

*Bureaucratic Informal Rules and State Infrastructural Power: Local Governments' Informal Land Administration in China**

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Abstract

Local governments in China often develop informal rules to address governance problems. However, existing research does not fully explore the causal relationship between the enforcement of radiating institutions and state infrastructural power, nor does it examine how informal rules affect state infrastructural power. This article aims to fill this gap by theorizing the existence of informal rules within the state bureaucracy and discussing their impact on state infrastructural power. It analyzes why and how local governments in China develop informal rules regarding land administration and bend regime-level formal land institutions from within. This article coins the term *bureaucratic informal rules* to describe this paradoxical combination of informality and authority demonstrated by the informal behavior of local governments. It identifies several mechanisms—displacement, conversion,

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drift, and layering—through which bureaucratic informal rules affect formal rules and state infrastructural power. The article also distinguishes between informal land administration and other informal rules involving local bureaucrats. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of institutional strength in discussions about state power and calls for greater attention to the sources of state strength.

1. Introduction

The effective enforcement of national-level formal institutions is central to state infrastructural power (hereafter SIP). According to Michael Mann, SIP refers to the “capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm.”¹ Other terminologies, invoking the *reach or presence* of the state,² are essentially exploring what Mann has called SIP.³ Mann’s definition suggests the existence of three collective actors (central state leaders, radiating institutions of control, and society) and three approaches to SIP (state capabilities, weight of the state, and subnational variations).⁴ Both the territorial reach of a state and its effects on society depend largely on the effective enforcement of centrally designed radiating institutions, which should not be taken for granted. Hence, the effectiveness of SIP depends on the degree to which the central state enforces its policies. SIP is weakened if local agents widely disobey the intentions of the central state.

The “institutional turn” in comparative political analysis has paid considerable attention to the formal designs of institutions in centralized countries.⁵ Radiating institutions for central state leaders (e.g., the legislature, elections, coercion, and ruling party) and their effects on regime durability have been examined extensively in the literature.⁶ Some scholars argue that these democratic institutions in centralized countries are more than window-dressing and indeed help sustain the regimes.⁷ Echoing this academic trend, students of Chinese politics have begun to explore various regime-sustaining “input institutions” in China,⁸ such as those related to representation,⁹ political consultation,¹⁰ political participation and co-optation,¹¹ protest control,¹² the distribution of central and local power,¹³ and cadre evaluation.¹⁴

However, recent research on political institutions in the developing world has shown that “instead of taking root and generating shared behavioral expectations, formal rules are widely contested, routinely