

# Building the New Socialist Countryside: Tracking Public Policy and Public Opinion Changes in China

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## Abstract

Ever since the introduction of the national political programme of “Building a new socialist countryside” (BNSC) in the early 2000s, renewed focus has been cast on how the Chinese government manages the gap between its rural and urban areas in the new millennium. Previous research has mostly studied the social and political consequences of the BNSC initiative without paying particular attention to its effects on public opinion. In this article, we present an analysis of the 2002 and 2008 waves of the mainland China subset of the Asian Barometer. Our results show a significant shift in the perceptions of the rural population in respect to how much impact government policies have on daily life. This shift brings rural perceptions more in line with those of the urban population in 2002. The paper concludes with the implications of our findings for the study of the relations between public opinion and public policy in China.

**Keywords:** Building a new socialist countryside; rural China; public opinion and public policy; CCP regime legitimacy

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As the largest autocracy in the world, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has defied many of its doomsday critics as, despite many political and socio-economic challenges, its ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to remain in power. Indeed, many scholars have tried to crack the puzzle of the CCP’s longevity with different explanations referring to the specific political structures or styles of policymaking.<sup>1</sup> One area of inquiry that has received little attention within China studies is how public opinion and public policy are intertwined.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Shambaugh 2009; Nathan 2003; Heilmann and Perry 2011.

2 With the exceptions of, e.g., Li, Lianjiang 2013.

The complex interaction between public opinion and public policy is often invoked to explain the success of liberal democracies. Incumbents aim at gaining support from among the electorate by responding to common public preferences; in response, public opinion reacts to this new context.<sup>3</sup> In authoritarian systems, the policy–opinion link is less clear and has surprisingly been subjected to less empirical scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> China is an interesting case, as its political leadership seems to have shown capacity for adaptation in response to public demands.<sup>5</sup> Other than well-documented repressive measures to quell domestic dissent, the CCP has been able to satisfy popular needs by guaranteeing high levels of employment, and providing opportunities for acquiring personal wealth and the freedom to travel abroad. One logical interpretation is that feedback loops between policy and opinion exist in China, too.

In this paper, we leverage the public policy–opinion nexus by means of a quasi-experiment, namely the leadership transition from the Jiang Zemin 江泽民 to the Hu Jintao 胡锦涛–Wen Jiabao 温家宝 (Hu–Wen) administration in 2002–2003.<sup>6</sup> In a bid by the latter administration to narrow disparities between citizens of the countryside and the urban centres, the “Building a new socialist countryside” (*shehuizhuyi xinnongcun jianshe* 社会主义新农村建设, BNSC hereafter) initiative was launched. Evaluation research on the BNSC so far has mostly studied its social and political implementation aspects and its outcomes, and has downplayed its interaction with public opinion.<sup>7</sup> We argue that despite the fact that there are no general elections or civil society, such as those that characterize liberal democracies, policy feedback loops are present in the PRC. Here, we want to diagnose whether people from rural areas had weaker perceptions of the role of government before the Hu–Wen administration implemented its grand plan for rural areas. Subsequently, we want to ascertain if public opinion in the rural areas shifted after these policies came into effect, with the expectation that disparities between the rural and urban populations in perceptions of the role of government have narrowed over the course of the implementation of the BNSC initiative.

The article is laid out as follows. First, we survey the literature on public policy and public opinion in China. We then introduce the policy context of the BNSC and the set of policies implemented by the Hu–Wen administration aimed at rural China. We go on to present the empirical data – the 2002 and 2008 mainland China subsets of the Asian Barometer – and our analytical strategy. We then present our results, which confirm our hypothesis that existing disparities between

3 Page and Shapiro 1983; Brooks and Manza 2007; Soroka and Wlezién 2010.

4 Research on decision making and agenda setting in China is, on the other hand, more common. See, e.g., Heilmann 2008; Saich and Yang 2003; Heberer and Schubert 2009; Wang 2006.

5 Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2009.

6 The first administration headed by Hu Jintao as president of the PRC and Wen Jiabao as prime minister of the State Council from March 2003 to March 2008.

7 For example, Ahlers and Schubert 2013; Ahlers 2014; Ahlers and Schubert 2015; Su 2009; Harwood 2013.

the urban and rural areas in 2002 (before the policy change) were reduced in 2008 (after the intervention). Finally, we discuss our findings and conclude the paper with implications for current insights on the relationship between public opinion and public policy in the Chinese context.

## The Link between Public Policy and Public Opinion in China

Insights into how public policy and public opinion interact have mainly accumulated from studies across liberal democracies.<sup>8</sup> Policy proposals depend not only upon structural factors, such as for instance economic prosperity,<sup>9</sup> but also on cultural conditions expressed by public opinion.<sup>10</sup> In a review study, Paul Burstein infers from 30 studies that causally link public opinion to public policy across liberal democracies, demonstrating a strong impact of public preferences on policy formation. Further, the effect of public opinion holds even after taking the role of civil society interest groups into account.<sup>11</sup> By effect, policy influences opinion, too, as described by the “thermostat” metaphor: “When policy increases (decreases), the preference for more policy will decrease (increase), other things being equal.”<sup>12</sup>

In the absence of democratic consultation in terms of elections and civil society, policymaking in China differs greatly from that in liberal democracies.<sup>13</sup> Although since the early 2000s, new actors and agenda-setting channels have hit the stage, the top leaders of the CCP remain the most powerful actors because they launch political campaigns or encourage initiatives directed at local governments.<sup>14</sup> When implementing important policies, the so-called mass line (*qunzhong luxian* 群众路线) – the mobilization of large parts of the population – remains one of the CCP’s most effective tools. By contrast, ad hoc policy decisions and incremental implementation without further preparations entail disadvantages, because they may result in selective implementation and unfunded mandates for local governments.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while in liberal democracies elections serve a function to prioritize policy proposals and gain political legitimacy, in China legitimacy largely rests upon policy output.<sup>16</sup>

China’s leaders entrust policy evaluation to leading think tanks or professional agencies that conduct surveys to accompany (experimental) implementation.<sup>17</sup> Since the enactment of the Legislation Law (*lifafa* 立法法) in 2000, legislators

8 Page and Shapiro 1983; Burstein 2003; Brooks and Manza 2007; Soroka and Wlezién 2010.

9 Dahl 1989; Lipset 1960.

10 Burstein 2003.

11 Ibid., 36.

12 Soroka and Wlezién 2010, 22–23.

13 For a good discussion of changing models of China’s policy agenda setting, see Wang 2008. Heilmann (2008) developed a heuristic to study the experimentation-based policymaking in China.

14 For a detailed overview of the characteristics of policymaking and policy styles in China, see Heilmann and Perry 2011; Howell 2004.

15 O’Brien and Li 1999.

16 Heberer and Schubert 2009.

17 Zhu 2008.

have been required to consider public opinion.<sup>18</sup> Presently, more than two-thirds of Chinese provinces have established “Public opinion service centres” (*sheqing minyi diaocha zhongxin* 社情民意调查中心), the purpose of which is to conduct surveys on policy proposals and provide input to legislators. He Baogang and Stig Thøgersen argue that the results of these surveys influence policymaking,<sup>19</sup> which supports an evolution to a technocratic understanding of policymaking.<sup>20</sup>

Academic reflections on the relationship between public policy and public opinion in China are the exception rather than the rule.<sup>21</sup> Chack-Kie Wong and Peter Lee find that the citizens of Shanghai positively rate economic reform in light of the benefits it has brought about but that they are also critically aware of the large income disparities it has caused.<sup>22</sup> After analysing the Beijing Pension Opinion Survey, Mark Frazier discovered that a plurality of 62 per cent of respondents are of the opinion that the state should be the main provider of pensions.<sup>23</sup> Whereas these surveys are in most cases very specific and locally restricted, only a few (for example, the China Household Income Project) allow for broader generalization, making it necessary to go beyond existing surveys to document the interplay between public opinion and public policy.<sup>24</sup>

## A Renewed Focus on the Rural Area

Borrowing insights from quasi-experimental studies,<sup>25</sup> ideally there should be a clear “treatment” in terms of a policy shift to observe changes in public opinion in order to assess the relationship between public opinion and the public policy. The “treatment” presented here concerns the leadership transition from the Jiang to the Hu–Wen administration in late 2002 to March 2003, with the latter’s new development paradigm aimed at dealing with persistent social disparities between the rural countryside and the urban centres. This transition was characterized by a shift away from economic growth and efficiency towards equality and sustainability,<sup>26</sup> institutionalizing the role of the government in providing social welfare,<sup>27</sup> with the particular goal of reducing socio-economic disparities in the countryside.

The harsh socio-economic deprivation experienced by rural regions during the Jiang era sits uncomfortably with the fact that the Communist Revolution drew much of its original support and legitimacy from the Chinese countryside. The CCP’s success in carrying out rural land reform policies in “liberated” areas in

18 He and Thøgersen 2010.

19 Ibid., 689.

20 Skocpol and Amenta 1986; Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988.

21 Alpermann 2009.

22 Wong and Lee 2001.

23 Frazier 2010.

24 Gao 2010.

25 Dunning 2012.

26 Ngok 2009.

27 Wang 2000.

the 1930s and 1940s has been a cornerstone of the regime's founding myth ever since. After the PRC was established in 1949, the Chinese countryside experienced profound policy changes as a result of the changing political orientation of the Party.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the CCP leadership shifted its focus to industrialization and urban workers, who soon profited from preferential treatment in the allocation of jobs and generous welfare packages provided by work units, as prescribed by the household registration system (*hukou* 户口).<sup>29</sup> When the CCP initiated reform in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the initial enthusiasm for agricultural reforms was soon replaced by a focus on marketization, industrialization and urbanization, which transferred much of the financial burden to the local level.<sup>30</sup> This tax shift saw rural governments relying on predatory measures to collect revenues from peasants in order to fund government expenses.<sup>31</sup> The huge burdens placed on peasants fuelled their growing grievances and political discontent from the 1980s onwards with a political leadership that was preoccupied with the urban population.<sup>32</sup>

By the year 2000, the “three rural problems” (*sannong wenti* 三农问题) – agriculture (*nongye* 农业), villages (*nongcun* 农村), and farmers (*nongmin* 农民) – had become a profound concern for the Party.<sup>33</sup> The CCP was deeply troubled by the rising discontent in the countryside sparked by the increasing disparities between rural and urban areas and the threat this caused to social stability and the Party's regime security.<sup>34</sup> Together with the leadership change from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao as the general secretary of the CCP, the focus on the rural–urban disparities “was finally incorporated into the larger framework of ideological reconstruction adopted by the 16th Party Congress” in late 2002.<sup>35</sup>

The first main policy change was the introduction of “tax-for-fee” reform (*fei-gaishui* 费改税) throughout China in 2002, which aimed at reducing the farmers' financial burden.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, a new rural co-operative medical system (*xin-xing nongcun hezuo yiliao* 新型农村合作医疗) was introduced in 2003 which was expected to cover all of China's rural residents by the end of 2008 and promised to relieve farmers' medical costs.<sup>37</sup> In 2004, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao pledged to reduce further and finally abolish rural taxes, a target which was achieved in 2006. This monumental reform “would relieve the Chinese peasantry of a burden it had shouldered for more than 2,500 years.”<sup>38</sup> The government also started to give subsidies directly to farmers to improve their welfare.<sup>39</sup> At the fifth

28 Oi 1999, 616.

29 Cheng and Selden 1994.

30 Su 2009, 1.

31 Zhang, Deyuan 2003.

32 Bernstein and Lü 2000.

33 Liu 2004.

34 Chen and Wu 2004.

35 Ahlers 2014, 30.

36 Yep 2004; Göbel 2010; Alm and Liu 2014.

37 Brown, de Brauw and Du 2009; Klotzbücher et al. 2010.

38 Ahlers 2014, 33.

39 Lin and Wong 2012.

plenum of the 16th CCP Central Committee in October 2005, the Party passed a key document containing guidelines on how to push forward the BNSC that listed its work in rural areas as a “major historical task.”<sup>40</sup> It was published two months later, on 31 December 2005. Furthermore, the 11th Five-Year Plan, adopted by the National People’s Congress in 2006, committed the Chinese central government to such a pledge.<sup>41</sup>

Conceived more as a macro political programme, the implementation of the BNSC varies according to local circumstances. However, substantial amounts of inter-government transfers have been provided by the central government to relieve local governments’ financial burdens in addition to specific BNSC funding, which may target specific aspects of rural governance, for example enhancing agriculture, improving farmers’ living standards, and providing clean housing.<sup>42</sup> According to Tony Saich, the BNSC consists of five complementary elements: (1) the elimination of restrictions on labour migration; (2) better protection of land rights; (3) supporting sustainable income in rural areas by grain and livestock subsidies and price supports; (4) the abolition of the agricultural tax; and (5) increased central government spending on health, education and rural infrastructure.<sup>43</sup> In addition, a “rural minimum living allowance system” (*nongcun zuidi shenghuo baozhang zhidu* 农村最低生活保障制度) was announced as part of the BNSC in 2007.<sup>44</sup> Overall, the central government’s contribution to the rural social assistance scheme in the form of transfers to local governments increased rapidly, from 3 billion yuan in 2007 to over 50 billion yuan in 2013.<sup>45</sup> All these initiatives – fully implemented in the 2010 Social Insurance Law – underscore a clear commitment from the government to social equality.

### Fertile Grounds for the Analysis of the Opinion–Policy Nexus?

Combining this strong policy reorientation on bringing more social justice to rural areas with the insight that public opinion polls have an increasing influence on shaping policy, we propose a few hypotheses. As discussed, in the 1980s and 1990s, China’s economic development was biased towards marketization by prioritizing the urban sector. Particularly under Jiang’s presidency and CCP leadership in the 1990s, rural conditions deteriorated as geographical inequalities increased. This development led eventually to rising grievances in the Chinese countryside.<sup>46</sup> Thus, after the leadership transition, the Hu–Wen administration had a vested interest in correcting some of the excesses of the previous administration and were especially concerned with the dire situation in the rural areas.

40 CCP 2005.

41 Ahlers and Schubert 2013.

42 Ahlers 2014, 33.

43 Saich 2011.

44 Ibid., 35.

45 Zhang, Guohua 2007, 78; Gov.cn 2014

46 Bernstein and Lü 2000; O’Brien and Li 2006; Guo 2001.

Given that the Hu–Wen administration implemented policies aimed at easing the financial burden of the farmers and focusing attention on rural areas, it can be expected that the administration reacted to differentials in public opinion between the rural countryside and the urban centres. This brings us to Hypothesis 1:

*Disparities between the rural countryside and urban centres in the perception of the extent government policies affected them were present in China before the BNSC came into effect, as under the previous administrations, Chinese living in urban areas were subject to more government intervention than those living in rural regions.*

Because of the insight that policies create a new context, we expect that this policy shift by the Hu–Wen administration would affect opinions.<sup>47</sup> Addressing the policy shift, Linda Li describes the BNSC discourse as “window dressing” and emphasizes shortcomings in the policy implementation and monitoring.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, Anna Ahlers and Gunter Schubert argue that this social reorientation by the Hu–Wen administration has led to tangible improvements in the lives of the rural population, such as income increases through a mix of infrastructural investment and agricultural specialization, or social welfare expansion.<sup>49</sup> Qualitative studies further show tentative evidence of the positive influence of this policy shift on individual perceptions. Interviewees in Shih Junn Shi’s study state that, owing to the introduction of rural pension schemes, they feel the government actually cares for the first time and makes an effort to impact their lives positively.<sup>50</sup> Yet, a robust test of this intervention using representative public opinion data has not been done so far. We therefore propose Hypothesis 2:<sup>51</sup>

*After the introduction of the policies related to the BNSC, Chinese living in the rural areas will become more aware of the influence of government policies on daily life.*

## Data and Methodology

### *Data*

In this study, we analyse the Asian Barometer, which is a cross-national survey project carried out for the first time in 2002, and for the second time in 2008, across a number of South-East Asian countries.<sup>52</sup> Owing to the proposed research

47 Arts and Gelissen 2001.

48 Li, Linda Chelan 2007.

49 Ahlers and Schubert 2009.

50 Shi 2008.

51 Hypothesis 2 implies that we expect no shift in perceptions among residents of urban areas because the policies of the Hu–Wen administration focused on improving the living conditions of people in the countryside, leaving the urban areas unaffected.

52 Data analysed in this manuscript were collected by the East Asia Barometer Project (2000–2004) and the Asian Barometer Project (2005–2008), co-directed by Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu, with funding from Taiwan’s Ministry of Education, Academia Sinica and National Taiwan University. The Asian Barometer Project Office ([www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org)) is solely responsible for the data distribution. The authors appreciate the assistance in providing data of the institutes and individuals aforementioned. The views expressed herein are the authors’ own.

question, the data are restricted to the mainland China subsample. To deliver the highest level of representativeness, the Asian Barometer team has taken extraordinary care over sampling procedures, interviewer selection and training, questionnaire translation, and quality controls at each stage of the fieldwork.<sup>53</sup> While the actual sample was 3,183 respondents (making a response rate of 84.1 per cent) for the first wave of 2002, we could only include 2,680 in the final analysis owing to item non-response. For the second wave of 2008, the actual response rate increased to a sample of 5,098 respondents, of which 4,078 are included in the final analysis. Combined, this adds up to 6,758 respondents. Analyses have been weighed using the *w\_CN* design.

The choice of the mainland China subsample of the Asian Barometer has been inspired by a few considerations. First, in contrast with, for instance, the World Values Survey, the Asian Barometer addresses specific particularities of Asian societies. These stronger details result in a dataset that is more representative of the whole of mainland China, including the rural areas. Furthermore, the developed questionnaire is more specific to the Chinese context – for example, to rate the situation before and after the Mao era, how many generations living in the respondent's household, and references to trust in local and national political entities. The second consideration regards our specific interest in comparing attitudes before and after the policy shift that coincided with the transition to the Hu–Wen administration in 2002–2003, which requires consulting the Asian Barometer. By contrast, a drawback of the Asian Barometer lies in the limited questioning of our dependent variable, i.e. the influence of national policy on daily life, which is measured in a rather narrow manner across both waves.

### *Dependent variable*

The dependent variable in our research is the question: how much impact do you feel government policies have on your daily life? This question was offered with four response categories: (1) no impact at all, (2) a little impact, (3) quite some impact, and (4) a great deal of impact.

This variable is important to an analysis in the Chinese context because, as mentioned above, the *hukou* system institutionally enforced separation between the public policies directed at urban and rural citizens. Whereas urban workers were considered as the vanguards of the socialist society up until 1978, the picture of preferential treatment for the urban population and neglect of the problems in the countryside did not actually change until the early 2000s. Only with the new administration under the Hu–Wen leadership was there a major shift in policy orientation aimed at increasing social justice in general; this treatment occurred only after the first wave of the Asian Barometer. A shift in the individual perceptions of the impact of government policies between 2002 and 2008 across urban

53 Methodologically, the Asian Barometer teams aim at reaching a minimum confidence interval of plus or minus 3% at 95% probability.

and rural areas can therefore support the notion that there is an interaction between public policies and public opinion in China.

### *Independent variables*

To document change in perceptions of the role of government among urban and rural respondents between 2002 and 2008, two independent variables are central. The first one concerns whether a respondent has been sampled from the urban or rural primary sampling unit and is collected from administrative meta survey information (i.e. the “level 3” variable).<sup>54</sup> In the first wave, 62.8 per cent of the respondents were from rural areas, while in the second wave this figure was 66.3 per cent. In the analysis, the urban areas serve as a reference category (code “0”) against which the effect of living in a rural area is contrasted (code “1”).

The second independent variable regards the survey wave, which serves to assess the impact of the “treatment,” i.e. the shift in public policy. The first wave, fielded in 2002, serves as the reference category (code “0”) against which the effect of the second wave, fielded in 2008, is contrasted (code “1”).

### *Control variables*

In order to assess the unique moderating effect of time on the relationship between the respondent’s living area and the perception that public policy impacts daily life, i.e. to parcel out the possibility that potential changes might be caused by differences in related socio-economic positions and/or attitudes, we control for a number of confounders. According to previous insights on attitudes towards government intervention, we consider structural respondent information and related opinions. Regarding structural information, age is expected to impact perceptions of government intervention, as the generation that was born before 1978 – the era of mass campaigns and collective work units – is very sensitive in respect of its perceptions of government interventions. Age has been operationalized in five categories, namely, younger than 25 years old, from 25 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, and 50 or older. Furthermore, the hypothesis is that women have a better eye for government intervention than men (reference category). We also included a question about how many generations live at home, with the expectation that people with more generations at home have a weaker eye for policy interventions. To capture socio-economic status, we include educational level, expecting that the more educated, i.e. those with a tertiary degree, will have stronger perceptions that government policies influence daily life than those with no education.<sup>55</sup>

54 Unfortunately, the Asian Barometer has no information available about which province the respondents live in, which would further facilitate the data analysis.

55 Alternatives have been considered, but as indicated, a drawback of the Asian Barometer is that some interesting survey questions, for instance subjective social class, are not present in either wave.

Next to the structural variables, we also include related opinions as control variables. We include perceptions of the economic condition of the country as well as the economic condition of the family in the model. The hypothesis is that people who have strong opinions that the economy is doing well for the country but who also think that, in their personal life, the financial situation is good, will see that governmental influence on daily life is high. With regard to institutional trust, we add two different conceptions of political trust to the model – trust in the local institutions and trust in the national institutions<sup>56</sup> – expecting that people with more trust in government, whether at the local or national level, will also have a clearer eye that policies affect their personal situation strongly.<sup>57</sup> Last but not least, political interest is also included, as we expect that people who are more interested in politics have the opinion that governmental influence is strong. For descriptions of all variables, see Appendix Tables A1 and A2.

### *Methodology*

To detect whether there are differences in perceptions across time and between the two different geographical groups, we first of all use t-tests to explore bivariate differences between groups, across time, and across time for each group separately; in a second step, we analyse whether expected differences between urban and rural respondents between 2002 and 2008 do hold when we, in a multiple regression model, control for the composition of the groups.

### **Results: Bivariate Exploration**

In the first step of the analysis, we look at some bivariate associations that indicate whether perceptions of government intervention have shifted between 2002 and 2008 among urban and rural respondents. First of all, across the pooled data, there is a significant difference ( $t = 7.68$ ;  $df = 8,016$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) between respondents living in metropolitan areas and respondents living in the countryside: on a scale of 1 to 4, urban respondents manoeuvre with a score of 2.52 between the scale categories “government policies have a limited impact” and “government policies have quite some impact.” On the other hand, people living in rural areas, with a score of 2.36, are more of the opinion that government policies have only a limited impact on daily life. Second, next to the significant

56 Theoretically and empirically, making this distinction is allowed. From a theoretical perspective, authors have already documented that the Chinese are more critical towards their local government compared to the national government. From an empirical perspective, factor analysis on the survey items covering institutional trust revealed two distinct underlying factors, i.e. trust in local institutions (courts, civil service, police and local government) and trust in the national institutions (national government, political parties and national parliament).

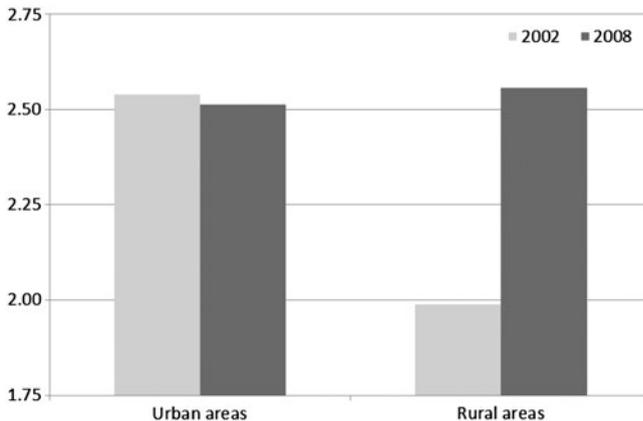
57 We have considered additional ideational covariates as controls, e.g. perceptions of corruption or opinions about democracy. However, these variables were to a considerable extent affected by item non-response, which is something that requires more attention in future research.

difference between urban and rural respondents, the pooled sample also indicates a significant difference over time ( $t = -16.04$ ;  $df = 8,021$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) in perceptions of the daily impact of government policies. While in 2002, the Chinese were closer to the opinion that government policies only have a little impact (score of 2.20), in 2008 they had moved more in the direction that policies have quite some impact on daily life (score of 2.54). Thus, on the basis of the first bivariate results, there are already indications that support our expectation that individuals in the countryside have weaker perceptions of government intervention compared to respondents living in urban areas, and that over time, perceptions of government intervention has increased.

In a subsequent step, we disaggregate the two geographical groups to assess whether perceptions have changed over time depending upon the geographical area (see Figure 1). On the one hand, results from a means difference test suggest that perceptions among the respondents from urban areas have not changed over time ( $t = 0.80$ ;  $df = 2,842$ ;  $p = 0.42$ ): whereas these respondents had a score of 2.54 in 2002, it decreased non-significantly to 2.51 in 2008.

Respondents living in metropolitan areas have thus remained persistent in their perception of the extent that government policies impact daily life. In contrast, perceptions of government intervention have shifted significantly among residents living in the countryside ( $t = -21.32$ ;  $df = 5,172$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). While rural respondents were, in 2002, spot on the response category that government policies have only “a limited impact” (score of 1.99), in 2008 they had moved right in between the categories “a little impact” and “quite some impact” (score of 2.56). What is more is that with this score of 2.56 on the 1–4 scale,

**Figure 1: Bivariate Exploration of the Difference over Time between Perceptions of Government Intervention among Urban and Rural Respondents**



Note:

Entries represent mean scores per survey wave disaggregated to the specific geographic groups on the question, “How much impact do you feel government policies have on your daily life?”, with response options on a scale from 1 (no impact at all) to 4 (a great deal of impact).

respondents from rural areas have completely caught up with respondents from urban areas (2.51), making a difference which is statistically non-significant ( $t = -1.79$ ;  $df = 5,055$ ;  $p = 0.073$ ). Thus, the disaggregated analysis built on the first insight that the difference over time and between urban and rural respondents can mainly be attributed to changed perceptions of individuals in rural areas between 2002 and 2008. Whereas these individuals had only weak perceptions of government intervention in 2002, confirming Hypothesis 1, they had caught up with the urban respondents in 2008, confirming Hypothesis 2. The results thus indicate that the shift in policy orientation towards more social justice for people in the rural areas has increased perceptions of the role of government.

### Multivariate Analysis

To check that the bivariate finding that perceptions regarding the influence of government policies on daily life have shifted between 2002 and 2008 among rural respondents, we need to consider composition effects, i.e. whether a change in the composition of the urban and rural groups explains differences in perceptions of government impact (for example, that the average level of education has increased substantially, or that trust in local government and trust in national government have not shifted over the two periods among the urban and rural respondents). In order to do so, a multivariate analysis of individual perceptions of government influence was conducted on the pooled data, with the main independent variables being the geographical distinction between urban and rural respondents, the year-effect, and the interaction between both, holding constant for potential confounding structural and ideational covariates.

Before we look at the pooled model, it is interesting to discuss the two separate models for 2002 and 2008 where the effect of living in rural or urban areas is given, parcelled out for potential spurious effects. Owing to space limitations, these models can be found in Appendix Table A3. An interesting first observation is that the perceptions of government intervention are strongly socially structured in 2002, while the opposite is true for 2008: whereas the  $R^2$  in 2002 is close to 15 per cent, it drops to 8 per cent in 2008.<sup>58</sup> Thus, in 2002, when the national government was not as proactive compared to 2008, differences in perceptions of

58 As we can see in Appendix Table A3, age has hardly any effect; additionally, it is difficult to give meaning to this effect, as there is an oversample of older respondents in the second wave. Gender has no effect when controlling for related attitudes. With regard to how many generations live at home, there is only a pronounced and positive effect in the 2002 sample. For educational diploma, we see that the more educated are more of the opinion that government policies affect their daily life. Perceptions of the economic situation of the country and of the family impact perceptions of government influence only to a limited extent, namely there is a positive effect of perceptions of attitudes towards the national economy in 2008 on perceptions of whether policies impact daily life. With regard to trust in local and national institutions, we see interesting trends that require further exploration in future research. While trust in the local government has a negative effect on the impact of policies on daily life in 2002, this effect is absent in 2008; however, we can clearly see a positive effect of trust in national institutions in 2008 while this effect was absent in 2002. Political interest, then, is strongly and positively related to the perceptions of government intervention.

governmental influence on daily life were more pronounced and could be better explained by relevant covariates. Turning then to the substantial puzzle of whether the divide between the urban and rural areas is more prominent in 2002 than it is in 2008, as the bivariate exploration tends to suggest, the analysis is affirmative. Holding constant for related explanations, in 2002, people in the countryside had an average score 0.32 scale points lower than urban respondents, a coefficient that is statistically significant from 0 ( $t = -7.01$ ;  $t < 0.001$ ); however, in 2008, controlling for confounding variables, we can see that rural respondents have a borderline significant higher score of 0.05 ( $t = 1.96$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ). The two separate models thus seem to lend confirmation to the bivariate test as well as to the general expectations.

The final test to find confirmation for the previous findings is to look at the multivariate test on the pooled data, as can be found in [Table 1](#). All models, i.e. Model 1 to Model 3, corroborate the bivariate findings. First of all, Model 1 shows that across the pooled data, respondents from rural areas have significantly lower perceptions of government interventions in daily life than metropolitan citizens. Second, Model 2 additionally demonstrates that differences across time are present, i.e. that people had a clearer eye for government intervention in 2008. Third, and most importantly, Model 3 shows that in a multivariate design, the perception that government policies influence daily life has increased substantially among rural respondents – as the main year effect lost a lot of statistical significance. This shows that the increase in perceptions over time can largely be attributed to changed perceptions among the rural respondents.

## Discussion

At the end of the analysis, the question is: how can we interpret the shift between 2002 and 2008 towards stronger perceptions among rural respondents regarding the impact government policies have on daily life? Can we actually be sure that the change in the perceptions among the rural respondents is caused by the implementation of a social justice agenda, more generally subsumed under the initiative of BNSC that was officially announced in 2006? Social policies such as the extension of health insurance subsidies and more involvement in old-age security programmes by the government constitute an important part of this programme; however, they were launched in the very early years of the Hu–Wen administration. Other social programmes, such as the extension of the minimum living guarantee for rural people, were only implemented a year ahead of the second wave, in 2007. By critically commenting on four issues, we argue that there is good reason to expect that the implementation of the project was responsible for the shift in perceptions.

The first point regards contemplation of the “pre-test” of our quasi-experimental design: is the situation in 2002 exceptional (an abnormality in the data), or is it really the case that at the beginning of the new millennium, rural residents simply had consistently lower perceptions of the role of government

**Table 1: The Multiple Regression Model Showing the Effect of Time on the Relationship between the Urban–Rural Distinction and Perceptions of the Influence of Government Policies on Daily Life**

	Model 1: pooled data		Model 2: + year effect		Model 3: + interaction	
	Param	T-Value	Param	T-Value	Param	T-Value
Intercept	1.56***	13.56	1.26***	10.97	1.45***	12.49
Rural (R: urban)	-0.09***	-4.03	-0.12***	-5.06	-0.39***	-10.52
2008 (R: 2002)			0.35***	14.11	0.08*	2.06
Rural*2008					0.44***	9.38
Age:						
- 25–29	-0.09	-1.90	-0.08	-1.60	-0.08	-1.70
- 30–39	-0.00	-0.04	-0.04	-1.08	-0.05	-1.30
- 40–49	0.07	1.72	0.00	0.06	-0.02	-0.37
> 50	0.19***	4.52	0.06	1.42	0.03	0.59
(Ref: < 25)						
Women	0.01	0.59	0.01	0.29	-0.00	-0.08
Generations	0.07***	4.86	0.04**	2.93	0.05**	3.29
Education:						
- primary	0.11**	3.07	0.07*	2.19	0.06	1.75
- secondary	0.34***	10.77	0.28***	8.98	0.22***	7.16
- tertiary	0.45***	8.38	0.43***	8.16	0.32***	5.79
(Ref: none)						
Economy, country	0.06***	3.99	0.04**	2.72	0.05**	3.44
Economy, family	0.03*	2.20	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.04
Pol. trust, local	-0.13***	-7.15	-0.09***	-5.26	-0.09***	-5.25
Pol. trust, national	0.04	1.39	0.12***	4.50	0.11***	4.29
Political interest	0.18***	13.17	0.19***	14.26	0.20***	14.42
R2	0.08		0.11		0.12	
N	6,758		6,758		6,758	

*Notes:*

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Entries represent the result of three separate multiple regression models explaining perceptions of whether government policies have influenced daily life.

compared to urban residents? The previous Jiang–Zhu administration was well known for its neoliberal style reforms, for instance privatizing a large share of state-owned enterprises. Social policies mainly targeted urban residents who, for the first time, were confronted with unemployment, and rural residents were largely neglected. Literally, there were no state-sponsored distributive public policies. Consequently, we find confirmation for Hypothesis 1 that posits that discrepancies exist in public opinion between the urban and rural areas.

A second issue concerns the absence of a shift among the urban respondents between 2002 and 2008, i.e. the two survey waves. As mentioned above, the urban population was subjected to major social policies long before 2002. Efforts were made to sustain economic growth and establish social protection in the urban areas, which resulted in, for example, the China Social Insurance Law that came into effect in 2011. This policy strengthened the role and responsibility of the government in respect of directly providing welfare to *all* citizens,

including urban citizens. By providing more social protection for the rural population, the government aimed at overcoming the urban–rural division over the long term (as stipulated in the law).

A third issue, then, regards how we are able to identify precisely the single causal effect of social policy change, downplaying the occurrence of other political developments, economic transitions or further cultural progress. Only two year-points restrict the analysis to one degree of freedom, which makes it impossible to bring multiple explanations into consideration. Nevertheless, we can expect several phenomena to interact: the BNSC initiative does not only include social policy features but also policies aimed at economic progress, and is at the same time an expression of the newly appointed (in 2002–2003) Hu–Wen administration. In sum, it is impossible to isolate the sole effect of the implementation of the new policy programme; nevertheless, as the content of the BNSC is targeted exclusively at the countryside, we can expect that the shift in perceptions is in response to the newly implemented policies.

A fourth and linked issue relates to the fact that 2008 was characterized as a year in which China was subjected to various events that might have distorted public opinion. On the one hand, the Beijing Olympic Games might have strengthened national identity and this may have affected in equal measure perceptions of the role of government for both urban and rural residents. Yet, with urban respondents less perceptive of governmental influence in 2008 than in 2002, it is questionable whether the Olympics distorted public opinion regarding government intervention generally. On the other hand, in 2008 China was hit by a series of natural disasters, including the Sichuan earthquake, which caused more than 50,000 casualties, and the south China floods, which led to the evacuation of more than a million people, mostly in rural areas. The Chinese government has made great efforts to compensate victims for the losses and damage, which might have made affected people more aware of government intervention. However, this visible presence and influence of the Chinese government cannot be decoupled from the increased focus on social justice that came after the transition to the Hu–Wen administration.

Combined, our results parallel qualitative findings from previous research on the role and impact of the BNSC initiative. Qualitative case studies researching the impact of the project in two Chinese counties concluded that BNSC is not just a slogan but materializes in benefits and services directed at the rural population, leading to changed perceptions.<sup>59</sup> Similar research on pensions in a rural district of Shanghai has also shown that the introduction of pension regimes has raised awareness of the government's role in the lives of rural citizens.<sup>60</sup> Triangulating our findings with results from qualitative studies provides robust evidence that the shifts in policy focus, caused by the Hu–Wen administration,

59 Ahlers and Schubert 2009.

60 Shi 2008.

have narrowed opinion gaps between urban and rural residents concerning the role of government.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to leverage existing scholarship on the interaction between public policy and public opinion by studying China as a case that goes beyond the context of liberal democracies. Existing studies limited to Western societies posit that representative democracies function well because of a clear link between public opinion and public policy – incumbents react to common public preferences; simultaneously, the general public receive cues and experiences from the new policy context that allow them to adjust their preferences.

Claiming that representative democracies work well because of this policy–opinion interaction implies that autocratic regimes are largely deaf to public articulations of demands when formulating policies. This study challenges this implication by showing that the urban–rural gap in individual perceptions of the extent government policies affect daily lives narrowed significantly between 2002 and 2008. According to our interpretation, this shift is mainly driven by the implementation of a set of policies targeting the rural areas, exemplified by the BNSC initiative of 2006, which consists of a number of measures to improve the social and economic conditions of the rural population. Whether the BNSC initiative has improved rural life and decreased inequality goes beyond our findings; rather it undergirds its role on rural inhabitants' subjective perceptions of the role of government.

Policy implementation in China is a process of trial-and-error, with public opinion polls becoming a more common instrument to create and evaluate public policies. The increased popularity of polling makes it highly unlikely that the Hu–Wen administration was not aware of existing social discrepancies (going beyond economic indicators) between urban and rural areas. As perception gaps between the rural countryside and the urban centres have narrowed, an important implication of our study is that by its policy reorientation, the Hu–Wen administration gained public legitimacy in the countryside. While such perceptions about government influence in daily life do not necessarily translate to broader regime trust, perceiving that government influences daily life is important in itself, as previous dynasties have fallen over disconnection from the rural areas. Therefore, if ultimately the BNSC programme fails to meet people's expectations, worries about discontent shown towards the Chinese government for falsely raising people's hopes might increase.

The main implication of our paper is, nevertheless, that the normative implication of the relationship between public opinion and public policy across liberal democracies, present in, for instance, Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien's study, needs to be amended. Even though the PRC is far from a representative democracy, triangulating our analysis with existing studies on the policy

reorientation of the Hu–Wen administration suggests that an autocratic regime also listens to the “pulse” of its population, with motives akin to those of representative democracies. Whereas elected officials in democracies would like to please the “median voter,” autocratic regimes do so to prevent mass resentment and in order to foster some sense of legitimacy. Future work, therefore, needs to triangulate this finding with other policy shifts. While it is certainly too early to analyse the similarities and differences between the Hu–Wen and Xi–Li administrations, one can certainly draw analogies with the current anti-corruption campaign initiated by President Xi Jinping 习近平, which aims to appeal to the Chinese public’s aversion to corruption and thus boost the popularity of the leadership.

**摘要:** 从二十一世纪初开始的建设社会主义新农村运动, 重启了对中国政府新世纪如何处理城乡差距的关注。之前, 对于社会主义新农村建设的研究多聚焦其社会和政治效应, 却从未研究其与公共舆论的关系。在这篇文章里, 我们分析了 2002 年次和 2008 年次关于中国大陆地区的亚洲民主动态调查。我们的研究发现自从建设社会主义新农村运动开始以来, 对于政府政策如何影响日常生活感知的城乡差距有所缩小。我们的结论对于如何研究中国的公共政策和公共舆论提出了一点启发。

**关键词:** 建设社会主义新农村; 中国农村; 公共舆论; 公共政策; 中国共产党政权合法性

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## Appendix

Table A1: **Descriptive Statistics for the Continuous Variables**

	Pooled Data		2002 Wave		2008 Wave	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Policies influence daily life (1–4)	2.42	0.93	2.20	1.05	2.54	0.83
Generations at home (1–4)	2.31	0.74	2.18	0.69	2.39	0.76
Economy of country (1–5)	4.00	0.78	3.94	0.87	4.04	0.71
Economy of family (1–5)	3.19	0.96	3.01	0.96	3.31	0.94
Trust in local institutions (1–4)	3.03	0.73	3.25	0.76	2.90	0.68
Trust in national institutions (1–4)	3.72	0.51	3.90	0.32	3.60	0.57
Political interest (1–4)	2.28	0.86	2.33	0.90	2.25	0.83

Table A2: **Descriptive Statistics for the Categorical Variables**

	Pooled Data		2002 Wave		2008 Wave	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Geographical location:						
– urban	2,900	35.0	1,180	37.1	1,720	33.7
– rural	5,378	65.0	1,999	62.9	3,379	66.3
Gender:						
– male	4,195	50.8	1,616	50.8	2,579	50.8
– female	4,065	49.2	1,568	49.2	2,497	49.2
Age:						
– 24 or younger	853	10.4	470	14.8	382	7.5
– 25–29	706	8.6	418	13.1	288	5.6
– 30–39	1,893	23.0	846	26.6	1,047	20.5
– 40–49	2,011	24.4	821	25.8	2,138	23.3
– 50 or older	2,766	33.6	628	19.7	5,044	41.9
Education level:						
– no education	2,122	26.5	940	29.6	1,182	24.5
– primary	1,580	19.7	585	18.4	995	20.6
– secondary	3,837	47.9	1,415	44.5	2,422	50.2
– tertiary	466	5.6	239	7.5	227	4.7

Table A3: Multiple Regression Analyses Explaining Perceptions of the Influence of Government Policies on Daily Life in 2002 and 2008

	2002 Wave				2008 Wave			
	Model 1: Structural		Model 2: + Ideational		Model 1: Structural		Model 2: + Ideational	
	Param	T	Param	T	Param	T	Param	T
Intercept	2.03***	19.10	2.17***	8.13	2.30***	30.86	1.22***	9.65
Urban–Rural	-0.32***	-6.97	-0.32***	-7.01	0.05	1.92	0.05	1.96
Age:								
– 25–29	-0.14*	-1.98	-0.12	-1.69	0.02	0.23	0.00	0.06
– 30–39	-0.04	-0.67	-0.03	-0.54	0.01	0.12	-0.03	-0.60
– 40–49	0.04	0.56	0.02	0.29	0.05	0.99	0.01	0.13
> 50	0.21	0.28	0.02	0.23	0.12*	2.24	0.05	1.07
Women	-0.11**	-2.75	-0.04	-0.99	-0.03	-1.10	0.02	0.70
Generations	0.08**	2.81	0.08**	2.95	0.04*	2.13	0.03	1.66
Education:								
– primary	0.15*	2.48	0.09	1.52	0.06	1.44	0.03	0.63
– secondary	0.47***	8.44	0.40***	7.02	0.19***	5.34	0.14***	3.75
– tertiary	0.54***	5.96	0.41***	4.52	0.41***	6.16		4.86
(Ref: none)							0.33***	
Economy, country			0.01	0.39			0.11***	5.74
Economy, family			-0.02	-1.01			0.01	0.88
Trust, local			-0.13***	-4.50			-0.04	-1.83
Trust, national			-0.05	-0.77			0.11***	3.94
Plt interest			0.22***	9.41			0.18***	11.01
R2	0.10		0.13		0.02		0.07	
Adj R2	0.09		0.13		0.01		0.06	
N		2,680				4,078		

*Notes:*

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001. Entries represent the result of four separate multiple regression models explaining perceptions of whether government policies have influenced daily life. The left Models 1 and 2 represent the analysis of the 2002 wave, whereas the right Models 1 and 2 represent the analysis of the 2008 wave.