

Lineage Solidarity and Rhetorical Resonance: Village Strategies to Retain Primary Schools in Rural China

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Abstract

As the state has shifted its priorities towards social harmony and poverty alleviation, this study finds rhetorical resonance, combined with strong lineage solidarity, as an emerging strategy for villages to compete for government resources and investments. By articulating grassroots needs as being in line with local cadres' performance goals, villages have successfully converted their needs into development proposals and mobilized lineage solidarity to persuade local cadres of the feasibility of such proposals. Drawing on three villages' school-saving efforts in Fujian province, our fieldwork illustrates how one village retained its school by mobilizing lineage solidarity and converting education into a "model" village project to boost cultural tourism. Others failed to do so and lost their schools. Under the target-based cadre management system, the bottom-up competition for government support is largely shaped by the villages' pre-existing development and resource structures, which may maximize management efficiency but may also reinforce socioeconomic inequalities between villages.

Keywords: lineage solidarity; rhetorical resonance; school consolidation; rural China; poverty alleviation

In rural China, lineage groups that connect families from the same patriarchal *bloodline*¹ have played an important role in pooling resources for collective goals² but are not always effective at holding government cadres accountable

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1 Feng and Yan 2012; Hu 2016.

2 Cai 2010; Gåsemeyr 2016; Peng 2004; 2010; Tian and Liu 2019; Tsai 2007.

or pushing for policy changes.³ Their limited political capacity is often attributed to a zero-sum game between grassroots demands and government goals, especially when the state places more emphasis on development than on popular support as the foundation of its legitimacy.⁴ When making appeals, grassroots actors may rely on their political connections.⁵ Or they may resort to direct confrontation to assert their rights, by seeking “justice” from higher authorities “above” or by organizing grassroots alliances “below.”⁶

This confrontation framework has been undermined, however, in the current political environment in which the state has shifted its policy priorities towards social harmony.⁷ Local governments in China have increased the use of non-coercive techniques, such as basing their actions on existing laws and rules, in their efforts to depoliticize appeals and mute resistance.⁸ The question of whether and how grassroots actors may adjust their strategies accordingly in negotiating with local governments has not been fully explored.

This article looks at how this new political environment may open up new possibilities for negotiating grassroots demands within existing rules, especially under the current target-based cadre management system.⁹ At the county and township government levels, leading cadres are responsible for achieving state-prioritized goals such as economic development and poverty alleviation. At the same time, they are responsible for maintaining social stability; failure to do so would cancel out the value of their other achievements.¹⁰ As a result, these local cadres act like pragmatic developers,¹¹ piloting various projects to maximize their performance goals.¹² These strategic actions can give rise to opportunism and moral hazard,¹³ but equally, grassroots actors can also take advantage of them. In this study, we show how grassroots actors have proactively aligned their demands with local cadres’ performance goals and taken advantage of the government’s modelling approach to strive for more resources and favourable treatment.

Our study compares three villages in P county, Fujian: Beishui, Shiwei and Fuwai.¹⁴ These villages fought to retain their primary schools in the face of a state-led campaign to consolidate schools in the 2000s (*chedian bingxiao* 撤点并校, hereafter “school consolidation campaign”). The campaign closed most

3 Lu and Tao 2017; Xu and Yao 2015.

4 Cai 2008; Zhao 2009.

5 Lu and Tao 2017.

6 Hurst and O’Brien 2002; Lee 2007; Lian, Glendinning and Yin 2016; O’Brien and Li 2006.

7 Dickson et al. 2016; Zuo 2015.

8 This process is also described as bureaucratic absorption. Chuang 2014; Deng 2017; Lee and Zhang 2013; Li 2010; Luo, Andreas and Li 2017.

9 Dai and Spires 2018; Paik and Lee 2012; Wong 2015.

10 Edin 2003; Landry 2008; Manion 1985; Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012; Whiting 2001.

11 In the Chinese administrative system that features “subcontracting” (Zhou 2014), “managed campaign” (Perry 2011), “experimentation under hierarchy rationale” (Heilmann 2008), and “policy steering” (Göbel 2011a), local governments have some autonomy in policy implementation, and they are mainly assessed on policy outcomes rather than processes.

12 Alhers and Schubert 2013; 2015; Heilmann 2008; Looney 2015; Schubert and Alhers 2012.

13 Cai 2004; Gao 2015; O’Brien and Li 1999; Smith 2009; 2010.

14 All county and village names are pseudonyms.

of the local village primary schools and relocated their teachers to bigger schools or urban areas. The villagers' attempts to defend their rightful access to public education was largely ineffective when it came to the primary schools because the county's education bureau justified closure decisions by selectively closing those schools that failed to meet criteria set by the bureau. By basing the criteria on efficiencies, the state successfully managed to spin villagers' complaints into a competition among villages, and only one of the three villages was successful in retaining its primary school. This village not only had strong lineage solidarity but was able to mobilize under a strategy of rhetorical resonance to link the allocation of education resources to the developmental goals and performance outcomes that local governments cared about.¹⁵

China's School Consolidation Campaign

In the Mao era, primary schools were widely distributed in villages and located close to children's homes (*jiujinruxue* 就近入学). Since the 1990s, labour out-migration and fertility decline have led to substantial decreases in the number of school-age children in rural villages. In 2001, the State Council issued its "Decision about the reform and development of basic education," which sought to allocate education resources more efficiently by merging village schools and investing in township schools. Between 2001 and 2012, over half of all rural primary schools (or teaching sites) and one-third of rural secondary schools were closed.¹⁶

To some extent, the school consolidation campaign fit the fiscal concerns of local governments in their provision of nine-year compulsory education. Following fiscal reforms in the 1980s, provision of school facilities and teachers' salaries had been a major fiscal burden for local governments, especially in poor areas.¹⁷ The tax-and-fee reform (*nongcun shuifei gaige* 农村税费改革) further reduced local governments' revenue, and many county and township governments had to use collective levies to support rural schools.¹⁸ The school consolidation campaign allowed local governments to relocate resources from scattered village schools to fewer and bigger schools under more efficient management. Another concern was related to urbanization and the local economy. With the closure of rural schools, families with school-age children had to move to towns and cities, which facilitated local governments' acquisition of rural land and contributed to economic and real estate development in towns and cities.

As the campaign unfolded, the central state became aware of some of its negative effects and urged local governments to slow the pace in 2006, but local governments were reluctant to do so and were slow to respond.¹⁹ In 2012, the Ministry of Education called for a termination of the school consolidation policy.

15 Burstein and Linton 2002; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986.

16 21st Century Education Research Center 2013.

17 Du and Sun 2016.

18 Göbel 2011b.

19 21st Century Education Research Center 2013.

Later that year, the State Council issued its “View on standardizing rural compulsory education distribution adjustment,” which officially required all local governments to cease closing rural primary schools and teaching sites (*jiaoxuedian* 教学点) and instead develop plans to rebuild rural schools.

These policy changes reflected the state’s new priorities of social stability and poverty alleviation. Rural education, once viewed solely as a fiscal burden, began to be regarded as an important capacity-building mechanism in the fight against poverty.²⁰ Since 2012, both the central state and local governments have increased their spending on rural education. But, constrained by the availability of rural teachers, most resources have been invested in existing rural schools rather than in establishing new ones. The national statistics show that between 2012 and 2018, the number of village primary schools continued to decline and showed no sign of increase.²¹

Field Sites

P county is located in the north-east of Ningde 宁德市, Fujian province, and is host to around 150 rural villages. Given the county’s beautiful mountainous landscape, the county government deliberated about boosting the lagging local economy via tourism, but any such development is constrained by the remoteness of many villages and the limited transportation infrastructure. Since the market-oriented reform of the 1980s, many villagers have migrated to cities for work, leaving behind elderly relatives, children and untended land. Despite the shrinking population, lineages remain influential in many villages and ancestral halls have been well maintained.

From 2014 to 2018, we made four visits to villages in P county and have monitored the situation in the field sites since then. During the first three trips, in 2014, 2015 and 2016, we collaborated with a non-government organization, the G Foundation, and visited 18 villages by purposely sampling an equal number of villages that were near to, far away from or a moderate distance from their town centres (six in each category). In each village, we conducted one-to-one interviews with village leaders, school headmasters, teachers, doctors and others who knew the village well. We also held at least one focus group with ordinary villagers.

Our main research focus during the first three visits was poverty alleviation in different villages, but “school closure” turned out to be a constant topic in interviews and group discussions. According to the Ningde 2018 statistics yearbook, by 2012, only 288 out of 2,084 villages still had primary schools (86 per cent closed). The situation was a little better in P county. By the time of our first visit in 2014, 31 out of 151 schools remained open (80 per cent closed). Villagers often voiced dissatisfaction and regret about losing their village school and many mentioned education as the best way to alleviate poverty.

20 Song, Yang 2012; Xue and Zhou 2018.

21 Yue et al. 2018.

We planned our fourth visit to P county in 2018 to compare villages that had made efforts to save their schools with different results. Among the nine purposely sampled villages, four had retained their primary schools, three had transformed their schools into teaching sites, and two had lost their schools but were attempting to rebuild them. By the time of our fourth visit, however, no village had succeeded in rebuilding a school. In each village, we interviewed village leaders, schoolteachers (if any) and ordinary villagers who wanted to talk about losing or saving schools. We also held focus groups with villagers who had school-age children. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and field notes were taken during visits.

The school consolidation campaign in P county

P county's education bureau interpreted the school consolidation campaign as an inevitable outcome of rural population decline and the county government's financial constraints. Owing to labour migration and fertility decline, the number of school-age children had decreased, from about 170 students per school in the early 1990s to 30 per school in the early 2000s.²² Thus, taking an efficiency-oriented approach to allocating education resources, the education bureau described school consolidation as a way to “distribute teachers to better quality schools, given the county's limited finance and manpower.”²³

The education bureau used three criteria with the same logic of efficiency to determine which schools to close. In order to remain open, a primary school had to have enough students to fill at least five grades. Otherwise, the school would be downgraded to a teaching site, with two or three grades. Second, the school had to meet a required student/teacher ratio of at least three teachers for five grades. For a teaching site, the minimum requirement was two teachers for three grades or one teacher for two grades. Third, the school could not be located near a township school or a sizeable village primary school. In those cases, students were expected to attend the bigger schools instead. In summary, village schools needed to be resourceful and efficient enough to be exempted from the school consolidation campaign.

The county's education bureau seemed to leave the choice in the hands of villagers, but it controlled a key resource in determining the fate of village schools: the publicly funded rural teachers. In assigning teachers to different schools, the bureau could indirectly force a school to close by relocating its teachers elsewhere. Such decisions, again, were efficiency driven and based on the annual assessment of village schools. As one village leader recalled, their village primary school was closed “because we did not have enough students, and the bureau relocated our teachers to the nearby township school.”²⁴

22 Interview with the deputy director of the county's education bureau, 16 March 2018.

23 Interview with educational bureau official, P county, 3 August 2016.

24 Interview with Beishui village leader, P county, 4 August 2016.

The bureau also offered another option: village schools could hire their own teachers. The village could choose to run the school outside of the public education system by paying teachers' salaries and taking responsibility for the problems and risks in running the school. For example, the county's richest village, Jiwei, used the village budget and overseas remittances to hire teachers and its school remained open despite the small student population.²⁵ Nevertheless, this self-financing option was not feasible in other poor villages.

By publicizing the school-closure criteria and self-financing option, the county's education bureau effectively silenced resistance. Villagers complained but found little justification to challenge a school closure when it was perceived as their own fault for "failing to meet the criteria," "having too few school children" or "having no money to hire teachers." Resistance was also undermined by weak collective motivation, as the policy only affected villagers with school-age children. And, instead of fighting the policy, most villages tried to bargain with the county's education bureau for favourable treatment; however, only a few succeeded in holding on to their schools.

Three Villages' Responses

This paper presents the school-saving efforts of three villages, Beishui, Shiwei and Fuwai, which were typical of the types of villages where schools were closed, downgraded or retained. All three were poor villages and shared similar geographic locations and population structures in the early 2010s (Table 1). All three villages are located in the mountains at a considerable distance from their respective town centres but are connected to the towns with paved roads. At the time of research, most of the villagers lived under the poverty line and over 50 per cent had migrated out for work. Despite limited village resources, all villages had well-maintained school buildings and villagers treated rural teachers with great respect.

All three villages bargained with the county's education bureau, with varied outcomes. Beishui represents a case of failure, as the primary school was closed. Shiwei represents a case of compromise, as the primary school was downgraded to a teaching site, which faced a future threat of closure. Fuwai represents a case of success, as the village kept its primary school and gained additional government investment to build a new campus.

Beishui: failing to mobilize resources

Beishui has three lineage groups: Sun, Rao and Huang. The Sun lineage has an ancestral hall in the village and holds greater influence over village affairs. Owing to a lack of local industries and the trend of labour out-migration to cities, Beishui had about 30 school-age children in 2000 across all six grades. The

25 Jiwei is a pseudonym.

Table 1: Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Three Villages

	Geographic Location	Population	Economic Status
<i>Beishui</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in a mountain; • far from town 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 580 registered villagers, about 150 stayed in the village, mostly over the age of 55; • ~30 school-age children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designated as village under the poverty line; • relies on agriculture and migrant work; • three-storey school building
<i>Shiwei</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in a mountain; • a moderate distance from town 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 505 registered villagers, about 200 stayed in the village, mostly over the age of 55; • ~20 school-age children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designated as village under the poverty line; • relies on agriculture and migrant work; • four-storey school building; • started to develop tourism in 2018
<i>Fuwai</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in a mountain; • far from town 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 632 registered villagers, about 300 stayed in the village, many over the age of 55; • ~40 school-age children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designated as village under the poverty line (removed in 2016); • relies on agriculture and migrant work; • three-storey school building (a new campus in 2018); • started to develop tourism in 2016

county's education bureau therefore transferred its three publicly funded teachers to other schools and closed the school.

Many villagers were upset by the news of the school's closure. Most school children were from poor families and were left behind by their migrant parents. They faced difficulties in transferring to the township school and many ended up in the school's boarding programmes. As the incumbent village head recalled, "They came to [the previous village leader] and expressed their eagerness to retain the primary school ... so [the previous village head] and I went to the county's education bureau and argued for our rights. The bureau was reluctant to allocate any teacher quota to our village ... We kept visiting the bureau almost every year but didn't know how to 'fight' properly."²⁶

Opposition was muted largely because the bureau gave the villagers options that turned collective dissatisfaction towards the government into an internal affair of the village. The bureau allowed the villagers to retain the school if

26 Interview with Beishui village leader, P county, 15 March 2018.

they hired their own teachers using the village's own budget. In Beishui, however, villagers could not agree on a budget for hiring teachers because families without school-age children were unwilling to contribute. The school building was then converted into an elderly centre for the village seniors' association.

After taking office in 2015, the village head saw a chance to reopen the school and obtained initial permission from the county's education bureau. He managed to reclaim the school building after several rounds of negotiation with the seniors' association and by offering another public space in exchange. The bureau still refused to reassign teachers to the school because of its small enrolment and instead encouraged Beishui to run the school outside of the public education system.

Again, it was difficult to raise the collective budget for this purpose. One seemingly viable solution was to divide the cost of the teachers among families with school children. These families had expressed a willingness to share the cost, but the village head worried that the system would not be sustainable. "If one family decided to drop out, it would increase the burden on others, and then more would drop out."²⁷

The village head himself was also reluctant to run a school without official endorsement. He worried that the related risks could undermine his leadership. "It is very difficult to deal with interpersonal relations in the village," he told us. "If you do a good deed, nobody will remember you. But if something bad happens out of good intentions, you will be blamed by everyone."²⁸

The village's weak lineage solidarity was partly to blame for the lack of mutual trust, which undermined grassroots collective actions, either in pooling resources or in sharing responsibility. As a result, not only ordinary villagers lacked the motivation to contribute to school funds but also the village head was reluctant to take a lead in fighting for common interests.

Shiwei: compromising for a teaching site

Shiwei is a single-surname village in which most villagers belong to the Huang lineage. There are three Buddhist temples and one Christian church in the village, but the Huang ancestral hall is the biggest building. However, out migration has left the village hollow. Since the early 2000s, Shiwei's declining student population has been an issue in the annual assessment by the county's education bureau, and Shiwei's teachers were gradually relocated elsewhere. In 2005, the village school had only one teacher for four grades, with roughly 20 students, and so the bureau decided to close the school. The village Party secretary (also village head) tried to argue with the bureau for the well-being of local school children. However, citing its budget constraints and Shiwei's small student population, the bureau reiterated its criteria and offered no help. With one teacher and four grades, Shiwei had two options: to retain its school by adding one more grade and recruiting two more teachers, or to downgrade the school to a teaching site by recruiting one additional teacher and removing one grade.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Holding out little hope of increasing student numbers (and the number of grades), the village leadership chose to convert the school to a teaching site. Although it was difficult to recruit two additional teachers, it was possible to find one, Ms Huang, who was from the Huang lineage in Shiwei and working at the township school at that time. The village Party secretary contacted Ms Huang immediately and asked her to come back to join the village school. Although the county's education bureau was reluctant to assign teachers to small schools, it would do so if the move was requested by the teachers themselves, as the bureau would "respect the willingness of the teachers." Feeling a responsibility towards the children of her village and her lineage group, Ms Huang decided to return to the village:

I have to come back, [even it means] taking on the extra workload of teaching two grades. The village Party secretary at that time said that the village would give me extra subsidies, but I have not received them so far. I think I belong to this village, so I should at least do something for it. If I do not come back, the school would definitely be gone. It's a good village. It would really be a pity if we have no school.²⁹

Even after hiring Ms Huang, the primary school still had to eliminate a grade to be downgraded to a teaching site. The village leadership decided to remove the fourth grade, the highest grade in the school, which only had two students. The village Party secretary managed to persuade the two families to transfer their children to other schools to make the downgrade possible. Belonging to the Huang lineage group, the two families regarded their sacrifice as contributing to the common interests of the lineage. The village leadership also mobilized villagers to donate money to cover the two families' expenditures resulting from the move. According to the village Party secretary:

The reason why we decided to sacrifice the highest grade was that we worried about young children, since they needed more care from parents and teachers. I hoped the two students in the highest grade were mature enough to study outside [the village], although we knew it was a big challenge for them. Therefore, we helped these two students by subsidizing them and their families. But the punchline here was that the money was not from the village budget. It was from villagers. Because these two kids sacrificed themselves for the future of the village, when I proposed to raise money, most villagers donated.³⁰

Owing to the solidarity of its lineage and the sacrifices made by Ms Huang and the grade-four families, Shiwei was able to retain its teaching site with an appropriate teacher–grade ratio. Shiwei also received help from overseas Huang lineage members who, when they heard the news about the impending school closure, raised funds to build a four-storey school building in 2007.

However, a new school building did not solve the long-term problem of the sustainability of the teaching site. The education bureau continued with its efficiency-drive approach to managing schools, even after the end of the school consolidation campaign. In 2013, the bureau re-assessed Shiwei's student population and relocated one of the two teachers elsewhere, putting the teaching

29 Interview with Ms Huang, Shiwei village, P county, 18 March 2018.

30 Interview with the Party secretary of Shiwei village, P county, 18 March 2018.

site at risk of closure. The village leadership had to make further compromises, by reducing its teaching site to two grades in order to meet the teacher–grade ratio requirement. This time the village leadership negotiated with the families of third-graders, asking them to transfer their children to the nearby township school. As a result, Shiwei’s teaching site was reduced to just first and second grade classes, with six students and one teacher.

When we last visited, in 2018, Ms Huang was about to retire. The village had not yet found a replacement. Again, the county’s education bureau refused to assign a new teacher to Shiwei given its small student population. Villagers in Shiwei were willing to hire a teacher, but it was difficult for a village under the poverty line to offer a competitive salary. Ms Huang voiced these concerns:

No one would come for only 2,000 yuan per month. The workload is extremely high because you need to teach all subjects. The living conditions cannot compete with the minimum standards of towns in every aspect. How can urban youth endure rural life? The reason I stay is compassion, my affection for this village, and my lineage. I am one of the members. Other than that, there is no reason for me to taste the bitterness.³¹

Ms Huang was willing to teach for a few more years, but the village leadership knew that this was only a temporary solution. The ideal long-term solution was to develop the local economy to attract return migration to the village, enhance its financial ability to hire teachers and increase the number of school children. To this end, the village leadership began to develop tourism. Using government funding allocated under the poverty alleviation campaign (*jingzhunfupin* 精准扶贫), Shiwei renovated its Renaissance-style church, which was built by missionaries in the 1930s, and created an adjacent organic vegetable garden. The village also paved roads and upgraded its electricity and internet systems. In 2018, the village attracted about 200 tourists every week, but income levels were not attractive enough to reverse labour migration flows.

Shiwei’s strong lineage solidarity helped the village to retain education resources: Ms Huang felt obligated to help; students were persuaded to transfer to other schools; villagers were mobilized to contribute to those students’ expenses; and overseas lineage members donated funds. This lineage solidarity, however, was mainly mobilized to make compromises, as the village, unable to increase student numbers or run the school independently, was not in a position to secure a better deal. As Yiqing Xu and Yang Yao demonstrate, although lineage solidarity is effective in pooling resources and solving grassroots difficulties, it might not be able to change the actions of local cadres.³² Regardless of how the villagers defended their education rights as part of the public welfare, under the government’s efficiency-oriented approach, the more compromise the village made, the less it was able to compete for more government resources and support.

31 Interview with Ms Huang, Shiwei village, P county, 18 March 2018.

32 Xu and Yao 2015.

Fuwai: succeeding in retaining a primary school

Fuwai is a single-surname village of the Zheng lineage. The Zheng ancestral hall is the most magnificent building in the village and sits next to the primary school. When we first visited Fuwai, the ancestral hall was the first place the village Party secretary (also village head) took us to visit. We were astonished by the numerous ancestral portraits on the wall. The leader told us that only the ancestors who passed the imperial civil service examination (*kejukaoshi* 科举考试) could have their names on the wall. In the hall, many tablets and couplets proclaimed that “the most important thing in the world is to study” (*dushu tianxia diyi* 读书天下第一). During the visit, we were frequently reminded that the Zheng lineage had a long history of emphasizing education, which was crucial for villagers’ self-cultivation as well as the village’s prosperity. In Fuwai, the school was framed as part of the cultural heritage that stimulated economic growth.

In 2000, Fuwai’s village school was at risk of being downgraded. With no students enrolled in grades four and six, the county’s education bureau decided to relocate the two teachers responsible for these grades. The village Party secretary used many different tacks when negotiating with the bureau including highlighting the school’s economic value: “As long as the school is maintained, children will stay, and so will their parents. If we have more of the labour force stay in the village, the village economy will grow. This is how the primary school can rejuvenate the village.”³³

The bureau was not convinced, but provided Fuwai with alternative options: to either persuade the publicly funded teachers to stay voluntarily or hire their own teachers. If the teachers agreed to stay but had no students to teach in grades four and six, then they would have to take that year as unpaid leave (*tingxinliuzhi* 停薪留职), with no salaries and benefits from the bureau, and have it deducted from their years of service (*gongling* 工龄).

As part of the efforts to persuade the two teachers to stay, the village leadership agreed to offer them a salary equivalent to the normal wage they would receive if there were students in their classes. All the villagers were willing to contribute, including families without school children. As the primary school principal told us:

Villagers paid for these teachers – even though they didn’t have students in the grades they were responsible for (grades four and six). We cannot lose those grades. If there is no grade six, then when grade five becomes grade six, we have no teachers for the new grade six. Having a teacher means having a school.³⁴

Fuwai also offered the teachers free lodging. Thanks to the village’s strong lineage solidarity, two families who had no school-age children offered their spare rooms for free. This offer was very attractive, as housing was a major concern for teachers who came from elsewhere. The village school usually did not

33 Interview with the Party secretary of Fuwai village, P county, 9 August 2016.

34 Interview with the school principal in Fuwai village, P county, 13 March 2018.

provide staff dorms, and rental rooms and hotels in nearby towns were often under-furnished and expensive. Some village leaders believed that this offer was key to persuading these teachers to stay and helping Fuwai to retain an intact school. Even with insufficient student numbers, the bureau had no reason to downgrade the school, for the moment.

The village leadership were aware that this temporary solution would not stave off future risks of closure if its student population continued to dwindle and the school's rating continued to deteriorate. To save the school in the long run, Fuwai devised a village development plan which incorporated cultural heritage elements, via the primary school, to encourage cultural tourism. Fuwai added *Beilu* 北路戏 opera training to the school curriculum and encouraged students to perform traditional opera songs and other cultural activities at local tourist sites on weekends. Gradually, Fuwai's *Beilu* performances gained in popularity and became an important tourist attraction. In August 2017, Fuwai held a successful three-day cultural festival, which attracted many visitors. The festival received extensive coverage in local media and was even reported in the major city newspapers. The county government, including the education bureau, lauded Fuwai's development proposal for its innovative and effective approach to stimulating economic development.

Retaining the primary school also boosted Fuwai's population. As most of the primary schools in neighbouring villages were closed, children transferred to Fuwai's primary school. It was much closer and cheaper than the township school and became a popular choice among families in neighbouring villages. Fuwai took advantage of families wishing to move closer to the school by welcoming newcomers to rent untended land and housing from its out-migrated villagers. The village proactively absorbed immigrant families as a new source of labour as part of "a dual strategy to boost the student body and the local economy, in order to increase the school's chance of survival."³⁵ Unlike most other villages in P county, Fuwai began to witness an increase in its labour force and income per capita.

Fuwai's success led the county's education bureau to choose it as a model village in the poverty alleviation campaign. Under P county's overall target of "eliminating poverty by 2020," departmental and bureau units were assigned quotas of villages to help raise out of poverty (*baogan* 包干). These departments and bureaus were expected to adapt poverty-alleviation approaches to fit different villages, but they were eager to find "model" villages to showcase their performance outcomes. Because Fuwai had used education effectively as a development engine, the county's education bureau awarded it model village status.

As a model village, Fuwai managed to gain more government investments. In the spring of 2018, the village leadership persuaded the county's education

35 Interview with Party secretary of Fuwai village, P county, 13 March 2018.

bureau to invest 100,000 yuan, an unusual amount given P county's limited government budget, to renovate the primary school building, expand the school campus and construct an adjacent opera house. The bureau regarded it as a reasonable top-up investment, however, because the village had managed to raise 80,000 yuan from villagers and overseas Zheng lineage members. Owing to Fuwai's previous achievements in incorporating education into cultural tourism, the bureau believed that their investment would, according to director of the county's education bureau, "induce positive results and stimulate others to follow":

The village cadres (of Fuwai) called me about building a new campus. I said sure, but there was a condition: you must have a considerable size, a decent design, and a future plan. Because you have a strong desire to build a school and this is a famous village in the township, we want to make this village our "brand."³⁶

The finished project would create a cluster of cultural attractions around the village, including the lineage hall, the primary school and the opera house. By demonstrating their capabilities in aligning their grassroots demands with local government's performance goals, Fuwai not only retained one of the biggest village primary schools in the locality but also pioneered new poverty alleviation strategies and managed to lift itself out of poverty in 2018. Despite the rapid decline of the rural population in neighbouring areas, Fuwei's school grew to accommodate 52 students and seven teachers in 2018. Fuwai's education-based development project made it "a successful model of poverty alleviation and rural development in P county and even throughout Fujian province."³⁷

The success of Fuwai's school-saving efforts was based on a combination of strong lineage solidarity and rhetorical resonance. Similar to Shiwei, lineage solidarity helped the village to pool its resources and to retain its teachers; however, unlike Shiwei, Fuwai did not opt for a temporary solution by making compromises, but instead proactively aligned its school development plan with a bigger picture of cultural tourism – a strategy which required strong lineage solidarity and mobilization capability. Its development plan included retaining education resources in the village, cultivating an awareness of cultural heritage among school children, attracting immigrant families to boost the labour force, raising funds and attracting investments towards further development, and competing for recognition from local governments. These school-saving efforts fitted well with the state's priorities of economic development and social harmony and helped the education bureau to meet its performance goals. Once Fuwai's success was recognized, the county's education bureau was eager to label Fuwai as the bureau's model village before it was claimed by other departments and bureaus. By channelling more resources to increase Fuwei's achievements and promote its reputation, the bureau – and Fuwei – created a win-win situation for the two parties.

³⁶ Interview with educational bureau official, P county, 16 March 2018.

³⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

Lineage solidarity plays an important role in addressing grassroots demands and achieving collective goals, but its impact has been constrained by evolving formal institutions. To deal with grassroots demands, local governments have shifted away from coercive measures towards adopting efficiency-oriented policies and modelling strategies, as shown in the school consolidation campaign in these villages. The county's education bureau used three criteria (minimum student enrollment, minimum student/teacher ratio and proximity to other schools) to evaluate the “efficiency” of village primary schools, to allocate education resources and to manage school development. This efficiency-oriented approach attributed a school's closure to the village's lack of resources and its failure to meet requirements. By emphasizing rules and providing alternative options, local governments tried to avoid being the target of grassroots complaints and directed public attention to competition among village schools or the villages' self-financing capabilities outside of the public education system. Such strategies helped to depoliticize and convert collective resistance to grassroots competition. Under the cadre management system, local governments strived to achieve performance goals and absorb grassroots resistance at the same time. The increasing emphasis on market efficiency in local governance has undermined grassroots appeals for justice, especially in poor and hollow villages. Grassroots actors, therefore, must adapt their negotiation strategies accordingly to defend their interests.

The comparison of three villages suggests how grassroots actors may succeed, compromise or fail when negotiating with local governments under this new political environment. With multiple goals and limited budgets, local governments have adopted a practical approach, as developmental agents and service providers, to enhance their performance and to mute resistance.³⁸ They selectively allocate resources according to deliberate cost-benefit calculations, ideally investing in the most promising areas to achieve multiple goals at the same time.³⁹ Taking advantage of these performance pressures, some villages have learned to mobilize their lineage solidarity to address grassroots needs and government goals simultaneously, and such strategies have helped them to successfully compete for more government resources and favourable treatment.

Rhetorical resonance does not mean grassroots actors focus on presenting their demands based on framing tactics; villages need to demonstrate their capability to accomplish the proposed “common” goals. For this purpose, the solidarity within villages (*neibu tuanjie*内部团结), especially the solidarity between village leaders and fellow villagers, has been a key criterion by which county governments select model villages.⁴⁰ Without the help of lineage solidarity, villages may fragment and villagers may then pursue their own self-interests rather

38 Göbel 2011a; 2011b; Thøgersen 2011.

39 Ahlers and Schubert 2013; 2015; Schubert and Ahlers 2012.

40 Ahlers and Schubert 2013; Chen and Liu 2020.

than collective goals.⁴¹ In short, it is the combination of rhetorical resonance and lineage solidarity that empowers grassroots actors to succeed in negotiating with local governments and to achieve their collective goals: rhetorical resonance enables grassroots actors to gain support from local governments, even if they have little political embeddedness, and lineage solidarity (and the related achievement records) paves the way for gaining model village status and attracting more government investments.

Our comparison also shows that the model village approach reinforces or exacerbates existing inequalities between villages. Shiwei, which struggled to maintain its teaching site, received very little help from the bureau. Only after Fuwai successfully marketed its cultural tourism was the bureau convinced by, and then willing to invest in, Fuwai's development plan. The already better-off village became a model village and gained the largest share of government investments because it could best serve cadres' performance goals. In contrast, poorer villages, which need the funds the most, may be ranked low on the cadres' list for allocating resources. If the efficiency-oriented approach and the model-village strategy are commonly used in poverty alleviation campaigns, there may be a risk that poor and hollow villages will be further marginalized.

Caution is warranted when extrapolating these findings to other Chinese villages. Our study focuses on villages below the poverty line. We were introduced to these field sights through the G Foundation, whose mission is to alleviate poverty. These poor villages often lacked the budget to hire their own teachers – an option open to rich villages. The villages under investigation relied more heavily on government support and tried to negotiate for favourable treatment, which made rhetorical resonance more important. In addition, the villages under study are situated in Fujian in a region characterized by strong lineage solidarity.⁴² Their lineage solidarity might have enabled grassroots actors to mobilize resources and frame their development plans more effectively under the rhetorical resonance strategy. Villages in other regions may employ different strategies to defend their rights under the new policy environment.

Despite its limited representativeness, this study points out different perspectives for understanding the relationship between grassroots demands and government goals, as well as the interaction between formal and informal institutions. Rhetorical resonance is only one of the emerging grassroots responses to local governments' new tendency to depoliticize grassroots demands. It is still possible for grassroots actors to resort to resistance, especially when grassroots demands are not compatible with local governments' goals.⁴³ But in those cases, villagers may also form grassroots alliances of common interests or become more enterprising when seeking individual interests.⁴⁴ In the current political context of

41 Song, Jing 2015; Song, Jing, Du and Li 2020.

42 Freedman 1966; Xiao 2010.

43 Cai 2008; Lu, Zheng and Wang 2017.

44 Paik and Lee 2012; Wong 2015; Song, Jing 2014; 2015; Song, Jing, Du and Li 2020.

shifting state priorities and the target-based cadre management system, the villages under investigation tried to mobilize lineage solidarity and convert collective demands into development projects that echoed local governments' performance goals in order to compete for government resources and favourable treatment. The varying rural political landscape regarding how such strategies may work in other parts of China calls for further exploration.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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摘要: 随着中国政府对社会和谐和扶贫工作的日益重视, 本研究发现, 宗族团结如果能够与当下的政策话语相结合(话语共鸣), 能够帮助村庄得到更多的政府资源和支持。一些村庄通过发掘基层需求与当地干部绩效目标的一致性, 将村民的利益需求转化为符合上级政府意图的发展项目和策略, 并依靠宗族的动员能力来向当地干部证明这些项目的可行性。本研究比较了福建省三个村庄在撤点并校政策下的不同保校策略: 其中一个村庄依靠宗族的动员能力将教育转化为当地以文化旅游促发展的“模范村”项目的一部分, 村小得以保存并发展; 而在另外两个村, 保校策略未能与脱贫和发展导向的政策话语接轨, 在学童流失的情况下难以证明自己的资源优势, 村小被撤或降级。在绩效导向的干部管理体制下, 村庄已有的发展水平和资源结构极大地影响了它们能否得到政府的支持, 这可能会提高政府的管理效率, 但也可能加剧村庄之间的社会经济不平等。

关键词: 宗族团结; 话语共鸣; 撤点并校; 中国农村; 扶贫

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