

*Meetings as Mirrors: An Invitation to an Understudied Mechanism for Understanding China and Politics**

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Abstract

Countless meetings are held in the Chinese governmental system every day, serving as a platform for various affairs to unfold. However, despite the ubiquitous nature of these events, there has been a surprising dearth of literature documenting and analyzing them. In this introductory article, we aim to address this gap by first reviewing the existing knowledge in meetings research and then summarizing three articles included in this special feature. These articles focus on the meetings at different levels of the Chinese government, ranging from county and prefectural to provincial and central levels. By drawing evidence from multiple sources, these studies cover crucial aspects of meetings and shed light on their inner workings and complexities. The first article presents findings based on the author's one-year participatory observations as a vice mayor, exploring the duality of executive meetings of a county government in the instrumental and symbolic dimensions. The second article examines how an inter-governmental conference absorbs new members. The third article probes the seasonality of issues under discussion in executive meetings of provincial governments and the state council, and examines the underlying allocation of attention paid

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to them. The special feature seeks to offer a glimpse into the meetings system in China. Furthermore, we hope to sow the seeds of knowledge in the field of China studies, inviting further exploration and research in this area. We present a tentative agenda for upcoming investigations into meetings within the Chinese governing system, posing challenging questions that may inspire future researchers.

In China, a township-level cadre (鄉鎮科級幹部 *xiangke ji ganbu*) attends no fewer than 200 meetings annually, with the number occasionally reaching 300. A county-level cadre (縣處級幹部 *xianchu ji ganbu*) dedicates an average of 10.5 hours per week, equivalent to 19.1 percent of their total working time, to participate in 5.5 meetings.¹ This translates to an average of at least one meeting per day for every 250 working days. The major leaders of the county party committee attend even more meetings annually—never fewer than 1,000.² It can be said that most cadres in the workplace, particularly government officials, are not only a part of humankind, but also a part of meeting kind.

1. Meetings: An Important but Understudied Area

When it comes to addressing the time-consuming topic of meetings in academia, it is surprising to observe the insufficient attention that has been given to research in this area. Despite the abundance of self-help books lining the shelves of walk-in bookstores, the academic community has largely overlooked the significance of studying meetings.³ Indeed, before Helen Schwartzman's seminal work,⁴ meetings were used only as a lens, a medium, a mechanism, or an occasion to explore other substantive topics. For instance, meetings frequently serve as a platform to delve into decision-making processes in academia—scholars investigate issues such as the decision rules of councils and committees.⁵ The famous garbage-can model, put forth by Cohen, March, and Olsen,⁶ conveys some crucial messages: (1) the meetings, where ideas are discussed and decisions are made, are essentially organized chaos; (2) ideas are generated but dumped into a metaphorical “garbage can”; and (3) the decision-making process is often characterized by problematic preferences, unclear technology and fluid participants. Research of agenda setting and policy processes also based on studies of meetings. Kingdon's multiple streams approach was derived from intensive interviews with informants in