CHU VILLAGE UNDER DEMOCRATIZATION: GUANXI, GOVERNANCE AND INEQUALITY IN A POST-SOCIALIST CHINESE VILLAGE

Haijing Dai

This article inquires grassroots state-society interaction in contemporary rural China that is experiencing political democratization and the emerging open market, by understanding the guanxi-based governance in Chu Village. I have found that the villagers, stratified into different economic groups in the reforms, have developed three different patterns of guanxi with the village Party secretary embodying the local state: the Network of Mutual Respect, the Network of Inter-Dependency, and the Distant Network. The Party secretary takes on distinctive roles in each pattern to maintain and utilise the guanxi, through which the structural inequality in the village is reinforced and the Party-state’s goal of social stability is delicately achieved. Encountering the changing conditions of post-socialism, guanxi, in its heterogeneous patterns of practices, continues its prominent role in village politics and contributes to the increasingly visible stratification and classification among villagers. The reasons for the continuity and the transformation are demonstrated and discussed.

Key Words: State-Society Interaction, Guanxi, Clientelism, Post-Socialism, Political Reform, Inequality, Rural China

Received 3 August 2009. Revised 30 November 2009. Accepted 17 March 2010.

Chinese and foreign scholars have long noticed the centrality of personal networks, or guanxi, in Chinese life, historically and in modern times [M. Yang, 1994; Yan 1996; Ong, 1997; Gold, Guthrie and Wank, 2002]. In the field of political governance, regarding grassroots state-society interaction in socialist China, the guanxi between state officials/cadres and societal members are often emphasised as a crucial factor. A clientelist political order, in which officials and cadres (patrons) allocate material goods and career opportunities to societal members

1 School of Social Work. University of Michigan (United States), hdai@umich.edu

Correspondence to: Haijing Dai, Assistant Professor. Department of Social Work Room 401, T.C. Cheng Building United College. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Shatin, N.T. Hong Kong.

Number 1 (2010) 85
In the post-socialist era, Chinese villages have been experiencing political reforms for two decades. Following the emergence of a national market economy, the more recent political reform in rural China grants villagers the right to directly elect village governmental heads and allows local governments to design their own democratization policies [O’Brien, 1994, 2001; Kelliher, 1997]. However earth-shaking the reform may sound, according to the Organic Law of China, prevention of village unrest and promotion of social stability, instead of democratising the political structure of the country, remain the uttermost important state goal of the reform policies [Oi, 1996; Horseley, 2001; Levy, 2006].

What has the political reform, combined with the not-fully-fledged market economy, brought to the cadre-vilager guanxi and the patron-client politics? How may the democratization policies affect state governance and social stability in Chinese villages? Scholars claim that social stratification of villagers in economic reforms [Latham, 1985; O’Brien, 1994], their direct contact with the risky market [Nee, 1996; Oi, 1999], and their participation in democratic elections [Kelliher, 1997; Kennedy, 2002; Manion, 1996] may change the networks of power between cadres and villagers, and thus influence the clientelist political order in rural China. But few studies to date have systematically examined how that is happening.

The study, based on my 7-month fieldwork of participant observation and in-depth interviews in 2006 and 2007, argues that under the post-socialist reforms, the villagers in Chu Village are stratified into different economic groups, and have developed three different patterns of networks (guanxi) with the village Party secretary representing the local state: the Network of Mutual Respect, the Network of Inter-dependency, and the Distant Network. The Party secretary, Wang Mei, takes on three distinctive roles in each pattern – respectively, Lao Wang (Elder Wang), Da Saozi (Elder Sister-In-Law), and Wang Shuji (Secretary Wang) – and interacts with the villagers differently in the networks. It is not guaranteed that the Party secretary can always fully fulfill the wills of the local state in her exercise of control through these networks, yet on the condition that she well maintains and utilises the three different patterns, social stability is delicately constructed in the village while the structural inequality among the villagers is reinforced.

I argue in this article that in Chu Village, where various contradicting elements (e.g. open elections and Party control) co-exist in the political structure, social relations are patterned and regulated not by a unified clientelist model between the villagers and the state cadre, but by their diversified practices of networking – clientelist or not. Although the post-socialist conditions have complicated the
patron-client model of state-society interaction in Chinese villages, guanxi continues its prominent role in rural political order. Connecting the field observations to theories of social network and guanxi scholarship in contemporary China, I explore the continuity and the transformation of guanxi in village politics, and demonstrate how attention to personal networks in rural governance may produce promising understanding of grassroots state-society relationship, meaning and practice of democracy after the political reform, and structural inequality that is increasingly visible in the post-socialist Chinese society.

1. Guanxi in Rural Governance

The communist Party-state is reputed as among the most stable and the most thoroughly organised of all the varieties of modern authoritarianism, with its control extended to the slightest detail of the everyday lives of its societal members [Shanin, 1990; Borkenau, 1971; Smith, 1976; Bauman, 1979]. Meanwhile, it is interestingly noticed that, instead of primarily exercising its control at the local level via coercion, the formal, impersonal and authoritative Party-state often relies on personal ties and informal bonds between cadres and societal members for implementation of policies and regulation of individual behaviors [Rigby, 1979; Nathan, 1973; Willerton, 1979; Baker, 1982; Pye, 1981]. In socialist China for instance, in urban factories [Walder, 1986] and rural villages [Unger, 1989; Oi, 1985], from the Great Famine [D. Yang, 1996] to the Cultural Revolution [Yan, 2003], particularistic and subjective networks of clientelism, trespassing the public-private boundary and sometimes carrying commitments to either the communist ideology or the leader Chairman Mao, were a major means for cadres to discipline clients and realise the wills of the Party-state at the grassroots level and for societal members to maneuver around state regulations and affect the effectiveness of local state control. Guanxi, according to these influential studies, provides a critical perspective for the understanding of grassroots governance, in the clash between the Chinese ‘relation-based’ (guanxi benwei) society [Liang, 1949; Fei, 1992; King, 1985] and the modern authoritative state.

Why guanxi is significant in the Chinese political and economic life remains an intriguing question for scholars and the literature to date can be broken down into two perspectives, which often get involved in heated debates [M. Yang, 2002; Gold, Guthrie and Wank, 2002]. On one side sit those who see guanxi as an essential element of Chinese culture, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the Chinese psyche [M. Yang, 1994; Pye, 1968; Solomon, 1971]; on the other side are the scholars who see guanxi as a response to specific institutional and historical conditions that happen to exist in China. The researchers in the latter group pick out the structural and institutional elements that they believe produce the
emergence of guanxi politics and economy, including unguaranteed subsistence [Burns, 1981], weakness in formal channels of state-individual communication [Oi, 1985], structural dependence on enterprise, management, and superiors for opportunities and material resources [Walder, 1986], and lack of rational legal system [Guthrie, 1998], and argue that when those conditions change, guanxi is likely to decline and be uprooted.

The paper contributes to the debate suggesting that the enduring guanxi-based village governance in post-socialist rural China is for both cultural and structural/institutional reasons, and neither side of the literature may alone fully explain the phenomenon. It is absolutely true that the market economy, especially in the eyes of the villagers of Chu Village, is still heavily state influenced and the administrations could be arbitrary or even despotic, and these conditions do shape the villagers’ reliance on the village cadre to survive in the new political-economy. Meanwhile, although the formal and legal channels to communicate with the state appear in rural China during the political reforms, the villagers do not regard them as ideal ways to solve their problems. They voluntarily choose to avoid encountering the legal system and the law enforcement, often not because they had bad experiences, but that they see it more appropriate and reliable for the village cadre to represent their interest just as before. In Brantly Womack’s [2006] term, it is the ‘expectation of continuity’, and using the analysis of Ann Swidler [2001], guanxi is in the cultural ‘tool-kit’ of the villagers and would be taken out to use whenever they feel necessary. The pervasiveness of guanxi in village governance and politics, as the paper demonstrates, cannot be simply attributed to either cultural tradition or institutional causes; instead, it needs to be understood in the everyday practices and interactions of the villagers embedded in the specific historical and social contexts. The ethnographic account of the politics in Chu Village provides reflections on the arguments of the two sides of the guanxi debate and how we may benefit most from the current literature.

2. Guanxi and Democracy

The political reform of democratization in rural China is a social experiment that has aroused the world’s attention and interest. Much ink has been spilt to uncover the origins, the controversial procedures, the conflictive implementations, and the multi-layered potential social impacts of village direct elections and self government [O’Brien, 1994; Kelliher, 1997; Horseley, 2001; Shi, 1999; Pastor and Tan, 2000; White, 1998; Levy, 2007; Li and O’Brien, 1999; Li, 2007; Unger, 1989]. The variables the scholars used to measure the implementation consequences of the reform policies range from the participation rates on the electorate side [O’Brien, 1994; White, 1998] to the design of candidate nomination procedures
and state influence on the rural government side [Manion, 1996]. The research portrays the villagers as largely ready for democratic participation while their capacity of social change is limited by the controlling attempts of the Party-government and powerful actors in the market. Whether villagers truly enjoy the opportunity to freely elect the cadres that satisfy them becomes questionable under such influences and it is important to differentiate the ‘real’ and the ‘cosmetic’ face of grassroots democracy in rural China [Kennedy, 2002].

The paper argues for more space for the agency of the villagers in accepting, involving in, and manipulating the political reform and democracy. The practices of guanxi in Chu Village absorb the contents of the reform policies; and votes, as well as democratic participation, are perceived and adopted by many of the villagers as a new basis to establish ties with the village Party secretary. It is in the refreshed net of guanxi in the village that we may fully understand the meaning of democracy to the villagers, and their concerns, gains, and costs in the participation in the political reform. The complication in the outcomes of the democratization policies for the villagers, which is missing from the current scholarship, raises the doubt if it is valid or necessary to analyze the grassroots democracy in rural China by the dichotomous categories like real vs. pseudo, and calls for attention to the more vague zone in-between where the villagers and the cadre of Chu Village practice guanxi and produce the local meaning of democratic participation.

3. Guanxi and Inequality

The connection between the guanxi literature and Bourdieu’s concept of social capital [1984, 1985] emphasises power and inequality indicated in the practices of guanxi [Smart, 1993]. The popular business-focused study of guanxi often operationalises the inequality in social capital as whether one is in or out of a particular connection [e.g. Guthrie, 1999] or how many strong ties one has in a system [e.g. Bian, 1994]. The paper suggests that such measures, due to their simplicity, fail to describe the full meaning of inequality that guanxi practices demonstrate. In Chu Village, every villager has a tie with the Party secretary and the social stratification is not about the number of connections, but the heterogeneous contents of the ties and the multi-facets of networking practices of the villagers in different social-economic statuses.

Social inequality in contemporary China has become too prominent to miss in observation. In Chu Village, the families of the successful entrepreneurs live in two-story houses guarded by heavy metal gates with ornamental engraving while a farmer’s family of four could be cramming in a shabby hut with no room separation. Researchers have studied variables such as income disparity, Party
membership, job inequality, and social mobility in China [for reviews, see Walder, 1995; Bian, Shu, and Logan, 2001; Bian, 2002], yet beyond the entangling general pictures, it remains crucial to scrutinise how inequality is understood, how the meaning of stratification is produced, and how the status structure is reinforced in the everyday life of the individuals, like the guanxi practices in Chu Village. The status of a villager, as shown in the paper, shapes the contents of the network the villager has with the Party secretary, and in return, the guanxi practices between the cadre and the villagers reproduce the structural inequality among the residents of the village. The study deals with inequality in Chu Village not merely as a given fact but working mechanisms open to analysis and interpretation.

4. Research on Chu Village under Reform

I went to Q County in Hebei Province in north China in May 2006 to attend a discussion meeting of political reforms in rural China, where I first met Wang Mei, the Party secretary of Chu Village. Although not fully understanding my project, she kindly accepted my request for fieldwork and took me to stay at her home after the meeting. During my residence in the area in 2006 and 2007², I participated in village social lives and administrations. I helped Wang Mei with document preparation and note-taking as a secretary, and therefore had access to all the meetings held by the village Party-government. Meanwhile, I worked as a part-time English teacher at the W Township Elementary School located in Chu Village and was invited to various social events of the villagers, from wedding to funeral, from public holiday celebration to private family dinner. Using snow-ball sampling, I interviewed 47 individuals including county officials, township cadres, and villagers in different social groups.

Chu Village lies along a national route connecting the north-east and the south-east China, and is close to the county town of Q County, as well as several major cities in north China. It has a population of 1,246 in 321 households, 90% of whom have the family name Chu. Only about 10% of the households (32) still take

² Staying at the home of the village Party secretary surely affected the villagers’ perception of my role and position and the data I could gather during the fieldwork, yet I took it as my angle to enter the community. At the beginning, the villagers did inquire my connections with the secretary and I could sense that they took caution when talking to me. But as time passed and I still stayed in their sights, they gradually accepted me as a member of the small community and many households regard me as a good friend. I would not claim that there is no bias in my data, but I feel confident to appropriately interpret and analyze the interviews and the field notes.
traditional agricultural farming (mainly growing grain products like wheat, corn, and sweet potatoes) and small-scaled poultry-and-livestock-raising as their main occupation; eight poultry-raising specialty households in the village collaboratively own three large chicken farms; and more than 85% of the villagers are now in the business of long-distance truck transportation. These business households lease their land to others and are no longer participants in agricultural labour.

Direct open-sea election of the village governmental head – the director of villagers’ committee (DVC) – has been held in Chu Village every three years since mid-1990s. Chu Fu, the current DVC, has won all the elections dated back to 2000. In 2002, Q County decided to adopt the system of Villagers Representatives Assembly (VRA) to further democratise village politics. Every 10 to 15 neighboring households in a village should elect a villagers’ representative, who then form the VRA. The VRA is defined as the most powerful organisation in the village, which has the right to make decisions for village development and supervise village cadres. The village Party secretary is required to first become a villagers’ representative and then win the chair election in the VRA; otherwise, the secretary should be removed from the position and the township Party branch will consider other appropriate candidates in the village. This policy introduces competition to the village Party organisation, but on the other hand, reinforces the legitimacy of the village Party secretary via the person’s democratic leadership in the VRA.

For Wang Mei, who has been the Party secretary of Chu Village for two decades, the effect of the reform focuses on the latter. She won the VRA chair election in both 2003 and 2006, and is unanimously regarded as the cadre representing the Party-state in the village. Chu Fu, the DVC, thinks he and the members of the villagers’ committee are ‘doers’ in the village government while Wang Mei is the ‘decision-maker’ and ‘leader’.

‘Let’s take the example of building a road,’ he said in an interview. ‘We only know how to use the money and labour to complete the project, but the secretary knows when we can start the job, where we can get funding, how we should ask the township and the county for money, etc. None of us can do that... We are the common villagers, but she is in the state cadre system and knows the upper-level...’

---

3 Open-sea elections (Haixuan): In an open-sea election, any person or group at the mass assembly held before the election can nominate a candidate, and all nominated candidates have the same opportunity to compete for the position.
Many villagers would echo his point that the DVC coming from the direct election is a capable member of the mass (laobaixing), but the Party secretary well connected with the above is an official (guan) who delivers national policies and directs the development of Chu Village.

‘You see, whenever the officials from the township and the county come, the Party secretary would accompany them. She is in their system and knows how to talk with them, even though she is very poorly educated. The other villagers just don’t know how to do that.’ A school-teacher at the township elementary school told me.

5. State Cadre in Guanxi

The Party secretary of Chu Village, Wang Mei, is in her mid-fifties, big and tall. Shortly after getting married to Chu Da in Chu Village, she started her political career in the village as the Director of the Village Women’s Federation and was selected to be the Party secretary in 1987. Wang Mei has a private office in the village, the walls of which are covered with award certificates: Excellent Party Cadre, Excellent Political Leader in Rural China, Top Ten Village Party Secretaries in Q County, etc. She looks young and energetic, with her dyed black hair and loud voice, compared with the other village women at her age. Although she received merely two years of formal education, she is articulate with her mind up-to-date.

‘It is hard to be a village cadre these days. Everything has to be about market, freedom, and democracy. It is not like before when you could just demand villagers to do things and they would listen... The above wants things to be done, but without causing any conflicts. On the one hand sit the tasks from the upper-level and on the other hand the support from the mass – isn’t that hard? ... You now have to develop networks and good relationships with the villagers to fulfill the goal – village politics here is all about guanxi!’

Wang Mei knows everyone in the village in person. I often walked with her on the main village road and saw her keep greeting everybody passing by, men and women, old and young. A Chinese village, as scholars pointed out [Oi, 1989; Rosenbaum, 1992; Kipnis, 1997], is both a state unit in the bureaucratic system and a society embedded in various networks. Wang Mei, the village cadre representing the local Party-state, has to maneuver different guanxi patterns and exercise state power through them.
6. **Lao Wang (Elder Wang): The Network of Mutual Respect**

In the developing market economy of China, some villagers catch opportunities and swiftly become the economic elites. In Chu Village, Chu Hai is such a legendary character. In his mid-forties, Chu Hai owns a large truck-transportation company with more than 20 trucks and 59 drivers. He completed high school in 1981, which was very unusual for people in rural China back then, and became a Chinese teacher at the township middle school. In the early 90s, he decided to quit the job and started his own business. With his connections in the township, the county, and the cities, he gradually accumulated wealth and became a ‘big boss’ in the village.

After purchasing an apartment in a city nearby through his friend in the Housing Bureau of that city, Chu Hai has moved the household registrations (*hukou*) of all his family members to the city and made them non-agricultural. The family keeps living in Chu Village only because there is enough parking space here for his trucks. ‘Officially, he is not registered under this village,’ Wang Mei told me. ‘He does not need to count on me for anything. We are friends and I respect him.’

Chu Hai views himself as a village intellectual and often talks about village politics with sarcasm and contempt. He refused to submit an application for Party membership when Wang Mei asked him to in the 90s, and again refused to be a villagers’ representative in 2003 when his neighbors voted for him. ‘Politics are dirty, especially in rural China where people are poorly educated and in low quality (*su zhì cha*),’ he told me. ‘I will never be a participant in such things.’ Wang Mei however does not feel offended at all by his remarks as she understands that ‘he is so educated that other villagers cannot communicate well with him — and he is a very busy businessman who could not afford the time to attend all those meetings.’ Yet still, Chu Hai regards high of Wang Mei:

‘*Lao Wang* is a very capable person that administers the village well. It is not an easy job... She has little education but knows how to deal with people. You can see, she is well respected in the village and I, too, respect her as an elderly and a friend.’

Gifts, as researchers have uncovered [Mauss, 1990; Kipnis, 1997], are indicators of various types of interpersonal relationships. Gift exchange that takes place in everyday life, not necessarily on festivals or special occasions, usually shows a mutual sense of respect and friendship in rural China [Yan, 1996]. Wang Mei’s nephew, who holds a job in a cigarette factory, one day brought her ten packets of Korean cigarettes that are not available in the Chinese market from his business trip to Seoul. Wang Mei took four of them out upon receiving the cigarettes and told her husband, who is a heavy smoker, ‘We probably should give them to Chu Hai. He always shares with us when he gets something fancy.’ Chu Da,
the husband, nodded and agreed that Wang Mei should pay a visit to Chu Hai’s house and take the cigarettes to him after dinner.

Their close friendship filled with respect is also embedded in their life routines. After dinner on summer evenings, Wang Mei and Chu Da often go to Chu Hai’s front yard and sit with his family there to *chengliang*. For hours, they share the latest news in each other’s family and gossip about going-ons in Chu Village. In the summer of 2006, a major topic was the daughter of Wang Mei and Chu Da working in the county town, who was considering a divorce. Chu Hai comforted the couple, who was very upset, that in large cities divorce is no longer a stigma and persuaded them to support their daughter’s decision if she felt happy that way. Their daughter got divorced in August 2006 and was re-married to another divorcée in January 2007. The new son-in-law, as Wang Mei put it, is much better a person than the ex one, and she was grateful to Chu Hai’s advice. She gave Chu Hai a photo of the newly-weds that was taken during their honey-moon trip to Beijing on the Chinese New Year. Chu Hai put it on the wall of his living room, together with his own family pictures, just like Wang Mei who has a photo of Chu Hai’s family in her family album.

And when Chu Hai’s eldest daughter comes home from her university every summer, he takes her to Wang Mei’s house on the first afternoon of her arrival to say Hi. The family would go to a restaurant to have the ‘welcome dinner’ in the evening, and Wang Mei and Chu Da are always the only invited guests they have at the table. Chu Hai’s children would call Wang Mei ‘auntie’ while their parents call her ‘Lao Wang’ at the happy reunion.

Although Chu Hai retrieves himself from village politics, his fellow villagers, knowing about his connections with the local officials, often come to him asking for help with career development. As Oi [1989] once predicted, Chu Hai is one of those village elites, who could become patrons of villagers in an emerging ‘multi-patron’ system. However, instead of offering patronage to become an alternative leader in Chu Village, Chu Hai helps the other villagers to show his respect to Wang Mei.

One afternoon I was using Chu Hai’s computer to check my emails when a not-very-close villager, Chu Fa, together with his 18-year-old daughter, visited the house. They brought with them a big basket of fresh fruits and two bottles of quite expensive white wine. Chu Fa’s daughter was about to graduate high school but had no intention to continue her education in college. She neither wished to

---

4 *Chengliang*: Literally means to enjoy the coolness of summer evenings. It is a common social activity in China, during which people chat and play games together.
become an agricultural labour and farm on the family lands. Chu Fa then came to Chu Hai to see if it would be possible for her to get a job in the county kindergarten, the director of which is a close friend of Chu Hai. After getting to know the girl a little bit, Chu Hai agreed to call the director the following day and make the request. Thanking him for millions of times, the father and the daughter walked to the front door and were about to leave. ‘Just a minute,’ Chu Hai said. ‘Don’t forget to tell the Party secretary that you get a job through me. You know, I am doing this looking at Lao Wang’s face.’ Seeing that I was quite surprised at his remarks, Chu Hai explained to me after Chu Fa left, ‘I do not want Lao Wang to think that I am growing some separate power independent from the village government. She always gives my family a lot of “face” and I need to behave respectfully.’

The network of mutual respect between the village Party secretary and the village elite, based on friendship and inter-personal guanxi moralities, is non-instrumental and fairly stable. The content of this pattern stays private. Living in this network with the state cadre, the village elite excludes himself from the political sphere of the village and is satisfied with and proud of the exclusion.

7. Da Saozi (Elder Sister-in-Law): The Network of Inter-Dependency

During the economic reform, many villagers in China actively participate in the emerging market and are constantly faced with the accompanying high risks. Lack of close connections with state officials, they are anxious of the quick changes in the market and the often times arbitrary market administrations. In Chu Village, this group includes the owners of family truck business, truck drivers, as well as the poultry-raising specialty households who have large chicken farms. Unlike Chu Hai, they cannot alone cope with the uncertainty and risks of the state-influenced and not-fully-fledged Chinese market economy.

They therefore continue relying on the village Party secretary – their state patron back in the socialist time – for protection. Wang Mei has learned, in her career spanning from the socialist to the post-socialist era as a grassroots Party cadre, to socialise with the local officials, play around market rules and policies, and negotiate with the market administration to assure the interests of the villagers – all of which are rare abilities that the common villagers obviously do not possess. These villagers call Wang Mei ‘Da Saozi’ (Elder Sister-in-Law), a role that in a Chinese family offers deep care and protection and meanwhile enjoys high authority and respect. The trust-worthy village Party secretary serves as a buffering belt for the villagers’ grievances in their participation in the unpredictable market and soothes their anxiety and unrest.
On the other hand, the villagers in this group are usually people at their prime age, with perspectives, and in relatively good economic conditions. They are members of the village self-government (including Chu Fu, the DVC), members of the VRA, and current and potential members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Wang Mei needs the support of these active village political figures to secure her position and complete the assigned state tasks. She develops a network of inter-dependency with them.

8. The Dependency of the Villagers on the Cadre

8.1. A Bridge to the Market Economy

Using her ability to socialise with officials in the township and the county, Wang Mei makes efforts to build strong connections with the market administrations. As a member of the People’s Congress of Q County and a representative of CCP members in the county, she is often invited to conferences and banquets with local officials. On those occasions, she introduces herself to the upper-level cadres in various departments, jokes with them at dinner tables, and drinks and smokes together with them. She pays particular attention to officials whose jobs are closely related to the businesses of the villagers – those in the Department of Traffic Administration and the Office of Hygiene and Safety of Poultry-and-Livestock-Raising for two examples. On important holidays, such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Day, and special occasions, such as the weddings of the officials’ children and the funerals of their parents, she visits them representing Chu Village, with cash gifts or expensive presents. Although the related business households in the village always share the costs of the gifts, Wang Mei makes these trips alone, in heavy storms, under the burning summer sunshine, and on weekends. Year after year, she amazingly knows every highway patrol officer in the county in person, who are always ready to offer her favors, just for one example. These connections enable her to become a safe bridge between the business villager households and the outside market economy.

Routine procedures of market administration in contemporary China could be very tricky, with the annual county inspection of chicken farms as one example. On the paper, the regulation defines the distance between two neighboring cage units as so far and the usage of antibiotics in each unit as so little that basically no profiting chicken farm can pass the inspection. Officials can easily write a ticket to the farm owners and shut down their places, but when Wang Mei is present, this would never happen. On the day of the inspection of his chicken farm in 2006, Li Xuecheng came to Wang Mei’s house at 6 am and asked Da Saozi to wait for the group of officials at the farm together with his family. She walked with him to the farm and comforted his anxieties by telling him that she is acquainted with most
of the officials in the group. When the group finally arrived at around 11 am, Wang Mei greeted them warmly and shook hands with every member, as if she were the owner of the farm. The officials quickly walked around the place, filling out the forms in their hands, and asked a few questions, most of which were answered by Wang Mei. Li Xuecheng treated the group in a fine restaurant at noon, as Wang Mei told him beforehand, and thanked the officials for their hard work. A certificate for a clean and safe chicken farm arrived at Li Xuecheng’s house only three days later.

Conflicts with market administrations, no matter how hard the villagers try to avoid them, often take place and they depend on Wang Mei’s help to settle them with satisfying results. Wang Mei carries her cell phone everywhere she goes so that whenever the truck drivers in Chu Village are caught for speeding, over-sized trunk, or over-weighted cargo on the highways in the county, they can find her. She then travels to where they are stopped by the village government’s car and communicates to the patrol officers face-to-face. Every time she comes out of the car, the officers recognise her as an acquaintance and smile to her; every time she says something like ‘look at my face’, they reduce the amount of the ticket, or for a lot of times, let the trucks go free. Wang Mei often has to travel to different spots in the county for four or five times a day, and this job constitutes the major part of her daily duty as a village Party secretary.

‘Those officers randomly stop trucks to complete their daily quota of fines,’ she once told me. ‘So they can let drivers with connections go and get the un-connected ones. But you know, I can only help them when they are in this county – outside of it, they are the un-connected ones.’

Conflicts with other interest parties, including contract competition, traffic accidents, disagreement on contract items, etc., are another part of the market risks. Faced with such troubles, the villagers count on their well-connected Party secretary to bring favorable settlement decisions from state officials in charge. Chu Xiu’s truck hit an elderly pedestrian in the county town in 2006 and he agreed to pay for all the medical costs plus cash compensation. He wanted to get the negotiation over the amount of compensation done fast, but the victim’s family kept the victim in a hospital receiving all sorts of medical examinations, some of which were extremely expensive and unnecessary. Wang Mei then brought the head of the Office of Traffic Accident under the county’s Department of Traffic Administration to the hospital, who persuaded the victim’s family to stop robbing Chu Xiu with medical costs and come to the negotiation table. It was very effective as the family agreed on the compensation amount merely one week later.
Market information such as valid prediction of commodity price is precious to the business people in Chu Village. Although Wang Mei knows nothing about rules of Economics, from her socialisation with the local state officials, she can get accurate information about the state-influenced market. She had dinner with the head of Q County’s Bureau of Price when she attended the annual conference of Party members’ representatives in the county in July 2006. She heard from him at the table that the price of eggs might go up the next year, and told the owners of the chicken farms in Chu Village once she got back. The farm owners made remarkable profits from this piece of precious information, and adored Wang Mei as their leader to get rich.

8.2. Life Benefits

In the economic reform, village Party secretaries lose their socialist control over allocation of material goods among villagers. In the open market of commodities, as Wang Mei pointed out to me, wealthy villagers can buy better products than what she could afford. However, as before, some benefits still cannot be purchased in the open market yet could be obtained through ties with state officials.

8.3. Urban Household Registration

Children born in Chu Village should be registered as ‘rural’ or ‘agricultural’ in the household registration system, which prevents them from going to the good schools in the county town\footnote{Residents in the county town are registered as ‘urban’ and the schools there only accept students with ‘urban’ household registrations.}. In order to get their children a fair education opportunity, parents in the business households are willing to spend a large amount of money to move the household registrations of their children to the county town and make them ‘urban’ or ‘non-agricultural’. Money alone cannot solve the problem – what is more critical is Wang Mei’s effort to use her connections with the county’s Police Department and its Bureau of Household Registration.

8.4. Birth Permit

Policy of family planning in rural China forbids villagers to have a second child if the first is a boy; and a third child if the first is a girl. This policy is widely hated in villages because most of the villagers need to have more children on whom
they can depend when they get old. An un-allowed child is not entitled to share village farm lands and brings the family a huge fine unless a birth permit is obtained from the upper-level government. With her connections with the Office of Family Planning in the county, it is possible for Wang Mei to persuade the officials there to get around the policy with excuses (e.g. made-up physical defects of the elder children in the family) and grant a birth permit to the villager’s family.

8.5. Career Opportunity

Through the connections of Wang Mei, the local officials and successful entrepreneurs may offer relatively comfortable and stable non-agricultural jobs to the villagers, such as the secretary or receptionist in the enterprises, the cook in the government cafeteria, or the cleaning lady of the state offices. Telephone calls or visits of Wang Mei often can get a nice position for the children of the villagers and change their life trajectories.

Such life benefits are scarce resources in rural China, and for Wang Mei, to obtain them is time and energy consuming and the outcome is never guaranteed. Thus the provision of the benefits from Wang Mei to the villagers in business households is much less universal than her assistance with their survivals in the market. The priorities are given to the members of the VRA, who are her closer partners in village administration. Others either do not make the requests knowing they would cost her too much trouble, or are often turned down with the words that ‘it is not a good time – the state is forbidding this right now – let’s try it next time.’

9. The Dependency of the Cadre on the Villagers

9.1. Votes and Political Support

The VRA of Chu Village consists of 24 members, 21 of whom are in the truck transportation business and 3 of whom are owners of chicken farms. They unanimously elected Wang Mei as the chair of the VRA, and therefore the village Party secretary, in both 2003 and 2006. ‘Who else can occupy the position?’ Chu Fu, the DVC, said in an interview. ‘No one can benefit the village as Da Saozi does.’

---

There is no social security or pension system in rural China. The elderly have to depend on their children completely.
It is also shockingly easy for Wang Mei’s proposals of village development to get approved at the VRA. In July 2006, Wang Mei suggested a new wider road be paved in the village and prepared a detailed proposal, which says that besides the fund from the township, every household, except the ones below the poverty line, should donate 10 RMB, and every adult male should work two hours per week for the project. At the VRA meeting, when she was talking about the road construction plan, the villagers’ representatives sat there quietly, messaging with their cell phones or even taking a short nap. Wang Mei asked people if they had questions or suggestions after her presentation, yet nobody had anything to say. ‘Let’s just do it as Da Saozi said,’ a representative said, and not surprisingly, the proposal got 24 votes. That important meeting concerning the money and labour of every villager took only about 20 minutes. I was curious whether the VRA members slightly cared about how much the road actually costs and how much funding it could get from the township, but Chu Xiu told me on his way back home after the meeting, ‘It is never wrong to listen to Da Saozi. She knows how to get things done. She helps us in every way possible and we need to believe her and support her in return.’

With the support from these villagers, Wang Mei can smoothly carry out her planned administrations of the village, which has earned her the reputation of an outstanding village Party secretary in Q County.

9.2. Implementation of State Policies

The upper-level governments and Party branches evaluate Wang Mei by her ability to implement state policies in Chu Village. In the reform era, enforcing state policies with threat and violence is strictly prohibited for the sake of social stability, which leaves Wang Mei the choice to depend on the support and cooperation of the majority of the villagers to accomplish her assigned state tasks.

Collecting fines from the households that disobey the family planning policy to have un-allowed children could be a nightmare of village cadres. In Chu Village, many households in the business of truck transportation choose to have more children than allowed. The boys in these families usually start driving trucks at an early age to help the family business, but driving trucks, although brings quick cash, is a high-risk job. The often-heard bad news that someone’s son is killed in a road accident compels the parents to give birth to more children to assure that they will have someone around when they get old. However, they never plan to escape the fines. They put the money together when the wife is pregnant with the un-allowed child and voluntarily bring it to Wang Mei. Chu Rong, whose wife was pregnant with their third child in 2007, told me after he paid the fines, ‘I just want
to have some more kids, all right, not to make troubles for Da Saozi… She helps us in business and we help her with her job.’

The members of the VRA not only cooperate themselves, but also pass the state wills from Wang Mei to the villagers that they represent. In 2005, the central government of China decided to start a campaign of ‘New Socialist Countryside’ in rural China to speed up the pace of urbanisation. As defined, in a model new socialist village, all poultry-and-livestock-raising households, meaning households raising more than ten poultry or livestock animals, must move away from the main residential area of the village and form their new neighborhood outside the village centre. During a VRA meeting in May 2006, Wang Mei proposed to have these households in Chu Village moved by December, and besides the state compensation, give them 80 RMB per room in their old houses for moving costs. As usual, the proposal was passed. Li Xuecheng, the chicken farm owner and the representative of many poultry-and-livestock-raising households, said in an interview after the meeting,

‘The compensation is reasonable for my moving, and you know, we should support state policies and Da Saozi… The thing is that now I will have to deliver this VRA decision to the other villagers – some of them only have like ten goats and may not want the troubles of moving… I am going to visit their homes and tell them that this is a democratic decision of the VRA, nothing else I could do.’

The next evening, he visited the house of Liu Ping, who owned 12 goats and had his new house build just in 2005. ‘The purpose of the policy is to beautify our village and it is for our own good… This is a decision of the VRA, which means it is democratic and it is final…’ Li Xuecheng repeated the two points for many times during his two-hour visit to the family. Liu Ping and Li Xuecheng live across the street and the two families get along fairly well. Liu Ping listened carefully and politely promised to consider moving at the end of their conversations. In August 2006, Liu Ping and his wife, after the long consideration, decided to give up their goats in order to keep living in their new house and focus on agricultural farming in future.

‘It is not easy for Xuecheng to do his job. We are friends, you know, and I want to keep it that way… Also, the VRA decides that and I do not want to be an obstacle for the village and an enemy to the majority,’ Liu Ping told me on the day he sold all his goats.

The project of moving out poultry-and-livestock-raising households went smoothly and quickly in Chu Village, which amazed the officials in the township and the county. ‘I depend on the VRA members for this, really,’ Wang Mei
reported to the county Party secretary during a meeting. ‘We all have to count on democracy nowadays.’

10. Public and Private

In her network of inter-dependency with the villagers in business households, Wang Mei, the Da Saozi, while collaborating with them in public village administration and market survival, also enters their private lives as a respected figure. One day, Wang Mei and I walked past the house of Chu Lin, a transportation boss in his sixties, and saw her youngest daughter-in-law washing some vegetables in the yard. Instead of putting the vegetables in a basin, she held them under the water tap and showered them with the running water. Wang Mei walked into the yard towards her at once, turned off the tap, and said to her, ‘What a waste of water! You need to get a basin.’ The daughter-in-law with a sorry smile apologized for not being thrifty, and fetched a basin. Hearing the conversations, Chu Lin came out of the house and thanked the Da Saozi for educating the young. ‘There is so much you should learn from her,’ he said to the daughter-in-law. ‘She is a master of life.’ All of them laughed.

11. Wang Shuji (Secretary Wang): The Distant Network

The last group of the villagers in Chu Village insists on their traditional agricultural life even in the reform and recluses from the market economy. Most of them regard themselves as uncompetitive in the market because of their bad health conditions, poor education, little starting capital, old age, conservative personality, or previous failed attempts; some never think about participating in the market economy disliking the uncertainties of it; and some simply cherish the belief that farmers should not be separated from the lands.

Villagers in this group work hard on their farm lands – their own or leased from the business households. Chu Village is fairly rich in farm lands and every legally registered adult can get two mu (about 0.33 acre), which is quite enough to support oneself for food. They may raise a few poultry or livestock, usually pigs, goats, or hens, mostly for the food of the family and sometimes for extra income. For them, life is simple – they buy seeds for grain plants, fertilisers, and pesticides from the distribution station of agricultural products in the county, practice the traditional farming skills, get enough food from the harvest crops, and sell the extras to the state at the protected price for cash income.

Yet, the simple life does not bring much income to these families, compared with the business households, and some of them are still living below the national poverty line. Their fellow villagers often joke about them, finding it hard to
understand why they are unable to join in some more rewarding businesses and better their lives. Chu Hai, the big boss of truck transportation, once said to me, ‘In this new era, everyone in Chu Village is participating in the truck business, unless there is something wrong with the people, either with the mind or the body.’ Knowing that they can hardly have a voice in village politics, these villagers are lookers-on during the democratic elections of the DVC and villagers’ representatives. ‘Our job is to farm the land, not to meddle with village administration – that is for the more capable people... I never dream about becoming a leader in the villager, or anything alike.’ Liu Shun, a farmer in his forties, who has a lame right leg from an accident, told me.

National reforms are distant to the villagers, and so is the village Party-state. After the central government abolished agricultural taxes and fees in 2005, village cadres nowadays seldom need to even visit these households. In Wang Mei’s words, ‘the cadres do not get things from them, and they do not make special requests to us either. All we need to do is to follow the regular state procedures of administration.’ In her distant network with them, she takes on the role of a commonly nice village Party secretary – Wang Shuji (Secretary Wang). She informs the villagers, usually through the village radio broadcasting, when the Agricultural Department of the county has come to distribute seeds, fertilisers, or pesticides, when specialists from the province have arrived to talk about farming techniques, and when it is time to sell crops to the state. She approves their requests of land-use for house-building as long as the state-defined conditions are precisely met. She also delivers on time social welfare money to the farming households, in particular the villagers living below the poverty line.

She visits the home of Chu En, the eldest Party member in the village, once a year on the evening of July 1st, the official birthday of the CCP. Chu En was a brave soldier during the communist revolution and joined the Party in 1943 when he was in the army. His wife passed away early and their only son, who is unmarried and seriously diabetic, now lives with him. In his 80s, Chu En still has to work in the fields to support his son, whose illness prevents him from the heavy agricultural labour. Every year on July 1st, the county Party branch sends gifts to Party members who joined the CCP before the 1949 liberation, and the village Party branch is required to help Party members living below the poverty line with cash. Chu En is always a recipient of both. On July 1st, 2006, I accompanied Wang Mei to Chu En’s shaky mud hut, with 80RMB from the village and a bottle of vegetable oil, as well as a bag of rice, from the county. Wang Mei left the gifts on the table, put the money in Chu En’s hands, asked about his son’s health, and left in 10 minutes. I stayed there for another hour, which surprised the father and the son, who think that they are so out of the politics of the village that I should never take interest in them. When I asked Chu En if he thought he should be treated better for his revolutionary history, he replied peacefully,
‘Time has changed. We cannot compete in the market and the government can do nothing about that. Wang Shuji is already trying her best to help us in every way she could offer – things could be worse for us if a bad cadre is in her position... The world is not for us anymore – it is for the capable.’

Beyond the regular duties of a village Party secretary, Wang Mei never offers special favors to these villagers. When it comes to implementation of state policies, she strictly follows the defined procedures. For the fines for un-allowed births of children, for instance, she accurately calculates the amount of the fine and sends the bill to the household before the child is born. If they do not meet the deadline of payment, their children just do not get registered in the household system. ‘It is the central state that designs the policy,’ she always tells the villagers. ‘It is not my policy. So please be cooperative.’ Even though some of the households are so poor that they can never gather enough money for the fine, Wang Mei will not offer to get a birth permit for them with her connections, as she sometimes does for the villagers’ representatives.

The villagers in the distant network are blocked from the political sphere of the village. They are absent from the democratic elections and voiceless about village development. The content of this type of network is completely public, including basically state-defined procedural connections. Containing no private ties and little everyday interactions, this network is unstable and could be the soil for overt disgruntlements and potential uprisings.

There was a heavily polluting lumber factory near Chu Village, and after a long negotiation between the factory owner and the village government, it agreed to stop its production line in 2006 and promised to transfer to cleaner industries. One afternoon in June 2007, when Li Huang and his wife were working in their wheat fields, black smoke from the factory came to their faces and covered the fields, full of almost-ready-to-be-harvested wheat, with a dirty fog. Grabbing some wheat in the fields, whose beautiful gold color had been turned into dark grey, they angrily smashed into Wang Mei’s office. ‘Look at what the lumber factory has done!’ Li Huang put the wheat on her desk and cried loudly. ‘Is this place still operating?’ Wang Mei was chatting with some VRA members and they were all astonished to see the couple in such manners. ‘According the agreement, they should have stopped last year,’ Wang Mei explained to them.

‘What agreement do you have with them?’ Li Huang’s wife almost shouted. ‘They are destroying the crops! They must have bribed you, right? How much did you get? If they do not stop today, we are going to the county or even Beijing to get a fair judgment!’
'Don’t ever threaten me with petition to higher authorities (shangfang)!’ Wang Mei raised her voice as well.

‘All right! All right!’ Chu Fu, the DVC, who happened to be in the office, interrupted. ‘Have a seat, Huang, and have some hot water.’

Chu Shan immediately poured some hot water into two cups and handed them to the couple. ‘If the factory breaks the agreement, it is not the fault of Da Saozi, right?’ he said. ‘But we can definitely talk to them and stop their production line.’ Li Xuecheng, a distant relative of Li Huang, patted him on his shoulder and joined in, ‘Brother, looking at my face, please just calm down.’ Li Huang and his wife looked at the VRA members in their faces and became wordless. They sat in the office, drinking water, and eventually got an oral promise from Wang Mei that she would talk to the factory owner and solve the problem in three days. The couple soon left with the grey wheat in hands. Although they were still uncertain whether the polluting smog would cover their fields again, they dropped the plan of petition.

‘Among the VRA members, some are neighbors, some are friends, and some are relatives. We were suddenly opposing to so many acquainted people, but we were alone...’ Li Huang’s wife told me when she was harvesting the wheat in the fields that evening. ‘We realised that if we insisted on petition, life would be very miserable for us in this village... We then decided to harvest more quickly so that the smog does not harm the crops if it comes again tomorrow.’

The unstable distant network between Wang Mei and these farmer villagers can give rise to open conflicts and possible protests. However, when the land reform has separated village families into independent farming units and when the majority of the villagers are patronised by the cadre in the network of interdependency, it is extremely difficult for movement unions to be created in the village. Therefore, the small group of angry rebels is usually desperately isolated with little support yet plenty of disapproval from their fellow villagers. As Kelliher [1992] pointed out, the disappearance of ‘the irony of state socialism’ in post-socialist stratification, which used to unite peasants into a solid class, often undermines the basis of village uprisings in present-day China. In Chu Village, uprisings are usually prevented at the early forming stage in the complicated networks between the villagers and the state cadre.

12. Conclusion

In the paper, I argue that in Chu Village under the post-socialist reforms, the villagers are stratified into three different groups and the Party secretary
embodies the village state interacts with them in three different types of networks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Villager Group</th>
<th>Cadre Role</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>Economic Elites</td>
<td>Lao Wang</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-Dependency</td>
<td>Market Participants</td>
<td>Da Saozi</td>
<td>Public &amp; Private</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Market Recluses</td>
<td>Wang Shuji</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Unstable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Three Types of Cadre-Villager Networks in Chu Village

The role of guanxi practices in village politics has neither faded out in the emerging direct political channels and institutions nor stayed intact without changes. Diminishing state control of materials and opportunities, emerging interdependence of cadres and villagers, and new contents of their exchange (particularly political support) have enriched and transformed the dependent Party-clientelism as the homogeneous pattern of guanxi in grassroots state control in the villages.

Through the personalistic network of mutual respect, the village economic elites achieve the equal status with the village cadre. The network of interdependency is the basis of village governance, as via it, the Party secretary keeps the majority of the villagers under control while mending the instability of the distant network. At the same time, the business households receive generous favors and benefits to their business development and wealth accumulation, which reinforces their ‘middle-class’ economic and social positions. Living in the distant network with the village government, the market recluses are cut off from the local protective umbrella, suppressed in their political voices, and left in deteriorating life conditions. The diversified guanxi practices in Chu Village, in clash with the occurring capitalism, echo the social stratification in the market and contribute to the increasing structural social inequality. Inequality in Chu
Village is not merely numbers in income gap, but mechanisms and experiences that produce the fundamental concepts of class and status with profound moral connotation and political effects.

Democratic institutions (such as the VRA system) and participation are realised in village governance, yet however, the participants adopt them as critical assets to exchange for the cadre’s patronage. The village government keeps its authority using the institutions as the new channels to dismiss discontents, prevent resistance, and suppress organisation of rebellions. The political reform, on the one hand, empowers the villagers participating in the market by enabling them to urge the village Party secretary to defend their interest, but on the other hand, their inter-dependency with the cadre limits their potential ability to resist state power. The agricultural households, voiceless in the new political structure, are silenced and oppressed not only in their guanxi with the village cadre, but also by the market participants – their fellow villagers, who are now the administrative collaborators of the village cadre. The obstacles restricting the true fulfillment of the ideals of democracy in rural China are not as simple as the arbitrary state interventions that put the cosmetic face onto village politics, but the intriguing grassroots mechanisms of guanxi patterns embedded in the state-influenced market economy and the unequal distribution of political power in the post-socialist village.

With this ethnographic account of the state control based on personal networks in Chu Village, I hope also to illuminate why the grievances and sufferings of the rural population in post-socialist China, which seems a daily lived experience of this bottom stratum, do not always leap into ‘rightful resistance’ [O’Brien and Li, 2006] or radical open protests, although there exists increasing consciousness of economic freedom and political rights. The rich contents of the villagers’ guanxi with the most grassroots representatives of the Party-state for a lot of times buffer, sooth, and suppress the discontents, in the everyday interactive practices between villagers and cadres. While recent studies on village governance in China often focus on the dramatic and highly visible elections or popular resistance [e.g. Kennedy, 2007; O’Brien and Li, 2006], as Lily Tsai [2007] claimed, it is important not to forget the day-to-day mundane experiences of Chinese villagers living through all the drastic reforms.

**Bibliography**


Chu Village under Democratization: Guanxi, Governance and Inequality...

Walder A. 1995. Career Mobility and the Communist Political Order, American Sociological Review 60 (2).