

Article

Analyzing China’s “One Village One Product” Policy Implementation through the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework and Policy Cycle Theory

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Abstract

The One Village One Product (OVOP) policy, originating from Japan and adopted by China to address the “Three Rural Issues,” has become a significant instrument for rural vitalization. This research employs the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework, coupled with policy cycle theory and policy instrument analysis, to dissect China’s OVOP policy implementation. Within the OVOP framework, the interplay of four policy tools—authority, resources, organization, and information—forms the foundation of policy execution. This research argues that achieving a harmonious balance between centralized decision-making and decentralized implementation depends on the strategic selection and integration of policy instruments. Empirical evidence, drawn from textual analysis and in-depth interviews, underscores the importance of these policy tools in promoting the integration of small-scale farmers into modern agriculture. Moreover, it highlights the influence of exogenous variables, such as physical conditions, community attributes, and operational rules, on policy effectiveness. This research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of OVOP policy at a broader level, providing valuable insights for policymakers seeking to address rural challenges and foster rural development. It lays the groundwork for future endeavors that could leverage quantitative data, strengthening the recommendations for China’s OVOP policy. It also offers valuable insights into the dynamics of top-down policy implementation in China, emphasizing the roles of local governance and small-scale farmers in achieving a delicate policy balance. The study ultimately aims to enhance the efficacy of policies like OVOP in promoting rural vitalization and addressing China’s “Three Rural Issues.”

Keywords

Policy cycle, Institutional analysis, Development framework, OVOP, Sustainable rural development

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Introduction

The “One Village One Product” (OVOP) movement was first introduced in Oita Prefecture, Japan in 1979. It has since been an effective way for Japan to develop the characteristic economy of rural communities from the bottom up (Anh, 2013). Consequently, it has been used as a reference by numerous developing countries, including China (Yang & Zhang, 2021), Thailand (Noble, 2019), Vietnam (Hoang et al., 2018), among others. In order to address the challenges of what is often referred to as the “three rural issues” — i.e., agriculture, rural areas, and farmers — China has adopted the OVOP policy since the 1980s (Yang & Zhang, 2021), and incorporated it into a broader Rural Vitalization Strategy in 2018 (Yang et al., 2022).

Within the general framework of rural vitalization, OVOP is regarded as a way for rural areas to develop modern agriculture according to local conditions and realize agricultural industrialization (Li & Gong, 2022). This policy directly faces the current situation that small-scale farmer family management is the long-term agricultural foundation of China (Shen & Chou, 2022). The OVOP policy involves central government guidance in its adoption while decentralizing power to local authorities for its execution (Li et al., 2017). This allows local governments have the opportunity to flexibly choose, combine, and use various policy tools within the rules communicated by the central government to promote the integration of small-scale farmers with modern agriculture (Liu & Li, 2023). The overarching objective is to realize the vision of addressing the “three rural issues,” encompassing increased agricultural yield, enhanced farmers’ income, and holistic rural development (Bu et al., 2020).

Some scholars have undertaken empirical investigations into various facets, delving into cultivated land and food-related issues (Yang & Zhang, 2021), examining the spatial distribution of distinctive agriculture practices under unique geographical conditions (Huang & Tan, 2023), evaluating the sustainable development of characteristic industries (Shen & Chou, 2022), and scrutinizing models for organizing production (Smith, 2019). Simultaneously, other scholars have employed the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework as a tool to analyze China’s agriculture and rural areas. Their research primarily focuses on rural collective actions grounded in environmental considerations (Su et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020; Zang et al., 2022), community-based studies encompassing comparative community knowledge analysis (Fan et al., 2019), and investigations into urban-rural population migration (Ma et al., 2019). Collectively, these studies lay the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of OVOP at a micro-level.

However, the imperative for a comprehensive overview of China’s OVOP policy implementation, informed by institutional underpinnings, remains. Such an approach is vital for grasping the inherent dynamics of OVOP policy implementation on a broader scale and offers policymakers a robust framework for policy assessment and decision-making. In summary, this research delves into the action phase of China’s OVOP policy implementation, an intricate landscape shaped by the interplay of policy tools under the influence of exogenous variables originating from the policy adoption phase.

This research employs the IAD framework (Ostrom, 2011) as a foundational analytical tool, complemented by the policy cycle (Anderson et al., 2022) and policy instruments (Dodds, 2018) as essential theoretical underpinnings. Its primary objective is to shed light on the execution of China’s OVOP policy, aiming to uncover the intricacies of its implementation. The IAD framework is a well-established approach for analyzing the institutional basis of public policy and comprehending the broader landscape of public institutions, including those relevant to public policy. It has evolved into a rich framework that incorporates various theories, including behavioral rational choice (Ostrom, 2019), polycentric theory (Ostrom, 2010), the theory of commons (Ostrom, 2009b), theories of collective action (Ostrom, 2014), and evolution theory

(Ostrom, 2009a), making it a robust tool for public policy analysis. Within the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, this study perceives the implementation of the OVOP policy as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of four distinct policy tools: authority, resources, organization, and information. These four categories of policy instruments are conceptually framed as key actors within this dynamic process. The research aims to elucidate the institutional features that underlie the interplay between “centralized decision-making and decentralized implementation” in China’s OVOP policy.

Moreover, this research posits that achieving a harmonious balance between centralized decision-making and decentralized implementation hinges on the strategic selection and seamless integration of policy instruments. To corroborate this assertion, this study employs textual analysis and in-depth interviews as methodological tools, thereby confirming the essentiality of the four distinct policy tools that demand prominence in the implementation of the OVOP policy. It also elucidates the intricate methods and underlying logic governing their interaction. These findings provide pivotal insights that warrant scrutiny within the realm of China’s rural economic policies. Furthermore, this research introduces a fresh perspective and avenue for examining China’s top-down rural development policies, particularly those characterized by a focus on centralized decision-making and decentralized implementation. It underscores that the consequences of centralized decision-making and policy adoption yield a distinct set of exogenous variables. These encompass physical material conditions, community attributes, and operational rules, and their influence exerts a substantial impact on the “action scenario of policy implementation.” Consequently, during the execution of the OVOP policy, local governments must remain acutely attuned to these exogenous variables, tailoring their strategies to the specific local conditions, as they wield a profound influence over the efficacy of policy instruments.

The analysis of China’s OVOP policy in this research serves a dual purpose. It not only clarifies the rationale underpinning its policy implementation but also aims to present a fresh perspective on the trajectory of rural development policies in contemporary China. In the current landscape of China’s development, the alignment of small-scale farmers with modern agriculture through OVOP, and the realization of agricultural modernization, represents a critical direction. This orientation significantly impacts the effectiveness of rural revitalization efforts and the capacity to address rural challenges successfully.

The article is organized as follows. In Section II, we delve into the relevant theories that underpin this study, encompassing the implementation background of China’s One Village, One Product (OVOP) policy, a comprehensive policy system analysis and development framework, the policy cycle theory, and the utilization of various policy instruments. Section III provides an overview of the research design, detailing the methods employed for data collection and the subsequent data analysis employed throughout the study. In Section IV, this research offer an in-depth discussion of the research findings, elucidating the key insights derived from the analysis. Finally, in Section V, this research present the policy recommendations and draw conclusions based on the findings and insights garnered throughout the study.

Literature

One Village One Product Policy

The One Village One Product (OVOP) movement, which originated in Japan’s Oita Prefecture during the 1970s, exemplifies an endogenous approach to rural development. Its objective is to rejuvenate local human capital and stimulate economic prosperity by harnessing regional

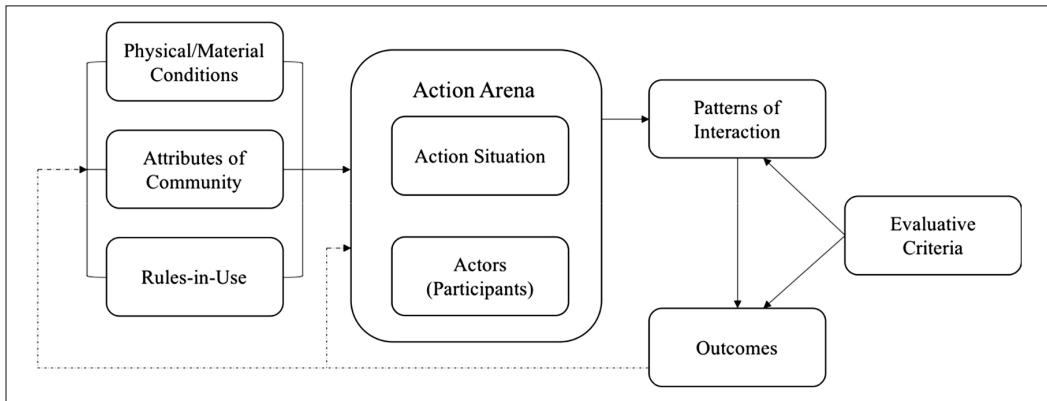


Figure 1. A Framework for Institutional Analysis (Adapted from Ostrom et al., 1994, p. 37)

resources and cultural assets (Kurokawa, 2009). The adoption of OVOP in China’s rural development policy in the 1980s (Yang & Zhang, 2021) and its subsequent integration into the 2018 Rural Vitalization Strategy (Central Committee of the CPC & State Council of China, 2018) reflects a strategic alignment with the OVOP ethos. This approach addresses the “Three Rural Issues,” aiming to enhance agricultural production, raise rural incomes, and promote rural advancement (Central Committee of the CPC & State Council of China, 2018; FAO, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). However, China’s top-down administrative approach necessitates a nuanced understanding of regional variations in policy implementation (Smith, 2019; Yang et al., 2022). Using Ostrom’s (2011) Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, this research delves into the intricacies of the institutions responsible for these differences, with the goal of shedding light on the diverse factors that impact policy outcomes in this evolving context.

Institutional Analysis and Development Framework

The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, emanating from Ostrom’s reflections on the tragedy of the commons (Ostrom, 1990), furnishes a unified lexicon conducive to interdisciplinary cooperation (Dietz et al., 2003; Ostrom, 1999). Through the years, the IAD framework has undergone successive refinements and ultimately found a more comprehensive expression in Ostrom’s “Understanding Institutional Diversity” (2006).

The IAD framework, serving as a general model for institutional analysis, furnishes researchers from varied fields with two sets of variables to incorporate into questions derived from their respective research areas (Schlager & Cox, 2018). The first set comprises exogenous variables, which include physical material conditions, attributes of the community, and rules in use. The second set involves an endogenous variable, namely the action situation, which encompasses the action situation and actors (participants), as illustrated in Figure 1 (Ostrom et al., 1994). An action situation is a dynamic situation, consisting of the interaction of several actors’ action strategies, reflecting different costs and benefits, which shows the diversity and complexity of the institutional (Ostrom, 2006; Schlager, 2019).

Policy Cycle and Policy Instruments

Within the field of policy analysis, the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework

offers a metatheoretical language and set of concepts that are pivotal for unpacking policy contexts and understanding the various stages of the policy cycle (Schlager & Villamayor-Tomas, 2023). These stages encompass policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and revision (or improvement) (Anderson et al., 2022), collectively encapsulating the holistic journey from problem identification to policy-driven resolution (Weible, 2023). Polski and Ostrom (1999) established a fundamental premise for utilizing the IAD framework in policy analysis. They underscored the significance of the ‘action situation’ within this framework, emphasizing the impact of exogenous variables on it.

The IAD framework propounds a cardinal principle and structure, enabling a logical derivation of insights spanning various theories and encompassing both correlations and causal relationships amidst diverse factors (McGinnis, 2011). For instance, it illuminates the interactions amongst maintenance policy instruments (Borrás & Edquist, 2013) and elucidates the mechanisms whereby governments sculpt the behavior of local resource users via policy instruments (Villamayor-Tomas et al., 2019). It is discernible that the performance efficacy of policy instruments is invariably contingent upon the political and administrative context in which they function (Imperial & Yandle, 2005). Consequently, the term “policy tools” refers to the technologies meticulously selected and employed by governments for the formulation, evaluation, and enactment of policies (Vedung, 1998). Unveiling the selection and utilization of policy tools emerges as a judicious and efficacious methodology for conducting policy analysis (Howlett, 2009; Jordan et al., 2005).

This study integrates the IAD framework with policy cycle theory to enhance the understanding of OVOP policy implementation. It diverges from previous work by examining the influence of institutional factors on the sustainability of rural development, which has been less emphasized in descriptive qualitative and quantitative analyses. Utilizing China as a case study, this research fills a gap in how policy instruments, informed by institutional structures, contribute to the durability and effectiveness of rural development initiatives under the OVOP policy.

Methodology

Research Design

This study judiciously embraces the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework as a perspicuous analytical apparatus and, undergirded by the scholarly rigor of policy cycle theory, circumscribes its inquiry to the meticulous analysis of “One Village One Product (OVOP) policy implementation.” It interprets “policy implementation” as a distinct action situation wherein policy instruments are conceptualized as the active actors (participants) that catalyze the emergence of the aforementioned action situation. Moreover, this research commits to identifying OVOP policy instruments and delving into the complexities of their interactive dynamics within the policy implementation milieu.

As illustrated in Figure 2, this study classifies the ramifications of policy adoption into a series of “exogenous variables,” including physical material conditions, community characteristics, and rules in use, treating them as a crucial analytical dimension. Concurrently, selecting and utilizing policy instruments are the catalysts that foster varied implementations of the OVOP policy across different administrative territories, molded to fit local circumstances. The elements and interplay of these instruments are further scrutinized in the subsequent analysis.

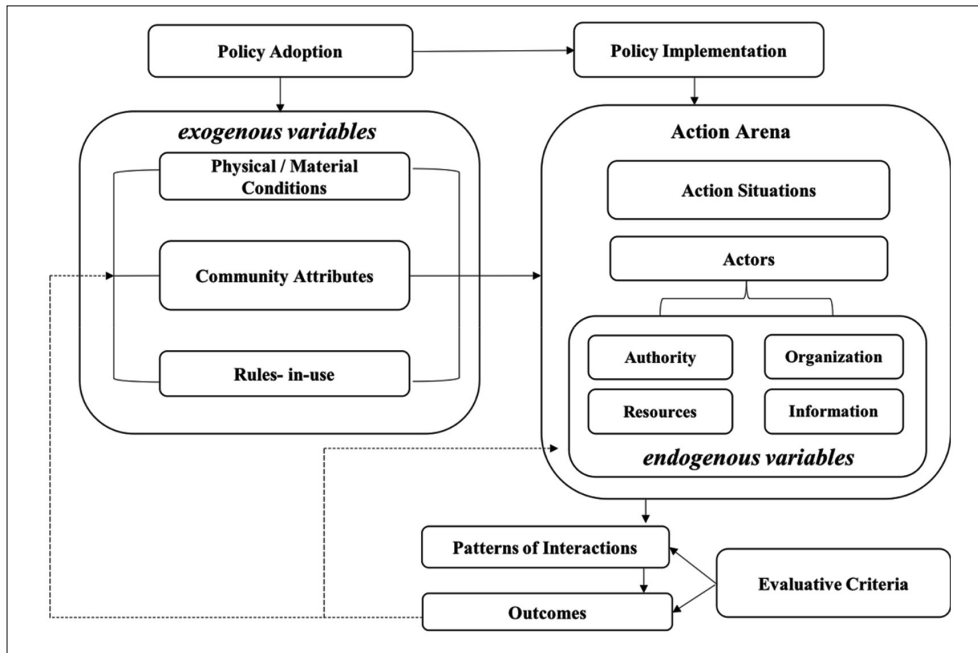


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for Analysis of China’s One Village One Product Policy Implementation source: Adapted from Anderson et al., 2022; Dodds, 2018, p. 34; Ostrom et al., 1994, p. 37

Table 1. Textual Analysis Data

Category	Content	Information
Annual Policy Statements	“No. 1 Central Document” spanning from 2004 to 2023	Clarify the central government’s position and strategic views on the “Three Rural Issues”
Rural Vitalization Initiatives	Measures promulgated by the Chinese government from 2018 to 2023 on strengthening Rural Vitalization Strategy	Financial support, Investments in human capital, Utility augmentation, and beyond
OVOP Policy Directives	Policy documents describing OVOP strategic deployment	Different stakeholders involved in the implementation of OVOP policy

Data Collection

The analysis inherent in this study bifurcates into two methodological steps. Firstly, a meticulous examination and textual analysis were conducted on three salient categories of policy documents emanating from the Chinese central authorities. These categorizations of documents are elaborated upon as follows:

These varied documents provide a panoramic view into the evolving priorities, strategies, and initiatives of the Chinese government, especially in relation to the nuanced interplay of policies aimed at synchronously bolstering the agricultural sector and fostering sustainable development

Table 2. Demographics of Interviewees

ID	Department/Field of Work	Occupation
C1	Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs	Civil Servants
C2	Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism	Civil Servants
C3	Provincial Cultural Industry Investment Holding Group Co., Ltd.	Civil Servants
C4	Municipal Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs	Civil Servants
C5	Community Subdistrict Office	Civil Servants
C6	Township and Village Subdistrict Office	Civil Servants
C7	Township and Village Subdistrict Office	Civil Servants
M1	OVOP Product Project Operator	Project Manager
M2	OVOP Product Project Operator	Project Manager
S1	OVOP Policy Research Expert	University Professor

within rural regions. This, thereby, presents an intricate tapestry, revealing the multi-faceted efforts and strategic underpinnings. This analytical dissection of policy, therefore, facilitates a comprehensive understanding, embedding itself as a pivotal examination of the trajectory and nuances inherent in China's OVOP policy landscape.

The employment of judiciously selected samples stands as the second strategy, wherein respondents for in-depth interviews are chosen with an acute awareness of ensuring a comprehensive and diverse participation throughout the policy implementation process. Simultaneously, the process of selecting interview participants was driven by the outcomes of textual analysis, specifically targeting pertinent institutional personnel who played pivotal roles in the execution of China's OVOP policy.

This study involved the orchestration of ten in-depth interviews, encompassing a variety of stakeholders (Table 1): (1) C1-C7, civil servants, who originated from an array of government departments and who operated at various administrative echelons; (2) M1-M2, project managers specifically associated with the OVOP initiative; and (3) S1, a senior scholar with a focused academic pursuit in the realm of OVOP policy. The criteria for selecting respondents are outlined as follows:

Firstly, China's OVOP policy is a top-down initiative. Once directives from the central government are received, local governments are required to comply with the central guidelines for policy implementation within a specified framework. Consequently, guided by Table 1, this study zeroes in on the principal local government departments engaged in the OVOP policy, specifically IDs C1 to C7 in Table 2. Secondly, aligning with China's objectives of advancing the OVOP initiative, this study chose two OVOP operators who have reached significant levels of scale, standardization, and intensification as interview subjects, as indicated in Table 2, IDs M1 to M2. These individuals are frontrunners in OVOP project management, embodying roles as farmer entrepreneurs, managers, and project overseers. Their extensive experience, spanning over a decade in the OVOP sector, has led to their projects being recognized as national model projects. Lastly, to corroborate the validity of the data from the aforementioned groups of interviewees, this study also engaged with a renowned scholar proficient in China's OVOP policy, rural development, and related topics. The data from their interviews provide comprehensive, in-depth, and trustworthy qualitative insights.

Data Analysis

This study utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews with purposive sampling as the main approach for selecting interviewees. Textual analysis of central policy documents established a sound foundation for this sampling technique. The research adhered to the principle of theoretical saturation, which was evidenced by the following observations: (1) The identification of conceptual categories for both endogenous and exogenous variables was affirmed in over 70% of the interviews. (2) The methodology included cross-validation of different respondents' views on identical subjects, which produced consistent content and feedback. (3) To a certain extent, the interviewees themselves recognized the findings of the research.

After transcription of the interview data, the material was meticulously coded. Text blocks were marked with codes capturing the informational essence of each content segment. This coding reassembly process sought to establish connections between the dispersed data, identifying and triangulating potential linkages. The coded data were then synthesized into overarching themes reflecting patterned responses and meanings within the dataset. Codes were clustered based on their interrelations and relevance to the main research question. For instance, terms such as "multiple certificates into one," "simplified approval," "efficient approval," "online government window," "benefits," and "improving efficiency" recurred across interviews. These information snippets collectively indicated a theme of "streamlining administration and delegating power." Through continued refinement and examination of the data, themes were polished and given descriptive names that encapsulated their core concept. For example, the "authoritative" policy instrument of "simplifying administration and delegating power" demonstrates how the Chinese government has effectively streamlined the application procedures, boosted efficiency, enhanced service to grassroots organizations, and established a solid framework for more profound integration of the OVOP policy.

Findings

Within the deductive structure of the IAD framework, this investigation meticulously examines pertinent policy documentation pertaining to China's OVOP policy. A consortium of exogenous variables has been delineated, originating from the outcomes observed in the adoption phase of China's OVOP policy. These encompass: (1) material conditions related to OVOP; (2) rule-in-use in OVOP policy; and (3) community attributes of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) as well as Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) within the OVOP context.

Furthermore, the study discerns a suite of endogenous variables, encapsulating participants within the OVOP policy implementation milieu, herein referred to as policy instruments. These instruments include: (1) authority; (2) resources; (3) organizational structures; and (4) information. The identification and strategic targeting of these exogenous and endogenous variables emanate not solely from a thorough examination of policy documents but also from comprehensive dialogues with stakeholders of varied dispositions.

This section inaugurates with an exposition of the identified variables, subsequently pivoting to a meticulous examination of participant interactions within the action scenario, thereby delineating the action situation endemic to the implementation of China's OVOP policy. It is imperative to underscore that this research predominantly concentrates on unveiling and interpreting the interactions of participants within such action situations. While exogenous variables will be alluded to as elements exerting a modicum of influence on the action situation, a deeper analytical foray into these variables does not constitute the central thrust of the present research.

Exogenous Variables

Within the IAD framework, this research predominantly delineate a triad of exogenous variables as pivotal drivers shaping the action situation. In the nuanced context of China's OVOP policy deployment, these exogenous variables crystallize into three salient constituents.

Firstly, physical or material conditions occupy a central role. China's OVOP policy intricately intertwines agricultural cultivation (Han, 2022), the processing of agricultural commodities (Yang & Zhang, 2021), and the valorization of both tangible and intangible cultural heritages (Shen & Chou, 2022). Distinct regions within China present a mosaic of natural terrains, resource abundance, and cultural repositories. The potential for the pragmatic and systematic exploitation of these resources, within the OVOP policy ambit, is inextricably tethered to the region-specific economic and sociocultural landscapes. Regions endowed with abundant natural resources, coupled with advanced economic and societal infrastructures, inherently possess an enhanced potential for the adept development, utilization, and safeguarding of local resources within the ambit of the OVOP framework (Huang & Tan, 2023).

Secondly, the operational precepts embedded within the OVOP policy serve as another exogenous linchpin. This dimension encapsulates several cardinal stipulations: (1) Meritorious OVOP endeavors should invariably be poised to address and redress the local "Three Rural Issues"; (2) Such ventures must be underpinned by a commitment to bolstering agricultural ascendance without relegating environmental sanctity to the periphery; and (3) A non-negotiable imperative is the judicious and sustainable safeguarding of cultural patrimony. Collectively, these principles encapsulate the foundational tenets of China's OVOP strategy: it champions judicious and methodical resource management, with sustainable development as its central guiding principle, ensuring that responses to local rural challenges are aptly contextualized to specific regional nuances (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the PRC, 2007, 2017).

Lastly, the community's attributes emerge as the third exogenous variable. This discourse positions China's SMEs and TVEs within the conceptual framework of a "community". The differential trajectories of OVOP policy execution across diverse territories are substantially modulated by the prevailing dynamics and vibrancy of SMEs and TVEs in those regions. Among them, those enterprises that have achieved outstanding OVOP operating performance are often called local "leading enterprises" or "dragon head enterprises." Notably, in locales where these entities manifest heightened industriousness, OVOP initiatives are poised to garner more affirmative engagement and resonance (Phelps et al., 2022).

The three factors in this study are deemed exogenous variables for several reasons. Firstly, the "rules-in-use" variable, developed during the OVOP policy's decision-making stage, reflects the outcomes of policy adoption and establishes standards based on existing laws and regulations. These standards can be adjusted based on data from policy monitoring and evaluation. Secondly, the community attribute variable includes SMEs and TVEs, crucial for OVOP's product industrialization despite being susceptible to market risks. Their function and performance are central during the OVOP policy implementation stage. Finally, natural conditions like geography and climate create exogenous variables due to their impact on rural resource endowments, influencing OVOP policy execution. The central OVOP policy document, from its adoption stage, underscores the need for organized resource development while ensuring protection.

Endogenous Variables

The OVOP policy is crucial for the implementation of China's Rural Vitalization Strategy, characterized by a top-down administrative model (Martindale, 2021) with decision-making

centralized at the national level. An in-depth analysis of policy documents and extensive interviews reveals a significant shift toward decentralization and increased local autonomy during the policy's execution. This necessitates a careful equilibrium between central decision-making and local implementation by the central government. A key finding of this study is the interaction of four key policy instruments that promote this balance and enhance the implementation of OVOP policies. Drawing from Dodds' (2018) framework, this research underscores four essential categories of policy instruments vital for the effective execution of China's OVOP policy: authority, resources, organization, and information.

Authority

To facilitate the transition of the One Village One Product (OVOP) policy from central decision-making to localized implementation, the central government has primarily adopted the policy instrument of "streamlining administration and delegating power," reflecting the evolving roles of government (Luo et al., 2010). Streamlining administration involves addressing redundant and restrictive institutional roles, filling gaps in public goods and services provision, and improving administrative efficiency. In tandem, delegating authority aims to reduce complexities arising from numerous economic activity approvals, burdensome procedures, prolonged approval cycles, and less-than-optimal efficiency. The policy prompts governments at all levels to clarify their roles and align their functions with central government guidance (Central Committee of the CPC & State Council of China, 2013).

Efforts to simplify also extend to managerial processes. Clear standards for individual items' administrative approval are laid out and shared, leading to uniform procedures that normalize organizational approval conduct. A collaborative mechanism is established between review and approval departments, supported by a service system that offers ongoing follow-up, oversight, and coordination for resolving issues. Notably, previously scattered approval authorities are now centralized within a single department, or integrated examination and approval units are formed. This alignment with industry categories encourages efficient multi-task management when setting up centralized approval departments for social, economic, and construction-related approvals. The policy's streamlining and delegation of authority make it easier for administrative villages, towns, communities, and agriculturally developed streets directly involved in OVOP implementation to apply for projects. The application process has been carefully streamlined for efficacy, better serving grassroots organizations and laying the groundwork for deeper OVOP policy integration. An interviewee highlighted significant improvements in the administrative process, illustrating the impact of policy reforms on operational efficiency. They noted, "It used to be that to get an approval, we had to go to several departments and get different stamps. Now, the service windows of different government departments are gathered in the government service hall, and we only need to go to one place to handle multiple businesses" (M1, personal communication, October 8, 2023).

Due to limited resource endowments in economically disadvantaged areas of China, small-scale farmers continue to rely on traditional agricultural production methods. China is endeavoring to transform this challenge into an opportunity by exploring various development avenues for different categories of small-scale farmers with the aid of government support. As a result, the second component of China's "authoritative" policy instruments is to foster an inherent connection between small farmers and modern agricultural development. This approach aims to achieve industrialization of the leading products under the OVOP initiative, ultimately advancing agricultural modernization (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council of China, 2019).

Introduced by Simon Anholt in 2008, "Place Branding" has been adapted by China within

the OVOP strategy, evolving into the “regional public brand” concept. This concept aims to attract consumers using the region’s reputation and perceived value. Local governments manage these brands to align with national strategies and ensure fair resource distribution, overseeing usage terms, entry processes, and user rights and obligations. They endorse compliant local manufacturers, using the regional public brands as crucial for aligning OVOP producer strategies with marketing efforts, linking product industrialization, smallholder integration, and market access. Ultimately, regional public branding supports regional development, resource efficiency, and socioeconomic growth, while also ensuring OVOP’s leading products maintain strong market competitiveness (National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC, 2023).

As can be seen, the efficacious implementation of China’s OVOP policy rests on three pivotal instruments within the domain of authority: the streamlining of administration coupled with the delegation of power; the cultivation of industrialization for flagship products; and the advancement of regional public brands.

Resources

Due to the diversified distribution of agricultural resources (Huang & Ding, 2016), small-scale family farming operations represent the primary form of China’s agricultural landscape today and are expected to persist (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council of China, 2019). Therefore, China employs a “moderate-scale operation” strategy (Liu et al., 2019) to furnish essential resources for small-scale farmers, thus fostering an organic linkage between small-scale farmers and agricultural modernization, tailored to local conditions. An interviewee involved in the implementation of the One Village One Product (OVOP) initiative highlighted the significance of governmental priorities in shaping agricultural policies. The respondent, identified as C1, stated, “China’s No. 1 Central Document for more than ten consecutive years has focused on the issues of agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. The focus of our work is to help small-scale farmers realize agricultural modernization in production according to local conditions. We think One Village One Product is a good promoter to achieve this goal” (personal communication, October 11, 2023).

The “resources” policy instrument firstly highlights the importance of the land transfer system and its institutional frameworks, allowing farmers to transfer their land contract management rights in multiple forms. To facilitate lawful and structured land transfers, relevant laws and policies have been established, encompassing land exchange, leasing, shareholding systems, using homesteads for housing, and joint stock cooperation for cooperative farming. These measures aim to optimize land use, expand management scopes, and modernize suburban agriculture, benefiting small-scale farmers in securing land ownership and contract rights (General Office of the State Council, PRC, 2004).

Secondly, China supports small farmers by subsidizing their access to modern production technologies and tools. They work with leading enterprises and farmers’ professional associations to guide small-scale farmers, particularly in challenging natural resource regions. This support includes providing access to small agricultural machinery, reducing financial burdens, bridging technological gaps, and ensuring the industrialization of OVOP’s primary products (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council of China, 2019).

Lastly, China champions the expansion of inclusive finance in rural areas, designing a credit information collection and evaluation system that specifically caters to small farmers’ needs. This financial initiative offers unsecured microcredit loans to these farmers, bolstering their financial capacity to embrace modern farming practices. As a testament to this approach, the Agricultural Bank of China has introduced various products, such as the “Farmer Small Loan” and “Rural

Individual Production and Operation Loan”, as strategic tools in line with China’s national policy of fortifying agriculture and benefiting farmers—including the OVOP policy (Agricultural Bank of China, n.d.).

Organization

Within the framework of China’s agricultural modernization, a pivotal emphasis is on facilitating small-scale farmers’ transition to contemporary farming techniques. In line with this objective, the central government has strategically allocated resources to support this demographic. For an efficacious appropriation of these resources by small-scale farmers, two core considerations emerge: firstly, the establishment of farmer-centric organizations becomes imperative to safeguard the rights and interests of this segment; and secondly, it is essential to develop streamlined pathways that enable these farmers to gain proficiency in modern agricultural technologies. In response to these pressing challenges, the Chinese government has institutionalized two specific “organizational” policy instruments. The primary approach involves fostering cooperatives tailored to unify the otherwise dispersed small-scale farmers. Concurrently, the second instrument centers on cultivating farmers’ professional associations dedicated to transferring contemporary agricultural expertise to these grassroots-level practitioners. The Farmer Professional Cooperatives (FPC) and Farmer Professional Associations (FPA) are two primary organizations that contribute significantly to this undertaking (Fock & Zachernuk, 2006; Rural Cooperative Economic Guidance Department, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the PRC, 2019).

Initially introduced in the 1950s, farmer cooperatives in China were mandated to modernize and collectivize agricultural production, taking advantage of economies of scale and shared resources (Garnevskaja et al., 2011). With the introduction of market-based reforms in the 2000s, traditional cooperatives dissolved, giving rise to more flexible and varied structures (Deng et al., 2010). FPCs appeared as professional farmer organizations, enhancing farmer autonomy and market alignment (Wen & Dong, 2010). Backed by local governments, these organizations guided farmers toward crop or industry specialization. As an essential aspect of OVOP policy execution, establishing an FPC within a village’s administrative boundary became a precondition. This requirement seeks to utilize FPCs to ease small farmers’ progression towards agricultural modernization by integrating them into larger, more efficient bodies that protect their interests and invigorate rural economic growth through standardization and increased intensity (Zhong et al., 2023). The participant, identified as M2, shared, “Like us farmers who grow the same crops or raise the same livestock, we will unite together. There is strength in numbers” (personal communication, October 15, 2023).

Concurrently, FPAs represent a pivotal component of the OVOP policy’s implementation framework. Their efforts span policy advocacy, skill development training, and facilitating resource accessibility, among other initiatives (Deng et al., 2010). Serving as champions of rural growth, FPAs foster the proactive participation of small-scale farmers in decision-making and promote the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices (Shen et al., 2005). Broadly speaking, FPAs are instrumental in maintaining competitiveness and addressing the complexities of contemporary agricultural requirements. They provide essential infrastructure while ensuring the supply chain remains efficient, and that product quality and safety are upheld (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the PRC, 2009). Given that small-scale farmers typically collaborate for economic advantage, FPAs advocate for collective endeavors. This includes widening market avenues, minimizing procurement costs and uncertainties, facilitating both public and private sector support, and establishing larger economic scales to benefit members (Christiaensen, 2013). These institutions epitomize a blend of socio-economic elevation and

agricultural progression in China's rural landscape. Consequently, organizations like FPCs and FPAs are integral in weaving small-scale farmers into the tapestry of China's OVOP policy-driven agricultural modernization.

Information

Under the "information" policy tools category, this study primarily explores three levels. The first is "documentary politics," grounded in China's political structure; the second is "e-government," centered around streamlining administration and delegating authority; and the third is "e-commerce," dedicated to fostering business development through technological innovations.

The prevailing model of Chinese politics is "documentary politics," established within the legal framework. This vibrant political trajectory, encompassing everything from the creation of policy documents to their implementation, doubles as a mechanism for political mobilization (Wang et al., 2021). The "documents" referenced can be classified into political, administrative, and information documents, each assuming the roles of strategy development, execution, and communication, respectively (Zhou & Sui, 2021). Additionally, documentary politics serves as a significant governance tool in China, known as "document governance", permeating the entire policy cycle (Lieberthal et al., 2020, p. 77–79). Throughout the phases of adoption to implementation, China's OVOP policy disseminates information via these three document types. Political documents, such as Central Document No. 1, highlight the critical role of OVOP in addressing the "Three Rural Issues" and in the rural vitalization strategy. Administrative documents, including the annual national OVOP demonstration village and town identification, along with monitoring and management measures, outline the necessary administrative rules and regulations for executing OVOP policies. Information documents, like OVOP project operation recommendations and related news, relay vital information including current affairs news and technological advancements related to OVOP.

In the 1990s, propelled by advancements in Internet technology, China began experimenting with e-government and e-commerce. In 1992, the General Office of the State Council of China devised a plan to develop a national administrative office automation system (Ma et al., 2005), marking the onset of China's progressive adoption and application of e-government. This trend continued up to the "14th Five-Year Plan" National Informatization Plan (Cyberspace Administration of China & Office of Central Cybersecurity Affairs Commission, 2021), which reaffirmed e-government's crucial role in various strategies, such as streamlining administration, delegating power, advancing new industrialization, informatization, urbanization, and agricultural modernization (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the PRC, 2016). The OVOP policy's implementation has substantially benefited from the technological foundation provided by e-government, as it has effectively realized the Chinese government's vision of streamlined administration and empowered delegation. This has resulted in enhanced efficiency in administrative processes of OVOP projects, spanning approval, supervision, evaluation, agricultural technology education, and labor management. Simultaneously, the rise of e-commerce, fueled by internet technology, has emerged as a prominent marker of China's socio-economic metamorphosis (Wang et al., 2021). This transformation has revolutionized the conventional models of economic transactions and social interactions (Zhang, 2019), broadened the distribution avenues for OVOP products (Phelps et al., 2022), and catalyzed the advancement of the rural economy (Liu et al., 2020).

During discussions with grassroots civil servants, the convenience and efficiency facilitated by the integration of e-government and e-commerce were frequently highlighted. One respondent, designated as C6, conveyed the participants' satisfaction: "We visited several farmers participating

in the OVOP project. They affirmed the convenience brought by e-government and e-commerce, and hoped that our work would remain as efficient as this” (personal communication, October 9, 2023). Both e-governance and e-commerce, rooted in information technology, have significantly reduced information dissemination costs and established extensive communication networks. These networks serve as vital links, connecting all stakeholders engaged in the implementation phase of the OVOP policy, ensuring a streamlined and inclusive process.

Conclusion and Discussions

Interaction of the OVOP Policy Instruments

After thoroughly reviewing and introducing the OVOP policy instruments above, this study conceptualizes them as active entities, integrating them into the “policy implementation” action situation to illustrate their interactivity. This approach aims to provide the clearest possible understanding of how China’s OVOP policy is implemented in practice. Consequently, the research includes interviews with two senior project managers who oversee OVOP projects recognized as national-level model villages, civil servants from various hierarchical levels involved with these initiatives, and an expert specializing in OVOP policy research.

Policy Communication from Central to Local Governments

The initial point of communication concerns the objectives of the OVOP policy. As previously mentioned, the OVOP policy integrates into China’s Rural Vitalization Strategy, aiming to address the “three rural issues.” Its overarching goal is to judiciously develop and utilize local rural resources, encouraging small-scale farmers to engage with modern agriculture through moderate-scale operations, industrialize a leading product, and subsequently propel the comprehensive development of rural areas. Its policy objectives align with those of rural vitalization and addressing rural issues. Given that this policy necessitates local governments to craft governance rules tailored to local conditions, authorized by the central government, the latter has conferred upon local governments the authority to select, monitor, and assess OVOP projects. This decentralization grants local governments the capacity to identify and bolster potential leading products, aiding their industrialization journey. In summary, while the central government underscores policy objectives and principles, it has devolved specific policy implementation responsibilities and certain decision-making authorities to local governments. Concurrently, local governments bear the responsibility to report back on decision-making outcomes to the central government, securing directives for subsequent administrative steps. Throughout this process, China has implemented an e-government system to enhance the efficiency of administrative communications, particularly in areas such as OVOP project submissions, administrative approvals, project monitoring, and evaluation.

Implementation of the OVOP Policy

Given that small-scale family farming is foundational to Chinese agriculture, connecting these small-scale farmers to agricultural modernization is imperative for industrializing specific agricultural products in particular villages or towns. To address this, local governments have developed support programs tailored to the objective natural conditions and resource endowments, advocating for the concept of moderate-scale operations. These programs provide

comprehensive support, including the distribution of production resources, orderly land transfers, and financial assistance from both the central government and inclusive financial institutions. A prime example is the Agricultural Bank of China, which stands out for offering tailored inclusive financial services. These services target both individuals, particularly small-scale farmers, and enterprises, including TVEs and SMEs, that are actively participating in OVOP specialty industries. The goal is to enhance their capability to effectively engage in production and management activities. The provision of production materials often entails support from relevant professional technologies. Examples include supplying and cultivating high-quality seeds, providing agricultural tools suitable for challenging geographical conditions (such as hills and sandy lands), and implementing scientific methods to mitigate and prevent agricultural pollution. To ensure small-scale farmers directly benefit from these support initiatives, farmers' professional associations play a crucial role. They assist local governments in delivering technical training to small-scale farmers and engage professional scholars to offer expert technical guidance.

Addressing the limited productivity of small-scale farmers is essential, but another challenge also presents itself: finding a solution for the narrow market access and high costs that small-scale farmers face. China's strategy involves the local government's encouragement and support of a selection of SMEs and TVEs, based on the industrial foundation and natural conditions of the towns and villages. These entities act as leading enterprises, organizing the dispersed small-scale farmers. The specific approach entails these leading SMEs and TVEs establishing agricultural product production bases, motivating farmers to adopt characteristic, specialized, and standardized production methods. This strategy efficiently facilitates the industrialization of leading products. To ensure fairness and stability in the contractual relationships between the SMEs, TVEs, and small-scale farmers within this model, farmers' professional cooperatives—mutual-help farmer organizations supported by the local government—have emerged to safeguard the interests of small-scale farmers. This approach is also referred to as the “leading enterprises + FPCs + farmers” model.

Upon the leading product reaching industrialization standards, the local government will conduct an evaluation based on various criteria which come from the top-down communication of policy rules from the central government. These criteria include whether the product meets the required quality standards, possesses local characteristics, represents a prominent industry, and has significantly contributed to farmers' prosperity. Products that satisfy these evaluation criteria will be designated as “regional public brands.” Ownership of these brands remains with the local government, ensuring alignment with national brand strategic objectives. This designation not only secures further opportunities for external promotion but also guarantees additional financial support. The distribution channels for OVOP products have also expanded effectively, thanks to e-commerce platforms like Alibaba and Douyin. Notably, OVOP bulk trade has made its mark in China's foreign trade, with some products establishing themselves as well-known regional public brands within the country. A prime example is the Dounan Flower Market OVOP project, which has blossomed into Asia's largest flower trading market (People's Daily, 2023). This project has realized the complete online intelligent operation of foreign trade transactions, spanning procurement to transportation (Sun et al., 2021). As a result, “Dounan Flowers” has blossomed into a high-value regional public brand (Sun, 2022). The success of this project has also transformed Dounan Village into a One Village One Product Demonstration Township. “Dounan Flowers” stands as a testament to the success of this initiative, not just fulfilling the policy goals of poverty alleviation and agricultural aid but also adhering to moderate-scale operations and sustainable development tailored to local conditions.

The interaction of the aforementioned policy instruments collectively shapes the entire framework of OVOP administrative management, the industrialization of flagship OVOP

products, and OVOP commercial operations, all of which contribute to the action situation where OVOP policy is implemented.

Recommendations

Limitations and Further Research

Currently, this study presents certain limitations, which we anticipate addressing and expanding upon in future research endeavors. The research utilizes China as a case study to provide a broad overview of the entire institutional framework governing the implementation of China's OVOP policy. While it offers a generalized conceptual model suitable for empirical research, it necessitates additional case studies and empirical investigations, particularly the inclusion of quantitative data specific to distinct OVOP projects, to fortify its validity.

Despite these existing constraints, the research nonetheless lays down a foundational approach for investigating the execution of top-down policies within China, scrutinizing the country's institutional capacity to strike a balance between centralized policy decision-making and decentralized policy implementation. Looking ahead, there is potential to leverage the conceptual framework established in this research, integrating quantitative data related to the OVOP initiatives. When amalgamated with comprehensive in-depth interviews, this strategy could facilitate a mixed-methods research approach, poised to deliver more impactful recommendations for China's OVOP policy. This would not only enhance the robustness of the findings but also furnish more impactful recommendations for China's OVOP policy. The ultimate objective is to ensure that such policies are more adept at spurring rural vitalization and addressing the pressing "Three Rural Issues."

Policy Recommendations

The implementation of China's OVOP policy serves as an illustrative case, shedding light on China's institutional frameworks for enforcing top-down policy initiatives. The distinctiveness and uniqueness of the OVOP policy's implementation are derived from its inherent need for bottom-up engagement, highlighting the pivotal roles of local governance and small-scale farmers. Consequently, this policy stands as a prime example of China's efforts in striking a balance between centralized policy formulation and decentralized policy execution. This equilibrium is predominantly maintained through the careful selection and application of policy instruments.

This research serves to bridge the IAD framework with policy cycle theory, employing the implementation of the Chinese OVOP policy as a case in point to scrutinize the dynamics at play within this action situation, under the influence of various participating policy instruments. Within the context of the OVOP policy's execution, the four policy instruments of authority, resources, organization, and information are operationalized, their roles distinctly defined yet intricately interwoven, culminating in the comprehensive action scenario of the OVOP policy implementation. Concurrently, factors such as physical material conditions, community attributes, and extant rules are considered as a set of exogenous variables exerting considerable influence on the policy's implementation. This study posits that the selection of policy instruments necessitates a preliminary assessment of these exogenous variables.

Initially, local governments ought to establish pertinent indicators for resource preservation, encompassing metrics like carbon footprint, recycling, and utilization of resources, as well as

enforcing regulations for cleaner agricultural production. Employing precise administrative directives is crucial for scientifically steering agricultural modernization within the boundaries of sustainable development. In regions where agricultural resources are scant, there could be a shift in focus towards cultivating alternative industries, such as cultural heritage initiatives under the OVOP framework. Furthermore, SMEs and TVEs play dual roles as significant drivers of rural economic development and as facilitators helping small-scale farmers to cut production costs and integrate into modern agriculture. Initiatives aimed at enhancing the innovative capacities of SMEs and fostering leadership skills among their managers warrant special attention, particularly in the wake of the post-pandemic era.

In the course of conducting extensive research and interviews for this study, it was observed that some respondents pointed out existing industrial obsolescence and a lack of clear brand visibility in certain OVOP industries, indicating a disparity between project inputs and expected outputs. This necessitates the implementation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for such lagging OVOP projects, to make informed decisions on whether to escalate support or discontinue the initiatives. In a discussion on the challenges associated with the further implementation of the OVOP policy, an academic expert identified as S1 emphasized the need for enhanced supportive policies amidst the push for rural revitalization. S1 noted, “At a time when rural revitalization and One Village One Product are in full swing, we should pay more attention to the improvement of corresponding supporting policies. For example, environmental issues, as well as issues such as land transfer” (personal communication, October 4, 2023). The widespread influence of the OVOP policy underscores the imperative for focused policy implementation, which inherently guides the subsequent phase of policy monitoring. Given the extensive application of China’s OVOP policy in sectors such as agriculture and cultural tourism, the imperative of “sustainable development” warrants close attention throughout the implementation process. This is particularly crucial as the potential ramifications encompass a range of issues, including agricultural pollution, cultural inheritance, industry oversaturation, and disparities in development, among other related concerns.

The case of China’s OVOP policy offers an illustrative example for a broad array of developing countries. It presents a unique opportunity to examine how endogenous development momentum, particularly among grassroots entities like small-scale farmers, can be catalyzed to connect with agricultural modernization under constrained conditions. Furthermore, the insights garnered from China’s implementation of the OVOP policy, including the potential adverse effects like environmental challenges and issues pertaining to sustainable development, provide valuable lessons for other developing nations. In summary, through text analysis and comprehensive interviews, this study leverages the IAD framework as an analytical tool, intertwining it with policy cycles and policy instrument theories. It conceptualizes policy instruments as active participants, exploring their collective influence in shaping the OVOP policy implementation scenario. The study underscores the importance of recognizing physical material conditions, community characteristics, and existing rules as crucial exogenous variables, all of which play a significant role in the execution of the OVOP policy. As a research sample, China provides policymakers with an institutional-based analytical perspective and unique empirical data.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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