

Introduction

Performative Boundary Work

A Blurred Boundary

‘Ecological Daxi welcomes you!’ (*shengtai Daxi huanying nin* 生态大溪欢迎您), proclaim the big red characters painted on a grey two-storey building where visitors turn right off the main concrete road onto the gravel road that leads through the village.¹ Although this slogan is legible, it is already starting to fade. Businesses have painted blue and black advertisements for excavation work, steel and water purifier repairs over it. A small blue sign promotes the peasant cooperative’s annual tasting of its organic agricultural products at the primary school, only 1,500 metres away. Thirty metres further down the road, another slogan on the wall of a house exhorts people to ‘start doing organic agriculture from the heart’ (*youji nongye congxin zuoqi* 有机农业从心做起). After another few hundred metres, one learns that ‘organic agriculture respects heavenly law, circular economy follows nature!’ (*youji nongye zun tiandao, xunhuan jingji fa ziran* 有机农业尊天道, 循环经济法自然). Following the rutted gravel road past rice fields, lotus ponds and mandarin groves and around a sharp turn, the words on another building announce that here one is ‘far away from agrochemicals and chemical fertilizer, creating an ecological home’ (*yuanli nongyao huafei, dazao shengtai jiaoyuan* 远离农药化肥, 打造生态家园). A kilometre later, the visitor arrives at the village square and village committee office, where a whole row of white wooden panels with black characters promote various village and party organizations, including a ‘peasant cooperative’ (*nongmin hezuoshe* 农民

合作社), a ‘cultural troupe’ (*wenyidui* 文艺队) and a ‘seniors’ association’ (*laonianren xiehui* 老年人协会). These slogans reflected the vision of Dong Jie, whose pursuit of participatory rural development and ecological agriculture led him to be valued as part of global civil society at the same time as he was praised as a good state agronomist.

In 2009, Dong, then in his forties, had organized a ‘peasant cooperative’ and initiated a transition to ‘ecological agriculture’ in Daxi, a village in the hills outside the megacity Chengdu, Sichuan Province, People’s Republic of China. The main impetus for Dong’s initiative came from NGOs that not only provided models for rural development but also funding for workshops and connections with experts and customers. From his office at the township headquarters, he telephoned every village party secretary in Qiuling Township to present his vision. One was responsive: Wang Zhaochen, the party secretary of Daxi Village, who had recently tried unsuccessfully to establish a peasant cooperative for mandarin orange growers. The township government permitted Dong to participate in NGO activities and to pursue his initiative in Daxi during his working hours, a type of in-between position that anthropologists have described as blurring the boundary of the state.

Criticizing the State: Discursive Boundary Work

I first encountered Dong as a critic of state-sponsored market-oriented agriculture at a workshop held by a Beijing-based rural development NGO at a cooperative in Shanxi Province. When he told me his life story in interviews, he emphasized a crucial turning point in his career: after over a decade promoting ‘agrochemicals’, he had recognized the problematic consequences of the state’s support for ‘modern’ agriculture.

In June 2015, Dong organized a workshop on ecological agriculture and sustainable living in Daxi Village that was co-sponsored by the Sichuan chapter of a Hong Kong-based NGO. Dong opened the workshop by emphasizing that the host institution – the village’s cooperative – was a ‘comprehensive cooperative’ (*zonghe bezuoshe* 综合合作社), not the kind of ‘specialized cooperative’ (*zhuanye hezuoshe* 专业合作社) promoted by ‘the state’. Dong stressed that its primary aim was not producing ‘commodities’ for ‘the market’ but providing ‘comprehensive services’ for ‘the community’. He argued that ‘peasants’ should rely on themselves rather than funding from ‘the state’ for cooperatives and organic certification schemes. Unlike

the ‘top-down’ agricultural trainings ‘the state’ offered, this ‘participatory’ workshop would not distinguish between teachers and students, he explained. Everyone would both learn and teach, based on their own unique perspectives. Organized peasants and consumers would unite in ‘mutual aid between city and countryside’.

Dong’s critique of the state thus extended to both industrial monoculture and certified-organic farming, which sounded very familiar to me. My own interest in rural development in China was sparked not only by my training in China Studies, which centred on rural politics, but also by my experiences co-organizing food cooperatives in Vienna with students and other activists since 2009. The most active food co-op organizers in Austria at that time were critical of ‘the state’ and imagined ‘social movements’ for ‘food sovereignty’. Through his NGO contacts, Dong was very familiar with globally circulating ‘alternative’ rural development discourses. In anthropology, this discursive distancing of the state has been captured in the notion of ‘boundary work’ (Beek 2012; Thelen, Vettters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018).

Dong’s boundary work was so effective that some of his former university classmates who worked for NGOs suggested that he should quit his official post, as they feared his position in the township government would impede his engagement in ecological agriculture. These remarks indicated they shared my impression that Dong was not merely fulfilling his duty as a state official but pursuing a different vision for the countryside.

Dong was not the only person who engaged in NGO discourse in this self-styled ‘ecological village’. Village officials, entrepreneurs and other rural citizens also learned to speak of ‘ecological agriculture’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘comprehensive services’ when with outside visitors and potential customers. But not all of them managed to persuade me they stood on ‘our’ side, that of a global social movement. Like me, some of the organized urban consumers who visited the village had doubts about the real reasons why, for example, an entrepreneur had invested in building the cooperative’s rice mill. Thus, NGO discourse was not sufficient evidence of actors’ authentic commitment to this alternative vision.

Avoiding the Taste of the State: Performative Boundary Work

Like me, NGO staff and other urban middle-class citizens saw Dong as positioned on the side of ‘civil society’² rather than the state. My

impression that ‘discursive boundary work’ alone could not explain all that was going on led me to develop this book’s view of the state and the concept of ‘performative boundary work’.

A younger colleague at the township government, who had recently been transferred from another township, told me that Dong’s lifestyle was not typical for a rural state official – someone, he imagined, who would frequently wine and dine, eat meat, drink alcohol, smoke and gamble with his buddies in teahouses, all to build and maintain his ‘*guanxi*’ (personalistic networks) and climb the hierarchy. Dong Jie, he insisted, was not the type to wine and dine to build his networks.

I agreed, then. But in retrospect, I think Dong knew very well how to build his networks. He invited visitors to the village and to meals. He would often ask a household that was located conveniently to both the village committee’s offices and the cooperative’s vegetable fields to prepare a ‘simple’ meal, with little meat and a lot of vegetables. Meat dishes were usually considered the most important dishes of a proper banquet, but during these meals Dong would emphasize to the visitors that he was vegetarian and explain that he cared about his health and that eating meat was not ecological. He also never offered cigarettes or alcohol to his guests. These small details that made his banquets appear different from those typical of that time and place, and also appealed to me as a food activist from Vienna. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1984) on social distinction, Dong’s taste for ‘simple’ vegetarian meals avoided the image of the official trying to build his networks through wining and dining but also the taste of ‘the state’ for meat-heavy meals and productivist industrial agriculture. Mundane performances like these distinctive banquets marked Dong’s activities as personal commitment and made his discursive distancing of the state effective for an urban middle-class audience, including me.

For others, the way Dong held banquets had nothing to do with the boundary between state and civil society. Before the NGO workshop on ecological agriculture and sustainable living, Dong had asked the usual household to mainly prepare vegetable dishes. A few days later, the field supervisor of the cooperative’s vegetable unit commented on the food that had been offered for workshop participants. During a break, he reported to the workers that only very ‘simple’ dishes including very little meat had been served. In particular, he complained that the classic Sichuan dish *Hui Guo Rou* (Twice-Cooked Pork) had been prepared with almost no meat. Rather than marking Dong Jie and the other organizers as a civil society alterna-

tive to the state, these vegetable dishes marked them as bad – even disrespectful – hosts. Many villagers in Daxi considered Dong an ordinary but somewhat stingy state official who, not unlike his predecessors, tried to make peasants adopt new agricultural technologies.

Similarly, the township government did not consider Dong to be on the side of civil society. He was not regarded as pursuing divergent goals and was never accused of neglecting the work the state paid him to do. Indeed, he was not only not sanctioned but received several awards for his accomplishments, was even offered a promotion, and the township government promoted his initiatives as contributions to the central state aim of ‘building an Ecological Civilization’.

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These brief ethnographic vignettes on participatory rural development show Dong Jie making policy by marking a difference between state and civil society. In front of a wealthy, urban middle-class audience, he performed a clear boundary between the state’s support for industrial and market-oriented agriculture and his own approach to ecological and community-oriented agriculture. Distancing ‘the state’ and successfully positioning himself on the side of ‘civil society’ and ‘community’, he gained access to resources for making policy as a township agronomist. With organized consumers and their purchasing power on his side, Dong had more leverage to make village officials and rural citizens adopt the agricultural practices he advocated.

Since Dong did not make an appearance as a state actor before this Western-oriented segment of the urban middle class, these citizens did not evaluate him through liberal state images. They did not regard him as a potentially ‘corrupt’ state regulator, even though he was building personalized networks with both producers and consumers through banquets. They also did not view Dong as an example of ‘the state’ imposing its will on the farmers and thus restricting their entrepreneurial freedom, but as someone who cared for nature, peasants and consumers. The other side of the coin was that his practices did not change their negative images of ‘the state’: even though these urban citizens valued Dong’s work, they just did not consider him a state actor.

At the same time, other citizens did not see the food Dong chose for banquets as a marker of the state boundary: if they noticed it at all, they just found it a bit strange. For rural citizens, his official title and government job were the markers that aligned him with ‘the state’. Similarly, the township government considered Dong’s distinction between market-oriented and community-oriented un-

important to his initiative of building an ecological village. The involvement of NGOs and consumer associations did not prevent the initiative from demonstrating the township's successful contribution to a central state goal.

Performed state boundaries – their production, multiplicity and productivity – are at the core of this ethnography of participation in a food network and democratic bureaucracy in a village in Sichuan in the mid-2010s. These projects of citizen participation proved especially productive for exploring boundary work between state and non-state. In this specific setting, various actors who are often retrospectively classified as 'state' and 'civil society' demanded citizen participation. Government documents and NGO programmes promoted partly overlapping and partly divergent visions for rural development. Sometimes this turned performances of participation into performances of state boundaries (Part I). Moreover, the democratic administration of social benefits required by the central government demanded interactions between officials and other citizens. Performed state boundaries are key to understanding how the line between 'proper' and 'improper' influence – that is, between participation and corruption – was drawn (Part II). Depending on how state boundaries were performed, practices might appear 'socialist' or 'liberal' (Chapter 1), 'transparent' or 'corrupt' (Chapter 2), 'caring' or 'intrusive' (Chapter 3), 'democratic' or 'paternalist' (Chapter 4), 'standardized' or 'irregular' (Chapter 5) and 'filial' or 'individualistic' (Chapter 6). Therefore, this book approaches the state not as essentialized substance but as performed boundaries that affect classifications of people, judgements of practices and, consequently, the distribution of resources.

In the social sciences, intense theoretical confrontations that are often linked to political struggles and transformations have produced a wealth of competing definitions of the state. Despite significant conceptual differences, a similar problem underlies most approaches to the state. The political scientist Timothy Mitchell (1991: 77) has called this the 'boundary problem' and argues that 'a definition of the state always depends on distinguishing it from society' and that 'the line between the two is difficult to draw in practice'. In anthropology, an article titled 'Blurred Boundaries' (Gupta 1995) launched the 'new ethnography of the state'. The blurriness of the state boundary has since become a commonplace and has been explored in depth by several strands of the political anthropology literature using concepts such as intermediation, brokerage, embeddedness or entanglement.

This anthropological work has offered an important counterweight to political science approaches that assumed a clear state

boundary and regarded deviations from that norm as signs of ‘corruption’, ‘incomplete state building’ or even ‘failed states’. However, a one-sided attention to blurriness neglects the potential of studying state boundaries. Focusing only on Dong’s intermediary position and the entanglements of township government, NGOs, peasant cooperative and consumer associations misses an important part of how he was making agronomic policy. Adopting the notion of ‘boundary work’ (Gieryn 1983) shifts attention to how actors perform the boundary between what they consider to be inside and what outside of the state. Like Dong, other intermediaries are often also ‘most effective when they *discursively* distance themselves from the state’ (Thelen, Vetter and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 13, my emphasis). As the vignettes above show, speaking the language of only state or only civil society was not always enough to position oneself successfully on one side or the other. Rhetorical style is only one element in the repertoire of performances of state boundaries. I introduce the notion of ‘performative boundary work’ to better capture the material production, multiplicity and productivity of state boundaries.

In the remainder of this introduction, I first present how this book approaches the state conceptually and methodologically through its multiple performed boundaries. Second, I situate the book in the anthropology of China by discussing widespread ideas about the otherness of the Chinese state and showing how claims of authoritarian, socialist or cultural otherness are linked to presumptions about state boundaries. Third, I introduce citizen participation as one productive opportunity for exploring how state boundaries are performed. Fourth, I take the reader to the self-styled ‘ecological village’, where most of the performances described in this book were staged. Finally, brief chapter previews show how attention to performances of state boundaries uncovers overlooked agency in the making of policy.

Performed Distinctions

The state has always been difficult to define. Its boundary with society appears elusive, porous, and mobile. I argue that this elusiveness should not be overcome by sharper definitions but explored as a clue to the state’s nature. (Mitchell 1991: 77)

Anthropological research on the state has tended to emphasize cross-cutting connections and thus the blurriness of both external borders and internal boundaries. While this has produced import-

ant theoretical interventions and innovative research perspectives, it has also neglected ethnography's potential for insights into how actors perform the multiple distinctions between state and non-state before various audiences.³ This book's approach to the anthropology of the state therefore combines analyses of discursive boundary work and of the performed state to develop the concept of performative boundary work and illuminate the multiplicity of state boundaries.

Appealing Blurriness

External borders – those between states – have attracted much attention in anthropological studies of globalization, migration, citizenship and borderlands. While some have studied the production and productivity of borders (Heyman 1994; Kearney 2004), others have studied them as something to be crossed. Highlighting transnational flows across states' territorial borders was an important intervention against a deep-seated 'methodological nationalism' in the social sciences. Significantly, this methodological nationalism had blinded state theories not only to territorial borders but also the links between state formation and nation building: 'Western state building was re-imagined as a non-national, civil, republican and liberal experience' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003: 581). Taking territorial borders for granted thus allowed theorists to concentrate on an internal boundary as a distinctive feature of the modern state.

For Max Weber, producing a sharp boundary between public and private was key to both producing and limiting state power. Weber particularly focused on how a rational constitution normatively regulated officials' acts by creating 'the criteria by which specific actions of specific individuals can be qualified as actions of the state so as to distinguish them from actions of private individuals' (Dusza 1989: 94). An idealized model of this Weberian state has often served as a foil in studies of non-Western states (Steinmetz 1999: 22; Migdal and Schlichte 2005: 3).

In anthropology, internal state boundaries – the lines between state and non-state others – have received very little attention. This claim may appear outrageous: after all, 'boundaries' were mentioned in the title of Akhil Gupta's (1995) seminal article. Yet anthropologists' analyses often focused on substances that blurred the state boundary: connections traversed the porous boundary, ambivalent feelings and emotions undermined the clear-cut boundary; performances camouflaged the boundary, and images, fictions and illusions made the boundary obsolete altogether (see also the Conclusion).

Paying attention to the blurring of the boundary allowed anthropologists to scrutinize the dominant paradigm. When comparative political theorists have not found the liberal ideal of the state, including a clear separation from society, they have tended to speak of ‘failed’, ‘weak’ or ‘partial’ states. In contrast, anthropologists were among those who developed a pronounced scepticism towards the existence of the state as a ‘substantial entity separate from society’ (Abrams 1988: 61). Gupta (1995: 375) used his ethnographic material on the Indian state to question the ‘Eurocentric distinctions between state and civil society’ and ‘the conceptualization of “the state” as a monolithic and unitary entity’. Anthropologists thus interpreted similar phenomena the other way around: rather than seeing failed non-Western states, they saw failed Western theory.⁴ Presented as a postcolonial theoretical intervention, the diagnosis of the blurriness of the boundary came with a compelling political-moral message that many anthropologists reproduced.

Such diagnoses of blurriness emerge easily during ethnographic fieldwork. Gupta (1995) used selected Western theories as a foil for studying a non-Western state. But even without such a theoretical straw man, the heat and noise of negotiations, conflicts, tensions and frictions have allowed ethnographers to pinpoint in-between positions and attribute them to a blurred boundary. A certain reading of one poststructuralist text, often quoted in anthropological studies of the state, contributed to translating the ethnographic impulse not to study phenomena without a context into a lopsided overemphasis on blurriness.

In the article ‘The Limits of the State’, Timothy Mitchell (1991) suggested that the ‘boundary problem’ in state theories – scholars’ difficulty in identifying a clear and stable line of distinction between state and society – indicated that the state exists not as a discrete entity but only as an effect.⁵ Following Mitchell, anthropologists have similarly questioned ‘whether it is empirically possible to identify state and society as separate domains’ (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 132). They have observed that the state ‘is the kind of object that dissolves on close inspection’ (Harvey 2005: 126). But stopping with diagnoses of a blurred state boundary risks overlooking important boundary work that is closely linked to questions of legitimate action and therefore influences access to a variety of resources.

Performative Distancing

For all that, Mitchell’s text can be reinterpreted as an invitation to analyse the state in terms of its boundaries. Acknowledging the elu-

siveness of the state boundary, he has himself called for studies that ‘examine the detailed political processes through which the uncertain yet powerful distinction between state and society is produced’ (1991: 78). He considers specifically ‘modern’ techniques and practices as producing this boundary: ‘the language of legal practice, the architecture of public buildings, the wearing of military uniforms, or the marking out and policing of frontiers’ (Mitchell 1991: 81). Several anthropologists have heeded this call, typically exploring discursive boundary construction. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002: chapter 4), for example, has studied how both Islamist and secularist bureaucrats used a state-versus-society discourse in their struggle for state power in the 1980s and 1990s. Both the ‘states at work’ approach (Beek 2012, 2017; Lentz 2014) and the ‘stategraphy’ approach (Thelen, Vettters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 8) respond to Mitchell’s formulation of the boundary problem by introducing the concept of ‘boundary work’ to the anthropology of the state.

While Mitchell provides an example of the boundary between state and economy, stategraphies of welfare and care have explored state images that related to family (Thelen, Thiemann and Roth 2018), civil society (Read 2018) and village community (Thiemann 2024: chapter 2) as non-state others. Ethnographies of states at work, on the other hand, have studied how bureaucrats draw a boundary between themselves and both politicians and civilians (Beek 2012; 2017). Yet, whether the cases are an oil company in Saudi Arabia, a home elder-care project in Serbia supported by Norwegian agencies, volunteers at hospitals in the Czech Republic, or police in Ghana, such studies show how ‘producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power’ (Mitchell 1991: 90).

Anthropologists within the ‘states at work’ framework have focused on ‘normative statements and narratives’ (Lentz 2014: 176) and bureaucratic writing as ‘linguistic boundary work’ (Beek 2017: 82). Stategraphy similarly highlights the ‘ideological boundary’ and the ‘discursive distancing’ of the state (Thelen, Vettters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 8, 11, 13). The discursive dimension of ‘boundary-work’ was already central in the work of Thomas Gieryn (1983), who introduced this concept in Science and Technology Studies to analyse the ‘ideological’ or ‘rhetorical style’ of discursive practices of scientists who attempt to demarcate their own science from others’ non-science.⁶

By highlighting discourse when studying the state as its boundary, the social scientific discourse on the state and its travels outside

of academia have themselves become important parts of the field to be researched. When discussing the works of political scientists, Mitchell (1991: 86) had already pointed out that ‘such writing should be seen as part of the much larger social process of generating the mysterious effect of the state, as a separate, self-willed entity’. The idealized Weberian or liberal image of the state as separate from society continues to be very influential around the world, including in China. But scientific conceptions of a blurred state boundary – most notably those of China’s pre-eminent anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005) – also inspired some actors in the rural development efforts under study here.

The importance of discursive boundary work cannot be underestimated. Still, our first ethnographic glimpses of the ecological village of Daxi have already shown that it is not only words – written or spoken, particularly in law – that matter but also acts like eating and substances like food. The concept of ‘performative boundary work’ includes nondiscursive practices and material artefacts as well as actors and audiences in the analyses. Dong Jie’s banquets also demonstrate that state boundaries are performed in unexpected settings, not only through policy creation (Mayrl and Quinn 2016), juridical decisions about corruption – enacted in ‘rituals of separation’ with lists that enumerate ‘rules of separation’ (Bratsis 2006: chapter 3, building on Douglas 1966)⁷ – or ‘the meticulous organization of space, movement, sequence, and position’ in the army (Mitchell 1991: 92).

The concept of performative boundary work combines growing attention to discursive boundary work with a recently rediscovered interest in performances of the state. This combination avoids limitations of each approach. Building on Clifford Geertz’s (1980) ‘theatre state’ and other studies of state rituals in the 1980s (Ahern 1981; Bloch 1987), studies of both extraordinary spectacles of authority and mundane performances of state power in courts and offices have helped link state images and bureaucratic practices and spotlight state officials and other citizens as both actors and audiences (Rasanayagam, Beyer and Reeves 2014; Jusionyte 2015; Kingsley and Telle 2016). Concepts from ‘new’ ritual theory (Bell 1992) and Erving Goffman’s (1956) interactionism have sharpened ethnographers’ focus on performances of state (Beyer 2014; Sedlenieks 2020b), democracy (Spencer 2007: 72–95; Ismailbekova 2014) and participation (Perreault 2015; Albert 2016).

Approaches to the performed state have mostly continued the new ethnography of the state’s one-sided focus on ‘the processes that make the state *appear* as an entity’ (Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005:

6; emphasis in original). This tendency is above all still ‘seeking to “denaturalize” the state’ (Kingsley and Telle 2016: 173) by asking how ‘performance[s] of politics reproduce, enable, challenge, or naturalize ideologies about the state’ (Rasanayagam, Beyer and Reeves 2014: 11). These studies thus follow Geertz (1980), who has argued that state rituals ‘were not means of representing the state or of masking its true nature but *constituted* the state’ (Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005: 10, emphasis in original); however, they still often end up in the analytical impasse of assuming the truth of the state. Without the theoretical shift from substance to boundaries, they can only ascribe ‘mimicry’, ‘mimesis’, ‘imitation’, ‘camouflage’ and ‘state-like qualities’ to performances of those whom they have categorized a priori as non-state actors. To avoid this analytical dead end, I argue – in parallel to Fredrik Barth’s (1969) move from essentialized cultural substance to ethnic boundaries – for shifting the focus to markers of difference and ‘ways of signalling’ the boundary between state and non-state. Thus reframed, studying the state through performance draws attention to the multifaceted materiality of boundary work.

Performing distinctions between state and non-state requires markers of difference. In principle, almost anything can serve, but in practice there are limited repertoires of stage designs and properties, costumes and characters, scripts and sequences available to actors at specific places and times. Different elements of these repertoires have specific material qualities: some are more durable than others, some easier to acquire and use. Hence, access to these repertoires is unequal. These repertoires of markers of difference explain both the apparent stability of state boundaries and the situational flexibility that allows certain stage designs and props (like assembly halls and official titles) to be put aside when the staging of another powerful scene (like a particular type of banquet) attracts the attention of part of the audience. This plethora of markers of difference also indicates multiple ways of performing state boundaries.

Multiplicity: Ethnography’s Unexploited Potential

Ethnographies of the state have great potential for insights into the different dimensions of multiplicity of performed state boundaries.⁸ When audiences are kept physically separate – for example, in front and backstage areas – certain markers are visible only to some, not others (segregated multiplicity, see Chapter 1). Different audiences’ uneven familiarity with particular markers further contributes to the multiplicity of state boundaries. Even when audiences are side

by side, actors' practices may appear to some as state acts, to others as non-state acts, and to yet others as having no relevance to this distinction (anaglyphic multiplicity, see Chapter 1).⁹ State boundaries also multiply because the state is always performed in relation to non-state others. Depending on the situation, these might include kinship, civil society, community, the market or religion (domain multiplicity, see Chapter 2 and 3).

Finally, temporality adds to the multiplicity of state boundaries. Expectations about future performances of state boundaries affect whether bureaucratic practices in the present are assessed as discretion within the boundaries of state policy or as deviation from it (anticipative multiplicity, see Chapter 5). Post hoc classifications by temporally displaced audiences produce still more versions of state boundaries as they engage with traces of markers of difference from earlier performances (folded multiplicity, see Chapters 4).¹⁰ Depending on the materiality of these performances, traces may be more or less difficult to recover, unfold or destroy. Textual documentation of laws, regulations and juridical decisions invites late-coming audiences, including social scientists, to retrospective boundary work. This may instantiate state boundaries after the event, when the distinction between state and non-state did not matter before or else was performed differently and through other markers. Dong's discursive critique and performative avoidance of the state's taste for meat-heavy productivist industrial agriculture disappeared when the township government represented the ecological village to higher-level officials as the achievement of an agronomist it employed. The kind of food served at the workshop was less persistent than official titles. Over time, previous state boundaries are 'unfolded' and 'folded' in novel ways to produce new effects.

The methodological limitations of much social science research cause it to mistake markers of difference for state substance or consider only certain well-known ones and thus overlook the multiplicity of state boundaries. In text-based research based on documents or interviews without observations of practices, situationally relevant markers such as official titles and legal categories often appear in hindsight as continuous and substantial attributes of actors and organizations. Ethnographic research centred on participant observation allows social scientists to share situations with actors and audiences and thus to study when such well-known markers of difference are or are not performed and acknowledged as relevant. Moreover, if ethnographers do not assume the state exists as an essential substance but take the proposition of this book that state boundaries are situa-

tionally performed in multiple versions seriously, they can discover unexpected markers of the distinction between state and non-state.

That activities and artefacts (like the way Dong Jie hosted banquets) may not mark the boundary between state and society for all calls Mitchell's main argument about the state effect into question. Mitchell (1991: 82) and many anthropologists following him start by presuming 'porous edges [aka blurred boundaries] where official practice mixes with the semiofficial and the semiofficial with the unofficial' and then ask how these are 'turned into lines of separation, so that the state can stand apart as a discrete, self-directing object'. This question assumes that boundary work is only a resource of power if a coherent image of the state is successfully produced. But Dong's successful performative distancing of a specific version of the state before one audience increased his influence over another, even though this other audience did not share this image of the state. Taking the multiplicity of performed state boundaries seriously requires us to also look at how different versions sometimes interact and at others exist side by side without interference.

That multiple boundaries are performed into existence does not necessarily mean that state boundaries become blurred. Rather than focusing only on practices that navigate tensions of in-between positions, performative boundary work invites anthropologists to also recognize the specific practices that enable or hinder such tensions to emerge in the first place. If state boundaries are performed successfully for one audience but their markers are not part of the repertoire familiar to another audience, state boundaries multiply without causing often-noted 'paradoxes' (Vollebergh, De Koning and Marchesi 2021) or activating repair mechanisms such as irony or cynicism in 'communities of complicity' (Steinmüller 2010, 2013; Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2016). Moving beyond a lopsided emphasis on blurred state boundaries enables anthropology to grasp the productivity, multiplicity and unexpected effects of performative boundary work.

State Boundaries and Multiple Chinas

I observed the performances of state boundaries examined in this book during fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork within the territorial borders of the People's Republic of China. But this alone does not make this book a contribution to the anthropology of China. As within other territorial containers, not everything that happens there is enacted as China; even though some scholars produce China as if

this was the case. What makes this book a contribution to the anthropology of China as well as to that of the state is that it examines how performances of (internal) state boundaries are sometimes interwoven with different images (or rather ‘versions’)¹¹ of the country. Indeed, state boundaries are often important elements in enactments of China as authoritarian, as socialist or as a cultural other.

While authoritarian and socialist versions of China are enacted by evidencing the lack of a boundary between state and society in opposing ways respectively based on Max Weber and Karl Marx, others have produced a culturalist version of China using historical evidence of a blurred state boundary. Some underline this blurriness as a culturally specific feature by pointing to the Chinese term *guojia* (国家), which is usually used to translate the English term ‘state’ but may also be translated into English as ‘nation’ or ‘country’.¹² *Guojia* consists of two characters, *guo* (国) meaning ‘country’ and *jia* (家) meaning ‘family’ and could be literally translated as ‘a country of families’ (Wei 2006: 24).¹³

Fei Xiaotong, a student of Bronisław Malinowski’s who became one of China’s most prominent anthropologists and was a source of inspiration for some of the rural development initiatives discussed in this book (see Chapter 2),¹⁴ has written about the important role of the gentry as intermediaries who blurred the boundary between state and society in ‘traditional China’:

On the vast continent, with bad communication systems, power is centralized only in name but not in fact. . . . The gentry mediates between the ruler and the ruled. . . . In their official capacity, they are agents of the ruler, but in their private capacity they are closely related to, and share common interests with, the ruled. Herein lies the popular though not thorough check on the absolute and often alien monarch. (Fei 1946: 8–9)

As Fei Xiaotong (1953: 79–81) explains, the officials sent by the central government stopped at the district level. Orders of the emperor, he argues, did not reach individuals or households directly:

When the central government orders the magistrate of the *hsien* [district] to collect taxes or conscribe services, the latter will send agents to the village to carry out the order. The government order passes unofficially from the hand of the agent to the local headmen, who occupy no official position in the government constitution. The order then will be announced and discussed in the village teashops. All those present may participate. No vote will be taken, but the headman will decide according to the public opinion as well as to his own sense of appropriateness

whether the order should be followed. If the decision is in the negative, the agent will be sent back to the magistrate without achieving anything. . . . However, court politics follows on the other hand. The elders of the village will call on the magistrate or ask someone among the town gentry to call on the magistrate for negotiation. Since the gentry have connections with the power hierarchy, the magistrate has to consider their suggestions and modify his order in a way he thinks fit. Sometimes the issue may gradually move up to the monarch himself. Very often, the monarch, to grant some personal favor, intervenes in local affairs in a way contrary to his own decrees. (Fei 1946: 9)

In this culturalist version of China, Fei and other scholars describe the ‘traditional system of government’ as relying on persuasion rather than on coercion. The state–society boundary was thus declared to be ‘alien to Chinese people’ (Wei 2006: 24).

Authoritarian versions of China have been produced and maintained by associating Weberian ideals about a clear-cut state boundary with changing facts and fictions generated within the territorial borders of the People’s Republic over the past few decades. For Weber, the state boundary affected both the production and limitation of modern state power (Dusza 1989: 91–96). For liberal critics, the boundary that protected against state intervention was the key concern. Although they continually accused the Chinese state of not respecting the boundary between public and private, what they rendered relevant as ‘private’ changed over time. During the Mao era, they mainly portrayed the boundary between politics and economy as missing. With the introduction of market elements in the post-Mao era under Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Reform and Opening Up’, they regarded economic institutions as moving closer to the West and shifted the critique to other topics. Attention turned, for example, to the Chinese state’s supposed violation of the boundary between politics and the family through its ‘Family Planning Policy’ (literally ‘Birth Planning’), better known outside of China as the ‘One Child Policy’. With the introduction of village elections, liberal critics used democratic elections in the West as a foil to criticize interventions of higher levels as transgressions of the boundary between state and citizens. Discussions about social movements in China (environmentalism, for example) have decried the lack of a clear boundary between the state and civil society with the ironic acronym GONGO, which stands for ‘government-organized nongovernmental organization’. More recently, outrage about internet censorship and the social credit system has transformed the state boundary element in the association of China as authoritarian by spotlighting the individual.

While the liberal version of the state demands a clear boundary, Marxists, Leninists and Maoists maintain that there should be no boundary between state and society (Grzymala-Busse and Jones Luong 2002: 533–534). Building on the ideas of Marx, Friedrich Engels (1987 [1877–1878]) famously wrote in *Anti-Dühring* that the state would ‘wither away’ or ‘die out’ in the process of moving from socialism to communism. Lenin (1974 [1917]) picked up this formulation in *The State and Revolution*, and Marxist-Leninist parties tried to achieve a oneness and sameness of state and society.¹⁵ Mao Zedong (1961: 22) criticized ‘a bureaucratic style of work divorced from the masses’, which Maoism sought to counter by promoting mass participation in political life (Gardner 1972). Weintraub (1997: 33) even speaks of ‘Maoist fantasies’ of ‘eliminating any separation between “public” and “private”’.

Clearly, the three versions of China outlined here – authoritarian, culturalist and socialist – come with different, even contrasting, evaluations of state boundaries. Thus, studies’ liberal, socialist or culturalist assumptions usually predetermine their conclusions about ‘the Chinese state’. The fact that all three versions base China’s uniqueness or otherness on how state boundaries are performed makes performative boundary work a powerful lens, one that promises to transcend inadequate culturalist images of a state boundary that is clear in ‘the West’ and blurred in ‘the Rest’, and that may even make visible some surprising similarities, overlaps and slippages between liberalism and socialism.

Liberalism and socialism both have models of ‘proper’ participation. In China, mass participation played a central role in Maoism but declined under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the 2000s, however, citizen participation has reappeared on the agenda. In rural policy, calls for participation have become ubiquitous since the 2010s. These range from liberal forms of village electoral democracy to socialist and humanitarian models of civic participation in care for certain populations, to forms of participatory bureaucracy such as ‘democratic appraisals’ of applications for state assistance. Citizen participation thus offers abundant opportunities to examine how different actors make policy by marking state boundaries.

Citizen Participation

Some have presented China as an extreme case for participation. When discussing the grand public–private dichotomy, Jeff Wein-

traub (1997: 16, Fn. 31) describes the Jacobin approach to citizenship and an intensified Leninist vision of ‘having the public entirely submerge the private through the continuous mobilization of civic virtue’. He notes that ‘Maoism attempted the most hyper-Jacobin intensification of participation and public virtue – and wound up, perhaps, most thoroughly burning them out.’ Since the early 2000s, more than three decades after Mao’s death, participation has been back on the agenda in China – if it ever actually was absent. China Studies scholars have noted that ‘a rising number of new policies and regulations . . . explicitly call for more public engagement in local policy implementation’ (Ahlers, Heberer and Schubert 2016: 60). Prior to Covid-19, Anna Ahlers, Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert (2016: 64) even spoke of an ‘official “public participation imperative” inherent in contemporary national policy terminology in China’.

Both the central government and NGOs have included calls for citizen participation in development projects and policies that addressed the ‘three-dimensional rural issue’. Wen Tiejun (2001), a leading ‘Chinese New Left’ intellectual, has contributed significantly to this debate. In simplified terms, the concept refers to the relationships between ‘peasants’, ‘the countryside’ and ‘agriculture’ as opposed to economic rural development approaches that focus only on agricultural economics. Wen, with other intellectuals and activists of the self-styled ‘New Rural Reconstruction Movement’, promotes not only ‘sustainability’, ‘ecological agriculture’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘community building’ but also ‘participation’ (*canyu* 参与). All these are buzzwords of global development discourse, but the New Rural Reconstruction Movement also references historical experiences in China: especially (as its name shows) the original ‘Rural Reconstruction Movement’ in the 1920s and 1930s,¹⁶ but also early collectivization efforts under Mao in the 1950s and the broader East Asian experience with peasant associations (Day and Hale 2007; Day 2008, 2013; Hale 2013).

Around the same time, in 2004, the Chinese Communist Party and the central government of the People’s Republic of China returned their attention from the cities to the countryside with the publication of Document No. 1 (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2008). Government programmes to ‘construct a New Socialist Countryside’ and ‘build an Ecological Civilization’ include a diverse set of policies, such as investing in rural infrastructure, resettling villagers, eliminating agricultural taxes, introducing agricultural subsidies, free compulsory education and launching new health and old age insurance schemes –

as well as establishing the Rural Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (*nongcun zuidi shenghuo baozhang* 农村最低生活保障, or *dibao* 低保) and passing a law on peasant cooperatives. It is the last two policies – with their calls for rural citizens’ participation – that became the focus of my ethnographic research, the one due to a theoretically-informed choice of locality and the other due to ‘serendipity’ (Okely 2012: 23).

My theoretical interest brought me to Daxi Village because I expected government and NGO support for its peasant cooperatives would provide a fertile field of interactions in which to study the negotiation of state boundaries. Once I had settled in, the cancellation of all existing Minimum Livelihood Allowances and the participatory reapplication process unexpectedly drew my attention to attempts to limit and expand that form of state support.

To be sure, the cases of participation examined in the six ethnographic chapters took quite different forms, but all proved instructive in terms of the production, multiplicity and productivity of state boundaries. State support for peasant cooperatives also included offering rewards to the cooperatives with the highest number of peasant members, including that in Daxi Village. Participation as membership was already enshrined in Article 20 of the 2006 ‘Law of the People’s Republic of China on Specialized Peasant Cooperatives’, which stipulates that at least 80 per cent of the members must be ‘peasants’ (in this case meaning citizens with a rural household registration). Both the agrotechnical training centre of Yinhe City’s agricultural bureau and a rural development NGO used Daxi’s peasant cooperative to mobilize peasant participation in their educational projects (Chapter 1). A food blogger was impressed by the participation of middle-class urbanites operating a consumer association’s shop that sold ecological food from Daxi’s peasant cooperative (Chapter 2). The State Council (2016) called for the ‘active participation of social actors’ in the provision of care and affection to China’s ‘rural left-behind children’. Another rural development NGO organized summer camps and called for the ‘participation’ of rural parents and other citizens in these public education activities (Chapter 3).

In 2007, the state introduced the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee for the rural poor. The State Council (2007; 2012) called for the participation of citizens in the bureaucratic administration of this form of state assistance under the heading of ‘democratic appraisal’ of other citizens’ applications. In the cancellation and reapplication process in Qiuling and other townships, participation changed its physical form (from lists of signatures to votes at public meet-

ings), but it was always supposed to be an antidote to corruption, another fruitful field for exploring state boundaries (Chapters 4 to 6). Indeed, Gupta's 'Blurred Boundaries' (1995) studied discourses of corruption, and Michael Herzfeld (2018) has argued that corruption is often seen as 'too much kinship in the wrong place' (Thelen and Alber 2018: 6). As the boundaries between state and family are not a given but must be performed situationally to be made effective, the way they are performed may turn 'proper' ways of influencing state policy into 'improper' ones – participation into corruption and vice versa – and shift the ground below actors' feet.

At first glance, these diverse notions of participation do not match liberal images of 'political participation' and 'democracy'.¹⁷ In mainstream genealogies, participation is often construed as a right and traced back to the Enlightenment and the secularization of European society through bourgeois emancipation in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Yet, it turns out that many theories and studies of political participation are connected to a narrative about a 'lack of participation' and 'political apathy' (MacLennan 1995), and imperatives to do something to change this. Against such negative evaluations, Jessica Greenberg (2010) has stressed that nonparticipation is not necessarily passive but can also be understood as an active act of rejection. From this perspective, participation appears less as a democratic right and, increasingly, as a duty, even in the case of 'democratic elections', the liberal textbook example of political participation.¹⁸ The forms of participation examined in this book should then not be interpreted as a strange Chinese exception but as specific articulations of an inherent tension between participation as a right and as a duty.

An Ethnography of Performed State Boundaries

My exploration of performed state boundaries in participatory rural development and democratic bureaucracy builds on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2013 to 2015, mainly in Sichuan Province. Participant observation was a key step in exploring repertoires of performed distinctions and beginning to understand the productivity of state boundaries in their multiplicity. This section introduces my field site, its rural development strategy and its residents' livelihood and discusses my research methods and interactions with research participants. Most of this fieldwork took place in the village I will call Daxi.

'Welcome to the Ecological Village'

The village of Daxi has about 1,500 inhabitants divided into nine 'villagers' groups' and is located in the Sichuan basin within the jurisdiction of Qiuling Township and the county-level city Yinhe.¹⁹ I first arrived in Daxi Village in autumn of 2013. It was the last of the eight villages I had visited on my trip through Beijing, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi and Sichuan Provinces. Based on my contacts from previous research on the New Rural Reconstruction Movement (Lammer 2012), I had planned my route with help from the staff of a rural development NGO based in the suburbs of Beijing. This NGO had stationed volunteers in each of the first seven villages for a year to support peasant organizations, most of which practised 'ecological agriculture', and to introduce what they imagined to be 'economic', 'cultural' and 'social cooperation' among the 'peasants'. As I have described, Daxi Village also promotes such organizations on the signs outside the village committee's office. Although this NGO was not active there, some of the staff who had visited previously knew Dong Jie, so my stay there was arranged through him. After we met at another Beijing-based NGO's workshop in Shanxi, he alerted the village party secretary, Wang Zhaochen, that a student from Austria would be coming to study the village's ecological agriculture and peasant cooperative. Secretary Wang, in turn, called a family who had previously hosted students who were studying both the village's well-established methane gas project and its relatively new transition to ecological agriculture. This process already hints at Dong Jie's pivotal role as a 'stranger-handler' who connects outside actors to the village.

As already mentioned, Dong Jie had founded the peasant cooperative that was now managed by the village committee. Meanwhile, Secretary Wang had persuaded his old schoolmate Wen Erqiang, an entrepreneur in the neighbouring market town, to invest in the village by building a rice mill. Dong Jie organized trainings in ecological rice cultivation, after which the village leaders organized production at villagers' group meetings. Starting with only one group, they expanded to others during the following years. Villagers could sell any rice to the cooperative that they cultivated according to the 'green' certification standard, but most kept the majority of their harvests for their own consumption and only sold a small share to the cooperative. Some households planted additional rice on the land of people who had moved away from the village, but no one cultivated more than eight mu of land (about 0.5 ha). As well as processing and mar-

keting rice, the cooperative operated a vegetable unit that employed four to five day labourers in 2013 and up to ten after expanding in 2014, but it struggled to find a market for its ‘ecological’ and ‘green’ agricultural products. Dong Jie played a central role in linking this self-styled ecological village and its cooperative with rural development NGOs and urban middle-class consumers organized in associations in Chengdu. I use the term ‘food network’ as a shorthand for this web of organizations concerned with the production, distribution and consumption of what they considered ‘healthy’ and ‘ecological’ food. How state boundaries were performed through the participation of peasants, consumers and parents in this food network is the topic of the first part of this book.

Livelihood

After considering the possibilities for my accommodation, Party Secretary Wang approached Lei Wenyong and his wife Chen Yongmin, a couple in their forties who had recently built a second storey onto their house. This upper floor was seldom used: they lived downstairs, and both their children worked elsewhere – the daughter in a shop about ten kilometres away in Yinhe City, and the son on a construction site in the provincial capital of Chengdu. Many relatively young people migrated from Daxi to big cities to work, and Lei Wenyong and Chen Yongmin were unusual for couples their age in that neither worked outside the village. They were also the only couple in their forties in their villagers’ group supported solely by agriculture, with no wage labour or non-agricultural small business income. Instead, they made their living from fattening pigs and selling their home-grown produce in Yinhe City or neighbouring villages to which Lei Wenyong travelled every morning on his small moped with two big bamboo baskets filled with mandarins and oranges in winter and with vegetables in summer. Although no other couple their age relied solely on agriculture, almost all households planted rice for their own consumption. Many also planted maize, wheat, rapeseed or sweet potatoes, grew mandarin oranges in hillside groves, or raised a few chickens and ducks at home. Several other households still fattened a pig or two, though not as many as before a recent crash in the market price. My stay in Daxi Village supplemented Lei Wenyong and Chen Yongmin’s ‘multi-functional agriculture’ (Ploeg 2008) with rental income.

Yinhe City and the surrounding area in the Sichuan basin experienced high immigration from other provinces, such as Guangdong

and Hunan, during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. These roots are recorded in Daxi Village in genealogy books published by clan organizations since the late 1990s. Today, the vast majority of those living in Yinhe are registered as Han Chinese: 99.95 per cent according to official statistics.

Due to its proximity to Chengdu (only about one hour by bus), Yinhe City's public finances have been treated like a prefecture-level city's since the 2000s. It is flourishing economically, and one often sees expensive foreign cars in the streets compared to similar-sized cities in Sichuan Province. However, most people get around by motorbike, electric scooter, microvan, tricycle truck or public transport. Many thirty-storey apartment buildings have been constructed along the big river during the last few years, levelling hills and replacing agricultural land and whole villages and factories with huge new squares and boulevards.

Construction still seemed to be booming in 2015, but builders, plasterers and painters from Daxi Village had started to complain about a decline in employment opportunities in the industry. Members of the villagers' group of the neighbourhood where I stayed prided themselves on their skills in this sector. Other villagers, who commuted to Yinhe City daily, worked in the service industry: for example, as cooks or waitresses. Still others operated small businesses in the village or the nearby market town. Many people in their twenties, thirties and forties worked further away, in Chengdu or even Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing.

While bicycles had been the most common means of transportation in the 1990s, almost all the men in the village have owned mopeds or motorbikes since the 2000s, some of them three-wheelers with a cargo platform. Some women had electric scooters. In the villagers' group where I stayed, only two households had access to cars: the party secretary and his son used the cooperative's microvan and pickup truck, and one of the three butchers owned a van for transporting pigs. Many women and elderly people did not have their own vehicle and walked the three kilometres to town on market days.

Infrastructure included one main village road, several side roads, a kindergarten and primary school, the village square and its office building and assembly hall, and several ponds owned collectively by villagers' groups and rented to villagers or outsiders for fishing or cultivating lotus root. In almost each villagers' group, one or more households operated simple teahouses, where villagers gathered to socialize and play mah-jong or cards: the game 'fighting the landlord'

was especially popular. At small shops, children could buy candy and adults cigarettes and daily necessities.

In the 1990s, villagers had started to build houses along the village road. Many had left their Mao-era houses, which were built of adobe with dirt floors, and thatched straw roofs, for new brick houses with concrete floors. As people's incomes increased through migrant labour in the 2000s, they tiled their exterior walls and acquired colour (more recently, flatscreen) TVs, refrigerators, electric fans (and sometimes air conditioners), water purifiers and rooftop solar water heaters. About a quarter of the forty households in the villagers' group were said to have bought a flat in Yinhe City for a child. However, not all villagers had kept up with this rise in living standards. Some continued to live in the old adobe houses. While many benefited from economic growth, there were thirty-one households in Daxi Village living on the state's Rural Minimum Livelihood Allowance in 2015. How state boundaries were performed through citizens' participation in the bureaucratic administration of applications for this form of state assistance is at the centre of the second part of this book.

Ethnographic Method and Research Interactions

For grasping the situational multiplicity of state boundaries, ethnography has a pronounced advantage over other methods. Being personally present in social situations offers researchers opportunities to understand which markers of the state and non-state distinction are becoming relevant. On the one hand, I observed boundary work taking place when I most expected it. During my time in Daxi Village, I attended the frequent meetings of villagers' groups and the village committee and the cooperative's, which took place less regularly. Although I repeatedly expressed my interest in these meetings to the village party secretary and the village leader, they rarely informed me in advance. Sometimes this was by phone, but often they just stopped by on their way, since I lived near the village offices. Two especially engaged leaders of villagers' groups more proactively invited me to their meetings. Often, I learned about meetings at short notice when I chanced to meet village officials or from my hosts and their neighbours. My participation was sometimes welcomed but always accepted. I was never excluded and often received patient answers to my follow-up questions about my observations during breaks or after the meetings, unless village officials had more pressing things to do. Only once, when some higher-level officials had come to the

village, did these officials ask me to leave the office for a moment. Besides participating in meetings, I joined visitor tours of the ecological village as often as I could and attended agricultural trainings offered by the county agricultural bureau and an NGO. Dong Jie initiated, coordinated or conducted many of these tours and workshops and usually informed me about them well in advance, sometimes asking me to help set up. These were also productive opportunities for observing how state boundaries were performed.

The rest of the time, I helped with agricultural work at the cooperative's vegetable unit and rice mill and in villagers' private fields, or chatted at the villagers' group's teahouse. While this participant observation might not seem related to boundary work, one key insight of this book would not have been possible without it: it was during a break in the vegetable fields that I heard the supervisor's then seemingly insignificant complaint about the food at the NGO workshop that led me later to realize how boundary work was not only discursive but performed and that state boundaries were multiple.

While Daxi Village served as the base for my ethnographic explorations, I combined this rather 'traditional' single-sited fieldwork with some of the tracking strategies of multi-sited ethnography (G. Marcus 1995). I followed the cooperative's ecological products to trade fairs, farmers' markets and consumer association shops in bigger cities, and I accompanied peasant cooperative members on visits to projects in other villages and at conferences about peasant associations and ecological agriculture. In comparison to the village meetings, which were not so obviously related to my interest in ecological agriculture and peasant cooperatives, Secretary Wang frequently remembered to invite me to join him and other active cooperative members in attending such events.

In addition, I had many conversations in which I tried to evoke their state images and hear their perspectives and reflections on observed events and earlier state practices that had happened before my fieldwork. Few of these conversations were formal interviews. Indeed, when I was halfway through my fieldwork, a villager wondered when I would finally start my research. Some students who had visited the village before to conduct 'fieldwork' on the methane gas project had carried out a standardized household survey that had obviously shaped villagers' expectations about 'proper' social science research. Prearranged, recorded interviews worked well with township and village officials, organized urban consumers and some rural citizens, especially the few who were or had once been actively engaged in communal tasks. However, others who were reluctant

to be interviewed were relaxed and talkative in less formal settings. Rather than expanding further on these general statements about the research process at this point, I will provide relevant information on the source of specific data and reflect on my interactions with research participants throughout the book.

To protect research participants, I have used pseudonyms for all persons and organizations and for places below the provincial level. In one case, I have changed personal details to avoid possibly identifying those involved and affecting their personal relationships. I have also tried to anticipate potential political risks for research participants, especially the potential consequences of documenting bureaucratic workarounds or deviations from directives and rules in the making of social policy. In the worst case, this might endanger the careers of officials or the material welfare of beneficiaries. To minimize these risks, I tried to find out what relevant actors already knew. Moreover, much of what I disclose has already been addressed by the township government, particularly regarding the cancellations, re-applications and reapprovals of benefits. As for the self-styled ecological village's rural development strategy, documenting non-ecological practices could potentially create distrust among customers and impair the cooperative's reputation. Again, what I describe was also seen by customers who visited it themselves, as I will discuss, and pointing out current shortcomings was even part of Dong Jie's approach to creating trust among visitors.

Besides documenting my own observations and conversations, I collected documents and publications from Daxi Village's peasant cooperative and other organizations in the food network, as well as central and local state documents on peasant cooperatives and the administration of *dibao*. But key to this study of the state as its boundaries has been participant observation to get at performed distinctions between state and non-state. The notion of performative boundary work directed my attention to repertoires of stage designs and properties, costumes and characters, scripts and sequences and allowed me to generate data about performances of state boundaries.

Upcoming Performances: Overview of the Book

The book is organized into two parts that demonstrate how performed state boundaries create resources for developing an ecological village and making social policy. The first explores how participation itself was performed in specific ways to mark the difference between

state and civil society. The second examines how state boundaries were performed when citizens participated in the democratic administration of *dibao*. Taken together, the six chapters testify to the multiplicity and productivity of performed state boundaries, uncovering often overlooked forms of agency in the making of policy.

Part I: State Boundaries in a Food Network

The first part shows, in three chapters, how Dong Jie, NGO staff and other urban middle-class citizens distanced the state when pursuing globally travelling visions of rural development such as sustainability, cooperation, community building, ecological agriculture (Chapters 1 and 2) and intensive mothering (Chapter 3). In each case, I follow the contrasts they articulated between state and non-state and study the specific ways they staged the participation of peasants (Chapter 1), consumers (Chapter 2) and parents (Chapter 3).

These chapters argue that these performances of participation became markers of state boundaries themselves, but sometimes only for certain audiences. Dong Jie's promotion of peasant participation made him part of global civil society to some but a good Maoist state official to others (Chapter 1). For middle-class citizens organized in consumer associations, Dong was positioned on the side of civil society and community rather than the state. Therefore, his personal relations with producers appeared to them to promote transparency about ecological agriculture in their food network, even though they saw personal relations between state officials and producers as potentially corrupting the state's organic certification schemes (Chapter 2). While these urban middle-class citizens were critical of state intervention in family life, they did not consider the promotion of intensive parenting ideals as intrusion into rural families, because rural community education projects were staged as mother society's care for 'rural left-behind children' (Chapter 3). Besides documenting this multiplication of state boundaries and their consequences, these chapters also show how different versions of state boundaries interacted – sometimes without causing tensions.

Part II: State Boundaries in Democratic Bureaucracy

The second part's three chapters concentrate on how state boundaries were performed to make or reject claims in the democratic administration of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (*dibao*). In list-making and public meetings where citizen participation was per-

formed, boundaries were also performed: between state (as bureaucracy) and community (Chapters 4 and 5), between state (as central government) and bureaucracy (Chapter 5), and also between state and family (Chapter 6). In this second part, tensions first aroused my attention: rural citizens complaining about a *dibao* application from ‘undeserving’ neighbours that they themselves had just supported with their signatures (Chapter 4); village officials calling *dibao* applicants stupid because of different expectations about the upcoming standardization process (Chapter 5); and the paradox of central state documents and township officials bemoaning both the persistence of familism (‘corruption’) and its supposed decline (‘lack of household responsibility’) when justifying the push to standardize *dibao* administration (Chapter 6). Such tensions have often invited anthropologists of the state to diagnose a blurred state boundary and in-between positions of people who were at the same time bureaucrats and neighbours (Chapter 4), representatives of the state and of the community (Chapter 5), or bureaucrats and relatives (Chapter 6). Yet what may appear in retrospect as continuous blurriness is often the multiplication of performed state boundaries at different points in time.

The second part, therefore, explores the multiplicity of state boundaries by shifting attention from simultaneity to temporality. Past performances of state boundaries became ‘folded in objects’ (M’charek 2014) like the lists of signatures intended to confirm citizens’ approval of *dibao* applications (Chapter 4). Later, questions were raised, recorded performances declared invalid, and state boundaries had to be performed anew. In the push for standardization in Daxi Village in 2015, expectations about future performances of state boundaries shaped the success of boundary work in the present (Chapter 5). In this renegotiation of care responsibilities between state and family (Chapter 6), the boundary was marked with the results of ‘kinship measurements’ (Thelen and Lammer 2021). Over time, different ways of measuring produced an apparent circularity: bureaucratic standardization was justified both with ‘too much family’ and ‘not enough family’. Rather than indicating ‘mistakes’, this circular argument hints at the multiple state boundaries produced through measured kinship.

Read together, these chapters suggest that it is time for anthropology to move beyond diagnosing a blurred state boundary.²⁰ The book’s conclusion argues that focusing on the production, multiplicity and productivity of state boundaries avoids the pitfalls of studying the state as substance, no matter whether the analysed substance

is solid (as is often the case in political science) or leaking through porous boundaries (as in anthropology). Attention to boundaries offers opportunities to reconnect fields of studies – for example, political anthropology with kinship studies – by spotlighting the relationality between state and various non-state others.

While this ethnography follows Mitchell (1991: 77) in taking the ‘boundary problem’ as hinting at the nature of the state, it suggests that this nature is multiple. Rather than assuming performative boundary work always has the effect of making the state appear to be a coherent entity above society, this book explores how the same actors and activities simultaneously stand inside and outside of the state for different audiences. Attending to the multiple versions of state boundaries can bring to light often overlooked practices that make policy not through open conflict but by preventing tensions from developing in the first place. It also shows how easily actors and their practices can be turned into something else, or even something opposite – liberalism into socialism, corruption into transparency, intervention into care, democracy into paternalism, standardization into deviation, traditional filial piety into modern individualism – because boundary work makes their ground change below their feet.

Notes

1. I have anonymized names of places below the provincial level, as well as names of persons and organizations directly involved in the village, the local administration and the food network under study. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese to English are mine. For relevant terms, Chinese characters and transcriptions in Hanyu-Pinyin are included in brackets.
2. Several Chinese terms can be translated as ‘civil society’. The term used in the food network under study was *minjian shehui* (民间社会), not *gongmin shehui* (公民社会). While *minjian shehui* refers to nongovernmental organizations among the people, *gongmin shehui* refers to matters of free speech and other civic rights. Giving multiple meanings to the term ‘civil society’ is not unique to China (see Hann 1996).
3. See also Jan Beek (2012: 553–554) for a discussion of other limitations emerging from the one-sided focus on blurred boundaries.
4. In his rejection of Eurocentrism, Gupta appears to take it for granted that in the Western context a clear boundary actually does separate state and society, rather than questioning whether Western scholarship is also projecting images on the West. Thus, Anthony Marcus (2008: 68) criticizes him for his monolithic understanding of Western state theory that ignores empirical research in Western scholarly traditions, such as

- American pluralism and Marxism, which do not postulate a strict distinction between state and society.
5. Mitchell and Nicos Poulantzas (1980) start from opposed assumptions of what structure is. While for Mitchell the state is experienced by citizens and officials alike as if it existed as a coherent structure, Poulantzas sees citizens, officials and scholars as faced with the messiness of manifold practices, discourses and material artefacts, from which they must discern their structured possibilities for agency in political struggles, and from which social scientists need to infer what the invisible, underlying but causally effective structure of the state – the relationship of forces and their material condensations – might look like. For Mitchell, state structure is obvious: it is an empirically experienced effect of practices that imposes itself on actors. For Poulantzas, state structure is both not directly observable and requires much practical and scientific effort to discern.
 6. Gieryn (1999: 23) argued that ‘boundary-work is strategic practical action’. Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar (1986: 21–23) similarly characterized scientists’ distinction between the social and the scientific as a ‘resource’ for actors in the laboratory.
 7. Looking at the ethical rules of the US House of Representatives, political scientist Peter Bratsis (2006) wonders why the limit for allowable gifts should be set at exactly fifty dollars, no higher and no lower; why privately sponsored travel has four-day and seven-day limits, no more and no less; and why additional earned income is limited to \$21,765 and not to \$21,764 or \$21,766. While many rationalizations might be given, he concludes that the main reason for these amounts is simply ‘that there is a limit, so that there is a rule of separation’ (Bratsis 2006: 64).
 8. My take on multiplicity is inspired by material semiotics (Mol 2002; M’charek 2013).
 9. Anaglyphic images require both colour-coded images and colour-decoding glasses to make a three-dimensional image emerge. Anaglyphic multiplicity refers to state boundaries that are performed through repertoires of markers of difference that can only be decoded by one part of an audience but not another.
 10. On folded objects and the politics of folding, unfolding and refolding the histories contained in such objects, see M’charek (2014).
 11. In the book project *China Multiple* (Lammer, Lazzarotti and Pettier, in preparation) of the Scientific Network ‘Anthropology and China(s)’ funded by the German Research Association (DFG), we approach China as a multiple object that various actors inside and outside of academia enact in different ‘versions’. Using this term rather than ‘images’ (or ‘representations’) highlights the specific material composition that affects the interactions of overlapping and competing Chinas. Focusing on the content of a plurality of representations alone overlooks the different sets of embodied skills (e.g. language proficiency), types of data, methodologies and technologies, and thus resources necessary for producing, stabilizing and challenging different versions of China.

12. *Guo* (国) is often translated as ‘country’, ‘state’ or ‘nation’. The original character was 國, which is often interpreted as consisting of an inside, the 或, surrounded by a border, the 口. The inside is said to depict a territory 口 protected by a wall 一 and weapons 戈. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), the simple form 国 was introduced, with jade 玉 becoming the value protected inside. Another variant of *guo* has the king 王 in its middle: 国. The second term *jia* (家) is often translated as ‘family’, ‘household’, ‘house of the family’ or ‘home’. The character is often thought to depict a roof 宀 under which a pig 豕 finds shelter. According to Xiang Biao (2010), the Chinese term *guojia* represents a highly abstract notion that does not separate out the territorial notion of country (*diyū yiyishang de guodu* 地域意义上的国度), the community of the nation (*minzu gongtongti* 民族共同体), the apparatus of violent domination (*baoli tongzhi jiqi* 暴力统治机器) and the administrative organization of the government (*xingzheng zhixing jigou* 行政执行机构).
13. Chapters 3 and 6 examine how boundaries between state and family are performed in the care for the ‘rural left-behind child’ and the ‘democratic administration’ of state assistance.
14. The agricultural economist Wen Tiejun has been among the most influential intellectuals of the rural development movement in China. In his writing, Wen also draws extensively on Fei Xiaotong’s work. When I met him at the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development of Renmin University of China in 2013 and explained my research project about state boundaries to him, his first reaction was that in China the boundary between state and society was blurred.
15. Critics of totalitarianism have argued that, contrary to Leninist claims about the state withering away, one-party rule had instead led to ‘the withering away of society’ (Meuschel [1992: 10] quoted in English translation by Ross 2002: 47).
16. This cooperative movement promoted a vision for the Chinese countryside that differed from the projects of both the Nationalist and the Communist Party. The most prominent leaders of the movement were Liang Shuming (Alitto 1979) and James Yen (Hayford 1990).
17. Due to the modernist academic division of labour, ‘political participation’ – like the state – has long been the topic of political scientists and sociologists. Participation only began to attract anthropologists’ attention in the 1990s, but it focused on ‘participatory development’ in the South, not on elections. Only with the new millennium have some anthropologists finally begun to study ‘participatory democracy’ (Perreault 2015; Albert 2016), but still in the South, in Latin America.
18. In fact, in a volume on the ‘tyranny’ of participation in development (Cooke and Kothari 2001), Heiko Henkel and Roderick Stirrat (2001: 174) had already challenged the standard genealogy of participation, tracing its origins to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century and pointing out that participation as a spiritual duty goes even further back than participation as a political right.

19. Since the dismantling of the People's Communes in the 1980s, the 'village committee' (*cunmin weiyuanhui* 村民委员会) has been defined as a 'self-governed' or 'autonomous' (*zizhi* 自治) unit in the countryside outside of and below the five levels of the state: 'centre' (*zhongyang* 中央), 'province' (*sheng* 省), 'city' (*shi* 市), 'county' (*xian* 县) and 'township' (*zhen* 镇). In the late 1980s, villagers in China started to elect the members of the 'village committee' and the 'head of the village committee' (*cunmin weiyuanhui zhuren* 村民委员会主任). Citizens in Daxi Village often referred to the head of the village committee, who was responsible for village administration, as the 'village leader' (*cunzhang* 村长). Villages are further divided into 'villagers' groups' (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组). Daxi Village, for example, is split into nine of these administrative sub-units, comprising about twenty to fifty households each. In the current official terminology, each villagers' group is led by a 'group leader' (*zuzhang* 组长), but citizens almost always use the older terminology of the Mao era 'production groups' (*shengchandu* 生产队), in which the person in this position was called '(production) group leader' (*duizhang* 队长). Since 2015, the five members of Daxi's village committee, and (more recently) the nine leaders of the villagers' groups, have received a small stipend from the township administration.
20. Almost three decades after 'Blurred Boundaries' appeared in the *American Ethnologist* (Gupta 1995), the American Anthropological Association's flagship journal is still publishing articles that expand on blurriness as anthropology's core concept for studying the state (for example, Akarsu 2020). Most notably, Natasha Raheja (2024) has suggested reframing blurriness as 'fuzziness' to capture the 'multisensory indistinction' of the state.