

**The Involution of Resource Inputs and the Loosening of Ties between Local Government
and Peasants in China:**

Dilemmas of Grassroots Governance under the “Multiple Prioritized Tasks” Regime

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内卷化的基层政权悬浮：县域多中心工作模式下的基层治理困局

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Abstract

The Chinese central government has greatly increased the resources dedicated to the countryside since its abolition of agricultural taxes and fees but has also assigned many more tasks to the local governments. County government, which had previously adopted a “single prioritized task” approach to governance, now has transitioned to a “multiple prioritized tasks” approach. This transformation has not only jeopardized the capacity of township governments to coordinate rural projects, but has also changed the earlier performance evaluation system from one that emphasized results to one that increasingly emphasizes “processes.” The relationship between the county and township governments has become increasingly bureaucratized and ossified. This has given rise to two problems. On the one hand, the increases in resource inputs have not come with a significant improvement of efficiency in local governance, which has resulted in involution in terms of returns to resource inputs. On the other hand, increasing bureaucratization has imposed mounting burdens on the administrative system. As a result, there has been a deteriorating relationship between the local government and the peasants, in which the former simply fails to respond to the villagers’ real needs and aspirations. To break through the problem of local governments becoming increasingly detached from and irrelevant to the villages, local governments should be given greater autonomy and flexibility. The central government should allow them greater autonomy in the use of resources in order to rebuild an organic relationship with the peasants by more appropriate uses of the new resources allocated to them.

Keywords

involution, loosening ties between local government and villagers, multiple prioritized tasks, grassroots governance

摘要

随着国家资源向农村的转移，基层治理事务也日益增多。在县域范围内，过去以简约治理为特征的单一中心工作模式正转向“多中心工作”模式。这一转型不仅使乡镇作为“块块”的统筹能力被切割，也改变了上级政府对基层的“结果考核”导向，加强了“过程考核”的权重。县乡关系的科层化趋势凸显，导致基层治理体系的刚性化。这带来了基层治理的两大困境：一方面，国家资源的大量输入并未带来基层治理效率的显著提升，致使国家资源输入的内卷化；另一方面，基层行政日益走向科层化，基层组织超负荷运转，却无力回应群众的真实诉求，基层政权仍然悬浮于村庄之上。要走出政权悬浮困局，国家需要赋予基层组织一定的自主空间，通过资源输入来重建基层组织与农民之间的有机联系。

关键词

内卷化、基层政权悬浮、多中心工作、基层治理

Since the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees in the early 2000s, the orientation of the state-peasant relationship in China has changed from “resource-extraction” to the provision of social services. Beyond that, the Chinese central government has increased infusions of inputs to the rural areas, which has brought about significant changes in grassroots governance. Since the county and township governments are the bridge that connects the state and the peasants, the

transformation of local governance provides a lens through which changes in the state-peasant relationship can be scrutinized. This article examines the evolution of China's local governance by exploring the transformation of the relationship between the county and township governments, and proposes a reconceptualization of the "modernization" of grassroots governance.

After the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees, the most striking change in China's grassroots governance was at first a drastic decrease in the financial revenue of local governments, particularly township governments. The latter had to borrow money and seek grants in order to keep running. This resulted in a kind of social distancing between local governments and the peasantry. Township governments became seemingly dispensable, and the ties between the state and peasants grew looser and looser, to the extent of becoming "suspended in thin air" (Zhou Feizhou, 2006). Zhou Feizhou's critique has deeply influenced studies of grassroots governance studies in the past decade or more. In the first few years after the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees, there seemed to be no need for local governments to deal with peasants. But it was not long before this situation changed. As transfer payments from the central government to the countryside increased so did the tasks assigned to the local governments. This transition triggered wide-ranging discussions of the impact of increased infusions of inputs on grassroots governance.

Following Zhou's interpretation, another study showed that aside from the weakening of the connection between the local government and peasants, the role of township government shrank so that it became merely an intermediary in the era of "governing through 'project grants'" 项目制 (Fu Wei and Jiao Changquan, 2015). This is because the financial and personnel affairs formerly controlled by the township government have been taken over by the county

government, resulting in the former becoming increasingly dependent on the latter.

Consequently, township governments can act only as an assistant in completing village-level projects (Fu Wei and Jiao Changquan, 2015). By functioning as coordinators for project grants, township governments cannot build close ties with the peasants. Additionally, in order to build a service-oriented state apparatus, the central government has assigned an increasing number of tasks to local governments. The county government, which had adopted the “single prioritized task” approach to governance (Yang Hua and Yuan Song, 2018), now has to deal with “multiple prioritized tasks,” a hallmark of governance in China today (Qiu Ye, 2021). As a result, although interactions between local cadres and peasants have increased, the ties between them have not grown stronger. In this sense, it is necessary to ask whether China’s government has actually turned itself into a “service-oriented” state.

Aside from the relationship between local government and peasants, another focus of research on China’s grassroots governance is whether local government has become bureaucratized. Some scholars have insisted that China’s administrative system has been conducive to bureaucratization, particularly in the financial relations between central and local governments, ever since the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up in the late 1970s. They have also pointed out that the bureaucratization of the administrative system has compressed social space (Qu Jingdong, Zhou Feizhou, and Ying Xing, 2009). Zhou Li-An (2014) has characterized China’s intergovernmental relationship as “administrative contracting,” a blending of bureaucracy with private-sector-style contracting. Under this structure, higher-level governments not only enjoy formal authority over such things as personnel, supervision, and approval, but also wield the power of intervention and veto. The lower levels of government in this system are granted discretionary power and control over how assigned tasks are performed. Zhou (2014) emphasizes

that administrative contracting differs from the operations of a typical bureaucracy in the sense that the former is concerned only with results, and does entail the strict supervision of whether the implementation process complies with prescribed rules and procedures. This echoes Philip Huang's (2008) notion of "centralized minimalism," which highlights the importance of semiformal governance in imperial China. In semiformal governance, local governance depended on unsalaried quasi-officials nominated by the communities themselves. This minimalist governance approach and the centralization of power complemented one another. According to Huang (2008), substantial aspects of minimalist governance have been inherited from imperial China and have persisted all the way down to the contemporary reform era. Following Huang's framework, another study on China's current rural governance argues that rural social elites play key roles in grassroots governance. These elites participate in village self-governance as semiformal personnel, connecting the formal administrative system and the informal clan-based rural community (Zhao Xiaofeng, 2014). Zhao Xiaofeng therefore argues that utilizing social resources from within rural communities is the foundation of minimalist governance.

Despite their different characterizations of China's administrative system, these studies all point to potential governance dilemmas brought by bureaucratization. The central government has issued many rules and regulations along with the increased infusion of inputs to the countryside, which has led to the standardization and routinization of local governance (He Xuefeng, 2019). In this context, the present article explores these practices and their implications for local governance.

Our study of how the county–township relationship has been shaped by the increase in "prioritized tasks" and the implications involved is based on twenty days of field research

conducted in March 2021 in Hugang township in northern Anhui.¹ We found that the administrative work assigned to the township government has increased since 2014, and the township government has encountered numerous problems in performing its tasks. The case of Hugang township is not exceptional in China's central and western regions. Taking this township as a typical case, this article examines the dilemmas of grassroots governance by exploring the changing pattern of local governance.

The Increase in Prioritized Tasks under Minimalist Governance

The township is the lowest level of government in China and enjoys formal authority. It is also closely connected with a highly complex rural society. Thus, township governance has dual characteristics. First, township government is part of the formal state bureaucracy. The establishment of a sub-county formal government apparatus was without precedent, and reflected the growing bureaucratization and rationalization of China's national governance since the Republican era (Huang, 2008; Zhang Jing, 2007). Second, township government deals with the face-to-face society 熟人社会 of rural China. Such a society has the capacity to mobilize informal resources within the rural communities. These informal resources can be wielded as tools of rural governance. Effectively settling disputes, for instance, would be impossible if township cadres simply followed formal rules to the letter. In this sense, township governments can be characterized as a "third sphere" apparatus in which there is a paradoxical combination of formal government and a semi-formal approach to governance (Huang Zongzhi, 2019). In other

¹ Hugang is a pseudonym.

words, although township government is part of the formal state apparatus, its operation is not entirely shaped by bureaucratic rationality.

Minimalist Township Governance

Local governance in China, as mentioned earlier, was long characterized by “minimalism.” Even after township governments were officially established, they were not merely sub-departments of the county government, and thus the relationship between the county and the township government was not that of simply two levels in a professionalized bureaucracy. Since the household responsibility system reforms were first enacted, collecting agricultural taxes and fees along with family planning were the main duties of the township government. Under heavy pressure and limited resources, township governments had to adopt a minimalist method of governance (Huang, 2008). That is to say, to get their work done they had to rely on the combined use of formal personnel and semiformal personnel, including rural social elites with high prestige. Although the division of labor among township government departments was usually blurry, minor routine tasks (i.e., other than collecting taxes and fees and implementing the family planning policy) were still completed by specific relevant departments.

Two factors enabled township governments to maintain this minimalist governance. First was flexibility in resource deployment. This was made possible by the fact that governance at the township level was responsible for only one or two “primary duties” or “prioritized tasks.” Since the issues facing townships varied from place to place and time to time, township governments needed to set their own priorities. Accordingly, although township cadres were officially affiliated with different departments, there was no clear-cut division of labor. Cadres thus had to deal with a wide variety of issues. Only cadres with wide-ranging skills could fulfill prioritized

tasks as needed. For example, the head of Hugang township's Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs mentioned that he had been discharged from the military in 1999 and since then has had one position or another in the Hugang township government. He worked in the General Management Office and the Judicial Department for eight years, and then was shuffled between the General Committee Office, Comprehensive Management Office, Letters and Visits Office, the Commission for Discipline Inspection, and Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, changing posts every two to four years. Cases like this are common. The frequent transfer of personnel allows cadres to become familiar with the township's tasks in all fields. For quite a long time, it was the flexibility of transferring personnel from one job to another that enabled township governments to fulfill their prioritized tasks at a low cost. Admittedly, this created some problems—for instance, ag-tech extension personnel ended up spending less time on providing technical services and much more time on “prioritized tasks” (Hu Ruifa and Sun Yiduo, 2018). But at the same time, since manpower and material resources were limited, flexibility was crucial for the township governments to keep costs low. In other words, even with limited personnel and resources, township government functioned relatively effectively through the flexible mobilization of manpower.

On the other hand, while the governance of rural society did of course to some extent adhere to formal regulations, mobilization of various informal resources was the most important factor in rural governance. Hugang's Commissioner of Politics and Law, the official in charge of public complaint filing issues, mentioned when interviewed that, “There used to be very few tasks assigned by the higher-ups, and so we didn't have a lot of work to do. [Besides,] many problems were solved by getting together with villagers over a drink. We worked effectively.” Cadres could, for example, collect agricultural taxes and fees by drinking or chatting with villagers at

their homes, rather than by invoking formal rules. “In those days, villagers considered it an honor if township or village cadres visited their homes and ate or had a drink with them.” In rural society, attention to social obligations 人情 and face 面子 cushioned the conflict between the state and peasants over tax collection. It was through such informal social resources that local governments informally exercised their formal power (Sun Liping and Guo Yuhua, 2010; Zhao Xiaofeng, 2014). And it was this use of informal resources that allowed township governments to maintain social order with a minimum input of manpower and material resources.

Since China’s local governments constantly faced the threat of fiscal shortages, they imposed a heavy burden of taxes and fees on the peasants, a burden that was not lifted until the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees. To be sure, there was still plenty of administrative disorder during the period of agricultural taxation. In general, however, when the prioritized tasks of local government were concentrated, township governments were able to adopt a minimalist approach to governance to fulfill difficult tasks such as tax collection and family planning. Minimalist governance, which is characteristically low cost, effective, and flexible, is fundamentally different from bureaucratic governance, at least as the latter is usually conceived. However, with the increase in resources dedicated to the countryside, the central government also assigned many more tasks to local government and required it to meet the highest possible standards in fulfilling these tasks (Fang Ning, 2020). This shift required local government to meet multiple governance goals which were considered prioritized tasks, posing a challenge to the previous minimalist approach.

Multiple Prioritized Tasks and the Problem of Governance

The increasing workload imposed on township governments was the direct result of the introduction of the “multiple prioritized tasks” system. When virtually all tasks were considered priorities, the way county governments, township governments, and villages operated was reshaped. Under the “multiple prioritized tasks” pattern, the role of county-level departments changed from directly providing services to merely delegating tasks. It has fallen to township governments to do the actual work, forcing them to incessantly mobilize their limited manpower and administrative resources. At the same time, village governments, theoretically self-governing bodies and not part of the formal bureaucracy, have been increasingly subsumed into the administrative system (Qiu Ye, 2021).

Looking at the case of Hugang township, it is clear that the township government’s prioritized tasks have increased in the last few years. According to the secretary of Hugang’s Committee for Discipline Inspection, prioritized tasks include the following. First, environmental protection, specifically, a ban on burning stubble. Second, improvement of the residential environment. Third, the relocation and settlement of villagers adversely affected by coal mining. Since a state-owned enterprise started mining in this town in 2008, the township government has relocated villagers whose houses and farmland were affected by land subsidence caused by the mining. However, the unfair distribution of apartments for resettled residents led to frequent petitions, and the problems prompting the petitions were not solved until 2020. Fourth, the collection of new rural old-age insurance and new rural cooperative medical insurance. Since higher-level government bodies require all residents to be covered, township and village cadres have been under a great deal of pressure. Fifth, the demolishing of illegally built breeding facilities, which were built on land zoned for crop production.

A member of Hugang's Political and Legal Committee commented that "each and every bit of work has to be taken seriously now. The county government ranks all the townships on every little task. We're forced to compete for first place on everything. Now all tasks have to be performed as if they were prioritized tasks." When there were few prioritized tasks, it made sense for the township government to set priorities and it was possible to mobilize the resources needed to complete them. However, treating all tasks as top priorities presents a challenge to township governments, with their limited manpower and other resources.

The increase in prioritized work is an unintended political consequence of the targeted poverty alleviation initiative, which has greatly reshaped the pattern of local governance. One of Hugang township's cadres remarked, "Before 2014 [and after the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees], the only prioritized task was family planning, which was a 'cap undertaking' 帽子工程.² All other tasks were considered routine, and so they didn't stress us out. But now, environmental protection, poverty alleviation, public complaints and petitions have all become cap undertakings. Targeted poverty alleviation should have been handled by the Poverty Alleviation Office, but in reality, it involves all the departments of the township government. Now all the other departments follow this model, and all work has become a prioritized task." In fact, one of the outcomes of the targeted poverty alleviation initiative has been the strengthening of both performance assessments of local governments and supervision by higher-level governments. Higher-level governments now conduct inspections of township governments and rank them

² A "matter of the cap" refers to any misconduct on this issue could lead to dismissal, which historically meant losing one's official cap.

every month. The cadres who hold the main positions in township government will be disciplined if their township is ranked low.

Another problem with the targeted poverty alleviation initiative is its overemphasis on process management. Several Hugang township cadres mentioned that ever since the beginning of targeted poverty alleviation work, they have been loaded down with tasks involving the work process: establishing and maintaining full and accurate archives, retaining the traces of every step in the work process, and strictly following the procedures in performing the tasks. For example, during his inspection tour of Anhui in 2020, Xi Jinping asked that the interests of people in the mining subsidence area be safeguarded. After that, governments at all levels in Anhui began to implement the “Political Directives of President Xi’s Inspection of Anhui Province.” For Hugang township, this work mainly has involved the construction and distribution of resettlement apartments. A cadre from the Hugang township Housing and Urban Construction Department mentioned that the county government required his department to create detailed profiles for each household in the subsidence area. This requirement was drawn from the targeted poverty alleviation initiative. This cadre pointed out that, to generate these profiles, it took township and village cadres four years to collect the necessary information on Hugang’s 780 impoverished households. His department was given only one month to complete the profiles of the 3,719 households in the mining subsidence area. Moreover, since there was hardly any precedent for creating profiles of this type, and the county government did not give clear instructions on what should be included in the profiles, the township government had to submit rough drafts first and wait for feedback. According to our interviewees, the profiles were revised and resubmitted six times. There were only four cadres in the Housing and Urban Construction Department, and only two of them were able to operate a computer, and almost no

village cadre knew how to work a computer. Therefore, to create these profiles, village cadres had to do everything manually on paper, and then submit them to the Housing and Urban Construction Department, where the two computer-literate cadres input the information into the computer. In creating the profiles, the department collected information on, among other things, the type of employment, work place, insurance participation status, and demographic changes. However, the collection of such information was hardly of much use in the relocation of villagers. Our interviewee mentioned that his department already had basic information about households in the subsidence area; otherwise, it could not distribute the resettlement houses. In any event, in order to track their work process and follow the procedures, his department had to devote an inordinate amount of resources to creating these profiles.

Overall, the increase in prioritized tasks has transformed China's local governance from a "single prioritized task" pattern to a pattern of "multiple prioritized tasks." Township governments have had to incessantly mobilize their limited resources to perform these tasks. This transformation has had three important consequences. First, township governments' coordination capacity has been weakened. The increasing infusion of inputs to rural areas has been of little use in this regard since it is accompanied by an increase of top-town assignments. Consequently, the power of departments of higher-level governments has been strengthened and at the same time vertical management has been enhanced while the coordination capacity of local government has been weakened. In the multiple prioritized task-centered pattern, the township government must do its best to mobilize all its administrative resources to complete all of the prioritized tasks. At the same time, township governments have had to play the role of an autonomous coordinator and respond to villagers' demands as much as possible. For instance, in the past, in order to successfully collect agricultural taxes and fees, township governments had had to ensure a supply

of public goods for agricultural producers, such as the maintenance of irrigation systems. This required township governments to make comprehensive arrangements in mobilizing resources to deal with endogenous governance issues. However, if township governments now have to treat every task as prioritized, township cadres will be overworked and suffer from stress. All this inevitably reduces the autonomy of township government and weakens its capacity to respond to villagers' demands.

Second, the multiple prioritized tasks regime has also changed how government performance is evaluated. One of the core principles of minimalist governance is that performance evaluations must be results-oriented (Zhou Li-An, 2014; Huang, 2008; Yang Hua and Yuan Song, 2018). When all tasks are prioritized, however, the evaluation system no longer emphasizes results but instead both results and process, which weakens the flexibility of grassroots governance and rigidifies policy implementation. The change in the approach to governance has also affected village self-governance. A village party secretary told us that he used to spend most of his time mediating disputes between villagers, but now information reporting takes up most of his time. This is hardly surprising since process evaluation entails detailed record-keeping, which is why township and village cadres spend so much time on document archiving. Inevitably, this reduces the time they have for interacting with villagers. Furthermore, the standardization of the policy implementation process has also increased the costs of grassroots governance. For example, a study by the first author of local governance reform initiated by the municipal government of Chengdu, Sichuan, shows that the standardization of village self-governance only results in increasing governance costs. In order to prevent corruption, the municipal government of Chengdu issued detailed rules on the use of village-level public service funds, and villages have been required to spend their budget in strict accordance with these rules. For instance, any

project with a budget over 100,000 yuan is supposed to be awarded through open bidding. This means that villages now have to pay both companies that prepare bidding reports and companies that audit the bidding process. These are new types of extra expenditures. Previously village collectives were allowed to organize construction teams. It has turned out that the standardized requirements have reduced the space for villagers' self-governance and has driven up costs (Chen Yiyuan, 2020). This stringent process management is supposed to ensure that local governments follow the rules, but in practice it has reduced the efficiency and flexibility of governance.

Third, the relationship between county and township governments has been increasingly bureaucratized, leading to rigidity in the local governance system. As Max Weber (1993 [1922]) noted, bureaucracy is characterized by the professionalization and specialization of administrative officials and by a clear division of responsibilities among administrative units, with each unit occupying a precisely defined spot in a hierarchical relationship with all other units. In a bureaucracy, officials are supposed to act strictly according to rules and maintain procedural justice. Minimalist governance, on the other hand, is characterized by a blurred division of responsibilities and a low degree of specialization. For quite a long time, the work of township cadres did not require specialized skills. More importantly, it was the blurred division of labor and flexible deployment of personnel that kept the cost of governance low. However, once the multiple prioritized tasks approach was adopted, township governments required a number of professionalized cadres who could deal with specialized tasks. In other words, township governments were bureaucratized. Moreover, not just township governments; village governance was also affected, with village cadres as well becoming professionalized (He Xuefeng, 2015; Gao Wanqin, 2019). Additionally, the bureaucratization of local governance is

also evident in the emphasis on process evaluation, procedural compliance, and accountability mechanisms, all of which appeared after the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees. In short, this kind of governance has been dubbed “technological governance” (Qu Jingdong, Zhou Feizhou, and Ying Xing, 2009). However, regional disparities remain. In China’s central and western regions, very few townships and village cadres had the skills needed to deal with document archiving work, and thus local governance was not standardized for quite a few years. However, in the context of the central government increasing the flow of resources to the countryside, to avoid corruption in the use of these resources, the requirements for meeting procedural norms have been raised to a new level, with the result that county and township governments are becoming increasingly bureaucratized.

Modernization of governance, however, does not necessarily entail bureaucratization. The objective, instead, should be a more effective, adaptable, and lower-cost governance. Since the issues surrounding grassroots governance are complicated and highly contingent, local governments should strike a balance between standardization and flexibility. This means, among other things, correcting the mismatch between the requirements involving the specialization and standardization of grassroots governance and township government’s limited manpower and material resources. In other words, the structure of the local government apparatus is still minimalist, but the state is pushing a bureaucratized transformation of governance. It is this mismatch that is at the root of the problems with China’s local governance.

Involution of Resource Inputs and the Changing Relationship between Local Government and the Peasants

The increase in prioritized tasks has forced local cadres to work overtime. Their most frequently expressed complaint is that they work “5 + 2” (meaning they are on duty not only from Monday to Friday but also on weekends) and “white + black” (meaning that they are on call both day and night). Working overtime has become the new normal. Paradoxically, this has made it increasingly difficult for township governments to respond to villagers’ concerns, which has resulted in a deteriorating relationship between local government and the peasants. Although the disconnect between local government and the peasants started with the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees, today the causes are different. In the first few years of the agricultural taxes and fees reform, the weakening of the local government–peasant relationship was caused by grassroots governments’ lack of funds and a decrease in their workload since they were no longer responsible for collecting taxes and fees. However, the problem was not solved even when the state increased transfer payments to rural areas. This is because the increase in resources has come with an increased burden of assigned tasks. Grassroots government is struggling to cope with bureaucratic inspections and assessments and hence is unable to respond to the real demands of the peasants. Therefore, local government is suffering from an involution in terms of returns to resource inputs, as if it were stuck driving around in circles, accelerating but never arriving at the destination, burning more and more gas but covering no real distance.

The Involution of Resource Inputs

One of China’s most remarkable achievements in recent years has been the substantial improvement of rural infrastructure. However, here too the picture is not entirely rosy. For instance, in many areas newly built roads and irrigation channels have deteriorated within two or three years after construction or even become unusable (Zhao Jiulong et al., 2020; Qiu Zheng,

2021). In the case of Hugang township, since 2013 six villager small groups 村民小组 have been awarded approximately two million yuan from the central government under the Beautiful Countryside Construction Program. Township and village cadres invested considerable time and effort in assisting these villager small groups in applying for and managing these grants. Moreover, considering that the township government's annual budget is only six or seven million yuan, the project funds represent a significant infusion of resources. According to a township cadre, although the villager small groups used the grant to build hardened roads, plant trees and flowers alongside roads, and install street lighting, these improvements did not last long due to a lack of maintenance.

In fact, the pruning of green belts and the simple maintenance of roads and street lights do not require much capital investment, but they do require that peasants be organized to do the work. The essential reason behind the lack of maintenance is the lack of organization and mobilization of peasants. In a sense, this is an extension of the “last mile” 最后一公里 problem in rural public goods supply. Studies on project-based governance and rural public goods supply have shown that peasants usually do not actively participate in these activities, and sometimes it is so difficult to coordinate peasant households that construction work has to be suspended (Liu Jianping and Chen Wenqiong, 2016; Wang Haijuan, 2015). In the project-based governance system, peasants, as beneficiaries, are passive receivers of service who lack agency. Worse still, township and village cadres act as mere intermediaries in implementing the projects, reducing township government to merely a coordinating mechanism (Fu Wei and Jiao Changquan, 2015). Since township and village cadres no longer play the leading role in organizing villagers, the input of resources from the central government does not improve local governance, but rather results in involution in terms of resource inputs.

Another factor contributing to this involution is the mismatch between the supply of public goods and peasants' needs and preferences. Hugang, which is located in a grain-growing area, depends on irrigation to sustain its annual rice-wheat double cropping system. The irrigation channels in eight of the fifteen villages of Hugang township are in urgent need of repair. Additionally, eighteen culverts and sluice gates, which were built in 1956 with handmade bricks, have not been repaired for many years. Many of the sluice gates have been lost, threatening flood prevention. The head of the Hugang's Water Conservancy Station mentioned that every year over ten thousand woven bags of sand and clay have to be placed to plug leaks in the culverts in the flood season and then removed after the danger of flooding has passed. It would be much easier if the culverts and sluice gates were repaired. That would cost over a million yuan, only half of what was spent on the beautiful countryside construction project mentioned earlier.

A key source of all these problems is that the state sets the rules for how grants to rural areas are to be administered. Consequently, township and village governments only play the role of intermediaries. When the autonomy and the flexibility of local government are compromised, its capacity to organize and mobilize the peasants is weakened. The fact that local government is deeply enmeshed in the hierarchical system implies that there is no intermediate layer between the state and the peasants. The township government and villages at one time were a "third sphere" where state power and rural society could be united and could act as a buffer between the state and peasants. But when state power is overwhelming and formal administration replaces "semi-formal governance" (Huang Zongzhi, 2019; Huang, 2008), there will be a risk of involution of state resources. Top-down policy design alone cannot meet the diverse needs of China's peasants.

Bureaucracy and the Loosening of Ties between Local Government and the Peasants

In order to fulfill the administrative tasks assigned by the central government, township and village cadres have to deal with the peasants to resolve any conflicts that may impede the implementation of such tasks. But these interactions do not strengthen the ties between the local government and peasants.

As mentioned above, the county and township governance system has been increasingly bureaucratized by the multiple prioritized tasks regime. Since the central government has made process evaluation as important as the evaluation of results, local government must devote a great deal of manpower and resources to prepare for inspections and assessments. The director of the Hugang Letters and Visits Office complained that “there are too many inspections and rankings now. In the accountability evaluation at the end of each year, all departments of the county government scored our subordinate township governments. Some of the regular inspections are just not necessary, but these higher-level departments insist on them.” Whenever there are inspections, the township government has to spend extensive time and effort in preparing all kinds of documents. This has been vividly exemplified in the targeted poverty alleviation program in Hugang. An official stationed in a village in Hugang noted that there were forty-three poverty-stricken households in the village where he once worked. During the four years he stayed in the village, he spent seventy to eighty percent of his working time preparing for all sorts of inspections, and only twenty to thirty percent on visiting and helping impoverished households. There were one and two provincial inspections at the middle and end of the year. It took him at least half a month to prepare the documents for each inspection. And there were at least four municipal inspections each year, none of which were at fixed times. He needed approximately half a month to prepare for each of these inspections. Additionally, there

were five or six district-level inspections each year, each of which took him three to seven days of preparation. Although not all inspections are as stringent as those for the targeted poverty alleviation program, the increasing emphasis on process evaluation and the accompanying detailed performance indicators and regulations add to the burden on local government. The director of the Letters and Visits Office told us, “There used to be fewer meetings and much less paperwork than now. We only needed to get the work done in accordance with the laws and regulations then.”

Moreover, with technological advances, higher-level governments have constantly fine-tuned their approach to inspecting and evaluating local governments. For example, in Hugang township environmental protection work has been added to the list of prioritized tasks in recent years. Looking at the ban on straw burning as an example, in 2020 the Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau had smoke detectors—dubbed “blue sky guardians” 蓝天卫士—installed on all telecommunication towers in the city. There are altogether five detectors in Hugang township, all of which are connected to a highly sensitive warning system that sounds an alarm once smoke is detected. The detectors are so sensitive that even the smoke from villagers’ kitchen chimneys and from setting off firecrackers will trigger an alarm. Once there is an alarm—even a false alarm—township and village cadres are supposed to deal with it within half an hour. Otherwise, the system will mark it as an “ignition point” and the cadres in charge will be fined. Even it is a false alarm, the township and village cadres are supposed to rush to the scene, take photos and upload them to the system, so that the alarm can be cancelled. In 2020, six ignition points in Hugang township were reported, all of which were caused by villagers’ burning dry weeds in irrigation channels or setting off firecrackers. One township cadre as well as three village cadres were fined. The improvement of monitoring capacity brought by technological progress not only

allows a deeper penetration of state power into the countryside but also a strengthening of bureaucratism in the local governance system.

Under such circumstances, grassroots government has to devote almost all its energy to dealing with top-down tasks and assessments, leaving it with no capacity to deal with the peasants' demands. Many difficulties that peasants face can only be resolved by the local government. For instance, in Hugang township, one of the problems most frequently mentioned by the peasants is the fragmentation of farmland, which has caused great difficulties. For example, a party member in W village, Hugang township, has approximately 10 mu of contracted farmland, but it consists of over twenty parcels scattered over a large area. Since this villager and his wife are too old to do farming, they offered to transfer their land to other households for free but no one wanted it. Generally, the contracted land area of an ordinary household in Hugang town is around 10 mu, which in most cases is scattered over a dozen or more parcels. This fragmentation not only hobbles agricultural mechanization but also takes more of the peasants' time and effort. The households in Hugang that still farm, sixty to seventy percent of all the households in the township, are strongly in favor of land consolidation. But this cannot be accomplished by individual households—instead, it requires planning and execution that can only be provided by township and village governments. However, both township and village cadres are overloaded by prioritized tasks and have no incentive to engage in this kind of endogenous governance.

Generally speaking, township government is still a minimalist institution, but it is increasingly caught up in China's bureaucratic administrative machine. In practice, the more detailed the performance evaluation indicators in the multiple prioritized tasks pattern are, the more time and effort the local government has to spend on fulfilling the assigned tasks. This leads to the

paradox that even though local cadres are working more hours than ever before, their capacity to respond to the peasants' demands is declining. Consequently, the ties between the local government and peasants have become looser and looser.

As noted earlier, the modernization of local governance does not necessarily mean bureaucratization. Rather, it refers to a pattern of governance that is highly efficient, low-cost, and adaptable to actual local needs. Since life is characterized by irregularity, complexity, and contingency, a certain amount of flexibility is called for. In other words, grassroots governance itself should seek a balance between standardization and flexibility. But in the multiple prioritized tasks pattern, grassroots government has become increasingly bureaucratic and the ability of the state to penetrate local society has been greatly enhanced. In the minimalist pattern of governance, on the other hand, although at the central level the state was very powerful, its penetration of the grassroots level was relatively limited. As a result, local society played an important role in grassroots governance. The overlap between state and society created what Philip Huang has termed "the third sphere" (Huang Zongzhi, 2019; Huang, 2008). When the local governance system was increasingly absorbed into the formal bureaucratic governance structure, however, local society was restricted in playing its role, which has resulted in the rigidification of the governance system and an increase in the costs of governance.

Conclusion: The Way Out of Governance Dilemmas

The building of a service-oriented state has transformed the functions of local governance. Not only are public goods such as education and medical care, which once were provided by rural communities, now delivered by the central government, but the state even intervenes in matters of private life such as courtyard cleaning and rebuilding household latrines. Consequently, local

government is now responsible for a multitude of assigned tasks. It is in this context that the multiple prioritized tasks pattern has emerged. In the process, the functions of township and village governments have been transformed, which in turn requires an adjustment of the logic of governance.

After the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees, initially the problem with grassroots government was mainly manifested in the “hollowing out” of township finances and the severing of the connection between the township government and the peasants. Before long, however, the state began to increase resource inputs to the countryside. After that, the local cadres had to interact with the peasants frequently in order to implement the policies of upper-level government or carry out mandated projects. Local government nonetheless is still detached from—and virtually irrelevant to—the peasants. This is because the resources provided are not used to satisfy the peasants’ demand for public goods. Furthermore, the capacity of township and village government to mobilize the peasants has been drastically reduced. The primary cause of the loosening of ties between the local government and peasants is not the low frequency of their interactions, but the less than desirable character of those interactions. To break free of this problem, local government should rebuild an organic connection with peasants through more appropriate uses of the resources allocated. Toward this end, this article highlights two crucial ways this could be achieved.

First, township government and village-level organizations should be given a certain degree of autonomy, thus establishing channels for peasants to express their demand for public goods. The state’s provision of resources could better meet the peasants’ needs in this way. Hugang township’s organization of farmland irrigation illustrates the benefits of close ties between grassroots government and the peasants. Ever since the collectivization period, Hugang has

maintained a well-organized irrigation system, one in which the township government plays a crucial role. Each year, the township and village cadres collect irrigation service fees from peasant households. The fees not only ensure the smooth operation of the irrigation system but more importantly act as a space for the peasants to express their demand for public goods. When the irrigation facilities needed repairs, the village cadres would encounter obstacles in collecting fees. The peasants asked the township government to undertake the repairs before they would pay the service fees. Normally, in this scenario, the village cadres would quickly report to the township government, and the latter would make a field trip to collect information and then apply for project funding. In other words, the government has the right to collect irrigation services fees, but it also has the obligation to respond to peasants' demand for public goods. Through the organization of irrigation, Hugang township has established the very sort of organizational channel that peasants need. Although this channel is still quite limited, it shows that when local government is given a degree of autonomy, creating an organic bond with villagers by balancing rights and obligations is possible.

Second, the state should activate village-level organizations' capacity in organizing the peasants so as to rebuild the public character 公共性 of village society. Before the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees, township governments and villages assumed the obligation of providing public goods to the villagers when they exercised their right of tax collection. Township and village governments saw to it that public facilities were repaired and maintained so as ensure agricultural production. After the abolition of agricultural taxes and fees, the state became a provider of rural public goods, and an increasing portion of the transfer payments from the central government were in the form of project grants. Although this has undoubtedly alleviated the burden on peasants, it has also meant that township and village governments no

longer have the motivation or ability to organize the peasants. However, aside from project grants, the state could also provide resources to the countryside in other ways. For instance, it could provide subsidies that the village collective would use as it sees fit. In this case, the use of the subsidies would be supervised by the villagers, not by the state. The Chengdu municipal government has initiated such a program. Every village in Chengdu is granted at least 200,000 yuan each year as public service funds. The villages have been given full autonomy in using these funds. This has not only opened up a space for villagers to express their preferences for public goods but also established an institutional channel for village cadres to interact with the villagers. Additionally, in community-based financial supervision of these funds, the informal authorities in the rural communities are mobilized to participate in public affairs (Chen Yiyuan, 2019). This means that it is possible for the state to activate village self-governance by providing resources. By organizing the peasants, villages can establish community rules, which could be strongly binding even though informal. Villagers will participate voluntarily in the construction and maintenance of public facilities only if they are organized. The key to ensuring that grassroots governance remains low-cost is to involve informal society in the formal system of governance.

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