


Village Leaders, Dual Brokerage and Political Order in Rural China

Xi Chen*  and Jingping Liu†

Abstract

Drawing on an ethnographic study in two counties in Hunan province, this article explores how political brokerage has contributed to political order in China by facilitating contentious and non-contentious bargaining between the government and ordinary people. To account for the changing role of village leaders in rural politics, the article develops a concept of dual brokerage. This concept not only recognizes formal and informal linkages between village leaders and the two principals – the government and the community of villagers – but also underscores the interactivity between the linkages. We contend that despite the tensions between village leaders' roles as state agents and as village representatives, these two roles in the reform era tend to be mutually beneficial. Under such an institutional configuration, village leaders in China in the reform era have strong incentives to act as dual agents and can make policy implementation more flexible and the use of state force more moderate. A comparison between the trilateral interactions before and after the tax reform in 2005 confirms that whether village leaders can effectively act as dual agents has a significant impact on the quality of rural governance in China.

Keywords: village leaders; informal institutions; rural governance; political brokerage; contentious bargaining; China

Without the support of solid institutions for political representation and conflict resolution, political order in China relies heavily on contentious and non-contentious bargaining between the state and society.¹ Such bargaining is often facilitated by brokerage provided by a variety of semi-state or non-state actors including mass organizations, NGOs, people's congress deputies, grassroots cadres and other individuals. Despite the recent boom in research on this topic, understanding of political brokerage in China is still very limited. When do brokers have a strong incentive and gain the capacity to mediate between

* Department of Government and Public Administration, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Email: xichen48@gmail.com.

† Department of Government and Public Administration, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Email: pennyliu1119@gmail.com (corresponding author). Both authors contributed equally to this article.

1 For discussion of contentious bargaining, see Chen, Xi 2012; Lee and Zhang 2013.

the state and society? How do they deal with the tension and conflict inherent in such a role? Does political brokerage help to maintain political stability and, if so, how?

Among the various political brokers, village leaders have played an especially important role in sustaining political stability in China.² As grassroots officials, they “are the first line of defense or offense of the authoritarian state.”³ They help the state to maintain social order in the countryside not just by fulfilling their traditional roles as arbitrators or mediators to resolve civil disputes in the community;⁴ they also often shape the implementation of, and sometimes the content of, state policy, and thus facilitate an often constructive bargaining relationship between the state and peasants.⁵ Yet, their role has varied across time and space. This article aims to develop a concept of dual brokerage that helps to describe and explain the changing role of village leaders in rural politics.

The role of village leaders in Chinese politics has been extensively examined in recent years. Scholars have noted their simultaneous commitment to both the state and village; however, these two types of commitment are predominantly viewed as competing or even mutually conflicting. Consequently, village leaders are described as “swing players” who are often compelled to take sides.⁶ Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, for example, argue that in confrontations between the government and peasants, village officials usually take the side of their superior office holders, although they acknowledge that some village officials occasionally side with peasants.⁷ A few studies have explored how a variety of institutional arrangements have provided strong incentives for village leaders to act as state agents.⁸ On the other hand, some studies highlight village leaders’ strong incentives to act primarily as community representatives. Arguing that state control has been substantially undermined by the rise of a market economy as well as tax reforms,⁹ they find that formal institutions, such as grassroots elections, and informal institutions, such as clanship, provide village leaders with a motivation to represent community interests¹⁰ and to engage in land redistribution,¹¹ public goods provision¹² and collective protests.¹³

In this article, we posit that the role of village leaders can be described as dual brokerage, a concept adapted from Prasenjit Duara’s influential book on rural

2 By village leaders, we mean village heads and Party branch secretaries. The role of other village cadres on village committees is somewhat similar.

3 Lee and Zhang 2013, 1477.

4 Read and Michelson 2018.

5 O’Brien and Li 1999.

6 Wang 2017, 9.

7 Bernstein and Lü 2003.

8 O’Brien and Li 1999; Kung, Cai and Sun 2009.

9 See, e.g., Chen, An 2007.

10 Manion 1996.

11 Kennedy, Rozelle and Shi 2004.

12 Tsai 2007; Xu and Yao 2015.

13 Li 2002; Zhang, Wu 2015.

north China in the early 20th century.¹⁴ Duara argues that rural leaders in the late Qing dynasty simultaneously provided two kinds of brokerage: entrepreneurial and protective. As entrepreneurial brokers, village leaders acted as fee-charging agents for the state, performing administrative functions in rural society; as protective brokers, they worked to protect the interests of the community. The role played by rural leaders had important implications for political change. Revolutions erupted when rural elites ceased to provide protective brokerage and instead focused on predation as state agents. While Duara's model of dual brokerage is illuminating, like many studies of contemporary rural politics, it also assumes that there is necessarily a trade-off between village leaders' role as state agents and their commitment to their communities.

We contend that despite the tensions between acting for the state and representing villagers, these two roles in the reform era tend to be mutually beneficial: the close relationship between village leaders and the government makes it more likely that villagers will lend them their support, and village leaders' popularity among villagers often helps them to develop close relationships with the government. It is exactly this simultaneously beneficial and conflicting relationship between the two roles that provides village leaders with strong incentives and important resources to mediate the interactions between the state and peasants.

This article will first explore the configuration of formal and informal linkages that provide village leaders with the resources and incentives to act as dual agents. Patron–client connections between government officials and village leaders as well as the relatively autonomous status of villages and the trust of the villagers are essential elements of a village leader's role as a dual agent. Village leaders often enjoy a near monopoly in terms of upward and downward information flow and can use considerable discretion on a variety of everyday issues. Since both the state and villagers face formidable barriers in direct interactions with each other, each tends to regard the linkages between village leaders and the other principal as an important resource.

After the exploration of the institutional basis, we will examine village leaders' strategies for coercing villagers without losing their trust while sometimes engaging villagers in collective actions without alienating government officials. In their efforts to cope with such challenges, village leaders often make policy implementation more flexible and reasonable and can moderate the use of state force. Such a dynamic and contentious process is often how political order is maintained and legitimacy sustained in rural China.

In this article, we are concerned not only with the general tendency for village leaders in the reform era to act as dual agents but also with the variations in their incentives and effectiveness for playing such a role across time and space. A great advantage of the concept of dual brokerage is that it can help us to isolate conditions to account for the change in village leaders' roles. In addition to social

14 Duara (1991, 254–55) suggests that his model of dual brokerage developed for the late Qing period is still relevant to the situation after de-collectivization in the early 1980s.

and economic changes, such as urbanization and industrialization, changes in government policy regarding coercion and capital have especially significant impacts on the position of village leaders as dual agents. In the last part of this article, we aim to solve an empirical puzzle: why did village leaders in China encounter serious challenges to their dual agency role in the 1990s and early 2000s but not afterwards? Our analysis shows how the tax reform in 2005 represented a watershed moment in the policy environment. Before the reform, when state–peasant interactions centred on extraction, village leaders in agricultural provinces experienced a crisis with sustaining their dual brokerage. Many either became the targets of peasant protests or quit under government pressure. The tax reform abolished agriculture taxes and made state–peasant interactions provision-centred. While this brought some new challenges, it made it considerably easier for village leaders to act as dual brokers.

The bulk of the evidence in this study draws on in-depth interviews from an ethnographic study in two counties in Hunan, one of the main agricultural provinces in China. The interviews, mostly with either village heads or Party branch secretaries in 15 villages, inquired into respondents' perceptions and actual interactions with local government officials and with villagers. In-depth interviewing is excellent for capturing the essential elements and processes of brokerage: "because brokerage rests on informal, personal relationships, understanding it requires close attention to micro-level relations and social psychological processes."¹⁵ As for sampling, the initial contact with some of the interviewees was based on family and personal connections, while other interviewees were identified using the snowball method. Because most of the respondents' behaviour and attitudes are nuanced and sensitive, these interviews required a considerable level of trust between the researchers and interviewees. One of the authors forged close relationships with some of the interviewees over a period of about four years. Since historical comparisons are one of our main tools, we sought to collect as complete information as possible for the past four decades. Some of the interviewees who had worked as village leaders for one or two decades, or even longer, offered particularly valuable information and insight on the historical changes that had taken place. In addition to interviewing all available village leaders (village heads and Party secretaries) in the 15 villages, we also interviewed villagers, enterprise executives and government officials. It is important to assess interviewers' biases by carefully crosschecking their narratives against other interviews. It should be noted that the roles of village leaders in other provinces may not have evolved in exactly the same way as in Hunan. For example, in coastal provinces where peasants had never experienced the same level of tax extraction, village leaders were spared the most challenging task facing dual brokers in Hunan in the 1990s and early 2000s. On the other hand, village leaders in such areas were likely to encounter the more severe problem of weak village solidarity resulting from more extensive industrialization and urbanization.

15 Stovel and Shaw 2012, 140.

Formal and Informal Linkages

Although village leaders are linked to the state via formal institutions such as the performance evaluation system (*jixiao kaohezhi* 绩效考核制), personal ties provide them with strong incentives to act on the behalf of the government.¹⁶ Township officials and village leaders often develop an intimate bond as “comrades plus brothers.”¹⁷ Village leaders sometimes reported that their main incentive to finish a task was to give township leaders “face” (*mianzi* 面子). Indeed, township leaders deliberately nurture personal relationships with village leaders to use as an emotional control tool. This type of relationship transforms formal government tasks into personal obligations. If village leaders fail to finish certain tasks, they feel personally in debt to the township leaders.¹⁸ Our interviews confirm the importance of personal ties. Although not every village leader had the chance to develop a close relationship with government officials, almost all agreed that such a relationship is important. One of the main advantages of personal connections is that they help village leaders to gain vital information when competing for resources and opportunities on behalf of the village. As one Party secretary remarked, “When funds come from above, they [government officials] can decide whether it should be given to Village A or Village B. If you are close to them, then it’s yours. This is how we obtained the funding for our road, landscape and waterworks projects.”¹⁹

Personal ties are not only useful for village leaders’ work, they also bring about important personal gains. The material benefits directly associated with village leader positions are usually very limited, so village leaders often care more about the indirect benefits that derive from their personal ties to township leaders. Some village leaders even regard such ties as the most important reward for their job. For example, one Party secretary relayed that “the relationship can help me to benefit from public projects. When land is expropriated for public projects, the projects are usually grabbed by local people.”²⁰ In addition to business opportunities, connections to government leaders can also boost the self-esteem of village leaders. Enormous gratification and pride are felt if, for instance, superiors attend the wedding of their children.²¹

Likewise, to a large extent, a village leader’s identity as the villagers’ representative is also based on informal linkages – although formal institutions, such as village elections, certainly play a role.²² Similar to lineages, villages also constitute trust networks, which can be defined as communities where members can “get personal attention, help with personal difficulties, long-term reciprocity,

16 While the narrowly defined cadre evaluation system in China only evaluates leading cadres at the township level and above, village leaders’ performance is assessed in a similar way.

17 Sun and Guo 2000, 33.

18 Wu 2007, 615.

19 Interview with a village Party secretary, 23 May 2018.

20 Interview with a village Party secretary, 15 May 2018.

21 Interview, village Party secretary, 23 May 2018.

22 See, e.g., Manion 2006; O’Brien 2001; Li 2002.

Table 1: **Village Leaders' Linkages to the Government and Villagers**

	Village leaders–government	Village leaders–villagers
Formal	Performance evaluation system, CCP hierarchy	Elections, self-governance rules
Informal	Patron–client network	Villages and lineages as trust networks; patron–client network

and cushioning against possible disasters or disabilities – benefits they cannot ordinarily acquire elsewhere.”²³ Although bonds within villages declined substantially in the reform era,²⁴ villages still provide relatively stable trust networks for villagers and village leaders alike. It is remarkable how often village leaders invoked this factor when they explained their motivation to defend the interests of the village. Compared to the village cadres’ loyalty to the state, which has always been limited and conditional, their commitment to their communities tends to be more stable and consistent. An important reason is that village leaders remain in the community for years, if not their entire life. A village secretary used a boat analogy to describe the difference. He compared government leaders to wooden boats that can move freely, while village leaders are like stone boats that stay in the same place forever.²⁵ Even long-serving village leaders regard their job as temporary compared to their relationship with the community. Another village leader used a different metaphor to describe his position: mud that can maintain a shape when the weather is dry, but melts and dissolves into the earth when it rains.²⁶ He and many other village leaders, therefore, adhere to the tenet that although it is impossible to completely avoid offending villagers, they should take care to minimize such slights because when they get old and retire they will still have to face these same villagers.

Alongside their connections to government leaders, close relations with fellow villagers can also bring about a variety of benefits to village leaders such as popular support, which is indispensable during elections and when carrying out their everyday duties but also valuable when conducting any personal business (if any). To be sure, village leaders are not just ordinary members of the community. Their goal is not simply to maintain agreeable relationships with villagers and avoid offending them. It is more important that they, as community leaders, diligently defend the community’s interests in order to maintain their authority and standing. They often regard the village as their domain and keep vigilant watch for possible threats from the state or other outsiders. From time to time, they need to provide patronage to their clients. Village leaders tend to invest more time and resources to cultivating good relationships with those villagers who are more likely to create problems. For example, one Party secretary described

23 Tilly 2005, 13.

24 He 2010.

25 Interview, village Party secretary, 23 May 2018.

26 Interview with a village head, 18 May 2018.

how he frequently treated a villager to meals or tea because she refused to talk to the government about the demolition of her house. Only in this way could he keep a communication channel open with her. Such investments sometimes take years to bear fruit and it would be virtually impossible for any other state agent to perform such a role.

While village leaders are linked to both the state and the community, their role as a dual broker is not a simple combination of their commitments to each side. Their linkage to the state is closely related to their linkage to the villagers. Inevitably, the two principals sometimes make conflicting demands. While village leaders do not have to maintain a perfectly neutral position, they must garner a minimum level of trust from both sides. Many village leaders regard this as their primary challenge in their role as dual agents. A village leader described the dilemma as being similar to the tricky task of keeping a balance between pleasing his wife and pleasing his mother.²⁷

These two linkages, however, often mutually reinforce each other. Village leaders' close ties with government leaders help them to develop relations with villagers, and vice versa. Personal connections to government leaders are usually viewed by villagers as evidence that their village leader has the capacity and resources to serve the interests of the village. Similarly, the government values village leaders who maintain good relationships with villagers because cadres with popular support can implement government policies more effectively. The mutually beneficial relationship suggests that it is possible and also desirable for village leaders to engage in dual brokerage, rather than just represent the interests of one side. One principal is happy when the agent – a village leader – simultaneously serves another principal.

To a large extent the role of village leaders is contingent on the relationship between their two principals. If the government and peasants are too hostile towards each other, it will be exceedingly difficult for village leaders to act as dual agents. On the other hand, if the government and peasants can easily interact with each other directly, village leaders will not be needed to act as brokers. In the reform era, although there have been tensions between the government and peasants, overall the level of hostility remains relatively low. At the same time, village leaders often monopolize the upward and downward flow of information between the government and villagers. This strategic position provides village leaders with invaluable leverage that they can use in their bargaining with both sides. Revenue collection and policy implementation often require the government to obtain personal information from villagers, but accomplishing this accurately and directly is far beyond the government's capacity. Township officials have to rely on village cadres to obtain the information essential for performing government tasks. Similarly, it can be difficult for villagers who need government services to access information directly. Poor villagers who are eligible for

27 Interview, village Party secretary, 23 May 2018.

minimum livelihood guarantee subsidies (*dibao* 低保), for example, have little idea whether any quota is available and how to apply for it. They rely on village leaders to keep them informed. To be sure, village leaders do not always have the monopoly on the flow of information. The government sometimes sends officials at various levels to the countryside to collect information directly; peasants may also directly petition upper authorities. Nevertheless, it is usually their control over information that gives village leaders the capacity to act as dual brokers.

Relatedly, because they are linked to the government in different ways, village cadres are generalists with a particularly wide range of responsibilities. As Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li remark, "Unlike street-level bureaucrats in many countries, Chinese rural cadres are not employees of a single agency assigned a limited number of tasks, but rather bureaucrats-cum-politicians answerable for a region's all-around governance and development."²⁸ This role often provides them with a viewpoint that differs from that of the government and leads them to avoid extreme measures in policy implementation. A village leader interviewed for this study, for example, persuaded the township government to reduce a heavy fine imposed on a family for violating the birth control policy, reasoning that if the family was impoverished by the penalty, the village leader would have more difficulty collecting taxes from them. As generalists, village leaders also enjoy a degree of flexibility and leverage advantageous for brokering. When negotiating with the government, for example, village leaders sometimes emphasize their achievements or make promises on other matters in exchange for cooperation with the issue at hand.

In sum, a configuration of formal and informal linkages in the reform era has provided village leaders with the incentives and capacity to simultaneously act as agents for the state and protective brokers for fellow villagers.

Coercion and Trust

As state agents, village leaders need to implement state policies, including unpopular ones, which are often met with resistance. Revenue collection and enforcement of the birth control policy were two of the most common and unpopular policies in rural areas in the first three decades of the reform era. As a village leader wryly remarked in an interview, revenue collection demands money, and the birth control policy demands life. Unsurprisingly, both tasks often entail the use of force. Another task that routinely involves coercion is maintaining stability. When collective resistance is triggered by land expropriation, pollution or other contentious issues, the government often uses force to break up protests. And, when petitioners appeal to higher authorities like Beijing and provincial governments, the government usually demands that local authorities, including village cadres, deal with them and prevent them from petitioning again.

28 O'Brien and Li 1999, 168.

With so many tasks requiring coercion, village leaders commonly resort to one or more of three methods. The first is soft repression by withholding services. Since villagers still rely on village leaders for a variety of issues, village leaders can punish non-compliance by refusing to provide the requested services. A village leader explained his primary strategy for dealing with villagers who refused to pay taxes and fees: “we can refuse to issue letters of certification, which they must obtain before they can find a job, obtain a quota for child birth, build their houses, or attend schools. People are usually quite afraid of this.”²⁹

The second is informal repression, which commonly involves the use of thugs³⁰ and also what Yanhua Deng and Kevin O’Brien term relational repression.³¹ A village leader’s response to a skip-level petitioner is a case in point: “last time, I dispatched several thugs to drag him [a villager who petitioned the county government] back home. Next time, I will request that his daughter, who works in a school, deal with him. As a public employee, she should not allow her father to petition every day!”³²

The third coercive method, raids (*tuji* 突击) by law enforcement teams, is more controversial. Raids are often very forceful and sometimes even brutal. In such actions, enforcement teams can punish peasants by detaining them, confiscating property or destroying their homes. Such measures are usually carried out by the government, which is regarded as an outsider. Most village leaders are usually reluctant to engage with this method, asking the township to dispatch such teams only as a last resort when dealing with belligerent villagers. The township government often launches such actions in periodic policy-enforcement campaigns, usually in response to pressure from above. The township government typically obtains consent from village leaders, who provide it with essential information and assist with “thought work” (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作). There are exceptions, however.

The village leaders in our study were aware that even if they did not initiate such raids, the villagers would likely still blame them for cooperating with the government. They therefore often rejected the township’s proposed actions. Some village leaders we interviewed said that they never allowed the government to conduct raids in their villages. Their leverage over the government came from either doing a satisfactory job in accomplishing other government tasks or because they had close relationships with government leaders. In rare cases when the government dispatched raid teams without their approval, village leaders were not reluctant to protest. A village leader described his experience when the township government severely punished a family for violating the birth control policy: “I lashed out at the township Party vice-secretary: ‘how could you take the action without notifying me! If you deal with issues in my

29 Interview with a village Party secretary, 13 May 2018.

30 Chen, Xi 2017.

31 Deng and O’Brien (2013, 534) refer to relational repression as “a control technique that uses social ties to demobilize protesters.”

32 Interview with a village head, 16 May 2018.

village in this way, never count on me for other tasks anymore' ... He was mad at my attitude and accused me of putting myself above the Party. Eventually, it was the township Party secretary who mediated our conflict."³³

As community leaders, many village cadres carefully safeguard their autonomy. A village leader described his relationship with the police:

I had a very close relationship with the chief of the police station. I told him that the police should not come to the village unless there was a murder or robbery. We will deal with all other problems by ourselves. This is because the police won't be helpful in handling our local problems, and their visits would only waste government resources.³⁴

Some village leaders use raids – or at least the threat of raids – to deal with defiant villagers. Despite their reluctance to offend fellow villagers, many village leaders believe that it is important to have such powerful deterrents. However, they use a variety of strategies, including extensive thought work (i.e. persuasion), to reduce the negative impact of such actions. Township officials ask village leaders to participate in raids because they know that village leaders can do a much better job of persuasion as few township officials have close relationships with villagers, and villagers have little trust in them. Persuasion often comes in the form of bargaining in which the authorities make a promise, such as reducing a fine, in exchange for compliance. Village leaders are much more suited to conducting such negotiations than township officials. As a village leader explained, villagers have no reason to trust the promises made by township officials since once the officials have left, they rarely can be reached by villagers.

Village leaders also have a few ways to bolster the legitimacy of raids and other coercive government measures. Since they have a broader knowledge and consideration of the villagers' problems, village leaders tend to impose penalties that are more flexible and reasonable. For example, as mentioned above, if a poor family is unable to pay a fine for violating the birth control policy, the village leader will plead with the government to reduce the amount. Similarly, during revenue collection, village leaders also often find it necessary to help some poor families who cannot afford to pay taxes or fees. Rather than arrange raids, they sometimes extend the deadline or even lend villagers money or grain. In some villages, leaders allow the poorest families to pay their loans over several years.

Framing the coercive measures and the targeted behaviour is another important way in which village leaders can enhance the justification for government coercion. For example, village leaders tend to focus on villagers who have a relatively bad reputation among their neighbours and whose behaviour is clearly unlawful or extreme and frame such non-compliance as detrimental to the public interest. This makes it less likely that the targeted villagers will gain any sympathy from fellow villagers.³⁵ Village leaders also often frame the raids as a

33 Interview with a village Party secretary, 25 May 2018.

34 Interview, village head, 16 May 2018.

35 Wu 2007.

necessary response if the miscreants ignore repeated warnings and opportunities for compliance before the punishment.

When coercive measures result in damage, village leaders often pacify victims with compensation or services. Village leaders' relationships with fellow villagers are long-term and multi-dimensional and occasional clashes through coercive activities are merely a few episodes in a long series of interactions. The resulting tension can be reduced over time. Village leaders have the opportunity to work on their relationships with villagers before or after the clash, making the aftermath less damaging. One village leader recounted one such incident:

Once, I personally beat a villager when he tried to interrupt our road project. He later still voted for me. This is because his family later had a conflict with neighbours when they built their house. They asked me to help, and I solved their problems. He believed that only I had the ability to do it.³⁶

These various forms of protective brokering and damage control have not only made the use of state power more moderate and humane but have also had a great impact on policy implementation. The family planning policy is a case in point. For a few years before the government officially scrapped it in 2015, the one-child policy was substantially relaxed in the countryside, partly owing to the efforts of grassroots cadres such as village leaders. Very few village leaders completely supported the family planning policy, and many of them quietly sabotaged the policy from early on. For example, village leaders in County H often hid information about violators and colluded with the township in their reports. When some violations were so serious that punishment was inevitable, they negotiated with the higher authorities to lower the fines imposed. A village leader described his approach to the implementation of the birth control policy:

Protection of villagers was often necessary. For example, if a villager is required to undergo sterilization, we can issue a letter to prove that the villager cannot endure such surgery because of some health issue. A villager can also choose to pay a fine after having a baby, or simply run away at night, and we village cadres just pretend not to know.³⁷

Such sabotage by village leaders often requires the collusion of township officials as well as the villagers themselves. There is always a sharp contrast in the approaches to coercion used by township officials and village leaders, and this sometimes causes tension between them. Township government officials at times complain that village leaders are too “soft.”³⁸ More often, however, the government approves of village leaders' more lenient methods, since the trust and connections village leaders enjoy with villagers is invaluable when calming confrontation. Whatever the attitude held by their superiors, village leaders' deep connections to the community encourage them to be more lenient and humane. As the frontline enforcers of major government tasks, with their natural tendency towards leniency and their capacity to negotiate with the government,

36 Interview, village head, 16 May 2018.

37 Interview, village Party secretary, 13 May 2018.

38 Zhang, Weiguo 1999, 225.

village leaders often substantially reduce the likelihood of violent clashes between the state and peasants.

Popular Contention and Dual Brokerage

Collective protests by peasants pose a threat to the village leaders' ability to act as dual brokers in two scenarios. In the first, village leaders become the target of peasant protests when there is a loss of the trust that is indispensable for village leaders to succeed as dual brokers. In the second, village leaders participate in, or even organize, villagers' collective protests. From government leaders' point of view, this is evidence of disobedience or disloyalty.

It is not difficult to understand why village leaders are often tempted to get involved in, or even organize, villagers' collective action. After all, one of their designated duties is to solve the problems faced by their communities, although contentious collective action is certainly contrary to government expectations. Most village leaders regard it as inappropriate for them to openly lead villagers' collective protests, but there is no consensus on what is allowed. For most, there exists a grey area in which village leaders can take some actions to defend the interests of their villages. A village secretary, for example, argued that it would be fine for the village to send village leaders or representatives to talk to the government. He acknowledged, however, that such moderate actions would make no difference, since "the government leaders would just respond with some good words rather than solutions."³⁹

Ambiguities surrounding the line between tolerated and forbidden activities are an inherent characteristic of claim-making in China.⁴⁰ Village leaders often take advantage of the political space created by such institutional ambiguity to stage various forms of collective action ranging from covert and moderate to openly defiant. In a low-profile form of action, village leaders simply act as bystanders and implicitly allow villagers' collective protests. For example, peasants suffering from the pollution caused by a local cement factory staged two protests to obstruct production. Village leaders indicated that their failure to stop the protests was a sign of their "implicit support."⁴¹ This is a relatively safe strategy although the government sometimes criticizes village leaders for foot-dragging. Village leaders sometimes engage in much more high-profile actions but still frame them as lawful. For example, in 2009, leaders from about 70 villages protested to the county government because funding for electrical renovation projects was extended to other villages but not theirs. These leaders not only petitioned the government but also staged aggressive actions such as occupying the office of the electricity company. They eventually succeeded in their mission. A village leader described this action as appropriate because all the participants

39 Interview, village Party secretary, 25 May 2018.

40 Chen, Xi 2012.

41 Interview, village Party secretary, 23 May 2018.

behaved well and only wanted to talk. More importantly, only village leaders participated; ordinary villagers were not mobilized.⁴² Such justifications are not always convincing but still provide cover for disruptive actions.

In this uncertain and generally hostile environment, village leaders nevertheless sometimes secretly encourage and organize villagers' collective protests. A village leader described his strategy for dealing with the government and a local factory in a dispute over land expropriation compensation:

I behaved as if I was persuading villagers to accept the terms of compensation. Actually, I sent a few people I trust to the government to protest. At the same time, I asked some team leaders and villagers to block the entrance of the factory. The government and the factory had to ask me to dispel the crowd. Then, I proposed some solutions. When I was doing this, I was respected by the government, the factory and villagers. The government and the factory believed that only I could control the villagers; villagers also admired me for my strategies to obtain more compensation for them.⁴³

Village leaders' support of collective protests can often create tensions with the government. However, in the dozens of collective protests in County H in which village leaders were involved, village leaders rarely suffered harsh punishment. One of the most defiant protests in recent years is a case in point. The protest was triggered by an irrigation project that involved six villages, but only four villages were funded and two were excluded. Enraged, the Party secretary in one of the two excluded villages coordinated with the leaders of the other village to organize a collective protest. They used a range of tactics, some of which were very confrontational. They petitioned the provincial government and also mobilized dozens of villagers to stage a demonstration with banners around the county government building. The government eventually made concessions and funded the projects in the two villages. Once the goal was accomplished, the village Party secretary resigned. As a Party secretary and a CCP member, she explained, she should be held accountable for "organizing people to make trouble." A more specific reason for her resignation, however, was the souring of her relationship with her patron, the township Party secretary, who told her, "I always supported you, and you returned my favour with this kind of action!" She believed that it made no sense for her to continue to work after ruining the relationship. Three years later, however, after the township secretary was promoted to the county government, this cadre was again elected as the village head and the government did not obstruct her new position.⁴⁴

One major reason that the government tolerates such behaviour is that the role played by village leaders in collective protests often facilitates constructive bargaining, although in some cases with additional pressure on the government. A village leader who became involved in a confrontation between villagers and the county government which was triggered by a fatal medical accident is a case in point. The family of the victim organized a violent protest in an effort to get a large

42 Interview with a village head, 6 June 2018.

43 Interview, village Party secretary, 23 May 2018.

44 Interview with a village Party secretary, 11 June 2018.

amount of compensation. In an effort to help the family, the village leader organized villagers to show up to increase pressure on the government. Some county officials proposed punishing the village leader but the deputy county head protected him because he had helped the government to resolve the problem.⁴⁵

Tax reform and the Dual Brokerage Model

Even when deploying coercive tactics or involving themselves in peasant protests, village leaders still strive to retain the trust of both government officials and villagers, and most of the time they fairly succeed. This does not mean that village leaders' role as dual agents has not faced systematic challenges in the reform era. In fact, from the 1990s to the early 2000s, the model of dual brokerage was in severe crisis throughout inland China. Many village leaders lost their positions when they became the targets of peasant protests or decided to resign when the burden of working for the government became too heavy. Such problems were part of a larger crisis of rural governance that gave rise to concerns among Chinese leaders and academics about regime stability in China. In Hunan province, for example, peasant protests increased substantially in the mid-1990s and peaked in 1998 when 387 collective petitions were recorded by local governments across the province. There were still around 200 cases of collective petitioning recorded each year in the early 2000s.⁴⁶

Faced with this crisis, Chinese leaders implemented a series of tax reforms, which culminated in the abolishment of agriculture taxes in 2005, a watershed moment in the policy environment for state–rural society relations. The direct cause of the crisis was a fiscal policy which exerted enormous pressure on grassroots cadres to extract revenues from the villages and also provided them with incentives and opportunities for predation. The waves of peasant protests mostly focused on extraction-related issues, which were often called the “three arbitrariness” (*sanluan* 三乱): arbitrary fees, fines and apportionments (*tanpai* 摊派). While the implementation of birth control policies was not about extraction per se, it often involved the extraction of fees and fines. Pressured to complete government-set tasks, village leaders often had to take excessively coercive action, which undermined the popularity of village cadres and decreased villagers' trust in them. The grassroots cadres' burden was further exacerbated by lack of funding for devolved public services and tasks imposed by higher and central authorities.⁴⁷

This policy environment provided opportunities and resources for local officials to engage in predation and corruption.⁴⁸ Routinely involved in coercion and often using thugs, some village leaders accumulated abundant coercive means that could be conveniently deployed for predatory activities. Furthermore, villages were required to collect the financial resources to fund

45 Interview, village Party secretary, 23 May 2018.

46 Data collected from Hunan Provincial Bureau of Letters and Visits in 2002.

47 O'Brien and Li 1999; Bernstein and Lü 2003.

48 Chen, Guidi, and Chun 2004.

Table 2: Tax Reform in 2005 and Village Leaders' Brokerage Model

	Before the reform	After the reform
The focus of state–peasant interactions	Extraction	Provision
Importance of patron–client network between government officials and village leaders	Lower	Higher
Village leaders' compensation linked to extraction	Yes	No
Coercion required/used	Higher	Lower
Village leaders as the targets of protest	More often	Less often
Village leaders as the supporters of protest	Less often	More often
Main issues of peasant protests	Extraction related (taxation, fines, fees)	Provision/development related (competition for projects, land, pollution)

schools and many other public goods including compensation for village cadres. Such fees were usually bundled with agriculture taxes and many ordinary peasants often had difficulty determining which fees were required by the higher authorities, the local governments or village cadres. As a result, village cadres were often tempted to take advantage of such opportunities to impose further financial burdens on peasants in order to enrich themselves.

Even village leaders who had not become the targets of peasant protests still often found it difficult to continue with their dual broker roles when villagers' trust in them diminished. Some village leaders quit their jobs and, in some cases, even joined peasant protests, because they, too, were dissatisfied with government policy and practice and were especially frustrated by the lack of support from the government. The government often blamed village leaders for the instability in villages.⁴⁹ Concerned about peasant protests, the central and provincial governments made great efforts to increase transparency regarding taxation and other fees. Such efforts to inform and empower the peasants to resist arbitrary fees, fines and apportionments encouraged them to rise up against village and township leaders and, occasionally, even leaders at the county level or higher. Although peasants' grievances mostly had their roots in policies issued by the central government or upper authorities, low-level government officials and grassroots cadres received much of the blame.

The situation dramatically changed with the implementation of tax reforms designed for the very purpose of resolving such problems. Almost every interviewed village leader who had experienced the transition agreed that it had become much easier for them to manage their relationships with villagers, especially as the focus of government–peasant interactions changed from extraction to provision and leaders were relieved of the tasks of collecting fees and fines.

49 Bernstein and Lü 2003.

Of course, this is not to suggest coercive measures are no longer used. Village leaders are still required to maintain stability and prevent skip-level petitioning and protests regarding land, pollution and other issues. However, such tasks are not nearly as demanding and have less of a negative impact on trust from fellow villagers. The abolition of agricultural taxes also removed most of the opportunities for corruption as village leaders could no longer bundle illegitimate levies with agricultural taxes anymore.

Today, when leaders are involved in peasant protests, it is more likely as implicit or explicit supporters of the action, rather than as the targets.⁵⁰ This has much to do with the claims made by peasants to the government, which have been dramatically transformed by the reform. Unlike in the pre-tax reform period when most peasants focused on resistance against excessive extraction, in the post-reform era many protests have focused on competition for government funding and other opportunities. Other issues in the post-reform era, such as land expropriation and pollution, are not entirely new. Protests on such issues have largely targeted outsiders such as factories or the government. The likelihood for villagers to protest against village cadres, however, has substantially decreased.

The shift from extraction-centred to provision-centred interactions has increased the need for village leaders to develop and maintain close relationships with government officials. Whether village leaders can help the village to make the most of opportunities to develop the local economy has become one of the hot voting issues in village elections. Since most economic opportunities come from the government, good patron–client relations can boost a village leader’s election chances.

The brief comparisons offered here help to illustrate why the dual brokerage model suffered a severe crisis before the tax reform, but not afterwards. This is not to suggest that village leaders no longer face any challenges in performing their dual agency roles – in fact, the tax reform has created new problems. For example, although peasant demonstrations against unpopular policies decreased dramatically, village leaders have become more involved in collective actions in a bid to secure resources and opportunities, since villages have become much more dependent on resources distributed by upper authorities.⁵¹ Village leaders risk losing the trust of their patrons in the government if they engage in peasant protests, as discussed in the last section. Meanwhile, village leaders’ involvement in distributing economic resources (such as land) and securing economic opportunities makes them more vulnerable to corruption, which erodes villagers’ trust in them.

Conclusions

Recent studies often associate village leaders with predation and corruption, sometimes describing them as local satraps “who use their strategic position

50 Wang 2017, 13.

51 Kennedy 2007.

between state and society to wheel and deal for personal monetary advantage.”⁵² In contrast, this article elucidates how village leaders help to facilitate a constructive bargaining relationship between the state and peasants when they strive to maintain the trust of both their patrons in the government and their fellow villagers. The point is not that village leaders have always succeeded in winning a high degree of trust from either principal, but that their efforts to pursue this goal have often made a difference. To be sure, local government officials’ toleration of village leaders’ involvement in popular collective action and peasants’ support of coercive and sometimes corrupt village leaders have often been given somewhat reluctantly. In this sense, this study does not contradict the common finding that peasants often have little trust in grassroots leaders, especially when compared with their trust in central and upper authorities.

The fact that village leaders’ commitment to the state and their linkages to village communities are often mutually beneficial has important implications for rural politics in China. Vivienne Shue’s influential work exemplifies a common understanding that treats village solidarity and village leaders’ linkage to their communities as barriers to state penetration and control.⁵³ Political order, however, is not simply built on state penetration and social control. The bonds between village leaders and their communities are helpful because they facilitate bargaining in contentious and non-contentious state–peasant relations. Such linkages, unfortunately, are threatened not only by extensive industrialization and urbanization but also by various government policies in recent years. The bureaucratization of the post of village leader, or the appointment of college graduates from outside the community, for example, are likely to undermine such linkages and therefore village leaders’ capacity to provide political brokering.

Other semi- or non-state actors who have the potential to broker state–society interactions often face a similar constraint. Corporatist mass organizations (for example, business associations,⁵⁴ labour unions⁵⁵ and the Federation for Disabled Persons⁵⁶) are most helpful to the state when they maintain relatively strong ties with their designated constituency. State leaders, however, are often wary of such relations and seek to undermine them. Consequently, while they can be relied upon to obey the government’s commands, such organizations have largely lost their capacity or incentive to broker more constructive relations between the state and their constituent groups.

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52 Unger 1989, 135.

53 Shue 1990.

54 Foster 2002.

55 Chen, Feng 2003.

56 Chen, Xi, and Xu 2011.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical notes

Xi CHEN is an associate professor at the department of government and public administration, the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Jingping LIU obtained her PhD degree from the department of government and public administration, the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

摘要: 本文利用在湖南两县的人类志研究, 探询政治经纪模式如何在中国通过促成抗争性和非抗争性博弈而增进政治稳定。为了描述和解释村干部角色的变迁, 本文阐述了双重经纪的概念。这一概念不仅承认村干部分别与村民和政府之间的联系, 而且强调这两种联系相互关联。村干部作为村民代理人的身份与他们作为政府代理人的身份之间虽然存在张力, 同时也互相促进。村民的信任有利于村干部行使政府代理人的角色, 政府对村干部的信任也有利于村干部代理村民利益。改革年代的制度框架赋予村干部很强的充当双重代理的积极性。村干部在尽力维持这一角色的过程中, 使得政策的实施较为温和灵活。本文对 2005 年农业税改革前后的比较, 证实农村治理的质量很大程度上取决于村干部是否能够有效地扮演双重代理人的角色。本研究阐释的双重经纪的概念对于理解人大代表和群团组织等居于国家社会之间的个人及组织在中国政治过程中的角色也有参考意义。

关键词: 村干部; 非正式制度; 农村治理; 政治经纪; 抗争性博弈; 中国

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