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Institutional Pathways for Transforming County-Level Cadres' Performance Orientation in the Context of New Quality Productive Forces

-- A Comparative Case Study of Two Counties in Zhejiang Province, China

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Abstract

The development of new quality productive forces has placed new demands on county-level development models and the logic of cadre performance evaluation. Transforming cadres' performance orientation is therefore an important institutional guarantee for translating new quality productive forces into practice and promoting high-quality county-level development. From an institutional analysis perspective, this study examines the structural tensions between new quality productive forces and existing performance-evaluation logic. It conducts a comparative case study of Sanmen County and Yongjia County in Zhejiang Province, focusing respectively on institutional practices for correcting performance-orientation deviations and incentivizing innovation. The study finds that the innovative, long-term, and uncertain characteristics of new quality productive forces require county-level cadres to shift from pursuing short-term visible achievements toward accumulating long-term performance, from horizontal imitation toward development based on local conditions, and from scale expansion toward innovation and quality improvement. Accordingly, differentiated and longer-cycle performance evaluation mechanisms should be improved, while fault-tolerance and correction, clarification and reputation-protection, and related institutional arrangements should be strengthened to create an institutional environment in which constraints and incentives work in concert. These measures can encourage cadres to develop a performance orientation compatible with the development of new quality productive forces.

Keywords

Performance orientation; county-level cadres; new quality productive forces; institutional pathways.

1. Introduction

Xi Jinping has emphasized that "the issue of performance orientation is fundamental and concerns the principle of serving the public and governing for the people" [1]. Performance Orientation not only affects cadres' understanding of what constitutes performance and how performance should be created, but also profoundly shapes local development paths and governance behavior. As China has entered a stage of high-quality development, particularly with the accelerated formation of new quality productive forces, local development increasingly depends on technological innovation, industrial upgrading, and efficiency improvement. Accordingly, the ways in which performance is created have gradually shifted from factor input and scale expansion toward quality and efficiency, innovation-driven

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development, and long-term accumulation. These changes have placed new demands on cadres' performance orientation.

Counties are important carriers for promoting industrial transformation and translating new quality productive forces into practice. Nevertheless, some county-level cadres continue to display tendencies such as emphasizing speed over quality, immediate and visible achievements over less visible, long-term achievements, and the short term over the long term. Examining the practical tensions facing county-level cadres' performance orientation in the context of new quality productive forces, together with the corresponding institutional responses, is therefore important for aligning cadres' performance orientation with development laws and promoting high-quality county-level development.

Existing scholarship has produced substantial research on performance orientation, mainly in three areas. First, studies have examined its conceptual meaning. Moynihan et al., for example, argue that the core of performance orientation lies in redefining governance accountability through value reconstruction and constructing a multidimensional evaluation framework covering political leadership, developmental quality, practical verification, public perception, and long-term institutional continuity [2]. Second, scholars have examined deviations in performance orientation and their correction. Taylor identifies typical distortions including impulsive decisions that deplete local fiscal resources, the preference for high-visibility flagship projects that ignore objective socioeconomic constraints, the pursuit of "digital performance" through oversimplified quantitative indicators, fabricated project initiation records and statistical manipulation, and "promotion-driven urgency" that prioritizes projects falling within leaders' immediate oversight [3]. Talbot, from value, institutional and technological dimensions, proposes strengthening coordination between performance competition and cross-departmental collaboration, reinforcing the guiding and constraining effects of empowerment and targeted accountability, and calibrating high-quality development with a sound performance orientation [4]. Third, research has explored how new quality productive forces affect cadres' performance orientation. Li & Zhang adopting the WSR systems methodology, contend that public administrators should grasp the evolutionary rules of new quality productive forces via systematic learning, foster innovative production relations through institutional reform, and satisfy diversified public demands through creative governance applications [5]. Zeng & Bao suggest that the renewed performance orientation should embody locally tailored development, sustainable governance practices, systemic thinking that balances visible outputs and long-term, less quantifiable achievements, and flexible mechanisms for error tolerance and corrective action [6].

Although these studies have interpreted performance orientation and its interaction with new quality productive forces from multiple perspectives, two limitations remain. First, the intrinsic logical relationship between new quality productive forces and performance orientation has not been sufficiently revealed. Second, existing research has focused predominantly on macro-level governance or higher administrative levels such as provinces and municipalities, paying insufficient attention to counties as fundamental units of economic and social development. Against this background, this study adopts an institutional perspective and focuses on county-level cadres. It addresses two research questions: (1) What structural tensions between new quality productive forces and traditional performance orientation are manifested at the county level? (2) How can institutional design promote the transformation of county-level cadres' performance orientation? To address these questions, the study examines institutional practices in Sanmen County and Yongjia County, Zhejiang Province, and analyzes the pathways and mechanisms through which county-level cadres' performance orientation can be transformed in the context of new quality productive forces.

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2. Structural Tensions between the Development of New Quality Productive Forces and County-Level Cadres' Performance Orientation

New quality productive forces entail not only changes in production technologies and industrial forms, but also changes in the ways local development outcomes are generated. Their characteristics of innovation-driven development, factor reorganization, and long-term accumulation create new requirements for the performance-evaluation logic traditionally applied to county-level cadres. These tensions are manifested in three main respects.

2.1. Temporal tension between longer innovation cycles and preferences for immediate visible achievements

Under traditional development models, infrastructure construction, investment attraction, and project investment tend to generate results within relatively short cycles. Project commencement, investment growth, and enterprise settlement can quickly be converted into measurable and presentable performance outcomes, creating a relatively clear chain of "input–output–evaluation." The development of new quality productive forces changes this logic. Whether involving breakthroughs in key technologies, construction of innovation platforms, talent recruitment and development, commercialization of research results, or digital transformation of traditional industries, value realization often requires a longer period and involves considerable uncertainty. The relationship between input and output is therefore not simply linear.

The challenge faced by cadres is thus not merely a general conflict between the short and long term, but a structural mismatch between the period required for innovation value to materialize and the period used to evaluate cadre performance. Cadre assessments often have clear annual and tenure-based deadlines, whereas the benefits of innovation may emerge only after the relevant evaluation period. When the actual value of an activity is difficult to observe and confirm in the current period, its visibility in cadre evaluation may be lower than that of projects capable of rapidly generating quantitative increases. This can create an incentive to believe that investing in long-term work is less rewarding than producing short-term highlights. In extreme cases, grassroots governments and social actors may even coordinate to manufacture data that conforms to evaluation requirements, producing the phenomenon of "performance order falsification" [7]. Therefore, the key to transforming performance orientation is not simply to emphasize the long term, but to solve the institutional problem of how long-term performance can be identified, evaluated, and incentivized, thereby encouraging cadres to move beyond immediate visible achievements and pay greater attention to sustainable development capacity.

2.2. Spatial tension between differentiated development paths and horizontal imitation-based competition

New quality productive forces are distinctly innovation-driven, and their development does not follow a standard model that can be directly replicated across regions. Even when developing emerging industries, some regions possess stronger industrial-chain foundations, some have technological and talent advantages, and others have distinctive application scenarios. Effective development paths depend on the comprehensive matching of industrial foundations, resource endowments, innovation capacity, and market conditions. The deeper the development of new quality productive forces, the more local governments need the capacity to identify comparative advantages and undertake exploratory risks.

Existing mechanisms of interlocal competition, however, contain a strong element of horizontal comparison and can place different regions on the same "track." Once an industry, project, or development model has been validated by the market, its successful experience becomes a

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reference for other regions seeking to reduce trial-and-error costs, thereby generating a mechanism of imitation based on visible success. Faced with uncertain governance environments, cadres may develop a self-protective behavioral logic and tend to choose strategies with lower costs and risks. Following proven industries and projects is relatively controllable and easier to justify, whereas differentiated exploration based on local conditions may generate greater accountability and evaluation pressure if comparable short-term results fail to materialize [8]. Consequently, horizontal competition may shift from promoting local development to encouraging regions to chase hot sectors, compete for emerging "tracks," and increase investment, resulting in convergent industrial layouts and repeated allocation of resources. The underlying tension is that new quality productive forces require differentiated competitive advantages, while traditional performance evaluation may reinforce homogeneous competition. Transforming performance orientation therefore requires moving beyond simple comparisons based on scale, quantity, and rankings, and paying greater attention to the fit between development paths and local resource endowments as well as the actual contribution of innovation exploration to long-term local competitiveness.

2.3. Behavioral tension between scale expansion and innovation-driven quality improvement

Traditional economic growth has often relied heavily on factor inputs. Expanding inputs of land, capital, and labor can directly promote project construction and aggregate economic growth. Under this development logic, launching projects, expanding investment, and increasing output naturally possess high performance visibility. The core of new quality productive forces, however, is not the simple addition of production factors, but the improvement of total factor productivity through technological innovation, industrial upgrading, and optimized factor allocation. The relationship between input scale and development performance has consequently changed: greater financial investment and a larger number of projects do not necessarily produce stronger innovation capacity or higher-quality development.

This transformation presents a deeper challenge to the established ways in which cadres produce performance. In the past, cadres could relatively quickly generate perceptible economic increments through resource integration and project advancement. Developing new quality productive forces, by contrast, requires more "slow-variable" work, including technology R&D, enterprise cultivation, talent development, and institutional innovation. Its outcomes are often difficult to measure through a single project or a single year. If investment scale, project quantity, and output growth remain the primary indicators of performance, cadres may substitute input for innovation and project quantity for development quality, or even create the appearance of growth through redundant construction and resource accumulation. Thus, transforming performance orientation in the context of new quality productive forces is fundamentally a transformation in the mode of performance production: from generating visible outcomes through resource input and scale expansion to creating sustainable value through innovation, efficiency, and structural optimization. Greater attention should be paid to output per unit of input, the quality of industrial upgrading, enterprise innovation capacity, and development potential, thereby shifting cadres' performance orientation from "how much has been done" toward "what value has been created."

3. Institutional Responses: Two Mechanisms for Transforming County-Level Cadres' Performance Orientation

If the development of new quality productive forces changes the conditions under which county-level performance is generated, institutional arrangements directly influence how cadres understand and choose performance-related behaviors. Based on this logic, this study selects Sanmen County and Yongjia County for a functional case comparison, examining two

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institutional mechanisms: correcting deviations in performance orientation and incentivizing innovation in the face of risk.

3.1. Sanmen County: Strengthening behavioral constraints through performance identification

Sanmen County has incorporated the requirements of a correct performance orientation into the routine management of cadres. Through differentiated evaluation, daily assessment, and comprehensive judgment, it has strengthened the identification of cadres' actual performance. Relevant practices emphasize classified evaluation according to the characteristics of different units and positions, while comprehensively using assessment, inspection, research, interviews, and other methods to understand cadre performance. In this way, cadre evaluation has expanded from a singular focus on outcomes toward greater attention to actual work performance, the process of fulfilling responsibilities, and public evaluation. The institutional mechanism can be summarized as: multidimensional identification → dynamic evaluation → deviation warning → timely correction [9].

The significance of this mechanism lies not primarily in increasing the number of assessment indicators, but in changing the visibility of cadres' performance-related behavior. If cadres only need to demonstrate final outcomes in annual evaluations, they may develop a preference for short-term visible achievements. When organizational authorities continuously identify performance through daily inspections, public evaluation, and observation of the process of fulfilling responsibilities, behaviors characterized by impatience for quick results or formalism are more likely to enter the organizational field of view. In institutional terms, Sanmen County's exploration mainly addresses the problem of preventing performance orientation from deviating. Its core function is to improve the capacity to identify and correct inappropriate performance behavior, gradually establishing more stable behavioral expectations that performance should not be defined simply by project quantity, investment scale, or short-term increments.

3.2. Yongjia County: Releasing innovation incentives through fault tolerance and correction

In contrast to Sanmen County's emphasis on correction, Yongjia County's institutional practice focuses more strongly on risk in reform and innovation. Centered on encouraging cadres to assume responsibility and act, Yongjia has explored an institutional arrangement linking fault tolerance and correction, clarification and reputation protection, and follow-up education. By clarifying the boundaries of fault tolerance, standardizing recognition procedures, and strengthening clarification and protection, it provides institutional space for qualified reform exploration. The mechanism can be summarized as: fault-tolerant exemption → clarification and protection → follow-up education [10].

The fault-tolerance mechanism primarily addresses the question of whether cadres dare to experiment. It distinguishes reasonable mistakes arising from reform exploration from deliberate violations and acts undertaken for private gain, thereby reducing cadres' concerns about excessive accountability for normal trial and error. The clarification and reputation-protection mechanism addresses cadres' concerns following inaccurate allegations, while follow-up education helps cadres who have been disciplined regain their working state and improve their performance. This mechanism corresponds closely to the uncertainty inherent in new quality productive forces. New technologies, industries, and business models are themselves highly uncertain. If cadres can share only the benefits of successful innovation while bearing alone the risks of failed exploration, rational behavior may become increasingly conservative. A reasonable fault-tolerance mechanism therefore reshapes the risk structure of

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innovative behavior, enabling cadres to undertake necessary exploration while respecting laws, regulations, and institutional boundaries.

The relevant practices in Yongjia County indicate that the institutional arrangement has moved beyond fault tolerance itself and gradually formed an institutional chain from risk sharing to clarification and protection and then to follow-up. Institutional incentives have thus shifted from simply "allowing mistakes" toward a more complete sequence of "allowing exploration → reasonably tolerating errors → providing timely protection → tracking and correcting deviations."

3.3. Comparative analysis: From correction alone to a combination of correction and incentives

Although the two counties differ in their institutional emphasis, both respond to the institutional requirements of transforming county-level cadres' performance orientation in the context of new quality productive forces (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Institutional Practices between Sanmen County and Yongjia County

Dimension	Sanmen County	Yongjia County
Institutional function	Performance identification and correction	Fault tolerance, correction, and incentives for responsibility
Institutional logic	Prevent inappropriate action	Encourage responsible and capable action
Behavioral orientation	Prevent impatience for quick results and formalism	Encourage reform exploration and responsible action
Corresponding tension	Preference for visible achievements and short-term orientation	Innovation risk and cycle mismatch
Internal limitation	Scientific validity and fairness of "health-check" indicators	Defining the boundary between fault tolerance and indulgence

The institutional experiences of the two counties indicate that a new performance orientation cannot be formed simply by increasing pressure or loosening constraints; it requires coordination between institutional constraints and incentives. On the one hand, scientific evaluation and dynamic supervision should be used to identify and correct deviations in performance orientation in a timely manner, preventing cadres from equating short-term visible outcomes with substantive development performance. On the other hand, mechanisms such as fault tolerance, correction, clarification, and reputation protection should reasonably share the risks of innovation, enabling cadres to explore within the boundaries of objective laws and institutional rules. Together, these mechanisms form the institutional foundation of a new performance orientation: moving beyond an exclusive emphasis on preventing inappropriate action toward a system that both prevents inappropriate action and encourages cadres to act courageously and effectively.

4. Institutional Pathways for Transforming County-Level Cadres' Performance Orientation in the Context of New Quality Productive Forces

The comparative analysis of Sanmen and Yongjia indicates that an effective institutional system for performance orientation needs to seek a balance between constraints and incentives, match problems with appropriate institutional instruments, and establish complementarity among

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different mechanisms. Only in this way can cadres' initiative, motivation, and creativity in development and governance be effectively activated.

4.1. Improve differentiated evaluation mechanisms and shift performance evaluation from "comparing increments" to "comparing quality and efficiency"

First, differentiated performance evaluation should be implemented. More precise evaluation standards should be established according to the development stage, industrial foundation, and functional positioning of different counties, avoiding the use of a single standard to measure development outcomes across different regions. For work with long cycles, such as industrial transformation, technological innovation, talent development, and innovation-platform construction, greater weight should be given to indicators such as quality and efficiency and development potential, encouraging cadres to focus more on development quality and long-term benefits. Second, visible and latent achievements should be evaluated together. Evaluation should cover both outcomes that have already materialized and work that lays the foundation for future development. For activities that may not generate output value in the short term but can enhance innovation capacity, optimize industrial structure, and strengthen development potential, reasonable evaluation space should be provided. By improving evaluation content and cycles, the system can gradually weaken the single orientation of "who grows faster and who has more projects," encourage cadres to focus on development quality and efficiency rather than short-term increments, and reduce short-term behavioral tendencies caused by the mismatch between evaluation cycles and innovation cycles.

4.2. Optimize development-guidance mechanisms and shift cadres from "following and imitating" toward "distinctive development"

Development guidance should be grounded in county-level resource endowments and industrial foundations, with differentiated mechanisms established to avoid simple replication of identical industries and models. First, classified guidance should be strengthened. Different development priorities should be identified according to industrial foundations, resource endowments, and development stages, rather than treating the scale of a single industry or the number of projects as universal development objectives. Counties should be encouraged to identify their own advantages and principal areas of effort. Second, distinctive development should be emphasized. For technological innovation, industrial upgrading, and model exploration based on local advantageous industries, outcomes should not be judged simply by short-term scale. Greater attention should be paid to contributions to industrial-chain upgrading, innovation-capacity development, and long-term development potential, encouraging cadres to concentrate resources on areas of genuine comparative advantage. Third, policy coordination should be strengthened. Key industries and innovation projects consistent with local development positioning should receive sustained support in projects, funding, talent, and other areas, preventing policy resources from repeatedly shifting with changing industrial "hot spots." Through the policy orientation of "classified guidance → distinctive development → sustained support," county-level development can shift from chasing hot sectors and duplicating layouts toward leveraging advantages and pursuing differentiated development.

4.3. Improve fault-tolerance and correction mechanisms and shift cadres from "risk avoidance" toward "innovation"

Transforming performance orientation requires not only correcting inappropriate performance behavior, but also providing necessary institutional space for reform and exploration that conforms to development regularity. Fault-tolerance and correction mechanisms should be further improved. For mistakes arising from objective changes in

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conditions where cadres act in the public interest, follow procedures, and actively explore, reasonable fault tolerance should be provided in accordance with relevant rules. Deliberate violations and acts undertaken for private gain, by contrast, should be strictly distinguished and handled in accordance with law and regulations. At the same time, mechanisms for clarification and reputation protection and follow-up education should be strengthened. Cadres subject to inaccurate allegations should receive timely investigation and clarification, while those who have been disciplined should receive appropriate education and assistance. These measures can reduce excessive risk concerns that may lead cadres to act timidly. It should be emphasized that fault tolerance does not mean lowering accountability requirements; rather, it means reasonably sharing the risks of innovation while clearly defining institutional boundaries and bottom lines.

5. Conclusion

The development of new quality productive forces brings temporal, spatial and behavioral structural tensions to county-level cadres' traditional performance orientation. Comparative cases of Sanmen and Yongjia County show that performance transformation needs both constraint and incentive institutions: multidimensional performance identification curbs short-sighted formalism, while fault-tolerance and reputation-protection mechanisms mitigate innovation risks and motivate responsible exploration.

To foster a new performance orientation, authorities should implement differentiated long-cycle evaluation that values quality-efficiency and latent long-term gains over simple incremental comparison. Local governance should encourage characteristic development tailored to resource endowments and avoid blind imitation. Meanwhile, fault-tolerance boundaries must be clearly defined to distinguish exploratory errors from deliberate violations.

Limited by two-case evidence from Zhejiang, further research is needed to test the applicability of these institutional pathways across diverse county contexts in China.

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