

**PhD Thesis Prospectus**

# China's Rust Belt Politics

## 中国锈皮带政治

Economic mentality, policy regimes and political obstacles to  
industrial revitalisation of Northeast China

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In China's rust belt, there are widely reported claims that economic revitalisation is hampered by an 'anti-market economic mentality' from the local people. However, the current Western academic literature places little emphasis on this as a significant factor in economic policy implementation in contemporary China. Is the economic mentality of the people an underappreciated factor in Chinese public policy implementation or an excuse masking much deeper problems with politics and governance in an economy in decline? This research seeks to explore the validity of economic mentality as a significant obstacle to revitalisation in Northeast China by analysing the role that ideas about market economics, entrepreneurship and commercial activity play in the policy regime on industrial revitalisation. It will then provide a more nuanced explanation for this policy implementation obstruction through analysis of the local institutions and interest groups on revitalisation and evaluate whether China's policy-making architecture, in its current configuration, is fit for post-industrial economic management.

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## Background

Northeast China is in a state of serious economic decline. The state-owned enterprise (SOE) and urban economy reforms of the 1990s have left Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces with a set of issues for which the old command economy ways of doing business are grossly inadequate or stubbornly difficult to change.

These issues include: low market engagement from businesses and a lack of sustained economic development, single ownership structures with a higher percentage of state-owned enterprises compared to other regions in China, slow adjustment in the industrial structure, outdated equipment and technology, heavy social welfare responsibilities for the SOEs, and a deterioration of the dominant industries in resource-based cities.<sup>1</sup> The Northeast is now a rust belt and this has stripped Northeasterners of their previous identity as the ‘eldest sons of the republic’ when they helped build ‘the heartland of the socialist economy’<sup>2</sup> and were the region considered the driver of industry in New China.

Because of this decline, in 2003, a revitalisation strategy consisting of a series of favourable policies from the central government was introduced to address these problems. These included tax reform on the agricultural and mining sectors, pilot projects in urban social security, VAT reform and cutting down depreciable life for fixed assets, preferable policies to support slum clearance, land and mineral resources development and greater access to foreign direct investment.<sup>3</sup> Even after the creation of this economic revitalisation strategy, many of these same issues continue to plague the regional economy.

Some researchers have found that by 2009 the initial policy effects of the 2003 strategy had already begun to ‘evaporate’.<sup>4</sup> As Figure 1 below shows, after the introduction of the initial 2003 plan there was a jump in real GDP growth in the Northeast provinces (an important measure of success for Chinese officials), however, since then rates have returned to pre-revitalisation

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<sup>1</sup> Wang, Mark et al (2014) *Old Industrial Cities Seeking New Road of Industrialization*, p 35.

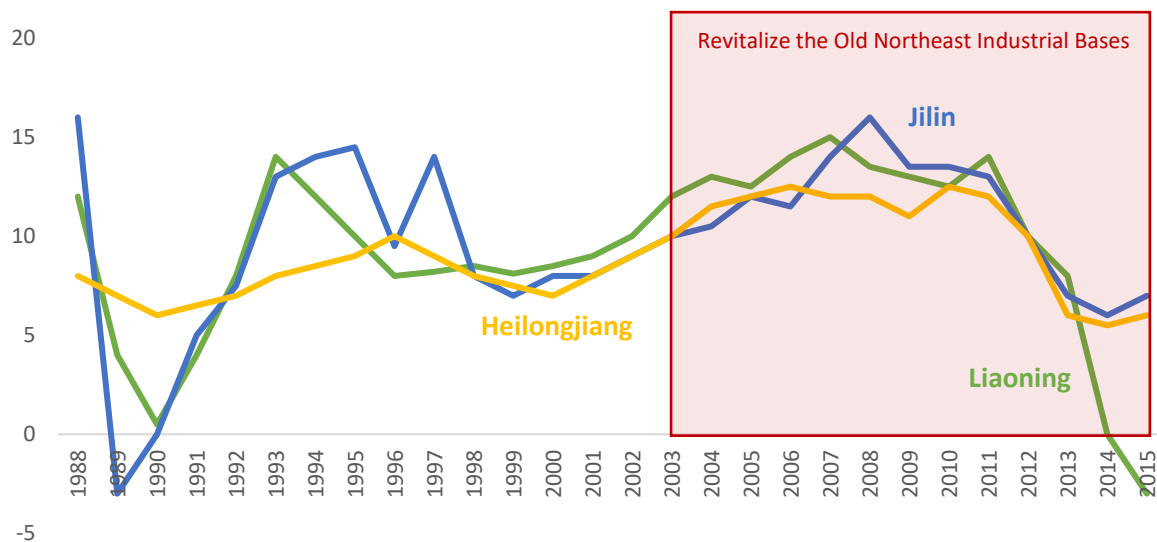
<sup>2</sup> Cho, Mun Young (2013) *The Specter of ‘The People’ – Urban Poverty in Northeast China*, p.26.

<sup>3</sup> Zhang, Pingyu (2008) ‘Revitalizing Old Industrial Base of Northeast China: Process, Policy and Challenge’ in *China Geographical Society* 2008 18(2) pp.109–118.

<sup>4</sup> Chung, Jae Ho, et al (2009) ‘Assessing the ‘Revive the Northeast’ (*zhenxing dongbei*) Programme: Origins, Policies and Implementation’ in *The China Quarterly* No. 197 (Mar., 2009), p125.

strategy levels and over a decade on, are now below even these.<sup>5</sup> Liaoning has even become the first Chinese province in 7 years to register negative growth and fall into recession in 2016.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1: GDP growth (%) in provinces of Northeast China year-on-year, 1988-2015**



In 2015, the provincial economies of the Northeast continued to have some of the lowest real GDP growth rates nationwide,<sup>7</sup> continued falling industrial production and a declining working-age population.<sup>8</sup> Due to the inability of long-term positive gains to be maintained, more than once the central government has had to ‘revitalise’ the revitalisation strategy, doing so in 2007<sup>9</sup> and again more recently in 2016<sup>10</sup>.

All this has policymakers and scholars in China searching for answers to why the Northeast is so difficult to transform when they, in theory, have the policies and the resources to fix the issue of economic decline?

<sup>5</sup> Statistics obtained from the China Statistic Yearbooks of relevant years from the National Bureau of Statistics website.

<sup>6</sup> Hornby, Lucy (2016) ‘China province falls into negative growth’ in *Financial Times*, published 28 April 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Renmin Wang (2015) ‘22 Shengfen qian sanjidu GDP zengsu tongbi xiahua liaoning jiangfu zuida diandi’ in *Renmin Wang* published 3 Nov 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Li Shen (2015) ‘Low fertility rate, labor outflow hampers NE China's development’ in *China Daily*, published 17 July 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China (2007) *Northeast China revitalization plan*.

<sup>10</sup> State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2016) *China to revitalize the Northeast*.

## Research puzzle

While Northeasterners and experts on the region recognise there is a problem, what is less understood are explanations for why efforts to revitalise the regional economy has had such little success other than in the short term (1-3 years). Interestingly, many researchers assert that continued economic decay in the Northeast is significantly influenced by deeply embedded ideological obstacles to market-based economic policies. This ‘Northeast economic thinking’ (东北经济思维) adversely affects how local officials, workers and business leaders perceive and understand the role of markets in the local economy.

Scholars believe the population of this region do not understand market economics, are not an entrepreneurial economic culture and continue to believe in a strong role for party-state institutions in managing the regional economy. This is given as the explanation for the ‘Northeast phenomenon’ (东北现象) during the 1990s, where the economy of the region began to decline, and the inability of the ‘Revitalise the Old Northeast Industrial Bases’ strategy (振兴东北老工业基地) to reindustrialise the region.

A sociologist at the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences in 2015 argued ‘the Northeast is the world’s best example of a Soviet-style economy, because its central-planning mentality has persisted for so long [where] a lot of people still don’t truly understand or believe in the role of the market.’<sup>11</sup> Another sociologist, Zheng Hangsheng, at Renmin University stated:<sup>12</sup>

The key to the rejuvenation of the north-eastern region is ‘structural transition’ from a deep rooted planned economy to a market economy. This transition requires a parallel change in the values, behaviours, and social norms of the people.

Chinese scholars from Jilin University have also observed that ‘the local governments, enterprises, and people in the north-eastern region have a strong bureaucratic mentality and tend to discriminate against merchants and mercantilism’<sup>13</sup>, and that the Northeast is ‘mired in a past of command economy’.<sup>14</sup>

Journalists, economic planners and researchers of different disciplines have all highlighted this mentality assumption as *the* explanation for why continued efforts to revitalise the Northeast

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<sup>11</sup> Economist, The (2015) ‘The north-east: Back in the cold’ in *The Economist*, published 15 Jan 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Cheng, Li, (2003) ‘China’s Northeast: From Largest Rust Belt to Fourth Economic Engine?’ in *China Leadership Monitor No. 9*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Zheng, Yangpeng (2015) ‘Officials in Northeast admit faking growth numbers’ in *China Daily*, Published 13 Dec 2015.

have not been as successful as many would have hoped. Some have described the dependence mentality of actors in political institutions of the region as ‘poisoned’,<sup>15</sup> ‘a serious problem’<sup>16</sup> and ‘not very responsive to the market’<sup>17</sup> for possible future reform. Fu Cheng, head of the Institute of Sociology at the Jilin Academy of Social Sciences has characterised the people of the Northeast as having no ‘savvy about the rules of the market economy’ and lacking the ‘finesse’ needed to carry out reform.<sup>18</sup>

However, the Northeast’s anti-market economic mentality would seem to be contrary to how economic reform and governance is understood to operate based on current theories of policy-making in modern China. In regions, such as the Yangtze and Pearl River deltas, it was local officials who drove a lot of the marketisation and industrialisation efforts, having a material interest to do so, one that overrode much of the ideological considerations of governing a nominally communist state. But the same literature states local officials in the Northeast are part of the problem, not bargaining and innovating with the central government for a market-based solution to stagnant economic development. This begs the question: Why do local officials appear to be part of the problem here when they are described a part of the solution everywhere else, including the dominant literature explaining China’s economic take off?

The puzzle for researchers on Chinese public policy presented by the Northeast is why do so many believe anti-market ideology acts as a key obstacle to implementation of the economic revitalisation strategy when it appears to have played a much less significant role in the nationwide market reform agenda overall? Are Northeasterners so powerfully and ideologically conservative when it comes to the economic reforms of the last thirty-five years, that they can resist the reform agenda while other regions cannot? Or is there some other political phenomenon, process, or factors at work that offers a more complete answer to why the Northeast continues to fail to move away from the old command economy ways of doing business?

Correct ideological discipline has always been an important part of the Chinese leadership’s control over bureaucratic organisations and the masses for policy implementation. It has sparked dramatic and often extreme policy change in modern China and is essential to understanding the

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<sup>15</sup> Zhang Zhouxiang (2016) ‘Problems the Northeast must solve’ in *China Daily*, published 28 Mar 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Dong Lisheng (2005) ‘China’s Drive to Revitalise the Northeast’ in *China Perspectives* 58, March - April 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Li Yongfeng (2015) ‘Central Planning Got the Northeast in Trouble – and Won’t Save It’ in *Caixin Online*, published 24 Sep 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Li Nan (2016) ‘Buffing the Northeast – New moves seek to spur economic vigor’ in *Beijing Review* no. 49 December 8, 2016.

dynamics of Chinese politics. However, there is also little in the way of evidence or proposed mechanisms explaining how obstruction by wrong-thinking Northerners can undermine both policies that have worked elsewhere in China and the considerable resources supplied by the central government to the strategy. While economic mentality is blamed for the decline in the regional economy and the failure of reforms to revitalise it, what may really be happening is that this anti-market sentiment is a *consequence* of economic decline, not the cause of it.

## **Research aims**

- To critically evaluate the concept of the anti-market economic mentality in Northeast China and the role it plays in policy implementation in that region.
- To better understand the mechanisms of policy implementation in the context of China in economic decline rather than industrial take-off.

## **Research questions**

1. How do ideas about the role of the market in the economy play a role, if any, in the implementation of market-based economic policy reforms in Northeast China?
  - a. How has the policy regime — the governing institutions, interest groups and ideas — on revitalisation of the regional economy of the Northeast responded to the central government's revitalisation strategy?
  - b. Is anti-market economic mentality a cause of obstruction in revitalisation policy implementation or a consequence of it?

## **Literature review: Chinese policy and governance**

This research seeks to use the academic literature on Chinese policy and governance in modern day China since 1949, particularly on the process by which policy is implemented. This includes studies and research by predominantly Western academics (or those trained in this academic tradition) dating back to the early 1960s up until the present day.

Why this literature? As the Chinese party-state is a key actor — if not *the* key actor — in structuring the Chinese economy, an explanation grounded in analysis of the governing institutions and policy-making architecture is necessary to explain the role mentality plays in the policy implementation process. Through a preliminary reading of this literature I have identified at least three themes on which this research will need to speak to better understand the policy implementation process in Northeast China and the place of economic mentality or ideological control in that process:

1. The process by which administrative organisations are created and evolve.
2. The structural environment of the formal and informal policy-making process.
3. The changing relationship between the centre and sub-national governments.

It is within these three arenas that politics is said to happen in modern China and where institutions, interest groups and ideologies compete in shaping public policy from conception to implementation. Understanding these three key themes will be critical to describing and then analysing how Chinese politics and governance operates in respect to the key research questions of this project.

Out of the literature on Chinese governance and policy-making there are some missing or more accurately, incomplete pieces that this research hopes to provide. One striking gap is the lack of theory building on regional economies in China having already industrialised before 1978. The structural processes of bargaining may work in an environment when the economic pie is growing and local leaders have institutional incentives to reach agreement on reform. But, what about for places where the pie is shrinking or where the goal is not rural industrialisation but revitalisation of decaying industries? As a general observation, research into the role of local actors in economic reform has focussed on the two regions where it has been most successful: the Yangtze and Pearl River deltas. Other regions still to experience such a take-off have also received attention but this is not the case with the Northeast.

## **1. Organisation-building**

In Northeast China — as in all regions of the country — the party-state organisation dominated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are responsible for the creation and implementation of public policy and the governance of the nation. No research on Chinese politics can avoid examination of how the organisations of the party-state operate and, from the early years of



Communist China, these organisations have been the focus of much of the academic research on that country.

The focus of these early studies was how the CCP had built new organisations and expanded the role of existing ones to incorporate ‘the greatest number of Chinese into the largest number of structured personal relationships’.<sup>19</sup> Lewis (1962) thought the Maoist concept of ‘mass line’ was designed to bring the leadership closer to the people and therefore policy implementation failure was the result of an incorrect relationship between the Party cadres and the masses. Organisations in the lives of the Chinese people were designed to connect them directly to the Party and involve them in public policy through cadre-directed debates, rallies, small study groups, and self-reform campaigns.<sup>20</sup> The process of creating and imposing new organisation became a central part of the politics and policy-making process of the country. For if the CCP was to succeed in birthing a ‘New China’ it was necessary to eliminate organisation that had held China back and create new ones that could facilitate this goal. However, early studies on how the CCP governed were heavily restricted by the access researchers had to primary sources within the country. Most scholars relied on extensive interviews and surveys with refugees living in Hong Kong and written material — propaganda, newspapers, documents — that could be smuggled out of the country or were released by the Party’s international relations department. Nonetheless, important works were published that shed light on the organisation building process and what role it plays on policy and governance of early Communist China.

During the 1960s, Barnett in his often-cited book *Cadres, Bureaucracy and Political Power in Communist China* (1967) found the CCP was highly successful in this endeavour and organisations that were able to be controlled by the central government reached all levels of administration in China, from the provinces to the communes more so than any dynasty previously.<sup>21</sup> Even scholars who did not focus on institutional causes for Chinese politics believed organisation building was a distinct part of governance in Communist China. Lucien Pye in his famous work *The Spirit of Chinese Politics* (1968) noted the speed at which organisations could be conjured up out of nothing and be highly stable and legitimate, but could also be destroyed quickly without sentimentality. He considered this a particularly Chinese cultural aspect of the organisation building process and essential to the understanding of political and policy change.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis, John Wilson (1962) *Leadership in Communist China*, pp.1-5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp.70-72.

<sup>21</sup> Barnett, A. Doak (1967) *Cadres, Bureaucracy and Political Power in Communist China*, pp.427-435.

<sup>22</sup> Pye, Lucian (1968) *The Spirit of Chinese Politics – A Psychocultural Study of the Authority Crisis in Political Development*, pp.164-167.

These administrative organisations were largely held together through extensive and total ideological indoctrination of cadres within the Party, many of whom staffed the government. The Communist Party is in some sense the post-revolutionary successor to the old gentry who previously occupied both positions of leadership in organisations of government and as elites in the Confucian social system of China. The key difference is that the Party used organisations to achieve this position while the gentry used their status in the social system.<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, organisation building has been the battleground of Chinese politics, especially during the Maoist period from 1949-1976. Harding (1981) argues this is because organisations frequently malfunction causing immediate administrative problems for political leaders. Also, staffing, structure and operations inferably affects the distribution of political power and the policy-making process. And finally, organisational development towards greater bureaucratisation imposes important social and political costs for political leaders, such as alienation from the state and autonomy from external control.<sup>24</sup> From a focus on organisations, the ability to gain access to better and more quantities of data meant research into Chinese governance during the reform era post-1978 proliferated and focussed on other aspects of the process of policy-making.

For this project, identifying what organisations are relevant and understanding the historical process through which they were created and have evolved will be important to analysing what role politics plays around the Northeast revitalisation strategy. Were new organisations created to implement the strategy and were existing organisations changed, including shifts in influence across agencies? How does the process of organisation-building help or hinder the implementation of the strategy?

## **2. Structural environment**

Having theorised the building of administrative organisations in China, the structure of the wider political environment became the focus of research in the 1980s and 1990s. What became more widely understood was how these organisations operated in a bigger political environment than a simple bureaucratic command structure. Research since this time has looked to comprehend how the structural environment affects the behaviour of actors in the policy process and this is especially relevant to the implementation of the Northeast revitalisation strategy.

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<sup>23</sup> Schurmann, Franz (1968) *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, pp.9-11.

<sup>24</sup> Harding, Harry (1981) *Organizing China – The Problem of Bureaucracy 1949-1976*, p2.

The field entered a new era with Lieberthal and Oksenberg's work in *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (1988) which has come to dominate the way the policy-making process and governing organisations are understood to operate in modern day China. Previous literature had developed two models for studying policy and governance in China: the first was the rational model where policy outcomes are the result of 'an evaluation of choices by a coherent group with shared perceptions of the values to be maximized in response to a perceived problem'.<sup>25</sup> The authors believed this model did not adequately understand the constraints placed on Chinese leaders which would allow for a rational process with accurate information leading to informed decision-making on a diverse set of policy choices.

The second model is the power model, where policy outcomes are to be considered the result of political struggles between leaders and their personal interests which were more important than national ones. Scholars such as Avery Goldstein (1991) have theorised the works of Chinese politics in terms of the structural powers constraints and opportunities based on the classic international relations theory of systems of anarchy and hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> Lucian Pye in his book *The Dynamics of Chinese Politics* (1981) highlights an important tension in the political system of Chinese between 'the imperative of consensus and conformity, on the one hand, and the belief, on the other hand, that one can find security only in special, particularistic relationships, which by the very nature tend to produce factions'.<sup>27</sup> Other authors such as Bo (2007)<sup>28</sup>, Fewsmith (2001)<sup>29</sup> and Chen (1999)<sup>30</sup> along with many others continue to emphasise the importance of elite personalities and their factions to the Chinese policy process.

Lieberthal and Oksenberg's thought this model did not sit well within the literature on Chinese policy-making drawing mainly from game theory to understand motivations, constraints and payoff matrices. It is here that the author's introduce their own bureaucratic model to analysis how policy gets formulated and implemented in post-1978 China. By looking at the large-scale energy development process of the 1980s, the authors argue the 'fragmented, segmented, and stratified structure of the state promotes a system of negotiations, bargaining, and the seeking of consensus among affected bureaucracies,' producing a policy process that is 'disjointed,

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<sup>25</sup> Lieberthal, Kenneth and Oksenberg, Michael (1988) *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes*, p11.

<sup>26</sup> Goldstein, Avery (1991) *From Bandwagon to Balance-of-Power Politics – Structural Constraints and Politics in China, 1949-1978*.

<sup>27</sup> Pye, Lucian (1981) *The Dynamics of Chinese Politics*, p4.

<sup>28</sup> Bo, Zhiyue (2007) *China's Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing*.

<sup>29</sup> Fewsmith, Joseph (2001) *Elite Politics in Contemporary China*.

<sup>30</sup> Chen, An (1999) *Restructuring Political Power in China: Alliances and Opposition, 1978-98*.

protracted, and incremental.<sup>31</sup> At each stage of the process, consensus building must occur before policy can go forward due to the fragmentation and hierarchy of the bureaucratic system. The higher an actor is on the authority tier, the more successful they usually are at being able to bring together the necessary interests to build a consensus.

The importance of structural bargaining is developed further by other scholars who often focus on different parts. Susan Shirk (1993) asks explicitly: how does a communist state end up implementing market reforms? Her answer is the structure of the political environment with flexibility and authority were key institutional factors leading to Chinese success in the transformation to a market economy in comparison to Russia after 1991.<sup>32</sup> Barrett McCormick (1990), for example, sees the strengthening of the overall Leninist party-state's administrative capacity and representative institutions through a series of reforms — including promulgating a new constitution and empowering civil society after the Cultural Revolution — as setting the stage for pushing through economic reforms.<sup>33</sup>

Researchers like Jean Oi (1999) however put a greater focus on local actors and their autonomy, arguing an institutional structure she calls 'local state corporatism' provided the incentives to local leaders to embark on reform without strict commands from the centre.<sup>34</sup> The opportunity of material gains will encourage even the most harden Maoist official to think the unthinkable and embrace markets over plans. Oi's theory is far more compelling when combined with the work done on the role of local leaders and institutions in implementation of economic policy from the centre. Institutional analysis has proved to be a valuable theoretical framework for analysing policy in the Chinese context, with researchers using it to try to explain particular periods of policy significance, such as the Great Leap Forward.<sup>35</sup> Lieberthal in his 'fragmented authoritarian' concept recognises both the elite-oriented rational-actor approach and the cellular conception of Chinese society developed by Vivienne Shue (1988) further adding to this the

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<sup>31</sup> Lieberthal, Kenneth and Oksenberg, Michael (1988) *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes*, p3.

<sup>32</sup> Shirk, Susan (1993) *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*, pp.346-349.

<sup>33</sup> McCormick, Barrett L. (1990) *Political Reform in Post Mao China – Democracy and Bureaucracy in a Leninist State*.

<sup>34</sup> Oi, Jean C. (1999) *Rural China Takes Off – Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform*, pp.2-6.

<sup>35</sup> Bachman, David (1991) *Bureaucracy, economy, and leadership in China – The institutional origins of the Great Leap Forward*.

importance of ‘the structure of the bureaucratic authority and the realities of bureaucratic practice that affect both the elite and the basic building blocks of society’.<sup>36</sup>

Politics in China plays out in arenas not so easily understood from a pluralist or democratic system perspective. However, competition for power and for policy does occur and it is the structural environment of the political system in China where it happens. Whether the structural environment of the Northeast looks and operates differently from the rest of China will need to be addressed in order to understand the political obstacles the revitalisation strategy faces.

### 3. Centre-local power relations

Part of the structural environment in which Chinese administrative organisations find themselves requires them to undergo extensive negotiations with various levels of government in order to push through policy changes. The relationship between the centre and sub-national governments at the provincial level or lower has been a challenge of Chinese history, not just in the modern era. However, modernity and advancements in communication and transportation has worked to consolidate the rule of the centre over far-flung regions of the historic Chinese empire. The strategy of installing outsiders at the local level plays a significant role in the politics of county-level government, and discouraging localist behaviour.<sup>37</sup> These processes continue to this day and have an impact on the formulation and implementation of policy at all levels of government.

The general trend since 1949 has been centralisation of administrative power with specific periods in the opposite direction.<sup>38</sup> Only after 1979 did decentralisation of authority become the norm for this power relationship. A grand bargain was struck where the central government would formulate broad policy objectives and in exchange local governments were given flexibility to implement them on terms they could accept. Centre-periphery relations became about bargaining and the building of consensus for any policy to be successfully formulated and implemented. Decision-making can therefore take a long time and corruption as a way to buy consent proliferates.<sup>39</sup> However, the bargaining arena is still hierarchical with the State Council

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<sup>36</sup> Lieberthal, Kenneth (1992) ‘Introduction: The ‘Fragmented Authoritarianism’ Model and Its Limitations’ in Lieberthal, Kenneth and Lampton, David (eds.) *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, p11.

<sup>37</sup> Barnett, A. Doak (1967) *Cadres, Bureaucracy and Political Power in Communist China*, p.133.

<sup>38</sup> Schurmann, Franz (1968) *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, p.174.

<sup>39</sup> Lampton, David (1992) ‘A Plum for a Peach: Bargaining, Interest, and Bureaucratic Politics in China’ in Lieberthal, Kenneth and Lampton, David (eds.) *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, pp.57-58.

having authority over commissions and the commissions over the ministries and provinces.<sup>40</sup> Who gets to participate in this bargaining can also determine policy outcomes and explain why some reforms get implemented and why others do not.<sup>41</sup>

Shue's *The Reach of the State – Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (1988) is a study of peasant localism and reveals how the policy process is a complex battle to get control of local areas by the central government. During the late Maoist period (1966-1976), local leaders played a defensive strategy of protecting their locality from outside interference, at the team-level, officials were able to distort policy and protect their interests. At a county level, officials were able to 'dig in their heels' and during tough negotiations resist directives and demands from the centre. Their goal was the protection and development of independent economic bases.<sup>42</sup>

Since 1979, local political actors and institutions have been given much credit for China's rapid economic development in last three-and-a-half decades. Much research has focussed on the particular local causes of development from areas such as the Yangtze River delta, and the degree to which they drove more market-oriented reforms despite conservatism from parts of the central authorities and even other provinces. Lynn T. White III noted in his work on local causes of reform in the Shanghai region the degree to which this region's pro-market, pro-reform mentality was locally-based contrasted with the so-called 'Beijing man', considered to be too influenced by the intellectual culture and status of his city as the national capital. He notes other regions have similar conservative attitudes to reform unlike Shanghai, including cities of the Northeast, but claims more research needs to be done to explain why and to what effect.<sup>43</sup>

The relationship between the centre and local governments need not be a zero-sum game where one loses at the expense of the other. Instead the relationship is more dynamic and interdependent requiring compromises rather than conflict — the bigger the potential conflict, the bigger the compromise. By looking at investment policy in Shanghai and Guangzhou, Linda Chenlan Li (1998) found institutional constraints in contemporary China incentivise cooperation in the policy process if the lines of authority get more clearly defined and control of resources is at stake.<sup>44</sup>

The significance, according to Pierre Landry (2008), of Deng Xiaoping and the reformers of the late 1970s was proposing a solution to the problem of a weakened Chinese state during the

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<sup>40</sup> Shirk, Susan (1993) *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*, p.106.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. pp.112-115.

<sup>42</sup> Shue, Vivienne (1988) *The Reach of the State – Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic*, pp.139-143.

<sup>43</sup> White, Lynn T. (1998) *Unstate Power – Volume I: Local Causes of China's Economic Reforms*, p56.

<sup>44</sup> Li, Linda Chenlan (1998) *Centre and Provinces: China 1978-1993 – Power as Non-Zero Sum*.

Cultural Revolution, which was actually greater decentralisation.<sup>45</sup> Decentralisation had two impacts, it set the conditions for marketisation of the economy and gave local government greater power to challenge the centre. The latter being mitigated by the Party's monopoly of appointment and recruitment, according to Landry.<sup>46</sup> Decentralisation has empirically improved two major problems of governance during the Maoist era: the flow of accurate information to the centre from the local governments and empowerment of local governments to improve productivity and efficiency because they could materially benefit themselves. Jean Oi in her work sees this latter point as fundamental to the rural industrialisation process by showing that 'China's rural reforms were crafted in such a way as to allow those who promoted economic development and pursued rural industrialisation to strengthen, not weaken their official power'.<sup>47</sup> Understanding the personal and institutional relationships the Northeast has to the central government — who are the primary author of the revitalisation strategy — will be critical to discovering the problems with implementation and the fit-for-purpose nature of party-state institutions for these kinds of reforms.

## Hypothesis

Economic reform programs, particularly ones advocating for a greater role for markets in the economy, were likely to have been met with official resistance in most parts of China. Therefore, to say the Northeast has an especially acute case of anti-market sentiment may be somewhat unfair. While considering the economic history of the Northeast, which is certainly different to other regions in China, this research offers a hypotheses that challenge the current understanding of its so-called economic mentality:

1. Negative sentiment towards market-based reform is more likely a consequence of a failure to implement success regional revitalisation programs, rather than a cause of the failure.

According to the theories put forward by other sociological and economic analysts, economic mentality is a key independent variable in determining the success or failure of the implementation of the revitalisation programs instigated by the central government. From Figure

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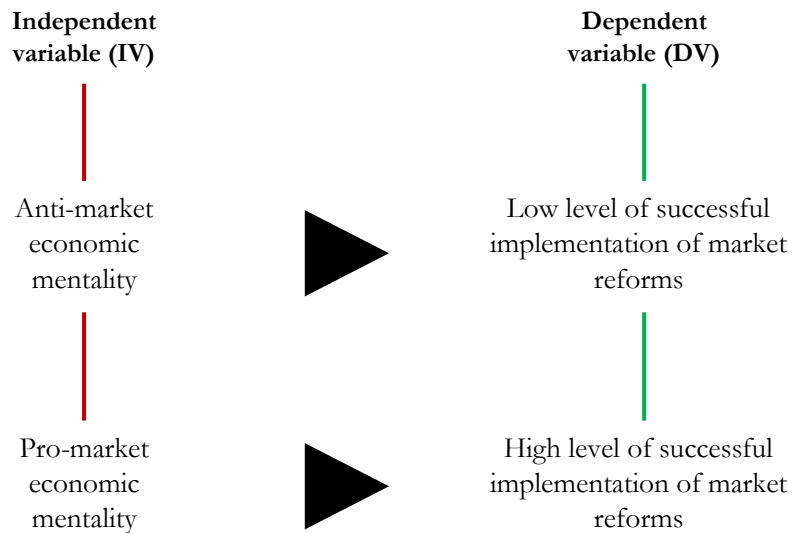
<sup>45</sup> Landry, Pierre F. (2008) *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China – The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. pp.258-263.

<sup>47</sup> Oi, Jean C. (1999) *Rural China Takes Off – Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform*, p.192.

2 below we can see that economic mentality is considered to play an important role in the revitalisation process.

**Figure 2: Current theoretical understanding of economic mentality in northeast China**



The ‘poisoned thinking’ and reflective affection for the old central planning economic model serves as a barrier to the necessary institutional changes that need to occur for implementation of the central government’s market-based revitalisation program. While intuitively this sounds reasonable, it does not consider a number of other factors.

First, market economics has been successfully implemented in other regions of China and resulted in a reallocation of the power and resources of local economic elites, including officials. The reform era from the late 1970s onwards was driven, according to some scholars, by local elites in places where economic policy had not always been positive.

Second, the period of the 1950s, held up as a golden age of Chinese command economics is not exclusive to the region of the Northeast. While considered the jewel in the crown of its Soviet-style command economy, the Northeast was not completely disconnected from the overall ups and downs of the national economy. Likewise, other regions of China experienced great development during these years and would by no means see themselves as having a ‘pro-market’ economic mentality.

Third, cadre recruitment, indoctrination and promotion is a national process. Local officials are not always native to the region they govern and the central government has it within its power to move officials they consider to be ideologically opposed to its policy agenda. Provinces and

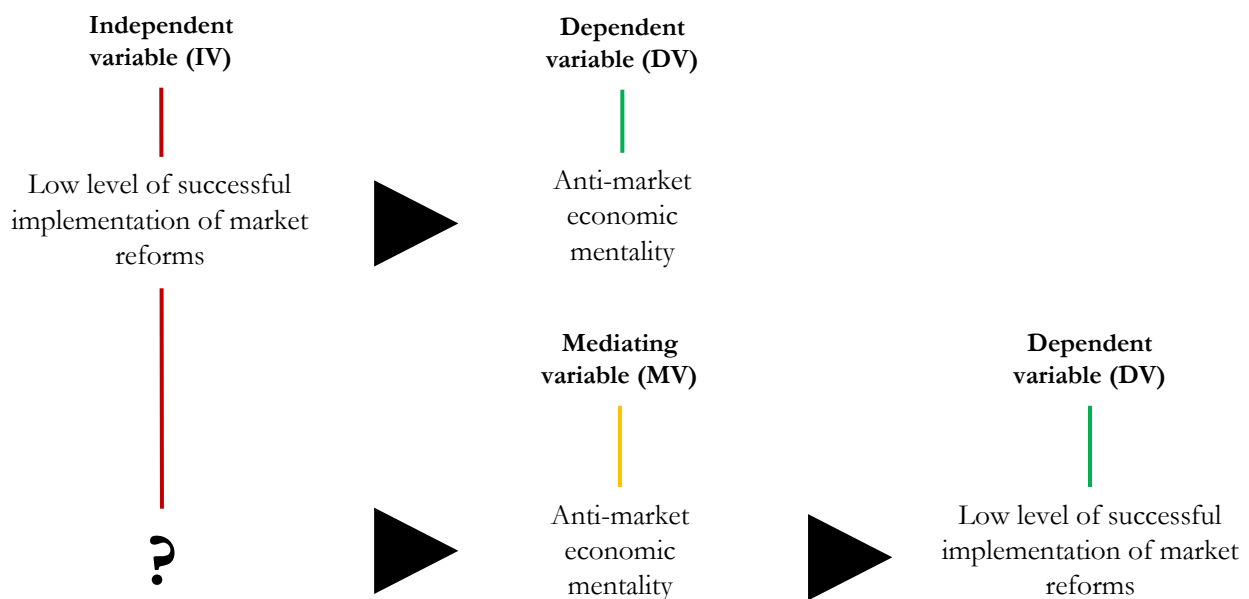


below have a great deal of power in the policy-making process but China is still a unitary state and a national campaign to enforce ideological consistency is not impossible.

Fourth, how the term ‘market’ is being used in this context is not as simple as it first appears. Many of the policies of the revitalisation strategy arguably do not follow strict market principles as many or preferential-type policies that attempt to keep many industries and enterprises open for business when that might otherwise fail.

Finally, other central government-led economic transformation programs have had success in regions with much more complex historical and institutional obstacles than how officials think about market economics. The Western Development Strategy, launched a few years before the Northeast Revitalisation Strategy, had similar goals of economic transformation in some of China’s poorest provinces. These provinces have the added obstacles of ethnic conflict, sparsely populated areas and even greater geographic isolation than the Northeast.

**Figure 3: Proposed theoretical understanding of economic mentality in Northeast China**



From Figure 3 above we can see that economic mentality may fit into the causal process of policy implementation but at a different point than current theories would state. It is more likely from a preliminary reading of the current literature on policy-making and governance in China that economic mentality is a consequence of the level of success in economic reform or there is a much more important independent variable that makes economic mentality more accurately described as a mediating one.

The question therefore becomes: how will this research look to isolate economic mentality as a variable to explore what its true role is in the process of implementation of pro-market economic revitalisation programs?

## **Theoretical framework: China's revitalisation policy regime**

This research combines two analytical approaches to the study of contemporary Chinese politics: bureaucratic bargaining and the influence of civil society and 'bottom up' political change on policy implementation. A critical evaluation and alternative explanation for the claims of ideological obstacles to the implementation of economic revitalisation in the Northeast of China requires understanding both the impact of bureaucratic interests and conflicts on policy-making and the role that non-bureaucratic social groups and organisations play in the process.<sup>48</sup>

It is not just party-state officials who are accused of possession of bad thinking when it comes to the economy; it is also the people themselves. Therefore, this research requires a theoretical framework which does not exclude non-state actors and organisations from its analysis. The theoretical framework this research will use to analysis the regional economic policy implementation in Northeast China is that of policy regimes. This framework is a holistic approach to the issue of poor policy implementation and can reveal not just the degree to which ideas play a role, but also what other factors may play a significant role.

### **Policy regimes**

The policy regime perspective is the theoretical framework that will guide this research as it focuses specifically on the political enterprise that is policy-making and how policies are themselves instruments of governing. It is useful in theory-building about the key political impact of policies. While most literature views politics as an obstacle from implementation, the policy regime lens reveals how politics can improve implementation through political legitimacy, coherence and durability.<sup>49</sup> According to May (2015) the literature on policy implementation failure, while providing a good basis for diagnosing misaligned incentives and shortfalls in

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<sup>48</sup> Heilmann, Sebastian (editor) (2016) *China's Political System*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: Lanham, MY, USA.

<sup>49</sup> May, Peter J. and Jochim, Ashley E. (2013) 'Policy Regime Perspectives: Policies, Politics, and Governing' in *The Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2013, p. 427.

organisational capacity, does not adequately address how politics shapes the likelihood of implementation success or failure.<sup>50</sup>

Policy regimes can be conceptualised as ‘the governing arrangements for addressing policy problems.’ They can broadly be construed to include institutional arrangements, interest alignments and shared ideas. Looking to regimes when studying policies allows for a descriptive construction of ‘a conceptual map’ and the use of an analytical tool ‘revealing how public policies set in place feedback processes that reshape the political environment and, in turn, affect the efficacy of public policy.’ The advantage of the policy regime framework is that instead of a specific policy being the unit of analysis, one may start with a set of problems – in this case, the effects of industrial decline. May & Jochim (2013) posit that the only criteria for a policy regime around a problem is that there have been authoritative actions at some level of government.<sup>51</sup> The boundaries for research are set for the project by the conceptualisation of the problem at hand and can be broad or narrow depending on the issue at hand.<sup>52</sup>

Because of the holistic nature of looking at a policy problem from a regime perspective, this framework will offer a much deeper understanding of the politics of the Northeast revitalisation strategy and associated policies. It will enable the identification of the various party-state institutions, relevant interest groups and the existence competing ideologies that interacts with the implementation of the revitalisation strategy. Capturing both formal and informal aspects of institutional arrangements is critical. Once identified, this framework allows for analysis which considers where the core idea of the regime has the support of key participants, how meaningful that support is, and if interest groups and institutions have reinforced it.<sup>53</sup>

These exist a variety of different frameworks to discuss policy regimes. Basing his theoretical framework on the IR regime literature, Wilson (2000) divides policy regimes into four dimensions:<sup>54</sup>

1. *Arrangements of power* which can include ‘a single interest group, a few professional associations or groups benefiting from the policy; a few competing interest groups or

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<sup>50</sup> May, Peter J. (2015) ‘Implementation failures revisited: Policy regimes perspectives in *Public Policy and Administration* 2015, Vol. 30 (3-4) p. 279.

<sup>51</sup> May, Peter J. and Jochim, Ashley E. (2013) ‘Policy Regime Perspectives: Policies, Politics, and Governing’ in *The Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2013, p. 428-429.

<sup>52</sup> Keohane, Robert O., and David G. Victor. 2011. ‘The Regime Complex for Climate Change.’ *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (1): 7–23.

<sup>53</sup> May, Peter J. and Jochim, Ashley E. (2013) ‘Policy Regime Perspectives: Policies, Politics, and Governing’ in *The Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2013, p. 435.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, Carter A. (2000) ‘Policy Regimes and Policy Change’ in *Journal of Public Policy*, No. 20, Vol. 3, 247–274.

coalitions; a broad base coalition with little opposition; or a few well-endowed interests with little opposition’.

2. *Policy paradigms* which ‘embodies ways of seeing, talking and defining problems, which in turn shape policy solutions’. Paradigms are discourses constructed by researchers, academics, interest groups, policy-makers and then disseminated through the media.
3. *Organisations* within government including the policy-making arrangements and the implementation structure.
4. *The policy* itself which entails ‘the rules and routines of the implementing agency. These goals, rules and routines legitimise the policy’.

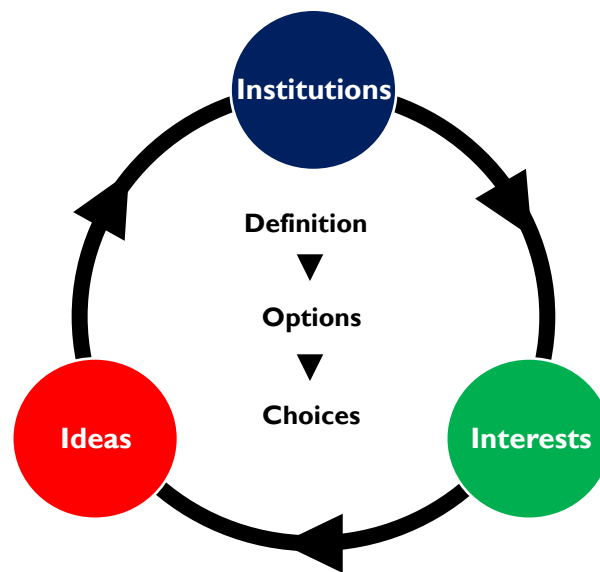
The framework this research will employ is known as the 3-i’s framework and clearly defines the three components of a policy regime and the various stages they engage with policy during the process from formulation to implementation.

### **3-i’s framework for policy regimes**

The so-called ‘3-i’s’ framework analyses three critical aspects of policy regimes: *institutions*, *interests* and *ideas*. This framework can not only help explain how policies change but does so by considering feedback loops in a dynamic analysis substantially different to regime theory in IR. Rather than treating economic mentality as an independent variable, this framework will treat it as one dimension of the policy regime revealing the extent to which ideas serve as an obstacle to implementation along with other factors.

The institutions, interests and ideas surrounding economic policy change in the Northeast region are for whatever reason unable to push through the central government’s reform agenda – the ‘whatever reason’ is the variable this research endeavours to find and explain.

**Figure 4: Representation of the ‘3-i’s’ theoretical framework**



As Figure 4<sup>55</sup> above shows, the 3-i's framework analyses the on-going relationship of three important concepts of public policy by looking at a specific policy change agenda being carried out. The three 'i's' are interacting with each other constantly through the process and this makes the framework deliberately holistic in explaining the phenomenon of change in policy regimes within a given context.

#### **i. Institutions**

The notion that institutions play a major role in shaping the politics and policy of a particular society is not new. Political science became reacquainted with the examination of institutions through March and Olsen's (1984) seminal work calling on political scientists to study the organisational nature of human political life.<sup>56</sup> From this many have written about the historical, rational and sociological effects institutions have on shaping political life.

Historical institutionalism looks at how political and economic institutions – defined as the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organised structure of the polity or political economy – shape policy definition, options and choices.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gauvin, François-Pierre (2014) *Understanding Policy Developments and Choices Through the '3-i' Framework: Interests, Ideas and Institutions*.

<sup>56</sup> March, James G., and Olsen, Johan P. (1984) 'The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life.' in *The American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3, pp.734-749.

<sup>57</sup> Hall, Peter A., and Taylor, Rosemary C. R., (1996) 'Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms' in *Political Studies* 44, no. 5, pp.936-957.

Historically-formed institutional factors can shape both the objectives of political actors and the distribution of power among them in a given polity.<sup>58</sup> Quite often, unintended consequences need to be managed through different types of institutional adaptation to avoid institutional dysfunction.<sup>59</sup> Issues such as path dependence and critical juncture play key roles in the study of institutions in policy change.

Examining the role that government structures and organisations, policy networks, and past policies play in the policy process of economic revitalisation programs will help in identifying the basis of resistance to market reforms. How do political and economic institutions shape the way north-eastern economic elites perceive the revitalisation program's problems and challenges and how do institutions explain its development and the obstacles to its successful implementation?

## ii. Interests

The agendas of different actors in the policy process is important to understanding why particularly choice are made and how successful policies are at being implemented by and for the relevant parties. Objective and subjective interests, even in different ideological traditions, relate to objective interests more commonly understood as 'rationality under freedom' or 'what a person wants or prefer if he or she had experienced all the alternatives'.<sup>60</sup> However this definition has some obvious flaws, not least the extent to which individuals are free to make rational choices.

Pluralism as influenced by Dahl has also played a key role in shaping understanding around interests in public policy. Government agencies not only act as one type of pressure group but are also subject to pressure from outsider groups themselves.<sup>61</sup> This brings up difficult issues when applying the concept to the case of modern China, with a predominantly Leninist party-state system, where the apparatuses of government attempt to penetrate civil society and control the ability of other actors to pressure it.

Therefore, a simpler discussion is often used when looking at interests in public policy. This involves the answering of two fundamental questions: Who wins and who loses in the policy

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<sup>58</sup> Steinmo, Sven, Thelen, Kathleen, and Longstreth, Frank. (1992) eds. *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis*, p.6.

<sup>59</sup> Streeck, Wolfgang, and Thelen, Kathleen (2005) 'Introduction: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies' in *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*, Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (editors).

<sup>60</sup> Connelly, William E. (1972) 'On 'Interests' in Politics' in *Politics and Society* 2, pp.459-477.

<sup>61</sup> Hill, Michael (1997) *The Policy Process in the Modern State (3rd Edition)*, Prentice Hill/Harvester Wheatsheaf: Hertford, UK, pp. 32-34.

process? And, by how much do they win or lose?<sup>62</sup> The first question requires trying to identify who benefits from a policy decision and who bears the costs, while the second questions involve trying to assess whether the costs and benefits are likely to be concentrated within a small group of people or diffused across a larger population.<sup>63</sup> In the case of the north-east, the conflicting policy regime interests of the central versus the local governments are critical to the implementation process.

### iii. Ideas

Ideas can affect how the policy actors in a given process are able to define a policy problem, but also how they see different policy options to be effective, feasible, and acceptable. This ‘i’ will be of particular importance in the examination of a so-called economic mentality as ideas about the market and how economic policy should operate goes to the very heart of this research.

In public policy studies, ideas can fall into two categories: the first is ‘knowledge or beliefs about what is, while the second is views about what ought to be, or combinations of the two’.<sup>64</sup> For the former, this evidence-informed policy movement promotes the critical value in using evidence in an open and systematic way to inform policy developments and choices. The latter, on the other hand, are what constitute a second type of ideas that can shape how actors frame problems and how they perceive different policy options to be effective, feasible, or acceptable.<sup>65</sup>

Important questions need to be asked about what knowledge informs the debate around economic revitalisation in the north-east provinces and the values of the actors trying to promote or resist policy change in this area. Are different policy actors drawing on various sources of evidence to advocate for (or to block) the policy? And in terms of the values system, is the policy option consistent with the dominant societal values or culture? Is the policy option consistent with the dominant policy style of the government? Is the policy option consistent with the values or ideological thinking of the most influential relevant groups?<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Stone, Deborah (2001) *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making*, pp.211-227.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Pomey, M. P., Morgan, S., Church, J., Forest, P. G., Lavis, J. N., McIntoch, T., Dobson, S. (2010) ‘Do provincial drug benefit initiatives create an effective policy lab? The evidence from Canada’ in *Journal of Public Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, 35(5), pp.709.

<sup>65</sup> Hall, Peter (1997) ‘The role of interests, institutions, and ideas in the comparative political economy of the industrialized nations’ in Lichbach, M. I. & Zuckerman, A. S. (editors) *Comparative politics: Rationality, culture, and structure*.

<sup>66</sup> Gauvin, François-Pierre (2014) *Understanding Policy Developments and Choices Through the ‘3-i’ Framework: Interests, Ideas and Institutions*, p.2.

The contributions this research will make to the established literature on policy regimes and policy change are to apply widely accepted theoretical concepts to a Chinese context where many of the assumptions either do not apply or are not as they appear. For example, the policy regime framework is operationalised on the assumption that government, civil society, business and unions are largely autonomous actors from one another. The situation in China is much more complex in this regard, with institutional overlap, restrictions on interest articulation and aggregations, and forceful imposition of ideological constraints on both formal and informal institutions.

## **Research design**

The research design for this project will be a regional case study with the purpose of describing in-depth various aspects of rust belt politics in the Northeast provinces. The three aspects of policy regime will be described and explained with special attention paid to the role of ideas in the implementation of the revitalisation policies. Once isolated, the role of ideas in the policy regime can then be better understood to find out to what extent they were a decisive factor in the implementation of the revitalisation policies.

This research will specifically be looking for the mechanism by which ideas around the role of the market have shaped the development of revitalisation policies and their implementation. This approach will both identify the governing and political factors that interact in the policy process and, in addition, provide greater empirically-based evidence on the validity of the anti-market economic mentality theory. By drawing out the role of institutions and interest groups, the research will also be able to discuss their possible role in obstructing or supporting revitalisation policies and implementation of economic policies in a deindustrialising regional economy rather than an industrialising one.

Appropriate identification of the key institutions, interests and ideas will be essential to the design of the research. Below are some of the 3-i's which will need to be analysed for this research:

- *Institutions:* Local party-state committees and congresses, state-owned enterprises, central government commissions, Northeast Council.
- *Interests:* Local officials, central leadership, private entrepreneurs, workers, SOE management, graduates, foreign investors.



- *Ideas*: Northeast economic thinking, Socialist Market Economy.

Initial steps will involve: establishing the parameters for the policy regime of Northeast revitalisation, identifying relevant institutions, interest groups and ideas that will need to be described before finally identifying appropriate subjects to collect data from using a variety of research methods.

## Research methods

The approach taken to gather sources, evidence and data will be methods that fall under the umbrella term ‘site-intensive methods’ (SIMS).<sup>67</sup> This method involves ‘the collection of evidence from human subjects within their ordinary settings, where their interaction with the surroundings informs the study just as the researcher’s own questioning does’.<sup>68</sup> What is being researched in this case is can be subtle is often hidden, sensitive or otherwise kept behind a barrier from the outside observer. To understand how ideas, interests and both formal and informal institutions play a role in policy implementation, this research will need to look at relationships, networks, identities, styles, beliefs or modes of action of participants in the policy regime.<sup>69</sup> This research will employ several research methods to collect the necessary data. Below is a list of the most common types of research methods for this type of study:

- *Interviews* – This research does not underestimate the difficulties of interviews with local officials currently in office. However, it may be possible to interview elite business leaders, retired officials, entrepreneurs, workers, academics and journalists who can provide insight or confirmation of facts. Connections with people in the region will be essential and are part of the plan for this research.
- *Participant observation* – Like the method of interviews, this may be possible through the assistance of Chinese academic institutions. Connections with elite Chinese academic institutions as well as local institutions in the Northeast will be critical. First-hand

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<sup>67</sup> Read, Benjamin L. (2010) ‘More Than an Interview, Less Than Sedaka: Studying Subtle and Hidden Politics with Site-Intensive Methods’ in *Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies* by Allen Carlson, Mary E. Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion (editors), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p148.

<sup>69</sup> Read, Benjamin L. (2010) ‘More Than an Interview, Less Than Sedaka: Studying Subtle and Hidden Politics with Site-Intensive Methods’, p150.

observation of an institution involved in the policy process would shed some light on the way institutions, interests and ideas interact.

- *Document analysis* – The CCP and governments of China publish many official documents that can provide empirical data on the policy decision and more importantly ideological underpinnings of policy choices.

## **Data collection**

Studying Chinese politics and the bureaucratic system is no easy feat and much valuable information is simply unattainable from the so-called ‘black box’ that is Chinese politics. However, concentrating efforts on lower levels of the politics system is more likely to reap data than looking at the system from higher ones. Case studies of the local state in China have been yielding the most promising insights in recent years. Also, partnering with relevant persons and institutions who study this type of phenomenon is also likely to make this research more viable.

I believe the research puzzle is more than broad enough to allow for several different research methods to collect data which is available. Learning how to study China in a systematic and empirical way, even if the result is a smaller part of what I set out to achieve, is a major part of this research endeavour. Furthermore, the maxim of ‘crossing the river by feeling for the stones’ seems especially apt in the process of studying Chinese contemporary policy as only when the research begins will the problems begun more visible.

## Research plan

*May 2017 – July 2017*

- Complete Human Ethics approval process for fieldwork.
- Complete background chapter on Northeast China.
- Make initial contact with Chinese experts on research in Beijing.

*August 2017 – Feb 2018*

- Chinese Language Course at Tsinghua University, Beijing.
- Preliminary meetings with academics in China.
- Fieldwork in Beijing, China

*Mar 2019 – July 2019*

- Fieldwork in Northeast China
- Continued Chinese Language Course at university in Northeast
- HSK examination (Level 5 or 6)

*August 2018 – February 2019*

- Mid-Term Thesis Review presentation
- Finish writing thesis
- Final presentation

## Chapter outline

1. Introduction
  - a. Research problem and preliminary hypotheses
  - b. Justification for research
  - c. Definitions and concepts
2. Background on the development of Northeast China
3. Literature Review: Governance and the public policy process in China
4. Methods and Methodology: Site-intensive methods (SIMS)
  - a. Research procedures
  - b. Ethical considerations
5. The policy regime of revitalisation in Northeast China
  - a. Ideas
  - b. Institutions
  - c. Interests
6. Analysis of regional party-state architecture in revitalising the Northeast
7. Conclusions

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