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Understanding how local actors implement teacher rotation policy in a Chinese context: a sensemaking perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Teacher Rotation Policy (TRP) is a recent teacher policy developed in the context of China. TRP seeks to close China's teacher quality disparities through rotating 'high-quality' urban schoolteachers to teach in hard-to-staff rural schools for a period of time. This qualitative case study examined how five policy actors carried out TRP in one rural county from 2012 to 2015. Guided by a sensemaking perspective, the study generated interview and observational data over three months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2016. The analysis of the data revealed high administrative expenses as well as unintended consequences of rotating teachers across schools. Three sensemaking strategies, namely using argumentation techniques, tailoring policy incentives, and leveraging cultural logics have emerged from the participants' efforts at enacting this policy. These research findings suggest implications for the efficacy and effects of teacher rotation for equalising teacher workforce in China and internationally.

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Teacher rotation; teacher policy; teacher workforce reform; policy implementation; Chinese education

Introduction

"A silkworm exhausts its silk till death (春蚕到死丝方尽)

A candle burns itself out to give light (蜡炬成灰泪始干)"

The two verses above, written by Chinese poet Li Shangyin over one thousand years ago, are still being widely used today to highlight the 'self-giving' characteristic that a good teacher should possess in China. Rooted in sustained historical and social discourses around collectivism, policies that ask teachers to sacrifice their personal interests for the collective good have been formulated and enacted to reform China's education, and the Teacher Rotation Policy (TRP, 教师轮岗政策) is a recent case of such endeavours.

Due to the long-standing urban-rural divide of the Chinese society, China's rural regions systemically lag behind the urban regions (Whyte, 2010). In education, China's rural schools, in general, perform less well than their urban counterparts in many respects (Hannum, 2003; Yang, 2018). Since 2014, China's central government has been using teacher rotation as

a means to close the teacher quality gap between its urban and rural schools. The core idea of TRP is to rotate 'high-quality' urban schoolteachers to teach in hard-to-staff rural schools for a certain period of time (Ministry of Education of China, 2014).

The practice of teacher rotation has been quickly scaled up and routinised across China as facilitated by TRP (Zhang & Su, 2017). A total of 1.8506 million teachers and principals participated in the rotation programmes during 2013 to 2016 (Ministry of Education of China, 2017). Recent studies (e.g., Xia, Liu, & Tang, 2015; Xing & Ge, 2018) have consistently reported an alarming problem that calls for immediate attention—teacher resistance, that many teachers presented low motivation to participating in rotation programmes. The large magnitude of teacher resistance can compromise the effectiveness and sustainability of the policy in the long run. To date, while studies have examined the phenomenon of teacher resistance from the perspective of the participating teachers, scant attention has been paid to the experiences and perspectives of local policy actors who play a vital role in shaping policy implementation process and effectiveness on the ground (Liao, 2018; Honig, 2006).

To begin to close the research gap, this study investigated how five key administrators of one county carried out a teacher rotation programme in their local context from 2012 to 2015. This study can offer a new account of the growing tension between individual teachers and equality-oriented policy in today's China from the perspective of ground-level policy actors. It can also contribute Chinese empirical evidence to the international discussion on the uses of teacher rotation for equalising teacher workforce. It is worth mentioning upfront that, given the qualitative and exploratory nature of this case study, the research findings should be used cautiously for policy evaluation or policy-making.

Literature review

Teacher rotation as a personnel deployment strategy used internationally

Broadly speaking, teacher rotation refers to a personnel deployment strategy that requires teachers to move to a different teaching position. South Korea and Japan are the two countries frequently mentioned in the literature for their systemic use of teacher rotation (Akiba, 2013; Kang & Hong, 2008). For instance, Kang and Hong (2008) discuss how teachers in South Korea are hired by city or provincial governments and assigned to positions in local schools. Then, every five years, the teachers are required to move to a different school within the same province. By doing so, teachers have a relatively equal probability of teaching in any given school within the province.

Some scholars (eg., Akiba, 2013; Kang & Hong, 2008) view teacher rotation as a critical factor that has contributed to the outperformance of South Korean and Japanese students on international tests. They argue that systemic and periodic uses of teacher rotation is an effective approach to equalising students' access to high-quality teachers that other governments could learn from. However, such claims are questioned by some other scholars (e.g., Park, 2013) because they are mainly based only on standardised test scores. In addition, a rich vein of scholarship suggests that teaching and the management of teaching workforce are highly contextualised (Day & Gu, 2010; Liao & Yuan, 2017). Rotating teachers from one context to another is likely to cause many and various costs to teachers and to the education system (Liao, 2019). Recent studies (e.g., Yuan, 2018) have

identified a range of difficulties facing teachers who participate in rotation programmes. The various and significant costs of rotating teachers caution the tendency of idealising the benefits of teacher rotation and call for more critical examinations of the practice of teacher rotation in their situated contexts.

Teacher rotation as a policy effort to address urban-rural disparities in China

Similar to many other countries, China has been grappling with providing equal educational opportunities to all students. Due to the long-standing urban-rural divide, China's rural schools significantly lag behind their urban counterparts in many respects, including school conditions, teaching workforce, and student performance (Hannum, 2003; Xue & Li, 2015). China's central government has enacted a series of teacher policies to tackle the urban-rural disparities by leveraging the pivotal roles of teachers. The teacher rotation policy is a recent case of such policy endeavours.

In 2014, China's central government issued a national policy called 'The Guidelines for Facilitating the Rotation of Teachers and Principals in Basic Education Schools within Counties (Districts)' (shortened as Teacher Rotation Policy (TRP) hereafter, Ministry of Education of China, 2014). The core idea of TRP is to send eligible urban schoolteachers to teach in under-resourced rural schools for a period of time. As compensation for urban schoolteachers' contributions, TRP rewards the participating urban teachers with both material incentives (e.g., a transportation subsidy) and non-material incentives (e.g., professional awards, early promotion). The key policy provisions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Key provisions of the teacher rotation policy (TRP) in China¹.

Dimensions	Contents
Goal	To promote balanced development of compulsory education within counties (districts) by rotating teachers across schools
How to rotate	Rotate teachers from schools located in urban areas (i.e., the county seat) to rural areas (i.e., townships and villages)
Who are eligible	Teachers who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● have <i>bianzhi</i>² ● teach in compulsory education (Grades 1–9) ● have taught consecutively in their original schools for the amount of time as required by the local authorities (usually 6–12 years)
Scale	At least 10% of all qualified teachers in a county should be rotated <i>per year</i>
Duration	At the discretion of the local authorities
Incentives	Priorities will be given to participating teachers in considerations of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● early promotion ● higher performance pay ● professional development opportunities ● awards
Mandates	If a county fails to implement the policy adequately or effectively, its application for the recognition of balanced development of compulsory education will be denied ³

Notes:

1. This policy requires both qualified teachers and principals to rotate. As this paper focuses on teacher rotation, we only summarised the key provisions pertaining to the rotation of teachers.

2. *Bianzhi*, translated roughly as 'the establishment,' usually refers to the number of established posts in a unit, office or organisation (Brødsgaard, 2002).

3. The recognition of balanced development in compulsory education is an evaluation of the counties for their performance on narrowing the urban-rural disparities in education beginning in 2012.

Encouraged by this policy, teacher rotation programmes have been quickly scaled up and routinized across the nation. However, recent studies (e.g., Xia et al., 2015; Xing & Ge, 2018) have consistently reported that teachers have presented strong resistance to participating in rotation programmes. For instance, according to a survey of 1,266 teachers in Tibet, 80% of the teachers did not believe that implementing TRP could narrow the urban-rural disparities in education (Xing & Ge, 2018). Many other studies (e.g., Chen & Fan, 2009; Si & Yang, 2015) have reached similar conclusions.

The existent literature has revealed a puzzling phenomenon: teachers have presented strong resistance to participating in rotation programmes, but the practice of teacher rotation has been scaled up across the nation. Who made it happen, and how? Furthermore, how can the answers to the previous question speak to the seemingly optimistic perception of teacher rotation as a promising approach to addressing educational inequality? Unfortunately, very few studies have examined these important questions.

China's education governance system as a critical institutional context

Local actors' enactment of a policy takes place in existing governance systems. Previous studies have found that China's education governance system is hierarchical, emphasises performance, and values the moral dimension and systemic attribute of teacher quality. These together lay out the important institutional context in which this study was conducted.

First, China's education governance system is highly hierarchical (Zhou, 2013). As embedded in the overall governance structure of China, the system consists of five levels of administration: national level, provincial level, county level, township level, and school level (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2007). Each level of administration undertakes particular responsibilities in policy process. Generally speaking, the central government sets up policy goals and provides general guidelines for implementation; provincial governments develop specific guidelines for implementation; county-level and township-level governments mobilise resources to support schools to enact policy on the ground. China's central government is powerful in influencing local schools by making national standards, allocating resources, and evaluating outcomes. Local actors are expected to conform to policy mandates and strive hard to realise intended policy goals (Yang & Ni, 2018).

Second, the system emphasises *performance*. Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has been relying on performance legitimacy, a model for sustaining power that entails consistently accomplishing concrete goals, to justify its governance (Zhu, 2011). Actors at different levels of administration face a great deal of pressure in demonstrating satisfactory performance, and thus they often seek each and every means possible to meet the goals set up by upper-level governments. However, actors are not always motivated or have the capacity to realise the intended policy goals. This fact has led to constant tension between different levels of administration. Such tension motivates upper-level governments to regularly inspect the performance of lower-level governments and sometimes may lead local actors to cope with policy mandates (Zhou, 2017).

Third, the system has developed a Chinese perspective of teacher quality, which highlights the moral dimension and systemic attribute of teacher quality. President Xi Jinping calls on all Chinese teachers to learn to be ‘Good Teachers with Four Qualities (四有好老师)¹. The four qualities are ideal beliefs (理想信念), morality (道德情操), solid knowledge (扎实学识), and caring and graceful hearts (仁爱之心). ‘Morality’ is repeatedly emphasised as the determining quality of a good teacher in today’s China (Wang, 2014). That teachers going to teach in high-need rural schools can be an embodiment of teacher morality. Furthermore, the system considers that the quality of teachers is an asset that belongs to the education system and can be mobilised across schools or regions for the overall benefits of the system. That is why some scholars (e.g., Cao & Lo, 2018) started to call Chinese teachers ‘system person (系统人).’

Based on the literature review, we asked two research questions:

- (1) From the participants’ perspective, what impact did the teacher rotation programme make on their local teaching workforce?
- (2) In what ways did the participants contribute to the perceived policy impact?

Conceptualising policy implementation: a sensemaking perspective

The focus of the study is on how local policy actors implement the teacher rotation policy. Among the various conceptualisations of policy implementation, the sense-making perspective is the one that highlights the pivotal roles of policy actors and focuses on the ways in which their meaning-making shapes policy process and outcomes (Honig, 2006). We adopted the sensemaking perspective as the conceptual framework for the study.

In particular, the sensemaking perspective posits that what meanings policy actors construct and how they act on policy can qualitatively shape the trajectory and destinations of a policy. Policy actors’ sensemaking includes both the cognitive activities occurring in their minds, and the implementation behaviours they display (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1995). Policy actors’ sensemaking can be influenced by an array of factors, including their existing cognitive structure, the institutional contexts in which they work, and the signals provided in the policy (e.g., policy goals, incentives, regulations) (Spillane et al., 2002).

The sensemaking perspective, as used in western contexts, implies that individuals should and are usually able to exert their agency in making sense of, adapting to, or even modifying the policy they work with. However, the concept of agency is used differently in contexts where the governance structures are hierarchical. The Chinese governance system also expects agency from individuals but primarily for the purpose of executing policy mandates. A saying, which is still widely used in China’s governance system today, vividly illustrates this point. That is, ‘Do your job when supportive conditions are available. Create supportive conditions yourself when they are not available, and then do your job². Furthermore, studies (e.g., Zhou, 2017) have also documented how individuals working in the Chinese governance system present their agency for the sake of themselves or their local interest groups. However, the forms of their agency

are generally more indiscernable and subtle than how individuals' agency is embodied in western contexts.

The varying connotations and representations of agency in different socio-cultural contexts caution direct applications of the sensemaking perspective to the Chinese context (Liao, 2018). Thus, we modified the original sensemaking framework by stressing the influence of socio-cultural contexts on policy actors' sensemaking. When collecting and interpreting the data, we also proactively attended to the socio-cultural characteristics of the research site and their influences on the process and consequences of implementing TRP.

Methodology: a case study

Research setting and participants

We used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to search for a research setting and participants. Ning County (pseudonym) emerged from the nineteen counties across China that we initially approached to be the 'best' choice. Ning resides in a remote and mountainous region in Shanxi Province. As of 2015, the population of Ning was 230,000. A total of 2,759 teachers were educating 26,300 students in 132 elementary and secondary schools there (Education Bureau of Ning County, 2016). Similar to many other counties in China, the teacher quality gap between Ning's urban and rural schools is persistently large. Ning turned to teacher rotation as a means to close the urban-rural teacher quality gap. By the time when this study's fieldwork took place, Ning had implemented the teacher rotation policy for four cycles, respectively in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015³. Over the four years, 169 teachers from 11 schools (mostly in urban regions) were distributed to teach and support 21 rural schools. See Figures 1–4 for the mappings of the teachers moving across schools.

Five education administrators who played key roles in carrying out the teacher rotation policy in Ning County participated in this study. Feng and Wang were Director and Vice Director of the Teacher Affairs Office in the Education Bureau of Ning County. They were leading the implementation of the policy in Ning County. Zhao, Yuan, and Cao, each as a representative of the principals of schools located in the county

Table 2. Participants' backgrounds.

Gender	Experience (years)			Institutional roles	Duties for implementing TRP
	Teaching	Administration			
Feng	M	15	20	Director, Teacher Affairs Office	Supervise the implementation of TRP in Ning County
Wang	M	11	6	Vice Director, Teacher Affairs Office	Execute Feng's directives
Zhao	M	11	18	Principal, County Seat Secondary School (Urban)	Implement TRP in their schools
Yuan	M	25	7	Principal, Township Middle School (Rural)	
Cao	F	16	15	Principal, Village Primary School (Rural)	

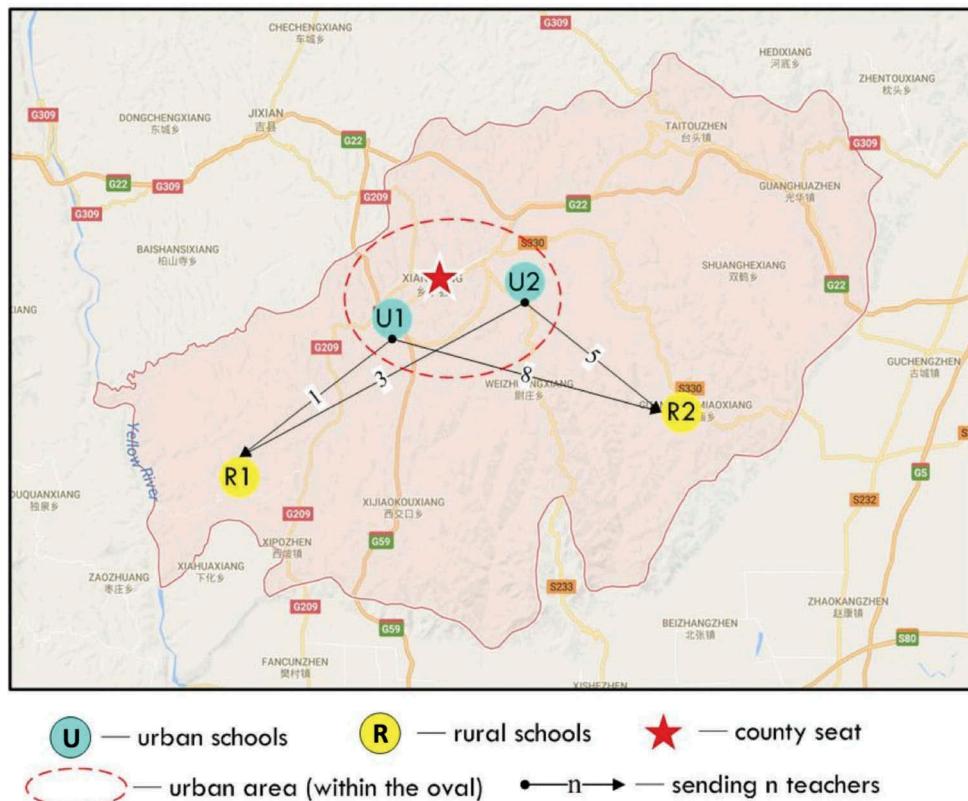


Figure 1. The mapping of TRP teachers (2012).

seat, in townships, and in villages, were in charge of carrying out the policy in their own schools. Table 2 displays the key backgrounds of the participants.

Data generation and analysis

First, the lead researcher conducted multiple ethnographic interviews with each participant. Each interview lasted two to three hours. The first interviews focused on the participants' backgrounds, their experiences with TRP, and their perceptions of the impact of TRP on Ning's teacher workforce. During the second interviews, the participants were asked to verify the key information collected in the first interviews, elaborate on the places that were unclear or not addressed sufficiently, and comment on the preliminary findings emerging from the ongoing analysis of the data. The lead researcher had the chance to conduct a third interview with Yuan and Cao. In the third interviews, the lead researcher asked additional questions about their thoughts of and actions on the rotation policy to enrich the data.

The lead researcher also observed how the participants behaved in critical implementation events, including the Education Bureau's meetings in which the two governmental officials developed strategies for carrying out TRP, the school events that the three

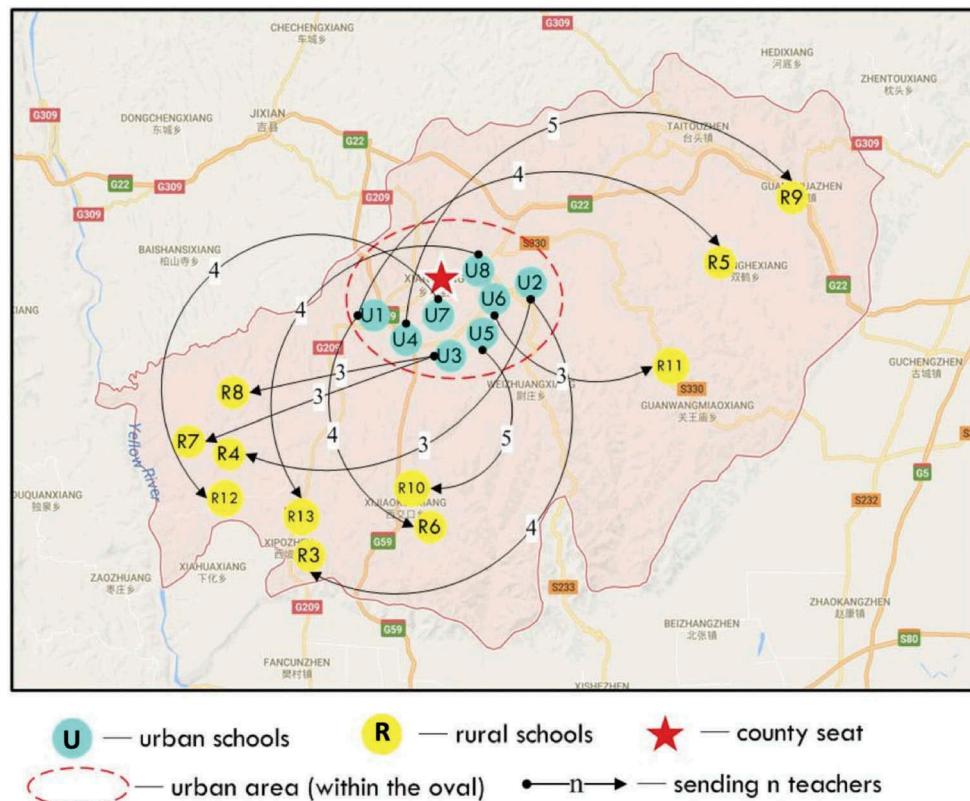


Figure 2. The mapping of TRP teachers (2013).

principals organised to encourage teachers to participate in TRP, and the informal occasions in which the five participants sought collaboration of other stakeholders. During or immediately after the observations, the lead researcher took field notes to document what actions the participants took, under what circumstances, and his interpretations of the events. As a result, 35,443 words of observational notes were generated as the second source of data.

We drew on the interview data to answer the first research question. In particular, we first bracketed the episodes of the data in which the participants expressed their views of the policy impact. Then, we categorised the bracketed data into two general groups: ‘positive impact’ and ‘negative impact.’ Next, within each group, we compared and contrasted the viewpoints of the participants, identified the similarities across the participants, and refined them to be the findings for the first research question. The analysis for the second research question consisted of three steps. First, we open-coded the interview data, which led to a set of initial codes about the participants’ actions of implementing the policy. Second, we refined these initial codes by introducing the observational data into the analysis. Third, we used data matrix to display the refined codes and to generate themes and assertions. See Appendix 1 for the data matrix.

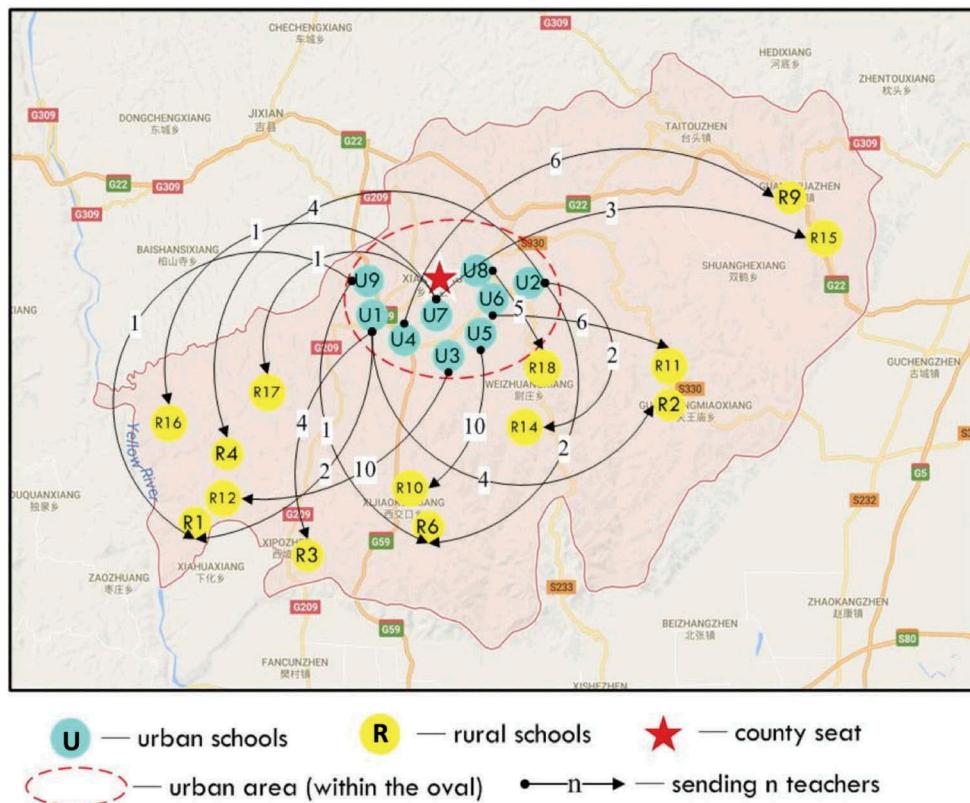


Figure 3. The mapping of TRP teachers (2014).

Findings

What were the participants' perceptions of the policy impact?

In sum, the participants perceived that TRP had temporarily made the distribution of teacher quality between Ning's urban and rural schools more equal. However, this result was achieved at the expense of discouraging and sacrificing urban schoolteachers. The participants also observed that TRP had caused unintended interruptions to the rural schools. The mixed impact as well as the resistance from the schools and teachers rendered the teacher rotation policy challenging to continue.

On the positive side, TRP did make Ning's teacher force structure more equal than before by sending dozens of urban schoolteachers to work in hard-to-staff rural schools. Furthermore, from the school administrators' perspective, a few participating teachers did help improve students' learning experiences and outcomes in the rural schools. For instance, Feng said that the Education Bureau organised a meeting for all TRP participating teachers in June 2016. The purpose was to circulate the successful experiences in carrying out TRP. Feng said,

Many teachers cried. They said, in the beginning, they felt reluctant to go [to teach in rural schools]. However, once they were there, looking into the eyes of the rural children, they felt

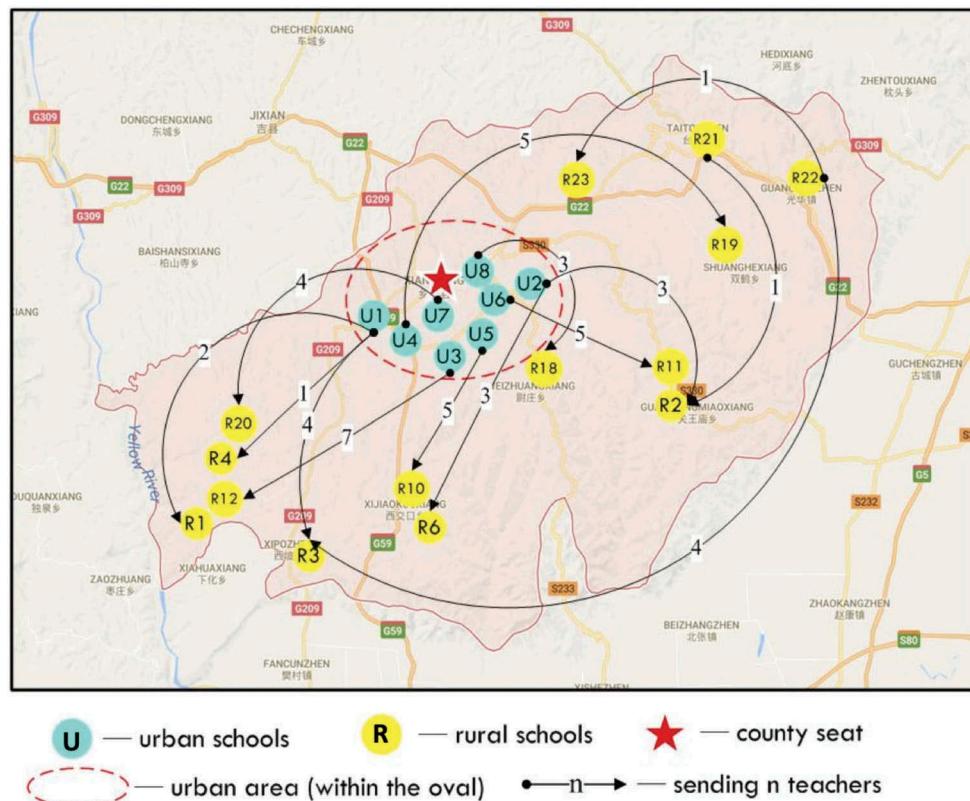


Figure 4. The mapping of TRP teachers (2015).

a strong sense of responsibility. The programme is one year, but one teacher even applied to stay in the rural school for one more year, because the next year her students [at the rural school] would take the high school entrance examination, and she said she wanted to accompany them until the end of their middle school lives. (Feng, interview 2)

The two rural school principals also acknowledged that TRP teachers had positively influenced their schools. For instance, Yuan, the principal of Township Middle School, said, ‘the [TRP] teachers injected new ‘blood’ into our school, inspired and helped our teachers to grow, and elevated our students’ learning outcomes’ (Yuan, interview 1). In short, by increasing the number of teachers with better-prepared teaching knowledge and competency, the participants considered that TRP had temporarily equalised the distribution of teacher quality between Ning’s urban and rural schools.

TRP’s unintended negative impact, however, seemed to be more salient in the data. All three school principals expressed their concerns about the policy. In particular, they worried that the pervasive coping behaviours, or even unprofessional behaviours, exhibited by many TRP teachers might have harmed rather than helped their schools. For instance, the TRP teacher in Village Primary School often arrived late and left early. What was worse, Cao, the principal of Village Primary School, said she did not have the necessary administrative power to address such behaviours. As a result, the students taught by that teacher sometimes had to study on their own in the classroom (Cao, interview 3). Similarly, Zhao,

the principal of County Seat Secondary School, felt disappointed and ashamed by the unprofessional behaviours that the TRP teachers from his school exhibited in the rural schools, such as declining to attend staff meetings and not teaching on Fridays. Those incidents led Zhao to believe that 'This policy [TRP] is not the right "prescription" for solving the inequality problems between urban and rural schools' (Zhao, interview 2).

Together, TRP caused both positive and negative impacts on Ning's teacher workforce. As Feng, the official supervising the implementation of TRP in Ning County, said, 'We cannot just let teachers make sacrifices. It [TRP] will not work if the government cannot provide generous enough benefits to incentivise teachers to make the extra efforts [of teaching in hard-to-staff rural schools]' (Feng, interview 2).

How did the participants contribute to the perceived policy impact?

In realising the perceived policy impact as reported above, the policy actors experienced persistent and various kinds of negotiation with the TRP teachers. Several forms of context-specific sensemaking strategies emerged from the policy actors' efforts to encourage urban schoolteachers to participate in the teacher rotation programmes. These included: 1) using argumentation techniques to convince teachers; 2) tailoring policy incentives to motivate teachers; and 3) using cultural logics as a norm to regulate 'misconducting' teachers. The policy actors' sensemaking strategies mirrored teachers' and schools' stiff resistance to TRP and also raised serious questions about how to use teacher rotation programmes to improve the teacher workforce in hard-to-staff schools.

Using argumentation techniques to convince teachers

The initial increases in TRP participating teachers were because the policy actors convinced some teachers that TRP was worth participating. They developed a set of argumentation techniques to convince the teachers to participate in TRP, and two particular kinds of techniques were noticeable in the data: setting up role models and borrowing the power of imagined costs/benefits. Setting up role models was the first argumentation technique that most participants in this study used for convincing teachers. They mainly relied on this technique to seek teachers' support when the targeted teachers were potentially resistant. TRP requires participating teachers to leave their original school for one to three years. Many teachers were not willing to participate in the rotation programme because changing their workplace for a year or longer would cause hardship or at least inconvenience to the participating teachers and their families. As the principal of County Secondary, Zhao was obliged to send 10% of his school teachers to participate in this programme. To achieve this goal, Zhao deliberately organised a teacher speech contest around the theme of 'Good Teachers with Four Qualities (四有好老师).' Based on recommendations, eight teachers who were regarded as the 'best' teachers in County Secondary attended the contest and shared their teaching stories. 'Being self-giving' emerged from the eight speeches as a core quality shared by the teachers. For instance, a Chinese teacher mentioned in his speech that he was so busy helping his students prepare for the college entrance examination that he forgot to pick up his daughter from her kindergarten several times. This story earned the teacher thunderous applause from the audience (Observational notes, 27 June 2016). By using the eight locally defined good teachers as role models, Zhao attempted to encourage the other teachers to look up to the

role models, learn to be self-giving, and finally be committed to supporting rural education through participating in the teacher rotation programme (Zhao, interview 2).

The second argumentation technique used by most participants was borrowing the power of imagined benefits/costs. For instance, Feng, the government official who directed the implementation of TRP in Ning County, used an imagined intervention to persuade all urban school principals to send their teachers to participate in TRP. When the Education Bureau was formulating the specific plan for implementing TRP in 2011, the original idea was to require the participating urban schoolteachers to work in rural schools for three years. Before officially issuing the policy, however, the Education Bureau received many complaints and resistance from the urban schools and teachers. Then, the Education Bureau decided to pilot this program with a one-year version. If things went well, the government would consider extending the length of rotation from one year to three years. Thus, when calling for urban school principals' support, Feng borrowed the power of the imagined three-year version of the rotation programme. He said to the urban school principals that it would be wise to tell their teachers to participate in the one-year version of the programme because it was possible that this programme would be elongated to be three years in the near future, and then the participating teachers would have to stay in rural schools for longer time (Feng, interview 2).

By using some locally developed argumentation techniques, the policy actors successfully enhanced the numbers of TRP participating teachers over time.

Tailoring policy incentives to motivate teachers

It was, predictably, difficult to attract teachers to participate in the rotation programme because it would cause challenges to the participating teachers' work and lives. However, the number of participating teachers still increased in the first three years. This outcome was partially achieved by the policy actors' strategic and responsive tailoring of the incentives that TRP provided to the participating teachers.

Ning County started implementing TRP in 2012. Initially, the policy guidelines required that both urban and rural schools should send 10% of their teachers to participate in a two-way teacher exchange programme. Due to the severe teacher shortages facing the rural schools, however, the Education Bureau decided to start with a one-way assistance programme. In other words, it meant that the programme only required urban schools to send their teachers to support rural schools.

In the beginning, the urban school principals encouraged their teachers to apply for the programme on a voluntary basis. As a result, only 17 teachers across the whole county applied. This number was much lower than what the Bureau expected. Then Wang, the official executing the implementation of TRP in Ning County, felt the need to employ more incentives to motivate teachers to participate. Therefore, in the following year (i.e., 2013), the Education Bureau decided to tie the experience of teaching in rural schools to a preferred qualification for professional promotion and awards. Driven by the desire for expedited promotion, more teachers applied, and the number of applicants climbed up to 43 in 2013 and 62 in 2014. Wang said most of these applicants were the teachers who were planning to apply for professional promotion in the next few years (Wang, interview 2).

The experience of participating in TRP, however, gradually lost its power over time in privileging teachers in competitions for professional promotion. Most teachers who participated in the rotation programme were still not able to get promoted after they returned

from supporting rural schools because the quota for promotion per year was relatively fixed and limited. This result discouraged the remaining teachers from taking part in the rotation programme. Consequently, the number of participants dropped down to 48 in 2015. Then, Wang and his office had to think of other measures, such as adding/enhancing the monetary and professional incentives. Thus, starting in 2015, the Education Bureau decided to reward the teachers who performed well in the exchange programme with both a certain amount of money and professional honours. By the end of the 2015–2016 school year, the Bureau organised a meeting to have all TRP participating teachers to circulate and reflect on their experiences with this programme. The Education Bureau finally picked three teachers as the role models, rewarded each of them with 1,500 Chinese Yuan, and the honour of outstanding rural supporting teacher, hoping to motivate other urban schoolteachers to participate in the programme in the next school year (Observational notes, 15 June 2016). Wang said,

We don't know whether the money and the honors we've added [to TRP's incentive scheme] can attract more teachers to apply the next year. We are just "crossing the river by groping the rocks." (Wang, interview 1)

The many and various adaptations that the policy actors made across different cycles of implementation showed that the construction of policy ideas on the ground was not a linear process or a once-and-for-all event. Instead, the actors had to frequently evaluate the interim policy outcomes, adapt the intervention schemes, and then revise their implementation strategies to try to approximate the intended policy goals.

Leveraging cultural logics as a norm to 'regulate' teachers

Although the policy actors actively used argumentation techniques and responsive incentives to nurture teachers' participation and cooperation, TRP's radical intervention (i.e., having urban schoolteachers to teach in challenging rural schools for at least one year) still led many TRP participating teachers to cope with it poorly, or even engage in unprofessional behaviour. When teacher misconduct occurred, the policy actors in this study used cultural logics, such as *mianzi*, which is still widely observed in today's China, to 'regulate' teachers. *Mianzi* literally means 'face,' but in the Chinese context, its meaning has been extended to be about the dignity and integrity of an individual or an organisation. Protecting each other's *mianzi* is an essential cultural norm that still guides many Chinese people's interpersonal interactions (Buckley, Clegg, & Tan, 2006). Seeking teachers' cooperation is a crucial interpersonal interaction in implementing the rotation programme.

Zhao's experience in addressing the misconduct of TRP teachers from his school well illustrates how the policy actors used cultural logics to seek teachers' cooperation. During the 2015–2016 school year, seven teachers from County Secondary participated in TRP. Three of them were rotated to a rural school located in a remote township of Ning County. A few weeks after the school year commenced, Zhao received a call from the principal of the rural school where Zhao's teachers were temporarily teaching. The rural school principal told Zhao that the three teachers raised several unreasonable requests, such as asking the rural school principal not to assign teaching tasks to them on Fridays because they wanted to go back to their homes located in the county seat. Zhao felt very upset about it. Zhao said,

Right after I hung up the call [from the rural school principal], I summoned the three teachers to come to my office right away. Once they arrived, I severely scolded them. I questioned them, ‘Do you know you are losing my face, the face of our school, and the face of yourself? How unprofessional you were to raise such unreasonable requests. If I hear of anything similar happening in the future, be prepared for some serious consequences.’ (Zhao, interview 2)

The above example illustrated a vivid role that *mianzi* played in the meaning negotiation among Zhao, the rural school principal, and the three teachers around how teachers should participate in the rotation programme. For the three teachers, they seemed to have prioritised the length of time they could spend at home out of respect for the *mianzi* (or integrity) of themselves or their original school. As for Zhao, he used *mianzi* as an instrument to press the three teachers to fulfill their policy obligations professionally.

The *mianzi* culture also influenced several other actors' sensemaking activities. For instance, Wang was worried about losing face when he reported his implementation of TRP in front of his superiors, and thus, he tried very hard to make his work performance look 'good.' As for Cao, the principal of Village Primary School, the *mianzi* culture made her stop spending energy managing the TRP teachers rotated to her school. During the 2014–2015 school year, Cao's school received one TRP teacher. Cao said she had noticed that the teacher failed to fulfil her job duties from time to time. For instance, the teacher sometimes left the school early or arrived late, which left the students in her class unattended. Cao was dissatisfied with the TRP teacher's performance, but she chose not to talk about her dissatisfaction in front of the teacher. Cao reasoned,

She [the TRP teacher] was just teaching here temporarily. Her labor contract, teaching position, salary, and benefits are still in the charge of her original school. I don't have any power that I can use to influence her. Therefore, I don't want to create any unnecessary conflicts between us. No matter whether she is doing a good or bad job here, she will be leaving soon. (Cao, interview 2)

Unlike Zhao leveraging the concept of *mianzi* to persuade misconducting TRP teachers to cooperate, Cao used *mianzi* to justify her turning a blind eye to the TRP teacher's unprofessional behaviour at her school. The roles that *mianzi* and other cultural logics play in policy implementation need to be explored further, but it is evident in these examples that cultural norms served as a powerful thread of logics, in addition to the policy and professional logics, in shaping the policy actors' thoughts and actions.

Discussion and implications

The research findings suggest several implications for understanding and studying teacher rotation in China and internationally. First, the research findings caution the tendency of idealising teacher rotation as a panacea for educational inequality. The persistent challenges experienced by the five participants of this study suggest that significant administrative expenses were coupled with teacher rotation. The expenses may include the additional incentives for motivating teachers to move across schools, the extra time and efforts that school administrators need to pay in accommodating rotating teachers' needs, and the negative consequences that some rotating teachers' misconduct may cause to students (e.g., the students left to study on their own in Cao's school), to collegial relationships between teachers and administrators, and to the ecology of the

whole school system. Even without considering expenses, the advocates of teacher rotation need to consider the institutional and socio-cultural foundations that sustain the rotation of teachers across schools. In the case of China, the pervasive practice of rotation is partly ascribed to the collectivistic social values, and partly because of the powerful governance system that makes the rotation of teachers possible (Brødsgaard, 2017). However, these foundations do not necessarily exist in many other societies, which would render it quite challenging to rotate teachers across schools systemically.

Second, the research findings contribute to the existent literature a new account of the growing tension between individual teachers and equality-oriented policy discourse in today's China. The participants' experiences shed light on how the ongoing shift of China's socio-cultural discourses might have influenced the implementation of teacher rotation policy. In traditional values of the Chinese society, teachers are expected to be self-giving (Wang, 2014). However, the continuing economy-focused reform and development have transformed the social discourse about what counts as worthy of pursuit, respect, and pride. Under this influence, wealth and power seem to be new criteria for judging one's social value (Lampton, 2008). Previous studies have suggested that teachers may have internalised those values and are beginning to explicitly pursue their individual mobility on the social ladder (Wang & Gao, 2013), which is fairly legitimate from an individualistic, modern, and democratic view. Equality-oriented teacher policies such as TRP, however, still rest on the assumption that teachers should be sacrificing their individual interest to the collective good. Those policies also operate on the assumption that China's hierarchical governance system could have implemented policy ideas faithfully on the ground, even if the interventions are as radical as moving teachers across schools for a year or longer. Nevertheless, the strong teacher resistance experienced by this study's five participants suggest that neither assumption was sustained. Chinese teachers today seem to have developed a stronger sense of legitimacy for pursuing their personal interests. Thus, when policies such as TRP ask teachers to 'sacrifice' themselves to contribute to educational equality, it would be natural to witness a great deal of resistance to it because participating in the policy contradicts their personal or even their families' best interest. This reality calls for policymakers to view socio-cultural discourses as dynamically changing and take the features of the present socio-discourses into account when revising TRP or devising new teacher policies in the future.

Third, the study has revealed three sensemaking strategies that can serve as a conceptual reference for future studies to explore the specific ways in which local actors embody their agency and shape policy implementation processes and outcomes in their situated contexts. The strategies include using argumentation techniques, adjusting policy incentives, and leveraging cultural logics. These strategies resonate with the recent studies on policy implementation. Lester, Lochmiller, and Gabriel (2017), For instance, emphasise the crucial role that the uses of languages play in shaping policy implementation. The participants' strategic uses of argumentation techniques in carrying out TRP echoes well with this point. We call for more empirical studies to refine the three sensemaking strategies in order to enrich the sensemaking theory in education policy implementation.

This study is limited in two ways. First, this study only examined a small number of participants in one rural county of China, and thus the findings are exploratory by nature. There are various kinds of challenging schools, many forms of teacher rotation policies, and different local approaches to carrying out policies in contexts with varying historical, socio-

cultural, and political characteristics. Therefore, it is likely that policy actors under other circumstances would engage with teacher rotation differently. Second, the perspectives of some other important stake-holders of teacher rotation policy were not included in the study, such as the rotating teachers' students and their fellow teachers. The voices of these significant others are needed to develop a holistic understanding of the complex phenomenon of teacher rotation and the logics behind it. We hope, however, that this study can serve as a starting point for future studies to address these limitations and ultimately strengthen the knowledge foundations for improving teacher workforce in China and internationally.

Notes

1. 'Good Teachers with Four Qualities (四有好老师)' is a notion brought up by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Beijing Normal University on September 9th, 2014.
2. '有条件要上, 没条件创造条件也要上' by National Model Worker Wang Jinxin in 1959.
3. Teacher rotation was initially practiced as a local policy in different parts of China, including Ning County. The central government turned it to be a national policy in 2014.

Highlights

- Teacher rotation as a policy idea gains increasing visibility internationally
- China's Teacher Rotation Policy (TRP) aims to equalize teacher workforce
- Local policy actors play crucial roles in carrying out TRP
- Local policy actors develop context-specific sensemaking strategies
- High expenses of implementing TRP caution the idealization of teacher rotation

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Appendix 1. The matrix of data.

'Thoughts' (interview data)					'Actions' (observational data)					Refined codes	Themes
Feng	Wang	Zhao	Yuan	Cao	Feng	Wang	Zhao	Yuan	Cao		
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Drawing metaphors	Using argumentation techniques to convince teachers
✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	Exaggerating	
✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a	Setting up role models	
✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Comparing alternatives	
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Lowering policy goals	Tailoring policy incentives to motivate teachers
✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a	Increasing incentives	
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Loosening mandates	
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Drawing on bureaucratic mentality	Leveraging cultural logics to ‘regulate’ teachers
n/a	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Leveraging the concept of <i>mianzi</i>	
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Seeking informal solutions	

Notes:

1. The ‘Refined codes’ are the codes that have been identified in both the interview data *and* the observational data of more than three participants.
2. The check mark (i.e., ✓) indicates that at least one episode of a particular participant’s interview/observational data conveys approximately the same meaning(s) as the corresponding refined code does; ‘n/a’ indicates that no episode of the data is identified with the corresponding refined code.