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Systemic Failure and Distorted Feedback: A Study on the Implementation Dilemma of Local Government's Cross-Strait Agricultural Cooperation from a Political Systems Theory Perspective

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Abstract

In the context of cross-Strait integrated development, agricultural cooperation policies between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan are intended to serve as key instruments for integration. However, these policies frequently encounter an implementation dilemma in which higher-level authorities actively promote policy goals while grassroots governments respond primarily through symbolic actions. Existing studies have largely explained this phenomenon from static perspectives, such as resource constraints or individual motivation, but have paid insufficient attention to how defensive compliance and distorted feedback interact to sustain systemic implementation failure. To address this gap, this study adopts political systems theory and conceptualizes policy implementation as a dynamic process involving input, conversion, output, and feedback. Using a comparative case study of two counties, supported by semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, the study examines how local governments process politically sensitive policy mandates under conditions of high political pressure and resource mismatch. The findings show that contradictory inputs create strong risk-avoidance incentives, leading local governments to adopt defensive compliance strategies during the conversion stage. Through symbolic implementation, resource diversion, and responsibility shifting, policies are translated into formally compliant but substantively hollow outputs. These symbolic outputs generate distorted feedback that conceals implementation failures and prevents higher-level authorities from making corrective adjustments, thereby trapping the policy system in a state of suspended implementation and apparent stability. Theoretically, this study extends political systems theory by revealing how defensive compliance and feedback distortion function as adaptive mechanisms that sustain system persistence while undermining substantive policy performance. Practically, it provides important insights for enhancing governance effectiveness and preventing systemic implementation failure in politically sensitive policy domains.

Keywords: defensive compliance; system; distortion; agricultural cooperation; environmental pressure



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1. Introduction

In the context of cross-Strait integrated development, agricultural cooperation policies concerning Taiwan have encountered an implementation dilemma within local govern-

ments on the Chinese mainland, where the strong enthusiasm of higher-level authorities contrasts sharply with weak responsiveness at the grassroots level. As a result, projects that were initially expected to serve as exemplary models of integration have deteriorated into little more than “paper programs”, revealing a systemic functional obstruction. This situation gives rise to a crucial question: why do such policy failures persist over time without effective correction?

Existing studies often explain this issue from static perspectives, such as local governments’ behavioral motivations or resource constraints [1,2]. In fact, the persistence of this low-efficiency stability suggests that the problem does not lie in a single stage of implementation. Instead, it points to a deeper fracture within the operational logic and feedback mechanisms of the entire policy system. This recognition highlights the need for a more macro-level and dynamic analytical framework to understand the roots of this phenomenon.

To address this governance puzzle, this study adopts the perspective of political systems theory and conceptualizes the policy implementation process as a dynamic system of input, conversion, output, and feedback that continuously interacts with its external environment. This theoretical perspective not only provides a compelling response to the research question, but also helps explain how contradictory policy inputs, characterized by high-pressure tasks and mismatched resources, are processed through local governments as the core of system conversion, ultimately producing outputs that are formally compliant but substantively inefficient.

Based on this foundation, this study conducts a comparative analysis of two typical cases, Y County in Q City and H County in S City, in order to uncover the internal mechanisms behind this system-level failure. The structure of this paper is organized as follows. Section 1 serves as the introduction, in which we outline the research background and present the research questions. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework based on political systems theory, offering a detailed review and discussion of the existing literature and constructing an appropriate analytical framework. Section 3 introduces the research methods, explaining the methodological approach adopted in the study and how these methods were applied in practice. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis of the two cases. Drawing on the theoretical framework, this section provides a systematic comparison of the cases and incorporates insights from semi-structured interviews to engage in dialogue with the theoretical arguments. Sections 5 and 6 offer the conclusions and discussion, where we summarize the key findings, highlight the theoretical contributions and future research directions, and acknowledge the study’s limitations.

2. The Analytical Framework of Political Systems Theory

An appropriate analytical framework provides the theoretical foundation of a study. It helps clarify the structure of the research problem and, through a systematic and organized analytical process, may also inspire new perspectives that deepen the analysis and enhance its academic value.

2.1. Conceptual Definition and Discussion of Defensive Compliance

In contemporary governance practices in China, defensive compliance has become a notable phenomenon, which appears paradoxical on the surface but is in fact logically coherent. It is not a form of traditional administrative slackness or passive non-action. Rather, it is a strategic behavior in which officials actively perform their duties in ways that serve the purpose of defensively avoiding responsibility.

Academic discussions of this phenomenon can be traced back to Weaver’s classic study on politicians’ blame avoidance behavior. This line of research argues that the motivation

of political actors to avoid potential negative responsibility may be even stronger than their motivation to seek positive credit [3,4]. In the field of public administration, this motivation evolves into defensive actions taken by public officials when confronted with reputational and career risks [5,6].

Within the context of China studies, scholars have further specified and conceptualized this type of behavior. It is manifested in practices such as making substantive decisions by strictly adhering to procedural requirements, including meetings and official documents, or obscuring the locus of responsibility in collective decision-making through intergovernmental joint actions and responsibility dispersion [7,8]. Its essence lies in a risk-shifting mechanism that transfers the potential risks associated with decision-making and implementation upward, downward, or outward, thereby avoiding the substantive undertaking and attribution of responsibility [9]. Defensive compliance exemplifies this logic. It is defined as a pattern in which grassroots officials, within the bounds of legality and procedural compliance, proactively narrow their own responsibility boundaries through selective implementation, proceduralized responses, and formalistic execution in order to cope with institutional pressures, resource constraints, and high levels of uncertainty [10]. This “grey-zone behavior”, situated between proactive action and passive inaction, is characterized by a high degree of concealment and strategic calculation, thereby exerting a more insidious erosion on the attainment of policy objectives.

However, although existing research on defensive compliance has provided valuable insights into its underlying motivations and behavioral expressions, it has largely overlooked a more fundamental question: why does the policy system fail to exercise its self-corrective capacity to achieve its intended goals in a substantive manner?

2.2. Systemic Breakdown: Toward a More Integrative Explanatory Framework

Policy studies have long recognized that the policy–implementation gap and policy failure are the norm rather than the exception [11,12]. For a long time, explanations of policy failure have tended to focus on a single dimension, such as flaws in policy design, the capacity or willingness of implementers, or disturbances from the external environment. Systems theory offers a more integrative analytical perspective by conceptualizing the policy process as a complex adaptive system composed of multiple actors, diverse goals, and multi-level interactions. Following this logic, policy failure is not the outcome of a simple linear causal chain but rather an unintended result emerging from interactions among various elements within the system [13,14]. Systems theory holds that the root of failure often lies in the malfunction of system structures, interaction patterns, and feedback loops, a condition referred to as system failure [15].

From the perspective of policy implementation, the meso-level constitutes a pivotal link within the policy system, bridging macro-level design and micro-level execution. The meso-level refers to the interaction, coordination, and cooperative networks among different functional departments and agencies within the government [16]. At this level, the effectiveness of interagency coordination and horizontal management is central to determining whether a policy can be integrated and consistently advanced toward the point of implementation [17].

Therefore, a deeper examination of the functional obstacles at the meso-level is essential for understanding the systemic roots of policy failure. Existing studies suggest that policy failure is a systemic phenomenon rather than an isolated event. Constraints related to limited resources [18,19], information asymmetry [20], delayed feedback [21], interdepartmental conflicts of interest [22], dynamic complexity, and insufficient capacities for learning and adaptation [23] together form an interconnected and mutually reinforcing

“system of problems.” Accordingly, coordination and implementation at the meso-level constitute a crucial stage in the overall process of policy execution.

Although systems theory highlights the significance of system failure and underscores coordination obstacles at the meso-level, it often portrays system malfunction as a passive and largely technical problem arising from poor coordination or resource shortages. What it does not sufficiently explain is how a system can actively and systematically produce and circulate distorted information, thereby allowing ineffective policy outputs such as defensive compliance to be misinterpreted as proper implementation. This distortion ultimately undermines the system’s capacity for self-correction and results in a breakdown of the feedback loop.

2.3. Theoretical Gap and Analytical Framework

As the preceding analysis shows, existing research presents a clear theoretical gap. Current studies do not provide an analytical framework that connects frontline actors’ defensive compliance strategies with the broader mechanisms of feedback failure within policy systems. Research that focuses solely on administrative behavior cannot explain why the system continues to tolerate such practices. At the same time, macro-level system analyses have not adequately revealed the concrete processes through which information becomes intentionally distorted within the system. Political systems theory, particularly the perspective that emphasizes feedback loops, offers unique explanatory potential to address this gap. For this reason, this section provides a detailed discussion of political systems theory and the key concepts relevant to this study.

The discussion begins with key concepts in political systems theory and its operational logic. Political systems theory views political processes as a continual cycle in which the system interacts with and responds to its environment. Its foundational premise is the distinction between the political system and the external environment. The environment refers to the social, ecological and geographic factors that shape and constrain the functioning of the system. The political system and its environment are mutually influential. Within this theoretical framework, several concepts are central to understanding system operations, namely inputs, outputs, the conversion process and feedback [24]. Inputs refer to the various factors and forces that affect the political system and have the potential to alter its organizational structure and fundamental characteristics [25]. Easton conceptualizes inputs as “all events that can in any possible way alter, modify, or influence the system from the outside”. He further categorizes these inputs into demands and supports. Demands refer to pressures originating from both the non-political societal environment and from within the political system, while supports represent forms of recognition or acceptance directed toward the system [26,27]. A permanent conversion process exists within the political system. The conversion process, often described as a “black box”, refers to the stage in which inputs entering the system are transformed into authoritative decisions and actions [28]. Demands and supports are formed within the environment. Once they enter the political system, they generate outputs in the form of decisions and actions. These outputs then influence the supports expressed by system members and the demands they raise, which subsequently re-enter the system. In this sense, the outcomes produced as outputs feed back into the political system and become new inputs. Feedback refers to the transmission of information about the state of the system back to the authorities. After receiving this information, the authorities respond and generate further outputs. If the system receives feedback but fails to produce appropriate outputs in response, it will still face the risk of crisis [29]. In short, inputs provide the raw materials for the political system. The system processes these raw materials and produces outputs, which in turn act upon

the system's environment and generate new inputs. This cyclical process constitutes the basic operational mode of a political system (as shown in Figure 1).

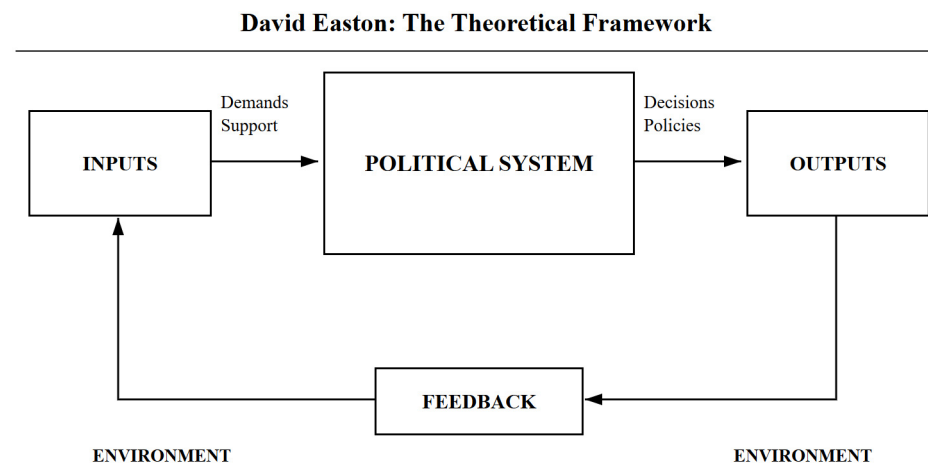


Figure 1. The Theoretical Framework of Political Systems Theory [30].

By applying the analytical framework of political systems theory, the perspective of policy feedback loops allows us to open the “black box” of Taiwan-related policies in the Chinese mainland at the local government level. This approach enables a detailed tracing of how information is processed, filtered, and even distorted within the system, ultimately shaping a self-sustaining dysfunctional system.

3. Research Method: The Comparative Case Study Approach

3.1. Choice of Research Method: Comparative Case Study

To further explore the underlying mechanisms of systemic failure in the implementation of cross-strait agricultural cooperation policies by local governments in the Chinese mainland, this study adopts a qualitative research paradigm and specifically employs a comparative case study approach. The selection of this method is based on the following considerations.

The core questions of this study are “why” and “how”: how the policy implementation system breaks down and why such failure persists over time. The selection of qualitative research methods stems from the recognition that mainstream quantitative statistical methods are applicable to multiple cases (in an attempt to establish overarching principles that apply to a wide range of cases) [31,32]. The case study method is one of the primary approaches within qualitative research. Its advantage lies in its ability to examine phenomena in depth and as a whole, allowing researchers to explore complex contexts and draw conclusions, rather than relying solely on the correlation analysis of individual data variables [33].

At the same time, case study research preserves the integrity and contextual embeddedness of policy implementation, thereby opening the “black box” of local government and revealing its internal decision-making logic and strategic behavior. Furthermore, by adopting a most-similar systems design to compare two highly comparable cases, this study is able to examine how the same systemic mechanisms operate across different contexts while controlling for key variables. This approach helps rule out idiosyncratic factors and enhances the theoretical robustness and explanatory power of the findings.

Comparative case study research requires systematic case selection strategies to control for confounding variables and to sharpen the explanatory leverage of core variables. In this study, case selection follows the logic of the Most-Similar Systems Design. Y County and H County within G Province were selected as comparative cases, as they are highly similar in terms of economic scale, fiscal capacity, and institutional environment, yet differ markedly

in industrial structure. A detailed comparison of key indicators is presented in Table 1. This design enables the study to control for potential confounding factors such as the level of economic development and to isolate the core impact of political system mechanisms on policy implementation outcomes.

Table 1. Basic Characteristics of the Selected Cases.

Indicator	Case County Y	Case County H
Regional GDP in 2024	RMB 14.523 billion	RMB 14.800 billion
General Public Budget Revenue in 2024	RMB 754 million	RMB 533 million
Share of Primary Industry Value Added in 2024	37.1% (agriculture-dominated)	13.5% (non-agriculture-dominated)
GDP per Capita in 2024	Approximately RMB 39,500	Approximately RMB 59,200
Policy Implementation Outcome	Project suspended	Long-term low-level operation

Case 1: Y County in Q City represents a typical agriculture-based county. In 2024, its gross domestic product reached RMB 14.523 billion, representing a year-on-year growth rate of 3.8 percent, placing its economic scale and growth at a mid-level within the municipality. The total output value of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery amounted to RMB 8.41 billion. Against the policy backdrop of agricultural upgrading and rural revitalization, the local government, together with representatives of Taiwanese farmers, jointly initiated the establishment of the “Yuyue Lianhua cross-Strait Farmers’ Cooperative”. The project’s initial capital of approximately RMB 3 million was raised through a combination of land equity contributions, labor contributions, and cash investment. It also introduced relatively mature cultivation techniques and managerial experience from Taiwan, with the aim of building a cooperative mechanism characterized by benefit sharing and risk sharing. During the preparatory stage, the initiative received attention and endorsement from the Provincial Taiwan Affairs Office and was scheduled to complete formal registration within the same year. However, in the course of implementation, the cooperative soon encountered multiple institutional and resource constraints. Although formally recognized by the local government, progress in key administrative approvals, financial coordination, and interdepartmental collaboration remained slow, resulting in repeated postponements of the official launch. Ultimately, under the dual pressures of institutional misalignment and insufficient resource support, the “Yuyue Lianhua cross-Strait Farmers’ Cooperative” was suspended.

Case 2: The cross-Strait Farmers’ Cooperative in H County of S City serves as an important practical platform within the provincial Pilot Zone for cross-Strait Rural Integration and Development. Despite its limited economic scale, the county faces considerable structural transformation pressures. In response, the local government has prioritized industrial project promotion and the improvement of fixed-asset investment efficiency. Within this context, although cross-Strait agricultural cooperation has received policy positioning and support at the provincial and municipal levels, it has not attained equivalent priority in county-level governance practice. Building on local foundations in green plum and lychee cultivation, as well as hot spring resources, the cooperative sought to develop a model integrating leisure agriculture with specialty crop production. It adopted a tripartite cooperation framework characterized by “Taiwanese technical expertise, local capital investment, and village collective organization”. However, during implementation, the project encountered significant bottlenecks at the county and township levels. On the one hand, limited fiscal and administrative resources were preferentially allocated to industrial projects and major infrastructure initiatives, resulting in the marginalization or adjustment of earmarked funds and supporting policies for cross-Strait agricultural cooperation at the grassroots

level. On the other hand, insufficient interdepartmental coordination hindered the effective translation of formal policy support into sustained operational input. Under these conditions, the cooperative partners sought to enhance the project's institutional visibility and political legitimacy by obtaining symbolic policy designations, such as recognition as a "Research and Practice Institute", thereby indirectly leveraging greater substantive attention and support.

The two counties are highly comparable with respect to key control variables. Their overall economic scale is similar, with a difference of only 1.9 percent. Both possess limited fiscal capacity and can be characterized as resource-constrained jurisdictions. Moreover, they operate under the same provincial ecological development policy framework. This design effectively rules out competing explanations arising from differences in economic foundations or institutional environments.

At the same time, the two cases exhibit a pronounced divergence in industrial structure. The primary sector accounts for as much as 37.1 percent of Y County's economy, reflecting a typical agriculture-dominant structure, whereas in H County it constitutes only 13.5 percent, indicating a shift toward non-agricultural sectors. If industrial foundations were the decisive factor, Y County, with its stronger agricultural endowment, would be expected to demonstrate superior policy implementation performance. However, empirical observation shows that cross-Strait agricultural cooperation projects in both counties ultimately failed. This convergent outcome suggests that industrial differences do not constitute the key explanatory variable, thereby directing attention toward deeper systemic mechanisms.

Based on the case characteristics and research design outlined above, this study advances the following core hypothesis: under conditions of high similarity in economic and institutional variables, systemic failure in local governments' implementation of cross-Strait policies primarily stems from internal mechanisms of "distorted feedback" and "path dependence" within the political system, rather than from differences in local resource endowments or industrial structure. The analytical framework is presented in Figure 2.

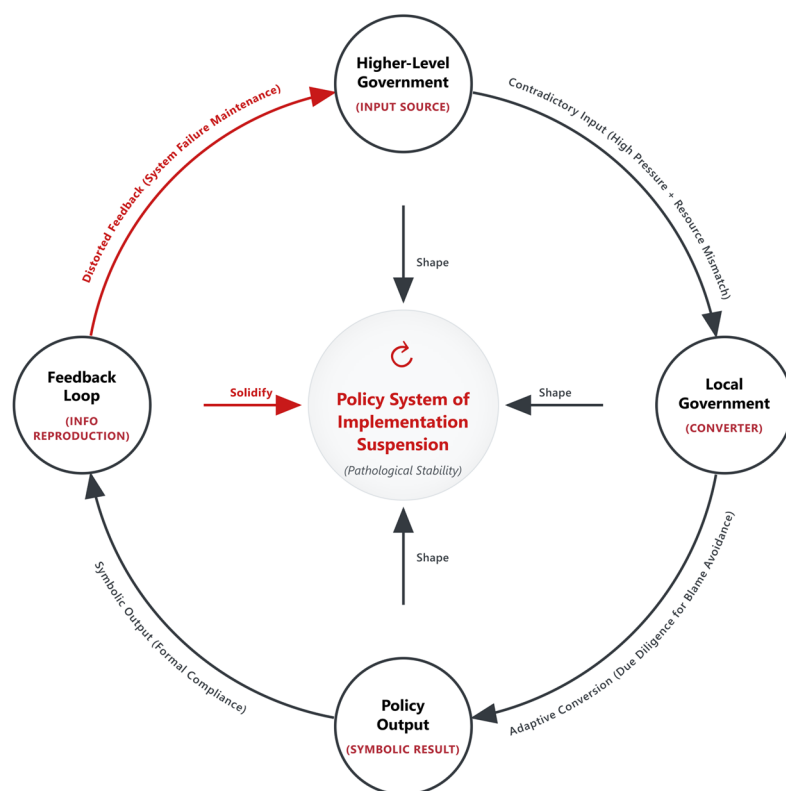


Figure 2. Model of Self-Sustaining System of Policy Implementation Failure.

3.2. Data Collection: Multi-Source Evidence Through Triangulation

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, this research conducted multiple rounds of fieldwork between May 2022 and September 2025 and employed diverse data collection methods to construct a triangulated body of evidence.

Group Interviews. Semi-structured interview protocols were designed around key stages of the policy process, including policy input, implementation translation, outcome presentation, and feedback adjustment. Interview participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Specifically, participants included frontline grassroots officials and cooperative leaders directly involved in policy implementation in Y County and H County, as well as personnel from higher-level departments and relevant stakeholders who played critical roles in institutional design, resource allocation, and oversight. This ensured the inclusion of actors across different administrative levels and functional roles. In total, four group interviews were conducted, involving 21 participant attendances, with each session lasting approximately 60 to 90 min.

Participant Observation. The researcher conducted field visits to both sites and directly observed internal government meetings, reception processes for higher-level inspections, cooperative inauguration ceremonies, and the cooperatives' routine operations or periods of stagnation. Through sustained field engagement, extensive field notes were recorded. These non-verbal cues and contextual details provided important background for interpreting implicit attitudes and strategic expressions in the interview data, thereby compensating for the limitations of interviews in reconstructing situational dynamics.

Document Analysis. A systematic collection and analysis of documentary materials related to the cases was undertaken. These materials included policy documents at the central, provincial, and local levels; government work reports; internal meeting minutes; project proposals; promotional materials; and relevant news coverage from local media. Together, these texts delineate the official policy narrative, which is juxtaposed with the practice-based narratives derived from interviews and observations. During data analysis, the researcher systematically addressed inconsistent statements in the textual material. Specifically, interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and subjected to open coding, followed by horizontal comparisons across statements related to the same policy stage and action process to identify discrepancies. These statements were then contextually classified by considering the participants' organizational level, positional role, and responsibilities within the policy chain, distinguishing between normative statements, strategic responses, and experiential descriptions. Cross-validation was further conducted using participant observation and policy documents. Contradictions that could not be reconciled were retained as valuable empirical evidence for analyzing tensions in policy implementation and deviations in organizational behavior, rather than being treated as research error.

4. Case Analysis: The Formation and Persistence of a Dysfunctional System

The implementation of policy at the grassroots level is never a linear process of execution. Rather, it is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of institutional pressures, resource constraints, and political logics. Through field-based case analyses of cross-Strait rural cooperatives in H County and Y County, this section seeks to demonstrate how local policy systems, through the interaction between institutional arrangements and actor behavior, come to form a self-sustaining state of dysfunction. The detailed case analysis will be conducted within the analytical framework of political systems theory, structured around four core components: policy input, implementation and conversion, policy output, and feedback loops.

4.1. Inputs: High Pressure Mandates and Resource Mismatch

According to the logic of political systems theory, any process of policy implementation begins with system inputs derived from the external environment, institutional constraints, and available resources. These elements not only determine the initial momentum of policy operation but also profoundly shape subsequent transformation processes and policy outputs. In the construction of cross-Strait rural cooperatives, higher-level authorities have sought to incentivize local governments to advance project implementation through policy directives, fiscal allocations, and various forms of resource support. However, in the practices observed in H County and Y County, these system inputs failed to stimulate grassroots initiative as expected. Instead, under conditions of intense political pressure and limited resources, they exacerbated the dilemmas faced by local governments.

On the one hand, the complexity of cross-Strait relations and their geopolitical sensitivity subject local governments to multiple constraints when promoting Taiwan-related rural cooperatives. Externally, policies intended to benefit Taiwan compatriots and local communities often face deliberate interference from external forces. Internally, Taiwan-related policies carry a high degree of political salience, which embeds policy implementation in an inherently risk-laden context. For this reason, higher-level authorities pay particularly close attention to such cooperative initiatives and supervise them through a highly politicized lens, thereby generating sustained policy pressure at the grassroots level. Against this backdrop, when advancing cross-Strait cooperation, higher-level governments tend to place Taiwan-related projects within rigid frameworks of political review and control. This approach restricts the flexibility and autonomy of local governments in project implementation while simultaneously increasing their administrative burden and political risk perceptions.

“Although the project was widely framed as a ‘political task,’ there was little willingness among relevant actors to commit substantive financial resources”. (20241014C)

“Local authorities showed a clear preference for large corporate investors, while projects defined as ‘political tasks’ were handled in a largely symbolic manner.” (20250920D)

At the same time, against the backdrop of heightened cross-Strait tensions, any managerial failure or economic dispute involving Taiwan-related cooperatives is highly likely to be elevated into a political incident, thereby generating a negative feedback loop in which problems become politicized. This risk not only undermines local officials’ accumulation of political capital and prospects for career advancement, but also activates accountability mechanisms at higher administrative levels, prompting grassroots governments to adopt highly cautious strategies of defensive compliance.

“When it involves the other side (Taiwan), many tasks become much harder to carry out.” (20250920D)

“Start-up capital is necessary to get things going, but when we communicated with the government, their response was very slow.” (20250920E)

On the other hand, although cross-Strait rural cooperatives are eligible for earmarked funding, the use of these funds is subject to institutionalized constraints. One key issue lies in the mismatch between policy objectives and local needs. Specifically, the industrial priorities promoted by higher-level authorities often diverge from the sectors that local governments currently seek to develop. Given the limited attention and administrative capacity of local governments, resources are therefore frequently allocated inefficiently or remain underutilized.

“Our village is currently focused on other industries. When this cross-Strait agricultural cooperative came in, it disrupted our priorities, and we simply could not spare the capacity to deal with it.” (20250920D)

“At present, preferential policies have not really been implemented. Without tangible incentives, it is impossible to move forward. If there are no resources, how can Taiwanese investors and farmers be attracted?” (20250920E)

Under the pressure generated by these intersecting constraints, grassroots governments’ responses to cross-Strait rural cooperatives display a typical pattern of strategic adjustment. Confronted with policy mandates and funding arrangements from higher-level authorities, local governments can neither advance projects autonomously nor ignore the need to maintain formal compliance with regulatory and performance assessment requirements. System inputs therefore not only provide the initial impetus for policy implementation, but also shape the behavioral logic of local governments. As a result, policy execution is transformed into a mode characterized by outward conformity and substantive avoidance under the combined pressures of resource scarcity and political risk. In fact, such an input configuration suggests that the political system is not in a state of equilibrium. When the scale or diversity of inputs is limited, the output side is likely to become overly concentrated, resulting in a narrowed range of policy responses. The coexistence of high-pressure mandates and mismatched resources constitutes what Easton’s political systems theory conceptualizes as contradictory inputs, which plants the seeds of adaptive distortion at the very outset of the system.

4.2. Transformation: The Subtle Manifestation of Defensive Compliance

Policy inputs do not automatically translate into effective policy outputs. Instead, they must pass through a complex process of transformation. Policy implementation is not a linear transmission process, but one that is continuously reconstructed through interaction and bargaining at the meso-level. At this stage, grassroots governments, when confronted with pressure from higher authorities and a vacuum of usable resources, often adopt a strategy of defensive compliance in order to provide a formal response to political responsibility. Because local conditions and resource endowments differ, H County and Y County each developed distinct coping strategies.

The pattern observed in H County can be characterized as formalistic compliance. Under the pressure of politically defined tasks and performance evaluation mechanisms imposed by higher levels of government, grassroots authorities in H County tend to demonstrate their implementation commitment through procedural actions. These include the timely issuance of policy documents, the regular organization of meetings for discussion, and the punctual submission of data and reports, all of which serve to construct an outward image of diligence and responsibility. In practice, however, actors at the county and township levels remain broadly cautious and, in many instances, deliberately avoid substantive advancement of the project.

“I did so much preparatory work early on, and the villagers were all on board, but the municipal government opposed it. They never seriously studied the policies issued by the Provincial Taiwan Affairs Office and were simply going through the motions of investment promotion.” (20241024B)

“Sometimes you put real effort into planning, but the municipal government just vetoes it outright.” (20250920E)

In terms of concrete implementation, although earmarked funds for the cooperative were formally allocated in accordance with policy provisions, they were often reallocated to other projects under the pretext of “overall coordination”, thereby undermining the

financial foundation on which the cooperative depended. At the same time, disagreements among government departments were frequent. It was common for one department to express support while another raised objections, repeatedly stalling the cooperative project during approval and coordination processes. Through such formally compliant practices, grassroots governments in H County effectively avoided direct responsibility and shifted risks onto the project itself, maintaining a delicate balance between compliance and avoidance.

“We supported the funding, but once it reached the local level it was reallocated to other projects under the pretext of overall coordination.” (20241024B)

“It was successfully registered in Zhanjiang as well, but during the process some departments said that people from outside the Chinese mainland were not allowed to set up this type of cooperative. It was debated for quite a long time.” (20250920E)

By contrast, Y County exhibited what can be characterized as a “delayed and frozen” response. During the preparatory phase, the county government actively attracted Taiwanese farmers, Taiwanese investors, and financial resources, securing close attention and preferential support from the Provincial Taiwan Affairs Office and signaling a clear political stance. However, once the project moved toward substantive implementation, the local government’s attitude shifted markedly toward passivity. The cooperative’s unveiling ceremony was repeatedly postponed, supporting policies were left unimplemented for extended periods, and approvals for key sites and resource guarantees were deliberately put on hold.

“We spent over 200,000 yuan on renovations, but the cooperative was never officially inaugurated. The money was fronted by the village committee, and now the town and county governments are passing the buck—no one is willing to cover this cost.” (20241014C)

“The policies from above are good, but when it comes to implementing them locally, nothing works, and nothing gets done.” (20241014C)

On the surface, the government of County Y explains the slow progress of the cooperatives with Taiwan by citing procedural deficiencies, policy gaps, and limited funding. In reality, however, it employs delays to continuously shift responsibility upward to higher-level governments or diffuse it laterally across departments in order to avoid accountability. County Y weakens the visibility of Taiwan-related cooperatives through “continuous freezing”, gradually marginalizing them from the public agenda and ultimately offloading responsibility through a cycle of “delaying” and “waiting”. Unlike County H, County Y’s policy shifts do not pursue formal appearances; rather, they mitigate policy risks by actively issuing slogans while delaying implementation, leaving the cooperatives in a prolonged state of “neither launched nor canceled”.

Why did County H and County Y follow different policy transition paths? This difference can perhaps be analyzed in terms of the local embeddedness of Taiwanese business actors in each case. In County H, the leading Taiwanese entrepreneurs have been cultivating local ties for a long time, forming deep social networks, which make it difficult for the county government to evade responsibility through tactics such as shirking. In contrast, the leading Taiwanese entrepreneurs in County Y have limited local engagement and lack robust social networks. This difference, in turn, shapes the local government’s choice of policy transition path.

In sum, although the policy transition paths of County H and County Y differ, both ultimately result in the stagnation of the cooperatives. On the surface, the cooperatives are presented as exemplars of governmental diligence and institutional innovation; in reality,

however, they lack the support for sustainable development and long-term operation. Despite the differing paths, both cases essentially reflect a “defensive compliance” strategy adopted by the system to maintain its own survival. This validates the theoretical assumption of this study, namely, that shirking behavior is a rational, system-level adaptation rather than mere individual inertia or negligence.

4.3. Output: The Gap Between Official Narrative and Reality

Although local governments exhibit different paths of defensive compliance in policy transitions, the ultimate output tends to converge, resulting in a rupture between narrative and reality. At the stage of policy output, the discourse frames the policy as a model of successful implementation, while in practice it often degenerates into an institutional shell lacking substantive operation.

In the cases of County H and County Y, the final output of Taiwan-related rural cooperatives reveals a clear “dual face.” On the surface, the cooperatives are depicted as exemplary platforms for implementing higher-level policies and promoting cross-Strait integration: bases are fully constructed, inauguration ceremonies are held, Taiwanese entrepreneurs and farmers participate, and official documents and media repeatedly reinforce terms like “demonstration”, portraying active local government engagement. County H maintains this symbolic compliance through formal adherence, preserving the appearance of execution, whereas County Y, despite employing freezing and shirking tactics, still shows the “existence of the project” in official records, creating symbolic evidence of development achievements.

However, the practical operations on the ground are deeply disconnected from the official narrative. Specifically, the cooperatives’ physical infrastructure is “built but unused”, with costly facilities and equipment left idle; organizational operations fall into “empty cycles”, as County H maintains formal compliance through meetings, reports, and documents, while substantive management is absent. County Y, meanwhile, mitigates policy responsibility through freezing and delaying measures, leaving Taiwanese actors nominally involved but excluded from decision-making, and local farmers lacking self-motivation. Furthermore, cooperatives face cumbersome approval procedures and difficulties in aligning funds with actual needs. Together, these phenomena indicate that the cooperatives have not become genuine production or collaborative organizations, but rather have evolved into highly politicized symbolic projects.

“The Taiwan Affairs Office said it could be done, but when we went to the Administration for Industry and Commerce, they said Taiwanese cannot be considered ‘farmers’, and the cooperative can only be registered by Chinese mainland.” (20241024B)

“What farmers care about most is how land translates into shares and how profits are distributed. If these issues aren’t properly negotiated, they’ll just say, Don’t come here.” (20241014C)

“Our team has already made great efforts, but the higher-level authorities are still stuck in the old investment-attraction mindset and haven’t updated it, so we cannot align with the new track of cross-Strait farmer cooperatives.” (20250920E)

The cases of County H and County Y vividly illustrate that the policy system’s output stage does not naturally convert inputs into effective outcomes; rather, it is shaped by the interplay of bureaucratic logic at the meso-level, institutional constraints, and resource scarcity. This rupture between official narrative and reality reflects a disjunction between outputs and objectives, as well as between narrative and practice, and exemplifies the system’s “symbolic output”. In functional terms, a political system operates through the process of “input–conversion–output” to facilitate constructive interactions

both among internal components and between the system and its external environment, thereby enhancing its capacity for persistence and development. However, in the two cases examined here, this functional chain does not culminate in effective problem-solving. Instead, policy outputs serve primarily as raw material for the subsequent construction of distorted feedback.

4.4. Feedback Loops: Constructing Positive Signals and Filtering Negative Information

Feedback loops are the lifeline that sustains the normal functioning of a policy system, enabling actual information from implementation to be fed back into the decision-making process to correct behaviors that deviate from objectives. However, in the governance of Taiwan-related cooperatives, this loop has failed to perform its corrective function and instead has become a key mechanism through which systemic dysfunction is maintained. The fundamental reason lies in the local government's deliberate "selective processing" of information: on the one hand, actively generating positive signals to meet higher-level expectations; on the other hand, intentionally filtering out negative information to avoid political risk, resulting in a systematically distorted feedback process. More specifically, grassroots governments do not passively lose feedback; rather, they actively reproduce information through multiple mechanisms. In routine operations, formalized reporting becomes the primary channel. By continuously presenting symbolic achievements such as unveiling ceremonies, media reports, and signing events, local authorities are able to construct an image of "smooth policy implementation" in the eyes of higher-level governments.

"For them, holding meetings and organizing ceremonies is mainly about taking good-looking photos. You have to understand that." (20250920D)

"We were quite thorough when it came to pushing forward the unveiling and organizing ceremonies, but after the unveiling, what was there left to do?" (20250920D)

During ad hoc inspection visits, this practice is reinforced through carefully choreographed tour routes and the selection of "reliable" interviewees, packaging the cooperative as a model project that is proceeding in an orderly manner. By contrast, farmers' dissatisfaction and the hollowing out of the project are treated as sensitive information and deliberately screened out, ensuring that they do not enter the field of vision of higher-level authorities. As a result, the feedback loop that should have conveyed accurate conditions is effectively transformed by local governments into a form of staged information display.

"They asked us to hold the unveiling ceremony at Base X because the environment there looks better and is more suitable for taking photos." (20241024B)

"Every now and then leaders come to inspect. When they are here, everything looks lively and presentable, but once they leave, we are still running around, completely overwhelmed." (20250920D)

This mechanism manifests differently in the cases of H County and Y County. Although the specific pathways diverge, both rely on the production of positive signals and the screening out of negative information, allowing higher-level authorities to continuously receive the illusion of "effective policy implementation." This illusion not only disrupts the system's corrective capacity but also, in turn, reinforces the incentive structure that encourages local governments to maintain a pattern of formalistic execution.

In the governance of cross-Strait cooperatives, the feedback loop has been transformed from a mechanism of information correction into a stage for performance-oriented governance. What higher-level authorities receive is not an accurate reflection of on-the-ground realities, but a political narrative that has been filtered and packaged by local governments. Feedback has not disappeared; rather, it has been consciously "reconstructed" at

the local level. Positive signals are amplified, while negative information is systematically screened out.

At a deeper level, the Taiwan Affairs Office, as the lead department responsible for policy coordination, occupies a relatively weak position within the local governance structure. It lacks substantive authority to impose binding constraints or to allocate key resources, and thus functions more as a symbolic mobilizer than as an actor capable of forcefully intervening in or correcting implementation deviations. This institutional positioning means that even when distorted feedback is received, the office often lacks the capacity to overcome entrenched local interest structures and administrative inertia, thereby limiting its ability to exercise effective oversight and correction.

More specifically, in promoting cross-Straits agricultural cooperation, local Taiwan Affairs Offices rely primarily on coordination and persuasion rather than command authority or performance-based enforcement. When attempting to advance projects on the basis of positive reports, they are unable to compel key functional departments such as finance, land administration, or agriculture and rural affairs to provide substantive support. Conversely, when negative information is systematically filtered out, they lack independent investigative mechanisms and accountability powers to verify conditions on the ground. Distorted feedback thus persists not because higher authorities are entirely unaware, but because they lack the corresponding authority and resources to intervene effectively. As a result, the performative governance practices of local governments can be sustained over time, while the corrective function of higher-level oversight remains structurally hollowed out due to mismatches between responsibility and authority.

As a result, the feedback mechanism comes to serve the maintenance of superficial system stability rather than the correction of deviations. At this point, a closed and distorted feedback loop is fully formed. By actively constructing positive signals and suppressing negative information, it effectively blocks the system's capacity for self-correction, ultimately trapping the entire policy system in the state of suspended implementation and pathological stability that this study seeks to illuminate.

5. Discussion

Based on the research findings, the core contribution of this study lies not in demonstrating that local governments engage in blame avoidance or formalistic behavior, but in revealing a more fundamental systemic problem. Under conditions of intense external pressure, political systems do not simply “underperform”; rather, the entire operational logic of the system—encompassing input, conversion, output, and feedback—undergoes a structural shift. Political systems theory typically assumes that as long as a system continuously receives inputs from its environment and obtains information on implementation outcomes through feedback mechanisms, it possesses the capacity for self-adjustment and corrective action. However, the cases of Y County and H County demonstrate that when the input side is subjected to sustained high political pressure and relatively insufficient resource support, the system's primary objective ceases to be the enhancement of policy performance, and instead prioritizes the persistence of the system itself. Under these conditions, local governments, as the system's core “conversion agents”, do not interrupt system operation; rather, they adjust conversion rules to ensure that the system continues to produce “acceptable” policy outputs without substantially increasing risk.

From the perspective of systems theory, this conversion should not be seen as abnormal behavior but as a typical adaptive response. The issue, however, is that this adaptation occurs not along the dimension of “how to better achieve policy goals,” but rather along the dimension of avoiding pressure from higher authorities. Consequently, system outputs gradually diverge from reflecting actual policy outcomes and shift toward symbolic outputs

that satisfy the political expectations of the input side. When these outputs are consistently incorporated into the feedback loop, the function of the feedback mechanism itself changes: it no longer serves to correct deviations, but primarily to confirm that the system continues to operate “as required.” As a result, the system does not collapse but enters a state in which it appears operational while functionally losing its capacity for corrective adjustment. This indicates that the implementation challenges in cross-Strait agricultural cooperation do not stem from failures in individual components, but rather from the system’s adaptive reconstruction under environmental pressure, producing a form of “functional failure” in its self-maintenance.

Moreover, this study offers an empirical refinement of the concept of feedback within political systems theory. Classical systems theory often treats feedback as a neutral technical mechanism, assuming that its content primarily derives from objective implementation outcomes. The findings of this study, however, show that in highly politicized policy domains, feedback itself becomes part of the system’s adaptive repertoire, with its content and form reshaped according to the system’s survival logic. Local governments do not cease providing feedback; instead, they filter, symbolize, and proceduralize it, making it more consistent with political security and institutional expectations. As a result, the system continues to receive information indicating that policies have been implemented, yet it struggles to discern the actual conditions of policy operation at the grassroots level. This feedback is not merely distorted or absent; it constitutes institutionalized low-risk feedback under specific environmental pressures. While it helps maintain system stability in the short term, it impedes learning and corrective action in the long term. Accordingly, the systemic failure revealed in this study does not indicate that the political system fails to operate, but rather that it succeeds too effectively in self-preservation, leading to a gradual suspension of policy goals.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study extends Easton’s political systems theory in four dimensions. First, at the level of system logic, this study interprets policy implementation failure as an adaptive mechanism aimed at sustaining the political system. Under conditions of intense political pressure and resource mismatch, the system prioritizes persistence over efficiency in order to ensure its own survival, thereby leading to the substantive suspension of implementation goals. Second, at the level of operational mechanism, this study uncovers the functional alienation of feedback loops within the political system. The empirical findings suggest that feedback has neither disappeared nor become ineffective. Rather, it has been transformed from a corrective mechanism that conveys substantive performance information into a confirmation mechanism that primarily transmits political legitimacy and symbolic achievements. Third, at the level of interaction patterns, this study argues that distorted feedback is not a unilateral deception from lower levels to higher authorities. Instead, it reflects a tacitly accepted interactive equilibrium among multiple actors. The persistence of such distorted feedback lies in the fact that it simultaneously satisfies the lower level’s need to avoid risk and the upper level’s need to maintain political appearance. It therefore constitutes a pressure-induced consensus among actors within the system. Finally, this study challenges the “functionalist assumption” embedded in classical political systems theory. Through an analysis of the cases of Y County and H County, this study finds that under conditions of intense political pressure and constrained resources, the political system tends to prioritize procedural adaptation, thereby evolving into a state of “involutionary resilience”. This suggests that political systems possess a dual logic of survival: they may sustain themselves either by effectively addressing external problems or by internally decoupling policy goals from implementation practices. This finding contributes to an understanding of the paradox of “stable failure”, in which a policy system remains politically stable while

functionally stagnant. In other words, this study offers a generalized functional perspective that may also be applicable to other centralized administrative contexts beyond the cross-Strait setting.

Taken together, this study moves beyond the behaviorist perspective that attributes implementation failure primarily to individual officials' blame-avoidance motivations. By examining the structural and functional dynamics of the political system, it provides a systemic explanation for policy failure and offers a novel analytical lens for understanding the phenomenon of "implementation suspension" in politically sensitive domains.

6. Conclusions

This study adopts political systems theory as its analytical framework and addresses the central research question of under what mechanisms and why local governments' cross-Strait projects persistently exhibit a "hot above, cold below" pattern and resist systemic correction, using a comparative analysis of agricultural cooperation practices in Y County, Q City, and H County, S City. The cross-Strait rural cooperative practices in Y and H Counties indicate that policy failure cannot be attributed solely to resource constraints or bureaucratic inertia. Rather, it emerges from a systemic mechanism that is generated and self-sustained through the interaction of institutional structures and administrative behavior. Specifically, under conditions of political pressure and resource misallocation, local administrative converters at the meso-level, motivated by risk avoidance, consciously filter and symbolically encode the actual operational information before transmitting it upward as acceptable feedback. Consequently, the output manifests as formally compliant, yet largely symbolic, achievements. In this context, the feedback channel ceases to function as a neutral corrective mechanism and instead operates as a device for maintaining institutional legitimacy and political security. It is precisely this actively constructed, selectively amplified, and deliberately obscured feedback that allows the system to appear to function normally on the surface while, in reality, remaining trapped in a prolonged state of suspended governance.

In other words, local governments' defensive compliance should not be understood merely as administrative inertia, but rather as a rational adaptive strategy adopted under high-pressure conditions to ensure their own survival. This strategy generates symbolic policy outputs, such as inauguration ceremonies and reporting documents, which transmit false positive feedback of "task completion" to the higher-level system, serving simultaneously as both input and output, thereby concealing the actual hollowed-out outcomes of the cooperatives. The core contribution of this study lies in reframing the dilemma of policy implementation from a static local governance problem into a dynamic systemic crisis sustained by distorted feedback, offering a new theoretical explanation for understanding and addressing implementation challenges in sensitive policy domains.

Moreover, feedback is not simply a passive flow of information but a highly political process, carrying both factual information and symbolic political signals, which local governments can purposefully couple, substitute, or obscure during transmission. In this mechanism, local governments are not passive implementers but act as "controllers of information". When institutional survival and political security are prioritized, the system often drifts toward "apparent stability", maintaining external legitimacy through symbolic outputs. This explains why cross-Strait rural cooperatives exhibit policy failures while continuing to persist over the long term. To truly improve policy outcomes, it is necessary not only to restore the authenticity of the feedback mechanism but also to break the self-reinforcing logic of policy symbolization, ensuring that policy evaluation and resource allocation genuinely align with grassroots practice, thereby achieving an effective connection between institutional design intentions and implementation realities.

Building on this study, future research could further explore cross-Strait integrated development across various fields and identify new pathways for peaceful cross-Strait relations from a systems theory perspective. It should be acknowledged that this study has certain limitations. On the one hand, the findings are shaped by case selection. Although the two cases are highly representative, they are situated within the specific context of current cross-Strait relations and the policy framework toward Taiwan on the Chinese mainland, which may limit the broader applicability of the conclusions. On the other hand, some interviewees may have exhibited unintentional biases during the interview process, which could have influenced certain aspects of the empirical material. These factors should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings.

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