



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Elite Capture and Corruption: The Influence of Elite Collusion on Village Elections and Rural Land Development in China

Ji Ruan¹  and Peng Wang² 

¹Department of Sociology, Guizhou Minzu University, Guiyang, Guizhou, China, and ²Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Corresponding author: Peng Wang, email: pengwang@hku.hk

(First published online 16 September 2022)

Abstract

This article presents a qualitative empirical study of elite collusion and its influence on village elections and rural land development in China. Drawing on ethnographic data collected from two Chinese villages, it investigates how village cadres collude with other rural elites, using bribery, gift-giving and lavish banquets, to establish reciprocal ties with township officials and other public officials. Meanwhile, the officials make use of formal organizations to corruptly obtain profits and form alliances with village elites. The article examines how rural elites, especially village cadres, use this collusion to profit from the misuse of villagers' collectively owned assets, the manipulation of village elections and the suppression of anti-corruption protests. It also offers new descriptive evidence of how recent reforms designed to strengthen the Party's overall leadership in rural governance may have actually facilitated elite capture and grassroots corruption.

摘要

本文采用质性研究方法探究精英间的共谋以及该现象对中国村庄选举和农村土地开发的影响。基于两个中国村庄所收集的民族志材料，本研究调查了村干部如何利用正式组织和利益共享的方式联合其他农村精英，以及如何利用送礼和请客等方式与乡镇干部和其他公职人员建立某种互惠关系。在此基础上，文章探讨了农村精英（特别是村干部）如何利用利益网络通过村民集体所有资产谋取个人利益；精英利益网络还常常被村干部用来左右村庄选举和平息村民的不满。此外，本研究还提供了最新的描述性证据，用以探讨近来党如何加强对农村的总体领导，以及在何种程度上能够有效地遏制精英俘获和基层腐败问题；文章认为，对相关纪检部门来说，精英俘获和基层腐败问题至今依然值得纪检部门高度重视。

Keywords: electoral manipulation; elite capture; elite collusion; grassroots corruption; land abuse; collective complaints; China

关键字: 精英俘获与共谋; 基层腐败; 土地滥用; 腐败的扼制

After passing the experimental Organic Law of Village Committees in 1987, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) started to build its socialist democratic system at the grassroots level by establishing local self-governance organizations. Over the last three decades, the CCP has made great progress with this policy: official statistics show that in 2018 China had a total of 650,000 grassroots self-governing organizations, including 542,000 village committees and 108,000 neighbourhood committees.¹ To develop rural regions and strengthen the Party's overall control over

¹ Zhao, Hong 2019.



rural governance, in 2018 the central government enacted a five-year plan entitled “The strategic plan for rural revitalization (2018–2022)” (*xiangcun zhenxing zhanlüe guihua* 乡村振兴战略规划 2018–2022). This plan promotes the principle of *yijiantiao* 一肩挑 under which the village Party committee, the elected village committee and the village economic cooperative (*cun jingji lianheshe* 村经济联合社) are led by a single person, the village Party secretary. The latest election season began in late 2020, when rural residents voted for village leaders who would serve for the next five years instead of the usual three. Village elections in China have once again drawn national and international press attention. As *The Economist* notes, “To the 550 m people who live in rural China, the results can matter. Decisions made by village bosses can have an enormous impact on people’s livelihoods. In particular, they wield power over the use of land, which is officially under ‘collective’ control – none of it is privately owned.”²

To enhance our understanding of rural governance and grassroots democracy, this article investigates key elements of village democracy, including the “exercise of power” (for example, managing collectively owned resources) and “access to power” (i.e. elections). Specifically, it examines elite capture of rural politics and collectively owned resources by focusing on the formation, function and resilience of elite collusion and its influence over village elections and rural land development. The article uses the term “collusion among rural elites” to refer to two layers of corrupt networking: first, a coalition among village elites, such as village cadres, lineage heads/elders, rich businesspeople and others with privileged access to social, political or economic power; and second, patronage-based hierarchical ties connecting village cadres with township officials and other public officials. This collusion allows local elites to capture rents from rural land development, manipulate village elections and suppress collective complaints in rural China. The study also investigates whether the central government’s five-year plan for “rural revival,” which implements the new principle of *yijiantiao*, can curtail the problem of elite capture and end grassroots corruption.

Drawing on long-term observation and interviews with a total of 57 informants conducted during two periods (from 2017 to 2019 and from late 2020 to early 2021), this article suggests that village leaders use gift-giving, bribery and lavish banquets to form patronage connections with local public officials through which the officials conceal the misuse of collectively owned resources and the leaders channel corrupt benefits to the officials in return. Village leaders also establish reciprocal ties with local elites, such as rich businesspeople and the elders who serve as heads of small groups in the village (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组). Village leaders deliver individual benefits (for example, allowing local elites to purchase collectively owned resources at low prices and helping their sons/daughters get jobs and promotions) to local businesspeople and heads of villagers’ groups, who reciprocate by offering the leaders support and loyalty.

Elite coalitions and vote-buying prevent rural residents from electing village leaders who will be honest and represent the interests of the whole village. Elected village cadres largely exclude local residents from decision making and management of village affairs in order to conceal the misuse of collectively owned resources. Grievances arising from village cadres’ abuse of village resources and the lack of institutional means to monitor the management of village affairs have compelled residents, especially lower-class villagers whose farmland and homesteads have been illegally expropriated, to sign petitions and form protests. Rural protests are handled in two ways: (1) a “hard” way in which local police officers and gangsters intimidate and violently suppress petitioners; and (2) a “soft” way in which village elites unite to label petitioners’ behaviour as immoral, deviant and disruptive. This results in petitioners being ostracized by their fellow residents.

Moreover, elite collusion appears to be resilient and may have even been facilitated by the recent implementation of the principle of *yijiantiao* in Chinese villages. Empirical data collected during the election period in late 2020 and early 2021 show that township governments do their best to ensure

2 “The West once dreamed of democracy taking root in rural China.” *The Economist*, 16 January 2021, <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/01/16/the-west-once-dreamed-of-democracy-taking-root-in-rural-china>.

that Party candidates who are loyal to township cadres win seats, while township governments disqualify a wide range of people who are politically unreliable. The tight vetting system ensures that “elected” village leaders proactively implement government policies and serve the interests of the local government. However, the new principle of *yijiantiao* strengthens elite coalitions in rural China and grants the village Party secretary extraordinary power but with insufficient checks and balances. Village cadres and their allies may use their increased power to further their material interests by misusing village resources. As a result, local supervisory commissions are forced to devote more resources to preventing village leaders’ misuse of power and grassroots corruption.

Elite Capture and Elite Collusion

Local elites, according to Aniruddha Dasgupta and Victoria Beard, “are locally based individuals with disproportionate access to social, political or economic power.”³ Elite capture,⁴ as a form of corruption, refers to the process by which local elites use their authority and influence to abuse public resources and monopolize the planning and management of development projects for personal gain at the expense of the larger population.⁵ Elite capture and corruption are increasingly attracting scholarly attention.⁶ The existing literature focuses primarily on the vulnerability of community governance and community-based development to elite capture and examines how resources from the World Bank and upper-level governments, which are intended for public welfare (for example, anti-poverty funds), are captured by local elites, particularly in rural areas in developing countries.⁷ China is no exception. Huawei Han and Qin Gao’s latest research establishes a causal relationship between political elite capture and targeting errors in China’s community-based welfare programmes.⁸ The concept of elite capture is also applied by Daniel Mattingly in recent research showing that local elites employ both formal official power and informal social power to induce villagers’ compliance with extractive policies and capture rents from land development.⁹

The common presumption about the relative vulnerability of national and local governments to interest-group capture is that “the lower the level of government, the greater is the extent of capture by vested interests, and the less protected minorities and the poor tend to be.”¹⁰ In a regime such as China’s, where there are no real direct or competitive elections, one of the major reasons why local governments are more vulnerable to capture by local elites is the greater cohesiveness of interest groups at the local level. In her 2021 article, Jingping Liu discusses the causal relationship between the abolition of agricultural taxes and the emergence of new clientelism facilitating corruption in China’s countryside.¹¹ In rural China, economic resources are transferred from the central government and market resources are distributed through clientelist or patron-client relationships.¹² Patrons (township officials) provide information on grant opportunities, state resources, protection

3 Dasgupta and Beard 2007, 230.

4 Elite capture is also known as interest group capture.

5 See Lucas 2016; Laffont and Tirole 1991; Dasgupta and Beard 2007.

6 Dutta 2009.

7 Fritzen 2007; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000.

8 Han and Gao 2019.

9 Mattingly 2016; 2020.

10 Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000, 135; see also Hamilton, Madison and Jay 2009.

11 Liu, Jingping 2021.

12 Ben Hillman, in his classic book *Patronage and Power* (2014), examines the role of patronage networks in coordinating the implementation of policies, regulating political competition and facilitating official corruption at county level. For other works focusing on the significance of patronage in understanding political behaviour and politics in China, see Shih 2004; Hillman 2010; Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012; Gong and Xiao 2017; Wang 2020; Wang and Yan 2020. A review of the existing literature shows that there is still insufficient scholarly attention being paid to the emergence, function and resilience of patronage networks at township and village levels, however.

or other benefits to clients (village cadres); these clients reciprocate by effectively implementing (unpopular) policies, sharing illicit benefits and offering their patrons loyalty, services and support. Within villages, village cadres become patrons distributing state and market resources to villagers based on reciprocal relationships (patron–client networks) rather than egalitarian principles.

Owing to the increasing size of government economic subsidies for the countryside and state extraction through land expropriation, village cadres have more opportunities to capture rents from rural development. For example, as Liu argues, village cadres often “keep a portion of the external resources for their own use,” make use of state and market resources to enrich their own private businesses, and “make a fortune contracting for government development projects without public bidding.”¹³ Moreover, Mattingly demonstrates that it is often difficult for village cadres to resist the temptation to defect from the side of the villagers during the process of land expropriation and development because such a defection can be associated with enormous personal gain.¹⁴

In rural China, there are three major categories of elites: political (township officials, village cadres, and others with political party affiliation), economic (rich businesspeople and entrepreneurs) and social (lineage heads, kinship group leaders and religious leaders). Mattingly’s research offers a systematic examination of how village cadres utilize both formal official power and informal social power to capture rents and confiscate properties; however, the roles of township officials and their patronage networks with village cadres are not sufficiently explored. In her study of the role of clientelism/patronage in generating economic equality and grassroots corruption at village and township levels, Liu distinguishes two layers of patronage network (between township officials and village cadres, and between village cadres and their villagers/clients), but her study neglects elite coalitions at village level and their impact on elite capture and grassroots corruption.¹⁵

It is worth noting that the relationships between village cadres and other village elites, although reciprocal, are not clearly hierarchical. Such relationships cannot therefore be characterized as patronage networks. To offer a concise and comprehensive understanding of elite capture and grassroots corruption, this article utilizes rich ethnographic data to investigate how elite collusion influences village elections and facilitates elite capture of rural land development, and uses the term *collusion among rural elites* to refer to both coalitions among village elites and patronage networks between township officers and village cadres.

Data and Methods

This article is based on ethnographic data collected from two villages in China’s XY province. Village D is far from the city and economically underdeveloped, while Village E is near the city and economically well developed. In both villages, residents are affected by village leaders’ land abuse. The empirical data collected through long-term observation and interviews offer a clear understanding of the elite capture of rural politics and land development.

We conducted fieldwork in Village D, located in City D, from March 2017 to September 2018, and also in Village E, located in City E, from October 2018 to October 2019 and from November 2020 to February 2021. Village D, with an area of 3.8 square kilometres, has a population of more than 12,000. In general, rural residents in China can be divided into three social strata: upper (village cadres, public officials, rich businesspeople), middle (self-employed businesspeople and full-time workers), and lower (full-time farmers, part-time workers and the unemployed).¹⁶ According to an internal report produced in 2017 by village cadres and village representatives,

¹³ Liu, Jingping 2021, 598.

¹⁴ Mattingly 2016.

¹⁵ See also Chen and Liu 2021.

¹⁶ See Bian 2002. This article uses occupation as a basic factor for analysing social stratification in rural China because occupation indicates income and social status.

about 7 per cent of the village population was in the upper-stratum category, 35 per cent in the middle, and 58 per cent in the lower.

Village E, with an area of one square kilometre, has a population of 2,250. Many villagers have moved to urban areas owing to the village's proximity to the city. Only 1,300 villagers live in the village permanently. Of these, about 30 per cent (the lower stratum) depend solely on their farmland to survive; 59 per cent of villagers are full-time workers in companies or small business owners and constitute the middle stratum; and 11 per cent, the upper stratum, are rich businesspeople who own companies or factories.¹⁷

Empirical data were collected through interviews and observation. The first author had established wide connections with villagers at all three levels before the start of this ethnographic research. In order to minimize selection bias, interviewees were not selected by chance but by strata category. The first author had also built connections with local officials and village cadres. We interviewed 57 people, including 49 rural residents at all social levels in the two villages, seven officials at township, county or city level, and a social worker from City D's petition office. Long-term socialization and interaction with interviewees (organizing and participating in banquets, exchanging gifts during traditional Chinese festivals and participating in traditional village ceremonies) not only enabled the first author to gain their trust but also enabled participant observation. He was able to observe village elections in late 2020 and the daily interactions between villagers and village cadres, witness (illicit) exchanges between village elites and village cadres, attend banquets organized by village cadres that were also attended by public officials, and understand everyday resistance (such as petitions and collective complaints) conducted by deprived villagers. Because both sides – deprived villagers and village elites – perceived the first author to be neutral, they were comfortable sharing their experiences, perceptions, dissatisfactions and behavioural justifications.

Given that this research examines difficult-to-observe elements of grassroots self-governance such as land misuse and corruption, evidence from multiple case studies is considered to be more robust and compelling than a single case study.¹⁸ The two cases follow analogous logic, aiming at theoretical replication rather than statistical sampling. That is to say, the authors carried out an ethnographic study in Village D then attempted to replicate the study in Village E in order to have a deeper understanding of elite capture and grassroots corruption.

The Vulnerability of Rural Land to Elite Capture: Land Abuse in Two Villages

A single rural household can only obtain one homestead under the policy of “one homestead for one household.” A rural resident may also obtain one piece of agricultural land under China's household contract system.¹⁹ The homesteads and farmland are collectively owned by all villagers, but the government only gives villagers the right to use the land and receive surpluses from it.²⁰ Only local governments have the right to transfer the land. This means that local government officials are hugely motivated to take land from rural residents and sell land use rights to real estate developers or factory owners because the compensation paid to villagers is significantly lower than the market price. This dual-track pricing system provides a tempting opportunity for village cadres, local officials and rich businesspeople to put personal gain above public interest, form corrupt alliances and abuse collectively owned rural land. As Andrew Wedeman states, by colluding with local government officials and/or real estate developers, village committees frequently act as dishonest brokers and “cheated farm families by pocketing a substantial part of what developers [and the local government] actually paid for land use rights or by accepting bribes in return for agreeing to sell those rights substantially below their market price.”²¹

17 These statistics were provided by village cadres.

18 Yin 2003.

19 Ong 2014; Wong 2015.

20 Oi 1999; Brandt et al. 2002.

21 Wedeman 2017, 110.

Rural residents in both Village D and Village E have long suffered from village cadres' misuse of land. In Village D in 2006, a total of 500 *mu* (33.35 hectares) of farmland was expropriated by the local government with the excuse of building a school and improving teaching conditions for children in rural areas.²² Residents who lost their farmland were compensated at 10,000 yuan per *mu* in 2006. But only 100 *mu* was actually used for building the school and the remaining 400 *mu* lay fallow until 2016 when village cadres and their patrons (township, city and provincial officials) finally obtained permission from the provincial government to build a large agricultural market and villagers' apartments.²³

Because the remaining 400 *mu* was eventually used for commercial and residential purposes rather than building a school, more than 300 households who lost their farmland lodged collective complaints with local governments at different levels. In 2016, the township government and village cadres compromised and paid additional compensation of 50,000 yuan per *mu* to villagers whose farmland was expropriated for commercial and residential purposes. But many residents in Village D were still dissatisfied with the compensation and continued to organize petitions for three reasons: (1) they felt they had been cheated by local officials and village cadres because 400 *mu* of the farmland was used for other purposes; (2) although villagers who lost their land received an additional compensation of 50,000 yuan per *mu*, they believed this compensation was still very low; and (3) many lower-class residents could not afford the new apartments built on their appropriated land, and they suspected that these apartments were used by village cadres to bribe public officials and sold to rich businesspeople for village cadres' personal benefit.²⁴ Even though these dissatisfied villagers had written many letters and petitioned all levels of government to recover their land and prosecute corrupt village cadres, no favourable response from government was forthcoming until we started to write this article.

Village E has been faced with the same land abuse problem. Five *mu* (0.33 hectares) of land, including 1.5 *mu* of agricultural land, was requisitioned to build apartments in the village in 2014 and the 116 resulting apartments were sold in 2016.²⁵ Villagers suspected that many of these were sold by the village leader, Zeng, to friends and relatives who were willing to bribe him. The unequal distribution of apartments angered many villagers, who petitioned local governments for redress. Petitioners also revealed that Zeng had illegally appropriated 39 *mu* (2.6 hectares) of agricultural land for his personal garden, where he built small wooden houses and leisure facilities including a swimming pool, a fishing pool and a golf range.

Elite Collusion in Research Sites

In our research sites, two types of dyadic relationship can be identified. The first is between public officials and village cadres: the public officials, especially township officials, act as patrons to provide protection to village cadres, who channel corrupt benefits to the officials. The second type of dyadic relationship is between village cadres and other village elites: the cadres distribute apartments and collectively owned lands at low prices to the elites, who reciprocate with bribes and general support. This section examines how village cadres developed reciprocal ties with government officials and police officers. It then investigates how village cadres use formal village organizations to establish mutually beneficial networks with other village elites.

22 One *mu* is the equivalent of 666.67 square metres.

23 The new apartments built by the village were small-property apartments. These are usually sold to rural residents in the village at a price significantly lower than that for legal apartments (see Qiao 2017). Many lower-class villagers are still unable to afford them.

24 A rural household needed around 400,000 yuan to buy and decorate a new apartment sold by the village. This is why many villagers were dissatisfied with the compensation they received from the village.

25 Agricultural land cannot be used for residential, commercial or industrial purposes.

Developing reciprocal ties with public officials

Zeng, the Party branch secretary of Village E, owns a construction company in the city centre. He benefits from having several close relatives working as senior officials in the local government through whom he has built a wide reciprocal network with township officials, police officers and other public officials at various levels. For example, Zeng's cousin, Jin, is the deputy head of the personnel department of City E, where Village E is located. Another relative, Xu, is head of the county's education department; Zeng helped Xu obtain his first government position. The first author interviewed Zeng several times and had dinner with him on a few occasions. Zeng loves befriending public officials and rich businesspeople and frequently invites them to lavish banquets and to fish in his private garden. Zeng's extensive connections with public officials have enabled him to become a broker to secure promotions for his friends in government.²⁶

Unlike Zeng, Dong, the-then Party branch secretary of Village D, does not have close relatives working in government.²⁷ Dong nevertheless managed to establish reciprocal ties with public officials. He is exceptionally good at creating and maintaining networks with people in power. For example, in order to forge a bond with an armed police officer who wanted a son but whose only child was a daughter, Dong invited the official to become godfather to Dong's own son. Dong frequently invites armed police officers, township government officials and other public officials to extravagant banquets in a private banquet hall located in premises belonging to Dong's brother.²⁸ Villagers also told the first author that some officials were given apartments for free or at a very low price, which they could sell on at a much higher price. Hui, a villager in Village D, said:

In fact, officials can get many apartments by using the names of their relatives, and then sell them secretly at a high price. We do not know how secret deals between Dong and the officials were reached, but there must be some corruption.²⁹

On many occasions, village cadres gave envelopes that usually contained cash to township cadres, and township cadres gave envelopes to county-level officials. When such transactions happened, participants went into another room and closed the door or asked others to leave the room. The first author was very curious about this and wanted to stay, but eventually a local cadre told him, "they are giving envelopes [with money] to officials, we cannot be here."³⁰ Giving envelopes to public officials is interpreted by interviewees as giving *renqing* 人情 (as a noun, referring to a favour); the person who gives *renqing* expects the recipient to return *renqing* in future.³¹ As Yunxiang Yan notes, "ritualized customary gift-giving embodies the notions of *guanxi* and *renqing* in everyday life and further engenders their power as behavioural norms."³² Government officials who accept *renqing* are expected to abuse their power and return *renqing*, while those who cannot fulfil the obligations of exchanging *renqing* are isolated by others in the social network.

26 The first author was also invited to have dinner in Zeng's garden, where he observed interactions between Zeng and his friends and transactions of power and money.

27 Dong retired in January 2021 and his nephew replaced him as village Party secretary.

28 This information comes from some of the villagers. The first author was once invited by a local official, who has connections with Dong, to have dinner in that canteen. Inviting public officials to a canteen that is not open to the public is safer than dining in a luxury restaurant, because it avoids attracting attention from anti-corruption agencies.

29 Interview with Hui, 2018.

30 Observation conducted in a restaurant near Village D in June 2017. The first author also witnessed village cadres giving envelopes to local officials in the office of the town government in November 2017; at a company owned by Dong's brother in January 2018; and in Zeng's garden in August 2019.

31 Ruan 2017; 2019.

32 Yan 1996, 22.

Exploiting formal organizations to form alliances with village elites

Village cadres are able to form alliances with village elites by exploiting formal organizations in the village, including the rural sage committee and the entrepreneurship association.³³ These civil society groups, as Mattingly argues, help township and village cadres ensure villagers' political compliance, "tamp down on protest, requisition land and enforce mandatory birth quotas."³⁴ During an interview, Dong, the-then leader of Village D, revealed that he had increasingly recognized the significance of employing formal organizations to unite village elites during his successful governance of the village.³⁵ For example, the rural sage committee in Village D comprised 34 members, including 23 rich businesspeople and 11 retired officials or professors.³⁶ Prior to its establishment, many village elites were dissatisfied with village cadres' corrupt behaviour so they secretly supported protests against the village cadres and stopped donating money to the village. The establishment of this committee in the village provided an ideal platform for village cadres to seek village elites' understanding and support by sharing with them profits generated through the misuse of farmland and homesteads. Dong managed to earn the trust and support of these village elites by selling them collectively owned farmland and apartments at a low price. As a rich businessperson told the first author,

I bought an apartment from Dong at a very cheap price, only 1,400 yuan per square metre, in 2017. The price of that apartment rose to 2,600 yuan [per square metre] in 2018. We predict that the price will rise as high as around 5,000 yuan [per square metre] in the next five years, because our village will have become the town centre by then.³⁷

In order to repay Dong's generosity, village elites began to oppose villagers' anti-corruption protests, throwing their weight behind Dong to form a corrupt alliance between village cadres and village elites. Village E does not have a rural sage committee, but it does have an entrepreneurship association consisting of 46 members who own factories and trading companies. The entrepreneurship association offers a good platform for village cadres and businesspeople in the village to get to know each other, build trust and connections, and to distribute illicit profits from land abuse. It gives village elites opportunities to share illicit benefits, and village leaders have gained support from most of the village elites; lower-class villagers, however, suffer from this alliance. They have not only lost their farmland and homesteads but are unable to afford the new apartments.

The principle of reciprocity in the exchange of favours, also known as the *renqing* norm, is widely employed by exchange partners to regulate behaviour. Our research revealed that local public officials were happy to accept banquets, gifts and cash from their friends. These public officials were also willing to be bound by an obligation to protect these friends' illicit businesses. Village cadres seeking to build their reputation among village elites were willing to accept favours provided by these elites and satisfy the elites' expectations. The elites in turn were eager to obtain permission to purchase more apartments and farmland. These illicit exchanges were exclusive to rural elites and their close friends and relatives; others were not permitted to participate, despite being willing to pay bribes.

33 In contemporary China, rural sages are capable and respectable rural elites such as successful businesspeople, retired government officials and professors.

34 Mattingly 2020, 20.

35 Interview with Dong, 2017.

36 Some committee members had moved to the urban area, but they were still invited to become members of the rural sage committee because village cadres needed their economic and social resources to develop their village.

37 Interview with Jie, 2018.

Consequences of Elite Collusion: Capturing Rural Politics and Suppressing Anti-corruption Protests

The livelihoods of rural residents in our research sites have been greatly affected by village cadres' abuse of collectively owned land. Lower-class villagers cannot build reciprocal ties with village cadres and local public officials because they are unable to afford the luxury banquets and expensive gifts that individuals who want to socialize with village cadres and public officials must offer. Although President Xi Jinping's 习近平 anti-corruption campaign targets lavish banquets and abuses of power,³⁸ village cadres continue to maintain close ties with local public officials by hosting dinners but do so in their private gardens rather than in expensive restaurants to avoid the unwelcome attention of anti-corruption agencies. As a result, lower-class villagers are socially excluded. Moreover, in our research sites, residents who had lost land were compensated at a level that was far below the market value of the land, and the welfare of these residents was jeopardized because they were deprived of the chance to subsist on and earn income from their land.

In Village D, the paltry compensation offered to rural residents who lost their farmland or homestead put their livelihoods at risk. Many were not able to afford one of the new apartments built on their land, the price of which has increased rapidly in recent years. When they had land, they could rely on it for survival and build a house on that land – it was not necessary for them to pay out a large amount of money for a new apartment sold by the village. Since expropriation, they have faced increasing poverty and worsening living standards.³⁹ Many have been forced to live with relatives in very old, dilapidated houses. These lower-class residents experience strong feelings of deprivation and resentment when they watch others moving into the new apartments built on their land. Similarly, lower-class residents in Village E had to give up the right to buy an apartment, rights which were then sold by the village leader to his friends (local officials and rich businesspeople). This prompted the fury of lower-class residents and generated serious conflict between village cadres and residents.

Middle-class rural residents have also grown increasingly dissatisfied with village cadres as they observe the lack of transparency and equality in the distribution of new apartments and land. Most middle-class residents, however, choose to accept this fact and do nothing because they work in companies and factories owned by village elites who have benefited from village cadres' land abuse and who strongly support village cadres' leadership. Thus, concern over job security has made middle-class residents unwilling to join lower-class residents' anti-corruption protests.

To solve the problem of deprivation in the village and safeguard land use rights, rural residents employ both institutional and non-institutional means. Rural residents have the right to elect village leaders (such as the village committee head) so that they may elect honest and accountable village leaders and actively participate in village affairs. Ethnographic data, however, show that grassroots democracy has been distorted by the powerful collusion of rural elites. The failure of institutional means (village "democracy") thus compels rural residents to adopt non-institutional means such as anti-corruption protests. Village cadres respond in two ways: a "hard" way, using reciprocal ties with township officials, police officers and gang bosses to suppress rural residents' protests; and a "soft" way, using reciprocal networks to demobilize lower-class residents' anti-corruption protests and make them feel disempowered and isolated.

Distorting grassroots democracy

The Organic Law of Village Committees allows villagers to manage their affairs, advance their interests and elect local leaders.⁴⁰ The law also stipulates that elections and decision making in the village

38 Fu 2015; Gong and Xiao 2017; Manion 2016.

39 See Brandt et al. 2002.

40 O'Brien and Li 2000.

should be democratic. To be specific, the village head is elected by a villagers' committee consisting of all adult villagers, and the Party branch secretary for the village is elected by the village Party committee, to which all Communist Party members in the village belong. The Party branch secretary is the most powerful village individual and can also be the village head. However, as Xin Liu argues, democratic elections and decision making often do not occur in practice because the township government appoints the Party branch secretary and chooses the nominees for village head.⁴¹ In our research sites, democratic elections have been seriously undermined and candidates who eventually become Party branch secretary and village head must first obtain support from township officials. For example, Dong served as Party branch secretary of Village D for six terms (18 years) and was also village head during his first five terms. Many villagers we interviewed pointed out that elections in the village had long been manipulated by Dong and his friends among the township officials.⁴²

In order to understand why Dong was able to serve as the village leader for so long, the first author managed to interview Xiong, a township official in charge of personnel issues. Xiong stated: "we usually do not change the Party branch secretary if she or he is capable and if there is no mass incident happening in the village."⁴³ Later, we discovered that Dong and Xiong were old friends and members of the same patronage network, and that Xiong frequently attended Dong's banquets. Dong also managed to establish a close tie with the town Party chief. We also interviewed Xiong's subordinates and a number of villagers regarding the significance of reciprocal ties with township officials in winning village elections. The information they provided suggests that if there is more than one candidate, the candidate with the strongest connection with township officials will win the "democratic election" in the village.

In addition to gaining support from township officials, candidates also need support from rural residents, especially when competition is strong. The most common means of obtaining support is bribery. Vote-buying in China's village elections has attracted scholarly attention in recent years. For example, drawing on fieldwork data collected from 14 Chinese villages, Tan Zhao finds that "vote buying has spread so rapidly in the past decade" and candidates' use of vote-buying in village elections is closely associated with economic gains generated by land takings.⁴⁴ Vote-buying also occurred in our research sites. Wu, gatekeeper of a factory in Village E, revealed that Zeng, the leader of Village E, gave him and his wife 500 yuan in both 2011 and 2014 to secure their votes.⁴⁵ But because Zeng established strong reciprocal ties with township officials in his first two terms and there were no strong competitors, he did not bother to buy votes from villagers in the 2017 village election.

Our ethnographic data suggest that only rich persons can be elected as village leaders because establishing reciprocal ties with township officials and buying votes are expensive.⁴⁶ Patronage and vote-buying undermine the ability of rural residents to hold elected village leaders accountable. Elected village leaders usually ignore the input of rural residents and only pay lip service to the importance of village democracy in the process of making decisions and managing village affairs. They usually dominate the decision-making process and misuse farmland and other collectively owned resources in order to earn illicit profits. Some of these gains are then channelled to individuals who provide electoral support. Furthermore, village leaders in both research sites made the allocation of new apartments and collectively owned land opaque in order to generate private profits and benefit their allies.

41 Liu, Xin 2000.

42 Interviews with Guang, Chu, Sheng and Liang, 2017–2018.

43 Interview with Xiong, 2018.

44 Zhao, Tan 2018, 278.

45 Interview with Wu, 2019.

46 See also Yao 2018.

Suppressing anti-corruption protests

Rural residents become petitioners in order to fight for their livelihoods and to gain social justice. In our research sites, we observed that rural residents' anti-corruption protests were suppressed by local elites in both "hard" and "soft" ways. Local government officials and police officers became involved in the "hard" suppression of petitioners to safeguard their patronage networks and to hide the fact that if rural residents petition upper-level governments it means local officials and police officers have failed to resolve rural conflicts and grievances. Local gangsters were also brought in to deal with troublesome petitioners. The village cadres, government officials, police officers and gangsters formed powerful networks with the intention of suppressing rural petitioners. In Village D, for example, village cadres allowed a construction team owned by local gangsters (and paid above-market rates) to build a garden and new apartments for the village.⁴⁷ A number of gangsters were also recruited as security guards for the construction site. Guang, one of the petitioners' leaders, told the first author how powerful this network of village leaders, corrupt officials and gangsters was:

We had been to Beijing to petition before, and [officials in the petition department] asked us to go back and talk to the land resource management bureau of our county. The head of the bureau's inspection department told us that it was illegal to build on the agricultural land. If we found someone building something on the land, we could phone [officials in the bureau's inspection department], and they would come to stop the illegal construction. One day, we found a construction team building something [on that land] and we phoned the head of the inspection department. However, [inspectors] arrived the next day and the construction workers had already left. We later realized that they had colluded with each other.

After that, a wall was built around that land, and villagers were not allowed to enter. On one occasion, about 20 villagers protested on that land and they were beaten by a number of security guards [gangsters]. We had videos on our phones as evidence. Following this, police officers arrested a few villagers, but not these security guards! As a result, no one dared to go onto that land. One year later, many buildings had been constructed.⁴⁸

Disobedient petitioners were intimidated by local police officers who visited petitioners' homes on the pretext of investigating cases or combating drug-dealing and gambling. On some occasions, police officers broke into petitioners' homes, frightening petitioners and their family members. Village leaders frequently employed gangsters to threaten or even use violence against petitioners. Petitioners' private property was invaded; sometimes, petitioners' ducks were poisoned, their chickens stolen and their vegetables trampled.⁴⁹

The "soft" method of suppressing anti-corruption protests refers to village elites' use of social networks to transmit gossip to demoralize and isolate petitioners within the village. The core group of complainants, as Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li note, "must convince other, less bold villagers how weak [and corrupt] grassroots cadres have become – and then they must use the support they have acquired to pressure higher levels to champion their charges."⁵⁰ Complainants,

47 The leader of Village E also established patronage networks with gang bosses, police officials and government officials to tackle villagers' protests. This section looks only at Village D owing to space constraints.

48 Interview with Guang, 2018. The information was verified by many other villagers.

49 The first author became aware of the risk of conducting fieldwork in Village D after he was followed while in the village. The last time the first author interviewed petitioners was in a large resort near the town where Village D was located. A total of 17 petitioners met the first author for discussions in the hotel, but after that meeting they refused to meet the author again. In a telephone conversation, a villager told the author that all of the 17 petitioners he had met were punished by the leader of Village D and his brother, the boss of a locally based criminal organization. The first author then decided to stop collecting interview data about Village D.

50 O'Brien and Li 1995, 782.

however, failed to influence village public opinion in our research sites. Village cadres become “moral entrepreneurs,” using the strength of their position in social networks to label certain types of behaviour as selfish, immoral and deviant. During an interview, the Party branch secretary of Village E commented on a villagers’ petition against him:

Some poor villagers ... they are lazy and addicted to gambling. They are always jealous of others’ success. They gamble and lose money so they cannot afford new apartments. That is why they go to petition. Please do not trust them, they are rubbish.⁵¹

This village leader attributed petitioners’ poverty and grievances to their individual irresponsibility and ignored the root cause of the problem, which was that the petitioners’ land had been expropriated without sufficient compensation.

The village leader’s condemnation of the petitioners as “rubbish” and “lazy” was taken at face value by other village elites. These elites were able to influence public opinion and change many villagers’ perception of petitioners’ anti-corruption activities. When the first author was invited for tea at the home of Hao, a retired banker and head of village D’s rural sage committee, Hao’s wife shared with him some gossip circulating among lower-class residents about village leaders’ corruption.⁵² Hao yelled at his wife:

How can you believe their gossip! [You need to] know who they are! They are lower-class people without knowledge! They know nothing about law and politics. I do not want to hear this nonsense again.⁵³

In our research sites, petitioners failed to secure any support from village elites.⁵⁴ Chu, a lower-class villager and leader of the petitioners’ organization, asked his rich relative, Hai, a retired professor originally from the same village, to support their anti-corruption protests. But Hai declined, explaining in an interview that:

Chu used to be a cleaner in my university. He is not smart, with a rather low education level. How can I believe him? Villagers always like gossiping. [I] do not believe their gossip, [because] most of their gossip is rubbish.⁵⁵

Village elites regarded the petitioners as “undereducated” and the gossip about village leaders’ illegal acts as “untrustworthy and rubbish.” Village cadres, on the other hand, were perceived to be knowledgeable, able to develop the village and supply it with benefits. The village elites’ justification for village leaders’ behaviour eventually influenced the perception of most of the villagers. For example, Jie, a rich businessman in Village D, told his lower-class relatives that the decision made by the village leader to build new apartments was advantageous for everyone in the village. He also suggested that they should not protest or sign petitions against the village leader. Because Jie was regarded as a knowledgeable and intelligent person, his relatives were more than happy to accept his “truth” and transmit it to other villagers.

As a result, the petitioners were increasingly excluded by other residents, who became less sympathetic to the petitioners’ suffering and increasingly unwilling to socialize with them. The anti-corruption protests came to be viewed by most villagers as immoral, deviant and disruptive.

51 Interview with Zeng, 2019.

52 Based on ethnographic data collected. Dao was a member of the faction established by village cadres.

53 Interview with Hao, 2018.

54 According to fieldwork data, the vast majority of village elites were members of the patronage network created by village cadres.

55 Interview with Hai, 2017.

The combined use of “soft” and “hard” methods of suppression resulted in most petitioners relinquishing their struggle for social justice.

The Resilience of Elite Collusion under the Current Rural Reform

The Chinese government allows township officials to appoint a Party branch secretary for each village who becomes the “number one” (*yi ba shou* 一把手) of the village. The elected village committee head then becomes the “number two” (*er ba shou* 二把手) and is subordinate to the unelected Party branch secretary.⁵⁶ This institutional design is an attempt to strengthen Party control over village communities and permits the elected village committee head only symbolic power. However, the Party is not always able to exert tight control over village communities, because the newly emerged economic elites, who are rich and powerful but politically unreliable, sometimes win village elections. These elites, according to Yao, are “not well educated but were street-smart, bold and prone to take risks and break rules in both business and political ventures.”⁵⁷ Relations between township officials and village cadres are sometimes strained because cadres may ignore local government interests and resist unpopular government policies. Tensions between village cadres can also break out when cadres compete for corrupt benefits. Politics in rural China can therefore be characterized as “the rise of strongmen entrepreneurs in village politics” following the disappearance of traditional morals in villages and the decline of Party control over rural communities.⁵⁸

The CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued “The strategic plan for rural revitalization (2018–2022)” in order to exert tighter control over village committees. Under this plan, the principle of *yijiantiao* has become a new norm in village politics. Capable village Party members who are loyal to the CCP serve as heads of both the elected village committees and the village Party committees. In the most recent round of elections, for example, the central government required local governments to increase the number of villages where the village Party secretary also served as head of the elected village committee. This political goal was inflated by local governments at each level: the lower the level of government, the higher the proportion of *yijiantiao* was required. In City D and City E, where our research sites were located, only Party members were allowed to stand for election to village committees. Township officials went to great lengths to ensure that the principle of *yijiantiao* was implemented in all villages.

Taking advantage of *yijiantiao*, township officials helped their preferred candidates win village elections. The impersonal Party loyalty that was essential for strengthening Party control over villages manifested in practice as personal loyalty and affective attachments to township officials. To be specific, township officials in our research sites deployed a tighter vetting system – a formal mechanism – to exclude a large number of potential candidates. For example, former village committee members who were not Party members were disqualified; villagers and former village leaders who disobeyed policies set by upper-level authorities and who supported or were involved in “illegal” protests were disqualified; and candidates who were related to criminal gangs and unauthorized religious groups were also disqualified.

Moreover, township officials allowed their preferred candidates to manipulate village elections. Officials turned a blind eye to their candidates’ abuse of the proxy voting system. In contrast to earlier research, which reports that “villagers have become increasingly keen to participate in grassroots elections and influence decision making in their village affairs,”⁵⁹ we found that the vast majority of villagers did not return to vote and instead appointed heads of small groups in the village as their proxies to vote.⁶⁰ This provided excellent opportunities for township officials’ candidates to use

56 O’Brien and Han 2009.

57 Yao 2018, 70.

58 Ibid.

59 Wong, Tang and Liu 2020, 22.

60 Most adult villagers do not live in the village because they work in urban areas or have their own businesses elsewhere.

existing factional ties or deliver gifts or promise benefits to gain support from the heads of small groups. Township officials also allowed their candidates to fill in ballots that were left blank.

The election outcomes in Village D and Village E were not unexpected. Dong, the former Party secretary of Village D, retired because of his age. His nephew, Jian, the former deputy village Party secretary, then became head of both the village Party committee and the elected village committee. Zeng, the former Party secretary of Village E, won the village election and would govern the village for the next five years. We also observed that a majority of township officials' preferred candidates in City D and City E won their elections, but there was still a very small number of winning candidates who were not township officials' preferred candidates. However, these candidates eventually gave up their elected positions because, in retaliation for their "non-cooperation," their private businesses (for example, their factories and firms) came under much closer scrutiny from government departments.

The ethnographic data we collected provide up-to-date insights into the impact of the recent village elections on rural factions. Village election reforms that emphasize the principle of *yijiantiao* increase the Party's capacity to govern rural China and solve the problems of disobedience and mass rural protests. However, elite collusion appears to be resilient and patronage ties are continuously employed to manipulate village elections and weaken grassroots democracy. When China's anti-corruption efforts ease off and security is no longer the top concern of local elites, these elites, who are politically correct but corrupt, will doubtless deploy reciprocal ties to maximize their material interests. If this happens, the local supervisory commissions should play a larger role in supervising the exercise of power by township officials and village leaders and reduce local elites' capability to capture rents and manipulate village elections.

Conclusion

This article investigates elite collusion and its influence on village elections and rural land development in China, adding to our understanding of village politics in China including "access to power" and "the exercise of power" by village authorities. More specifically, our analysis of ethnographic data collected from China enriches the existing literature on elite capture and corruption in authoritarian China. In rural China, where ownership of collective resources is ambiguously defined and inadequately protected, village cadres and their allies benefit from the misuse of these resources. Village cadres can reap huge illicit gains by abusing village assets; village elites are able to buy land-use rights to collectively owned resources and build apartments on farmland at a low price; and local public officials benefit from bribes, expensive gifts and lavish banquets supplied by village cadres. This all comes at the expense of lower-class villagers, many of whom lose their rights to collectively owned assets without proper compensation.

Elite collusion and vote-buying have made elected village cadres unaccountable to the villagers they govern. Village cadres are accountable to local elites, including the village elites and township officials who support village cadres to win elections. This negatively affects the livelihoods of the disadvantaged and the middle class. Middle-class residents are unwilling to oppose village leaders because many of them work in factories and companies owned by village elites who generally support village cadres. Many lower-class villagers become petitioners, fighting against these greedy village cadres and striving for proper recompense; however, these petitioners are often suppressed by police officers and gangsters who are members of elites' faction. Furthermore, petitioners' anti-corruption activism is derailed by village elites who ensure that petitioners are socially marginalized and increasingly powerless. The recent reform establishing the new principle of *yijiantiao* consolidates Party control over village committees and increases village cadres' compliance with Party policies. However, *yijiantiao* also strengthens the power of rural elites, which can result in greater corruption and the systematic abuse of power if not properly monitored.

Elite capture and corruption are closely connected in both authoritarian and democratic regimes, but they are still underexplored in rural China. Using micro case studies, this article unmasks the hidden aspects of villagers' self-governance. It contributes to our understanding of the development of elite collusion in the countryside and analyses how such collusion facilitates corrupt exchanges, distorts grassroots democracy and suppresses rural protests. Given China's unique political and social system, further investigation into elite capture in authoritarian China is needed in order to offer a solid foundation for the comparison of elite capture in both authoritarian and democratic regimes and to contribute to the understanding of elite capture from a global perspective.

Acknowledgements. We greatly appreciate the helpful comments and suggestions given by Feng Chen, Qing Liu, Jingyi Wang, Huifang Yu, Mengyi Wang and Hilary Wright. We also thank four anonymous reviewers for their comments. This work was supported by Key Scientific Research Projects of Hanshan Normal University (Project No. XS202005) and a grant from General Research Fund (GRF) by the Research Grants Council (RGC) in Hong Kong (Project No. 17608821). All errors remain our own.

Conflicts of interest. None.

References

- Bardhan, Pranab K., and Dilip Mookherjee.** 2000. "Capture and governance at local and national levels." *American Economic Review* 90 (2), 135–139.
- Bian, Yanjie.** 2002. "Chinese social stratification and social mobility." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, 91–116.
- Brandt, Loren, Jikun Huang, Guo Li and Scott Rozelle.** 2002. "Land rights in rural China." *The China Journal* 47, 67–97.
- Chen, Xi, and Jingping Liu.** 2021. "Village leaders, dual brokerage and political order in rural China." *The China Quarterly* 247, 662–680.
- Dasgupta, Aniruddha, and Victoria A. Beard.** 2007. "Community driven development, collective action and elite capture in Indonesia." *Development and Change* 38(2), 229–249.
- Dutta, Diya.** 2009. "Elite capture and corruption: concepts and definitions." Working paper, National Council of Applied Economic Research.
- Fritzen, Scott A.** 2007. "Can the design of community-driven development reduce the risk of elite capture?" *World Development* 35(8), 1359–75.
- Fu, Hualing.** 2015. "Wielding the sword." In Susan Rose-Ackerman and Paul Felipe Lagunes (eds.), *Greed, Corruption, and the Modern State*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 134–160.
- Gong, Ting, and Hanyu Xiao.** 2017. "The formation and impact of isomorphic pressures." *Governance* 30(3), 387–405.
- Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison and John Jay.** 2009. *The Federalist Papers*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Han, Huawei, and Qin Gao.** 2019. "Community-based welfare targeting and political elite capture." *World Development* 115, 145–159.
- Hillman, Ben.** 2010. "Factions and spoils: examining political behavior within the local state in China." *The China Journal* 64, 1–18.
- Hillman, Ben.** 2014. *Patronage and Power: Local State Networks and Party-State Resilience in Rural China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Laffont, Jean-Jacques, and Jean Tirole.** 1991. "The politics of government decision-making." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 106(4), 1089–1127.
- Liu, Jingping.** 2021. "The abolition of agricultural taxes and the transformation of clientelism in the countryside of post-Mao China." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 49(3), 585–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2021.1873290>.
- Liu, Xin.** 2000. *In One's Own Shadow: An Ethnographical Account of the Condition of Post-reform Rural China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lucas, Anton.** 2016. "Elite capture and corruption in two villages in Bengkulu Province, Sumatra." *Human Ecology* 44(3), 287–300.
- Manion, Manion.** 2016. "Taking China's anticorruption campaign seriously." *Economic and Political Studies* 4(1), 3–18.
- Mattingly, Daniel C.** 2016. "Elite capture: how decentralization and informal institutions weaken property rights in China." *World Politics* 68(3), 383–412.
- Mattingly, Daniel C.** 2020. *The Art of Political Control in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Brien, Kevin J., and Rongbin Han.** 2009. "Path to democracy? Assessing village elections in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, 359–378.
- O'Brien, Kevin J., and Lianjiang Li.** 1995. "The politics of lodging complaints in rural China." *The China Quarterly* 143, 756–783.
- O'Brien, Kevin J., and Lianjiang Li.** 2000. "Accommodating 'democracy' in a one-party state." *The China Quarterly* 162, 465–489.

- Oi, Jean C.** 1999. *Rural China Takes Off: Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ong, Lynette H.** 2014. "State-led urbanization in China: skyscrapers, land revenue and 'concentrated villages'." *The China Quarterly* 217, 162–179.
- Qiao, Shitong.** 2017. *Chinese Small Property: The Co-evolution of Law and Social Norms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruan, Ji.** 2017. *Guanxi, Social Capital and School Choice in China*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ruan, Ji.** 2019. "‘Bribery with Chinese characteristics’ and the use of *guanxi* to obtain admission to prestigious secondary schools in urban China." *Critical Asian Studies* 51, 120–130.
- Shih, Victor.** 2004. "Factions matter: personal networks and the distribution of bank loans in China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 13(38), 3–19.
- Shih, Victor, Christopher Adolph and Mingxing Liu.** 2012. "Getting ahead in the Communist Party." *American Political Science Review* 106(1), 166–187.
- Wang, Peng.** 2020. "How to engage in illegal transactions." *The British Journal of Criminology* 60, 1282–1301.
- Wang, Peng, and Xia Yan.** 2020. "Bureaucratic slack in China: the anti-corruption campaign and the decline of patronage networks in developing economies." *The China Quarterly* 243, 611–634.
- Wedeman, Andrew.** 2017. "Village elections and grassroots corruption in China." *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 13, 107–129.
- Wong, Siu Wai.** 2015. "Land requisitions and state–village power restructuring in southern China." *The China Quarterly* 224, 888–908.
- Wong, Siu Wai, Bo-sin Tang and Jinlong Liu.** 2020. "Village elections, grassroots governance and the restructuring of state power: an empirical study in southern peri-urban China." *The China Quarterly* 241, 22–42.
- Yan, Yunxiang.** 1996. "The culture of *guanxi* in a north China village." *The China Journal* 35, 1–25.
- Yao, Yusheng.** 2018. "Village elections and the rise of a new elite." In Yingjie Guo (ed.), *Local Elites in Post-Mao China*. New York: Taylor and Francis, 53–72.
- Yin, Robert.** 2003. *Case Study Research Design and Methods*. London: Sage.
- Zhao, Hong.** 2019. "Graphics: China's democracy at a community level." *CGTN*, 24 November, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-11-24/Graphics-China-s-democracy-at-a-community-level-LSHLZMXaW4/index.html>.
- Zhao, Tan.** 2018. "Vote buying and land takings in China's village elections." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, 277–294.

Ji RUAN is professor in the department of sociology at Guizhou Minzu University. His main research interests include *guanxi*, rural studies, educational sociology, Confucianism, love, marriage and family relationships.

Peng WANG is associate professor in the department of sociology at the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include crime, corruption, economic sociology, bureaucracy and governance.