

Challenging, Complementing or Assuming ‘the Mandate of Heaven’?

Political Distrust and the Rise of Self-Governing Social Organizations in Rural China^{*}

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INTRODUCTION

Both governance and civil society have come to attract considerable interest globally. Civil society matters for good governance because it can help to balance the role of the state and the rights of citizens and to promote constructive interactions between and within government and non-government forces (Putnam, 1994; Roy, 2008; Tandon and Mohanty, 2003). Such balancing and interaction are particularly important in a transition economy like China, given the increasing concern about social instability as a threat to its economic prosperity (Pei, 2006; Perry and Selden, 2003). In the impulsive rush to economic prosperity, there have emerged unprecedented opportunities for citizens to associate and play an active role in community affairs outside the government and Party. It is also often the case that those at the losing end find neither the state nor business having sympathy for their plight and grievances.

In the context of contemporary rural China, the rise of formal and informal civil society activities and organizations,¹ large in number and of great diversity, is widely regarded as one of the most significant developments in local governance. Of the growing body of research literature in this field, two strands can be distinguished. The first one focuses on the extent to which Chinese villagers have been ‘challenging the Mandate of Heaven’, in the words of Elizabeth Perry (2002).² A significant number of studies examine why and how Chinese villagers have resorted to ‘mobilized’, rather than ‘institutionalized’, modes of political participation, to protect themselves from a ‘predatory’ local state and to further their collective interests. The analytical emphasis has been on the driving forces, the patterns and the potential political impact of collective protest and resistance in the countryside (e.g., Bernstein and Lü, 2003; Cai, 2008; Guo 2001; O’Brien and Li, 2006). Excessive tax burdens, widespread official corruption, land expropriation without proper compensation and the deterioration of the environment have been major sources of rural unrest in recent years. The number of illegal and violent collective protests has been increasing and they have become more organized. ‘Rural China is likely to remain fertile soil for widespread protest and social unrest that could threaten the stability of the Communist regime’ (Zweig, 2003, p.132).

The second strand suggests, instead, that the social organizations of Chinese villagers have been by and large ‘complementing the Mandate of Heaven’. A large number of publications illustrate that rural associations have engaged in a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with a ‘benevolent’ local Party-state to promote economic

positive influence on villagers' participation in self-governing social organizations. It is also found that lineage structure, inter-lineage rivalry, intra-lineage cohesion and labour out-migration have statistically significant impact on villagers' participation in such social organizations at the village level. These results are robust to major control variables which represent the economic, social and geographic features of individual villages.

This research aims to enrich the literature on civil society–governance–development interface in general and the interaction between political distrust/trust and participation in social organizations in particular. Because the traditional concept of political trust, which focuses on citizens' general attitudes toward an abstract government, cannot provide explanatory power to the village-level variation in autonomous civic associations, we resort to a refinement of the concept as appealed by Levi and Stoker (2000, pp. 495-6) and adapt it to the Chinese context in line with Li (2004, 2008). We examine the political attitudes of villagers towards their township governments and officials. Our survey questions on the perceived trustworthiness of township leaders are designed to capture both 'competence to perform what one is trusted to do, and motivation to perform' (Hardin, 2006, p. 36). Our analysis and the empirical findings indicate that, when distrusting local Party and government officials, for their unwillingness and/or inability to perform their functions, villagers might attempt to partly 'assume the Mandate of Heaven', by participating in an alternative arena – unofficial and self-governing social organizations – in which they can serve the interests of themselves and their communities, while fending off government interference in their activities. In addition, the significant impacts of political distrust, lineage structure, inter-lineage tensions and intra-lineage unity on villagers' social participation suggest the sensitivity of rural China's self-governing associations to local history and to the initial conditions of individual villages. This is in line with the pluralistic perspective on the origin and evolution of social organizations (Berkowitz and Roland, 2007).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reports the general development of social organizations in rural China and puts an emphasis on the emergence of unofficial and self-governing associations. Section 3 develops hypotheses with respect to our key explanatory variables: the level of political distrust and the nature of lineage structure and relations. Section 4 reports survey design and measurements of political trust, lineage features and other variables included in our econometric estimations. Section 5 presents the estimation results, and Section 6 concludes.

traditional mass organizations nor part of the local Party-state apparatus. Table 1 reports the number and proportion of such associations by major categories and types in our sample. It also reports our estimations at the national level, which are based on proportional extrapolation. The table shows that there were in total 552 grassroots social organizations in our sample villages in 2004-05. They include the associations for wedding and funeral affairs, old people associations, Christian churches, ancestral, Buddhist, and other local temples, organizations offering technical support to farmers, mutual aid groups, consumer protection associations, dispute mediation associations, village security patrol groups, and others. Of these diverse organizations, over 18% are churches, temples, and other religious organizations; 16.7% are in the category of cultural, sports, and health organizations; 14% are engaged in civil dispute mediation; 13.8% are community security control committees or patrol groups; and another 13.8% belong to the categories of technical assistance and mutual-aid in production. This leads to an extrapolative estimation of the number of rural grassroots social organizations at the national level being 3.16 million.

(Tables 1-4 about here)

While the major function of rural grassroots associations is the delivery of production services, they also play an important role in the provision of local public goods. Table 2 reports the proportions of these organizations that initiated various village-level infrastructure projects and the rates of successful implementation of these projects during the period of 2000-2005. It shows that about 19% of rural associations took the initiative to undertake local public infrastructure projects, such as the construction and repair of roads, bridges, and drinking water supply systems. Of these initiatives, 67% were successfully implemented. About 16% of these organizations took the lead in carrying out agricultural infrastructure projects, with a success rate of 65%; and around 12% of them engaged in the improvement of school facilities, succeeding in 78% of the cases. In rural communities, initiating and carrying out infrastructure projects usually requires the approval and support of the village government. Surprisingly, in our sample, about 50% of the public infrastructure projects that were carried out by local temples were run independently, without the help of the village committee or Party branch. This suggests that some rural social organizations constitute a separate sphere of activity from the local Party-state, where villagers cooperate to meet their needs, taking over some of the tasks

typically prevails. This stream of research identifies local government officials as the leading actors who set pace for the development of rural social organizations, with the objective of mobilizing socioeconomic resources and popular support for the fulfilment of their political and bureaucratic duties,⁶ in a context of extending fiscal scarcity, increasing difficulties in enforcing highly contested policies, and the persistent push by the central government for bureaucratic downsizing (Hansen, 2008; Oi, 1999; Rozelle *et al.*, 2005; White *et al.*, 1996). In contrast, studies on the ‘mobilized’ political participation of villagers often pinpoint the predatory side of the local politico-administrative process. They show that villagers’ protests against local cadres increasingly give rise to, and are channelled by, underground social organizations, which are ultimately repressed and dismantled (Bernstein, 2000; Bernstein and Lü, 2003; Thornton, 2004, Yu 2008). While socioeconomic factors do play a role in both the above processes, they become the dominant force in the analysis of those, mainly informal, organizations built up by a ‘bottom-up’ process. The rise of associations initiated and led by villagers is seen as rooted in the transformation of the Chinese rural economy and as stemming from very different segments of the rural population, in response to the new needs and opportunities that they face in a rapidly changing socio-economic context (Hu, 2007; White *et al.*, 1996; Zhang and Baum, 2004).

Although the above literature is overwhelmingly based on qualitative case studies and cannot provide direct help to our quantitative research, the politico-administrative perspective draws our attention to the political attitudes of villagers towards their township officials, given the fact that the latter sit at the bottom of the government hierarchy and directly implement almost all policies related to rural society. On the other hand, the socioeconomic perspective points to some of the social conditions which are either conducive or restrictive to the development of rural associations. It suggests a close association between social cohesion and intra-lineage solidarity and between social divisiveness and inter-lineage tension. It also helps us to identify effective control variables in the social, economic, and geographic domains.

Political Trust/Distrust

Trust is cognitive or rational, in that it is dependent on assessments of trustworthiness of the potentially trusted person or institution (Levi, 1998; Hardin, 2006). Individual trustworthiness involves *motivation* and *competence* to perform what one is trusted to do. Institutional trustworthiness implies ‘procedures for selecting and

refuse to recognise legal protections and privileges granted by the central government (Li 2004; O'Brien and Li 2006; Minzner, 2006). Collectively, policy-based resisters seek audiences with higher levels and lodge complaints against grassroots cadres, demanding 'the repeal of local policies, the removal of local emperors, and the lifting of illegal local impositions' (Li and O'Brien, 1996, p. 29).

Third, abuses of public trust and power by local officials increasingly lead Chinese villagers to undertake collective acts of violent resistance, which arguably reveals the limited effectiveness of existing political and legal institutions in inducing villagers to seek redress of their grievances peacefully and in guaranteeing socio-political stability in rural China (Bernstein and Lü, 2003; Guo, 2001; Thornton, 2004).

Adding to the above list, although not being mutually exclusive, this research highlights that villagers who distrust local Party and government officials are not necessarily 'alienated apathetics' totally disengaging from the public sphere, nor 'alienated activists' resorting to political protest and resistance (Seligson 1980). They may become 'social activists' and participate in self-governing social organizations in order to improve community governance independently from formal local political structures. In other words, villagers, who are aware of their collective needs and recognize that local officials lack institutional incentives and/or financial and other resources to meet these needs, might opt for engaging in self-governing associations, in order to improve their livelihoods, while avoiding the risks entailed by political protest and resistance. This discussion leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: *Other things being equal, the villagers' political distrust in local governments increases their participation rate in self-governing social organizations.*

This hypothesis is in sharp contrast to the positive relationship between political trust and associational activism in democratic regimes as suggested by previous researches. For instance, Brehm and Rahn (1997) demonstrate that confidence in US federal institutions, such as the Congress, the Executive Branch and the Supreme Court, increases the level of citizens' civic engagement. Booth and Seligson (2005) show that trust in local government increases civil society activism in the context of Costa Rica.

To test this hypothesis, we will focus on villagers' political distrust in township Party and government officials. This focus is justified by the following two reasons. First, in explaining everyday socio-political behaviour, like civic associational activities, distrust

have these positive effects. On the other hand, in some locations, inter-clan rivalry and violence seem to be an increasingly important source of rural unrest (Chiang, 1995; Gao, 1999). As indicated in Chiang (1995), a side effect of clans ‘is frequent feuds between clans or villages of different lineages (surnames) that are particularly serious in southern China. Because the rival clans reject the mediation of local officials, the disputes often result in large-scale armed battles.’

The literature clearly suggests that a higher level of tension between sub-village lineage groups would weaken villagers’ willingness and ability to trust their fellow villagers in other lineages and, as a result, their incentives to undertake associational activities at the village community level. On the other hand, typically, the larger the number of lineage groups in a given village, the greater the number of local ancestral halls and temples. Our fieldwork shows that these ancestral halls and temples are often the birthplace of many existing unofficial and self-governing social organizations, because they are the historical testimony of intra-lineage solidarity, an instance of the so-called ‘bonding social capital’ at the village level, and they accumulate economic and, especially, social assets which facilitate the development of grassroots associations. This discussion leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: *Other things being equal, (a) tension between sub-village lineage groups reduces villagers’ participation rate and (b) the number of ancestral halls/temples is positively correlated with villagers’ participation rate in self-governing social organizations.*

This hypothesis enriches the recent literature on social participation in heterogeneous communities, which suggests that heterogeneity within communities, in the form of wealth inequality, ethnic or racial diversity, has a negative impact on social cooperation, group formation and participation both in developed and developing countries (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000; La Ferrara, 2002; Miguel and Gugerty, 2005). While inter-lineage rivalry would play such a negative role, the bonding social capital within individual lineage groups may add a positive push. It is the interplay of intra-lineage cohesion and inter-lineage tensions that ultimately affects the vibrancy of associational life in Chinese villages.

The above discussion suggests a ‘supply-side’ argument for the potentially positive effect of rural out-migration on associational development in the communities of origin. This positive effect could be attributed to the associational skills and experiences gained by migrants in destination areas and, especially, to migrants’ networks, the latter being defined as ‘sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin’ (Massey *et al.*, 1993, p.448).

A ‘demand-side’ argument for this potentially favourable effect can be pushed forward as well. Those members of the rural population who do not migrate might have incentives for self-organization, in order to fill the temporary ‘vacuum’ left by migrants, in terms of labour inputs and intergenerational support. As Murphy (2002) points out, migration forces a redefinition of the intra-household division of tasks and resources, which does not always benefit those left behind – mainly, women, children and the elderly. Households consisting of elderly couples or a spouse left at home with children, incur an increased work burden, as a result of the migration of one or several household members, but do not necessarily benefit from the resources generated by it. For those staying in the village, informal and self-governing associations might represent an accessible and inviting venue for participation and mutual assistance, in order to cope with the needs created by migration, given the absence of a social safety net provided by the local state. Hypothesis three summarizes this discussion:

H3: *Other things being equal, out-migration increases remaining villagers’ participation rate in self-governing social organizations.*

DATA, MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES, AND METHODOLOGY

Data

The dataset is from our own national survey. The survey was conducted in the summer of 2005. Stratified sampling was used to select sample villages. First, we divided the country into six regions and randomly chose one province in each of them. Jilin, Hebei, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Jiangsu, and Fujian were finally included. We then ranked all counties in each province into five quintiles according to the per capita gross value of industrial output and randomly selected one county in each quintile. For each of these 30 counties, 1 township was randomly selected from those townships with the level of per capita net

avoid bluntly asking questions of a politically confrontational nature such as ‘do you believe your township officials are willing to let the villagers’ committee run truly autonomously?’ In contrast, more general and less direct questions would give villagers some sense of distance and safety. Second, we should avoid questions which villagers can interpret too idiosyncratically, thus rendering inter-personal comparison misleading. Third, attitudinal questions can be prone to the possibility of reciprocal causation. For example, villagers’ answer to the above-cited direct question may partly be a *consequence* of the functioning of self-governing social organizations and thus using this answer to explain participation in self-governing organization can be problematic.

In line with Li (2004, 2008), we design five questions to capture villagers’ political trust in township Party and government officials (Table 5). Question 1 is relatively abstract and gauges villagers’ general feelings toward their township officials. Question 2 intends to partly capture villagers’ understanding of the relationship between township officials and village cadres. Township governments regularly pick model party members and cadres in their jurisdictions and award honours as well as money to these people. Many of these models are village cadres who have assisted township officials in accomplishing government targets, such as tax and fee collections, birth control, etc. Questions 3-5 intend to extract villagers’ beliefs in the intention, willingness and competence of their township officials. Of special relevance is whether they care about peasants and have the conscience to do the right thing, even though it may undermine their fulfilment of targets assigned by the higher levels of government.

A cognitive and bi-dimensional measurement of trustworthiness assessments is adopted, as advocated by Levi (1998), Hardin (2006) and Li (2004), among others. We code 1 if the interviewed villagers agree or somewhat agree and 0 if they do not agree. The ‘not sure’ response in the Chinese context usually means disapproval, but the respondents are hesitant to say so because of the political implications. To achieve a village-level measurement for each political trust question, we use answers from ordinary villagers only and take the weighted average. The weights are based on the population-size of the respondent’s household. The simple arithmetic average of these five indices is defined as the average index of political trust at the village level. In addition, we use the first principal component of these five indices, which explains 68.7% of total variance, as an alternative way to aggregate them.

Table 6 compares the level of political trust across the six sample provinces. Villagers in Fujian, one of the most prosperous coastal provinces, consistently rate their

Addressing the Issue of Endogeneity

The potential problem of endogeneity is a common challenge for attitudinal variables in quantitative analyses. Although we have aimed to partly address this problem in designing the measurement for political trust, without formal tests it is unclear whether the solution is adequate. We thus use instrumental variables (IVs) to further detect and correct for endogeneity. Finding valid IVs, however, is often challenging. They should be exogenous and have real effect on the suspected explanatory variables (political trust in our case). Moreover, IVs influence the dependent variable (participation rate in self-governing organizations) only through their impact on the potentially endogenous variables. If the IVs are valid and endogeneity exists, two-stage estimates are more adequate. If the IVs are valid but the variables in question are not endogenous, estimates without IVs are more efficient (Woodrige 2001).

We find two valid IVs: the number of villagers who participated in the anti-Japanese war, the liberation war and the Korean War under the leadership of the Communist Party, and the number of people prosecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Presumably the higher the number of veterans, the higher the political trust of villagers; the higher the number of persecuted people in Cultural Revolution, the lower the political trust. Indeed, the first stage regression shows that these two IVs have significant impacts on our political trust variable (cf. Appendix). The over-identification tests show that they are indeed exogenous and the Hausman tests show that OLS and IV estimations are statistically indifferent (Table 7). This indicates that our political trust variable is not endogenous and thus the OLS estimation is more efficient than the IV estimation. This also reassures that our indicators have captured fairly stable political beliefs in villagers.

(Table 7 about here)

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The estimate results are presented in Table 7. As we just discussed, both Sargan and Basman over-identification tests indicate that two instrumental variables are exogenous and furthermore the Hausman test suggests that two political trust indexes are not endogenous. These tests suggest that the OLS estimator is well-behaved and more efficient than the 2SLS estimator. Therefore, the following discussion will focus on the OLS results.

and government officials, the nature of lineage relations, and the extent of out-migration. The econometric estimations based on our survey data confirm these hypotheses. The empirical results are robust to the endogeneity concern and to typical control variables which represent the socio-economic and geographic features of individual sample villages.

A political economy interpretation of these findings is the following: in rural China, the low level of villagers' political trust in township Party and government officials – for their unwillingness or inability to perform their functions, or for their lack of integrity or competence – provide villagers with incentives to set-up and join grassroots self-governing associations, which can meet their needs and improve their livelihoods independently from the local Party-state. However, whether they can succeed in doing so seems to be also conditioned by the degree of social cohesiveness at the community level, the density of social networks and villagers' past experiences of cooperation and mutual help. Thus, factors rooted in villages' socioeconomic structure, history and development path, such as lineage structure and relations and the extent of out-migration, favour or hinder villagers' participation in rural self-governing associations. Higher levels of rural out-migration and social capital accumulation in ancestral temples/halls, coupled with lower levels of inter-lineage rivalry, translate into greater availability of human, social and physical capital at the community level, which are particularly essential for the growth of rural grassroots self-governing social organisations.

These findings enrich the on-going debate on local state-society relations in the context of a transition and developing country like China, going beyond the traditional confrontation-cooperation dichotomy. The rise of grassroots self-governing social organization is possible even under an authoritarian political regime. These social organizations are not necessarily vehicles for cooperating with, nor opposition forces to, the local Party-state. Instead, they represent a separate sphere of social activity, where villagers cooperate to improve their living conditions, while keeping distrusted local officials at an arm's length. This is in support of the arguments made by Hadenius and Ugglå (1996, p. 1629) that 'when citizens can rely on the state to supply a good, their incentive to produce it themselves naturally diminishes. If, however, the state stops providing the good – for reasons economic or political – independent organizations often step in. A burst of organizing in civil society can be the result'. In rural China, informal and self-governing associations have emerged and taken over some of the tasks that local officials do not perform as required. These social organisations are tolerated by the

Note

¹ Civil society here is understood as ‘the public realm of organised social activity located between the state and the family, regardless of normative orientation’ (Tostensen et al. 2001, p.7).

² We use this expression in reference to the behaviour of the Chinese rural population vis-à-vis the local government, rather than the central government.

³ A strict definition of ‘self-governing organization’ will be presented in Section 2.

⁴ The CSI assessment is based on 74 indicators, which are grouped into four dimensions: Structure, environment, values, and impact (CIVICUS, 2006).

⁵ Technical details on sampling will be presented in Section 4.

⁶ Through the establishment, management and/or support of social organisations, local cadres have also pursued their individual goals, such as increasing their personal income, political power, prestige and connections (Hansen 2008).

⁷ The text of this law is available at www.cecc.gov/pages/selectLaws/laws/organicLawVillComm.php.

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Table 2. Participation of Grassroots Social Organizations in Local Infrastructure Projects, 2000-2005 (%)

Category of social organizations	Roads, bridges, tap water & others		Infrastructure for agricultural production		School buildings & facilities	
	Rate of participation in initiations	Success rate of implementation in the initiation	Rate of participation in initiations	Success rate of implementation in the initiation	Rate of participation in initiations	Success rate of implementation in the initiation
Wedding & funerals	19	86	14	80	14	80
Cultural, sports & health	35	57	21	69	17	62
Learning	19	50	23	57	17	80
Local temples	11	80	10	25	5	0
Churches & religious	12	20	7	33	2	100
Technical	15	75	20	70	8	100
Mutual aids in production	17	50	25	67	8	100
Rights protection	19	80	31	75	23	100
Civil intermediation	18	85	12	78	12	89
Public order & security	11	71	11	43	6	75
Others	30	100	30	100	40	75
Total	19	67	16	65	12	78

Source: Authors' village survey in 2005.

Table 3. Participation Rates of Villagers in Self-governing and Government-controlled Social Organizations, by Sample Province

	No of villages	Self-governing	Government-controlled	All social organizations
Jiangsu	19	2.08	8.38	10.46
Sichuan	20	0.21	2.75	2.96
Shaanxi	16	4.08	4.81	8.89
Jilin	21	1.65	9.81	11.46
Hebei	19	1.55	4.64	6.19
Fujian	20	15.07	17.20	32.27
All samples	115	4.13	8.08	12.21

Source: Authors' village survey in 2005.

Table 6. Five Measurements of Political Trust in Six Sample Provinces

	Township cadres respected	Model cadres highly regarded	Township policy beneficial	Willingness to uphold justice	Ability for problem solving	Gross index of political trust
Jiangsu	0.37	0.41	0.53	0.60	0.66	0.51
Sichuan	0.46	0.47	0.65	0.76	0.86	0.64
Shaanxi	0.27	0.34	0.37	0.47	0.70	0.43
Jilin	0.43	0.54	0.52	0.62	0.65	0.55
Hebei	0.37	0.32	0.47	0.56	0.65	0.47
Fujian	0.32	0.26	0.34	0.39	0.58	0.38
All samples	0.37	0.39	0.48	0.57	0.69	0.50

Source: Authors' village survey in 2005.

Appendix: First Stage IV Estimation

	Average political trust	First principal component
Number of people prosecuted during the Cultural Revolution	-2.384 (1.68)*	-26.071 (1.63)
Number of villagers who participated in wars under the leadership of the Communist Party	2.022 (1.91)*	22.556 (1.90)*
Labour migration 2000	0.001 (1.10)	0.011 (1.09)
Inter-lineage tension	-0.012 (1.29)	-0.128 (1.27)
No of ancestral temples	-0.187 (3.76)***	-2.086 (3.76)***
No of household non-agr businesses	-0.000 (0.13)	-0.002 (0.13)
% of households in top three family names	-0.001 (0.88)	-0.006 (0.89)
No of private enterprises	0.001 (0.99)	0.016 (0.97)
No of collective Enterprises	0.036 (1.71)*	0.402 (1.71)*
Ln(net income p.c.)	0.028 (0.79)	0.312 (0.79)
Farmland per capita	-0.033 (0.16)	-0.388 (0.17)
Ln(population)	0.045 (1.22)	0.501 (1.23)
% of flat farmland in total farmland	-0.001 (1.82)*	-0.009 (1.82)*
Ln(distance to the town)	0.017 (0.87)	0.198 (0.89)
Constant	-0.027 (0.08)	-5.922 (1.67)*
No of observations	115	115
R-squared	0.41	0.40
Joint Significant test of IV	0.0215	0.0247