ELITE CAPTURE
How Decentralization and Informal Institutions Weaken Property Rights in China

By DANIEL C. MATTINGLY*

POLITICAL decentralization is often argued to strengthen political accountability.[1] A common argument in favor of decentralization is that by placing power in the hands of local officials, it brings government closer to the people. When citizens and officials belong to the same social groups and organizations—from temples and clans to social clubs—it helps citizens to monitor officials and sanction them when they perform poorly in office.[2] The informal rules and norms created by these social groups, often referred to as informal institutions, can encourage cooperation and accountability.[3] Elinor Ostrom and others have shown that grassroots social organizations can protect group property rights, suggesting that these social organizations can be powerful tools of accountability in places where formal state institutions are weak.[4]

Important evidence of the benefits of grassroots social organizations comes from China, where scholars have found that lineage and temple organizations use informal incentives to hold village-level officials accountable. Influential work by Lily Tsai shows that lineages or

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[1] For helpful reviews see Bardhan 2002, Wibbels 2006, and Treisman 2007.

[2] Putnam 1994; Fox 2015.

[3] Helmke and Levitsky 2004.

[4] See Ostrom 1990; Greif 1993.

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clans reward village officials who perform well in office with increased moral standing in the group.[5] The reward of increased social standing discourages officials from enriching themselves with public funds and encourages them to use village money to pave roads, to mend schoolhouse roofs, and to strengthen other public services. Subsequent scholarship on village-level public goods provision in China reinforces these findings.[6] This work suggests that where democratic institutions are weak, strong social institutions can substitute for formal institutions like free and fair elections.

In this article I argue that strong informal institutions also empower local elites who can use their influence to capture rents and confiscate property. I examine whether including the leaders of lineage groups in village political institutions in China not only improves public goods provision, as the recent literature establishes, but also limits the power of local officials to appropriate villagers' land. Throughout the developing world, land is often the most valuable asset owned by the poor.[7] In recent decades in China, local leaders have requisitioned land from tens of millions of farmers to sell the use rights for lucrative commercial, residential, and industrial development.[8] These land expropriations supply a large portion of the tax base for many local governments and redistribute the equivalent of a half-trillion US dollars of property each year from villagers to the state.[9]

I find that the inclusion of lineage leaders in village political institutions *weakens* villagers' land rights. I draw on a unique mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence. Qualitative process tracing and a survey experiment demonstrate that villagers have a high degree of confidence in information supplied by their lineage group leaders. As a result, when lineage group leaders are incorporated into village political institutions, it gives local officials a powerful tool to elicit compliance from villagers for land expropriation policies.[10] While village-level officials do not have the legal authority to confiscate land, they administer land expropriations and work to elicit villagers' compliance with them, and

[5] Tsai 2007a; Tsai 2007b.

[6] Chen and Huhe 2013; Xu and Yao 2015.

[7] Boone 2013; Holland 2014; Baldwin 2014.

[8] Hsing 2010; Rithmire 2013; Rithmire 2015.

[9] That is, in 2012 the Chinese government generated more than US$600 billion in revenue from the expropriation of land and the subsequent auctioning of land use rights. See *Chinese Land Resources Report 2013* 2014.

[10] This is consistent with work by Unger 1989, Kelliher 1997, and others who note that village committees were introduced in rural China in the wake of de-collectivization partly in order to select leaders who can elicit compliance with state policies. It is also consistent with a study by Deng and O'Brien 2013 that shows that the Chinese state uses bureaucrats' family ties to protesters to demobilize them.

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so they are a crucial part of the calculus of land deals. Using data from a national survey, I find that when lineage elites join village political institutions, it increases the likelihood of a land expropriation by 14 to 20 percent. These land requisitions by lineage leaders lead to widespread political dissatisfaction.

These findings show how strong social institutions can benefit citizens when it comes to public goods, yet hurt them when it comes to property protection—suggesting that social institutions serve as channels of bottom-up informal accountability *and* top-down political control. Whether they are conduits of accountability or control depends on the structure of incentives. The provision of public goods might be thought of as a repeated game with relatively low stakes, a structure that allows a cooperative equilibrium to emerge. But the one-shot opportunity to profit from land development raises the payoff of defecting from this cooperative equilibrium by an order of magnitude or more. In China, the average village spends around $15,000 per year on public goods, while a single acre of expropriated land yields an order of magnitude more in revenue and potential rents.[11] The focus on public goods in the recent literature has led scholars to conclude that strong informal institutions constrain officials. Yet land and local development are arguably more consequential than public services for the distribution of wealth, and in this context the elite have incentives to use social institutions as tools of political control.

Elite capture of local politics is, in light of these findings, about more than control over formal political institutions. Local elites can exploit a combination of formal official power and informal social power to elicit compliance from local populations and to extract rents. A number of scholars have noted the danger of elite capture of decentralized institutions in contexts as varied as Africa, Asia, and Latin America.[12] But these studies sometimes struggle to explain precisely why local populations fail to hold these local elites accountable, either at the ballot box or through protest or some other type of collective action. I suggest that local elites can exploit their control over group social networks to encourage compliance with extractive policies.

Grassroots social organizations are therefore no substitute for strong formal institutions of accountability. When social elites join village political institutions in China it creates the illusion of voice—group

[11] Data on public goods from Martinez-Bravo et al. 2011. Data on expropriated land from *Landesa China Survey* 2011.

[12] Bardhan 2002; Campos and Heilman 2005; Acemoğlu, Reed, and Robinson 2014; Malesky, Nguyen, and Tran 2014.

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members may reward village officials who perform well in office with increased moral standing and respect, but these elites are also at risk of being co-opted by the state. This suggests a limit to the idea that grassroots social organizations can replace formal state institutions of accountability, at least so long as these social institutions are linked to the state. Instead, the raw politics of collective action and protest are more effective curbs on official behavior.

Land Rights and Decentralized Institutions

Land rights are central to China's recent political history. Mao's promises to collectivize rural land and eliminate landlords swept the Communist Party to power in 1949, and experiments with collective agriculture defined the early years of communist rule over rural China. The subsequent reversal of land reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s—farmers now have long-term use rights to private plots of land that are still owned by village and subvillage collectives (*jiti*)—led to an increase in grain production and what may be the largest reduction of poverty in human history. More recently, the Land Management Law of 1986 sanctioned the legal transfer of land-use rights, leading to the emergence of a state-controlled land market that helped spark the past decade of China's explosive urban growth.[13]

Unlike a typical land market, in China the state monopolizes the lucrative rights to develop agricultural land. The right to convert land's legal status from agricultural land (*nong yong di)* to construction land (*jianshe yong di*) belongs solely to the state—specifically to county and higher levels of government. To develop land, county and higher levels of government have the authority to expropriate land from village collectives and then transfer the ownership rights to the state. Once the land's status has been transferred to the state and converted from agricultural to construction use, governments can auction the land-use rights, typically for an order of magnitude more than they compensated the farmers. The profits from land expropriation and conversion have come to account for between 30 to 70 percent of government revenue.[14] According to an official report from the Ministry of Land and Resources, in 2012 sales of land-use rights generated 4.2 trillion yuan (or

[13] Rithmire 2015.

[14] See Cai 2003. More recent estimates are similar in magnitude, though there is significant uncertainty. As Rithmire 2015 notes, officials treat data on revenue generated from land as extremely sensitive.

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$600 billion) in revenue, a figure that may, if anything, underestimate the actual amount.[15]

It is important to underscore that in China, officials at the county level and higher have final authority over decisions about land use. Nevertheless, village collectives' ownership of rural land makes village officials important players in land politics. There are two key groups of cadres in Chinese villages, the Communist Party and the village committee, each of which exert some control over village land and other collective property (see Table 1). An elected village committee formally holds a great deal of de jure power, and often administers the allocation of village land in conjunction with the heads of the villager small groups (*xiaozu*). The elections for these committee posts have become gradually more competitive over the past two decades, although electoral manipulation by township governments remains common.[16] In principle, village committees are autonomous organizations with no formal connection to the rest of the government hierarchy. However, an unelected village Communist Party secretary, who is generally appointed by the township, often wields more de facto power over village policy than the village committee.[17] As a result, despite the autonomy of village political institutions from the government, in practice higher levels of the party-state exert considerable power over villages through party appointments and party discipline.

Village officials play important roles in land expropriation. First, they serve as representatives of the landholding village collectives during negotiations with higher levels of government over land-use planning. They frequently work directly with firms and higher level officials to attract investment to their village.[18] If they succeed, they bargain with higher level officials or firms over the amount of compensation the village will receive in return for the land. One study found that in 39 percent of cases, village political institutions retained some portion of the compensation, in some instances more than 50 percent.[19]

Second, village officials sometimes use their power to reallocate land within the village and set aside some for smaller scale industrial and real estate projects. As Jean Oi notes, village political institutions are essentially "socialist landlords."[20] In the 1980s and 1990s, local officials used

[15] See *Chinese Land Resources Report 2013* 2014.

[16] See Manion 2006 and O'Brien and Han 2009 for helpful discussions about the effect and history of village elections.

[17] Oi and Rozelle 2000.

[18] Cai 2003.

[19] Deininger and Jin 2009, 32.

[20] Oi 1991, 193.

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TABLE 1
KEY VILLAGE INSTITUTIONS OF SELF-GOVERNMENT IN CHINA[a]

	Communist Party Branch	*Village Committee*
Leader	party secretary	village chief
Average leader tenure	10 years	7 years
Average size	7 party cadres	4 members
Selectorate	Communist Party	villagers

[a] Data on leader tenure and institution size from Martinez-Bravo et al. 2011.

their power over land allocation to ensure that collectively owned enterprises had preferential access to local land.[21] Through the mid-2000s, large-scale land reallocations—in which village officials redistributed the land holdings of a large numbers of villagers—were the "preferred avenue" for land expropriations because they could be accomplished by making each villager's land holding slightly smaller with no direct compensation.[22] However, the 2003 Rural Land Contracting Law placed tighter controls on when village officials could undertake such large-scale land reallocations, curbing, though not eliminating, land taking by village officials for the purpose of land development.[23]

Village officials and village political institutions often benefit directly from land expropriation. One survey found that 37 percent of village own-source revenue is derived from land expropriation.[24] Land sales also present significant opportunities for local corruption.[25] In one four-year period in China, between 1999 and 2002, the Ministry of Land and Resources investigated more than half a million illegal land transactions, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that village officials can make many times their annual salary in kickbacks from land deals.[26]

Villagers can also potentially benefit from land expropriation. Below, I present quantitative evidence on the consequences of land expropriation. The results show that land seizures are in general not correlated with a significant increase in collective petitioning, suggesting that in most cases villagers remain relatively satisfied with the political status quo after expropriation. Yet the results also show that when lineage leaders confiscate land, the amount of petitioning surges. This suggests

[21] Oi 1999, 133, n. 72.
[22] Deininger and Jin 2009, 23.
[23] Deininger and Jin 2009; Hsing 2010.
[24] Deininger and Jin 2009, 29.
[25] Chen and Kung 2015.
[26] Zhu 2005; Cai 2003.

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dissatisfaction with village officials after the land seizure, and that land seizures undertaken by lineage leaders are unusually extractive; villagers are getting a raw deal. The evidence is discussed below in more detail.

Informal Institutions and Lineage Groups

I focus in this article on the political role of a specific type of local elite —the leaders of lineage groups. Members of the same lineage group have a common surname and are descended from a common known ancestor. Villages in China can vary in the degree to which villagers consciously identify with their lineage. Even within the same region, lineage ties can be of marginal importance in one village and highly salient in another.[27] Nevertheless, as Yiqing Xu and Yang Yao note, lineage groups are regarded by most scholars "as the most important social group in Chinese villages."[28]

Lineage groups are important in part because they create shared norms, sometimes referred to as informal institutions, which influence group behavior. Lineages encourage cooperation among their members by conferring higher social status on members who provide aid to the lineage. As Tsai demonstrates, this norm provides incentives for village cadres to increase village public goods expenditures.[29]

At the same time, lineage group norms also encourage compliance with lineage elders and other authority figures—making these groups potential channels of political control. Prasenjit Duara notes that officials in imperial China promoted lineage institutions for this very reason:

> The presence of lineage groups and patrilineal ideology in northern villages was in no small measure a result of their vigorous propagation by scholars, officials, and the imperial center from the Song through the Qing. Regarded as embodying the principles of classical antiquity, the ideology of descent was seen as an ideal moral and ritual medium for regulating behavior and social order.[30]

Today, the rules and norms created by lineage groups still encourage respect for lineage group elites. Lineage leaders have three important characteristics: (1) their advice and counsel is often required within the lineage for life events (*dashi*) such as funerals or weddings; (2) they

[27] Freedman 1966; Duara 1988; Tsai 2007a.
[28] Xu and Yao 2015, 371.
[29] Tsai 2007a.
[30] Duara 1988, 92.

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informally resolve disputes between group members; and (3) they are central nodes in village social networks and important sources of information and gossip about village politics and society. Different villages have different ways of referring to these leaders. These range from lineage chiefs (*zongli*),[31] to lineage elders (*zhanglao*), and lineage heads (*zuzhang*). Lineage elites broadly construed help protect the group's property, mobilize the group in protests, and influence village politics more generally.[32]

A Theory of Political Control

I argue that when local elites with significant social power are included in decentralized political institutions, it strengthens the state's control over local society and allows officials to confiscate property. The logic of the theory relies on the informal power wielded by these elite. Informal norms encourage members of social groups like clans to trust their leaders and to defer to them.

These norms are reinforced through years of repeated interaction between leaders and group members. In game theoretic terms, public goods provision might be thought of as a repeated Prisoner's Dilemma. The budget for public goods and services must be set every year, but the payoffs do not change very much and are fairly predictable. Repeated interaction creates incentives for clan elite and clan members to play a cooperative strategy. This kind of repeat play is more or less the basis of the traditional village "moral economy."[33]

Yet, with land development the stakes are much higher than with public goods and information is opaque. Returning to the game theory analogy, suppose in the context of this repeated Prisoner's Dilemma that after many periods of playing cooperatively, one player privately observes a one-shot chance to pocket a windfall gain by defecting from the cooperative equilibrium. In this period, the player will switch to playing defect. Under a grim trigger strategy (in which as soon as an opponent defects a player will switch to playing defect for the rest of the game) both players would play defect in the subsequent periods of the game. We might, as a result, expect to see some amount of political dissatisfaction or protest directed against lineage leaders following the revelation they have defected from the cooperative equilibrium.

[31] Yan 2012.
[32] Perry 1980; Li and O'Brien 2008; He and Tong 2002.
[33] Scott 1977.

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Case Study Illustration of the Theory

Two structured case studies illuminate the role that lineage elites play in exerting political control over their members. The case studies I present are from villages in the same prefecture in Eastern Guangdong.[34] No two villages can represent a country as large and as diverse as China; I present these two because they illustrate the causal process at work in relatively clear terms, and provide some intuition for the basis of the theory.

As Table 2 shows, these two villages are "most-similar"[35] cases, with comparable economic, social, and political conditions. I selected them from the survey data presented below. Headwater Village represents an interesting off-the-line[36] case—it lies along a major road to the prefectural capital, is reasonably well off, and yet in defiance of expectations, no land expropriations have occurred there; nearby Peng Village has nearly identical characteristics. The key difference is that in Headwater Village, influential members of the village lineage group have remained independent from village political institutions, whereas in Peng Village they have joined it.

Peng Village has a single dominant lineage group, with resources that include an ancestral hall and a record of common ancestors called a *zupu*. The village chief has been an unofficial leader of the kinship group for years. Even before he took his position, he had emerged as someone to whom others would go to for information, to resolve disputes, and to consult with on matters like weddings. When asked who the most influential member of the kinship group is, villagers generally mentioned the village chief; when asked who the leader was in the years before he joined the village committee, most still named him.

In 2009 the village chief and party secretary used their power over the land reallocations to distribute, probably illegally, about thirty plots of farmland to an entrepreneur from a nearby city. The leaders used what one villager called "dirty tricks" (*bianxiang shoufa*) to prevent immediate mobilization against the plan, taking advantage of the village's dense social networks and lack of information about the development plan. First, they persuaded other lineage leaders—the heads of the village's big families (*dahu*)—that the expropriation scheme would benefit everyone. Once they had the backing of these key allies, they moved on

[34] The names of the villages have been changed to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.
[35] Przeworski and Teune 1970.
[36] Lieberman 2005.

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TABLE 2
CASE STUDY CHARACTERISTICS

	Headwater Village	*Peng Village*
Annual income in yuan, median	12,000	10,000
Years schooling, mean	5.7	5.9
Competitive elections	no	no
Distance to city	20 km	26 km
Annual religious festival	yes	yes
Lineage groups	yes	yes
Lineage group elites	not village cadres	village cadres
Property expropriations	no	yes

to persuading the little families (*xiaohu*) to support the plan. Officials then collected several thousand dollars from nearly every household as a down payment on a new apartment, an amount that for many farmers represented most of their savings.

But the housing never materialized and villagers were left with bulldozed farmland and empty bank accounts.[37] The leaders fled to the nearby township. Villagers suspected township officials protected these leaders because they, too, had benefitted from the scheme. As one villager lamented, the committee chief and party secretary treated their kin group members like lackeys (*zhushou*) and then betrayed them.

When lineage group elites are included in village political institutions, they use their social power to pressure villagers to support land and other expropriation schemes. Villagers face steep costs to organize against local government. They also face high levels of uncertainty about the value of any expropriation deal on the table. Overcoming the collective action problem is difficult under these conditions of uncertainty, especially when socially influential villagers have expressed support for the plan.

However, in the hamlet of Headwater, just a few miles down the road, the influential members of the village's dominant lineage group have not joined the government. When asked who the most influential members of the lineage group are, most villagers named one of a small group of men who are not members of the village committee. The key village committee members and party officers have little social authority or prestige (*weiwang*) within the lineage group.

The core lineage group elites play an almost daily role in bargaining with the government and even providing private governance. They

[37] Deininger and Jin 2009 find that in about a third of land takings, the project is not completed.

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gather funds to distribute a modest stipend to retirees and the poor and to put on a religious festival that requires a high degree of collective organization. When asked who they would go to if they had a dispute with the local government, villagers frequently mentioned one of the lineage leaders. Despite a favorable location near the highway to the prefecture's administrative seat, no land requisitions have been facilitated by village officials in Headwater.

The threat of violent collective action organized by independent kinship group leaders is not an abstract threat for village cadres in Headwater. Indeed, a half-hour's drive down the road from Headwater is a village whose tight-knit lineage groups forced the party secretary and village committee to flee during violent protests over land expropriations; another hour or so farther down the road is the village of Wukan, whose lineage leaders organized a similar protest that ousted leaders. As a village committee member in another nearby village put it, "You can't do anything around here without coordinating (*xietiao*) with the lineage leaders first."

Observable Implications

The theory outlined above suggests that when lineage leaders join village political institutions, they are likely to use their informal influence to pressure villagers to comply with land expropriations. In contrast, where lineage leaders remain autonomous, the threat of collective action organized by these leaders restrains officials. This theory has several observable implications:

1. Lineage group leaders' endorsement of land expropriation plans should increase villagers' support for these plans.
2. When lineage elites become village cadres, land expropriations should be more likely to occur.
3. Land expropriations undertaken by lineage elites should be more exploitative, leading to more protests and other collective action after the fact.

In the sections that follow, I test each of these observable implications using quantitative data.

Lineage Leader Endorsement Increases Support for Land Expropriation

What underpins the power of kin group leaders? The existing literature suggests that collective action is easier to undertake within identity groups because group members share common cultural symbols, they

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are more "findable" in social networks, and they can socially sanction each other.[38] I highlight a different mechanism: informal institutions encourage deference to group elites and as a consequence, other members of the group have a high degree of confidence in information supplied by these elite.

Uncertainty about important information is a key feature of land requisitions in China. Villagers lack information about whether they are being offered a good deal. They do not know whether the state is willing to bargain over the terms of the expropriation, and they do not know when officials will turn to coercion. To some extent, villagers may also lack information about the willingness of others to engage in collective action.

Under conditions of uncertainty, lineage group leaders can provide valuable information. When a kinship group leader declares that a property-confiscation plan is exploitative, it may persuade villagers that this is indeed the case and also signals that a wide range of others in the group may be willing to take costly collective action to protect their property. Conversely, when these leaders endorse a land expropriation plan, villagers receive a signal that the offer may in fact be the best available and that other members of the group may be not be willing to engage in collective action.

To test this observable implication, I conducted an experiment in a rapidly urbanizing municipality in southern China. This municipality had recently announced a plan to redevelop (*gaizao*) dozens of surrounding villages, some of them still agricultural and others highly urban "villages in the city" (*chengzhongcun*). The redevelopment plans called for seizing villagers' land and homes in most of these villages, and the plan had received extensive local media coverage.

I randomly selected villages using a multistage procedure, stratifying on whether or not the village was on the land-seizure list, and by district. Within each randomly selected village the enumeration team canvassed door-to-door and in public spaces. It is important to note that the canvassing did not produce a random draw of households, but the resulting sample nonetheless closely matches the characteristics of the population in these villages. The sample was 49.8 percent female, had on average a lower-middle-school (*chuzhong*) education, with a mean age of 54. The age of the sample reflects a slightly higher degree of outmigration by young villagers than is typical, but if anything, this age

[38] Habyarimana et al. 2007.

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bias weakens the results presented below; conditioning on age increases the statistical significance of the estimates.

An experimental manipulation measured whether villagers would be more likely to have confidence in information that came from kinship group leaders about property seizures. The prompt was meant to elicit opinions about the very real possibility that the government would act to seize their property. I randomized whether a statement supporting a property-seizure plan was endorsed by a village official, a lineage group leader, or a villager (which served as a baseline condition). Enumerators read villagers the following statement:

> This municipality has plans to "redevelop" dozens of villages by 2020. Suppose a [villager] [lineage leader] [village official] from your village said: "This redevelopment plan benefits us, we should all support it." Do you have confidence (*xinxin*) in this [villager's] [lineage leader's] [village official's] statement? [Yes] [No] [Don't know].[39]

Each respondent only saw one prompt, so it was impossible for them to compare the identities of endorsers.[40]

There were several reasons to suspect that the endorsement experiment would not change respondents' confidence in the statement. Respondents faced the real likelihood that their property would be seized, and may have already had solidified attitudes toward existing plans. Respondents lived in an environment where lineage group ties were not particularly strong. In this municipality, while lineage groups are salient features of local society, they are only weakly so. Seventy percent of respondents reported they had no active ancestral hall or that they did not visit it. Moreover, respondents were presented with a prompt that did not mention a specific kinship group leader whom they knew and respected.

Even with these hurdles, villagers were significantly more confident in messages supplied by hypothetical kinship group leaders. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents that express confidence in the endorsement made by each type of figure. Respondents were sixteen percentage points more likely to be confident in the endorsement of a kinship group leader when compared against a baseline condition (that

[39] In the prompt, the term used for village official was *cun ganbu* and the term used for kinship leaders was *jiazu zhanglao,* or "lineage elder." Extensive presurvey interviews suggested that in these villages the influential members of lineage groups were referred to this way. The precise number of villages to be redeveloped has been slightly altered here to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

[40] The prompt is similar to a confidence experiment implemented by Chhibber and Sekhon 2014 in India.

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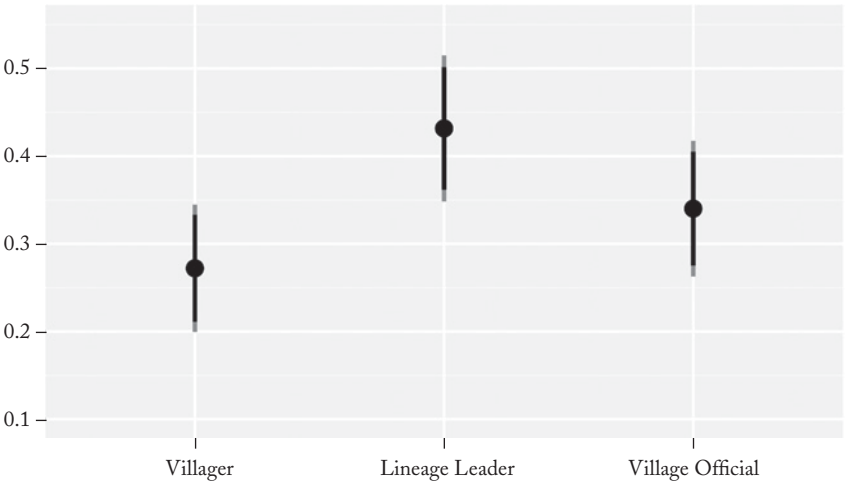


FIGURE 1
SURVEY EXPERIMENT[a]

[a] Percentage expressing confidence in statement supporting expropriation plan, by type of leader endorsement. Dark lines show 90 percent confidence intervals and light lines 95 percent confidence intervals.

of an anonymous villager). This difference is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. Villagers are also nine percentage points more confident in statements made by lineage leaders than village officials. This difference is suggestive but is not statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, though arguably the political sensitivity of the village official condition may have created a floor effect for this endorsement.

The results of the experiment suggest that villagers are more likely to have confidence in information about property taking from lineage group elites than from other villagers or officials. In the supplementary material, I provide additional evidence showing that the endorsement effect of lineage group leaders is strongest in villages where lineage elites are in office and land expropriations have been announced; this provides suggestive, though by no means conclusive, evidence that a process of elite-led persuasion is in fact at work in villages where expropriation plans have been announced.[41] I next turn to quantitative evidence that shows that including lineage group leaders in village political institutions is associated with an increase in land expropriation in villages throughout China.

[41] Mattingly 2016.

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National Data and Variables

The primary data for the analysis of national data come from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). The survey was conducted in 2005 by researchers from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and the Peoples' University of China. The survey's rural sample was created by stratifying among three regions (east, central, and west), then sampling seventy-five county-level units. Within each county, the survey randomly sampled four townships, and within each township, two villages. A total of 408 villages were sampled. The CGSS provides high-quality data, especially in comparison to state-generated statistical yearbooks about land, which contain incomplete and likely falsified data.[42] I also used the survey data to select several case studies, such as those presented above, which provided additional assurance about the survey's accuracy.

I draw on the CGSS for data about village-level lineage institutions. A positive feature of the CGSS is that it measures the presence of lineage groups by asking villagers directly about the salience of these groups. Some recent studies have measured the presence of lineage groups in China by coding for the presence or absence of lineage group ancestral halls or written lineage histories. The chief advantage of the latter approach is that the measure is simple and objective; unfortunately, many active lineage groups lack ancestral halls or written lineage histories. This is particularly common in areas with low levels of literacy prior to the communist revolution, where members did not have the ability to record family histories or the resources to build ancestral halls. Yet lacking these resources does not indicate the irrelevance of lineage. To the contrary, in these villages lineage groups may still play a central role in conflicts over village resources and in village elections. Most surveys show that less than 20 percent of villages have active lineages with resources like ancestral halls or lineage histories; yet one report estimates that lineage groups exert influence in elections in 40 percent of villages.[43] Relying on ancestral halls or lineage histories to measure lineage group presence likely undercounts lineage groups, and so it would be valuable to have an additional measure that relies on villager opinion about the influence of these informal groups.

The CGSS asks villagers directly whether "there is a lineage group network (*jiazu wangluo*) in the village" and if there is, whether "the leaders or most influential members of the lineage network [are] also

[42] Bian and Li 2012.
[43] Kelliher 1997.

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village cadres." The disadvantage of this approach is that it relies on respondents' understanding of what constitutes a lineage group. But the approach also captures villages where lineage groups are a salient social feature but that lack either ancestral halls or family histories. In the analysis presented below, I create a dummy variable for the presence of lineage groups and lineage leader composition, coded 1 when at least one respondent affirms that a lineage group is present.

There are drawbacks to this approach, but I present the results because the estimates provide conservative estimates and qualitative research suggests that it captures the underlying concept well. In the supplementary material, I show that the results are robust to several different ways of coding these variables.[44] I also show that if the analysis is restricted to lineage groups that have formal organizations, ancestral halls, and written family histories, the estimated effects are even larger.

I also draw on the CGSS for data on the main dependent variable, land expropriations. I use an indicator variable for whether villagers report that village leaders reallocated land due to a state land expropriation (*guojia zhengyong tudi*) or to the expropriation of land for development of an enterprise (*fazhan qiye yongdi*). One advantage of this survey-based measure is that it does not rely on village administrative records, which field research shows do not capture many smaller land expropriations, in part because many villages do not have the capacity to conduct regular cadastral surveys and in part because local officials sometimes wish to conceal land conversions of uncertain legality.[45] I restrict this measure to expropriations that occurred during the tenure of the current village leadership.[46] In the supplementary material, I present results from two alternate measures: village revenue from land sales—as discussed above, land expropriations generally involve the transfer of compensation directly to village bodies—and the amount of cultivated land in the village.[47] These results are consistent with the results in the main body of this article.

I combined data from the CGSS with outside sources to create a unique data set with a rich set of village characteristics. These covariates

[44] Mattingly 2016.

[45] Inaccurate official data on land is part of a larger problem of manipulation of official statistics in China. See Wallace 2016 for an overview and Tsai 2008 for a discussion of falsification of village-level statistics.

[46] I used the year the village cadre module respondent became a village cadre as a proxy for the last turnover in village leadership. This respondent was either the current village head or party secretary. Dates of land expropriations were reported by villagers. I then excluded all land expropriations that occurred before the current leader became a cadre. To the extent that recall errors are random, doing so downward-biased the estimates.

[47] Mattingly 2016.

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include a measure of economic activity using nighttime luminosity data from 1992, which is a plausible pretreatment measure of wealth for nearly all villages. I also created measures of the village's distance from township and county seats, agricultural suitability, and terrain roughness. I drew on the CGSS for measures of surname and ethnic fragmentation, township control over elections, and the number of households. In the supplementary material, I present a detailed breakdown of how each variable was constructed.[48]

Lineage Leader Inclusion Leads to Land Expropriations

This section tests the second observable implication of the theory—when lineage groups join village political institutions it increases the likelihood of land expropriation, all else being equal. The implicit counterfactual is villages with active lineage groups where lineage leaders do not join village political institutions. Of course, the argument is not that these social institutions are the only determinant of land expropriation, only that they exert an independent causal effect.

I use national data to estimate the likelihood of land requisitions when lineage elites join village political institutions. No observational study can conclusively demonstrate a causal effect, but the evidence shows a strong correlation between lineage leader incorporation and an increased number of land expropriations. The association holds when using different sets of control variables and regional fixed effects. The results also pass a placebo test, weakening the case that unobserved characteristics of villages drive the results.

I present least squares regression results that adjust for some of the most important potential confounders. In the supplementary material, I also present results using matching and entropy balancing.[49] Here, the general model I use is:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta x_i + \mu z_i + \gamma W_i + \theta_j + \varepsilon_i.$$

For each village i in the data set, y_i is the dummy variable for a land expropriation. The variable z_i is an indicator for whether or not an active lineage group exists in the village, and the variable x_i is an indicator for whether or not the leader of the lineage group is also a village cadre. In most specifications, I also include a matrix of conditioning variables

[48] Mattingly 2016.
[49] Mattingly 2016.

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W_i and province fixed effects θ_j for each province *j*. The coefficient of interest is β, which captures the difference between villages with and without incorporated lineage group leaders, conditional on an active lineage group being present.

In column 1 of Table 3, I present results without any of the conditioning variables or fixed effects. Note that the coefficient estimate is the same as a difference in means estimate, which is because all villages with incorporated elites also have an active lineage group. Villages where lineage elites are cadres are sixteen percentage points more likely to experience a land seizure than villages where lineage elites remain autonomous. This simple test is important because it demonstrates that the results do not depend on using a specific set of conditioning variables, or indeed any conditioning variables at all.

One rival explanation for the results is that economic and geographic characteristics drive both land expropriation and leader incorporation. For instance, it might be the case that lineage leaders have incentives to join the government in wealthier villages, where it may be more lucrative to be a village official, but the government would expropriate land in these wealthy villages regardless of whether lineage leaders join the government. Or, as work by James Scott suggests, it could be the case that the state generally wishes to assimilate social groups and their elite, but it has better information about villages close to population centers and in areas with flatter terrain.[50] These villages are also more likely to experience land expropriations because land close to population centers is more valuable.

A related concern is that the results may be limited to specific regions of China. For example, the results may be driven by southern provinces, which have flourishing lineage groups and local civil societies.[51] To address this concern, the remaining specifications include province fixed effects.

Column 2 of Table 3 presents results that condition on geographic and economic variables. It shows that including province fixed effects and conditioning on wealth (using the nighttime lights proxy), distance from county seat, terrain roughness, and agricultural suitability changes the estimates only slightly. In these specifications, the inclusion of lineage elites in village political institutions is correlated with a fourteen percentage point increase in the likelihood of a land expropriation.

Another explanation for the results is that they are the outcome of

[50] Scott 2009.
[51] Hurst et al. 2014.

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TABLE 3
ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES REGRESSION: DEPENDENT VARIABLE IS INDICATOR FOR LAND EXPROPRIATION

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*
Lineage leader is cadre	0.164**	0.142**	0.140**	0.141**
	(0.069)	(0.072)	(0.071)	(0.072)
Active lineage	–0.091*	–0.057	–0.044	–0.034
	(0.055)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.058)
Wealth (nighttime lights proxy)		0.004	0.003	0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Distance to county seat (km)		–0.001	0.00004	0.0004
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Terrain roughness		0.0001	0.0001	0.0001
		(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Agricultural suitability index		0.054*	0.044	0.035
		(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.030)
Township control over elections			0.128	0.108
			(0.094)	(0.097)
Distance to township (km)			–0.010***	–0.010**
			(0.004)	(0.004)
Surname fragmentation index				0.159*
				(0.090)
Ethnic fragmentation index				–0.134
				(0.193)
Number of households (logged)				0.039
				(0.034)
Constant	0.151***	–0.001	0.021	–0.287
	(0.021)	(0.094)	(0.095)	(0.223)
Province fixed effects	no	yes	yes	yes
Observations	392	390	390	376
R^2	0.014	0.124	0.145	0.141
Adjusted R^2	0.009	0.056	0.074	0.058

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

differences in the degree to which higher levels of government, especially townships, exert control over villages. Township governments that have high levels of capacity can gather information about villages and then appoint lineage leaders to government, but these may also be the sort of townships that have the coercive capacity to implement land expropriations. If this is the case, it could be that lineage leaders have no independent causal effect on land expropriation. Instead, township leaders might appoint leaders for some other reason, such as increasing popular approval of the township government.

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Column 3 adds controls for the distance to the township government, as well as a measure of township control over village elections. (This measure is the percent of villagers who report that the village committee was appointed by the township government instead of through a fair and free election.) The measure of township control over elections should also capture control by higher levels of government to some degree, since townships implement policy decisions by higher administrative units. The estimate remains essentially unchanged and is statistically significant.

In addition, it could be the case that social characteristics determine both land seizures and lineage leader incorporation. Column 4 includes a measure of surname fragmentation, which is a frequently used proxy for fragmentation among different lineage groups.[52] This measure is only an approximation because one surname group can potentially contain multiple lineage segments. The index captures the likelihood that two randomly selected villagers will belong to different surname groups.[53] This specification also includes a measure of ethnic group fragmentation, which captures the likelihood that two randomly selected villagers will belong to the Han majority and a minority group.[54] Finally, it includes a control for the number of households in a village. Again, these results remain essentially unchanged, with an estimate of a 14 percent marginal effect.

One might be concerned that the results are driven by lineage groups that lack formal resources like ancestral halls, which other studies have used to measure lineage group presence. In Table 4 I rerun the analysis focusing on lineages that have lineage halls or family histories. The results show that if we restrict our attention to lineage groups that possess these formal resources, the estimated effects are even larger, between 19 and 22 percent, depending on the set of conditioning variables.

In the supplementary material, I include additional, nonparametric tests like matching and entropy balancing.[55] The estimates remain consistent, and show that the results do not depend on the functional form of the regression model or linear extrapolations. The supplementary material also includes tests using alternate measures of the dependent and explanatory variables.

[52] Tsai 2007b; Xu and Yao 2015.

[53] The surname fragmentation index is: 1 – (percent of village in largest surname group)^2 – (percent of village in second largest surname group)^2 – (percent of village in third largest surname group)^2.

[54] It is calculated as 1 – (percent villagers Han ethnicity)^2 – (percent villagers non-Han ethnicity)^2.

[55] Mattingly 2016.

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TABLE 4
STRENGTH OF LINEAGE INSTITUTIONS[a]

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*
Lineage leader is cadre	0.216***	0.217**	0.209**	0.193**
	(0.083)	(0.085)	(0.085)	(0.086)
Active lineage with	–0.103*	–0.058	–0.052	–0.049
ancestral hall or *zupu*	(0.059)	(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.064)
Economic controls	no	yes	yes	yes
Political controls	no	no	yes	yes
Social controls	no	no	no	yes
Province fixed effects	no	yes	yes	yes
Observations	392	390	390	376

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

[a] Least squares regression estimates, where the dependent variable is an indicator for land expropriation occurring in the village.

PLACEBO TEST

Because of the observational nature of the data, an important concern is that unobserved differences between villages drive the results. For example, it could be the case that some villages have more entrepreneurial residents than others or it could be the case that local political bosses (*tuhuangdi*) have strong control over some subset of villages.[56] Such differences might be difficult to observe and account for in the quantitative analysis but might plausibly drive land expropriation and development.

As an additional test, I examine whether the inclusion of lineage leaders has an effect on land expropriations *before* the leader takes office. If some unobserved time-invariant characteristic of villages drives the results, we would expect to find a positive estimate, reflecting the fact that the inclusion of lineage leaders does not drive results. But if my argument is correct, we would expect the estimate to be close to zero, since lineage leader incorporation in the present cannot influence events in the past.

Consistent with my theory, Table 5 shows that a lineage leader being a village cadre has no effect on land expropriations in the years prior to the leader taking office. In this table I use the same specifications as the main results in Table 3 (columns 1–4). However, in Table 5 the dependent variable is whether the village experienced the land expropriation prior to the current leadership joining the government. To construct

[56] Hurst et al. 2014.

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TABLE 5
PLACEBO TESTS[a]

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lineage leader is cadre	0.009	–0.003	–0.006	–0.005
	(0.042)	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.043)
Active lineage	0.018	0.041	0.044	0.045
	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.035)
Economic controls	no	yes	yes	yes
Political controls	no	no	yes	yes
Social controls	no	no	no	yes
Province fixed effects	no	yes	yes	yes
Observations	392	390	390	376

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

[a] Least squares regression, where the dependent variable is an indicator for land expropriations *before* the current leadership took office.

this variable I relied on villagers' reports for the year that land expropriations occurred, as well as for the year of the last leadership turnover.

The estimates are very close to zero and change sign depending on the set of conditioning covariates I use. Note that the standard errors are *smaller* than in the main results, so it is not the case that the results are not significant because the estimates are less precise. Overall, these results are inconsistent with the idea that unobserved time-invariant differences between villages drive the results.

Like a panel design, the vulnerability of this placebo test lies in the possibility of unobserved time-varying differences within units. The most plausible alternative explanation of this sort relates to the onset of urbanization, which might coincide with lineage leaders taking office. However, the main results control for distance to the county and township, nighttime luminosity, and terrain roughness, among other factors, casting doubt on the likelihood that this rival hypothesis drives the results.

EXPROPRIATIONS BY LINEAGE LEADERS LEAD TO PROTEST

The third observable implication of the theory is that villages where lineage leaders have expropriated land will experience more protests than other villages that have experienced land expropriations. When lineage leaders join the village government, it reduces the bargaining power of villagers and as a result the expropriations are more extractive. After the land taking occurs, villagers will be upset to discover its

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TABLE 6
PETITIONING AND LAND EXPROPRIATIONS[a]

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*
Lineage leader is cadre	0.000	−0.011	−0.017	−0.016
	(0.051)	(0.055)	(0.055)	(0.055)
Land seizure	−0.046	−0.082	−0.088*	−0.088
	(0.050)	(0.053)	(0.053)	(0.055)
Lineage leader ×	0.319***	0.362***	0.378***	0.352***
Land seizure	(0.111)	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.118)
Constant	0.111***	−0.021	−0.025	−0.489**
	(0.019)	(0.084)	(0.086)	(0.204)
Observations	392	390	390	376
Economic controls	no	yes	yes	yes
Political controls	no	no	yes	yes
Social controls	no	no	no	yes
Province fixed effects	no	yes	yes	yes

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

[a] Dependent variable is an indicator for whether or not villagers have participated in a collective petitioning incident.

unequal terms and will be likely to lodge some sort of complaint against the village government. At this point, the lineage leaders' influence will be unlikely to quash the collective action, because trust has been broken (in game theoretic terms, villagers are in the punishment phase of a grim trigger strategy). Since the local state has already profited from the land deal, and since local officials may have personally benefited from it, the complaints of villagers may fall on deaf ears.

In Table 6, I present evidence showing a strong correlation between land taking by lineage leaders and petitioning. The dependent variable is an indicator for whether or not villagers report having participated in a collective petitioning incident, which are most often directed against lower-level officials. On the right hand side, I interact whether or not a land seizure has occurred with whether or not a lineage leader is a cadre. I include the same set of controls as with the analysis presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

Two striking features of land taking emerge. First, land seizures in general are not associated with petitioning. The second row in the table shows that villages where lineage elites are not in office do not on average experience more protests. This hints at the fact that villagers may often find the terms of land seizures to be agreeable, and that land development brings ancillary benefits like increased nonagricultural employment.

Second, in villages where lineage elites are cadres, experiencing a land

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seizure is correlated with a sharp increase in the likelihood of experiencing a protest. The interaction term in the third row is positive and statistically significant across all the specifications. When lineage elites are not in office, protests occur in only 7 percent of villages where land has been expropriated. When lineage elites are in office, protests occur in 38 percent of villages where land has been expropriated. It is important to note that the survey does not include information about the content of the petition; it is possible that these petitions may be about other matters, but the most plausible explanation of the strong association between the two is that the petitions result from the land expropriations.

In the supplementary material, I present additional evidence on the correlation between land takings and economic outcomes.[57] The results suggest that most land expropriations lead to improvements in employment and income, but when they are undertaken by lineage elites, there is no increase in employment and income.

Conclusion

The lesson of this article is simple: local civil society groups often serve as tools of political control, and cannot replace formal institutions of accountability. As work by Ostrom and Tsai shows, nonstate groups can to a certain extent help members police themselves, especially in the context of repeated interaction.[58] When these groups are truly autonomous, they can even help curb state predation. For example, similar to the findings presented here, Timothy Frye finds that business organizations in Russia can help protect private property.[59] But the incorporation of the leaders of these groups into state institutions does not represent real political inclusion, rather, it is a form of co-optation.

These findings show how seemingly democratic institutions can serve as institutions of co-optation even at the lowest level of politics. The literature to date has shown how regimes co-opt elites in national legislatures[60] and how authoritarian institutions help the regime distribute rents and resolve conflict between political factions.[61] Scholars of Chinese politics have also investigated how the regime has experimented

[57] Mattingly 2016.

[58] Ostrom 1990; Greif 1993; Tsai 2007a. See also Evans 1995 on the benefits of embedded autonomy, and Lierl 2015 for a contrary perspective.

[59] See Frye 2000 and Frye 2016. See also Grossman 2016 for further discussion of informal institutions and property rights.

[60] See for example Blaydes 2010; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Svolik 2012.

[61] Shih, Adolph, and Liu 2012; Truex 2014; Hou 2015.

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with feedback mechanisms, transparency, and limited press freedoms to gather information about the behavior of local officials.[62] Yet the logic of political co-optation in local politics is comparatively unexplored.

Future work might examine whether co-opting local elites is an effective long-term strategy. It may not be, since once local elites have used their power to capture rents from land development, they lose their moral authority. In the short term, this may not matter to local officials as long as they can extract enough from each village to fill local coffers (as well as their own pockets). Yet there are only so many villages in which this governance strategy can be repeated, and so it may trade short-term gains for long-term problems—as has arguably occurred with social service policies or efforts to strengthen rule of law without an independent judiciary or civil society.[63]

These findings stand in stark contrast to a number of recent studies that have linked strong informal institutions in rural China to high levels of public goods provision.[64] These findings also raise the question of whether there is a trade-off between public goods and property rights—a bargain in which villagers receive more public goods but have weaker land rights might benefit local elites. Future work on distributive politics in rural China should examine public goods alongside local development policies.

Outside of China, there are intriguing parallels between the role of lineage leaders and other types of local political brokers. The most obvious may be with traditional leaders such as tribal chiefs. Daron Acemoğlu, Tristan Reed, and James Robinson find that chiefs in Sierra Leone exploit their control over local civil society to control local politics and development.[65] Kate Baldwin shows how national leaders cede control over land to traditional chiefs to increase electoral support among noncoethnics.[66] Interestingly, Baldwin also finds that voters tend to cast their ballots for political candidates endorsed by chiefs because they infer, correctly, that politicians with connections to chiefs will provide higher levels of public goods.[67] This is broadly consistent with the idea that traditional kinship institutions can help buttress public goods provision, which occurs in a context of repeated interaction

[62] Lorentzen 2014; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2015; Distelhorst 2015.

[63] See Lü 2014, Wang 2014, Birney 2014, and Fu 2016 for important discussions.

[64] See Newland 2016 for a helpful overview of the literature on local public goods provision in China.

[65] Acemoğlu, Reed, and Robinson 2014.

[66] Baldwin 2014.

[67] Baldwin 2013.

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and relatively low stakes, but leaves open the question of what role these elite might play in large-scale land requisitions. Recent work by Lauren Honig finds that it is *autonomous* chiefs with power that historically has been independent of the state that protect their constituents from land confiscation.[68]

A second parallel is with other types of brokers in the developing world. There is intriguing evidence that outside of China, local brokers also trade targeted benefits in return for support for elites, who often gain much more in the bargain.[69] For example, Tariq Thachil shows how elite parties in India use nonstate groups to supply services to the poor and in return, the poor vote for parties whose policies disproportionately benefit the elite.[70] Other types of brokers, such as the leaders of informal settlements,[71] could play similar roles in other contexts.

In general, elite capture of decentralized institutions is probably widespread. For example, Edmund Malesky, Cuong Viet Nguyen, and Anh Tran show how in Vietnam local councils were captured by existing political elite, who diverted public resources for their own benefit.[72] As a consequence, the abolition of local councils led to a surprising improvement in public service provision. My research also shows that elite capture is not inevitable. When village officials in China face competition from lineage elites who have not joined local political institutions, their behavior is constrained, and land requisitions are less likely. In this way, rival elites can play a positive role, acting as informal watchdogs and using their informal authority to encourage collective action when local officials bend the law.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0043887116000083.

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[68] Honig 2015.
[69] De La O 2015; Stokes 2005.
[70] Thachil 2011.
[71] See for example Auerbach 2016.
[72] Malesky, Nguyen, and Tran 2014.

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