

PART II.

**State Boundaries in
Democratic Bureaucracy**

Democracy and Paternalism Folded in Documents

Introduction

After a villagers' group meeting, I was talking with two neighbours, both female, about the households in their group that received the Rural Minimum Livelihood Allowance (*nongcun zuidi shenghuo baozhang* 农村最低生活保障; *dibao* 低保 for short), a form of monetary assistance for the poor. Commenting on *dibao* households in general, the first woman told me that the state would give *dibao* to anyone who was just 'too lazy'. Those households 'want to receive money without working for it', she explained, claiming that anyone who was friends with the right person could arrange to get *dibao*. She contrasted this image of a typical undeserving *dibao* household with her own, emphasizing how hard she worked.

Our conversation then turned to a particular household in their villagers' group whose application they considered unjustified. Dong Xiaodan, who had applied for *dibao* for her family, claimed to suffer from emphysema. But apart from occasional coughing attacks, her fellow villagers saw no signs of this and accused her of being too lazy to work.¹ Her husband's disability, on the other hand, was visible to everyone: he had lost a leg in an industrial accident. Even so, the neighbour blamed him for the incident, asserting that other people at the factory had been more careful. She also pointed out that Dong Xiaodan's husband earned good money as a self-employed trader – several hundred RMB a day, she claimed, which was more than an ordinary day labourer – and that he even had a motor tricycle al-

though other families only had cheap motorbikes. Thus, she did not consider these fellow group members needy.

Meanwhile, the other woman was listening to our conversation with an expression of displeasure on her face. She whispered in the ear of the first, who immediately explained to me that her neighbour had been afraid I might repeat what they had said to other group members. They did not want to risk ‘offending people’ (*dezui ren* 得罪人).

Rumours from other places or media stories about undeserving or not needy *dibao* recipients were often a topic of conversation in Daxi Village. Sometimes, rural citizens made critical remarks about fellow villagers behind their backs, speculating or complaining about how they had managed to receive *dibao*.² The related criticism that ‘the state’ was corrupted by *guanxi* and thus caring for the wrong people was also widespread. What makes the case of Dong Xiaodan unusual is that either woman could have rejected her application at the villagers’ group meeting. To avoid ‘offending people’, they had put their names on the list of signatures in support of Dong Xiaodan’s application after several requests from the group leader.

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As part of pervasive anti-corruption discourses in China, the State Council had asked citizens to participate in the bureaucratic selection process for the Rural Minimum Livelihood Guarantee. In a 2012 opinion, it demanded a ‘standardized democratic appraisal’ (*guifan minzhu pingyi* 规范民主评议). With this demand, the central government scripted citizens in the role of temporary bureaucrats – as if they were better than actual bureaucrats. Based on an apparent assumption that citizens were ‘closer’ to society than officials, the Council imagined them as more capable of reading society – due to their supposed embeddedness in the village community, they were believed to be in a better position to see and judge whether their neighbours should receive the *dibao* they had applied for. In Qiuling, citizens’ approval of *dibao* applications was supposed to be made legible to the township administration in the form of a list of signatures.

This kind of democratic administration could be understood as the introduction of another hurdle, a mechanism for mutual control, shifting part of the disciplinary responsibility further down from the village committee to the villagers as temporary bureaucrats. Indeed, political scientists have criticized such procedures as ‘alarmingly intrusive’ (Solinger 2008: 42). Such a perspective represents potential *dibao* recipients as passive victims confronted with a state that suc-

cessfully penetrates the village and the private lives of rural citizens. This not only reifies the state and overestimates its power but also overlooks forms of citizens' agency outside the binary of active resistance and passive accommodation.

In this chapter, I examine how this tension between approval on the list of signatures and rejection in backstage conversation was produced through rural citizens' boundary work in democratic administration. From a liberal perspective that cherishes the idealized Weberian model of a rational bureaucracy, democratic bureaucracy may appear fundamentally flawed. Bringing citizens' personal choice into policy implementation is regarded as an improper blurring of the boundary between state and society. Sociologists from the School of Rural Governance have provided an alternative narrative. Translating villagers' statements about 'not offending others' into a sociological concept (Wang H. 2011), ethnographers of *dibao* trace the 'logic of not offending' neither to the failure of the socialist institution of democratic appraisal nor to memories of the confrontational style of public meetings during the Mao era and a contemporary longing for harmony. Rather, the blurring of state boundaries and the failure to assume governance responsibility is attributed to a specific historical event: the abolition of the agricultural tax. From an anthropological perspective, however, blurred state boundaries do not appear exceptional but ubiquitous (see the Introduction).

Since the Manchester School's image of the 'village headman' (Gluckman, Mitchell and Barnes 1949), many studies have pointed to bureaucrats' 'embeddedness' (Thelen, Veters and Benda-Beckmann 2018) and highlighted their 'intercalary' (Kuper 1970), 'inter-hierarchical' and 'in-between' positions and the resulting tensions they have to navigate. Anthropologists have argued that one way in which bureaucrats deal with the tensions emerging from their 'double body' (Dubois 2010) is to attempt to 'renegotiat[e] firmer boundaries' (Vollebergh, De Koning and Marchesi 2021: 750). But this assumes that in-betweenness is the default position of bureaucrats and is resolved through boundary work. Instead, this chapter suggests that boundary work is also what produces tensions in the first place. What retrospectively appears as blurriness is not a continual condition but points to the multiplication of performed state boundaries over time.

This chapter studies the temporal multiplicity of performed state boundaries through a list of signatures mandated by the township government, produced by rural citizens and then moving back to the township administration. Lists and other bureaucratic documents have received considerable attention over the past two decades (Hull

2012). Most prominently, James C. Scott (1998) has directed our attention to the centralized state and its efforts to render a complex world legible and governable through lists and other ‘state simplifications’ such as maps, charts and tables. Following Scott, others have written extensively about how powerful public and private institutions try to ‘see like a state’ (T. Li 2005). Turning Scott’s perspective on its head, or rather looking at the other side of the same coin, Alice Street (2012) shows how technologies of legibility were used as ‘technologies of visibility’ at a Papua New Guinean government hospital by both managers and patients who wanted to be ‘seen by the state’. While this perspective resonates with lists of signatures being produced to receive state support, it does not help capture what happens when performances of state boundaries appear to fade into the past.

Inspired by Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, Amade M’charek (2014) has proposed the concept of the ‘folded object’ to grasp how objects carry their history along with themselves. Rather than making a linear history visible, objects gather time by folding different events into their materiality. This folding makes some distanced events appear as connected, while other events appear far-off and irrelevant. It leaves some moments of its history visible, while others remain hidden as long as the object is not unfolded – for example, when people ask questions about its past. Understanding the lists of signatures produced in support of *dibao* applications as folded objects helps in understanding when state boundaries performed at different moments in time are folded in the list and when different actors unfold and refold this history so that blurriness and tensions are either created or avoided. This makes the list into a marker of democracy at one moment and a marker of paternalism at another.

Below, I first discuss the literature on the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee, observing that both incrementalist and critical approaches reproduce the state-versus-society paradigm that is deeply entrenched in China Studies. Second, I introduce ethnographic studies of *dibao* that reject this dichotomy by exploring the village as ‘soil’ for the implementation of state policy and suggest that this embeddedness produces the ‘logic of not offending’ in *dibao* administration. Then, I describe how state boundaries were performed in the application process and folded into the lists of signatures that then moved to the township government. Finally, the invalidation of the lists of signatures informs my concluding reflections on the temporal multiplicity of state boundaries.

Beyond Studies of *Dibao*

In English- and Chinese-language social science debates on *dibao* policy, one can distinguish several distinct approaches. While ‘incrementalist’ approaches portray the development of *dibao* policy as rational optimization of state assistance for the poor, ‘critical’ approaches highlight the political strategies pursued with *dibao* policy. Scholars have traced the emergence of *dibao* to protests by workers and peasants but also showed how local governments have integrated *dibao* policy into their different strategies of capitalist accumulation. Having highlighted the strengths of incrementalist and critical arguments, as well as their limitation of approaching state and society as separated entities, I introduce the ethnographic analyses of rural sociologists. Their concentration on embeddedness comes close to the lopsided attention to blurred boundaries in the anthropology of the state diagnosed in the introduction.

Incrementalist Arguments: Improving the State for Society

The ‘rational’, or ‘incrementalist’ (Chan 2010), argument about the development of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee is that Chinese leaders did not have one single blueprint for the reform of social assistance policy from the outset but instead experimented with local pilot programmes before adopting a national policy for the whole society. The standard narrative concerning the new social assistance is that the *dibao* programme was pioneered in Shanghai in 1993, with the Ministry of Civil Affairs reproducing the model in other cities and planning a nationwide programme. In 1997 the State Council started to promote the urban *dibao* programme for the whole of China but left a great deal of discretion to local governments. Only in 1999 did it make it compulsory, and they published detailed regulations for the programme and required local governments to pay for it. Even after these regulations, actual coverage remained limited, since many local governments lacked funds. Only in 2002 did the central government step in with significant financial support for the programme, almost doubling the number of recipients to 20.6 million within one year. More than half of the total costs came from the central government, even though its own regulations required local governments to pay for *dibao*. In 2007, the State Council authorized the Ministry of Civil Affairs to revise the regulations. In the same year, after a debate that included several ministries, the State Council (2007) fi-

nally published Document No. 19, announcing the establishment of the rural *dibao* programme nationwide. The rural scheme was set up ten years after the urban one and fifteen years after the first rural experiment in one county in Shanxi Province in 1992 (which even preceded Shanghai's renowned urban pilot project) (Guan and Xu 2011: 29–34).³ With this narrative, studies following the incremental perspective have made a valuable contribution by disaggregating the state into different ministries and into central and local levels, as well as by documenting changes in the programme over time.

Critical Arguments: State versus Society

Other authors criticize this instrumental view that policymaking is rational problem solving. Adopting a more 'critical' approach, they have argued that the late adoption of the rural *dibao*, as well as variations between rural and urban and between different localities, could only be explained by 'political' factors (Zhang H. 2009; Chan 2010; Hammond 2011; Solinger and Hu 2012). Building on critical sociological accounts of the tension between capital accumulation and political legitimacy faced by the capitalist state, Chak Kwan Chan (2010) has traced the 1997 establishment of urban *dibao* to protests by workers laid-off during the so-called 'restructuring' of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, and the 2007 establishment of rural *dibao* to protests by peasants who lost their land in the 2000s.⁴ This reaction to protests taking place in the face of subsistence crises is framed as aiming to ensure political stability and poor people's work ethic for capital accumulation. A problem with this approach is that it reduces politics to a function of capital and ignores local differences.

Dorothy Solinger and Hu Yiyang (2012) have explained differences in the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee between the wealthy city of Wuhan and the poor city of Lanzhou. They argue that in Lanzhou the amount of state assistance was less generous, so recipients were allowed to support themselves through participation in the informal sector in the streets. The authorities in Wuhan, in contrast, tried to regulate the labour market by luring the poor away from the streets with a more generous Minimum Livelihood Guarantee: street vendors were not regarded as suitable for an economic strategy based on the image of a 'modern city'. Hence, local governments did not necessarily strive to enhance the work ethic of the marginalized, although the 1999 document by the State Council argued that the urban Minimum Livelihood Guarantee would 'encourage self-support through labour'. Solinger and Hu thus showed that there was not a

unitary capitalist state in China, by pointing to different strategies of capital accumulation of the local state in Wuhan and Lanzhou.

However, all these ‘critical’ approaches are problematic because they are based on a prevalent framework in China Studies that takes the boundary between state and society for granted. In this state-versus-society framework, one cannot capture any practices of citizens except resistance. Therefore, Chan (2010) sees the agency of workers and peasants only in the protests before the introduction of the social assistance policy, and in the paper by Solinger and Hu (2012) only the local state is seen to have agency in the implementation of the social assistance policy. They portray recipients as needy and deserving but stigmatized and passive victims who receive ‘just enough to keep body and soul together’ (Tang Jun, quoted in Solinger 2011: 37): ‘Quiet and subdued, these people will cause no chaos.’ (Solinger 2011: 53) ‘There is little reflection over state policies’ role in leading the individual and his/her family into poverty; most attribute their misfortunes to their age or inadequate strength and skill’ (ibid.: 60). ‘The sense of disgrace these impoverished people feel cuts off any inclination to form a grouping that might protest in unison’ (ibid.: 61).

What is missing from this picture is how citizens are involved in making *dibao* policy beyond the simplistic dichotomy of passive conformity and active resistance. Some rural sociologists have adopted an ethnographic and relational approach and turned their analytical attention to the embeddedness of state actors and other citizens when studying the implementation of *dibao* policy.

The School of Rural Governance: The Village as the ‘Soil’ for State Policy

Sociologists associated with the ‘School of Rural Governance’⁵ have criticized most China-based policy analysts for looking at problems with the Rural Minimum Livelihood Guarantee from an external perspective. This external perspective focuses on policy formulation, raising issues such as inadequately defined eligibility criteria and an insufficient level of state assistance, geographically uneven implementation, misappropriation of funds, undemocratic processes of implementation and non-standardized administration (Xing 2014: 157). Instead of assessing *dibao* implementation based on external standards, the rural sociologists argue that an internal perspective of the countryside is necessary (Liu 2009). Liu Yanwu refers to rural society as being the ‘soil’ (*turang* 土壤) for *dibao* practices. He empha-

sizes the need to consider this concrete social basis when discussing *dibao* policy (ibid.: 26).

Following He Xuefeng,⁶ these sociologists use interviews and participant observation to explore theoretical issues of rural governance. Their studies identify different ‘logics’ in the process of *dibao* implementation (Liu 2009; Wang 2011; Xing 2014), pointing out that this form of assistance for the poor was transformed in certain places into a ‘means of and resource for rural governance’ (*zhili shouduan* 治理手段) (He and Liu 2008; Liu 2008). In their conclusions and policy recommendations, they not only propose reworking the design of the policy but also follow He Xuefeng’s general argument about the decline of rural culture and the need for ‘reconstructing rural society’.

The Logic of Not Offending

Wang Hui (2011), a student of He Xuefeng, has suggested that a ‘logic of not offending’ (*bu dezui luoji* 不得罪逻辑) is at work in *dibao* policy at the village level in China. As mentioned above, the two neighbours who complained about a *dibao* application of a fellow villager also claimed that they did not want to offend others. This concept thus seems to have some applicability to the dynamics I observed in Daxi Village. Narratives that attribute this logic to certain historical events (such as the Cultural Revolution or the abolition of agricultural tax) possess persuasive power due to their elegance. My ethnography of performed state boundaries will suggest a more immediate explanation below.

Untold Memories: Open Confrontation during Maoism

The call for mass participation in politics and administration is not new in the history of rural China. As discussed in Chapter 1, in 1943 Mao Zedong’s (1965) theory of the ‘mass line’ suggested that leaders should learn from the masses concerning policy formulation. During the Mao era, participation in administration and mutual evaluation in production team meetings was practised daily in rural China. During the Cultural Revolution, class struggle meetings were even more confrontational (Potter and Potter 1990: 36–93; Unger 2002: 7–92). Therefore, one might be tempted to relate these past experiences to present practices of participation and the logic of not offending in rural governance.

During my one-year stay in Daxi, I found it difficult to learn much about the Maoist past in the village. The only references to this

era that I overheard in everyday conversation were connected with either food or cultural activities. During abundant meals and when leftovers were thrown away or fed to pigs, villagers, especially the older ones, told stories about scarcity and hunger during the Mao era. Typically, they would contrast them with the contemporary situation, pointing to improvements since land was transferred to households in the early 1980s and praising the state's current policies.

Sometimes villagers, mainly women, reminisced about the pleasures of visiting neighbouring production brigades on foot to watch films at cinemas that no longer existed. Former members of the production brigade's propaganda team told me how they enjoyed singing in the fields and dancing together in the evening. One neighbour told me how exciting it was for her to walk with her mother to the city during the Cultural Revolution and see the mangoes Mao had been given by Pakistan's foreign minister.

None of the discussions I overheard in smaller or bigger groups concerned past conflict during team meetings or struggle sessions during the Cultural Revolution, although such conflicts did exist. A former village accountant whose family had been classified as 'poor peasants' during land reform, confessed to me in a private interview that he had publicly denounced neighbours as 'counter-revolutionaries' in struggle sessions during the Cultural Revolution. But he did not want to go into the details, declaring that 'the past is the past'.

In some situations, rural citizens in Daxi directly referred to the discourse about a 'harmonious society' introduced in 2004 by then President Hu Jintao. The above-mentioned two women, for example, emphasized that they lived in a 'harmonious community'. While unspoken memories of confrontational meetings during Maoism and rural citizens' knowledge of central government slogans about harmony somehow resonate with citizens' aim of not offending others, Wang Hui claims a political-economic link between this aim and another, more recent historical event.

The Abolition of Agricultural Tax and Peasant Atomization

Wang (2011) traces the logic of not offending back to the abolition of the agricultural land tax in 2006. He argues that before the tax reform villagers could delay or withhold tax payments to pressure village officials. After the tax was abolished, villagers no longer had this means to back up their demands when they were negotiating with village officials. Village officials, on the other hand, could no longer rely on state coercion to collect taxes. Instead, they embraced the logic of

not offending as a political tactic to retain rural citizens' support in village elections. Hence, Wang (2011: 47) claims, relations of mutual control disappeared, leading to a weakening of rural governance and a lack of governance responsibility. For him, the logic of not offending thus became the new mentality of village society.

Wang (*ibid.*) frames the rise of the logic of not offending as a sign of the decay of public regulations, as well as of the loss of basic political principles and effective sanction mechanisms in the village. This led to chaotic village governance and the disintegration of the polity. He argues that with tax abolition the countryside lost a safety valve that enabled both villagers and village officials to let off steam and resolve contradictions. Now, relations between officials and villagers are superficially peaceful, but in private each complains about the other, and unresolved contradictions have increased. With the loss of village officials' governance responsibility, the 'boundary between public and private was blurred' (*gongsi jixian mohu* 公私界限模糊), with affairs that formerly were handled in public now handled privately and both villagers and officials using personal relations and friendships to get things done (Wang 2011: 49). Finally, Wang (*ibid.*: 50) advances the proposition that the logic of not offending not only wastes explicit collective resources but also 'implicit governance resources': social capital such as trust, local rules and local norms.

According to Wang (2011: 47), a traditional village is a society of acquaintances in which institutional and traditional village authorities often correspond. After the abolition of the agricultural tax, he notes a transformation from a society of acquaintances to an increasingly cold and detached society of strangers characterized by peasant atomization and rationalization in the countryside (*ibid.*: 49). In a similar vein, another sociologist of rural governance, Liu Yanwu (2009: 28), draws on the anthropologist Yan Yunxiang's (2003) diagnoses of the rise of the 'uncivil individual' in China, arguing that the current problems in rural governance of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee stem from individuals who do not want to assume responsibility, only to obtain benefits for themselves.⁷

While the logic of not offending might indeed be widespread in rural governance in China today, I am sceptical about tracing its emergence to the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2006 as a single crucial historical turning point. There is no doubt that tax abolition and earlier tax reforms in the 1990s had significant consequences for rural governance. Scarce budgets make village officials resort to *dibao* as a 'means for governance' (He and Liu 2008; Liu 2008).⁸ However, attributing the social logic of not offending to the lack of agricultural

taxes is not convincing. Like anthropological approaches that focus on embeddedness only, it overlooks the efficacy of boundary work, and in the case of document-mediated democratic administration, the materiality of objects such as lists of signatures in which performed state boundaries are folded.

Folding State Boundaries into a List of Signatures

If one analyses performances as the substance of the state, certain costumes, such as uniforms, and certain props, such as flags, stamps and seals, always appear as symbols of state authority. In this kind of analysis, these state symbols may be used either by officials to perform the state or by non-state actors to imitate it. While such an analysis acknowledges the power of performance, it simultaneously assumes the truth of the state independent of such performances when it reduces certain performances to mimicry or camouflage (see the Introduction). At the same time, it forecloses the possibility of grasping those situations in which apparent state symbols do not mark the boundary between state and non-state for those involved. I argue that this was the case in the list making processes analysed below. Viewed retrospectively and from the outside, the lists of signatures may appear as signs of the ‘alarmingly intrusive’ process of democratic administration that enabled the state to penetrate rural society. Approaching the state as its boundaries instead allows the analysis of how actors script and perform state boundaries at different moments in time and how these boundaries become folded into such seemingly unambiguous symbols of the state.

Scripting an Expanded State Boundary

Laws and regulations are a key area for discursive boundary work between state and non-state (see the Introduction). In 2013, following the State Council’s 2012 regulation providing for ‘democratic appraisal’ of applications for the Rural Minimum Livelihood Guarantee, the administration of Qiuling Township asked citizens to participate in the bureaucratic process. Group leaders and villagers in Daxi explained that a list of signatures should be attached to the application to express the citizens’ consent. Citizens did not sign individually but as representatives of their households, as was usual during villagers’ group meetings. Before this procedure had been introduced, I was told, villagers submitted their applications to the village commit-

tee, which would, after approval, forward them to the township level administration. The official rationale for the democratic appraisal was embedded in broader discourses about corruption. According to township officials, it would help avoid ‘misuse’ and ‘fraud’ and reduce the number of citizen complaints.

This call for citizen participation scripted the expansion of the boundary of the state, shifting some tasks from bureaucrats to other citizens. As temporary bureaucrats, citizens were to judge the applications of their fellow citizens in terms of *dibao* standards that define conditions and criteria of neediness. The signatures on the list were to be confirmed with red thumbprints, using the authoritative colour of the state. The document then travelled to higher levels of the state, and temporary bureaucrats turned into ordinary citizens again. One day in March 2015, I happened to observe such list making processes at two meetings of villagers’ groups in Daxi.

These recurring meetings of villagers’ groups took place on a flexible schedule, depending on when policies were handed down from the township government. In Daxi Village, the peasant cooperative also used these meetings to coordinate activities of the villagers, especially the cultivation of rice. When representing the cooperative to outside visitors such as NGO staff, higher-level officials and urban consumers, the village leaders, who also led the cooperative, emphasized that attendance at these meetings had increased since the establishment of the cooperative in 2010. As discussed in Chapter 1, claims of high citizen participation in Daxi Village compared to other villages in rural China provided opportunities for the village to access additional resources, including not only government grants but also urban consumers’ purchasing power. For Dong Jie, performing peasant participation in a specific way allowed him to distance himself from the state in front of a segment of the urban middle class that was familiar with the liberal ideal of a clear-cut boundary and critical of top-down interventions of the Chinese state. In the case of the lists of signatures produced during such villagers’ group meetings, citizen participation was staged not for this middle-class urban audience to distance the state but for fellow rural citizens, who were themselves scripted and performed as temporary bureaucrats.

Performing as Community Volunteer

One evening in March 2015, Lei Wenfeng, the leader of Villagers’ Group No. 9, invited me to another meeting of his group. At 8:00

the next morning, I walked along a narrow path through the yellow blooming rapeseed fields to the house of the family who had hosted the last meeting. The open courtyard in front of the building was still almost empty. Only a handful of villagers were standing scattered around. As I got closer, Yang Changjun, a man in his sixties, greeted me as he approached the house from another direction. He showed me a red stamp pad he had just picked up at the house of the leader of the villagers' group. This red colour was typically used for seals or thumbprints on state documents.

After chatting with me for a minute, Yang Changjun took a sheet of paper out of his bag and approached a fellow villager. He called his name and demanded a signature, without further explanation, and the man answered that he could not write. This problem was resolved, as I had noticed on other occasions in the village, by another person signing and the man certifying that with a red thumbprint. Yang Changjun went on to collect more signatures and thumbprints in the same way: first addressing the fellow villager by their name and relationship to him, then directly requesting a signature in a friendly tone. In almost every case, the villager signed and made a thumbprint without asking for further information.

When one woman did not immediately respond to his request, he added that he was not asking for himself but for 'him' and pointed to a man standing a few metres away, leaning on a stick and with a catheter bag visible at his side. When I asked what was going on, a woman explained to me: 'His brother cannot write, this is why he is helping him. It is about confirming that the household is a Minimum Livelihood Allowance household.' A man interjected from behind: 'That's democracy. It's about approval.' Yang Changjun added: 'The higher level also has to agree. It has to go up above, then the allowance will be approved to come down.'

I asked who was eligible for the allowance. A woman explained, pointing to Yang Changjun's brother, 'look at him, he can't survive. Thus, the application for the Minimum Livelihood Allowance'. 'So, you're confirming that he really needs the allowance?', I asked. She confirmed:

Yes, look at him, he is ill. He has to apply for the allowance. In a case like that, all members [of the villagers' group] will agree to sign. How could someone get the allowance without this acceptance? If someone has money, why should they get the Minimum Livelihood Allowance? If you can still work, why should you get it? Only someone who doesn't manage to make money gets it.

Meanwhile, Yang Changjun continued to ask neighbours for signatures for his brother as they arrived. Another villager came by and did not immediately understand what was going on, so Yang Changjun asked him to come over and give his thumbprint. Another woman supported him, asking the person to come and sign it. Both Yang Changjun and the woman did so without clarifying what the thumbprint confirmed.

At about 9:00 AM, group leader Lei Wenfeng opened the meeting of his villagers' group, which lasted for about two hours. Afterwards, most of the villagers left, and it looked like Yang Changjun was also leaving without having turned over the application and list of signatures. After a few steps, however, he returned to the group leader, who was still sitting at the table with his papers. Yang Changjun handed over the handwritten application, a diagnosis from the hospital and the signature list, commenting: 'It's more than thirty signatures, the great majority.' Yang Changjun added: 'If someone falls ill, no matter how capable he is, he doesn't work anymore, right? He has to go to the city twice a month to get his catheter changed.' Lei Wenfeng looked at the application, which said that Yang Changjun's brother was 74 years old and his wife had died twenty years before. It mentioned several geriatric illnesses and the catheter and explained that he had to rely on his children to pay all the treatment costs. After skimming through the material, Lei Wenfeng added his signature to the list.

He then raised the issue of disturbances during the meeting. At one point, a man had accused the village committee and group leaders of gaining illegitimate benefits by acting as brokers for accident insurance companies. This charge was based on a story about a neighbouring village where this had allegedly happened, and some other villagers joined in the attack. Lei Wenfeng, obviously annoyed, insisted repeatedly that he did not benefit from helping to arrange insurance for those who wanted it. As he was about to complain to Yang Changjun, the latter interrupted, advising him to 'work a little less hard' and 'reduce the burden a little bit'. 'But look at what kind of situation we had today', Lei Wenfeng replied. Before he could continue, Yang Changjun cut him off a second time: 'No, no, no, you will see, after two days everything will be fine again. You are doing a good job. Today there is simply no cultivation of thought.' And, pointing to the application materials, he closed the conversation with, 'I troubled you about this as well.'

The question that preoccupied me while observing the creation of the list of signatures was why people did not really ask why they

were being collected. They either signed immediately or presented a technical reason for why they could not put their name on the list, like the man who claimed illiteracy. I did not observe a single person refuse to sign. Hence, it is worth examining the interactions between the applicant and his fellow villagers more closely.

We can observe that Yang Changjun chose to gather the signatures for his brother before the official start of the meeting. His first step was to create an intimate situation by addressing his neighbours personally. In doing so, he reminded them of their relationship to him: of past, present and possible future entanglements. He then made his 'ask' using very few words. While he could have recited *dibao* regulations and argued that his elder brother had a right to state assistance, he decided not to address fellow villagers as bureaucrats. He also could have verbalized his brother's neediness to the citizen-bureaucrats, as he did in the handwritten application. Instead, the demand he presented was extraordinarily modest and simple – a signature and a thumbprint – and could be met in seconds. Having first approached the group members directly, Yang Changjun also chose to approach group leader Lei Wenfeng personally to submit the application. In contrast with the villagers, he showed the group leader the written application. After checking the application materials and adding his signature to the list, Lei Wenfeng approached Yang Changjun, as his senior, with his personal feelings about being accused of misusing his office, and Yang Changjun reacted as a trusted friend and encouraged him to keep up his good work. Therefore, I understand his signature and those of the other members of this villagers' group not only as citizens' evaluations of the brother's neediness but even more importantly as demonstrating Yang Changjun's social efficacy.

For my interpretation of the event, it is important to know about Yang Changjun's embeddedness in the village community as an engaged person. For example, a couple of days before the meeting in March of 2015, he had helped carry out a survey for the cooperative as part of a small group of volunteers. Yang Changjun is also active in the local Christian community and attends weekly prayers at a family home in a neighbouring village. Building on his embeddedness in the village community, he related to the other members of the villagers' group as an engaged community member rather than as a supplicant in front of temporary bureaucrats.

This is not to say that people did not care about the meaning the township government would ascribe to their signatures. When I explicitly asked if they knew the purpose of the signatures, the answer some participants gave in front of each other was straightforward: it

was about a *dibao* application. When prompted, these rural citizens immediately explained the criteria for *dibao* to me, presenting them in a way that suggested that there was no tension between state policy and the local understanding of neediness and deservingness. Scholars have pointed out that *dibao* policy has fundamentally changed since its introduction, due to leaders' shifting political agendas (Solinger 2017), resistance of workers as former representatives of 'the people' against being reduced to 'numbers without history' (Cho 2013), and the sociotechnical features of policy as a knowledge process (Lammer 2023b). While *dibao* had been designed to help the 'poor population' based on poverty being 'measured and calculated in numerical tables' (Cho 2013: 71), in its actual implementation the criterion has changed from income to inability to work (Cho 2013: 89–90; Lammer 2023b: 12–14). In line with much of the anthropological literature that starts from an assumed difference between state law and local norms, one might thus argue that there was indeed a tension between the *dibao* criteria specified in government documents and the criteria relevant for rural citizens in Daxi Village. Scripting them as temporary bureaucrats would thus put them into in-between positions and force them to deal with tensions. Yet this ignores the efficacy of performed state boundaries. Their temporal multiplicity did not let such tensions emerge. In the observed situation, those present performed their criteria of neediness and deservingness successfully as official *dibao* criteria.

Furthermore, some of those present stressed that they had the power to reject the application if it did not meet *dibao* criteria. Following the wording of the State Council, one villager pointedly described this procedure of citizen participation in bureaucratic administration for me with one word, 'democracy'. When he answered my question that had interfered in Yang Changjun's performance by locating the list making process in the terrain of statehood and citizenship, Yang Changjun quickly distanced the state by interjecting that it was the higher levels that would make the final decision.

In front of Yang Changjun, the villagers assured me that they thought that his brother's application was justified. They underpinned their claim by pointing to Yang Changjun's brother and the clearly visible signs of his condition. The catheter and the stick on which he leaned were taken to represent his illness and his old age and indicate his inability to either work or manage life on his own. While these villagers could see applicants as objectified signs of their own situations, this was not the case with the township administration. To be 'seen by the state' (Street 2012) and recognized as needy,

the applicant must make the social situation legible through a simplification, a suitable description of a ‘difficult life’ transformed into documents.

Yang Changjun produced the list as a bureaucratic form to make the state see his brother as needing *dibao*, in a manner reminiscent of the ‘compliance with forms without any internalization of their content’ that Street (2012: 15) observed in the case of Papua New Guinean citizens’ use of government health cards to get access to public health services. He made use of the simplification prescribed by the township administration and concentrated his efforts on collecting the signatures. The production of the material document demanded the use of the red stamp pad, but Yang Changjun avoided enacting it as a marker of the state. Besides distancing the state in discourse, Yang Changjun avoided mentioning *dibao* regulations and used fellow villagers’ names to mark the situation as non-state. Therefore, I regard him not as performing the boundary between state and society in the scripted way but as pushing the state boundary out of the villagers’ group again.

In this case, no one questioned this *dibao* application. I also heard no one question the neediness and deservingness of Yang Changjun’s elder brother behind his family’s back. The response to the list-making process for the other *dibao* application on that day looked different, as the introductory vignette to this chapter showed.

Performing as Paternalist Organizer

Yang Changjun’s way of collecting signatures for his brother was just one of many possible ways of producing the mandated list, as is shown by the other application process that took place only a couple of hours later, at the meeting of the Villagers’ Group No. 1. As usual, the meeting took place in the front room of a villager’s house. One of the topics during the meeting was an application for the Minimum Livelihood Allowance. Group Leader Wang Yiyou started with the statement that ‘everyone should sign this application’. He then went on to explain:

Originally, we had six *dibao* households in this group. Recently, however, the *dibao* of one household [the one where the meeting was taking place] was cancelled. Because one Minimum Livelihood Allowance was cancelled, Aunt Dong [Xiaodan] has submitted this application.⁹ She asks everyone to sign. This will then be reported to the upper levels. Now there are five households. Those who participate at this meeting today should write their name and sign. [Pause.] If you agree. Xiaodan came

to me and raised the issue. This is the situation in Xiaodan's household. Her husband is a person with a disability. The little daughter is only seven years old. Xiaodan has emphysema. And that is why Xiaodan has written this application and is asking everyone for a signature. Later, the application will be posted publicly. After this announcement, the application will be handed over to the village committee and the village committee will hand it over to the township to approve it. We don't decide it. You don't decide it. The government will come for an examination. Thus, we advised her to write this application, and everyone should sign it today.

Later, another man read the application to everyone. This included one additional fact: that the household has 'no labour force': 'When I [the household head] was working outside of the village in 2005, I accidentally cut off part of my leg and it was classified as a level four disability.' Wang Yiyu, the group leader, emphasized again that everyone present should sign the application. He then paused and again added that those who agreed should sign. Later, he counted twenty-one signatures and asked who had not yet signed, pressing some more villagers to do so.

Neither Yang Changjun's brother nor Dong Xiaodan collected the signatures for their *dibao* applications themselves. Yang Changjun had collected signatures for his brother at the earlier meeting without asking the group leader for help, probably because the group leader had already become the target of criticism in earlier meetings. Dong Xiaodan had personally contacted the group leader in advance to help her collect the necessary signatures. Yang Changjun was used to approaching other villagers concerning village affairs, as when conducting the survey for the cooperative as a community volunteer. In contrast, Dong Xiaodan spent a lot of time chatting at her neighbours' small corner shop and teahouse, where Wang Yiyu also regularly stopped in to chat and play cards.

In order to gain a better understanding of Dong Xiaodan's choice to ask this group leader to carry out the collection of signatures and the way he called for signatures, one needs to take the embeddedness of the involved actors in the village community into account. In the social life of this villagers' group, Wang Yiyu takes on the role of a paternalist organizer not only with regard to bureaucratic administration but also life-cycle rituals and agricultural production, including organizing members of the villagers' group for the mandarin orange harvest in autumn.

As a remnant of a 1980s and 1990s township policy of agricultural specialization, Villagers' Group No. 1 still has many mandarin orange groves in the hills. Almost every household has one. Due to

labour migration, most of the households now lack the labour power to both harvest the oranges and sell them at the market themselves. Instead, they have established connections with traders from neighbouring districts, neighbouring provinces or even further away. As it would take one household several days to harvest the fruit all at once, a pattern of cooperation has developed within the villagers' group to solve this problem. In this case, the commodification of labour power as well as further integration into regional and national agricultural markets has led to more cooperation rather than atomization, as classical modernization theory celebrates and as agrarian populists bemoan.

When I helped with the autumn harvests in 2013 and 2014, I observed Wang Yiyou's key role in coordinating this work effort. When a household closed a deal with outside traders, they would ask the group leader to recruit harvest workers. On the evening before the harvest or in the morning of the same day, Wang Yiyou would walk through the neighbourhood, shouting the names of group members, asking if they would help with the harvest. It was especially hard to find men who were considered strong enough to carry the two heavy baskets on a shoulder pole from the grove down to the road where the traders waited with their trucks. Those who were called for the harvest were expected to help. The villagers assured me that it was possible to say no, but only if one could offer acceptable reasons for failing to participate in this collective effort, such as needing to work on one's own fields or having business outside of the village, or because of an invitation to an occasion like a wedding or funeral, or care responsibilities at home.

A similar pattern of coordinated mutual aid can be found in life-cycle rituals. When a member of the villagers' group dies, the standard is for all the households of the villagers' group to be invited to help with the funeral along with the relatives and close friends of the deceased. The family usually asks Wang Yiyou to coordinate the members of the villagers' group, in terms of contacting neighbours until he has enough for the tasks at hand. In addition to inviting helpers to the funeral banquet, the family usually prepares packages of cigarettes and red envelopes with money. These gifts are then handed out by the group leader during the ceremonial procession to the grave on the hill.

As mentioned, the applicant, Dong Xiaodang, asked Wang Yiyou for paternalist help concerning her *dibao* application, and he called on fellow villagers for help with this matter as he did for harvests and funerals.¹⁰ Like Yang Changjun, Wang Yiyou stressed the undemand-

ing act of providing the signature demanded by the township government. Only in secondary remarks did he relativize his request to sign by pointing out the possibility of declining to sign if one did not agree. Like Yang Changjun, he relativized the signatures' importance in determining the outcome, emphasizing that it was neither village officials nor the villagers' group members who would have the final say concerning eligibility. By drawing attention to this limit of democracy in bureaucratic practice, Wang Yiyou denied any responsibility on the side of the villagers. Shifting responsibility to the higher levels of the state helped him secure the continuing success of his paternalism. By shifting up the boundary of the state, he was trying to convince the other citizens to refrain from obstructing the attempts of a member of the community to claim *dibao* and creating open conflict.

Wang Yiyou thus did not perform the state boundary according to the script of the township government. Instead of turning rural citizens into temporary bureaucrats, he turned the act of collecting signatures into a performance of belonging to the community of the villagers' group. His embeddedness in the village community was a precondition for the success of this type of performance. This community I am writing about should not be idealized or misunderstood as undifferentiated or as a revival of a past traditional rural culture or a relic of the collective era. While the villagers' group certainly has a history and some villagers still refer to it by the Mao-era term 'production team', the community is also clearly not simply a remainder of the past. I have pointed to mutual obligations within the villagers' group, not only for life-cycle events but also the agricultural cycle. This mutual aid does not come without conflict. For example, during harvest time, one woman told me that she had considered refusing to help one family with the mandarin harvest because she disapproved of the way the woman often scolded others. Furthermore, as I have argued, mutual aid in the collective mandarin orange harvest is a contemporary strategy to overcome a rural household labour shortage that is related to the recent phenomenon of migrant labour. This community evolves, then, in a broader structural process of agricultural marketization and commodification of rural labour power. It is not fixed but must be constantly reproduced and can be transformed in interactions. Asked to help with the signature collection, Wang Yiyou turned the procedure into an event through which the community of the villagers' group was reproduced alongside the bureaucratic document.

As the backstage complaints in the introductory vignette to this chapter showed, practising democratic bureaucracy through this spe-

cific way of list making also activated a logic of not offending. While rural sociologists traced such a logic to the abolition of agricultural taxes and the ensuing peasant atomization, my research shows to the contrary the ongoing relevance of village officials' and citizens' embeddedness in the village community. Yet rural citizens' embeddedness did not quasi-automatically create tension when the township government scripted the extension of the state boundary through democratic appraisal. In contrast to anthropology's preoccupation with the blurring of the boundary, I argue that only the performative distancing of the state during the production of a list of signatures for enacting democratic appraisal activated and sustained the ties of community.

Folding Scripts and Performances of State Boundaries

So far, the lists of signatures have been shown as folded twice: during instruction and production. The township government scripted the temporary extension of the state boundary. Rural citizens were to perform their roles as temporary bureaucrats with several props: papers, signatures, thumbprints and red ink. The lists of signatures produced in the Villagers' Groups No. 1 and 9 that day in March 2015 registered this script. The stipulated props, especially, left material traces in the form of signatures and red thumbprints. The history of the document being folded like this thus foregrounds certain visible symbols that can easily appear as markers of the state boundary in retrospect. The way the history of the list is materially folded thus enables specific politics; for example, support for scholars' liberal arguments about an intrusive socialist state and the withering away of society (see the Introduction).

But it was not only the township's instructions that were folded visibly into the list. Some improvisations also materialized that could later raise questions, if not suspicions, about the making of the list. The handwriting of some names looked strikingly similar. Had one person signed for another? Why? Did the other person know about it? Was the person absent? Or was the person present but could not sign for himself, as with the illiterate person in Villagers' Group No. 9? If additional evidence is produced – for example, through interviews – the history of the list is unfolded and refolded in a new way.

Other practices were also registered by the list but folded so that they were not visible without additional evidence or reinterpretations that downplayed the red ink as a marker of the state. Yang Changjun's and Wang Yiyu's discursive distancing of the state and

the performative use of markers of the village community were part of the production of the list of signatures, as was the discursive appropriation of central government rhetoric ('That's democracy!') and the affirmation of their role as temporary bureaucrats by the rural citizens in explaining the application process to me. Yet while the success or failure of these performances of the state boundary materialized in the form of signatures or their absence, the content of these performances was folded in a way that made it inaccessible in retrospect.

The temporal multiplicity of performed state boundaries was thus registered in objects such as this list of signatures. But depending on the way these performances were materially folded into the object gave prominence to certain markers and made some versions of state boundaries more enduring than others. In this case, some props (such as the red stamp pad) left visible imprints, while certain sequences (such as addressing rural citizens either individually as fellow villagers by using names and relational terms or collectively as temporary bureaucrats by reciting *dibao* regulations and written applications) did not leave distinctive traces. As such, the lists of signatures attached to the applications and forwarded first to the village committee and then the township administration appeared as evidence of state boundaries that had temporarily been extended into the villagers' groups, as scripted by the township government. But this is not yet the end of the story. Additional evidence, like villagers' complaints, had the potential to unfold the folded multiplicity of performed state boundaries.

Conclusion: Temporal Multiplicity and Folded State Boundaries

In this chapter on democratic administration of the Rural Minimum Livelihood Guarantee, my participant observation and ethnographic writing brought the multiple state boundaries that were folded into the two lists of signatures to light. My attention had been aroused by villagers' backstage complaints that pointed to the tensions created through the temporal multiplicity of state boundaries. While the township government had scripted rural citizens as temporary bureaucrats, the signature collection was performed in a way that turned it into a question of belonging to the village community. While the red ink on the document was visible and ready to be read as a marker of the state that pointed to the township's script of dem-

ocratic administration, the similarly visible signatures did not reveal the content of the performed state boundaries that were involved in their production. Yet complaints could lead to the unfolding of different versions of performed state boundaries registered in the lists of signatures, enabling reinterpretations of democracy as paternalism.

This chapter thus contributed to China Studies and the study of *dibao* in particular but also to the anthropology of the state in general. Analyses of state boundaries offer an alternative to the persistent state-versus-society paradigm in China Studies (Perry 1994) and combine the strengths of anthropological approaches to the Chinese state that have focused either on bureaucratic practices (Pieke 2004) or state images (Steinmüller 2013; Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2016). Attention to performances of state boundaries highlights agency beyond active resistance and passive accommodation regarding *dibao* policy.

Against a widespread anthropological impulse, conceptualizing the temporal multiplicity of performed state boundaries offers an alternative to diagnoses of a blurred boundary. Different versions of state boundaries are performed over time and produce situational effects, without former versions necessarily having a direct influence on the next performance. Material objects register the history of performed state boundaries. The notion of folded multiplicity offers an analytical vocabulary for understanding not only how earlier performances of state boundaries affect later performances but also how audiences interact with past performances. It draws attention to the specific materiality of objects that affords certain elements of state boundaries performed in front of future audiences – stage designs, props, costumes, characters, sequences – greater visibility than others. This privileges some versions of performed state boundaries over others, without completely ruling out the possibility of those boundaries that have been folded in less visible ways to become unfolded later on. This unfolding can be prompted by additional evidence or reinterpretations of the folded objects. In this chapter, I analytically unfolded the scripted and performed state boundaries that the lists of signatures carried with them. But beyond academic interest, this temporal multiplicity of performed state boundaries folded into lists of signatures also made itself felt as a greater rupture.

Readers may want to know if the applicants' list making processes proved successful and whether they were finally seen by the state as needy. However, about one month after the events discussed in this chapter, Yinhe City announced the cancellation of all Minimum Livelihood Allowances, including those in Qiuling Township's Daxi

Village. In the name of ‘standardization’, all recipients had to reapply. Apparently, citizen complaints had continued even after democratic administration had been scripted as the collection of signatures in 2013. Declaring the lists of signatures invalid also made the previously scripted and performed state boundaries, which were folded into them, ineffective. The reapplication process opened the stage for the next round of performing state boundaries. This time, democratic administration was performed through voting in public meetings. These performances are the topic of the remaining two chapters.

Notes

1. This was not the only case in which an invisible illness invited stigmatizations of laziness. Another neighbour once complained to me that she had been suffering from rheumatoid arthritis for more than twenty-five years. The village officials knew about her illness and had arranged for a small allowance of 200 to 300 RMB per year from the Office of Civil Affairs to pay for her medication. She was unable to do anything because she felt great pain as soon as she started to exert herself physically: it was painful even to walk. She told me that as her illness was not visible some neighbours did not believe her and thought that she was lazy.
2. These speculations often expressed a mixture of annoyance and admiration. While poverty is stigmatized in China, Robert Walker et al. argue that the receipt of *dibao* is not. They found that in some places *dibao* enhances the status of people because it demonstrates that they had enough social influence (*guanxi*) to get it approved (Yang, Walker and Xie 2020).
3. Qiuling Township, in which Daxi Village is located, first introduced the Minimum Livelihood Allowance in 2003 with a very low monthly payout of only 10 RMB per person. This was gradually raised and in 2014 amounted to 50, 60 or 80 RMB depending on the classification of need by the township administration. In 2013 and 2015, as discussed in Chapter 5, the township pushed for a more ‘standardized’ implementation of the policy after a rising number of complaints by villagers.
4. In 2006, following rising social unrest because of high fees and taxes since the 1990s, the Chinese state ended the several thousand years’ practice of taxing agriculture for revenue. Furthermore, the central government launched several new social policies in the countryside, including the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee.
5. See Day and Hale (2008) for an introduction to this branch of sociology in China.
6. He Xuefeng is director of the China Rural Governance Research Centre at Wuhan University.
7. Yan Yunxiang (2003: 16) has argued that ‘[t]he socialist state has played a key role in the transformation of private life and in the formation of the

- uncivil individual': during the Mao era, the socialist state encouraged autonomy and independence in private life and dependency on the collectives and the state in public life. With the state in retreat since the early 1980s, he says, a social vacuum of moral values and behavioural norms emerged that was filled by the values of utilitarian individualism found in late capitalist society.
8. In Chapter 6, I discuss how the village committee of Daxi Village used the *dibao* as a resource to pursue the development strategy of becoming an 'ecological village'.
 9. This suggests that, despite official denial (Chen et al. 2013: 333), quotas for available Minimum Livelihood Allowances did matter.
 10. In the next chapter, I analyse how the overcoming of 'traditionalist' paternalism was performed in a push for standardization of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee in spring of 2015.