Villager Groups and Self-Governance in China:

Power, Incentives, and Risk Prevention

Chenglin Wei

Institute for China & World Studies / School of Political Science & International Relations,

Tongji University, China

weichenglin678@163.com

Yansen Ding

Institute for China & World Studies / School of Political Science & International Relations,

Tongji University, China

ethan.ys.ding@gmail.com

中国村民小组自治：权能基础、动力结构及风险防控

魏程琳

同济大学 政治与国际关系学院 / 中国战略研究院

丁岩森

同济大学 政治与国际关系学院 / 中国战略研究院

Abstract

Building a modern grassroots governance system synchronized with national development has become a significant part of China's rural revitalization strategy. To cope with the overlapping of property rights, social identities, and work and living space in China's villages,

the villager group 村民小组 has been endowed with relatively complete governance power. Regional social networks, the moral constraints of reputation in the village, and the administrative incentives provided by the government constitute the incentive structure of villager group governance. At the same time, granting group cadres official authority and social power enables them to better coordinate the relationship between state and society, safeguard the rights and interests of villagers in the group, and provide low-cost public goods through their structural position in "the last kilometer" 最后一公里. However, they may also bring about the political risk of group confrontation, the economic risk of embezzling collective assets, and the moral risk of negligence and political inertia. To ward off these risks requires strengthening the leadership of grassroots party organizations, making full use of social supervision, ensuring that cadres operate in an open and above-board fashion, and introducing the notion of the rule of law, thus forming a compound risk-prevention mechanism for grassroots power and building a solid foundation for national governance.

Keywords

villager group self-governance, governance capacity, social foundation, incentive structure, risk prevention

摘要

在推进乡村振兴战略的新时代，打造与国家发展同步的现代化基层治理体系，成为当前乡村治理体制改革的重要任务。在村域社会，产权单元、社会认同单元以及生产生活空间单元重叠的村民小组，拥有相对完整的治理权能及相应的政治经济社会基础。地域社会关系网络、村落声誉调控以及来自官方的行政激励，构成小组治理的动力结构。同时分享官方权威和社会权力的小组干部，能够在“最后一公里”的结构性位置上较好协调

国家社会关系、维护小组村民权益、低成本提供公共产品，亦可能带来村组对抗的政治风险、侵吞集体资产的经济风险以及懈怠懒政的道德风险。因而有必要加强基层党组织引领、发挥社会监督力量、完善组务公开制度并引入法治理念，形成针对基层小微权力的复合式风险防控机制，筑牢国家治理根基。

关键词

村民小组自治、治理权能、社会基础、动力结构、风险防控

Exploring Effective Governance Units: A Review of Villagers' Self-Governance

As an experimental field of democracy in China, villagers' self-governance has long attracted the attention of scholars at home and abroad. Since the trial implementation of the Organic Law of Village Committees in 1987, villagers' self-governance has gone through the stages of independent exploration, institutionalized practice, and renewed innovation for more than thirty years.[1] With the atomization of rural families, village resettlement, and the institutionalization of villagers' self-governance committees in rural China, the question of how to optimize these self-governance units and build a modern grassroots governance system synchronized with national development has become an important subject in China's rural revitalization strategy.

The Practice of Villagers' Self-Governance and a Review of the Literature

The practice of self-governance, launched in Yishan County, Guangxi Province, that regards

[1] The Organic Law of Village Committees was formally adopted in 1998 and amended several times thereafter.

the natural village as the basic operative unit, was approved by the central government in the 1980s. The Organic Law of Village Committees (For Trial Implementation) promulgated in 1987 clearly stipulates that "villagers committees should consider villagers' living conditions, population and historical habits, and the villagers' economic condition before establishment, and shall follow the principle of facilitating villagers' self-governance. Villagers committees shall generally be established in natural villages. Several natural villages may jointly establish a villagers committee; a large natural village may establish several villagers committees." To streamline administration and cut down on organizational costs, the law was revised in 1998 and set the village self-governance unit at the level of the administrative village. The term "natural villages" disappeared from the Organic Law of Village Committees, but the term "villager groups" was retained and such groups were granted substantial power.

An administrative village is often composed of more than one natural village. Some administrative villages even have more than ten natural villages, such as in Yingde County in Guangdong Province and in Langxi County in Anhui Province. A natural village is usually composed of more than one villager group. After 1998, research on village self-governance has essentially been limited to elections in administrative villages. The development of villagers' self-governance since the 1990s is an important result of the decentralization of state administrative power (Xu Yong, 2005). However, the withdrawal of state power from rural areas in the post-tax era has not resulted in the obvious development of villagers' self-governance. This is in part because of the diversification of rural social interests and the weakening of villagers' ability to engage in collective action. It is also because the administrativeization of the work of the village committees promoted by the local government has further undermined the basis for villager group self-governance. Some places have even eliminated villager groups. This has made it impossible for the government to

work effectively at the grassroots level, but also has had the unintended consequence of freeing criminal forces and heretical sects to take advantage of the absence of cadres to enter rural society. Therefore, as the sociologist He Xuefeng (2005) has bluntly stated, "there are endless problems in the process of merging villages."

In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on the issue of the lowering of the governance unit. Xu Yong and Zhao Dejian (2014) have pointed out that the great difficulties and institutional obstacles involved in nominal grassroots self-governance are the result of taking the administrative village as the basic operative unit of villagers' self-governance rather than the villager groups or the natural village. Deng Yanhua (2012) and Liu Sheng (2019) have pointed out that the process of merging villages has resulted in several problems, including a worsening of information asymmetry, an increase in governance costs, a rigidification of governance systems, the nominalization of village democracy, and obstructions in implementing policies. He Haibo (2018) has argued that natural villages, compared to administrative villages, can better preserve community memory and foster modern social relations. They are also catalysts for consistent interests in land property rights and industrial development, and the supply of public goods. Li Yongping and Ci Qinying (2017) have argued that the villager groups in the Western Sichuan Plain have effectively responded to the public welfare demands of peasants in their production and everyday lives. Li and Ci attribute this to peasants' own ability to mobilize organizations, maintain order, and balance benefits. Wu Hao and Zheng Yongjun (2018) have proposed that the attributes and the degree of implementation of rules are related to level of the basic unit of villagers' self-governance. They contend that the higher the degree of the implementation of rules the better the performance of self-government. In 2014, Document No. 1 of the CPC Central Committee also explicitly stated, "Explore effective forms for realizing villager self-governance under different situations. Rural communities that are

experimental-construction units and villager groups with collective land ownership are permitted to have villagers' self-governance trials with communities and villager groups as the basic unit." This has provided a policy basis and space for action for governance by villager groups.

However, the academic community has not yet reached a consensus on the most suitable self-governance unit, the administrative village or the natural village. Tang Ming (2020) and Xiang Jiquan and Wang Mingwei (2019) have pointed out that making the natural village or villager group the administrative self-governance unit may contravene current institutional arrangements and the law itself. The result could be a disordered governance hierarchy and problems with system connections. Some scholars also are concerned that lowering the self-governance unit might cause administrative problems (Tang and Xu, 2015).

Self-governance practices across the country tend to follow one of two different tendencies. One is the merging of administrative villages, which increases the population of administrative villages to 3,000–5,000 people, concentrates power in the hands of cadres, and raises the unit of self-governance. The other is shifting the power of self-governance to lower-level units (Huang and Wu, 2020).

Recently, the scale of the administrative village has expanded, the degree that village committees are subject to administrativeization has been growing, and the rural revitalization strategy requires the improvement of rural governance. In this context, self-governance based on existing single administrative villages can no longer meet the needs of grassroots governance. The form, unit, and institution of villagers' self-governance should develop simultaneously at both the practical and theoretical levels. However, the issue of which units are most suitable for villages' self-governance remains, while the power structure, social foundation, and possible risks of villager group self-governance lack systematic research. In fact, whether or not the government regards the villager group as the self-governance unit of

the formal organizational system (by establishing a villager self-governance committee), does not affect its objective existence and function as a micro self-governance unit. This article analyzes the mechanism underlying villager group self-governance in the rural governance system in terms of how it fits into the organization of social governance. The article also delves into the important issue of what makes villager group self-governance possible.

Introduction to the Field Research Sites

Taiqing Village, in Guanzhong, Shaanxi, has had a tradition of group self-governance since 1980. Taiqing Village has five natural villages, eight villager groups, 710 households with 2,908 people, and 5,500 mu of arable land,[2] of which 4,200 mu are planted in kiwifruit. Taiqing Village has a leading Communist Party branch and several subordinate branches, the number of which can rise or fall according to the number of party members in the village. At present, there are four subordinate branches. In 2017, the village's per capita disposable income reached 16,309 yuan. During the people's commune period, the five natural villages gradually merged into one production brigade—Taiqing Production Brigade. In 1980, under the household contracting system, the land was allocated to the households of Taiqing. To keep the population and land area of each villager group more or less equal, three of Taiqing's natural villages (Yujiayuan, Taiqingpu, and Qijiapu) created two villager groups each, and the other two natural villages (Caojia and Sujiacun) created one each. After the land was allocated to households, villager groups became in effect the grassroots governance unit. Thus far, each villager group in Taiqing has kept some collective reserved land, that is land set aside by the collective to be used for readjusting the amount of land contracted and for contracting to new residents. In addition, each has the power to reallocate the land of the

[2] One mu equals 666.6 square meters, or about 0.16 acres.

villager group, dispose of the group's other property, and decide questions involving public affairs. Each also has the preliminary right to approve various types of villagers' certificates. Based on in-depth case analysis, the discussion that follows will systematically examine the basis of the power of villager groups as well as the incentives and the risk-prevention mechanism of group self-governance, thus expanding the research on the practice and theory of villagers' self-governance. It will also provide policy recommendations for advancing the modernization of grassroots governance. The empirical materials for this article come from rural surveys recently conducted by the first author and affiliated research groups in Shaanxi, Hubei, Henan, Shandong, Guangdong, Guangxi, Zhejiang, and other provinces. The cases discussed in the article are mainly from research conducted from 2016 to 2019 in Taiqing Village.

The Power Structure and the Foundation of Villager Groups

The academic research on the lowering of rural self-governance units is mainly limited to divining which level—villager groups or natural villages—is the more suitable for village self-governance. However, there has been hardly any research on the internal power structure and basis of villager groups. As a complete first-level self-governance unit, the villager group requires a full panoply of governance capabilities to match its governance tasks. From the perspective of public service, group governance requires financial power, regulatory power, governance power, and basic personnel power. These four powers are closely related to the regional political, economic, and social system environment.

The Power Structure of Group Governance

Michael Mann (2012 [1993]) divides power into infrastructural power and despotic power. The former refers to the state's ability to penetrate local society and induce the people to

voluntarily obey. The latter refers to the exercise of power without the consent of the people. Wang Shaoguang (2014) further subdivides the basic power of the state into eight capabilities: compulsion, absorption, penetration, certification, regulation, command, redistribution, fusion, and integration. Using this scheme, one can compare the power structure of macrostate governance with that of the villager group as a micro-autonomous unit, and note that the villager group requires four particular powers: financial power (absorption ability), governance power (regulation and command ability), administrative power (decision-making and redistribution ability), and personnel power.

Group financial power

Finance is the foundation of public governance. The financial power of villager groups includes management, generating profits, and distributing the group's collective assets. Generally, the purpose of group governance is mainly to attend to public problems that the individual household is unable to solve. This can include, for example, providing drinking water, building roads, and operating water conservancy projects. To effectively provide public goods such as these depends on the ability of the villager group to obtain funds. In addition, the group has daily operating expenses, such as the salaries of the group leader, cashier, and accountant; the provision of public sanitation; and the maintenance of the area set aside as a green belt. Our investigation found that the income of the villager groups mainly comes from three sources: the regular income of the group, such as from contracting reserved land and transferring collective assets; funds raised from group members for public projects, following the principle of "one project, one meeting" 一事一议;[3] and government

[3] After China abolished agricultural taxes and fees in 2006, the overall planning of projects by township governments and the fund retention system in the villages (such as management

project funds and village committee appropriations.

In the 1980s, village land begin to be allocated to households. Taiqing Village stipulated that each villager group should reserve 10 percent of its collective land, mainly to be used to pay group cadres' wages and the group's public expenditures. At the same time, the villager groups in Taiqing and surrounding villages have retained the right to adjust the distribution of land among the villagers and have implemented a flexible policy of "the land contracting relationship should remain unchanged for thirty years, but the contracted area should be adjusted slightly every five years." This ensures the fair distribution of land rights. As their population grew, some groups began to allocate part of the reserved land to villagers with little or no arable land. However, given the need to maintain public services, every group in Taiqing has retained a certain amount of reserved land.[4] Some groups have even retained 10

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fees, public accumulation funds, and public welfare funds collected from villagers annually) were abolished. The central government stipulated that local government should establish public services that directly benefit villagers and no longer collect fees from peasants for such services. Thus, the "one matter, one discussion (or meeting) system" has become the method of raising funds to reduce the burden on farmers. The "matter" usually consists of public welfare projects that the villagers support, such as farmland water conservancy construction, road construction, and water supply projects. The "discussion (or meeting)" refers to the method whereby the beneficiaries of public affairs can independently negotiate an agreement and make decisions on public projects. In practice, group members are usually the beneficiary units of projects, and the resolution method is usually the household representative meeting.

[4] When land was distributed to households during the 1980s, the villager groups retained a few fields to cover increases in the population and anticipated collective public expenditures in the village. Thus, the use of villager groups' reserved land is flexible. Later this land

percent of the village's fields as reserved land. Aside from their reserved land, groups also have some other collective assets such as barren mountains, barren slopes, and temples. Compared with other parts of the country, the villager groups in Taiqing have relatively ample assets, as shown in Table 1.

evolved into a collective asset of the villager group, but by then most such groups had already carved up these public resources.

Table 1. Collective assets and liabilities of the villager groups in Taiqing Village, August 2019

Group	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7	Group 8
Population	303	480	251	300	410	390	335	420
Collective land (mu)	700	1,200	440	400	500	680	670	500
Reserved land (mu)	80	Farmland: 100 Woodland: 100	50	15	15	70	80	35
Other assets	Barren mountain; one temple	One barren mountain, six temples	One temple	One temple	One barren mountain; one temple	One temple	One temple	One temple
Debt (10,000 yuan)	7	7.5	0	2.5	3	1	0	0
Accumulated funds (10,000 yuan)					20		6	

Note: The fee for contracting reserved land is as follows: Groups 3 and 6: 350 yuan per mu per year; Group 7: 500 yuan per mu per year; Group 8: 300 yuan per mu per year; Groups 1, 2, 4, and 5: 100–200 yuan per mu per year.

As Table 1 shows, all eight of the groups have their own reserved land. It is this land that provides the most stable source of income for villager groups in China's central and western regions, where the collective economy is weak. Reserved land, as we have noted, provides the funds for paying group cadres' wages, repaying collective debts, and providing public services. Before 2018, each group in Taiqing Village had three civil servants: a group leader, an accountant, and a cashier. The annual salary of each ranged from 2,000 to 3,000 yuan and was paid out of the income of the group. In 2018, the county implemented a rural cadre wage reform whereby responsibility for paying the wages of rural cadres, generally between 5,000–8,000 yuan a year, was transferred to the village. In addition, the village manages group accounts collectively, and the branch secretary serves as group cashier.

Group regulatory power and autonomous power

Group regulatory power refers to the power to direct villagers in accordance with village rules and regulations, and involves such things as dealing with conflicts and disputes, punishing "nail households" (households that stubbornly resist the implementation of public policies) as a part of managing public affairs, disciplining free-rider members, allocating and adjusting collective land, and so on. Autonomous power refers to the power of groups to make independent decisions about what to do and not do. This is obviously different from the administrative-type operations of village committees.

In Taiqing Village, which mainly raises cash crops, the right to contract land is one of the most important rights of the villagers. Adjustments to the allocation of contracted land have become a symbolic event demonstrating the fairness of governance in the village. Since the implementation of the contracting to the household policy in the 1980s, each group in Taiqing routinely engages in a "slight change of land allocation every few years." However, some group members are always unwilling to accept a reduction in their land as the size of

their household shrinks. For this, the group usually proposes two solutions. First, peasants who do not withdraw from the land should pay the group a contract fee set at the market price, and then the group will give the money to peasants who are entitled to more land. Second, peasants who are neither willing to withdraw from the land nor pay the contract fee will no longer be allowed to use the public services provided by the group, such as irrigation and various certifications. In addition, the group leader has the obligation to provide judicial relief. When there are disputes over neighborhood boundaries and residential plots, the group leader must come to mediate. Otherwise, he or she will be regarded as incapable, which can even induce villagers to launch petitions.

Unlike the village committee, the villager group has the relatively autonomous right to decide whether to do something, such as accepting households from outside as members of the group, or building garbage dumps, water towers, roads, and so on. After the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees, the relationship between peasants and land has been attenuated. From 2004 to 2014, many villager groups accepted households from other villages as a way of solving the problem of a shortage of collective funds. The newly arrived settlers paid 5,000–10,000 yuan to the group in return for the same right to land as group members (about 1.5 mu per person). According to law, the village committee has the right to decide whether to accept migrants. However, actual decision-making power lies with the villager group because all the rights, such as the right to land that migrants want to share, are held by the group. In 2017, the Taiqing village committee wanted to set up a garbage dump in a naturally-occurring pit that belonged to Group 8, for which the committee would pay the group 500 yuan per mu. However, the representatives of Group 8 thought that the pit was more valuable and rejected the committee's decision. In 2010, the whole village launched a tap water improvement project. Two villager groups (Groups 5 and 8) were unwilling to pay because some peasants believed that the original drinking water system was adequate. In the

end, the groups decided not to undertake this project. Hence this collective action failed. (On collective actions, see Olson, 1989.)

Group personnel power

In recent years, because the Taiqing village committee has taken over the management of some of the villager groups' affairs, the latter's personnel power/rights have been shrinking. However, the traditional democratic election of group leaders and village representatives survives and guarantees the groups' power to appoint and dismiss personnel. In practice, the handling of public affairs within the villager groups usually is subject to the full democratic governance process, including villagers' representative meetings and household representative meetings. One villager representative is usually selected by five to ten households, with about eight representatives in one group. Each household selects one person from the household as a member of the household representative meeting. With the support of the village cadres or branch secretary, the leader of each group is usually elected from the corresponding household representative meetings. If a villager group cannot agree on the selection of its leader, the village committee will designate the group leader. Thus, the personnel power of choosing the group leader within the villager group lies at the organizational foundation of group self-governance.

The basic principle of the reform of the rural administrative system is consistency of responsibilities and rights. The fundamental reason why Taiqing's villager groups can provide so many public services and perform their governance function is that they enjoy sufficient governance power. The financial, governance, administrative, and personnel powers that each group still retains have become the institutional potential for group governance. This is the secret behind the nearly forty years of successful group governance in Taiqing.

The Political, Economic, and Social Foundation of Group Governance

Villager groups in different regions obviously have different governance capabilities. In some areas, villager groups exist in name only, rendering grassroots work impossible. In other areas, however, villager groups exercise real self-governance. Villager groups that perform their governance functions well are, without exception, those that enjoy sufficient governance powers. However, villager groups are not naturally endowed with these governance powers. Our investigation has shown that the collective property rights system, acquaintance society, and administrative empowerment constitute the essential material, social, and political foundation for effective group governance.

The foundation for property rights: Collective land ownership

The "three-level ownership system, with production teams as the base" 三级所有，队为基础 formed during the people's commune era directly affected the choice of property rights units in rural China when farmland was allocated to households. As a result, production teams, which are nowadays called villager groups, have become the unit of collective landownership. The collective ownership of rural land not only has guaranteed the political status of the public ownership of the means of production, but also has laid both the institutional foundation for an ethical and fair approach to the villager group's land rights and the economic foundation for group governance.

As the collective property unit, the villager group not only owns the group's farmland but also has the unfettered right to occupy, use, and dispose of all public resources of the group, such as roads, water conservancy facilities, barren slopes and ditches, temples, and woodland. From a sociological perspective, property rights are a bundle that includes governance functions such as disposal, distribution, adjustment, regulation, and punishment

(Cao Zhenghan, 2008). Based on their right to collective property, villager groups are a community of interests and bear the responsibility for managing, regulating, and redistributing collective assets. Managing water conservancy projects, public forests, temples, and temple fairs, and building roads has become the main source of legitimacy for villager groups.

At present there are two trends in the practice of governance in rural China: the governance of collective property rights and governance based on collective property rights. The former has mainly occurred in the developed rural areas of the Pearl River Delta. Most of the land in this area has become marketable due to the industrialization and urbanization in the delta. Villager group governance in this case revolves around the distribution of land rental income, the separation of village committees from village collective stock cooperatives, and the controversy over whether women who have married men in other villages but retained their *hukou* in their natal village have a right to collective shares and dividends from the natal village. Thus, the collective economy has become the core content of grassroots governance in the delta. In contrast, the vast majority of rural collective land in central and western China has not yet been marketized and village governance lacks endogenous economic resources. This has led to the weakening of rural collective property rights and the hollowing out of the collective economy, a serious challenge facing rural governance today.

Social foundation: The regional social community

Villager groups have become a regional social community due to their history, consanguinity, and geographic ties. (On social communities, see Tönnies, 2010 [1887].) It is this that provides an important social foundation for group governance in village society. In social practice, the villager group is not only a unit of production assistance between villagers, but also a unit of social identification, action, and communication. For example, weddings and

other celebratory occasions in the Guanzhong countryside are all based on the villager group and kinship as the unit of communication. Temples are scattered across various villager groups, and are usually under the management of such groups. Religious activities are also based on these groups. Social interactions, production exchanges, religious fairs, and public participation in festivals all form a basis for consensus and norms and provide informal institutional resources for group social governance. Villager group governance fully reflects the autonomous character of governance in an acquaintance society. Therefore, it is different not only from the administrative governance of village government, but also from the service-oriented governance of urban communities as well as from legalized governance based on formal rules.

For a long time village customs have been the cultural basis for the stability of the grassroots social order. Public norms are folk laws that restrict villagers' behavior and guide the resolution of social conflicts. Guanxi based on the logic of reciprocity is another important governance mechanism in rural acquaintance society. Previous studies have proposed several similar concepts such as "semi-formal administration," semi-formal governance, and the informal operation of formal power (Sun and Guo, 2000; Huang Zongzhi, 2008), which fully reflect the social aspect of grassroots governance. Obviously, modern grassroots governance is not a matter of simply replacing these governance models, with their stable social structures and deep cultural traditions of an acquaintance society, with governance via digital technology, or administrative actions, or legal norms. Rather, it is a matter of mixing and respecting each orientation. But social autonomy in villages will remain the main feature of villager group governance.

Political basis: Unit recognition and administrative empowerment

The villager group is a geographic, social, and political community. It has both top-down

legal and administrative political legitimacy and bottom-up social legitimacy. Although the villager group is not a formal part of the government bureaucracy, the law recognizes it as having the status of a unit that exercises governance and is vested with the power to carry out its mission. Villager groups are charged with cooperating with village-level authorities and undertaking self-governance within the group. Article 3 of the Organic Law of Village Committees (as amended in 2010) states that "Village committees may establish several villager groups based on villagers' living conditions and collective land ownership relations," legally confirming the role of villager groups as a secondary governance unit of the village. Villager groups are important organizers and participants in the election of village committees and the governance of village-level affairs. For example, Article 12 stipulates that "the village election committee shall be composed of a chairman and members, and is elected from the villagers' meeting or the villager representative meeting or the villager group meetings"; Article 25 stipulates that "a village with a large number of people or scattered inhabitants may establish a villager representative meeting to discuss and decide on matters authorized by the villagers' meeting. Five to fifteen households elect one villager representative, or every villager group elects its own representatives. The villager representative shall be responsible to the household or his or her villager group, and accept villagers' supervision." The law also stipulates how the villager group leader is elected and details the content and methods of group governance. The law clearly states that the villager group meeting elects the villager group leader, and that the term in office of the leader is the same as that of the villager committee. Furthermore, group leaders can be reelected. This law also stipulates that "the operation and management of collectively owned land, enterprises and other property belonging to the villager group, as well as the handling of public welfare matters, shall be discussed and decided by the villager group meeting in accordance with the law, and the decision and implementation process shall be open to the group members in a

timely fashion." A villager group meeting requires a quorum of more than two-thirds of the group members over eighteen years of age or more than two-thirds of the household representatives in the group, and decisions made by the group require the approval of at least half of the participants.

It can be seen from the above that legally the villager group has relatively complete power of self-governance. However, self-governance has been intentionally or unintentionally ignored in most places, and villager groups are either absent or have been absorbed into the village government. In order to stir up their enthusiasm, the Taiqing village committee has given more power to the groups. For example, when villagers go to the village committee to get documents certified, those documents must first bear the official seal of the villager group. Since the village committee is a governance unit recognized by the state, its seal plays a vital role in confirming and authenticating a wide variety of things: villagers' education, employment, credit for buying houses or cars, transferring household registration, and others. Villager groups enjoy the authority conferred by the official committee seal, which provides administrative legitimacy and institutional resources for managing the free-rider problem. Practice has shown that the administrative empowerment of villager groups in Taiqing Village has made the distribution of responsibility and power more balanced and self-governance more effective at the micro-grassroots level.

The practice of villager group self-governance

The importance of the villager group for its members lies in the fact that it can accomplish things that a single family is unable or unwilling to do and effectively provide public goods to support villagers' agricultural production and material and cultural life. The public governance matters of Taiqing's villager groups can be categorized as follows: first, public sanitation, including the picking up of trash; second, management of residential plots,

including the planning and allocation of the plots, and timely prevention of disorderly and excessive occupation; third, the mediation of disputes; fourth, the supply and maintenance of public goods, including the group's motorized wells, roads, tap water, natural gas, etc.; fifth, land adjustments and daily affairs. The villager group must not only carry out all these undertakings but must also assist the village committee in carrying out such tasks as family planning, environmental improvement, targeted poverty alleviation, the promotion of agricultural technology, and so on. In 2018, the payment of the wages of the villager group leaders in Taiqing was transferred to the village committee, thus drawing the villager groups and the village committee closer in personnel matters. The villager committee has become the key link between national administration and social self-governance, and the villager group has become the main field for realizing villager self-governance.

Three types of activities reveal the complexity of villager group self-governance. First, the self-governance of cultural activities. The rural areas of Guanzhong enjoy a rich historical and cultural heritage. Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and folk religious activities are found throughout the countryside. Almost every village has a temple fair of one size or another. During temple fairs, villagers set off firecrackers, play drums, burn incense, perform rituals, recite scriptures, and watch performances of Qin opera. Temple fairs are a cultural event for people to visit relatives, return to their parents' homes, and go shopping (Zhao and Zhang, 2012). Temple fairs in the Guanzhong countryside are usually held at three levels: the villager group, the natural village, and the administrative village. No matter the level, the villager group is the fundamental unit. As in rural areas in southern China, in Guanzhong peasants actively participate in folk religious activities, and are even more willing to contribute money to religious activities and the construction of religious sites. To regulate rural cultural activities, the Taiqing village committee stipulates that villager group cadres can personally participate in and organize temple fairs. However, using village and group

public funds is not allowed. Taiqing's villager Group 1, with the approval of the villager representative meeting, decided to draw on the group's funds to help pay for the construction of a temple. However, the village party secretary disapproved the proposal. The group members thus asked for donations and raised more than 100,000 yuan to build the temple. Temple fairs are typically a self-governance activity through which public norms and the ability to take collective action are produced, thereby becoming an important local resource for villager group governance. This reflects the unity of social identity, belief, and emotion in the villages.

Second, democratic governance of group public assets. Around 2010, Group 5 in Taiqing earned 200,000 yuan by selling wasteland soil. The group leader suggested investing the 200,000 yuan in building a sightseeing park. However, many members disagreed and asked for a share of the money. Later, the group representative meeting decided to use this money to fund a cooperative medical insurance scheme. The funds were used up within five years. Group 8 also took advantage of the opportunity to sell wasteland soil for a profit. Later, because the trucks carrying the soil were noisy and raised dust and damaged the roads, the residents became very upset. Group 8 held a meeting of household representatives to discuss whether to continue selling the soil, and finally decided not to do so. These two incidents illustrate that final decisions that affect the villager groups are made through discussion among the members of the group, and not by the group leader, who has no arbitrary decision-making power. This fact fully reflects the democratic nature of group self-governance (Ji Lixin, 2016).

Third, collective action in the supply of group public goods. Guanzhong has a dry climate, and most villagers use underground water tanks to store rain as drinking water. In 1990, to ensure a supply of clean domestic water, the villagers of Groups 5 and 8, located in the natural village of Qijiapu, decided after discussion to cooperate in the construction of a

water tower, with the cost to be divided among all members according to their land allocation. Aside from two low-income families in these groups, all the other villagers paid on time and the drinking water project was successfully completed. In 2010, Taiqing administrative village obtained a national drinking water project covering Groups 4 and 7 in Taiqingpu and Groups 5 and 8 in Qijiapu. The villagers in Groups 4 and 7 had long suffered the inconvenience of having to buy water from other groups and quickly raised the needed funds. However, during the village consultation meeting in Qijiapu, several villagers complained that the original facilities were still available and there was no need for new investment. Furthermore, these people mobilized many villagers to oppose the water tower project. After two consultation meetings, the Qijiapu community decided not to build a water tower. In 2016, our research group found that most of the villagers in Qijiapu regretted their decision. Also in that year the villager committee tried its best to win a drinking water project again for Groups 5 and 8. The total cost of project was 760,000 yuan, of which the government would provide 260,000 yuan, leaving it up to the villagers to raise the balance of 500,000 yuan themselves. The group consultation meetings finally decided that villagers who lived in the village for a long time would be assessed 300 yuan per person, while villagers who lived outside the village for a long time would pay a reduced amount—600 yuan per family, considering that these families usually have more than two members.

To advance the fund-raising work, the two groups each elected three villagers responsible for leading the group, collecting money, and managing accounts. Two days after this was announced, our research team followed the fund-raising group to the peasants' homes and found that most peasants supported the fund-raising drive, but were still hesitant. The group leader, who has extensive experience in village affairs, told us that "a person usually has to go three times to a peasant's house to collect all the money they owe." To ensure a successful launch, the group leader advanced 57,600 yuan of his own money and

then had to wait to get reimbursed.

The above three types of cases show three aspects of group self-governance. In collective folk cultural activities supported by regional habits, the people exhibit a high degree of spontaneous participation, and the villager groups only need to exercise simple governance to ensure safety and standards, which highlights the nongovernmental aspect of the group. In the management of group public assets, the groups' residents fully discuss issues such as the use of collective assets and the distribution of collective income, which highlights the democratic aspect of group governance. In the supply of public goods such as drinking water projects and road construction, it is necessary to mobilize the group villagers through meetings, discussions, and persuasion, and to deal with "nail households" through collective resolutions and public rules to avoid the phenomenon of "the tragedy of the anticommons" (Heller, 2009: ix). Thus, since the villager group is a political and social community, the nongovernmental, democratic, and public coercive aspects of its governance are inherent constituents of its social power and act to strengthen the social foundation for its existence, operation, and development.

The Incentive Structure of Villager Group Self-Governance

Since the group leader always faces the problem of offending people and has too many tasks and too little money, why are people nonetheless willing to be a group leader and actively work for the sake of the group? Where does the incentive for group governance come from? Apart from obvious material benefits, are there other sources for villagers' self-governance? The following discussion will analyze the incentive structure of villager group self-governance from the perspective of regional politics and society.

The Interest Linkage Mechanism within Regional Society

In his study of village governance in North China, Prasenjit Duara (1991) discussed governance via what he termed “entrepreneurial brokerage” and “protective brokerage” and pointed out two types of incentives—social benefits and economic benefits—available to village cadres. He Xuefeng and Ako Tomoko (2006) also argue that village cadres cannot play a role as active agents if they do not expect to receive economic or social rewards. The economic rewards they refer to largely consist of the informal income of village cadres, such as the misappropriation of public resources, illegal private gains from providing public services, illegal selling of collective resources, and even embezzlement of collective assets (see also Feng and Li, 2012). In China’s post-tax era, the structure that created opportunities for villager group cadres to rake in illegal gains by providing services has been institutionally eliminated. However, national project resources awarded to rural areas have provided a new opportunity structure for rural cadres to exploit (Chen Feng, 2015). More importantly, assuming the mantle of a villager group cadre has become an important avenue for peasants to enter the regional social network in order to benefit both socially and financially.

In practice, a group leader can obtain material resources and political status from the administrative system and from things such as economic relationships brought about by the status. In 2018 in Taiqing Village, for example, the annual salary of a group leader was increased from 2,000–3,000 yuan to 6,380 yuan, and the village committee awarded nearly double the salary to those with an outstanding performance review. An income of this size is still an attraction for peasants or people running small businesses in the villages of midwest China. In addition to a salary, the villager group leader receives subsidies for meetings and work. The group leader may also receive gifts such as tobacco and alcohol from villagers after handling official or private affairs for them. For the group leader, this is a double reward since it is both material and emotional. However, for village cadres, the expansion of relationships and market opportunities brought about by their cadre status is a more practical

concern.

Our research in rural areas such as Hancheng in Shaanxi, Ninghai in Zhejiang, and Yuncheng in Shanxi found that many business owners vie to become village committee cadres or villager group leaders. Their main purpose is to improve the level of their social ties through acquiring the status of a village committee cadre or villager group leader and counter their reputation as "vulgar high rollers," as well as to take advantage of the opportunity to expand their social network and access to market resources. In the context of the merging of administrative villages in China, there are few village cadre positions. However, many villagers compete for the position of group leader because the leader exercises the actual power of the villager group and its administrative unit usually overlaps with the physical unit of the natural village. The villager group leader is collectively referred to as the "small village chief." Many of the cadres in Taiqing's villager groups are business owners. For example, the Taiqing village party secretary owns a business with over ten million yuan in assets, and at least four of the eight group leaders own businesses dealing in lumber, fruit, furniture, cold storage, and others. In the Taiqing area kiwi, plums, peaches, and other fruits are abundant. Many local villagers are fruit brokers and fruit distributors. When merchants from all over the country gather, being a villager cadre is the best guarantee of political credibility in front of unfamiliar merchants and peasants. This often brings more business to villager cadres. According to statistics, 80 percent of Taiqing's villager group cadres run fruit businesses and fruit agencies. And fruit commission agents can make about 100,000 yuan a month. Therefore, the expansion of relationships, businesses, and market opportunities brought about by their cadre status is far more important than the material benefits such as the salary that comes with their position.

The Reputation Mechanism within the Acquaintance Society

Currently, rural village cadres and group cadres are wealthy peasants who usually are private business owners (Chen Wenqiong, 2020) and middle-class peasants who are comfortably well-off (He Xuefeng, 2016). According to national surveys, peasants on the middle and lower rungs of society rarely serve as village leaders. This is because they usually have no incentive and little ability to serve as village leaders and because villagers typically do not believe they can be good leaders. In addition to the incentive of material benefits, trust, competition, and face-saving within the acquaintance society are also sources of incentives for peasants to serve as village/group leaders.

In the Guanzhong countryside, it is almost impossible for people who are selfish or have a bad character to be elected as a village/group cadre. When we interviewed seven group leaders in Taiqing Village and asked why they had become group leaders, their main explanation was that since the villagers had collectively recommended them, they felt obligated to accept. Moreover, they felt they had to do a good job for the sake of face. Face is the prestige of an individual in society. Having face is a sign of a person's success in life. Some peasants even commit suicide for the sake of personal face and reputation (Wu Fei, 2009: 181–84). Face can exist at two levels. The first is a social evaluation at the public level, such as the virtue of safeguarding the public interest of the village. The second is a social evaluation at the private level, which is mainly related to personal behavior, career achievements, family success, and other social evaluations. Those who serve as villager group leaders because of their dedication to public welfare and who live up to the trust the public has in them are mainly promoted by the reputation mechanism at the public level, and those who serve as group leaders because of personal and family reputation are mainly promoted by the reputation mechanism at the private level.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes the principle of collectivism. Therefore, people devoted to public affairs and who act fairly in the village often enjoy a good reputation, and

village leaders are generally elected from among such people. D, the leader of Group 4, was born in 1950 in Taiqing Village, and has a straightforward personality and is public spirited. He was elected as group leader twice, in 1980 and again in 1986. In 1987, he led the villagers in building water wells, which turned 300 mu of barren land into a fertile fields. In 2007, D was reelected as the group leader. After he took office, he found that the group got bogged down in adjusting land allocations. Thus, he adopted the policy whereby any household that fails to pay its contract fee cannot use the group's motorized wells to water their land. This step finally enabled him to collect the arrears. In 2008, D, together with other group leaders and five branch secretaries, reported many times to the township government that the accounts were chaotic and the work of the village committee cadres was not welcomed, requesting that the village committees be strengthened. His appeal led to committee elections. As a result, D was elected as the director of the village supervision committee in 2013. D, who has resigned many times and was recommended as the team leader by villagers many times, can hardly say that he has obtained obvious material rewards from his position, but his social recognition and high praise have become the driving force for him to work hard on behalf of the villagers.

While the village acquaintance society establishes public norms for villagers, it also invites comparisons of reputation, face, and status among villagers, which causes reputation competition in the village. The position of village cadre is not only a symbol of a person's high social reputation and face, but also can be a sign of a family or clan's reputational status in the village. Although it has been more than forty years since the launch of the reform and opening up, the status of the matrilocal son-in-law in most villages is still low. To prove that he is his own man, F, a matrilocal son-in-law from northern Shaanxi in Taiqing village's Group 3, vigorously ran for the village leader position in order to change his personal image. In 2004, F, then thirty-two years old, was elected group leader. At that time, the group was

38,000 yuan in debt. However, under his leadership, the group hardened all the muddy roads in the group in 2005 and fixed all the field roads and motorized wells. F got all the funds for these projects from higher-level departments instead from the villagers. This brought him social recognition for his ability. Subsequently, F was elected the deputy director of the village committee in 2011, the village committee director in 2018, and took over as the secretary of the village branch of the Communist Party in July 2019.

Rural society is different from urban society. Everyone in a village lives in a close social network and is subject to public evaluation. The social reputation mechanism based on public opinion establishes the standard for an individual's social success. It has also generated an incentive for villagers to obey public rules, actively promote themselves, and run for public office.

The Administrative Incentive Mechanism in Grassroots Government

Philip Selznick (1953 [1949]) pointed out that no matter what the goal of an organization is, it faces the simple problem of seeking survival in its own institutional environment, and hence the organization should be regarded as an "adaptive structure." Villager group self-governance is not free from outside interference. Rather, it is involved in a process of continuous communication and negotiation with the external environment, local government, and market entities. Since the villager group is the nation's most basic self-governance unit, its exercise of governance is inevitably affected by the local government. In addition, official administrative incentives also constitute one of the incentives for the active governance of villager groups.

That the village committee pays the wages of the group leaders of Taiqing Village suggests that the leaders are answerable to the committee. In fact, Taiqing's group leaders are officially required to assist the village committee in carrying out its work. The target

responsibility assessment system in the formal bureaucracy has also been applied to the management of villager groups. In 2018, Taiqing Village raised the group leaders' salary to 6,380 yuan a year and introduced annual performance bonuses of 5,000 yuan. The bonuses were mainly paid based on work performance assessment scores, which were calculated according to a deduction method. That is to say, failure to attain a required target resulted in the deduction of points from the assessment score. The evaluation criteria fall into three categories. The first is purely administrative work (20 points). This includes attending to the daily work involved in the government's rural revitalization campaign so as to ensure its smooth operation, which entails cooperating with rural cadres to complete various tasks: family planning, targeted poverty alleviation, agricultural insurance, technology promotion, telecommunications and power grids, post and telecommunications, cultural and entertainment work, and preparing various statistical reports. The second is work involving villagers' self-governance (20 points). This includes resolving conflicts and maintaining public facilities such as motorized wells, roads, tap water, and natural gas in the group. The third is both administrative and self-governance work (60 points), which mainly includes environmental sanitation and residential plot management. The assessment of all these types of work is divided into two forms: daily assessment and year-end assessment. Failure to meet the targets specified in the daily assessment will result in fines and the deduction of points. The year-end assessment is organized by the village party secretary, the village director, the director of the supervisory committee, and the four branch secretaries. The group leaders are required to report on their annual work to an appraisal group. The appraisal group assesses the daily and annual work of the group leaders and awards points accordingly, thus arriving at the group leaders' performance assessment score and corresponding performance rewards. In 2018, the highest salary among group leaders in Taiqing Village was 10,000 yuan, and the lowest was more than 3,000 yuan, which was generally higher than in previous years.

Therefore, getting a favorable performance evaluation was an obvious incentive for group leaders to perform their duties.

Aside from wielding salary incentives, village cadres also promote group work through mechanisms such as branch secretary supervision, rankings determined through meetings, admission into the party, and removal of group leaders. Convening a group leader meeting is an important mechanism for the village committee to promote various tasks. At these meetings, village cadres will openly report the recent work of each group leader and their ranking of scores to stimulate reputation competition among the group leaders. “Don’t strive to be the best, but at least don’t be the worst” 不争工作最先进、起码不能最差 has become the working philosophy of many group leaders. In their study of the supervision of police behavior, Brehm and Gates (1993) pointed out that the influence of employees’ attitudes on the level of absenteeism is far greater than the supervision of managers. They argued that if organizations seek to reduce absenteeism, they need to encourage friendship between police officers, cultivate a sense of doing the right thing, and finally form mutual emotional constraints and reputation maintenance mechanisms. Villager group leaders who do an outstanding job can be rewarded not only with a high salary, but also with a recommendation to support an application for Communist Party membership. They may also be promoted into the ranks of village cadres. Almost all the cadres of the committees in Taiqing Village once worked as group leaders. The villager group has thus become a breeding ground for village cadres. In short, being a group leader undoubtedly carries with it strong incentives for peasants who want to get ahead politically.

Practice has shown that any group with stable leadership and a responsible work style will have clearer finances, a fairer distribution of benefits, and a greater supply of public goods. Village-level governance in this case will generally be positive and enterprising. Since the villager group is the governance unit most directly connected with the villagers, the

quality of the work of the villager group steps into the picture of the overall situation of social self-governance, grassroots governance, and information governance at the national level. Improving the power structure of villager group governance and making the income expectations of group leaders consistent have become the key to promoting effective group governance.

Construction of a Risk-Prevention Mechanism for Villager Group Self-Governance

The countryside is the foundation of national politics. Therefore, village cadres' ethics and political competence directly affect the success or failure of the construction of grassroots political power. Some scholars have pointed out that the current "micro-corruption" behaviors of village cadres, such as the embezzlement of collective assets, state poverty alleviation relief funds, agricultural subsidies, and funds for returning farmland to forests, are eroding the foundation of the party's rule (Wang, Chen, and Yu, 2009; Shen Xiaopeng, 2017). However, since previous studies generally regard the village committee as the lowest-level governance entity and unit, they have generally overlooked the fact that the governance risks and prevention mechanisms of villager groups are an important part of the rural governance system.

Types of Risks

From the perspective of the practice of governance, the villager group is the smallest governance unit with complete governance power, the key point of interaction between the state and society and an important field for integrating administration and self-governance. Nevertheless, there are three types of risks attached to its self-governance function: political risk, economic risk, and moral hazard.

The political risk of confrontation between village and group

In recent years, with the policy calling for exploring the effectiveness of various potential units of villagers' self-governance and with the advancement of academic research, villager groups and natural villages have gradually attracted the attention of the academic community. It is generally thought that governance at these levels will promotes grassroots democratization. However, villager group governance is subject to the political risk that the government can easily absorb such groups as a micro-administrative unit instead of allowing them to maintain their democratic and self-governing nature. As we have noted, the village committee of Taiqing Village pays the salaries of the villager group leaders, and has thereby drawn them into the village administrative organization. At present, the administrative tasks assigned by superiors account for more than half of the daily work of the villager group leaders. Obviously, rural grassroots government has an incentive and desire to manage and supervise the group leader. However, once the group leader is administrated like a village cadre, group self-governance loses its meaning. In this situation, villager self-governance cannot exist unless some other source of support could be found. This is exactly why scholars have opposed the administrativeization of village cadres.

From another perspective, a villager group with complete governance power has the ability and foundation needed for self-governance. It can handle all kinds of affairs within the group on its own and has the right to reject the work arrangements proposed by the village government. Specifically, this right of rejection reflects the scope of villager group self-governance, such as whether to agree to build a garbage dump in the group, accept the settlement of residents from other villages, and so on. However, the group cannot refuse compulsory administrative work and policies, such as family planning, a ban on burning, and policies on low-income households. It is easy to see that there is a clash between social democratic self-governance and administrative intervention. Our survey found that the

greater the separation of the villager group from the administrative village in terms of spatial distance and public services, the stronger the desire and incentive for self-governance and the stronger the villagers' recognition and response to the group leader. For example, Group 1 in Caojia Village is 1.5 kilometers away from the village committee. This makes it difficult for the elderly residents in Group 1 to walk to the village committee compound to enjoy the free lunches available there. In addition, more than 80 percent of the villagers in the Caojia group are surnamed Cao, and the villager group overlaps with the natural village. The spatial and psychological distance makes for division and confrontation with the village. In 2008, the Taiqing village director, who was from the Caojia villager group and was surnamed Cao, was ousted by the villagers, causing most of the group's villagers to lose face. In the 2012 election of the village committee, the villagers of the Caojia group gave their full support to someone surnamed Wu, which caused D, a good candidate from the perspective of village administrative organization, to lose the election. This left the village power structure unbalanced.

The current political risks of group self-governance are, first, that the village administration constricts the space for group self-governance, since it deprives the villagers of both a spokesperson for self-governance and a space for action. Second, villager group self-governance is antagonistic to rural administrative organizations. In order to protect the interests of the villagers, villager groups with strong self-governance capabilities are likely to refuse to cooperate with the work of the village administrative organization. They may also have different opinions and interests from those of the village. This confrontation increases the instability of policy implementation. One of the directions of the development of grassroots politics could be building a protective consultation system that guarantees space for self-governance by villager groups and reduces the clash between administration and self-governance (Yang and Guo, 2015).

The economic risk of embezzlement

Economic interests are one of the forces driving group governance. However, a single-minded pursuit of economic interests will damage the foundation of villagers' self-governance. Collective assets are a source of power for maintaining the normal operation of the villager group and are also its most vulnerable resources. A study has pointed out that in recent years, the number of cases of micro-corruption of village cadres has been increasing, the amount peculated has been rising, and the harm has become increasingly severe (Liu Ziping, 2018).

In June 2019, after two inspections by the Taiqing Village Supervisory Committee, it was discovered that the leaders of Groups 3 and 6 in the natural village of Yujiayuan had embezzled assets of their groups worth 42,000 yuan and 50,000 yuan, respectively. The leaders of these two groups secretly contracted 120 mu of reserved land (with a lease period of two years) in 2014, and the two secretly shared the 84,000 yuan generated by the contract. Because the contract payment was not recorded in the account books, the group was unaware that there were problems. In addition, the villagers were not clear about the price and duration of contracts for collective reserved land. This information asymmetry gave the group leaders an opening. The leader of Group 3 resigned in 2016, and the leader of Group 6 embezzled 8,000 yuan of group funds during his three-year term. The two returned all the money, and the debt of 43,000 yuan in Group 3 was basically eliminated while the debt of 60,000 yuan in Group 6 was whittled down to 10,000 yuan. The group leaders were able to use information asymmetry and their position to enrich themselves through embezzlement because of the over-concentration of power in their hands, the lack of a supervision mechanism, and the villagers' inattention to village affairs. But it was also because of the imbalanced nature of the income of group leaders. Group leaders who pay for a group project in advance with their

own money are likely to come up with the idea of taking advantage of their position to line their pockets.

Corruption among villager groups entails not only the loss of collective resources, but also the destruction of the economic foundation of villager group self-governance and the disintegration of the group governance community. Rural development today requires not only strengthening the collective economy, but also systematically protecting the collective economy to prevent the micro-corruption of village cadres from eroding the already weak economic foundation of grassroots governance.

The moral hazard of lazy governance

As the agent of villager group self-governance, the group leader is entrusted with governance power and is responsible for integrating group resources, strengthening the collective economy, providing public goods, and maintaining order at the grassroots level. The focus of principal-agent theory (Hölmstrom, 1979) is on how to avoid the moral hazard of the agent's laziness in an environment of conflict of interest and information asymmetry. Since villager group leaders' job performance is subject to administrative review and since their salary is paid by the village committee, the leaders are not quite "street-level bureaucrats"—i.e., "public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the exercise of their job" (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]: 3)—but since they have a share of both formal and social power, they can be described as quasi-street-level bureaucrats. By occupying the gap between state and society, villager group leaders have the opportunity to tap into a wide variety of resources, but also the opportunity slack off and neglect their work.

According to our investigations in Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Shaanxi, Henan, Gansu, and other places in recent years, less than a quarter of all village cadres actively carry

out their duties. In Taiqing Village, however, village governance is active and vigorous. It took ten years for the current village committee's cadres to transform Taiqing from a backward village with weak grassroots organizations into an advanced village and become a provincial-level "democratic village model" and a municipal-level "beautiful village model." Our survey found that most of the current leaders of the eight villager groups are also active. However, some people are unwilling to be group leaders. After being elected as group leaders, they do not cooperate with the village committee nor do they serve the villagers. The social reputation mechanism and administrative incentive mechanism do not work in these cases. J, the leader of Group 4, is a 70-year-old retired worker of a municipal enterprise. He was elected as the group leader by the villagers when no one wanted the job. He only cooperated with the village administrative organization to do some things that had to be done but otherwise was inactive. Group leader Q, who opened a furniture factory in the county, became the group leader after mobilization by village cadres and the recommendation of the villagers. However, he was almost indifferent to group affairs. The affairs of the group were handled by the group cashier, who was also ineffective.

Building a Compound Risk Prevention Mechanism

Since party members and grassroots party organizations provide the leadership in China's villages, improving the quality of both party members and intra-party democracy is vitally important. The report of the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China also called for, among other things, strengthening the rural governance system, which includes local autonomy, and cultivating *sannong* ("three rurals," meaning issues related to rural areas, agriculture, and peasants) work teams that understand agriculture. Therefore, building a compound risk prevention mechanism has become a top priority for maintaining rural order and stabilizing the rural work team system.

Giving full play to villager supervision

The micro-administrative powers that directly impinge on people's production and everyday life require supervision. In recent years, village affairs supervision committees established in various rural areas have become an important institutional setting for social and public supervision to prevent corruption and dereliction of duty (Kang and Zhou, 2014). In 2008, with the help of the villager group cadres and the villagers, a newly elected village committee group of Taiqing Village established a villagers supervision committee. Its main task is to supervise the villager group accounts, a matter of concern to the villagers. After a rigorous inspection, the illegal use of funds amounting to 180,000 yuan in the village and group was finally cleared up. Most of the funds had been misappropriated or embezzled by the village and group cadres, who issued false reports to hide their corruption. This time, the Taiqing Village Supervisory Committee recovered 140,000 yuan in cash. Thus, an institutionalized social supervision mechanism supported by the people was formed. In 2019, the Taiqing Village Supervisory Committee received reports from the villagers and twice reviewed the accounts of Groups 3 and 6. The investigation found that the leaders of the two groups had peculated group funds. The results of investigation were made public, which in effect amounted to a warning to all the villager group leaders. At present, village affairs supervision committees have basically been established in all villages across the country. Nevertheless, a considerable part of their work is limited to checking the figures in the account books rather than supervising how funds are actually used. Therefore, their power is merely formalistic. The result is that policy objectives—supervising the financial activities of the villages—are neglected. The functions of active supervision and active governance have not been brought into play, and there are very few committees that will take the initiative to look deeply into a group's accounting records. We recommended strengthening the independent status of village

affairs supervision committees. In addition, the official affairs of the villager group should also be included within the scope of the supervision of village affairs, and a mechanism for tracing the investigation of responsibilities should be established to give full play to the power of social supervision.

Improving the transparency of group affairs

In China's post-tax era, under the impetus of high-level central government departments, the transparency of village affairs has been gradually improved. The matters and content that grassroots organizations make known to villagers have gradually expanded, and the villagers' right to know and to supervise has been guaranteed to a certain extent. However, the villager group as a micro-unit of self-governance has been ignored in policy, and a system of publicity announcing group affairs does not exist. For example, in Taiqing Village, we saw that information such as higher-level policy documents, village-level quarterly financial status reports, and a list of the village's low-income households were all posted on the village affairs bulletin board. However, official information on the group was not released. Some group leaders even obstruct the village affairs supervision committee from checking the accounts. This shows that there is room for corruption in the exercise of micro-administrative power. Thus, a standardized system is needed. We recommend that a group affairs public announcement system be established as soon as possible. Making accounting records public and regularly publicizing other important information will promote the democratization of group self-governance.

Introducing procedural governance and legal governance

The fact that the corruption of villager group cadres is invisible and can take many forms and that there is a time lag involved in party organization supervision and social supervision,

undercuts village affairs work, leads to a loss of collective resources, and damages the very foundation of group governance. Therefore, we recommended introducing the concept of procedural governance, employing supervisory actions in advance, implementing procedural controls over villager group governance, and paying more attention to the quality and social effects of group governance instead of simply being result-oriented. At the same time, legal governance should be introduced. Village cadres who are corrupt and embezzle collective resources should be handed over for legal action, thus maintaining grassroots justice and warning potential violators.

To sum up, in the process of advancing the modernization of grassroots governance, the government should use the leadership of grassroots party organizations as an integrative mechanism, and give full play to and integrate the power of social supervision, institutional norms, and the rule of law, thus forming a composite risk prevention mechanism for grassroots micro-authority and establishing strong institutional protection of villagers' self-governance.

Conclusion

Since the Organic Law of Village Committees formally adopted in 1998 identified the administrative village as the villagers' self-government unit, villager groups have been regarded as an appendage of the village committee. As a result, they no longer receive the attention of scholars and policy-makers. Instead, studies on villagers' self-governance have turned to such issues as the administrative absorption of wealthy people into grassroots governance, democratic consultation, and the mechanism behind the use of governmental projects to manage village affairs. According to the presumption that "state decentralization results in social empowerment," as state power gradually has withdrawn from rural grassroots governance in the post-tax era and become a "floating regime," villagers' self-governance

will gain unprecedented space for growth. However, in reality village-level self-governance organizations have been caught in the pincers of state administrative absorption and increasing social division.

Although academia and policy circles have long paid little attention to villager group governance, the group has always existed as the first-level governance unit. Furthermore, this unit has provided efficient and stable governance in most rural areas. The nearly forty years of group self-governance experience in Taiqing Village has demonstrated that the interaction between state and society at the most basic level and the micro-operation mechanism of social self-governance can be positive, and has answered the question "How is group self-governance possible?"

Since the 1910s, the Chinese government has been committed to building a modern grassroots regime. In the new era of advancing the strategy of rural revitalization, how to build a modern grassroots governance system synchronized with national development, how to improve rural governance capabilities, and how to build new rural areas that are prosperous, ecologically livable, and continue to give full play to their potential to promote stability, become important issues for future research.

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Chenglin Wei (PhD, Huazhong University of Science and Technology) is an associate professor in the Institute for China & World Studies / School of Political Science & International Relations, Tongji University. He is currently conducting research on urban and rural governance in China.

Yansen Ding is a graduate student in the Institute for China & World Studies / School of Politics & International Relations, Tongji University. His research interests focus on political sociology.