

Introduction

It is widely observed, and indeed true, that a simple peasant in prerevolutionary China had little contact with government officials. Unless involved in a lawsuit or criminal case, he never visited the office of the county magistrate, the lowest-level appointee of the regular bureaucracy who oversaw hundreds of villages and an average of 250,000 people.¹ This was even true for landowners who owed taxes to the government, for they seldom traveled to the county seat to pay a tax in person, or to obtain a deed directly from the yamen when buying land. Instead villagers usually turned to unofficial agents in their own or neighboring communities for those purposes. Noting the limited effectiveness of the city-based imperial administration, which barely extended beyond the city walls, Max Weber remarked that a Chinese village was nothing less than a “self-governing settlement without a mandarin!” (Weber 1951 [1922]: 91). Sidney D. Gamble, who conducted fieldwork in rural North China in the early 1930s, found that the government lacked any interest in the villages “beyond receiving their tax payments.” The peasants were still able to “keep a varying amount of control over their local affairs and usually to recover gradually any that had been taken from them by reform programs developed in the capital” (Gamble 1963: 8).

But the villages were not totally out of the government’s reach; nor was the subcounty administration necessarily chaotic, inefficient, and open to malfeasance. In fact, during most of the imperial times, the state was able to extract enough taxes to meet its normal needs and maintain social order in most of the country. What made this possible was a wide variety of informal institutions in local communities that grew out of the interaction between government demands and local initiatives to carry out day-to-day governmental functions. Therefore, I prefer to use the term *governance* in this book to describe the operational realities of those informal institutions rather than

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government, which denotes the state imposition of control through formal agents and systems. Governance, in other words, was a shared process between state authorities and rural dwellers, involving predominantly endogenous arrangements that satisfied the needs of both the rulers and the villagers during the imperial period, and a combination of the formal and informal systems after 1900. The purpose of this book is to offer a detailed account of the actual operation of those institutions in Chinese villages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Focusing on Huailu county in Hebei province of North China, this study seeks to shed light on three major issues. The first is the traditional patterns of rural governance and their implications for understanding the nature of the Chinese state before the twentieth century. The prevailing perceptions of the imperial Chinese state have centered on the bureaucratic system, ranging from the imperial court to the yamen of the county magistrate, including its formal organizations as well as informal and illicit elements.² Few, however, have paid attention to the administrative process below the county office, especially governing activities in peasant communities. Owing in large part to the unavailability of documentation at the village level, much of the conventional wisdom on village administration remains limited to the statutory frameworks and methods of rural control attempted by the early Qing rulers and their deterioration in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Hsiao 1960; Ch'ü 1962; Watt 1972). With regard to land taxation, likewise, we know most about the official representation and elite discourse on the methods, legal or illegal, used in tax collection and long-term changes in the tax burden during the imperial and Republican periods (Wang 1973a and 1973b; Zelin 1984). Without access to local records on land taxation, however, few have systematically examined the process of tax collection and administration at the bottom of society. To get a complete and more realistic picture of the Chinese state and its interactions with village society, it is necessary to shift attention from the state apparatus to informal institutions at the grassroots level that performed everyday government functions.

An empirical study of the local governing process will also permit a deep look into the inner workings of village communities and patterns of peasant behavior. Despite the many studies on rural China that have focused on the peasant economy and collective action in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we know very little about the motives and strategies of the villagers in daily community affairs; much is to be done to alter the old view of Chinese peasants as ignorant, docile individuals vulnerable to the abuse and tyranny of the powerful within and outside their community.³ This study examines the peasants in a social context in which established practices, shared assumptions, and power relations combined to motivate and constrain the vil-

lagers in their pursuit of self-interest and collective goals. This approach will enable us to obtain a picture of the villagers that enriches as well as revises the traditional images of Chinese peasants and village communities.

A third objective of this book is to scrutinize changes in rural administration after 1900. Studies of village politics in late Qing and Republican China have overwhelmingly concentrated on protests, revolts, and revolutions of rural dwellers in defiance of abusive elites and government officials. This focus on contentious politics in rural society has much to do with scholars' overriding concern with social unrest that led to the sweeping triumph of the Communist revolution in the first half of the twentieth century. This study instead turns to the orderly changes intended by the government and rural elites in that period, most noticeably the installation of the formally elected village government, the founding of primary schools, and new measures in land taxation. While competition and conflict were unavoidable when those reforms were introduced to the rural society, their successful implementation in the villages entailed consensual efforts among all participants, including the government, the elites, and ordinary villagers. In this study, I analyze these changes in a discursive context in which traditional values and assumptions about power and leadership interacted with a new set of political notions and concepts that accompanied the advent of the formal institutions to shape the consciousness of rural dwellers. My emphasis is on how changing values and popular notions about authority and legitimacy were translated into action to form the strategies of both the notables and the ordinary in village politics. A close examination of both the institutional and discursive changes will help us understand whether the villages under study underwent a transition from the traditional pattern of governance based on informal, indigenous practices to a new one under externally imposed, formal institutions before the Japanese invasion and the subsequent Communist revolution in the late 1930s and 1940s.

South-Central Hebei as a Core

An important reason I chose Huailu county as the locality for this study is its location in the south-central Hebei plain, a core area of the North China "macroregion."⁴ In his discussion of regional development of Chinese cities in imperial times, Skinner depicts agrarian China as composed of nine "physiographic macroregions" corresponding to the country's drainage basins (Skinner 1977: 210–49, 275–351).⁵ For all its defects and inaccuracies, this concept is still useful and valid for understanding the regional patterns of economic and social formations in imperial China, given the undeniable facts that the country comprised ecologically and culturally distinct regions and that within each macroregion conspicuous distinctions in population

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density, land fertility, and commercialization existed between core and periphery.⁶ Past studies have examined in varying detail the rural conditions in different macroregions.⁷ Most studies of North China, however, have focused on its peripheral areas. These include the Huaibei region (Perry 1980), the Japanese (Mantetsu)-surveyed villages located mainly in northeastern Hebei and northwestern Shandong (Myers 1970; P. Huang 1985; Duara 1988), northwestern and southwestern Shandong (Esherick 1987), and the Hebei-Henan-Shandong boarder area (Pomeranz 1993; Thaxton 1997).⁸ These studies show that the ecological settings, social conditions, and popular culture varied widely in North China. In general, however, the dominant view of this region has been associated with the image of an insecure natural environment, low-yield dryland farming, and villages of predominantly owner-cultivators. It has been observed that the harsh farming conditions and the consequent scarcity in areas such as Huaibei and northeastern Hebei made peasants vulnerable to the repeated ravages of natural disaster, which often stripped them of all means of subsistence and forced them to migrate. The high rate of migration in and out of villages in turn resulted in weakened lineage organizations, evident in the fact that most villages were multiple-surname communities. In contrast, south-central Hebei has consistently been a core area of the North China macroregion. Located in the piedmont plain east of the Taihang Mountains, south-central Hebei was relatively secure from the frequent droughts, floods, and waterlogging that had long threatened many other parts of the North China plain. This ecological security, coupled with a highly developed well-irrigation system, permitted a high level of land fertility and population density in the region.

What interests us here is the correlation of ecological settings with the pattern of human activities. Elizabeth Perry, in her study of peasant revolts in Huaibei, an area she equates with the periphery of North China, argues that there is a close connection between natural environment and human choices. She finds that difficult and insecure conditions tended to give rise to collective violence, or "aggressive survival strategies," because of heightened competition over scarce resources. It is thus her central proposition that "peripheral zones may have been especially prone to enduring traditions of rural unrest. Defined by inhospitable ecological circumstances, peripheral areas could well have set the stage for violent forms of peasant adaptation [to the local environment they inhabited]" (Perry 1980: 261). What remains unidentified are the characteristics of social arrangements in the ecologically stable areas. My examination of the peasants' strategies for coping with natural and social environments in the core zone of North China reveals a pattern of village communities and village-state relations that differed substantially from that in the peripheral areas. In general, the villages in south-central Hebei displayed greater collectivity and solidarity than those

in the rest of North China. One of the central purposes of this book thus is to show how ecological security and social stability in the core area gave rise to cohesive village organizations and communal practices in local governance.

Given the regional differences in local ecological and social conditions and administrative practices, throughout this study I warn against making national-level generalizations without fully considering regional variations. I frequently compare the area under investigation with other areas, in particular Southeast China and the Yangzi delta, in order to highlight the contrasts between the core and peripheries within North China and to obtain a more precise and complete picture of village society.

County Government Archives

In addition to its location in the core area, an equally important reason to study Huailu county is its rich collection of archives pertaining to village administration. Currently preserved at Hebei Provincial Archives in Shijiazhuang city, the “old regime” archives of Huailu county government include over 5,000 files (*juan*) on a wide range of issues concerning land taxation and local administration. The files I have used in this study date from the beginning of the Guangxu reign (1875) to the eve of the Japanese occupation (1936), a period that witnessed the transition from imperial control of rural society to the vigorous state-making process under the Guomindang government.⁹ These materials fall largely into two broad categories. One is documents generated by different levels of official agencies, including the provincial government, the county magistrate (the county head after 1928), his yamen offices, and gentry-controlled “self-government” bodies of the early twentieth century. These records provide details on the workings of every aspect of local administration. They allow us to see, for example, how the tax burden was determined by negotiation between the government and local elites, how the county yamen maximized its tax revenue by investigating illegal deeds and unregistered land, and how the state taxed people through formal and informal agents.

The vast majority of the Huailu archival files, however, are records of administrative cases. Unlike civil disputes over land, debt, marriage, inheritance, and the like that involved common people of the peasant society, administrative disputes mainly had to do with local administrative service and occurred primarily between the administrative agents on the one hand and community members on the other. Chinese archivists thus classify these cases into the general categories of *neizheng* (internal administration), *xingzheng* (administration), or simply *tianfu* (land taxation). Archival records on these disputes include complaints and countercomplaints filed by villagers and pe-

titions from village leaders. These files thus allow us to see how the disputes were adjudicated by the county court or mediated by peasant communities. They also permit an up-close examination of village practices pertaining to local governance, such as the selection of village agents, their relationships with local communities and with the county yamen, the taxation of land deeds, the investigation of unregistered “black land,” the transfer of tax liabilities, the creation of village government and local schools, and so forth.

Other sources I refer to in this study include local gazetteers of the imperial, Republican, and contemporary periods, the *wenshi ziliao* or recollections of local history published in recent decades by “renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi” (People’s Political Consultative Conference) at different levels, as well as government statistics and research papers by scholars of the 1930s. It is noteworthy that the field survey reports produced by researchers of the Japanese Southern Manchurian Railway Company (Mantetsu), a major source that has informed past studies of North China, also include data on the farming conditions in two villages of Huailu county, Macun and Dongjiao (Hokushi keizai chosajo 1940; Kahoku sogo chosa kenkyujo 1944). Although these two surveys contain no data about the social and political institutions in the villages, their detailed records of labor use, cropping patterns, land output, and peasant income nicely supplement the archival materials that I have used in this study.

Village Governance

VILLAGE AUTONOMY VERSUS STATE DOMINANCE

Two contrasting approaches have shaped traditional interpretations of village-state relations in imperial China. One presumes an autocratic state capable of penetrating all the way down to every village and household through the imposed groupings of rural households known as *baojia* for neighborhood surveillance and *lijia* for adult male registration and tax collection (see Chapter 3 for full explanations). These devices, we are told, allowed the state to use the rural agents as its tool to exert authority in local society. By putting all aspects of rural life under its direction and supervision, the state successfully prevented the growth of any forms of local autonomy or self-government.¹⁰

The other approach presumes autonomous communities operating against government control. The idea that Chinese society functioned autonomously was quite popular in the early twentieth century in both Western scholarship and Chinese writings. In his analysis of Chinese social organizations, for example, Max Weber consistently emphasized the existence of communal autonomy and its tension with the patrimonial monarchy. Ac-

ording to Weber, the autonomy and cohesion of Chinese villages stemmed from local self-governing bodies, which carried out duties such as road improvement, river dredging, local defense, criminal control, schooling, and funeral and burial services; no less important were the clan organizations in community life, as evidenced in the supremacy of clan elders' power and ancestral halls. It was clan solidarity based on the cult of ancestors that "withstood the ruthless encroachments of the patrimonial administration," resulting in a constant clash between patrimonial rule from above and the clans' strong counterbalance from below (Weber 1951: 86–87).

Despite their contrasting views of local administration, the above two approaches have one assumption in common—that is, the dichotomous opposition between state and society. Local governance was perceived as a realm of either omnipresent state influence or predominantly local autonomous practices. To a degree, this paradigm of binary opposition between state control and local autonomy may be ascribed to the fact that earlier scholarship on local government was largely based on traditional source materials, mainly official documents, local gazetteers, and private writings. As Kung-chuan Hsiao complained, these sources are marred with "possible biases, inaccuracies, partiality, dishonesty, or carelessness," for they were written from the standpoint of either the government or the literate, particularly the gentry (Hsiao 1960: vi–viii). It is no wonder that one often finds in those writings a juxtaposition of the idealized image of state control with various counter-ideals that were depicted as full of flaws.

Moreover, in the absence of reliable empirical studies, scholars could only perceive and interpret the different forms of village governance in the context of theoretical constructs then available and appealing to them. The very absence of a formal government below the county level and the prevalence of self-governing bodies in local society prompted scholars to treat them as forms of self-government in opposition to the autocratic state. Likewise, in the 1950s and 1960s when the theory of "oriental despotism" was prevalent (e.g., Wittfogel 1957), scholars tended to perceive the Chinese state as despotic and penetrative, and dismissed *baojia* and its variants merely as tools of state control that had nothing to do with autonomy and self-government (Hsiao 1960; Ch'ü 1962; Balazs 1964; Watt 1972; and Fu 1993).

Dissatisfaction with this paradigm has caused scholars to seek a sophisticated alternative construct for understanding the complexity of village-state relations in imperial China. The constant tension and conflicts between state and society, as recent studies have revealed, did not preclude their mutual dependence in local administration.¹¹ In the resolution of civil disputes in Qing China, for instance, many disputes were resolved by neither the informal method of community or kin mediation nor formal court adjudication, but instead by the working of a "third realm" of civil justice, in which both

the formal and informal systems participated and interacted with each other (P. Huang 1993b). In the day-to-day operation of the county government, for another example, the ostensibly “formal” county court employed a large number of “informal” or illicit clerks and runners who were not subject to any statutory administrative regulations. While acting as agents of the state, they were simultaneously an occupational group rooted in the local community, thus functionally mediating between state and society (Reed 2000). For Chen Hongmou, a model bureaucrat in eighteenth-century China, effective administration rested on communal self-management as well as heightened government efforts; local initiative and state activism were complementary rather than incompatible in the actual practice of governance (Rowe 2001).

Together, these recent findings suggest a new direction in which we can explore a more dynamic and complicated relationship between state and society. The dichotomy between state control and local autonomy that prevailed in earlier studies of local administration was inadequate to explain the complex realities of rural governance; we need an alternative conceptual framework built on solid empirical researches. For this purpose, this study moves attention from the activities of the bureaucrats and their underlings at and above the county level, which have concerned the aforementioned studies in recent years, to the governing process in village communities.

PRACTICES IN HUAILU VILLAGES

Villages in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Huailu county adopted neither the original statutory *baojia* and *lijia* systems that were officially promoted in early Qing nor illegal arrangements banned by the government. What prevailed in the local communities was a form of voluntary cooperation among villagers who shouldered administrative tasks that had been performed by the *baojia* and *lijia* personnel. The key position in the cooperation was the *xiangdi*, who acted as an intermediary between the county *yamen* and his village. Chosen from local dwellers by annual rotation, the *xiangdi* performed a variety of tasks delegated by the county magistrate. He was required, for example, to report local crimes and help *yamen* runners to arrest criminals or bring summoned disputants to court. He was also responsible for issuing official deeds, prompting the payment of deed taxes, and investigating untaxed deeds and unregistered land. And it was his duty to collect irregular levies and provide facilities on the magistrate’s instruction. The *xiangdi*, as shown in Chapter 3, performed the same functions as the rural agents under the previous *baojia* system.

However, the *xiangdi* was not just an agent of the government. He also served the needs of fellow villagers and represented his community before the county *yamen*. This was evident in his roles in all activities pertaining to

land taxation. Unlike the statutory tax system that required villagers to pay taxes individually, a common practice in Huailu and neighboring counties was for the *xiangdi* to pay in advance all of the taxes of the community members during the collection period, using public village funds or loans; he then collected his monies from individual households after the taxes had been paid. The villagers preferred this cooperative arrangement because the *xiangdi*'s collective payment of taxes saved them the time and expense of delivering the taxes individually. Moreover, it precluded the intrusion into local communities of tax-prompting *yamen* runners under the official tax system and also made it impossible for tax farmers from outside to extort additional taxes from individual taxpayers, a phenomenon not uncommon in many parts of North China.

Subcounty administration in Huailu was characterized by a variety of cooperative arrangements among community members. The key to understanding the prevalence of cooperation in local governance, I will argue, lay in the fact that most villages in the area under study were highly cohesive communities of predominantly owner-cultivators. Endowed with a secure ecological setting where the absence of frequent natural calamities minimized migration, the villagers developed over time tight kinship networks and a strong identity with the community. With the support of village conventions and shared principles, they cooperated in community projects that benefited all members. Such cooperative practices were of course not limited to the villages in Huailu and other counties of south-central Hebei. We will find that similar cooperation existed in other areas as well, such as the lower Yangzi region and southeastern China, where comparable ecological conditions, property relations, and social networks prevailed.

SUBSTANTIVE GOVERNMENT

My examination of local administrative disputes shows that the magistrate rarely interfered with the working process of village institutions when they functioned to generate the expected taxes and social order. He stepped in only when disputes arose that disrupted the normal operation of those institutions and when the community failed to mediate on its own. And the magistrate acted on those occasions only as an arbitrator. In fact, this noninterference approach was not limited to Huailu county, but was a standard method of conducting government widely seen in imperial and early Republican China, despite variations in the ways local communities interacted with the government. What we can find from the case of Huailu county, however, is an accurate picture of how the magistrate routinely dealt with villages and how local arrangements worked to benefit both the government and the community.

From the rulers' point of view, the government's assignment of tasks to

local communities and the promotion of cooperative practices in the villages had two obvious advantages. First, it freed them from the mundane task of dealing with individual villagers in tax collection and police control and saved them the expense of hiring additional underlings to perform those tasks. Second and more important, it reduced illicit practices in administrative activity. A deeply rooted conviction among the ruling elites throughout the imperial period was that the involvement of yamen underlings in local administration would inevitably result in malfeasance, for the self-interested and underpaid underlings were always in a position to engage in wrongdoing to enrich themselves at the cost of local people. Allowing the community to shoulder those official duties instead could solve the problem because local agents were always subject to the scrutiny of the community, and their abuses, if any, could be handled by the community itself.

Therefore, the imperial rulers preferred to minimize government intervention in local governance and to encourage villagers' voluntary cooperation in fulfilling their duties to the government. As long as the informal institutions of local communities proved able to meet the government's need for tax income and local control, the state showed no inclination to extend its reach further down than the county level; instead it allowed local communities and their own agents to assume all administrative tasks of the government. The communal arrangements in Huailu villages fell well within the scope of voluntary cooperation the state promoted.

In this study, I use the term *substantive government* to characterize the government's noninterference, laissez-faire orientation and the predominance of informal practices in subcounty administration. This term emphasizes the fusion of government purposes into local, unofficial arrangements and distinguishes this reality from the long-used standard practices that prevailed in the formal, centralized bureaucratic system at and above the county level. Unlike formalistic administration, which ideally precludes informal elements and nonstandardized practices, substantive government was a realm in which both the government and society participated and where governmental functions intermeshed with local arrangements.¹² The primary goal of the state in this realm was to ensure that the public order be maintained and its financial needs be met to the extent that they would not jeopardize local stability. So long as these demands were satisfied, the state felt no need to involve itself in the process of local governance. Instead, in order to achieve its goals, the state opened the realm to local communities and encouraged their participation when local initiatives did not infringe on state interests. Local society, too, found it to their advantage to develop cooperative, self-governing arrangements to deal with the government and minimize its disruptive intrusion. We thus find in substantive government a common ground where the interests of the state and the village society converged. This was a realm,

however, that must be distinguished from various illegal practices in local administration that encroached on the prerogatives of the state and therefore suffered its ceaseless attacks and prohibitions. It should also be distinguished from forms of local "autonomy" that ruled out government influence from the community.

The Chinese Peasant

There has been a substantial amount of scholarly literature on Chinese peasants in recent decades, dealing with issues such as peasants' engagement in family farming for self-consumption, their involvement in domestic and international markets, their social mobility and dislocation, and their participation in rebellious and revolutionary movements in the modern era. What remains largely obscure, however, is the everyday experience of the peasants in community life, especially their strategies for survival in the context in which communal norms and values were interwoven with individual interests and power relations. By and large, past studies of village politics in imperial and Republican China have tended to concentrate on elites, be they gentry, clan elders, or headmen of endogenous village associations, rather than ordinary peasants.

This study shifts the focus from the dominant to the dominated. My account of peasant behavior is based on a variety of "administrative cases" from Huailu villages, which involved disputes over two sets of issues. One had to do with the collection and payment of land taxes, surcharges, middlemen's commissions, and school contributions or tuition. The other pertained to the election and appointment of villagers to local positions, including the *xiangdi*, village heads, schoolmasters, and teachers. These cases permit a close look at the functioning of various cooperative arrangements, administrative institutions, kinship organizations, and power relations, as well as the less visible aspects of community life, such as communal norms, values, and beliefs. Together, they bring to light a peasant world in which the villagers cooperated on the basis of institutional arrangements and shared assumptions, and at the same time engaged in rivalry and even assault in the face of competition and conflicts of interest.

MORAL COMMITMENT VERSUS SELF-INTEREST

The social behavior of the peasants may be seen as combining their pursuit of self-interest with their moral commitment to community norms and conventions. I propose that both the rational calculation of personal gain and the constraints of normative requirements played a significant role in shaping their strategies for involvement in community activities. This is especially clear when we look at the working realities of established practices and

conventions pertaining to cooperation in administrative and self-governing activities.

Known to local residents as “village regulations” (*cungui*), “local regulations” (*xiangui*), or “old regulations” (*jiugui*), such arrangements had existed in local communities for generations and varied widely in different localities, reflecting the diversity of social ties, interest patterns, and power configurations in the peasant society. Although acknowledged by all community members, these regulations usually lacked codified texts. They were publicly discussed and came to the attention of the government only when disputes broke out. Indeed, it is primarily in complaints and petitions from the villagers that we find the concrete stipulations of those regulations.

The central importance of such regulations was most evident in the handling of administrative cases. When filing a complaint, for example, a plaintiff typically started with a statement about relevant *cungui* and went on to accuse his opponent of violating the regulations. In his initial reaction to the complaint, the magistrate normally instructed the community leader (usually the village head) to mediate the dispute in accordance with local regulations. If the mediation was successful, the village head would report back that the dispute had been settled in compliance with the village regulations. If the disputes evolved into a court session, the magistrate would invariably adhere to local regulations in making a ruling.¹³ In no dispute did I find any villagers who openly challenged their *cungui*; instead, they unanimously acknowledged the central importance of the regulations in community life. When they quarreled, it was usually not the regulation itself but about their own qualifications or lack of qualifications for serving the *xiangdi* or other offices. By and large, these conventional regulations remained effective in the 1910s and 1920s.

The village regulations are critical to our analysis of the peasant society, for they not only guided economic practices and social exchanges in peasant communities, but also reflected the shared principles and normative commitments of community members. Two basic principles stand out as common to these village regulations: reciprocity and the right to subsistence. By the *cungui* in most Huailu villages, the *xiangdi* had the duty to pay in advance taxes on behalf of his fellow villagers; in return, the villagers had the obligation to repay him before a designated date. Likewise, according to the *cungui*, the *xiangdi* was responsible for all of the costs associated with his payment of the taxes, and the villagers compensated the *xiangdi* by allowing him to act as a middleman in the sale of all kinds of commodities and paying him a commission. In most communities, the *cungui* also linked the burden of *xiangdi* service to one’s landholding or tax liability. The more land a person owned, the more years he served as the *xiangdi*. Households with less than the minimum amount of land required for one-year’s service were ex-

empted from the burden, obviously because they could not afford the expenses involved in performing the *xiangdi* duties. This arrangement brings to mind the “subsistence ethic” that James C. Scott explicated in his study of peasant society in Southeast Asia. This ethic assumes that all members of a community have a presumptive right to a living so far as local resources will allow. As a moral principle, it enables peasants to create and maintain a social practice that insures the weakest against crisis by making certain demands on better-off villagers. This right to subsistence, Scott argued, produces a redistributive effect and works as a shock absorber during economic crises in peasant life (1976: 40–41).

The villagers in Huailu, however, were not always committed to community norms and regulations; they were goal-directed, calculating agents as well, who chose strategies that best served their individual ends after taking into account all factors, symbolic and material, that concerned their interests and evaluating all alternative routes of action. Thus, while the villagers cooperated to achieve collective benefits that they could not obtain as individuals and accepted communal arrangements that served their purposes under normal conditions, they might turn to alternative options when circumstances changed. For example, some villagers competed for the position of *xiangdi* when it was very profitable; when providing the service became burdensome, however, they tended to evade it, using whatever pretexts were available to them. My examination of disputes over tax payment also demonstrates that the villagers tended to repay the *xiangdi* in a timely manner for the tax duties he had advanced on their behalf where the village regulation prescribed their mutual obligations in this regard. Disputes took place more often where the communities fell short of such cooperative conventions. And taxpayers were most likely to be derelict when the tax collector was from outside the community, feeling no normative obligation to outsiders or other communities. The actions of the villagers thus varied under different circumstances; they could be at once moral community members subject to normative constraints, and self-interested individuals focused on maximizing material gains. Despite their seemingly contradictory propositions, both the “moral economy” thesis and the “rational-choice” theory are partly applicable to the analysis of village politics in late Qing and Republican Huailu, but neither of them could fully explain the complexity of peasant behaviors.¹⁴

UNDERSTANDING PEASANT BEHAVIORS

To understand the patterns of peasant actions, this study considers two sets of factors that influenced their strategies for participation in collective events. One was the social context of the community that comprised a wide array of institutions, ranging from kinship ties, power structure, and property

relations to explicit regulations and implicit norms, values, and principles, of which the most important was no doubt the perceived supremacy of *cungui* in the community. Together, these institutions informed the villagers' "durable dispositions" or *habitus*, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, which shaped their perceptions and attitudes, and made their motives and actions readily intelligible to all members of the community (Bourdieu 1976; 1977: 72 and 80). The other was the immediate situation that confronted individuals, which changed from time to time and from person to person. Serving as village head or schoolmaster, for example, could be an honorable and lucrative opportunity at one time and a thankless burden at another. A household of average means, in another instance, could well afford to serve the community as a *xiangdi* under normal conditions. However, if misfortune struck, continuing the service could lead to disaster for the whole family. Therefore, what defined the possibilities and limits of a person's strategies, I will argue, were not only the shared principles or dispositions embedded in the community but also the specific situations in which the individual deliberated and acted.¹⁵

It is in this context that the actions of ordinary villagers as well as the notables could be properly explained. The villagers chose to abide by local regulations under normal conditions because conformity to such arrangements was necessary to maintain one's social standing and economic security in the community. Anyone who failed to perform his duties as prescribed by the regulations ran the risk of being denounced by and isolated from the rest of the community, and consequently being denied access to the collectively produced goods of the group. It follows that to fulfill one's obligatory duties was in itself the most important means of ensuring subsistence in the village. It was not uncommon, to be sure, for a villager to deliberately shirk his duty or vie for a profitable job in violation of community conventions. To do so, however, he had to couch his action in the language of observing or defending village regulations and limit his wrongdoing to a degree that minimized the damage to his standing. Overt denial of normative duties and flagrant violation of community conventions rarely occurred in such circumstances.

Much the same can be said about the powerful in the community. Living in a social network that comprised many forms of patron-client relationship, people of means and influence were always in a position to abuse their power by protecting those they favored at the expense of others. Nevertheless, as community leaders whose status rested mainly on their reputation and the trust of community members, the powerful were subject to the same community norms and informal sanctions in the form of rumor, gossip, ridicule, and even open denunciation as ordinary villagers. They could not afford to brazenly abuse their influence or openly breach established rules,

for fear of losing their reputation. Quite the contrary, the notables had to actually or at least ostensibly support the accepted norms and practices in order to uphold their prestige, which was indispensable for maintaining their leadership in the community.

Obviously, the moral obligation to adhere to community norms or the rational calculation of self-interest alone cannot explain peasant actions and village solidarity. For most villagers, conformity to community regulations should be seen as the optimal strategy for maintaining their well-being, rather than merely the result of internalizing community norms and values. However, unlike a rational actor in the highly developed market economy who can base decisions on personal preferences or utility maximization, individuals in the precapitalist community had to take into account normative constraints and commitments linked to the specific group as well as their private interests and personal goals (North 1998). Villages in Huailu, after all, were social spaces where explicit institutions were interwoven with implicit principles and diffuse sanctions to empower and constrain the actors in their pursuit of private gain and collective goals. It was the interaction between shared group principles and personal circumstances that shaped their strategies for the production and reproduction of both material and symbolic capital. We cannot fully understand the Chinese peasants and their diverse strategies unless they are perceived in this context.¹⁶

“State-Making” in the Village

North China villages underwent many institutional changes as a result of the implementation of the New Policy (*xinzheng*) for economic, educational, and administrative modernization after 1900. By and large, we can identify two distinct phases in which these changes took place. The first was the late Qing and early Republican period from 1904 to 1927. The most important development during those years was the introduction of the “self-government” (*difang zizhi*) program, especially the creation of the village head (*cunzheng* or *cunzhang*) position and the establishment of new-style primary schools in many villages. The second was the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the Guomindang government took further measures to penetrate rural society such as the installation of a formal government at the ward (*qu*) level and the reorganization of village government into artificial administrative units called *xiang*. As the administrative apparatus expanded at the sub-county level, government expenditures mounted, entailing increases in the tax burden in the form of multiplying surcharges.

THREE VIEWS OF STATE-MAKING IN RURAL CHINA

Recent studies have identified three patterns of political changes under

the rubric of “state-making” in early twentieth-century rural China. The first was the breakdown of traditional communities owing to the increasing pressure of state penetration, as evidenced by the withdrawal of local elites from village government, who had spoken in behalf of local communities. It occurred when the tax burden increased and village leaders felt unwilling to perform their thankless duties of tax collection at the risk of alienating themselves from fellow villagers. Many thus resigned from office, leaving a political vacuum that permitted the rise of “village bullies and tyrants,” a phenomenon that became prevalent in North China villages in the 1920s and 1930s (P. Huang 1985: 264–74, 289–91; Duara 1988: 159–60, 181, 252). Whereas the breakdown of traditional village leadership took place mainly in disaster-prone areas where community ties were tenuous, in solidary villages based on strong lineage organizations and/or strong elite leadership a pattern of community “closure” prevailed. To resist bureaucratic intrusion and multiplying impositions, the elites in these localities organized their communities as a “united community front” (P. Huang 1985: 259–64). As the tension between state and village increased, they assumed the leadership of armed resistance, which often involved the participation of the entire village (see also Perry 1980: 163–207 and Prazniak 1999: 45–91).

Unlike the two views described above that highlight the failure of state-making and its disruptive impact on the countryside in the early twentieth century, the third underscores the growing capabilities of the state in regulating political and economic activities in local society. In his study of the Hebei-Henan-Shandong border region, Kenneth Pomeranz describes the government as both a “more successful donor,” able to provide and improve police, public health, and other key services to local society, and a “more successful extractor.” The result of state-making in this region thus was the simultaneous strengthening of state and society (Pomeranz 1993: 272). Susan Mann observes that there were compromises between state and society in the course of state-making, as seen in tax-farming in the collection of *lijin* (transit tax) in the early twentieth century. Rather than treating these profiteering businesses in taxation as signs of the state’s inability to penetrate local society, Mann interprets their acceptance as “useful compromises” that contributed to the historical process of state-building in all societies and were “essential steps on the road to success” for China’s modern state-builders. In general, proponents of this approach identify state-making in early twentieth-century China as a successful process, comparable to that in early-modern Europe (S. Mann 1987: 6).

It must be acknowledged that the process of state-making in different areas of early twentieth-century China varied in different local ecological and social settings. Therefore the above three patterns of state-village relations were likely to prevail in regions with different conditions. Exactly how these

trends affected the everyday operation of power structures and popular perceptions of local leadership, however, has not been made clear in previous studies. Moreover, despite recent scholarship on rural North China that has discussed the enforcement and malfunctioning of newly instituted administrative agencies and popular protests against internal decay and external intrusions, much of the scholarly attention has concentrated on either the late Qing period when the New Policy took effect or the Guomindang period when state penetration accelerated. Almost no research has been done on changes in village politics during the interim between 1912 and 1927. The dominant image of Chinese politics during this period is one of disunity, corruption, and chaos under warlordism. This image is largely true of political and military competition between rival warlords. However, once we shift attention from the obvious national phenomena to local political process, a different picture emerges that shows many significant and meaningful developments. My examination of village politics after 1900 thus concentrates on the early Republican years and their differences from the Guomindang era in order to highlight continuity and change in village leadership in the early twentieth century.

OBVIOUS CHANGES

One significant change in the local power structure in early twentieth-century Huailu was the formalization of local leadership. Before the twentieth century, informal leadership in rural China usually rested with those who built prestige and influence on the basis of their literacy, seniority, wealth, or social connections. After 1900 the introduction of the self-government movement allowed the rural elites to formalize their leadership through their control of village government and primary schools. 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 the deliberative assemblies and offices in charge of police, education, and financing.

This change in village leadership no doubt gave the rural elites greater influence in their localities and more opportunities for self-aggrandizement. They abused their power where social constraints and public sanctioning were weak or nonexistent. However, in tight-knit communities such as those of Huailu, where cooperative arrangements remained untouched and where they identified themselves with the rest of the community as landowners and taxpayers, the elites had to speak on behalf of the village before the government in order to defend their own interest and reproduce their reputations among the villagers. Not surprisingly, the village heads, though formally appointed by the county government, owed their loyalty primarily to the community rather than the magistrate. It was in their capacity as village

heads that the local notables mobilized to combat tax escalation and abuses in the 1910s and 1920s. In the campaign to investigate unregistered and untaxed holdings ("black land") in the early 1930s, likewise, the *xiangzhang* (head of the *xiang*) normally reported only a nominal amount of black land in his village, although the actual amount could be substantial. These facts implied that the village communities in the core area remained as solidary as before and were far from the verge of breakdown in the 1920s and 1930s. And elite leadership in behalf of local interests effectively prevented the tension between village and state from mounting to the point of violent protest in Huailu county before the Japanese occupation in 1937. This reality contrasted sharply with the withdrawal of community leaders from local government and the resultant political decay, a phenomenon that prevailed in ecologically unstable areas.

Another significant development in local politics was the state's growing ability to assert itself in rural society. This is especially evident when the early Republican and Guomindang periods are compared. In the 1910s and 1920s, when the government was yet to extend its formal reach to the village, the magistrate relied heavily on the elites, especially urban elites active at the county seat, to start self-government projects and extract more resources from the countryside. To maintain a working relationship with them, the practical magistrate in Huailu county had to yield to the elites when the latter, who were usually the largest landowners, resisted tax increases or the investigation of black land. The magistrate often acted as a mediator between the provincial government and local elites, rather than as a representative of the state.

This situation, however, came to an end after 1928 when the Guomindang government took resolute steps to weaken the presence of urban elites and to extend the formal bureaucracy below the county level. In addition to dissolving the county assembly, a stronghold of the urban elites, and creating the formally elected *xiang* and supra-village *qu* (ward) governments that answered more directly to the county head, the new regime took radical measures to update tax administration. It took back the tasks of tax transfer, tax-roll updating, land-deed writing and investigation by unofficial agents and handed them over to the newly created ward government offices. These moves signified a departure from the traditional methods of rural governance relying on local, informal personnel. Thus in Huailu villages during the successive waves of state-making before 1937 we find a concurrence of tighter state control over local society and the formalization of local administration that enhanced the leadership of rural elites.

PERCEPTIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

Modernization in local administration caused not only conspicuous de-

velopment in local leadership and village-state relations, but also subtle yet significant changes in the way people perceived the changing power structures and articulated their interests. The establishment of village government and primary schools in the late Qing and Republican years, for example, was accompanied by the intrusion of a nationwide discourse on “self-government,” which presupposed the priority of national goals over the objectives of the community and individuals, the supremacy of “modern” national systems over traditional local institutions, and the legitimacy of formal legal principles instead of informal moral norms.

Rural elites who embraced the imposed institutions as new opportunities for personal gain enthusiastically mastered the new language of official discourse and used it to fashion their public exchanges with the government and among themselves. We thus found in disputes over village leadership that the traditional notion of the diffuse power of community leaders based on their seniority and reputation gradually yielded to a new assumption that village headship should be based on legal, formal election and the principle of division of duties, as well as proper age and education. It was also publicly accepted, for instance, that the new-style primary schools were not only more “scientific” than the traditional private school (*sishu*) for eliminating illiteracy, but also a critical means of training modern citizenry and saving the Chinese nation from the perils of imperialism. State-making, in this light, was not only the creation of a formal national system in place of local institutions, but also the establishment of the dominance of the national political discourse in public debate at the local level.

This is not to suggest, of course, that external ideas superseded or prevailed over traditional assumptions of the villagers in the early twentieth century. Quite the reverse; the villagers often reacted to the enforcement of new institutions by expressing their own values and notions. While the village head or the schoolmaster may have used the external language to legitimize and disguise his own self-interested actions, the ordinary villagers expressed their anger and resentment by the various means available to them, including private chatting, cursing, spreading rumors, and even revenge. The “hidden transcripts” or “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” is equally important for understanding peasant reactions to state penetration (Scott 1990: 4).

Village discourse in early twentieth-century Huailu county thus was often a mix of old notions rooted in the community and new concepts borrowed from outside. The elites, as the primary beneficiaries of the new institutions, could use both the vocabulary of official discourse on state-making to justify their newly obtained privileges and popular values to legitimize their power within the community. Likewise, the ordinary villagers, while adhering to traditional values to justify their claims, did not

hesitate to appeal to exogenous concepts to defend their interests. Thus was a transition in the popular vision of power and legitimacy already under way in early twentieth-century rural society.

To understand the changes and continuity in village governance in the early twentieth century, then, we must expand our attention from institutional changes to symbolic areas where the discursive hegemony of imposed systems interacted dynamically with the legitimizing power of embedded assumptions. Village communities in early twentieth-century China, in other words, were places where endogenous institutions coexisted with the newly created systems, and where the shared values, attitudes, and assumptions mixed with the invading ideas and rhetoric of the state. State-making in the core area of rural North China was neither a lineal development nor a complete failure during the late Qing and Republican periods, but a gradual process in which national systems and ideas penetrated the village to coexist with or replace local arrangements and popular values and to refashion the strategies and perceptions of both the notable and the ordinary in the village.