

# *Behind Closed Doors: Examining the Duality of Government Executive Meetings in a Chinese County\**

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## *Abstract*

Executive meetings (EMs) play a pivotal role in the Chinese government's decision-making. Despite their centrality, little is known regarding the organizational intricacies of EMs. Drawing upon participatory observations conducted in County Z, this study explores the dual nature of EMs by scrutinizing their instrumental and symbolic aspects. Primarily, EMs are an indispensable infrastructure for government organization, connecting meetings from horizontal, hierarchical, and temporal dimensions. Prior to the convening of a meeting, this infrastructure acts as a discerning filter, allowing issues to undergo a meticulous maturation process before being catalogued in the agenda. Within the context of an EM, the mayor assumes the role of a "sense-maker," utilizing the meeting as an educational forum to disseminate tacit knowledge of governance and integrate the fragmented attention of diverse stakeholders. Secondly, the ostensibly inefficient phenomena observed during EMs underscore the ritualistic nature inherent in these meetings. A meeting room is metaphorized into a symbolic theater where manifestations and perpetuations of power

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and status unfold over time. As a ritualized event, EMs encompass a paradoxical but comprehensive chain of legitimization, in which preceding decisions are affirmed and responsibility is diffused among participants. Consequently, EMs epitomize the amalgamation of both technical and symbolic expressions of the state. Through the exploration of the function of EMs in shaping the local state, this article endeavors to elucidate the intricacies of the Chinese government's internal mechanisms.

The following news release is commonplace in China: "On a certain date, a certain meeting was held; some important people attended the meeting and made decisions on such and such matters." Meetings are an essential mechanism that enables the Chinese government to function effectively. During meetings, information is gathered, funds are allocated, and regulations are discussed. The decisions reached during these meetings have substantial economic, political, and social impacts. One could even argue that China is governed through its conference rooms. How are these meetings organized? How do participants discuss and make decisions on diverse issues? These questions are crucial for comprehending China's governance. However, outsiders possess limited knowledge about what is going on inside the government's meeting rooms.

As a vice mayor, I participated in meetings held in the executive meeting room of County Z. The room spanned approximately a hundred square meters and featured a long table. Positioned at the head of the table was the mayor, while the ten vice mayors, arranged according to seniority and ranking, sat on either side of the mayor. I was the most junior vice mayor, and naturally sat farther away from the mayor. At the beginning of each meeting, a stack of meeting materials, prepared by secretaries, was placed in front of me. My coworkers were exchanging cigarettes and joking in a lighthearted manner.