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Village Governance in Chinese History[*]

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How were villages organized and constituted in Chinese history? How were decisions made in the communities? How were public goods and services provided there? What are the changes and continuities of village organization and governance in the history? This paper is an effort to answer these questions by providing a historical account of rural society. The discussion is sectioned along the line of time, including Imperial (221 BC – 1912), Republican (1912 –1949), and Mao's China and after (1949 – present). Since Chinese history is very long and complicated, the discussion provided here is nothing more than a sketch. Moreover, it is necessary to note that the analysis mainly relies on secondary sources, especially those works in historical scholarship.

Village Organization and Governance in Imperial China

In Imperial China (221 BC - 1912), village organization was closely associated with the lineage system. In fact, many rural communities were the outgrowth of lineages or clans. Usually, when one or several families moved to a rural place from somewhere else and camped down there, a small habitation began to emerge and became a village decades or even centuries later. Thus, the communities were organized along the lines of lineage, especially in southern China (Freedman 1958; 1966; Huang 1985, 233-237; Duara 1988, 86; Spence 1999, 13-14). Mono-lineage villages predominated in this region. For instance, among 1291 villages in Gao'an of Jiangxi in mid-1800s, 1121 (87 percent) of them were mono-lineage communities. In contrast, many or even the majority of villages were

multi-lineage ones in northern China (Hsiao 1960, 327). Despite the difference between the south and the north, the role of lineage in village life was very important throughout the rural society.

Details of lineage structure varied in different instances, but normally each kinship group recognized a suitable member as its head who was responsible for administering lineage affairs. Sometimes, several "executive members" might be selected to assist the lineage head to perform his functions. Larger lineages were often divided into branches, and sub-heads were instituted in the branches. Several factors were considered significant in selecting lineage leaders, and they included age, seniority in generation, education, reputation, and personal ability. In some cases, social and economic status also played an important role (Hsiao 1960, 331-333).

In mono-lineage villages, heads of the lineage were usually responsible for public affairs related to the whole organization, and sub-heads of branches dealt with affairs with regard to their respective branches. In multi-lineage villages, heads of several lineages often divided the governing power in some way, depending on their strength and influence. For instance, in a village of north China, the governing council of the village consisted of 12 councilors called *dongshi* or *gongzheng*. There were two representatives each from the five largest lineages, and two from the rest. The position of the representatives was usually hereditary (Duara 1988, 105-107). Of course, in some cases, larger and stronger lineages dominated decision making over village affairs, while smaller and weaker ones have little power. The imbalance was partly responsible for

frequent and sometimes deadly conflicts between lineages (Freedman 1958, 106-113; Spence 1999, 77).

Under the leadership of heads and sub-heads, lineages usually established some rules and regulations (*jia gui*) to administer community affairs and supervise the behavior of members. The rules and regulations encouraged good conduct and desirable values in the Confucian tradition, such as respecting elders, helping one another, and working hard. Violations of the rules almost invariably incurred punishment of some kind, usually to be administered by lineage leaders. In some cases, the penalties were very severe, including corporal punishment, expulsion from the lineages, and even the death penalty (Beattie 1979, 121). The rules and regulations were often read aloud and explained to all members, and written down in genealogical records (*jia pu* or *zu pu*). In mono-lineage villages, these rules and regulations in fact became "village regulations" (*cun gui*).

Lineages provided various public goods and services for members, and in some cases, non-members living in the same communities. The goods and services included managing lineage property, supporting education, resolving conflicts, raising relief funds, self-defense, and compiling genealogical records (Yang 1945; Hsiao 1960; Freedman 1958; 1966; Beattie 1979). Many lineages had common property, especially land. It was estimated that in some areas, one-third of the cultivated land belonged to lineages. In some cases, they even owned between 50 and 70 percent of cultivated land. Some of lineage land was often designated for special purposes, such as school land, ritual land, and charitable land (Freedman 1958, 11-18). Lineage leaders or appointed managers

recorded, rented, and took care of lineage land, and incomes from the land were used for the welfare of members.

Another important function of lineages was to support education. Many of them sponsored education in one way or another. Some provided financial assistance for their members, who demonstrated aptitude or zeal in their studies, to be prepared for and take imperial examinations, including traveling expenses. The successful candidates were often awarded cash prizes worth hundreds of taels. Other lineages set up school facilities for their youthful members, especially those who belonged to families of modest means (Hsiao 1960, 340-342). It is believed that the remarkable academic record in Tongcheng county of Anhui in late imperial China was, to a large degree, attributed to several lineages' constant striving for educational attainment (Beattie 1979, 122-123).

Another distinctive feature of village organization and governance in imperia China is the important role of gentry. Although the social group included retired officials and other elites, many of them were degree holders who passed certain imperial examinations. Gentry assumed crucial leadership in organizing community life in rural society. One reason is that the formal government reached only the county level in imperial China, and the county administrative staff was small (Kuhn 2002, 21-24). A magistrate often had to govern several hundred thousand people. For example, at the end of the eighteen century, there were 1436 counties, and each county magistrate, on average, was responsible for governing almost three hundred thousand people. This posed great challenges to the official. Moreover, the magistrate was always an outsider with a very short term of

service, ranging from 1.7 to .9 years in Qing dynasty, since the “law of avoidance” prevented them from serving in their own province. He knew little about local conditions and found it necessary to rely on local elites. Thus, much of rural governance fell to local gentry operating outside the formal bureaucracy (Chang 1955, 52-54; Ch’ü 1962, 180; Esherick and Rankin 1990, 3).

As informal leaders, the gentry played an intermediary role between local society and the imperial authority. On one hand, the magistrate found it much easier to pass an order to the people through the gentry than through the formal government channels; on the other hand, the gentry could make the people’s reactions known to the government since they were the only natives who had access to the magistrate (Ch’ü 1962, 180-181). While the gentry and the magistrate depended upon each another, each exercised its power in a different way. The interplay between them shaped the power relationship into patterns of coordination, cooperation, and conflict (Ch’ü 1962, 168). In normal times, the main interests of the government and the gentry coincided, and they cooperated in keeping the wheels of society turning and maintaining the status quo. When their interests diverged, the gentry criticized or even opposed and blocked official actions but without any serious threat to the imperial regime (Chang 1955, 70).

The gentry, as community leaders, often actively organized and even funded various local public goods and services, such as roads, bridges, granaries, irrigation systems, river dredging, charity schools, foundling homes, public cemeteries, local defense, and the establishment of shrines and temples (Chang 1955, 51-70; Hsiao 1960, 275-320; Ch’ü

1962, 180-185). There were many such examples in Chinese history. For instance, a *chien-sheng* of Hua-chou in Shensi financed the construction of more than 100 *li* of roads through the mountains, which cost him 10,000 taels. A local gazetteer of Jung-hsien, Kwangsi, indicated that gentry helped build 52 bridges and 21 ferries, while local government constructed only three bridges in the region. In 1879, a number of gentry members together in Lu-chou, Anhwei, with the support of the provincial officials, planned and carried through a large project of building dams, which prevented floods and made navigation possible for merchants. It was reported that the dams protected the lives and property of millions of people and saved several hundred thousand taels of custom and *likin* revenues. A *sheng-yüan* of the countryside in Cho-hsien of Chihli sponsored a canalization project for his locality that irrigated more than 3,000 *mu* of land in Chia-ch'ing period. Local villagers were still benefiting from the project in the Republican era. The gentry also contributed heavily to the establishment of schools and academies (*shuyuan*) and subsidized students. In 1832, the gentry of Chin-shan, Kiangsu, contributed 31,000 taels for the erection of a new academy, and a widow donated an estate for the grounds of the institution (Chang 1955, 51-70).

Of course, the informal leadership assumed by clan heads and local gentry does not imply that the imperial authority had no influence on villages at all or never attempted to control rural society and peasants. In fact, some emperors, especially in late imperial era, worked hard to control villages by establishing *baojia*, *lijia*, and *xiangyue* systems, although their implementation was uneven across regions (Li 2005). *Baojia* was a sub-administrative police system in rural society. It is said that the system had its origin in the

zhouli (Rites of the Zhou) over 2,700 years ago, but the idea of policing was introduced into it as late as in the Sui dynasty (581-618). In Song (960-1279), the system for the first time assumed the name of *baojia* and made the detection and reporting of criminals its sole function. In late imperial China, *baojia* became the system of police control, a device to watch and check the number, movements, and activities of the people, through agents selected from local inhabitants. The scheme of the *baojia* system was simple. Every ten households were arranged into one *pai*; every ten *pai* constituted a *jia*; and every ten *jia* formed a *bao* (Hsiao 1960, 26-31). The *baojia* system broke the natural boundaries and divisions of village communities.

The *lijia* system was established for tax collection in late imperial China. It can at least be traced back to the *lishe* system in Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Originally, its function was to assist local officials in the registration of rural inhabitants to facilitate the assessment of the labor service imposts. Later, it became involved in the process of tax collection and ceased to perform its original function (Hsiao 1960, 84; 95).According to the scheme of *lijia*, every 110 households in rural areas constituted a *li* in which the heads of the ten households having the largest number of tax-paying adult males were elected *lizhang* (heads of the *li*); the remaining 100 households were divided evenly into ten *jia*, with an elected *jiazhang* in every *jia*. The *jiazhang* was assigned the duty of collecting the tax records of the eleven households under his supervision and then handled them over to the *lizhang*, who sent them to local officials (Hsiao 1960, 31-33).

Xiangyue (local covenant) was regarded as another control system, using ideological indoctrination, over local society, employed by the imperial state. In fact, the origin of the system was closely related to the idea of local self-governance. In 1076, a Confucian scholar wrote the *Lüshi xiangyue*, laying down a plan for organizing a sort of village self-government based on agreement. For him, *xiangyue* was a spontaneous, voluntary, and genuinely autonomous association of villagers for the fourfold purpose of common endeavor in morality, education, social intercourse, and economic assistance (Hsiao 1960, 201; Li 2005, 108; 257-258). It was aimed at promoting good and virtuous behavior in villages. The *yue* (covenant) included provisions on both public and private behavior of community members, and established rules on self-cultivation, social conduct, dispute resolution, inter-generational deference, and basic community functions such as poor relief, health care, and local defense. Yet, in the Qing dynasty, *xiangyue* became the tool of ideological control over local society by requiring rural people to learn the imperial orders and edicts (Kuhn 1975, 260-261).

Finally, although villages were, to a large degree, governed by lineage leaders and local gentry, they were far from self-governing or democratic. First of all, only a small group of social elites, whether they were lineage leaders or gentry, dominated decision making over public affairs in rural society, although most of the population as commoners was not completely excluded from participation (Ch'ü 1962, 198). In the first half of the nineteenth century, the number of gentry was only 0.2 percent of the whole population. With their family members included, the total was just 1.3 percent (Chang 1955, 139).

Meanwhile, the social elites' interests were at times in conflict with those of the rest of the community, and many of them abused their position and privileges and suppressed the commoners.

Second, to obtain the status of the gentry often relied on wealth rather than equal competition, especially in late imperial China, and poor people had fewer opportunities to rise to the position. Although many gentry members took and passed exams, many others purchased educational degrees and titles and were called "irregular gentry". In the first half of the 19th century, the "irregular gentry" was 32 percent of the whole group. The number reached to 36 percent before long (Chang 1955, 137). At the same time, lineages maintained or even accentuated inequality among members, especially between the elder and the young, between men and women, and between husbands and wives (Yang 1987, 117-119).

Although villages enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, the imperial authority never hesitated to interfere with village life when it deemed it necessary and desirable (Hsiao 1960, 263). Heavy taxes, land concentration, and corrupt officials often made peasant life difficult and even miserable, which led to frequent peasant uprisings, rebellions, and revolutions in Chinese history (Kuhn 1970; Perry 1980; Bianco 1971; Bernhardt 1992; Spence 1978; 1999).

Villages and State Strengthening in Republican China

Since the late imperial era, China has witnessed a deliberate and far-ranging trend toward centralization of power and building a modern and strong state (Ch'ü 1962; Watt 1972, 99; Bedeski 1981; Huang 1985; Duara 1988; Zhang 2000). As Kuhn (2002, 132) put it, the twentieth-century politics of China is "a story about the relentless march of the central state." The imperial regime's immediate successors tried their best to replace the "self-government" institutions established in the 1910s with centers of bureaucratic administration. Some of the warlords (such as Yan Xishan in Shanxi province) experimented with new kinds of state agents in villages, and the Kuomintang regime bureaucratized rural society by establishing administrative units below the county level.

These attempts had a profound influence on village organization and local society. If the imperial state had physical difficulties in penetrating villages, the state during the Republican era (1912-1949) took advantage of modern improvements to reach local society. The efforts to build a strong and modern state greatly transformed rural areas, and the state began to penetrate local society more deeply and moved toward bureaucratization, rationalization, and administrative extension (Duara 1988).

In fact, in the early period of the Republic, the founding leader Sun Yat-sen recognized the importance of local self-government,[1] maintaining that constitutional government must be built from the bottom up. According to him, democracy needs to be instituted at the county level. Only when all the counties within a province were practicing democratic self-government did that province become democratically self-governing. And then, a democratic nation becomes possible. However, for Sun, democracy and local self-government are not independent values, but prerequisites to the supreme goal of national integration and strength (Kuhn 1975, 283).

Under the aim of state strengthening, the late imperial and early republican governments launched some programs of local self-government. As a slogan, local self-government (*difang zizhi*) was supposed to mobilize popular participation in local government, creating a politically educated citizenry for the nation-state in order to strengthen it against imperialism (Wakerman, Jr. 1975, 24). But in practice, the movement of local self-government led to the rising of "local bullies and evil gentry" (*tuhao lieshen*), because the programs formalized and bureaucratized the power of local leaders without effective check (Kuhn 1975, 288-295).

Since the late Qing, the state had begun to conduct much of its administrative business in local society through a system of entrepreneurial brokerage. Magistrates were able to

[1] According to Kuhn (1975, 270), it was Huang Zunxian (1848-1905), the Cantonese diplomat and foremost Chinese interpreter of Meiji Japan, who introduced the term "self-government" (*zizhi*) to Chinese politics. While serving as judicial commissioner in Hunan during 1897, Huang was associated with Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong in the Changsha-based Southern Study Society (*nanxue hui*).

administer a jurisdiction of roughly 300,000 people by “contracting” out many administrative functions to village leaders, who were granted power to make collections from the people but not subject to strict supervision. These leaders became entrepreneurial brokers (Duara 1988, 42-47). Village office was no longer pursued as a way of expressing leadership aspirations or gaining prestige; rather, men began to seek office for immediate gain, often at the expense of the community interests (Duara 1988, 159). Thus, village leaders began to dissociate their political vocation from the traditional cultural nexus and rearticulate it through more formal administrative arrangements with the state. Those who were most active even extended their influence beyond the village and joined urban elites to hold positions in county-level institutions, such as offices in charge of police, education, and financing (Li 2005, 17).

The process of state strengthening through entrepreneurial brokerage led to what Duara (1988, 73-77) called “state involution,” which means that the state cannot develop systems of bureaucratic responsibility at a rate faster than the entrenchment of the informal apparatus of extraction. The involuntary process in the villages became a vicious cycle: the increased demands of the state led to the proliferation of entrepreneurial brokerage, and this proliferation led to yet higher demands. Under these conditions, traditional village leaders were increasingly replaced by “local bullies,” who pursued office for entrepreneurial gains at the cost of the community interests (Duara 1988, 251).

In the early 1900s, the county administration began to impose various new tasks on village leaders. Formerly, if the land taxes were paid and no criminal case which had be referred to the law courts occurred, the village and the government had little to do with each other. Now, the government wanted the village to implement many new programs and to eliminate many undesirable things. Village leaders, with new authority, were required to be responsible for managing the new schools, constructing roads, and undertaking various projects designed to bring the village within the ambit of the state-led nation-building process (Yang 1945, 186, 244). At the same time, village leaders had to handle the financing of these projects, as well as the tax levies imposed on the village. The state's increasing demands on village leaders to levy taxes and implement policies alienated them from their constituencies and deepened the division between the leaders and peasants (Duara 1988, 218-221).

Thus, the Republican period saw a major increase in the tax burden on the peasantry, as warlords competed with the Kuomintang regime to extract the greatest possible revenue from the countryside. Numerous surcharges were added to the land tax, pressing landlords and owner-cultivators to the point of resistance (Perry 1980, 40). The most hated of the new taxes levied by warlord regimes was "apportioned funds" (*tankuan*). Without reliable registers of taxable land, the warlords simply required villages to pay a certain sum, leaving it to the local headman to "apportion" the payments. This onerous system not only increased peasant burdens but also strengthened the power of village heads and gave them more chances to abuse the power in local society (Kuhn 2002, 101).

The heavy tax burden, abusive collection, and land concentration were partly responsible for peasants' support for the Communist revolution (Bianco 1971).

Shortly after 1927, the Republican government began to model sub-county administration upon the system which Yan Xishan, governor of Shanxi, had been operating in that province since 1917. The system was based on a four-level hierarchy of units below the county: the *lin*, a five-family group; the *lü*, of twenty-five households; above them is the *cun* (village), consisting of several small adjoining settlements; finally, the *qu* (wards), three to six per county. The ward head was really a kind of sub-magistrate, appointed directly by the provincial chief, with purely administrative rather than representative functions. Thus, ward heads, in effect, became the lowest level of regular bureaucratic administration with wide-ranging powers, and the intermediate level between the county and villages was institutionalized (Kuhn 1975, 284-285).

In 1941, Kuomintang enforced the "large township" (*daxiang*) system, consisting of 1000 households, and it was aimed at replacing the administrative functions of the natural village. All village governmental activities were to be centralized at the township level, and the natural village became a subunit governed by a township assistant. The village was no longer empowered to have a budget and to engage in self-defense or crop watching. The setup of township was an important step of the state to penetrate and control local society, which worsened the involuntary effects of state expansion (Duara 1988, 223-225).

The process of state strengthening and penetration into rural society during the Republican era undermined the key features of village organization in imperial China. The establishment of township government and the bureaucratization of village leadership fundamentally changed the political landscape of rural society and the balance of power between the state and society. Instead, the villages became a part of the arena of state strengthening and modernization. Increasingly, the state claimed itself as the source of power of villages, and they were subject to state regulation and manipulation.

At the same time, state strengthening weakened the lineage system significantly. The reorganizing of village governing structure crossed natural boundaries and divisions existing in villages for a long time, which made lineages less important. Village institutionalization resulted in a gradual shift from lineage to settlement as the focal point of rural organization (Perry 1980, 156). Many functions of lineages were taken away by formalized and bureaucratized village offices and township governments, although it was not necessary that the latter performed them better. More importantly, with the weakening of lineage as an intermediary association, villagers became more atomized and subject to entrenching of the state and its agents.

Further, the role of gentry as local leaders declined dramatically in the process of state penetration. In the early 1900s, the abolishment of the imperial examination system severed the tie to the gentry. The formalization of village leaders and the establishment of township governments left little room for the gentry to perform their original functions.

It is necessary to note here that, in the 1920s and 1930s, a group of leading scholars, who were deeply troubled by rural crisis and poverty, launched a movement of rural reconstruction. In their eyes, the peasant problem was the key to China's modernization and cultural revival. The crucial part of the solution was to educate peasants, and the contents of the education included morality, literature, citizenship, public health, and livelihood. The scholars maintained that intellectuals should go to villages and be close to peasants in order to teach and influence them. Thus, they established rural research institutes and peasant schools in some villages to engage in experiments and train peasants. Two well-known institutes (Shangdong Rural Reconstruction Institute and the Chinese Mass Education Association), under the leadership of Liang Shuming and Yan Yangchu (James Y.C. Yen), were set up in Zouping county of Shandong province and Ding county of Hebei province, respectively. These experiments helped promote literacy of peasants, improve their livelihood and public health, and facilitate their cooperation, but the movement of rural reconstruction came to an end in the late 1930s due to the War with Japan and other reasons (Zheng 2000; Alitto 1986).[2]

[2]After 1950, Yan Yangchu, a graduate of Yale, continued his rural reconstruction experiments in other developing societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. His ideas and approach has been promoted by International Institute of Rural Reconstruction he established in Philippines in 1960. See: http://www.iirr.org/.

Village Restructuring under Mao and Rural Transformation after Mao

Although the Communist regime fiercely attacked the Nationalist government from every angle, they did share one goal – building a modern and strong state. In fact, when the Communist Party came to power in 1949, it claimed it was building a "New China." This "New China" was more centralized and autocratic than its predecessor, because it was intended to be an omnipotent and tutelary state. The tutelary power was much like what Tocqueville ([1840] 1990, 318) well articulated,

> "That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks on the contrary to keep them in perpetual childhood; it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided that they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for them security, foresees and supplies their necessity, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property and subdivides their inheritance: what remains but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?"

Following some Marxist doctrines, Mao was prepared to utilize such a state to reshape the whole society and the minds of the people. But his attempt to transform China was

based on utopia and force rather than "reflection and choice" (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay [1788] 1961, 33). During his rule of about three decades, Mao launched a series of mass campaigns to transform villages and rural society, which led to one disaster after another. Although Chinese peasants helped him defeat Kiang Kai-shek and Kuomintang, Mao showed no sympathy for them.

Soon after Mao came to power, he and the Communist regime tightened control over villages and peasants. In order to make the control easier, Mao reorganized rural communities by establishing "administrative villages" (*xingzheng cun*) across the boundaries of natural villages, which is still practiced today. The goal of the reorganization was for consolidation, concentration, and penetration, and did not take into account historical and traditional boundaries of natural villages and their common interests. In some rural areas, one administrative village consists of several natural villages. Even though these natural villages share no common interests or have no relationship with one another, they are organized as one governing unit. Thus, since there was no mechanism to balance the power among the natural villages as lineages did in imperial China, village leaders had few incentives to take into account the interests of some natural villages if they did not come from them. Inevitably, the people in these natural villages suffered, which led to many conflicts between natural villages.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Mao began to collectivize farming and rural life, and launched many movements, including the notorious Great Leap Forward. The agricultural radicalism and collectivization profoundly transformed village organization and decision

making over farming (Zweig 1989; Yang 1996; Unger 2002). Hundreds of thousands of communes were organized in rural areas, and villages and peasants were forced to join the communes. Villages were organized as brigades, and each brigade included several production teams. All productive assets, including land, draft animals, tools, and labor, and everyday life were collectivized. Peasants had no choice but contributed labor, and communes and brigades made all of decisions over farming, allocation of grain, and other village affairs. The collective system was designed to gather the produce of peasants more firmly than ever into the hands of the communist state (Kuhn 2002, 110). Such kind of collectivization and centralization led to a tragic famine and paved "the road to serfdom" (Hayek 1944). It was estimated that about 20 or even 30 million of people died of the famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s following the Great Leap Forward (Becker 1996).

At the same time, the Communist party-state went further to penetrate villages by setting up a Party branch in each administrative village or brigade, which is still the case at present. The Party branch became the governing body in villages, with the Party Secretary at the top and having the final say. For the first time in Chinese history, party penetration of villages was institutionalized. The Party branch replaced traditional village leaders including gentry and lineage heads, and all governing power was centralized in the hands of the Party Secretary, who was usually appointed directly or approved by township officials. The ultimate decision maker over village affairs, the Party Secretary also identified with the interests of the party-state rather than village interests, even though he or she was usually the native villager. Unlike the traditional village leaders as

the representative of community interests, the Party Secretary was, in effect, the agent of the Communist state. Following the order and directives of township government, the Party branch in villages, in fact, became one level of the hierarchical bureaucracy, although they were not part of the formal government in theory and not paid by the state. The Party Secretary and other branch members did enjoy various advantages that enriched them. By establishing the Party branches in villages, the penetration of the Communist state into rural society was unprecedented.

When reorganizing villages and institutionalizing the Party branches in rural communities, the Communist regime disorganized lineage associations and dismissed traditional village leaders by taking over lineage property and prohibiting lineage activities, customs, and rituals. In Xin village of this study, lineage members had to hide two huge stone lions as lineage property in a lake in order to protect them. The confiscation of lineage property, such as land and temples, was a terrible blow to lineage organizations. At the same time, lineage was criticized as "feudal reminiscent" in Mao's mass movements.

Ideologically, the Communist regime penetrated villages through class stigmatization and "class struggle." Villagers were classified as different classes according to their property and status under the former regime, such as landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, and poor peasants. Poor peasants ranked the highest in terms of their political status in the scheme. Under the regime which became "a form of latent civil war between the government and the people" (Djilas 1957, 87), Mao let poor and middle peasants struggle against rich ones and landlords who were regarded as "exploiters." Thus, the rich

peasants and landlords became the underdog, and were not allowed to participate in village public affairs. Such kind of class stigmatization strengthened inequality among villagers and cut communities apart (Kuhn 2002, 133).

The party-state under Mao penetrated into every village and even every peasant household, and almost every aspect of rural life was under the firm control of the regime. Where the imperial state claimed only the power to tax and to maintain order, the party-state asserted its right to restructure the society (Huang 1990, 321). Under Mao, villages were profoundly reshaped, and peasants suffered poverty and hunger. Reforms were much needed to make rural life bearable and prosperous.

In the late 1970s, with Mao's death and the demise of the Cultural Revolution, rural reforms were under way. Struck by poverty and hunger, a group of peasants in poor Anhui province pioneered family farming by allocating their collective land to each household. The success of the experiment led its spread to other villages and rural areas soon with the support of some Party leaders. In the early 1980s, the collectivized farming system was dismantled, and the "household responsibility system" was established throughout rural China. The dissolution of collective farming significantly undermined the economic control of the Communist state over villages, and individual households took back their decision-making power over farming, although land is still collectively owned by villages. The "household responsibility system," to a large degree, weakened the centralized power of the Party Secretary in villages.

With the collapse of collective farming, the brigades as village governing organizations no longer worked. Thus, some peasants in Guangxi began to organize Villagers' Committees as village governing bodies to provide public goods, such as defense and fire control, in the early 1980s. Later, many villages in other regions followed them to establish such Committees. Some of them selected the members of the Committee by election. When the post-Mao government recognized that elections might be an effective way to mitigate the tensions between peasants and village leaders, it sanctioned or partly supported village elections. In 1987, the government passed the Organic Law on Villagers' Committee (experimental), and the organization and village elections became legitimatized. In 1998, the Law was revised and promulgated again.

With the introduction of village elections, members of Villagers' Committee began to challenge the power of the Party Secretary in some communities, since they felt that they had greater legitimacy to make decisions over village affairs. Thus, the power of the Party Secretary was undermined or even threatened in the villages. Although there were many problems with village elections, they opened the possibilities for peasants to make their own choices on the governing mode of villages (Manion 1996; Li and O'Brien 1999; O'Brien and Li 2000; O'Brien 2001). At the same time, lineage organizations have been reviving in many villages, especially in southern China (Wang 1997). Lineages not only began to provide some public services for members and facilitate the opening of rural enterprises, but also began to limit or even challenge the power of formal village leaders, especially the Party Secretary.

Thus, with the loosening of party-state control in post-Mao China, villages have been becoming more and more diverse in terms of their institutional structure. Although Party Secretaries still play a dominant role in making decisions over public affairs in some villages, their power has been decreasing in many others. In some communities, Villagers' Committees have been beginning to play some role in public affairs, while, in others, lineages have been making efforts to share decision-making power with cadres. In still others, some or many villagers have chances to participate in decision making through public meetings or other means. These developments indicate that villages have been moving in different directions in post-Mao China, and their structures vary much.

Conclusion

The brief historical account discusses how villages were organized and governed and the relationships between rural society and the state under different regimes. It reveals that the role of lineages and informal leaders such as gentry in village organization and governance has been decreasing throughout the history until recently, and the penetration of the state into rural society has been becoming increasingly deep before the rural reforms in post-Mao China.

In imperial China, lineages and gentry were crucial for village organization and governance, and they played the leading role in providing public goods and services in

local communities. But this does not imply that the imperial authorities did not exert control over the rural society, although their influence was relatively limited. Further, rural communities were far from self-governing in imperial era, since their structures were basically hierarchical and commoners had few opportunities to make decisions over public affairs. During the Republican era, with the state building and strengthening, lineage organizations declined in rural society. Bureaucratic administration reached below county level and penetrated into villages. Mao's China witnessed the unprecedented control over peasants and rural society through agricultural collectivization and the commune system. Party Secretaries became the ultimate decision makers over public affairs in villages under the party-state regime. Nevertheless, post-Mao reforms have been changing the political landscape in rural China, and the state control over villages has been loosening. The role of Party Secretaries has been declining in rural society, and villages have been moving toward different directions.

The historical analysis indicates that there are changes and continuities in village organization and governance. The ebb and flow of lineages is a good example to demonstrate such changes and continuities. In imperial era, lineages were crucial for village organization and governance, but their importance, with the state strengthening process, declined during the republican period. In Mao's China, the lineages were under fierce attacks and thus almost disappeared in rural society. During the post-Mao era, however, lineages have been reviving in many rural areas, especially in southern China.

Furthermore, as we have seen, although villages were structured in a similar way during Mao's era, they are much more diverse in today's China due to the loosening control of the communist regime. It is true that some villages are still dominated by Party Secretaries, but many others are moving toward more open decision making structures. In some communities, lineages have been reviving and playing a more important role in public affairs, and in others, many villagers have the opportunity to participate in decision making in one way or another. The diversity in village structures provides me a good opportunity to examine how they influence governance performance in terms of providing public goods and services.

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