Transforming the Agency of Chinese Cadres: A Case Study of the ‘Sending the Cadres Off’ Scheme in Hubei Province

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Abstract

This study examines the process of the cadre’s agency transformation in China through a case study of a radical cadre training measure experimented by a local government in Hubei Province, Central China. The ‘sending the cadres off’ scheme in Xian’an district, executed in 2001, has sent 897 cadres to seek jobs in self-help principle at coastal cities of China from 2001 to 2010. The idea is to immerse the cadres in the institutional environment of the more advanced markets in the coastal cities, so that the cadres would take up new habits and ideas that would benefit their work in fostering the development of Xian’an when they return to government. The study investigates sent-off cadres’ continuous-flow ideas, reflection, and behaviors within a decade. Various methods in political anthropology are employed, including the interviews, participant observation, document collection, content analysis, thematic analysis and narrative analysis, complemented by preliminary quantitative methods—description analysis, cross-tabular analysis, and quantitative content analysis.

The empirical findings suggest that sent-off cadres were embedded in two competing institutional logics: socialist bureaucratic logic and capitalist market logic. The interaction between the cadre’s agency and two institutional logics, is not an either/or analysis, rather, all are happening in a given society sphere, which is coalesce and conflict. The interaction process is subtle, complicated, dynamic and diachronic, which contains not
only rational and analytical aspects, but also intuitive and emotional responses. The contradiction between two institutional logics has the potentiality to change the cadre’s agency, and then to change traditional bureaucracy.

During the two-year immersion in the market, for sent-off cadres, the capitalist market logic was an alternative ‘frame of reference.’ Through a continuous learning process, cadres were intentionally or unconsciously acquainted with the market. Cadres’ agency transformation presents the features as knowledge-based changes, balancing transformative agency, and personalized transformation. It opened a window in socialist bureaucratic logic when sent-off cadres were repositioned in the government. Practically, the changes in government policies and regulations lag behind the changes of the cadre’s agency. It temporarily weakened the potentiality of cadre’s transformative agency to promote the change from the planned-oriented traditional bureaucracy to the market-oriented responsible government. However, the potentiality of cadres’ continuous-flow agency, which is a preparatory and promising way to make changes, should never be underestimated since the cadre’s agency transformation contains a variety of choices and orientations, among in the changes of structure.
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