



Challenging, complementing or assuming ‘the Mandate of Heaven’? Political distrust and the rise of self-governing social organizations in rural China

Vanesa Pesqué-Cela^a, Ran Tao^b, Yongdong Liu^b, Laixiang Sun^{a,c,d,*}

^a Department of Financial & Management Studies, SOAS, University of London, UK

^b Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP), Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

^c Institute of Geographic Sciences & Natural Resources Research (IGSNRR), Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

^d International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Laxenburg, Austria

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 March 2008

Revised 21 August 2008

Available online 3 September 2008

JEL classification:

D02

D71

L31

O17

Keywords:

Social organizations

Local governance

Political distrust

Rural China

ABSTRACT

Pesqué-Cela, Vanesa, Tao, Ran, Liu, Yongdong, and Sun, Laixiang—Challenging, complementing or assuming ‘the Mandate of Heaven’? Political distrust and the rise of self-governing social organizations in rural China

The emergence of self-governing social organizations is one of the most significant yet unexplored developments in rural China. By conducting a nationwide village-level survey, we find that these organizations are playing an important role in the provision of local public goods and services. To explain villagers’ participation rates in these organizations, we specify and estimate two simultaneous equations and find that the level of villagers’ distrust in township leaders exerts a significant and positive influence on the participation rates. We argue that, when distrusting local government officials, largely for their unwillingness or inability to provide public goods and services, villagers might attempt to participate in autonomous social organizations to serve their own and community’s interests independently from the local Party-state. We also find that lineage structure and relations and labor out-migration have significant impacts on villagers’ participation in such social organizations. *Journal of Comparative Economics* 37 (1) (2009) 151–168. Department of Financial & Management Studies, SOAS, University of London, UK; Centre for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP), Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China; Institute of Geographic Sciences & Natural Resources Research (IGSNRR), Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China; International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Laxenburg, Austria.

© 2008 Association for Comparative Economic Studies. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. 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

* Corresponding author at: DeFiMS, SOAS, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom. Fax: +44 20 7898 4089.

E-mail address: ls28@soas.ac.uk (L. Sun).

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 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 and social development. Rural social organizations provide local officials with the financial and organizational resources, as well as the legitimacy, which are necessary for them to govern more effectively. These organizations also provide indispensable assistance to local governments in economic regulation and coordination, in the delivery of public goods and services, and in the implementation of policies set forth from above (e.g., Hansen, 2008; Oi, 1999; White et al., 1996).

However, local state–society relations in rural China might go beyond the dichotomy of confrontation versus cooperation. As acknowledged in Tostensten et al. (2001, p. 18), 'the relationship of civil society to the state is varied. Civil society may be a countervailing power to the state, indeed, an anti-state force. Alternatively, it may take a collaborative stance vis-à-vis the state and thus risk co-optation. Or, it may be seen as a separate sphere of activity—as non-state rather than anti-state.' While recognizing the relevance of confrontational and cooperative patterns of interaction between political and social actors in rural China, this research intends to highlight that Chinese villagers are also organizing themselves in self-governing associations, neither to *challenge* nor to *complement* the local state, but to autonomously *assume* some of the functions and tasks that the local state does not perform as required or expected.

In sharp contrast to most of the previous publications, which are overwhelmingly based on qualitative case studies and thus inevitably have some difficulty in explaining variations across different jurisdictions, this research is built on a national survey conducted by the authors in 2005, which covers 115 villages, 58 townships and 30 counties across 6 provinces in China. One key purpose of the survey is to reveal and assess the explanatory factors underlying the involvement of Chinese villagers in a wide spectrum of rural social organizations that are not part of, and enjoy operational autonomy from, the local Party-state apparatus. To our knowledge, this research constitutes the first attempt to investigate the social, political, and economic forces that drive the rise of a broad range of 'self-governing social organizations' in rural China.³

Our survey data shows that self-governing social organizations have mushroomed in Chinese villages and in some areas they have made significant contributions to the provision of local public goods and services, albeit with local characteristics and limitations. The data also reveals striking variations across villages in terms of the occurrence of grassroots associations, their organizational scale, and villagers' participation rates. Our econometric estimations indicate that the level of villagers' distrust in township leaders constitutes a key explanatory factor for such variation and exerts a significant and positive influence on villagers' participation in self-governing social organizations. While (time-lagged) local government performance measures, such as election quality and public goods investment per capita raised by the village government, do have an impact on villagers' participation in self-governing social organizations, their impact is mainly exerted through the channel of political (dis)trust formation. It is also found that lineage structure, inter-lineage rivalry, intra-lineage cohesion and labor out-migration have statistically significant effects 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 the 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 proposed by Levi and Stoker (2000, pp. 495–496) 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

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' (Tostensten et al., 2001, p. 7).

² We use this expression in reference to the behavior 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.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5092690>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5092690>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)