepreneurship that contributed to economic innovation and expansion, even though it also produced costly fake and failed “models” along the way. Yet post-Mao experimentation did not stop at the search for individual models and policy options. Rather, it has resulted in serial, and cumulatively radical, redefinitions of policy parameters for economic activity over time.

Conclusion

The pattern of experimental governance in China has distinctive foundations in a hierarchical Party-state and differs from models of decentralization or federalism that are frequently applied to explain the dynamics of central–local interaction in China’s economic reform.¹⁰⁸ The findings presented in this study support Elizabeth Perry’s proposition that “certain elements of China’s revolutionary inheritance have actually furthered the stunningly successful implementation of market reforms”.¹⁰⁹ This paradox can also be seen in the case of reform-era experimentation that has been crucial in facilitating policy innovation, yet is rooted in Maoist techniques of rule.

One of China’s core strengths in reforming its economy has been its distinctive process of central–local interaction in policy generation. Explanations that stress central–local factional machinations as the paramount driving force behind policy innovation cannot appreciate the extent and importance of local initiative in generating novel policy instruments and in transforming the parameters and priorities of central policy-makers over time. Furthermore, the effectiveness of experimentation is not based on all-out decentralization and spontaneous diffusion of policy innovations. China’s experiment-based policy-making requires the authority of a central leadership that encourages and protects broad-based local initiative and filters out generalizable lessons but at the same time contains the centrifugal forces that necessarily come up with this type of policy process. Conceptual dichotomies such as centralization vs. decentralization, or constitutional concepts that suggest a stability of vertical checks and balances, such as federalism, cannot capture the oscillating dynamics of China’s policy-making approach. It is *experimentation under hierarchy*, that is, the volatile yet productive combination of decentralized experimentation with ad hoc central interference, resulting in the selective integration of local experiences into national policy-making, that is the key to understanding China’s policy process.

In searching for the causes of China’s unexpectedly adaptive authoritarianism over the last three decades, this distinctive policy process may provide a more powerful explanation than static factors (such as the initial economic structure or the state’s enforcement capacity), arguments based on quasi-natural economic

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *East Asia Decentralizes: Making Local Government Work* (Washington: World Bank, 2005); Yongnian Zheng, *De Facto Federalism in China: Reforms and Dynamics of Central-Local Relations* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007).

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?”, *The China Journal*, No. 57 (January 2007), p. 6.

liberalization and inevitable convergence with market principles, or explanations that treat policy experimentation merely as a derivative feature of factional rivalry. It is China's historically entrenched process of policy generation through local experiments and model demonstrations that has provided a productive link between central and local initiative and has allowed policy-makers to move beyond policy deadlock in spite of myriad conflicts over strategy, ideology and interests.