

Reassessing the Performance Evaluation System in the Xi Jinping Era: Changes and Implications

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Abstract Existing literature on China’s Performance Evaluation System and how it shapes cadre behavior tends to assume a hierarchy of work targets either through the framework of soft targets, hard targets, and priority targets with veto power or through target measurability. However, this traditional conceptualization of target hierarchy can no longer capture the nature of content of today’s Performance Evaluation System nor can it explain cadre behavior under the new economic and political order imposed by Xi Jinping. Based on field research conducted in various administrative level localities of four provinces during 2014, 2016, and 2017, I argue that today’s Performance Evaluation System has evolved into an increasingly balanced system driven by three prevailing features: the diminishing hard/soft targets dichotomy, the much more constrained power of priority targets with veto power, and the comprehensive quantification of evaluation targets. This study contributes to an updated understanding of the incentive mechanism of the Performance Evaluation System and how that can help explain cadre behavior today. The findings of the research have important political and economic implications on the Xi administration and the Communist Party.

Keywords Cadre · Performance · Evaluation · Target · Incentive · Personnel

Introduction

In November 2011, when I was conducting fieldwork for my dissertation in central Hubei province at a municipal tourism administration bureau, my interviewee—a senior official at the bureau—had to change our meeting time in order to attend a banquet hosting people from a village that the bureau was sponsoring in alleviating its

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poverty. Amazed at the fact, I asked my interviewee: “Is this how poverty alleviation work is done?” “It is what it is,” he replied with a smile.¹ In November 2012, Xi Jinping became China’s paramount leader and pledged to wipe out poverty in the country by 2020. I returned to the same place in June 2016 for another round of fieldwork only to find out that my contact, the same official, as the bureau’s responsible person for poverty reduction work was stationed at a village. When I called him asking if I could meet him for an interview, he said: “I’m four hours’ drive from the city. For you, a female comrade (nv tongzhi 女同志), it’s too hard to get here. If you have any questions, you can send them to my QQ (a Chinese instant messaging software service).”²

Why is there such a big change in how officials treat poverty alleviation work: from paying lip service at banquets to working at the front line? Traditional literature on cadre and organization evaluation tends to view poverty alleviation work as either “soft” target or target that is difficult to quantify and hence unlikely to be well enforced by local leaders. The inability of the existing literature to explain this behavioral change in local cadres led me to examine the current Performance Evaluation System (*jixiao kaohe* 绩效考核系统, hereinafter PES) and its important changes in the Xi Jinping era. In this article, I argue that based on the three prevailing patterns, today’s PES has evolved into an increasingly balanced system and that the traditional conceptualization of target hierarchy is no longer able to capture the incentivizing mechanism of the PES. I also discuss how this more balanced PES shapes cadre behavior and its political and economic implications on the Xi administration and the Chinese Communist Party.

The first section of this article begins with a quick overview of what the PES is and how it functions as an incentive mechanism. It then clarifies the definitions, the level of analysis, and method in the existing literature and this research. The second section discusses the two ways in which existing literature conceptualizes a target hierarchy and how it is used to explain cadre behavior. The third section examines three dominant features of the current PES that have transformed it into an increasingly balanced system and thus rendered the traditional conceptualization of target hierarchy obsolete. The conclusion analyzes how this more balanced PES helps shape cadre behavior within the new political and economic context under Xi Jinping as well as its political significance for the rule of the Chinese Communist Party.

Studying the PES: Concept, Level of Analysis, and Method

The appraisal of government and cadre performance in China has been widely researched [9, 14, 15, 17, 23, 24, 30, 33, 38, 41, 50, 51]. Although scholars have named the system differently,³ its essence is fundamentally similar—an incentive mechanism to motivate cadres and organizations to accomplish policy goals set by the party state through linking evaluation results to decisions about cadres’ political career ([30], pp. 939, [36]) or financial bonuses ([51], pp. 109–112).

¹ Interview with a municipal official, Yichang 宜昌, Hubei, 30 November 2011.

² Interview with a municipal official, Yichang, Hubei, 28 June 2016.

³ See, e.g., O’Brien and Li ([41], p. 172) call the system “cadre responsibility system” whereas Chan and Gao ([9], p. 4) and Gao ([17], p. 618) refer to it as “the target-based responsibility system (*mubiao zerenzhi* 目标责任制).”

Concept

Earlier literature concerning performance evaluation tends to focus on the appraisals of individual cadres: some works examine the various evaluations of cadres carried out by the Organization Department [36]; some analyze the evaluations of ordinary civil servants as one component of the party state's personnel management system [6, 13]; and many concentrate on the evaluations of two leading local cadres—party boss and government head—based on the responsibility contracts they sign with upper-level authorities [14, 50, 51]. Later scholarship starts to incorporate the evaluations of local government organizations and party units [9, 16, 17].

Currently, the PES has evolved into a comprehensive institution that generally includes evaluations of both individual cadres and organizations, and local governments have been trying to coherently integrate the results of both types of evaluations. To be more specific, today's PES regime of local governments usually consists of a varying combination of the following three types of evaluations: evaluation of subordinate governments, evaluation of government functional departments and party units, and evaluation of their leading cadres (i.e., the party secretary and government head of each subordinate government and the director of each government functional department and party unit [*yibashou* 一把手]).

In this article, I try to specify which particular type of evaluation in the analysis whenever possible. Otherwise, I use “PES” to refer to the overall system. This is conceptually adequate because the three evaluations are closely linked to each other. First of all, while evaluations of subordinate jurisdictions tend to be more comprehensive than those of functional departments and party units, they often share many targets that are considered especially important for the year by the local government or upper-level authorities. Currently, for example, “party-building (党的建设)” work is one of those commonly shared targets across local PES. Also, one of the prominent shared targets for a Hubei county's 2016 evaluations is “precise poverty alleviation (精准扶贫) [21];” but for another county of Zhejiang province, one of the shared important targets among its 2017 evaluations is “tourism and service industry development (旅游服务业发展) ([52], [53]).” Moreover, the performance evaluations of leading cadres tend to integrate the results from the performance evaluations of the organizations that they are in charge of. For instance, the same Hubei county's 2016 evaluation of its leading cadres stipulates that 40% of the final score for each cadre directly translates from the performance results of his or her organization (i.e., township or county government or party unit) evaluation [21]. Apparently, this evaluation method is designed to help ensure target fulfillment by holding leading cadres accountable for the performances of their respective organizations. The director of the PES office for the county comments on the nature of performance evaluations, “ultimately the PES is about evaluating individuals.”⁴

Despite the loose boundaries among its three types of evaluations, the PES is characterized by one enduring distinction. Although all public officials are subject to evaluations in the local PES regime, the major emphasis is on the leading cadres, not the ordinary civil servants. As Edin points out, “All state cadres at the local level are evaluated but it is only the leading cadres... that are held accountable to higher levels”

⁴ Interview with a county official, Gong'an 公安, Hubei, 1 June 2017.

([15], pp. 7–8). To illustrate, a Hubei county's 2016 PES dossier contains four sets of evaluations: evaluation of township governments, evaluation of county government functional departments and party units, evaluation of township party secretaries and government heads and the directors of county government functional departments and party units, and evaluation for other members of party committees of townships and county units. While the first three sets of evaluations are called "PES Implementation Methods (实施办法)," the last set of evaluation is entitled "PES Guidance Instructions (指导意见) [21]." This difference in document title indicates that the county government directly controls the performance evaluation of the three types of leading cadres—township party secretaries, government heads, and the directors of the county government functional departments and party units—but leaves that of other cadres to the authority of township leaders or county work units.

My interviews with various types of officials also suggest this different focus of the PES. Ordinary bureaucrats tend to see the PES as merely a formality that has little consequence on their economic welfare or political career, and all they have to do to fulfill the requirement is rarely more than filling out a daily log on their routine job responsibilities.⁵ In contrast, leading cadres feel immense pressure under the PES and take it extremely seriously. As one township government head commented, "This [PES] is a way to give cadres a hard time (整干部); it's almost killing cadres (整死)."⁶ Overall, this feature of selective control of cadres in the PES is a natural extension of the party state's dual cadre management system; the top party and government officials in any given jurisdiction along with some key cadres of certain rank are managed by the Organization Department of the high-level government, but the other officials are locally managed either by the Organization Department or the Personnel Bureau.

Level of Analysis

Almost all existing works of PES focus on the county level and below.⁷ In other words, these works either examine how county governments evaluate their functional departments and subordinate townships or how township governments evaluate their functional departments and subordinate villages and neighborhood communities. My investigation finds that county governments, at least in Hubei province, are also subject to comprehensive evaluations by municipal governments [26]. Due to lack of empirical evidence, however, it is not clear whether a systematic PES is applied to municipal governments⁸ or provincial governments⁹ by their immediate upper-level governments,

⁵ Interviews: county official, Hubei, 9 June 2016; county official, Hubei, 16 June 2016; municipal official, Hubei, 29 June 2016.

⁶ Interview: Yangjiachang 杨家厂, Hubei, 16 June 2016.

⁷ See, e.g., Chan and Gao ([9], p. 4) claim that "performance measurement... was introduced in governments at and below the county level in the 1990s."

⁸ Interview with a municipal PES official, Fuyang 阜阳, Anhui on June 19, 2014, revealed that Anhui provincial government conducted a systematic PES on municipalities, but I was not able to obtain formal documents to substantiate this claim. In contrast, county PES officials at Gong'an, Hubei, stated that in Hubei province, there was no PES applied to municipal Party secretaries and government heads (interview, 23 July 2014).

⁹ See, e.g., Zhu and Jin ([60], p. 138) assert that there lacks a performance evaluation system for provincial governments; Su et al. ([45], p. 3) and Choi ([12], p. 969) also acknowledge that they have not found evidence that can attest to provincial leaders' performance being evaluated.

respectively, although news reports suggest that individual single-issue evaluations of municipal¹⁰ and provincial governments¹¹ do exist. Overall, the PES has become an increasingly institutionalized system widely adopted across localities.

Method

Initially, Western understanding of the PES relies exclusively on textual analysis of key central government documents [6, 36]. Later, scholars start to incorporate firsthand interviews of Chinese cadres as an important research source along with original official documents [13, 14, 16, 17]. This change in research source corresponds with the broader change in China's economic and political climate. That is, after the economic reforms, the country has granted more foreign access to its data and personnel, the result of which has contributed to a flourishing China Studies field.

Despite the great progress in increased knowledge in many areas of the previously closed country, however, studying the party state's personnel management system and the PES, in particular, continues to face tremendous challenges. Most importantly, the party views its control of cadres as critical to its rule and thus treats personnel information as highly sensitive and manages it in a secretive fashion ([4], pp. 69; [8], pp. 719; [37], pp. 70–103). This reality makes it very difficult to obtain original PES documents, let alone a systematic collection of them across localities or administrative levels ([9], pp. 5; [38], pp. 67). This explains why existing studies of PES have relied primarily on documentary analysis of PES within a single [17] or a very small number [14] of jurisdictions.

In line with the existing literature, this research also employs a qualitative method that relies on a combination of interviews and official PES documents from a small number of cases. To be specific, this article mainly draws on data gathered from field research conducted in prefecture-level cities, counties, and townships of four provinces—Anhui, Hubei, Zhejiang, and Hebei—during the summer months of 2014, 2016, and 2017. And due to constraints of time, money, and ability to secure interviewees, I focus primarily on one county within each province.

The selection of these provinces seeks to increase the variation of localities in terms of both geographic location and economic development: Anhui and Hubei are centrally located neighboring provinces that are middle performers in economic growth; Zhejiang is an eastern coastal province that has traditionally been one of China's richest places; located in northern China, Hebei, used to boast strong growth numbers, thanks to its heavy industries such as coal mining and steelmaking, but its economy is currently suffering from the central government policy to reduce overcapacity. The PES system is well known for its local variations ([5]; [15], pp. 11; [38], pp. 67), which result from the substantial leeway that local governments possess in areas such as content design, implementation rules, and communication of evaluation results. So the idea is that by comparing and contrasting PES from this very diverse pool of localities, if I can identify consistent features shared among all four provinces, they would tell me

¹⁰ For example, Hubei provincial government issued methods in 2015 on the evaluation of municipal leading cadres' work on the rule of law [32].

¹¹ For example, the central government started in 2014 to evaluate provinces' carbon dioxide emission reduction [56].

a great deal about the overall PES system. Also, carrying out the field research over 3 years allows me to capture the incremental changes to the PES after Xi took office.

Furthermore, the field research data mainly consist of interviews and internal documents concerning local PES solicited from my interviewees. The interviews are in the format of semi-structured meetings guided by similar sets of questions with individual or multiple interviewees. Over the 3 years, I was able to secure 45 interviews with three groups of people. The dominant group is government and party officials. They are either in charge of implementing the PES or are subject to the PES evaluation. For officials at the prefecture and county level, they come from a wide range of units such as the Organization Department (组织部), the General Office of government (政府办公室), or party committee (党委办公室) as well as People's Congress (人大) and the Political Consultative Conference (政协). For officials at the township level, they are either the local leading cadres (i.e., party boss and government head) or members of the township party committee. The second group of interviewees is managers of state-owned enterprises, such as The People's Bank (人民银行), China Unicom (中国联通), and tourism development companies, which are subject to the evaluations of local PES. The third group is scholars of local universities and party schools (党校). They are people of great resources who not only provide me with useful insights on the PES but help me connect with potential interviewees.

Admittedly, studies based on a small number of cases tend to be limited in the generalizability of their findings. And ideally, a statistical study of a large number of PES documents across many localities and administrative levels would be more methodologically compelling. But again, the secretive and sensitive nature of personnel data has hindered any large-scale and systematic collection of PES documents. And my field research experiences suggest that the precarious politics under the conservative Xi administration has further constrained scholars' access to official interviews and government documents. This is because cadres are extremely cautious about making any mistakes that might risk their political careers, and they are very reluctant to agree to an interview or provide any government documents, even those officially labeled as "public information."

Working within the constraints of China's political reality, I have tried to maximize the generalizability of my findings by selecting a very diverse set of cases that are largely representative of the country's ordinary provinces. I have also utilized numerous Chinese sources that examine PES in other localities, including news reports and academic articles. This triangulation provides evidence that the findings of this study are generalizable. But nevertheless, to capture the complexities of China's PES institution is beyond the capacity of any single study, and advancing our knowledge demands more studies on this challenging subject.

Existing Literature: a Hierarchy of Targets

Scholars have applied the PES to explain cadre behavior in a variety of issues, such as economic development [5, 50], central-local relations [14, 51], policy implementation [1, 41], and the judicial system [30, 38]. These existing works mostly presume a hierarchy of work targets and tend to conceptualize it in two ways.

The majority of scholars tend to differentiate work targets by three categories—“soft targets (*ruan zhibiao* 软指标),” “hard targets (*ying zhibiao* 硬指标),” and “priority targets with veto power (*yipi foujue* 一票否决, hereinafter *yipiao foujue* targets)”—and assign varying importance to each category. There lacks, however, a clear consensus among scholars as to what exactly defines or constitutes each type of targets. Some see hard targets as economic in nature¹² while others believe that they could be political as well as economic.¹³ Also, some scholars differentiate the targets by the type of cadres who are held responsible for fulfilling the particular targets. That is, hard and priority targets with veto power are the responsibility of leading cadres, whereas soft targets are fulfilled by non-leading cadres ([15], pp. 10). In addition, some scholars suggest that the distinction of the targets lies in the consequences of target attainment; all targets are important for cadres to obtain economic bonuses, but only hard and priority targets with veto power are tied to cadres’ career prospects ([7], pp. 21–22; [15], pp. 11–12). But nevertheless, typical examples of hard targets include economic growth ([14]; [23], pp. 1056; [43], pp. 167), tax revenue collection [3, 15, 22, 35, 43, 48], maintaining stability ([23], pp. 1056; [43], pp. 167), and so on. As for *yipiao foujue* targets, they are often viewed as political in nature ([14], pp. 39) and include work such as family planning and social order. The existing literature suggests that failure to fulfill *yipiao foujue* targets would automatically discredit one’s overall performance regardless of how well one has worked on other targets. This highly punitive nature of *yipiao foujue* targets, so the logic goes, compels officials to fulfill such targets at all costs, and local governments prefer to designate essential work as *yipiao foujue* targets to ensure completion of such work [14, 38, 41]. In terms of soft targets, they seem to be treated as whatever work that is left unclaimed by the other two types of targets and examples range from cultural and social development ([15], p. 10) to recruiting party members and propaganda work ([43], p. 167).

Despite the lack of consensus, the shared assumption in this popular way of conceptualizing target hierarchy is that hard targets and *yipiao foujue* targets are more important and more strictly monitored than soft targets, and thus, officials are more likely to fulfill the former two types of targets than the latter one ([15], pp. 10–12; [23], p. 1056). This assumption explains why local officials became avid promoters of economic development because gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate was often used as one of the hard targets for evaluating officials’ performance [50, 51]. Similarly, as failure to fulfill *yipiao foujue* targets will cancel out all other work performance, local cadres religiously pursued work related to family planning and social stability, and two types of work that are designated as *yipiao foujue* targets nationwide [41]. Even popular media reports rely on this assumption about PES and its hierarchy of targets. For instance, reporting on the drama of Chen Guangcheng 陈光诚, the blind anti-population-control activist who fled to the American embassy in April 2012, *The Economist* attributes the human-rights abuses to the party’s cadre evaluation system that rewards local officials who meet higher priorities, the most important of which

¹² E.g., Edin states that “hard targets tend to be economic in nature... ([14], p. 39).”

¹³ See, e.g., Kennedy’s examples of hard targets for township cadres contain both taxes and birth control ([29], p. 711), and Heberer and Trappel’s list of hard target examples include “economic development, stability, increase of local level income, and birth control ([23], p. 1056).”

are maintaining social stability, achieving economic growth, and enforcing population control, even if they break laws [46].

The other common way of conceptualizing the hierarchy of targets in the existing literature is by target measurability. That is, targets are perceived as more important and more likely to be carried out by cadres if they are easy to measure and quantify than targets that are difficult to do so. O'Brien and Li, for example, claim that local officials' selective implementation of unpopular central directives but not popular ones is partly because in PES unpopular policies such as population control and revenue collection are quantified and therefore are easier to be monitored by upper-level governments, whereas popular policies like fee limits and forbidding corruption are difficult to quantify and enforce.¹⁴ Moreover, Chan and Gao ([9], pp. 6–7) assert that functional targets are not as important as common or core targets mostly because functional targets are “relatively vague, abstract, and non-quantifiable.” Additionally, Gao differentiates non-mission-based targets from mission-based ones in that non-mission-based targets tend to be “one-size-fits-all” ([16], pp. 70S–71S) and “difficult to measure by quantitative indicators” so that the evaluation of these targets focuses on meeting “baseline requirements” ([16], pp. 64S). In a nutshell, as Zhou states, cadres' implementation bias is unavoidable as long as there are quantifiable and non-quantifiable targets ([59], pp. 49).

Current PES: an Increasingly Balanced System

My research finds that today's PES has evolved into an increasingly balanced system of three prominent features: the diminishing hard/soft targets dichotomy, the much more constrained power of *yipiao foujue* targets, and the comprehensive quantification of evaluation targets. Together, these three features render the traditional conceptualization of target hierarchy problematic.

Diminishing Hard/Soft Targets Dichotomy

Resulting from years of incremental shift in target emphasis ([7], pp. 32), current PES witnesses an increasingly balanced distribution of evaluation weights among all sorts of targets. Economic work, though still important, no longer is the only priority. A comparison of the major targets of a Hubei county's PES of its townships for 2014, 2015, and 2016 clearly demonstrates this trend.

As Table 1 illustrates, despite still being the predominant target, “economic development (*jingji fazhan* 经济发展)” has experienced a consistent drop in evaluation weight—from 60% in 2014 to 49% in 2015 and 42% in 2016. Another conspicuous pattern is the increasing weight assigned to the target of “party-building work (*dangde jianshe* 党的建设),” jumping from 2014's 15 to 26% in 2015 and 27% in 2016. This target consists of more specific sub-targets, especially “building party discipline and clean governance” (*dangfeng lianzheng jianshe* 党风廉政建设, hereinafter BPDCG). As a township deputy party secretary states, anti-corruption and party-building work used to be dispensable (*keyou kewu* 可有可无) but is now the number one priority (*di yi wei* 第

¹⁴ O'Brien and Li enumerate what constitutes popular and unpopular policies in one paragraph ([41], p. 170).

一位).¹⁵ Furthermore, for the target of “society governance (*shehui zhili* 社会治理),” its weight has remained largely stable, 25, 24, and 22% for 3 years, respectively. This target incorporates a wide range of work, such as “environmental protection (*huanjing baohu* 环境保护),” “arable land protection (*gengdi baohu* 耕地保护),” “public security comprehensive governance (*shehui zhian zonghe zhili* 社会治安综合治理),” “population control (*jihua shengyu* 计划生育),” and “production safety (*anquan shengchan* 安全生产)” ([18], [19], [21]).”

It is worth noting that Gong’an 公安 is an economically less developed county compared to counties in the eastern or coastal provinces,¹⁶ so economic development is supposedly a higher priority for Gong’an than other richer counties. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the decrease in evaluation weight assigned to economic development is probably similar, if not greater, in the PES of other localities. Additionally, given the severe environmental degradation, especially the smog problem, confronting China today and the public anger it has triggered, more weight is expected to shift away from economic development to environmental protection [57].

Indeed, the 2015 PES of Kaiping 开平district¹⁷ of Tangshan 唐山city, a leading steel manufacturing city in Hebei (Table 2) whose air pollution is among the worst in China, shows the target of “economic development and project construction” (*jingji fazhan yu xiangmu jianshe* 经济发展与项目建设) counts 33% for evaluating townships and 28% for neighborhood communities (*jiedao* 街道) [28], much lower than the 49% of Gong’an County for the same year. Again, this Hebei example demonstrates a more balanced PES where non-economic work, especially government reform and anti-corruption in this case, has gained more value vis-à-vis economic work. Additionally, for the major target of “urbanization and ecological environment” (*chengzhen jianshe yu shengtai huanjing* 城镇建设与生态环境), its evaluation weight is 15 and 20% for townships and neighborhood communities, respectively. Because I was only able to secure Kaiping’s PES for this single year,¹⁸ I am unable to say whether there has been a consistent increase to the value of this target on environmental protection over time. But my 2017 interview with a township deputy party secretary of Kaiping strongly suggests that it is the case. He declares: “For us, the amount of work for environment protection exceeds that of economic work...and many of our cadres often spend their nights spying on factories for any unlawful emissions....”¹⁹

In sum, the above examples from the two provinces suggest that current PES has gradually but consistently turned into a system where the difference in evaluation weight is shrinking among major work targets. Accordingly, the traditional labels of “hard targets” and “soft targets” that distinguish targets based on varying importance are becoming increasingly irrelevant

¹⁵ Interview with a township official, Kaiping 开平district, Hebei, 19 June 2017.

¹⁶ A random comparison of 2016 government work reports between Gong’an and Ninghai 宁海, a county of Ningbo city, Zhejiang province suggests that Gong’an’s 2015 GDP was 21 billion yuan, whereas it was 43.4 billion yuan for Ninghai.

¹⁷ Kaiping district carries the same administrative rank as a county does.

¹⁸ The challenge of gaining systemic access to PES documents has already been well documented ([9], p. 4). And my research experience suggests that this challenge remains today.

¹⁹ Interview with a township official, Kaiping district, Hebei, 19 June 2017.

Table 1 Gong’an County PES of its townships, 2014, 2015, and 2016

Target	2014 (%)	2015 (%)	2016 (%)
Economic development (<i>jingji fazhan</i> 经济发展)	60	49	42
Society governance (<i>shehui zhili</i> 社会治理)	25	24	22
Party-building work (<i>dangde jianshe</i> 党的建设)	15	26	27
Unique and innovative work (<i>tese chuangxin gongzuo</i> 特色创新工作)*	N/A	1	2
Comprehensively deepen reform (<i>quanmian shenhua gaige</i> 全面深化改革)**	N/A	N/A	2
Comprehensively govern the county by rule of law (<i>quanmian yifa zhi xian</i> 全面依法治国)***	N/A	N/A	5

Source: compiled from Gong’an PES leading group 2014, 2015, and 2016 [18, 19, 21]

Notes: Care should be taken when comparing PES across time as local governments more often than not make minor changes to the format of PES every year, such as renaming and regrouping targets. Due to such changes to the county PES over the 3 years, the targets in this table have to be rearranged based on the contents they entail for the purpose of comparison

*This target was not created until 2015

**This target was not created until 2016

***This target was not created until 2016

Curtailed Yipiao Fojue Targets

My research finds another prevailing feature of current PES—*yipiao fojue* targets’ less than presumed make-or-break nature. First of all, the use of *yipiao fojue* targets is much restricted. Once considered a powerful incentivizing tactic, *yipiao fojue* targets were used so extensively in PES that cadres, particularly those at the grassroots level, faced insurmountable pressure, and were having trouble meeting all the demands [49]. Especially, in July 2013, Zhao Guanghua 赵光华, a deputy township head of Sichuan province, resigned from his post, citing “huge pressure and low income (压力大, 收入低)” in his personal online blog. Interviewed by a well-known newspaper, Zhao specifically talked about how work on “maintaining stability (*weiwen* 维稳),” an important component of the national *yipiao fojue* target—“public security

Table 2 PES of Kaiping District of Tangshan city, 2015

Target	Townships (%)	Neighborhood communities (%)
Economic development and project construction (<i>jingji fazhan yu xiangmu jianshe</i> 经济发展与项目建设)	33	28
Urbanization and ecological environment (<i>chengzhen jianshe yu shengtai huanjing</i> 城镇建设与生态环境)	15	20
Party-building work (<i>dangde jianshe</i> 党的建设)	12	12
Safety and rule of law (<i>pingan jianshe yu fazhi jianshe</i> 平安建设与法制建设)	10	10
Five evaluations (<i>wu pingjia</i> 五评价)*	30	30

Source: compiled from Party Committee of Kaiping District, Tangshan city, 2015 [28]

*This major target consists of five sub-targets that focus on government reform and anti-corruption work

comprehensive governance”—had taken up most of his time and left little time “to do what he is supposed to do (*gan zhengshi* 干正事).” Likewise, when asked about the greatest pressure of his work, Zhao revealed that it was his work related to “production safety,” another national *yipiao foujue* target, and that “even if he had worked very diligently for his job, he would still likely to be held accountable for an unpredictable accident [54].” Only a few days later after Zhao’s resignation, another deputy township head of Fujian province committed suicide and left a note also citing “pressure from work [44].” Such incidents stirred intense national discussions on the role of *yipiao foujue* targets in PES and increased awareness of their perverse effects on cadre behavior and policy implementation [58].

As a result, local governments have developed a critical view toward *yipiao foujue* targets and recognized that their use in PES must be strictly limited and used with caution. Many local governments have over the years cleaned up and reduced the number of *yipiao foujue* targets in PES, such as Xinjiang [55], Jiangxi [27], Anhui [2], Hebei [42], Shenzhen 深圳 [47], Hubei [25], and so on. An official in charge of PES work at Fuyang city, Anhui province, also asserted: “Currently, our province only allows five *yipiao foujue*—production safety, energy conservation and emission reduction (*jienerg jianpai* 节能减排), public security comprehensive governance, population control, and BPDCG. The abuse of *yipiao foujue* is prohibited. Not everything can be evaluated by *yipiao foujue*.”²⁰ This change explains why today’s PES of all levels of governments usually contain no more than five or six *yipiao foujue* targets.

More importantly, not just the number of *yipiao foujue* targets that has been restricted so has their power. To begin with, when used in PES, the punitive mechanism of *yipiao foujue* targets is less often activated than previously assumed. Take population control, a long-standing *yipiao foujue* target, as an example. In its 2013 PES of its townships, Lixin 利辛 County describes three situations where the punitive mechanism of the *yipiao foujue* target can be applied to responsible cadres: “First, coercive enforcement of long-term contraception against people’s will that turns into major and pernicious cases (*zhongda e’xing anjian* 重大恶性案件); second, coercive enforcement of abortion that turns into major and pernicious cases; and third, illegal collection of fees and violation of personal or property rights that cause malign impacts (*e’lie yingxiang* 恶劣影响) [34].” This description signals the county government’s deep reluctance to use *yipiao foujue* to punish its township leaders except under very specific circumstances. As Heberer and Trappel also contend, “only in extreme cases, usually those that have gained translocal or national media attention, do evaluation data or *yipiao foujue* turn into a sanctioning mechanism ([23], pp. 1057).”

In addition, my investigation finds that even when the punitive mechanism of *yipiao foujue* targets is applied against a cadre, this outcome does not automatically discredit his or her entire work performance. According to the existing studies, although the specific methods of utilizing *yipiao foujue* targets vary by localities, the shared assumption is that failing a *yipiao foujue* target will greatly reduce the chances for material rewards and career promotion. While this assumption stands true, my research detects a much more nuanced and less punitive reality when local governments implementing the disciplinary measure of *yipiao foujue* targets.

²⁰ Interview with a municipal official, Fuyang, Anhui, 19 June 2014.

Specifically, I find that PES awards are ranked in several tiers²¹, and being punished for unfulfilling a *yipiao foujue* target usually means moving down the award tiers instead of total disqualification. In other words, the punished cadre is not eligible for the first tier award—“outstanding” (*xianjin* 先进) or “excellent” (*youxiu* 优秀)—but if his or her overall PES points are high enough, he or she can still make the lower award ranks such as “good” (*lianghao* 良好).²² To help illustrate, one PES official informed that “In 2012, our county was supposed to be a provincial outstanding county based on the ranking of PES performance of all the province’s counties. But we received a *yipiao foujue* on the target of BPDCG, so we were not given the original award. Nevertheless, our party secretary and county head still received 40,000 yuan cash award per person.”²³ Another case in point, in a county document that publicizes the 2015 PES results, there are six award categories—“excellent units” (*youxiu* 优秀单位), “outstanding units” (*xianjin* 先进单位), “improved outstanding units” (*jinwei xianjin* 进位先进单位), “good units” (*lianghao* 良好单位), “average units,” (一般单位) and “excellent individuals” (优秀个人). The county Municipal Construction Investment Company (城投公司) is awarded for the category of “good units” (*lianghao* 良好单位) despite failing the *yipiao foujue* target of “public security comprehensive governance” ([20], pp. 3).

In addition to using a more lenient sanctioning method, upper-level governments exhibit much sympathy toward their subordinates and understanding of the flaws of the *yipiao foujue* mechanism. When asked whether *yipiao foujue* targets are considered more important than other targets by leading cadres, two officials from a county PES office admitted, “No. The work of *yipiao foujue* is not something that cadres can do well by themselves. Take ‘production safety’ for an example. Of course, leading cadres can put a lot of emphasis on this area of work. But safety accidents could be matters of chance that are out of [their] control. ‘Family planning’ is another example. If someone from your work unit insists on having a second baby, you can do nothing about it except that the person is fired from work and the work unit fails the *yipiao foujue* target.”²⁴ These words denote that local governments are clearly aware of the arbitrary nature of using *yipiao foujue* targets to gauge the overall performance of cadres. And every year, local governments experiment with ways to better integrate the results of such targets into the overall PES outcome.²⁵

In sum, these findings imply that the role of *yipiao foujue* targets in defining cadres’ overall PES performance is much more limited than traditionally assumed in the existing literature in terms of the number of *yipiao foujue* targets used, how often the punitive mechanism of such targets are actually applied, and how the evaluation results of such targets are translated into cadres’ final PES points. This does not mean that *yipiao foujue* targets are no longer important. They still are, as two township officials stated, “[*yipiao foujue* targets] are bottom line; are red line; and must be done.”²⁶ But their importance does not necessarily overpower other targets or prevent leading cadres from carrying out other types of work. In other words, *yipiao foujue* targets do not

²¹ E.g., in the 2016 PES of its 16 townships, Gong’an County categorizes awards in three tiers: two “first prize” 一等奖, three “second prize” 二等奖, and two “progressive prize” 进位奖 [21].

²² Interview with two county officials, Gong’an, Hubei, 23 July 2014.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Interview with a county official, Gong’an, Hubei, 12 June 2016.

²⁶ Interview with two township officials, Xiangshan 象山 county, Zhejiang, 12 June 2017.

possess as a decisive explanatory power as prescribed to them in existing studies to account for cadre behavior, and the restrained role of *yipiao foujue* targets has helped contribute to a more balanced PES.

Comprehensive Quantification

The third prominent feature of the current PES system is that its evaluation method has transitioned from selective quantification of certain targets to comprehensive quantification of almost all targets, even for those that are traditionally considered not amenable for quantification.²⁷ This feature has led to a more balanced PES in terms of target measurability.

Local governments have gone to great lengths to approach the goal of comprehensive quantification by delineating the very specific tasks involved for every work target, crafting concrete evaluation instructions for each particular task, and spelling out the points to be added or deducted for successful performance or failing to fulfill each task. Although evaluation rules for tasks listed in the comprehensive PES dossier might seem general and vague for the sake of brevity, there are extremely detailed and lengthy instructions on these evaluation rules formulated by the government or party unit in charge of evaluating the particular task.

Take Gong'an County's 2016 PES of its townships as an example. To evaluate two major targets that might seem difficult to quantify—"comprehensively deepen reform" and "comprehensively govern the county by rule of law"—the 64-page dossier not only specifies the concrete tasks composed of each target and the numeric values assigned to every single task, but also identifies what specific evaluation instructions to follow. In this case, these instructions are made by the Office of Comprehensively Deepen Reform Leadership Team (*shen gai ban* 深改办) and the Office of Rule of Law (*fazhi ban* 法制办), two cross-agency units in charge of the evaluation of the two targets, respectively [21]. I was unable to obtain these instructions for Gong'an County but did manage to acquire the nine-page evaluation instructions for "comprehensively deepen reform" of Hebei's Kaiping district, which reveal very concrete measures to quantify this target [31].

It is important to note that this transition towards comprehensive quantification does not happen overnight, but results from local governments' continuous effort to quantify targets over the past three decades. The target of BPDCG, for example, clearly illustrates this gradual but steady change over the years. In a township's 2009 PES of villages, the target of BPDCG consists of four categories of work that are very loosely defined. One category of work, for example, dictates that village cadres must "support the actions of discipline and inspection units and of other law enforcement authorities and timely report any problems within villages that are against the law or disciplines and cooperate with investigation." Another category of work stipulates that "Party cadres must not participate in activities such as 'using drugs, gambling, prostitution' and so on [39]." As a township head commented: "before the 18th Party Congress, the evaluation of party-building work was not only scant but vague and loose (*wuxu* 务虚)." ²⁸ Evidently, in line with O'Brien and Li's claim, work described in such

²⁷ Kinkel and Hurst discuss a similar issue of the "hyper-quantified conditions" in the judicial cadre evaluation system [30].

²⁸ Interview with a township official, Gong'an county, Hubei, 18 June 2016.

ambiguous terms is inherently difficult to measure or monitor and therefore is bound to be ignored by local officials.

However, the 2013 PES of the same township operationalizes the BPDCG target in a much more concrete and quantified fashion. For instance, cadres receive two points for timely update the village affairs bulletin board and one point for recording minutes for working meetings of democratic supervision committee and discipline inspection team [40]. These are mundane but highly specific tasks that are amenable for enforcement and thus are easy to hold cadres accountable if they fail to perform. Similarly, when evaluating BPDCG, a county's PES of townships for 2015 and 2016 are so detailed that every possible graft offense is clearly outlined and assigned a point deduction, as small as 0.15 point [21]. For instance, "if found... consuming alcohol during lunch time on workdays or using public funds for leisure travel...leading cadres lose 0.5 point every time; cadres of party committee (*banzi chengyuan* 班子成员) lose 0.3 point every time; and average cadres lose 0.2 point every time... [19]."

Measuring targets is an evolving process, and China's local governments keep experimenting with new methods to better quantify work that is not easily quantifiable.²⁹ The above examples epitomize the profound change to the evaluation method of the PES system; it has transformed from selective to comprehensive quantification. As one township head asserts, "non-quantified targets are very rare nowadays."³⁰ This feature helps make the PES a more balanced system because economic development or population control targets no longer trump anti-corruption, environmental protection, or other "popular" ones just because the former type of work is more measurable and enforceable. And this feature of comprehensive quantification suggests that the traditional way of constructing target hierarchy based on measurability is slowly but surely losing its currency.

Implications and Conclusion

The current PES system displays three prominent attributes: decreasing weight of economic targets accompanied by increasing weight of non-economic targets, especially those related to party-building and anti-corruption work; curtailed power of *yipiao foujue* targets; and comprehensive quantification of evaluation targets. These attributes have contributed to an increasingly balanced PES system where all types of work targets are indispensable to a successful performance, and shortfalls on some targets can no longer be outweighed by impressive performance on others. More importantly, the three attributes of the current PES and its resulting more balanced nature reflect that it is not just simply a shift of numeric values among different categories of work. Instead, they indicate a qualitative change in the PES system where the traditional ways of conceptualizing a target hierarchy in the existing studies, either through the taxonomy of soft targets, hard targets, and *yipiao foujue* targets or the

²⁹ It is important to note that target quantification is highly contested in terms of whether the quantifying method faithfully captures the work's content and nature. But measurement accuracy is beyond the scope of this research.

³⁰ Interview with a township official, Gong'an County, Hubei, 16 June 2016.

measurability of targets, have lost much conceptual rigor, and hence explanatory power, when accounting for cadre behavior today.

It is time to reassess the nature of PES content and how it shapes cadre behavior. When asked about the soft and hard targets in local PES, an official responded: “There are no such things as soft and hard targets. What we have are all hard targets.” Unconvinced and concerned about the feasibility of grassroots cadres fulfilling all tasks, I further pressed him, “How is that possible? Some say that if all work is important then nothing is important. The township government has very limited resources at its disposal, how can you do all work equally well?” He said: “It’s about facts now (*shishi qiushi* 实事求是). If you can’t finish something, you just can’t.”³¹ Another township official of Zhejiang province described the PES in this way: “The systematic evaluations are to drive you to work as much as you could and reduce negligence. [They are] comprehensive. Some work, such as the party history archival (*dangshi dangan* 党史档案) work, might have never occurred to me as the party secretary during the year. But it is listed in the evaluations, so I have already divided up the work and have my deputy party secretary and director of party and government general office (*dang zheng ban zhuren* 党政办主任) in charge of this work. If this work is not listed in the evaluations, I might have neglected it.”³² These words testify that evaluation content has become increasingly balanced as well as comprehensive and leading cadres no longer expect to receive a good PES score with selective implementation of some targets but not others. In other words, to achieve satisfactory performance, leading cadres must be attentive to all work assignments and hit the targets through delegating responsibilities to subordinate officials and organizations.

This changing cadre behavior has important political and economic implications for the authoritarian regime. Politically, branding himself as a man of the people, Xi Jinping builds his popularity among ordinary citizens on pillar initiatives such as anti-corruption, poverty reduction, and environmental protection. Therefore, being able to deliver on his promises is of great importance to the Xi administration. For decades, local officials had turned a deaf ear to central directives on these initiatives partly because the related work targets in the PES are either given too little weight vis-à-vis that of the economic development or are too ambiguous to quantify. But the current PES of a more balanced nature can help reverse this long-time local neglect by allocating more evaluation weight to targets related to Xi’s pillar initiatives and maximizing the quantification of these targets. This helps explain the empirical puzzle I encountered during field research—the drastic change in local governments’ attitude towards poverty alleviation work—from paying lip service by hosting banquets to posting officials to toil at villages. As a result, by having local governments religiously enforce targets such as anti-corruption, poverty reduction, and environmental protection, once deemed too “soft” or difficult to quantify, the PES in the Xi Jinping era helps strengthen Xi’s popularity among ordinary citizens and solidify his unparalleled power within the party leadership. Economically, China under Xi Jinping is facing the daunting challenge of transitioning away from a model obsessed with GDP growth and heavily driven by polluting manufacturing and wasteful state investments towards one that focuses on the services, domestic consumption, and sustainable development.

³¹ Interview with a township official, Kaiping district, Hebei, 19 June 2017.

³² Interview with two township officials, Xiangshan county, Zhejiang, 12 June 2017.

And the current PES of a more balanced nature can help the party tackle this challenge by more equally distributing evaluation weight among economic and non-economic targets. This new incentivizing design in the PES is certainly to change the growth-at-all-cost mindset of local officials.

In sum, as an important incentivizing tool, the more balanced PES helps the Xi administration and the Communist Party fulfill their political promises and economic plans and thus secure their ruling legitimacy without political democracy. However, the PES incentive system is not without its drawbacks. As the evaluation weights have become more evenly distributed among all sorts of government and party work, local cadres, especially those at the township level and below, find the PES targets increasingly onerous to fulfill. When asked what his daily life was like, a township head said, “I usually get up at 5:40 am and don’t get to go home until 10 pm.” In awe of his crazy schedule, I gathered all my strength and further probed him, “Are you happy with your job?” He paused and looked at me with a forced smile, “There is no other way (*hen wunai* 很无奈).”³³ This raises the important question about the sustainability of the PES. For how long can the party state rely on this internal high-pressure incentive system to maintain its ruling legitimacy? As many grassroots cadres are quitting their job,³⁴ the future of the PES seems rather uncertain.

This research contributes to an updated understanding of the PES and how that can help explain cadre behavior today. Hopefully, this research will help usher in more studies that examine the party state’s personnel management regime amid the new political and economic order under and after Xi Jinping.

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³⁴ For example, a standing deputy county head of Zunyi 遵义city, Guizhou province, resigned after he was too busy to attend both of his parents’ cancer and open-heart surgeries [10]; similarly, a hugely popular county party secretary who once did skydiving to promote local tourism suddenly left his job [11].

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