The abolition of agricultural taxes and the transformation of clientelism in the countryside of post-Mao China

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Abstract

A substantial body of research has revealed the historical transformation of clientelism in the countryside of capitalist societies. Although rural China has distinct politico-economic structures from the capitalist world, I argue that the framework of clientelist transformation also fits it. I identify the abolition of agricultural taxes by 2006 as a watershed moment in facilitating the transformation in post-Mao China. This national policy marked a dramatic change in Chinese state-peasant relations from state extraction based on taxes to state provision of economic subsidies for rural modernization, state extraction through land expropriation, and market extraction through wage labor and contract farming. In the former relation, clientelism based on the ethics of egalitarian distribution and subsistence security protected peasants from excessive extraction. In the latter, clientelism has become more instrumental for peasants to access state and market resources. External linkages, in consequence, have replaced ethics as the dominant basis of patronage. The new clientelism widens the economic inequality and hence facilitates the emergence of class consciousness and conflict within villages; it also opens villages up to more state and market extraction. The article suggests that the framework of clientelist transformation can be applicable even in societies with distinct rural social, economic, and political structures.

Key words: clientelism, moral economy, party patronage, abolition of agricultural taxes, rural China

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Introduction:

Clientelism was originally a key anthropological concept for the analysis of social relations in pre-capitalist peasant societies. Owing to the scarcity of resources and vulnerability to threats, traditional peasants often needed to seek support from resourceful parties. This kind of 'friendship' is hierarchical and instrumental in that 'an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron (Scott 1972a, p.92).' The patron-client linkage has three basic characteristics: hierarchy, reciprocity, and face-to-face contact (Powell 1970). The scholarship of moral economy has made an influential contribution to the patron-client system. It argues that the system is one of the most important communal institutions securing subsistence of peasants in traditional agrarian societies and that its legitimacy lies in the ethics of reciprocity, justice and subsistence security (Scott 1977; Schmidt et al. 1977).[2]

In the first wave of research on clientelism in the 1960s and 1970s, many studies assumed that the traditional social relations would eventually disappear in the course of development and democratization (for a review, see Roniger 2004). A more prosperous economy, higher levels of education, more social mobility, greater government representation, etc. are believed to reduce both the demand for and supply of patronage (Theobald 1983; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007).

[2] There is debate between moral economists and neo-classical economists over the nature of clientelism in traditional peasant societies. Neo-classical economists argue that the traditional system is maintained because clients face the problem of collective action. Rather than following ethics, patrons use strategies to prevent clients from gaining power and to maintain divisions between them (Popkin 1979). This article follows the scholarship of moral economy, as it is more useful for explaining the historical transformation of clientelism in rural China.

However, the ancient system of resource distribution remains prevalent even in well-off democratic countries (Hicken 2011; Piattoni 2001), although clientelism has changed significantly in form (Weingrod, 1968; Scott 1972a, Graziano 1976; Archer 1990).[3] While the old clientelism is used by anthropologists to refer to an enduring social relationship based on the ethics of traditional villages, the new clientelism is used by political scientists to describe modern party patronage. It is a less enduring and more instrumental relations 'in which party politicians distribute public jobs or special favors in exchange for electoral support (Weingrod 1968, p.379).' Consequently, the traditional patrons whose patronage was based on personal resources have been replaced by patron brokers who deliver party patronage to clients.

This transformation is important because it marks the process of political integration through which the state-village boundary is erased, patron-client relations are replicated at a higher level of state organization, and peasants are involved in state politics, particularly electoral politics. The new clientelism, as Roniger (2004) points out, has become an enduring feature of modern politics together with other forms of particularistic engagements (p.357). Empirical research on the patron-broker-client network also suggests its significance for modern party politics (Stokes et al. 2013).

A substantial body of literature attempts to explain the historical occurrence of the transformation of clientelism. There is agreement that modernization of the countryside facilitates the transformation. As Powell (1970) argues, two underlying processes, 'state centralization and market expansion' are largely responsible for linking the little community and the larger socio-economic system in which it exists (p.413). Similarly, Scott (1972a)

[3] Scholars use different terminology to describe the transformation. Weingrod (1968) refers to a transformation in clientelism from the anthropological sense to the political science sense; Scott (1972a) refers to a transformation from traditional to contemporary clientelism; for Graziano (1976), it is a change from the clientelism of notables to party-mediated patronage; Archer (1990) regards it as a transition from traditional to broker clientelism. For simplicity, this article uses old and new clientelism throughout.

argues that an intrusive national economy and national political system facilitate the transformation by impairing the effectiveness of local redistributive pressures and nationalizing access to patronage. For example, Scott and Kerkvliet (Scott 1972b; Scott and Kerkvliet 1975) describe how the penetration of modern state and market economy into the countryside of Southeast Asia eroded the moral basis of the old clientelism. In addition, the increasing social mobilization, differentiation of system boundaries, the rising distributive capacity of the state (Lemarchand and Legg 1972), and state development strategy for transforming rural areas (Weingrod 1968) are all contributors to this transformation. Apart from the macro processes, scholars also propose a variety of factors specific to different countries. These factors include the emergence of partisanship in Colombia (Archer 1990), a populist party's accession to power in Greece (Mavrogordatos 1997), and the divergence of urban and rural areas in terms of socioeconomic and geographic conditions in Greece, Spain, and Turkey (Cinar 2016).

Most of the literature is focused on capitalist societies, and the transformation of clientelism in China is rarely considered. One important reason for this is that the 'old' and 'new' politico-economic structures in rural China are distinct from the stereotypical 'traditional' and 'modern' structures in most of the capitalist countries, respectively. First, in the Mao-era commune and subsequent household responsibility system (HRS) starting from the late 1970s, access to land was based on village membership and subsistence security was prioritized in agricultural production. In this regard, Burns (1979) claims that the old clientelism centered on subsistence no longer applies in China. Oi (1985) also finds that clientelism in the Mao-era was interest-maximizing rather than risk-minimizing in nature. Since the mid-1990s, the central policy has shifted from HRS to agricultural modernization, facilitating the rise of agrarian capitalism but Chinese characteristics (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). The party state is still deeply involved in redistributing land and managing the rural

economy. Moreover, in terms of political structure, China lacks party competition, which is usually considered an essential institutional condition for the new clientelism characterized by party patronage.

Despite the differences in politico-economic structures, I argue that the theoretical framework of clientelist transformation also fits China. Focusing on the post-Mao era, I identify the abolition of agricultural taxes by 2006 as a watershed moment in facilitating the transformation (see: Table I). This national policy marks a dramatic change in Chinese state-peasant relations from state extraction based on taxes to state provision of economic subsidies for rural modernization, followed by state extraction through land expropriation and market extraction through contract farming and wage labor. Along with this shift in relations, the production methods in villages have changed from small-scale subsistence and petty-commodity production to large-scale capitalist production and wage labor, and the economic relations have changed from reciprocity and redistribution to market exchange.

Prior to the tax elimination, the old clientelism based on the ethics of egalitarian distribution and subsistence security protected peasants from excessive extraction, and hence secured their subsistence. The new clientelism after the tax elimination is more instrumental in peasant access to state and market resources. As a consequence, external linkages have replaced ethics to become the dominant basis of patronage. Compared with the old clientelism, the new system is less stable because of the higher instrumentality and contingency of external linkages, and greater competition between patrons. In addition, where village cadres usually hold the position of patron, entrepreneurs have replaced peasants as the village cadres because of their stronger external links.

The transformation of clientelism has significant consequences for agrarian politics. First, in terms of the relations within villages, while the old clientelism maintained the

egalitarianism, the new clientelism widens the economic inequality and hence facilitates the emergence of class consciousness and conflicts in villages. For the new patrons, holding patronage entails greater economic benefits, and the distribution of patronage is also less likely to follow the ethics of egalitarianism. Second, the new clientelism opens up villages to the state and market. While the undermining of village insularity means more access to external resources, it also facilitates the exploitation of peasants by the state and the market.

Table I: Clientelism before and after the abolition of agricultural taxes

	Old clientelism	**New clientelism**
Structural conditions		
State/market-peasant relations	State extraction based on taxes	• State provision of economic subsidies to modernize agriculture and welfare • State extraction through land expropriation • Market extraction through wage labor and contract farming
Production method in villages	Small-scale subsistence and petty-commodity production	Large-scale capitalist production and wage labor
Economic relation in villages	Reciprocity and redistribution	Market exchange
Characteristics		
Basis of patronage	The ethics of egalitarian	External linkages

	distribution and subsistence security	
Patronage	• Protection from excessive state extraction (taxation) • Re-distribution within villages	Access to state and market resources
Patrons	Traditional peasants as village cadres	• Entrepreneurs as village cadres • Other village elites
Preferred qualities of patrons	Weak external linkages	Strong external linkages
Stability	Higher	Lower
Consequences		
Relations within villages	Maintenance of egalitarianism	• Widening of economic inequality • Facilitation of class consciousness and conflict
Relations of villages to state and market	Maintenance of village insularity	Facilitation of state and market exploitation

The ethnographic data for this article were collected from H County, Hunan province. Located in central China, Hunan is an important agricultural production area. The villages in H County are mostly poor with low industrialization. The fieldwork was conducted in 2017, a

year of village elections, with a follow-up visit in 2018. I attempted to identify the voting choices of villagers, which is an important indicator of clientelist linkage, through observing elections in four villages. In addition, I interviewed dozens of voters, candidates, village cadres,[4] township officials, and executives of enterprises stationed in the villages. In one of the villages, the local party chief hosted me for 10 days. This immersion in a remote agriculture village helped me to better understand the voting preferences of villagers and the changing cadre-mass relations over the years. In 2018, I visited 15 villages in the county and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 village cadres (either village committee directors or party chiefs) and also executives of enterprises. Regarding sampling, I had done fieldwork in some of the villages and established connections there; the other villages were identified by the snowball method. My contextual knowledge and mutual trust made the interviews highly informative. As historical comparison is my main tool, some of the village cadres who had worked for several decades offered particularly valuable information and insights into the historical changes in village politics. Moreover, accounts gleaned from fieldtrip reports by Chinese researchers and media coverage are used as supplements.

The article is organized into four sections. First, I illustrate how clientelism based on ethics protected peasants from excessive state extraction during the tax period. Next, I explain how the tax abolition dramatically changed China's state-peasant relations, and how the change makes external linkage an important basis of clientelism. In both sections, I use voting decisions of peasants in village elections as an indicator of the clientelist linkage. The following section analyzes the consequences of the new clientelism for relations both within villages and between villages and the state and market. In the conclusion, I discuss how the research contributes to the theoretical framework of clientelist transformation and sheds light on agrarian politics beyond China.

[4] Village cadres in this article refer to village committee members and village party branch members.

Before the tax abolition: the old clientelism based on ethics

Prior to the tax abolition by 2006, the peasant burden (*nongmin fudan*) was one of the most important issues in the Chinese countryside, especially in the central and western provinces, where agricultural production is the main source of income. The peasant burden refers to a series of formal and informal state extraction including taxes, levies, fees, and fines for extra births under the family planning policy. The burden was heavy because local governments largely relied on it to meet their spending. Local governments became more predatory after the 1994 tax-sharing reform that aimed to increase the tax revenue shared by the central government. From 1989 to 1997, taxes, levies, and fees across the nation rose from 74 to 108 RMB per capita, a rate greater than the increase in income. Between 1985 and 1991, for example, the burden increased at 16.9% per annum while income increased at 10% (Li 1992; Bernstein and Lü 2000).

In light of the heavy burden, clientelism served as an important protective mechanism for peasants. This story is complementary to the one told by the theory of rightful resistance in the same period. O'Brien and Li (2006) explain how peasants made use of policies and laws to resist the predatory and corrupt local cadres. However, rightful resistance did not occur everywhere. In most of the villages I visited, the cadre-mass relations were not as hostile, despite the heavy peasant burden. Instead, relations were characterized by the old clientelism. [5] As head of a self-governing community, village cadres had both the responsibility and discretion to protect peasants from excessive state extraction, which made them key patrons for peasants. As a party chief bluntly stated: 'as long as you do not break

[5] The argument is further strengthened by the fact that H County and Heng Yang County, where much of the original research on rightful resistance was conducted, belong to the same municipality and share very similar socioeconomic and political backgrounds.

any policy and law, you need to protect local interests. In other words, you need to operate within the line [referring to laws and policies]. The line is rigid, but humans can be flexible.'[6]

In the villages, protection by village cadres followed the traditional ethics of egalitarian distribution and subsistence security in peasant societies. Because state extraction was sometimes so excessive that it threatened the subsistence of poor families in villages, village cadres often made benevolent local policies (*tu zhengce*) concerning redistribution for the sake of their subsistence. As the abovementioned chief said, 'For those families who were too poor to afford the taxes or were thrown into poverty by natural disasters or accidents, the village government or we village cadres would pay their taxes or extend their due date.'[7] Another village cadre exempted the poor from taxes. 'In some cases, we just turned a blind eye to the extremely poor families. Some villagers still owed 20,000 RMB after the elimination of tax.'[8]

Redistribution was more explicit when village cadres replaced punishment with reward in taxation. Village governments might return a portion of the levies to peasants as a reward. As a result, the peasants were motivated to hand in fees on time, while their burden was also alleviated. The village party chief told me:

> We gave rewards according to the time you handed in money. The period from July to August was divided into three ranks. The earlier you handed in money, the more rewards you could get. The method was effective and as many as 80% of villagers could get a reward.[9]

Making rich families pay for poor families was also common. One party chief recalled how he collected the fines for extra births:

[6] Interview conducted on December 12, 2018.
[7] Interview conducted on May 13, 2018.
[8] Interview conducted on May 25, 2018.
[9] Interview conducted on May13, 2018.

> If your economic condition was better, I fined you according to the standard regulated by local governments and even asked for more, as long as you could afford it. By contrast, when it came to a poor family, I would ask for less than the standard, as the extra fine paid by the rich people could make up the shortage. In this way, I could still reach the quota assigned by the government, and all villagers were happy.[10]

In terms of the method of extraction, village cadres also preferred protective ones. First, they controlled a few tools of coercion for fulfilling state targets, like withholding services and asking township officials to conduct raids (*tuji*) that included confiscating and destroying property, detainment, etc. However, they tended to use intensive persuasion as the first resort, because this method was more humane and caused little harm to villagers (Chen and Liu 2020). 'The only thing you could do was conduct as much as thought work (*sixiang gongzuo*) to make them understand the policy. People all value personal bonds (*ganqing*), so if you went to their house very often, they would feel comfortable [and therefore listen to you].'[11]

Certainly, in some cases, village cadres had no choice but to impose coercion on disobedient fellow members. Still, they applied it carefully to secure the subsistence of villagers. Many village cadres, for example, tried to avoid using raids, especially demolishing a villager's house, because they knew that shelter was the lifeline of a peasant family. As one party chief said, 'It does not matter to take away his possessions, but it is absolutely unacceptable to demolish his house.'[12]

The protection of village cadres occurred not only within villages but also in interactions with the state. When law enforcement by local governments broke the ethics or threatened the autonomy of rural patrons, some of them took risks to confront local officials

[10] Interview conducted on May 21, 2018.
[11] Interview conducted on Dec 12, 2018.
[12] Interview conducted on May 18, 2018.

through noncooperation. This, as a result, not only protected the subsistence of peasants but also maintained the insularity of villages. One village party chief illustrated his gatekeeping role in the tax period thus: 'Only with my guidance could the local government come to implement the policy; only with my permission and coordination could the government and enterprises come to conduct development projects.'[13] He offered an example of how he had rejected a demand from the local government for fees owing to the injustice of the demand.

> To build a township road, the township government wanted my village to contribute 250,000 RMB, while asking a neighboring village for only 100,000 RMB. I rejected the decision, claiming it was unfair. If they insisted on the decision, I would quit, and then they would not get one penny from the peasants. Finally, the government compromised and decided to take 125,000 RMB from us.[14]

Sometimes the township government went to villages to enforce the law without notifying the village cadres, and the enforcement always drew moral condemnation. In this situation, village cadres demanded redress for the enforcement and defended their autonomy.

> Once, a team of township officials came to my village to conduct raids; before I got notified, they had already torn down the house of a villager for an extra birth. 'You [referring to the officials] could have imposed a fine; you could have done thought work. How could you ruin his house?' I was so upset. I told them: 'If you ever come to my village again without telling me, do not ask me for anything ever again!'[15]

By following the ethics and maintaining the insularity of villages, the paternalist cadres not only maintained their social prestige but also secured the political loyalty of ordinary villagers. As one village director explained, 'Sometimes the family was too poor to

[13] Interview conducted on May 13, 2018.
[14] Interview conducted on May 13, 2018.
[15] Interview conducted on May 25, 2018.

afford the government's demands. In this situation, if you helped them out, they would feel very grateful to you and make every effort to give you the money once they earned it.'[16]

The protective clientelist relation is best reflected in the voting decisions of villagers in village elections. Introduced in the late 1980s, village elections are one of the most important self-governing institutions for selecting the village committee.[17] Faced with state extraction, villagers tended to vote for protective cadres who followed an ethical approach. Opinion surveys in both inland agricultural provinces (Jiangxi and Hunan) and coastal industrial provinces (Guangdong and Zhejiang) show that most peasants preferred cadres who were fair, honest, and would resist illegal state extraction (Xiao and Qiu 2001; Yu 2000; Guo 2003; He and Lang 2002) during the tax period. In addition, cadres of this type could usually maintain stable leadership. In a remote agricultural village, for example, the elderly man had been in office as party chief and committee director from 1971 to 2014. He was a typical paternalistic leader who acted as gatekeeper to protect his village. Over the years, elections in his village were virtually meaningless. Sometimes there were no elections; when there were, he received over 90% of the votes.

Moreover, villagers showed aversion to candidates who have close linkage with the local government, as this implied less intention to protect. For instance, Kennedy (2002) compares village elections with open nomination and party state nomination and finds that the elections with open nomination tended to elect leaders without party membership. Villagers explained that 'non-party membership represents a political "outsider", and these candidates may be less inclined to blindly follow township policies at the expense of the village (p.471).'

[16] Interview conducted on May 23, 2018.
[17] For a discussion on the background of village elections, see Epstein 1997; O'Brien and Li 2000.

Certainly, the old clientelism will be hard to maintain when state extraction becomes too excessive, as a number of historical studies of China suggest (Duara 1991; Huang 1985). In my fieldwork, as the pressure from their superiors increased, some village cadres chose to align with the state; others quit office or were fired for failing to reach state targets. Some even became activists who led villagers to resist (Yu 2007). However, I argue that the watershed moment for replacement of the old clientelism was the elimination of agricultural taxes across the country.

After the tax abolition: the new clientelism based on external linkages

State provision and the new state and market extraction

The issue of the peasant burden gained extensive attention from scholars and the Chinese government, as it frequently aroused social unrest (Bernstein and Lü 2000; O'Brien and Li 2006). In the early 2000s, the central government launched the tax-for-fee reform (TFR) to eliminate various local fees and utilize the single agricultural tax. By 2006, the agricultural tax had been completely eliminated across the nation. This benign policy, however, led to a decline in rural revenue (Fork and Wong 2005; Luo et al. 2007). The situation worsened when the tax reforms occurred against the backdrop of the bankruptcy of village-owned enterprises and intensification of the practice of township governments managing village finances (*cuncai xianguan*).

Given the shortfall in rural revenue, the Chinese government began to increase economic subsidies for the countryside. In the No. 1 Central Document for 2004, 'taking less (*shaoqu*) and giving more (*duoyu*)' was proposed as the guideline for managing rural affairs. In 2006, the programme 'Constructing a New Socialist Countryside' (*shehui zhuyi xin nongcun jianshe*) was launched, and one of the central ideas was to increase financial

assistance for rural areas. The National Planning of Agricultural Modernization (*quanguo nongye xiandaihua guihua*) from 2016 to 2020 and the Strategic Planning of Rural Revitalization (*xiangcun zhenxing zhanlue guihua*) from 2018 to 2022 all promised to increase financial investment further.

Figure I shows the dramatic rise in central government investment in the countryside from 352 bn in 2006 to 1,380 bn RMB in 2013 (The Ministry of Finance 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013; Renmin Net 2013). The investment of local finance (from provincial to county level) was also increased; for example, it was 1,279 bn RMB in 2009 and 1,563.4 bn RMB in 2010 (The Ministry of Finance 2010, 2011).

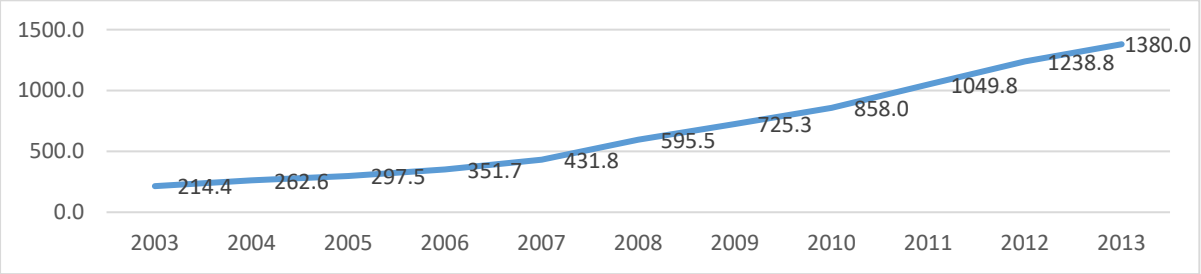

Figure I: Chinese central government investment in rural areas (billion RMB)

The state investment has two major goals. The first is to spur agricultural modernization through subsidizing large households of agriculture (*nongye dahu*), large-scale agricultural enterprises, and the building of agricultural infrastructure. The financial support is based on the Chinese government's belief that large-scale agribusinesses are the major force in agricultural modernization (the State Council 2012). The second main goal is to involve peasants into the state welfare system by funding education, medical insurance, the minimum living standard guarantee (*dibao*), pensions, etc. It is notable that the state also compensates companies with tax privileges and subsidies for providing welfare for local villagers (the State Council 2012). From 2009 to 2011, for example, national financial spending on agricultural modernization and welfare remained around 35% and 55%, respectively, of overall rural spending per year (The Ministry of Finance 2010, 2011, 2012).

This state provision has facilitated state extraction in the form of land expropriation and market extraction in the form of contract farming and wage labor. There is no doubt that agricultural modernization and state-funded rural welfare are explicitly used to move small-scale producers from their land and replace traditional subsistence and petty-commodity production with large-scale capitalist production in agriculture and related industries. Through this process, governments gain considerable revenue from transferring rural land to developers. Land expropriation therefore has replaced taxation as the major source of grievances in Chinese rural protests (Yu 2005). Market-based exploitation occurs in a less explicit way. Large households that can afford the initial investment or own substantial land produce on contract for agriculture companies; other peasants become seasonal or regular wage labor for the capitalists or large households. This is more likely to happen when their land is expropriated by the state or land becomes unproductive owing to industrial pollution.

It is noticeable that state and market extraction are nowadays distinguished from state extraction based on taxation, in that the former could mean economic opportunities for many peasants. They have the bargaining room to seek more beneficial terms from the state and market in terms of land compensation, environmental compensation, job opportunities, wages, welfare, etc. In land expropriation, for instance, getting incorporated in a land deal is one of the most important responses of peasants apart from resistance (Hall et al. 2015). All in all, the shift in state-peasant relations following the tax elimination facilitated the transformation of clientelism into a channel for peasants to access state and market resources.

External linkages as the basis of patronage

The distribution of state and market resources in rural China is largely based on personal connections. State grants, for instance, can hardly meet the demands of the whole countryside

despite their large scale (Li 2016). In this regard, local authorities (mainly county and township officials) have considerable discretion over resource distribution. First, most central investment in the countryside is in the form of financial transfers to local governments. For example, in 2009 and 2010, 654.3 bn RMB and 774.2 bn RMB, respectively, were transferred to local governments, accounting for 90% of central investment that year (The Ministry of Finance 2010, 2011, 2012). Moreover, the 2017 central document on the management of financial support for the countryside advocates that the distribution power should reside with county governments (the State Council 2017). Although township governments have little financial power, they can influence financial distribution through mediation such as by providing project information and government contacts for villages, submitting applications for villages, and coordinating project implementation between villages and county governments.

As a result, personal connections such as friendship, kinship, and working relations between village cadres and county and township authorities become key to acquiring resources (Li 2016; Ying 2013; Liu 2015; Sun 2016). Such linkages enable village cadres to acquire information on grant opportunities earlier than others so that they can better prepare their application. Also, close connections are powerful in influencing decision making by local authorities. Village elites who are not cadres can also use their connections with the government to seek resources, but the cadres are in a better administrative and political position to do so. As one village director commented: 'To be a village cadre, you must have good social relations...the government would not grant you public investments unless you take the initiative to use your social relations, without which you will go out feeling blind and not even know whom to ask.' [18]

[18] Interview conducted on May 18, 2018.

Another village party chief described in greater detail how he took advantage of his connection to acquire government funding for public goods in his village:

> Nowadays many funds are available [from the government] to benefit peasants. But you must tell the party secretary or the head of the township what you want to do with the funds . . . then he will introduce you to some government department in the county, say, the Bureau of Water Works. He might also tell you whom you should talk to, and how you should submit the proposal. When the quota comes from above, they [i.e., county government officials] can decide whether it should be given to Village A or Village B. If you are close to them, then it is yours. This is how we obtained the funding for our projects on the road, landscape, and water works.[19]

When it comes to market resources, personalized distribution is less constrained than that of government resources. Capitalists tend to offer more economic resources and opportunities to village cadres with whom they have close relations. In one case, an agricultural village faced a pollution problem following the entry of a mining enterprise. The villagers had asked the enterprise and local governments for compensation for years without success. After a middle-aged businessman became the director in 2010, the situation changed. He emphasized the importance of his friendship with the executive of the enterprise for delivering compensation to the village:

> Because I have a good connection with the enterprise, every time I asked them for compensation, they were more likely to pay, even though they sometimes did not admit the pollution was their fault. Also, when I needed to help villagers appeal to local governments, the governments would usually ignore me if there was no pressure from above. However, the government would listen if the enterprise helped me to

[19] Interview conducted on May 23, 2018.

persuade them, because the enterprise paid considerable taxes to the government every year.[20]

The personalized distribution of state and market resources leads to the replacement of ethics with external linkages as the basis of patronage. This shift is reflected in the voting decisions in village elections. The contrast between the preference for candidates who are close to the government and capitalists today and the aversion to this kind of candidate during the tax period is sharp. In the words of a villager during the 2017 village elections:

> Today, villagers judge your capability [when voting]. If there are five government projects for six villages, you must show your capability to win it. Also, since the cement factory came to our village, village cadres have changed more frequently. Many people are waiting to see your capability [to deliver benefits from the factory to villagers]. Without this capability, you cannot even stay in office for one term.[21]

The case in point is that peasants follow the state and capitalists to vote. Despite the improvement in electoral procedures in recent years (Tsai 2010), Chinese local governments still use a variety of strategies, such as persuasion and coercion, to mobilize votes for the preferred candidate. It is noticeable that capitalists also attempt to interfere with village elections to achieve their desired outcome. In some cases, the interference is indirect. They let the government do the job after notifying the government of their preference. It can also be as direct as vote buying. For example, an executive of the mining enterprise revealed that he had told a few local employers of his preference and then asked them to mobilize votes by rewarding them with overtime pay.[22]

[20] Interview conducted on June 1, 2018.
[21] Interview conducted on June 12, 2017
[22] Interview conducted on May 12, 2017.

However, the electoral intervention entails a monitoring problem, mainly owing to the practice of the secret ballot. Voters are free to ask for privacy when casting ballots. In the 2017 elections of H County, I observed that some villagers asked for a private room to cast their ballot and did not take the government's recommendation. Others simply abstained. In this case, local authorities and capitalists could barely do anything about the disobedience. As the executive said about the monitoring problem, 'We did not know whether they actually voted according to our preference, so sometimes electoral results were not as we expected.'[23] A township official said much the same thing: 'Elections are to test that the party's intention is consistent with voters' intentions. If not, we must accept the results and admit the failure of the election. This kind of thing sometimes happens.'[24]

Despite the monitoring problem, voting commonly followed the state and enterprises in H County. Many of the village directors I interviewed, for example, said they were elected after being invited by township governments to run for elections. Also, when some elites unwelcome by the state popped up as challengers, they received bitter criticism from villagers for their disruption. For example, even though everyone knew the government had named the next women's director, the former women's director insisted on running for office. In the end, she lost the election and was mocked by other villagers. 'She could not win because the government did not recognize her. She should have quit the competition to avoid embarrassment,' said a villager.[25] In another village, similar things happened when the former director intended to challenge the government-designated candidate. 'The township government did not support him, but he insisted on running the campaign. He was disrupting the election,' a villager criticized.[26]

[23] Interview conducted on May 12, 2017.
[24] Interview conducted on May 13, 2017.
[25] Interview conducted on June 1, 2017.
[26] Interview conducted on June 12, 2017.

For peasants, the intervention by the state and capitalists signals which candidate has better linkage with them and will therefore hold more patronage resources. As one villager said, 'it is okay to follow the consensus because… the candidate designated by the government would of course be capable [in seeking resources]...'[27] Another voter raised the same concern about the capability of leaders to deliver resources. 'Even if you are elected, you can do nothing when the government does not support you.'[28]

As external linkages have replaced ethics as the dominant basis of patronage, the new clientelism presents two important differences from the old version. First, the new clientelism has less stability. One obvious reason is that the relation is more instrumental. Moreover, it is difficult for rural patrons to maintain their personal connections with local authorities or capitalists because of both the inherent tensions between peasants and the resource providers and the frequent shifts in local authorities. In addition, patrons face more competition owing to the larger pool of patrons and greater economic incentives. For example, in my fieldwork, it was common to find village cadres who had held leadership for over a decade during the tax period, while today, changes in village leadership are more frequent.

Second, the identity of the patron has changed significantly. In the past, most village cadre-patrons were traditional peasants who spent most of their time in the village and lived on household production. Now, entrepreneurs have grasped the village leadership and become patrons because they have more opportunities and resources to establish and maintain connections with the governments and outside capitalists. As a former peasant cadre told me why their generation had lost leadership, 'We old village cadres do not fit this new era. Our

[27] Interview conducted on June 12, 2017.
[28] Interview conducted on May 3, 2017.

relationships with government officials are rigid (*yingbangbang*), while many of the cadres today have private connections such as card-playing friendship with them.'[29]

The change in leadership along with the shift in clientelism has been observed in many villages in H county. Among my sample of 20 village cadres in the county, 11 had served in office before the tax elimination, while nine became cadres after that. Among the 11 former cadres, nine were either peasants or workers, and two were peasants who had become entrepreneurs while in office. All nine of the current cadres were entrepreneurs.

Political consequences of the new clientelism: within and beyond villages

The transformation from old to new clientelism has significant consequences for relations both within villages and between villages and the state and market.

Reinforcement of economic inequality and potential class conflict within villages

While the old clientelism preserved egalitarianism within villages, the new clientelism reinforces economic inequality. First, although clientelism often breeds corruption, the new patrons have more opportunity for corruption than the old patrons as they control greater resources. They often keep a portion of the external resources for their own use. An elderly peasant bitterly criticized the corruption: 'The leaders are called personal connection (*guanxi*) cadre. They use their *guanxi* to seek public investment from the government, but the money is not properly used for welfare programs. Those who use only half of the funds can be counted as good cadres.'[30]

[29] Interview conducted on May 25, 2018.
[30] Interview conducted on May 25, 2018.

This kind of corruption is common across the country. According to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, as many as 6,000 cases of rural spending fraud worth more than 2bn RMB were investigated in 2013, and the money was embezzled from funds allocated for infrastructure projects, land requisition, renovation of dilapidated houses and basic living allowances (South China Morning Post 2014).

Apart from corruption, the delivery of external resources also enriches the private businesses of entrepreneur patrons. For instance, those running agribusinesses have privileged access to government subsidies for agriculture. In addition, many of the village cadres I interviewed had off-farm businesses in construction or construction-related industries such as gardening, and for good reason: they make a fortune contracting for government development projects without public bidding.

While the patrons accumulate wealth, poor peasants are more likely to be excluded from the patronage distribution as it is less constrained by the ethics of egalitarianism than under the old patronage system. First, the new patrons tend to distribute patronage according to their private connections with villagers. For example, both qualitative and quantitative studies find that close relatives of village cadres have better access to *dibao* (Li and Walker 2018; Han and Gao 2019). The biased distribution is particularly unfavorable to poor households, as they tend to be more alienated from the political elites.

In some cases, the new patrons also charge villagers for their services, which consequently excludes the poor to a larger extent. A villager told me of the importance of gifts in asking the party chief in his neighboring village to connect with the local governments:

> The chief had a close connection with the government, so the village had very good public goods. But many villagers hated him because he was so greedy. Every time

you went to his house to ask for help, he stood on the second floor to observe whether you had brought gift. If not, he would ask his wife to make some excuse to ask you to leave. [31]

Similarly, in the provinces of Guizhou and Guangxi, some village cadres were found to charge villagers a 'hard-working fee' (*xinku fei*), 'running errands fee' (*paotui fei*) and 'gratitude fee' (*ganxie fei*) for channeling government subsidies to renovate dilapidated houses (Xinhua Net 2015; Renmin Net 2017).

The increasing economic differences resulting from the new clientelism will spur class consciousness and conflict in villages. Large wealth gaps are being experienced personally by poor peasants in their everyday lives. The rich often own luxurious, oversized houses and fancy cars that appear rather inharmonious in a poor village. The effect tends to make poor peasants feel alienated from the rich and generate antagonistic feelings. As Thompson (1966) points out, 'class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs (p.9).' For example, a female peasant talked about the entrepreneur cadres in her village. 'They are different from us. We are peasants, while they are entrepreneurs. They know nothing about our life. How could they represent us?' [32]

Facilitation of state and market extraction

While the old clientelism aimed to protect the insularity of villages, the new clientelism opens up villages to the state and market. For peasants, this certainly means more access to external resources, but as mentioned above the inflow of resources is accompanied by the

[31] Interview conducted on May 15, 2018.
[32] Interview conducted on June 2, 2107.

state extraction in the form of land expropriation and market extraction in the form of contract farming and wage labor. Furthermore, the extraction is facilitated by the linkage of rural patrons with government authorities and capitalists, which is usually characterized by a clientelist exchange. The pyramid of clientelist linkages is rather effective for extraction nowadays as it is less coercive than taxation.

In the case of land expropriation, for instance, in 2014 the H county government decided to expropriate hundreds of hectares of land across three villages for a cement factory. Due to the low land price, the plan met fierce resistance. In this situation, the township authorities used their clientelist linkage with village cadres to turn land grabbing into a personal debt. The township party secretary first appealed to the director of one of the villages with whom he had the closest relationship. As the director recalled, 'faced with the resistance, the party secretary was very anxious and had no choice but to ask me for help. He said you must get things done in your village, so that you can set a good example for other villages.' In this situation, the director had to follow because his connection with the party secretary had brought his village considerable economic resources over the years.[33]

In another two villages, the clientelist linkage also took effect, although to a smaller extent. As one of the village party chiefs said, 'The land grabbing was unjust for peasants, to be honest. But I had to help the government. I have an emotional bond (*ganqing*) with township officials, and we often need to meet each other. So, I am obliged to help the government to relieve some pressure.' [34] The so-called emotional bond was instrumental. The chief worried that failure to fulfill the obligation would result in the withdrawal of

[33] Interview conducted on May 23, 2018.
[34] Interview conducted on June 6, 2018.

government resources. As he stated, 'If you do not help, the government will not support you in any way. That means it would be very hard for you to seek investment in the future.'[35]

When it comes to wage labor and contract farming, such as by leasing land to companies or working on company land, wage labor relinquishes control over the means of production without any claim over the products of the land (Zhang 2012). The extraction of contract farmers takes various forms, such as subjecting their labor and land to control by the companies (Watts 1994), company violation of contracts (Singh 2002), and increasing self-exploitation (Porter and Phillips-Howard 1997). The clientelist linkage between village cadres and capitalists facilitates these forms of extraction by repressing potential resistances.

In a traditional agriculture village, for instance, pollution from a mining enterprise forced many villagers to give up rice farming and work for the company. The extraction caused frequent protests by the villagers. In this situation, as the executive of the enterprise said, 'Village cadres are very important to us. We tend to avoid dealing with local peasants directly because it is hard; we ask the cadres to deal with the peasants instead.'[36] He put the village director on the payroll by appointing him head of the security department. This turned stability maintenance into a personal obligation of the director to the executive.

Conclusion and discussion

This article explains how the abolition of agricultural taxes by 2006 facilitated the historical transformation of clientelism in the countryside of post-Mao China. When state extraction based on taxation is replaced by state provision of economic subsidies for rural modernization, state extraction based on land grabbing, and market extraction based on wage

[35] Interview conducted on June 6, 2018.
[36] Interview conducted on June 13, 2018.

labor and contract farming, the old clientelism shifts to become more instrumental and less enduring. Certainly, there are regional variances across the countryside. The shift in clientelism is more salient in poor villages than in wealthy ones because the change in state-peasant relations is more dramatic in the former.

Although political and economic structures in the Chinese countryside are quite distinct from those of most capitalist countries, this article shows that the theoretical framework of clientelist transformation drawn from these countries also fits China. It firstly validates the view of the scholarship of moral economy that clientelism acts as an important communal institution in traditional agrarian societies to protect the subsistence of peasants, even in socialist states where subsistence security is prioritized. The subsistence-first structure does not make the old clientelism inapplicable, as argued by Burns (1979) and Oi (1985), but rather fosters it by making villagers prefer those cadres who reliably protect them from state demands in the form of grain quotas[37] or taxes.

Moreover, this article implies that party patronage does not necessarily involve party competition. Certainly, in this case, peasant clients do not contribute electoral support but political loyalty in the general sense. Fundamentally, it manifests what Weingrod (1968) argues, that 'the "politics of development" is thus a central cause of the expansion of party patronage (p. 384).' Unlike the traditional days when state power in rural China was represented by taxation, population control, and land registries, etc., today, the state is eager to transform the structure of the countryside in the name of 'modernization' and 'development'. Moreover, it is often joined by the market and sometimes NGOs (Leonard et al. 2010; Gupta 2014). These attempts are not peculiar to China, as there is increasing national and international attention paid to the "backwardness" of peasants in the developing world. Therefore, the article sheds light on the clientelist transformation to party patronage in

[37] In the Mao era, grain quotas were the main form of state extraction.

the countryside of many other countries where the dominance of one party is prevalent despite the de jure party competition, as Scott (1985) finds in Malaysian villages.

In conclusion, this article suggests that the framework of clientelist transformation can be applicable even in societies with distinct rural social, economic, and political structures.

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Acknowledgements:

I want to thank Jun Borras, Jingzhong Ye, Lianjiang Li, The Journal of Peasant Studies (JPS), and College of Humanities and Development Studies (COHD) of China Agricultural University for providing me with an opportunity to present my draft at the 2019 Writeshop-Workshop in Critical Agrarian Studies and Scholar-Activism. I also want to thank Collective

of Agrarian Scholar-Activists from the South (CASAS) for the support. For comments and suggestions, I gratefully acknowledge Xi Chen, Chi Shun Fong, Jenniffer Vargas Reina, Lizahmy Makena NTONJIRA, and the anonymous reviewers. Special thanks go to one of the anonymous reviewers for his/her remarkably helpful suggestions, tolerance, and patience.