6

Measuring Familism, Marking Corruption

Introduction

Duan Shuxi, whose responsibilities as the head of the Qiuling Township Civil Affairs Office included *dibao*, considered it her duty to educate citizens about the policy regulations relevant to improving their 'human quality' (*suzhi* 素质).* In an interview in May 2015, shortly after the push for standardization, she proudly recounted an example of how she had explained the rule that adult children had to contribute a certain amount of money each month to support their parents.

Once, when visiting a village in the township to explain the policy, she had immediately noticed there was a young man in the audience. She wondered what he was doing at the meeting and why he needed *dibao*. When she asked some other villagers, they told her that he was there for his grandfather, who had been receiving *dibao*. Therefore, she explained during the meeting that young people had a 'care responsibility' (*shanyang yiwu* 赡养义务) to the elders in their families and that it was impossible for the elderly to receive *dibao* when the young did not contribute monetary support. Children had originally been responsible for supporting their parents, she continued, but many no longer cared about them, even if they themselves were well-off. She announced that the officials would publish a list of all *dibao* recipients in the village (what was called a 'democratic announcement') and emphasized how embarrassing it would be for any adult children whose parents' names appeared on the list. She

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recounted with satisfaction that the young man had left before the end of the meeting, which she attributed to his bad conscience. She took pride in having 'successfully' educated him when the family did not reapply for *dibao* after she announced the general cancellation at that meeting.

In this story, Duan Shuxi drew on the central government's discourse on reviving the 'traditional' virtue of Chinese familism to dissuade a *dibao* recipient from reapplying. She invoked tradition using a noble virtue of the past to publicly shame a citizen in the present and rendered his attempt at defending a claim to *dibao* immoral by teaching him how to become a 'properly' filial child. This public performance made the young man appear deficient in the virtues of traditional familism and guilty of modern, selfish individualism.

It would not be completely far-fetched to see this young man's participation in the meeting as a kind of care for his grandfather based on familial obligations. Indeed, it was rather unusual for the younger generation to attend such meetings in place of the elder generation. Stigmatization due to receiving *dibao* was an issue of contention in some of the families affected. The 77-year-old Li Jiazheng, the first speaker at the democratic appraisal meeting in Daxi Village (Chapter 5), told me his unmarried adult son had tried to dissuade him from reapplying: he said it was extremely shameful to receive *dibao*, and only those who lacked both skills and capabilities 'ate' it. The young man in Duan Shuxi's story had probably been sent by his family, maybe unwillingly, because they thought that he would be better able to understand the policy and handle the new bureaucratic procedures. In attending the meeting, he was trying to access monetary support for his grandfather.

Yet Duan Shuxi did not consider the young man's participation in the meeting a possible kind of care based on familial obligations but regarded it as displaying a lack of filial piety even though he was trying to provide for his grandfather.[1] Here, Duan Shuxi's judgement of the young man's practices and her assessment of 'lack of filial piety' depended on the source of the money. For her, *dibao* was marked as state money and thus could not serve as an indicator of kinship, even if past performances of filial piety that distanced the state could become folded into the *dibao* (see Chapter 4 on the folded multiplicity of state boundaries).

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This chapter focuses on how 'kinship measurements' (Thelen and Lammer 2021; see also Chapter 3) were used to mark the boundar-

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ies between state and non-state. In making *dibao* policy, actors selectively, and sometimes strategically, measured kinship in different ways. This application of kinship measurements produced and used boundary markers that turned *dibao* practices into 'individualism' or 'corruption'. Different methods of measuring enabled the paradoxical justification of *dibao* standardization with reference to both 'too much' and 'not enough' kinship. Through kinship measurements, the standardization of *dibao* policy was made by constituting two 'improper' non-state others: *dibao* recipients that were measured as having 'too much' kinship with bureaucrats and *dibao* households that were measured as having 'not enough' kinship – a lack of filial piety and traditional Chinese familism.

This attention to measured kinship being turned into markers of state boundaries contributes to anthropological debates about the mutual constitution of state and family (McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Thelen and Alber 2018). In the context of China Studies, it challenges both culturalist and statist arguments regarding the relationship between social policy and familism. Moreover, it shows how such academic arguments inform certain kinship measurements. After outlining these arguments in the first section, I will then introduce central government discourse that associated the standardization of the *dibao* scheme with traditional Chinese culture in seemingly contradictory ways. Standardization was, paradoxically, supposed to both overcome and revive familism. The third part shifts backward in time. Based on interviews, I reconstruct *dibao* practices in Daxi Village before the general cancellation in April 2015. Rural sociologists have argued that, in the context of limited village and township budgets, rural officials turned the *dibao* into a negotiable means for governance (He and Liu 2008; Liu 2008). To show that this was also the case in Daxi Village, I analyse how village officials strategically used and rejected 'traditional Chinese familism' and measured kinship differently when assembling needy *dibao* households and when demanding family workfare. Finally, the conclusion argues that 'traditional Chinese familism' was neither a stable cultural base on which social policy was made nor the result of a monolithic state acting on society. Rather, kinship measurements that marked state boundaries were selectively applied at different moments in making *dibao* policy. The repeated measuring of kinship and marking of state boundaries became circular: kinship was used to mark *dibao* receipt as legitimate or corrupt, yet the prevalence of *dibao* receipt was used as an indicator of declining kinship and taken for granted as a marker of the state. This either turned performances of filial piety into evidence of

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misplaced traditional familism ('corruption') or made them invisible by representing them as modern individualism ('lack of household responsibility').

The State in Studies of Chinese Familism

China Studies has produced both culturalist and statist arguments regarding the relationship between social policy and familism. The culturalist assertion is that the persistence of a traditional culture specific to China (and other East Asian countries) determines the state's welfare regime. This perspective builds on modernization theory and the assumption of a decisive cultural difference between the West and the East. In very broad strokes, the story goes like this. In the West, modernization and economic development led to the decline of the family, and comprehensive social welfare had to be developed to substitute for the loss of family functions. In supposedly Confucian East Asia, in contrast, the family is particularly important and familism has stayed strong despite Westernization and modernization in other aspects of society and therefore there is no country with comprehensive social welfare in East Asia.

One of the most prominent of such arguments is Linda Wong's (1998) *Marginalization and Social Welfare in China*, which contends that traditional Chinese familism was 'the sacred cow eagerly milked by an economizing state' (ibid.: 191). More than twenty years after its publication, her book is still widely quoted. Wong's book is considered the first English-language book on the welfare programmes of the civil affairs administration in China and contains extensive analysis of primary sources. However, some have criticized her culturalist focus on traditional Chinese familism in understanding the perceived difference to Western welfare. For example, Jane Duckett (1998: 1059–60) argued that Wong did not 'pursue the economic, political and ideological factors that have formed the current welfare system in China as far as she might have'. Instead of retreating to cultural difference as an explanation of last resort, Duckett suggested that the continued importance of the family in China, particularly in the countryside, might instead relate to the current stage of economic development. While I share Duckett's critique, the explanation she suggests is still based on an economistic paradigm of modernization and developmentalism. A more radical critique is required: some historians and anthropologists are forcefully arguing that this mainstream narrative about the decline of kinship with the arrival of

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modernity does not even hold true for the West (McKinnon 2013; McKinnon and Cannell 2013; Sabean and Teuscher 2013).[2]

In the anthropology of China, researchers place recent developments in the family on a broad spectrum between the demise and the persistence of familism and filial piety. Yan Yunxiang (1997, 2003, 2010) has most pointedly put forward an individualization thesis based on modernization theory. Following William Goode, he argues that the 'triumph of conjugality over patriarchy' started with the socialist revolution in the 1950s and was completed with the turn to market reform in the 1980s. Yan laments that these transformations up to the 1990s also brought about the erosion of family values and what he calls the rise of the 'uncivil individual', as well as a decline in filial piety and traditional provision of support for the elderly. Since the first publication of his provocative thesis more than twenty years ago, many have argued that Yan 'tends to overstate the extent to which individuals have become unmoored from family and other social and cultural ties' (Harrell and Santos 2017: 6). Somewhere towards the other end of the spectrum, one finds the argument by Deborah Davis and Sara Friedman (2014), who emphasize that the institution of the family remains robust and the value of intergenerational obligation and reciprocity, as well as lifelong commitments to extended family ties, endures despite a trend of deinstitutionalizing marriage and sexuality.

Despite these opposite assessments of the Chinese family, these studies tend to share certain features. I highlight three limitations here. First, all accept and reproduce the narrative that patriarchy, familism and filial piety really were strong in the past and only disagree about in what way, and at what speed and to what extent this move away from supposedly traditional Chinese culture happened.[3] Second, despite their differences all the above-mentioned studies of the Chinese family assume a boundary between politics and family life. Therefore, their empirical research looks at patterns and negotiations of descent, marriage, residence, familial care and inheritance, as well as at family ideals in everyday discourse.[4] Third, if the state is included in the analysis of families, it is mostly in references to state images from policy documents or media reports concerning, for example, the dissemination of traditional Confucian virtues. The state is rarely studied through a focus on bureaucratic practices. If the latter enter the picture, it is only through family policy proper: for example, the popular topic of birth planning. While negotiations and conflicts within families are stressed, negotiations between bureaucrats and citizens only rarely receive closer attention. Due to this tendency to neglect concrete state practices on the ground, the

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state enters the picture, if at all, only as a unitary actor that intervenes from the outside with clear intentions. Yan Yunxiang (2003: 182–83), for example, writes that:

> [t]hroughout the history of China, the state and the cultural elite regarded filial piety as a fundamental ethical and social norm; accordingly, imperial law was designed to protect the powers and privileges of the senior generation, particularly the senior members in the family. . . . After the 1949 revolution, the party-state launched ideological attacks on the notion of filial piety through various political campaigns, . . . [b]ut the party-state has never tried to attack the traditional practice of elderly support in rural areas. Instead, in the 1950 Marriage Law and its later versions, elderly support is a legal duty of Chinese citizens and is thus backed up by state sanctions. . . . It is fair to say, therefore, that a fundamental change in the elderly support system was never the intention of the state.

In their otherwise complex and fine-grained treatment of the transformation of patriarchy in China, Stevan Harrell and Gonçalo Santos (2017: 32) describe further developments in the post-Mao era with a similar focus on the state as a monolithic actor above the family: 'The state has withdrawn from its previous commitments to providing social services of various kinds, . . . meaning that the family has taken on many new obligations.'

In a way, this argument turns Wong's (1998) assertion on its head. Rather than as the 'traditional' host of a parasitic state, familism now appears as the very product of state action or inaction. It is no longer traditional culture that shapes the seemingly modern state; it is the modern state that produces seemingly traditional culture. While this turn away from culture to the state is important insofar as it draws our attention to diverging interests, negotiations and contradictions, it still takes the boundary between state and family for granted, stopping one step short of fully exploring the negotiations of what actors consider to be inside or outside of the state. Rather than presuming that the family in China is either the stable essence of traditional Chinese culture or the product of the intervention of a monolithic state, the remainder of this chapter draws attention to how different actors perform state boundaries by measuring kinship and thereby make *dibao* policy.

Justifying Standardization with Measured Familism

The central government's discourse concerning the standardization of *dibao* administration made many references to the family. As the fol-

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lowing subsections show, standardization was paradoxically framed as needed to counter both a supposed excess of family and a lack of it. Claims about 'too much' and 'not enough' familism could each be supported by the two contrasting arguments offered by anthropologists of the Chinese family outlined above. On the one hand, the individualization thesis provides fodder for the central government's claim about an alleged weakening of 'household responsibility'. The thesis about the persistence of family obligations and extended family networks, on the other, speaks to discourses of anti-corruption that claim that closely related persons are too frequently favoured. Kinship was measured in two distinct ways: to identify 'social connection allowances' and 'human feelings allowances' and to demonstrate a decline of traditional familism.

Measuring 'Human Feelings' and 'Social Connections'

In China, 'modernization' and 'development' are high on the government agenda and in the 2010s President Xi Jinping pushed 'anti-corruption' efforts. As Thelen and Alber (2018: 5–6) point out, developmentalist approaches tend to regard 'corruption' as one of the main obstacles to economic growth and 'proper' political functioning. In these approaches, they argue with Michael Herzfeld (2018), corruption means 'too much kinship in the wrong place' (Thelen and Alber 2018: 6). Indeed, kinship measurements to identify corruption were one key aspect of *dibao* standardization.

Many stories circulated in everyday conversations and the media about how officials arrange *dibao* for their relatives. Policy documents promised that the standardization of *dibao* administration would limit the practise of favouring 'relatives and close friends' (*youqin houyou* 优亲厚友). In 2013, the State Council reported to Premier Li Keqiang about the problem of '*renqing bao*' (人情保) and '*guanxi bao*' (关系保), literally 'human feelings allowance' and 'social connection allowance'.[5] 'Democratic appraisals' and 'democratic announcements' should enable 'mass supervision', according to the State Council (2007). Furthermore, in 2012 the State Council recommended instituting a registry of recipients who were 'close relatives' (*jin qinshu* 近亲属) of officials involved in *dibao* administration and that the county-level government should closely examine and strictly manage those recipients. Here, kinship measurements were to produce evidence that changed the non-state other of performed state boundaries. These additional markers could change *dibao* beneficiaries from independent citizens (see Chapter 5 on how the overcom-

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ing of paternalism was performed in democratic appraisal meetings) into dependent kin.

In this justification of *dibao* standardization, taking one's responsibility for family and relatives seriously was regarded as strong and widespread in Chinese society. But in the view of a modern bureaucracy, what might be called traditional Chinese familism appeared dangerously misplaced. *Dibao* recipients who had kinship relations with officials looked suspicious. There was 'too much kinship in the wrong place'. Central government officials regarded such situations as having a serious negative influence on the image of the party and the government.

One *dibao* that was cancelled and not renewed in the standardization push in Daxi Village was said to have matched the category of the so-called 'social connections allowances' criticized by the State Council. While bureaucratic measurements of kinship may appear more formalized – for example, in using legal documents that evidence genealogical closeness – other forms of generating evidence are also used, such as measuring lived closeness based on interviews (Markó 2021). Likewise, other citizens measured kinship by relying on conversations as well as their own observations. In conversations with villagers prior to the general cancellation and reapplication in 2015, one 70-year-old woman's *dibao* was sometimes a topic of gossip. People thought that she had gained it through close connections between her family and those of some village officials. They thought her family was doing well and did not need the *dibao*. While these rumours thus introduced markers that located this *dibao* on the family side of the state boundary, village officials and the concerned woman told me a different story that highlighted the village community (see Chapter 2 on the domain multiplicity of state boundaries).

After the cancellation, the woman herself told me that her family had 'good relations' with the village cadres, and her retrospective story also did not make reference to written regulations to locate her *dibao* on the state side of the boundary (as other recipients did in the negotiations described in Chapter 5). Instead, she discounted the markers generated through kinship measurements by pointing to the office building of the villagers' committee as a marker of the village community. Her story will show how village-level officials pursued development strategies through *dibao* policy in the context of a meagre village budget. As 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980), they negotiated compromises within a space for manoeuvre delimited by quotas and resources determined at a higher level, villagers' demands and rural governance issues. The story shows how *dibao* was turned

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into a 'means for governance', as sociologists from the School of Rural Governance have argued (He and Liu 2008; Liu 2008). In this case, the village's development strategy as an 'ecological village' was at stake.

After establishing the peasant cooperative in 2010 and declaring their goal to transition to ecological agriculture, the village leaders gained the attention of higher-level officials. A new office and assembly building for the village committee and a paved village square were constructed when some of these higher-ranking officials visited for a prestigious on-the-spot meeting. This project required a site, and they had their sights set on a collective land allotment to which the woman's family held the land use rights. She recounted that the village officials had asked her family to exchange their field next to the village road for two smaller paddy field allotments elsewhere. She emphasized that the land they were offered was of poor quality, had been fallow for years and was full of weeds, which meant a lot of work. The first time her family had transplanted rice seedling, the weeds outcompeted the rice, and the seedlings turned black and died.[6] Consequently, the first harvest was very poor. She told me that she had complained to the village officials and proposed that they should buy her 'social insurance' (*shebao* 社保)[7] to compensate for the problems arising from exchanging the cultivated plot for the uncultivated one. The village officials explained to her that they could not buy her social insurance as it was not in the village committee's budget. Instead, they offered to arrange *dibao* for her.

In retrospect, she emphasized that her adult sons had recommended against accepting the offer. She also stressed that she refused to fill out the application herself when asked to by the former village group leader. Therefore, the village officials prepared the application themselves, arguing that they were subsidizing her because she could not harvest grain. Furthermore, she downplayed the significance of the Minimum Livelihood Allowance to her, stating that it had been only a few hundred RMB per year – only 45 RMB per month at first, and it never reached more than 80 RMB. When I asked if she was disappointed that she had lost the benefit, she told me very formally that she had never thought about how long she would continue to receive it. It was good that the *dibao* had been cancelled, she said: no one 'ate from the state' anymore.

This 70-year-old woman had kept her skills as a strong negotiator out of the story as much as possible. Looking at her initial demand for compensation, we see how well she understood the village committee's position. She knew they needed an impressive office building

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and village square to display Daxi as an exemplary ecological village to higher-level officials and that the village committee had some leeway concerning the administration of social policies. While she overestimated the village officials' power to arrange social insurance for her, the committee, facing budgetary constraints, was willing to work the system in other ways and arrange *dibao* for her so they could take the land and build an appealing base for visitors to the ecological village. Yet as the above-mentioned gossip shows, in 2015 the office building no longer successfully marked the old woman's *dibao* as serving the village community. Adding evidence about kinship amid anti-corruption discourse, gossip shifted the ground and placed her *dibao* on the family side of the state boundary.

Measuring 'Household Responsibility'

Along with complaints about 'too much kinship', officials criticized a lack of 'household responsibility' (*jiating zeren* 家庭责任) in their justifications for standardizing the administration of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee. Since the nationwide introduction, the household was construed as the relevant unit for assessing *dibao* eligibility (State Council 2007). They also underlined that government relief should be combined with 'household support', 'mutual aid in society' and 'individual self-reliance'. In 2012, the State Council emphasized even more explicitly that 'the household was the [relevant] unit' for the *dibao*.

President Xi Jinping stressed at different occasions that 'filial piety towards parents and respect for seniors' was a 'traditional virtue' of the 'Chinese nation'. This 'guided people to assume household responsibility on their own initiative'. This perspective has also been mirrored by researchers at the Development Research Centre of the State Council. In the critique of the 'welfarization' of the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee already mentioned in Chapter 5, for example, one researcher (Wang W. 2017) decried the weakening of household responsibility when some households divide and take apart the household and detach from old members on purpose. To counteract welfarization, he suggests reviving the 'outstanding traditional culture' of self-reliance. To illustrate this possibility, the author compares *dibao* numbers from China to the lower rates of state assistance in what he calls other countries with a 'shared East Asian Confucian culture'. The researcher thus used statistical evidence on state assistance in different countries as an indicator for measuring kinship. Based on the assumption that less care at one scale necessitates

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more care at another,[8] China's higher level of state support signalled a breakdown in family care while lower levels in other East Asian countries indicated stronger kinship relations.

To strengthen household responsibility, the researcher then suggests strictly limiting the access of old people with adult children to the *dibao* and relying on the 'Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly' and other relevant regulations to ensure that the persons legally responsible for providing support are included in the investigation of the household's income situation (Wang W. 2017). As mentioned in the Introduction, law is a key field in which scripts for performances of state boundaries are produced, in this case for negotiation of care responsibilities between state and family.

The question of the enforcement of the legal obligation to support one's parents adds another dimension to the governments' invocations of tradition. Duan Shuxi, the leader of the Office for Civic Affairs of Qiuling Township, complained in an interview that many 'ordinary common people' did not follow the relevant law because they were – she thought a while about what word to use – 'traditional'. She continued to explain that even if the adult children did not obey their parents, and even if the old parents had to work very hard, and even if their children had a good life, and even if the old parents were very angry with them, most parents would nevertheless not sue their children although the law would enforce their rights. Such situations were relatively widespread in the countryside. Hence, she always stressed the benefits of 'ruling by law' when she went to the countryside intending to 'raise the quality' of the citizens.

I also asked Duan Shuxi what would happen if adult children did not provide their parents with what the application forms classified as 'care income' (*shanyang shouru* 赡养收入). Before the recent push for standardization, she explained, village officials would have tried to apply for *dibao* for the elderly parents in such cases. Now the village committee instead should try to 'mobilize the children' to care for their parents. Officials would now explain the law and the policy to the young to make them support their parents financially.

Like the researcher from the Development Research Centre of the State Council, Duan Shuxi viewed citizens' use of state law as indicating stronger or weaker kinship. For the researcher, a higher number of recipients of state assistance indicated the decline of traditional familism; for Duan Shuxi, a lower number of cases involving elder rights indicated the persistence of traditional familism. Here, her reference to tradition refers to too-strong family ties that prohibited the

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use of modern law that could otherwise have enforced the filial piety of traditional Chinese familism.

Again, the invocation of tradition offered a justification for standardization and consequently for cuts to social expenditures.[9] In the case of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, under-implementation of the 'modern' law on the side of citizens was devalued by officials as 'traditional' in the derogatory sense of 'backward'. Citizens who emphasize their relationship with the state over their relationship with their family usually appear as 'modern' in developmentalist discourse. In this case, citizens who prefer state redistribution and do not want to lose their entitlement to *dibao* are nonetheless rendered problematic. They are characterized as backward because they refuse to use the modern law to enforce what is portrayed as equally traditional but valued as a virtue: redistribution within the family.

The discourse of promoting traditional family virtues and responsible adult children fits well into discourses brought to the village by the 'community building' efforts of the NGOs related to the New Rural Reconstruction Movement and analysed in the first part of this book. This became clear to me during a conversation between Dong Jie, the township agronomist, and Wang Yiyou, the leader of Villagers' Group No. 1.

In a break during the shooting of a report for the local TV station, the two discussed a state-funded project of 'constructing a Beautiful New Countryside' that was taking place in the neighbouring village where Dong Jie held the position of village party secretary. In this role, Dong Jie had successfully applied for state money to build wooden pavilions for visitors and old people to sit in. On a recent visit to this village, Wang Yiyou had been impressed by the pavilions and said that it would be nice if Dong Jie could also help them construct such fine buildings in Daxi Village. Dong Jie first seemed flattered, then immediately emphasized that the villagers should primarily rely on themselves, not those outside. Group leader Wang Yiyou repeated that they relied on him and that it would only work if he helped them. But the township agronomist again replied that the key was self-reliance. Otherwise, one would become dependent, he warned. Hence, it was necessary that the village first rely on itself and only then seek outside support.

As the conversation turned to the recent changes regarding the *dibao*, Dong Jie emphasized children's duty to care for their parents. If children did not care for their parents, it only proved that the parents themselves had failed in raising their children, and they could not

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simply transfer this responsibility to the state. One should not look for excuses but instead seek the cause in oneself. He lamented that people's thinking had changed for the worse, with some traditions getting lost or thrown away. He claimed that people had once been content when they had 'enough'. Now, he said, those who 'eat [receive] *dibao*' without even meeting the necessary conditions thought only about how they could keep 'eating' it. Once, before the 1970s, everyone believed that those who took without working should feel ashamed. Today, many thought that everyone should eat *dibao*, even if they had the capacity and talents to work. People's thinking had totally changed, he claimed. Once, they had thought they would only get rewarded for their own labour: back then, one said that 'although the people were poor, their will was not'. Now it was the other way around: 'the people were not poor, but their will was.'

The NGO narrative on self-reliant, cooperative communities could easily be carried over to the field of social policy. In both cases, a moral imperative to be individually willing to be active replaces and delegitimizes demands for redistribution directed towards the state. Only the non-state unit of promoted self-reliance differs. In one case, reference to 'tradition' evokes the virtues of a romanticized village community; in the other case, it evokes the imagined filial piety of the child in the traditional Chinese family.

This section showed that both the virtues and vices of 'traditional Chinese culture' were mobilized to justify cancelling *dibao* allowances during the push for standardization. According to one line of argument, there had been more familial care and self-reliance in the past, but this had been lost recently. This narrative of the loss of household responsibility goes hand in hand with another discourse about too-strong familial relations that are said to still exist and threaten the rational and scientific conduct of modern bureaucracy. The discourse of standardization thus promised, seemingly paradoxically, both modernization against traditional familism and a return to it.

Both sides of this apparent paradox can be confirmed through kinship measurements that are applied to mark the boundary between state and non-state. As we have seen in the introductory story to this chapter, filial piety may find expression in providing monetarily through different sources. Boundary work that marks *dibao* as state money not only can render such forms of support for the elderly invisible but can even turn traditional familism into its opposite, modern individualism. This was the case both when Duan Shuxi publicly shamed the young man and when researchers used *dibao* statistics to

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measure kinship based on the assumption of a zero-sum game between state support and family care. These measurements thus rely on *dibao* being permanently marked as being on the state side. Other kinship measurements that are used to fight corruption question this very assumption. This was the case both when villagers gossiped about the 70-year-old woman's *dibao* being based on 'social connections' and when the State Council suggested building a registry for kinship relations between *dibao* recipients and responsible bureaucrats. Such measurements attempted to unfold past performed state boundaries to judge whether the *dibao* receipt was indeed located on the state side. Thus a circularity of kinship measurements appeared: measured kinship was used to mark state boundaries and markers of the state were used as indicators of kinship. *Dibao* was taken for granted as the marker of the state side in measurements that diagnose a decline of familism and at the same time was fundamentally questioned by kinship measurements aiming at discovering corruption. This circularity should not be understood as pointing to wrong measurements that could be improved. Rather, it points to the generative capacity of measurement,[10] and the very nature of the state: the multiplicity of its boundaries.

Making *Dibao* Policy by Selectively Measuring Familism

That measurements are generative and state boundaries are multiple does not mean that anything goes. Once kinship measurements have been institutionalized, certain technologies need to be used, certain methodologies need to be followed and data must be available or made available in suitable formats. Evidence can also be hidden or even destroyed, and alternative indicators can be proposed even though they must struggle with established indicators for recognition.

During a conversation after the push for standardization, one township official told me that he had heard that some village committees redistributed *dibao* to those individuals whom they considered to be experiencing difficulties, as part of an internal agreement within the village. He commented that some village officials in the township 'do things in a chaotic manner'. What township officials called 'chaotic practice' when they had the 'ordering intention' (Bauman 2002: 287) of the standardization push in mind did not lack its own rationale. Building on interviews with village officials and citizens, I will now reconstruct *dibao* practices in Daxi Village before the general cancellation and reapplication in April 2015. The first

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section examines the practice of assembling needy individuals into *dibao* households. The second section focuses on workfare practices that made families relevant again as non-state others. In particular, I explore how kinship was measured in both cases.

Measuring Kinship to Assemble Dibao Households

In March 2015, one month before the cancellation of all *dibao* and the call for new applications, I had a conversation about *dibao* policy in the village with a leader of a villagers' group. The group leader stressed that *dibao* could only be granted to a whole household. He explained that although the amount of the allowance for a household was calculated per person, it was not possible for only some of them to receive it but not all. After a short pause, he added that earlier it had been possible for individuals to receive the *dibao*, as if he assumed that I might have heard about such a case. He explained that it had been possible to 'create a *dibao* household' (*zucheng yige dibaohu* 组成一个低保户).

He described the following example. If two households each included one person in a difficult situation, the *dibao* of one of those households could then be divided between the troubled persons in each household. This practice was no longer possible, he added: an entire household now had to qualify for *dibao*. After another short pause, the group leader stated: 'The countryside . . . the countryside is complicated, very complicated.'

From the perspective of one of the former individual recipients, the village's welfare practice was not 'complicated' or 'chaotic' at all. In the previous chapter, I introduced Li Yongkang, whose *dibao* was cancelled during standardization because he lived in his son's newly built house. When I talked to him in May 2015 in the sparsely furnished main room of this house, he confidently argued that the previous handling of the *dibao* by the village committee was correct. He said that he had known that 'state policy' had always targeted '*dibao* households' and not '*dibao* individuals' (*dibao geren* 低保个人). However, the village committee had more power, he explained: they only had to report the names of potential recipients to the township and the latter did not 'go down to the countryside' to investigate the applications. The village committee felt that it was irrational that in a household where only one (registered) member had difficulties the others should receive *dibao* as well. It was irrational to give it to those who were able to work and worked outside of the village, he added. Thus, the village committee redistributed the *dibao* of those

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household members who were able to work to sick, disabled and frail people living in other households. For example, he himself received *dibao* due to disability, he said, pointing to his mutilated fingers.

Similarly, an old man from another villagers' group did not depict the previous *dibao* policy in the village as 'chaotic', although he now emphasized that none of the former recipients in his group had met the conditions formulated by 'the state'. He told me that earlier on the households had not prepared the applications themselves and the members of the villagers' group had not participated in the decisions about the applications during public meetings. Instead, the group leader filled out the applications and handed them over to the village committee. He also suggested a rationale behind the group leader's decisions. He claimed that this group leader applied for the *dibao* for the elderly people in his villagers' group, meaning those who were older than sixty or seventy years.[11] The *dibao* was therefore given to individuals within different households, or sometimes to more than one person, as when there were two elders in the family.

In 2012, five years after the countrywide introduction of the rural *dibao* programme, the State Council stated more explicitly than in 2007 that the household was the proper unit for applications for the *dibao*, as mentioned in the section on strengthening household responsibility. I read this as an indication that the practice of creating one *dibao* household out of needy individuals from several families was not just unique to one village but was more widespread across China.

The village officials' main rationale for this past *dibao* practice thus resembled, to a certain extent, the one formulated by the State Council. One difference was that the village officials retrospectively appeared focused on needy individuals instead of viewing households as the 'proper' unit. However, they could not grant *dibao* to every individual who might be regarded as needy. While the township government did not review how *dibao* was distributed within the village between 2007 and 2013, there was a limit to how many *dibao* were allocated to each village. For example, another villager told me about how the village officials worked with the quota set from above.

The 77-year-old Li Jiazheng, whom I introduced in the last chapter, had not yet been informed that the township had approved his reapplication when we talked in May 2015. As we squatted on the ground outside the old adobe house where he lived with his wife and his adult son, he explained that the house belonged to a neighbour, who let them stay there for free. After the neighbour's former husband had died in a motorcycle accident, she had remarried and

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moved to her new husband's house in the same villagers' group. Since a wall of Li Jiazheng's own adobe house in the old compound of the pre-revolution landlord was likely to collapse the next time it rained, she let the family move into her former home. Li Jiazheng insisted, in contrast to Li Yongkang, that 'state policy' regarding the cancellation and the renewed applications had indeed shifted from supporting individuals to supporting households.[12] He explained that he and his mother, but not his wife, had received *dibao* in the last two years. Village officials had then transferred his allowance to a neighbour who had become paralysed. He told me that the village officials explained to him that they had to do this because so many people already received *dibao* in the village. After the recent death of his mother, he again could receive *dibao*. This quota meant that not everyone who might be regarded as needy could actually receive the allowance, which of course led to disagreements about who was judged to fit the category of 'needy individual' and could become a member of an assembled *dibao* household.

Dibao policy in Daxi Village partly overlapped with the State Council's (2007) emphasis in Document No. 19 that 'government relief' should be combined with other forms of support. It also valued mutual aid, as with the adobe house that was turned over to needy neighbours to use. It valued individual self-reliance even more than the central government because it emphasized that individuals capable of working should not receive the *dibao*. However, *dibao* practices in the village did not accept the needy being denied state support because they happened to be registered in a household with others who could work. In this regard, this *dibao* policy rejected the discourse of 'traditional Chinese familism'. The boundary between state, family and individual was performed differently when the village officials made, rather than only implemented, *dibao* policy. To secure funding from higher state levels, villagers and village officials alike had no problem freeing themselves from what some authors describe as a deeply entrenched Chinese traditional culture.

If one does not assume that families or households are essential entities but acknowledges the generative power of kinship measurements, assembled *dibao* households prior to the standardization push no longer appear as 'fake' in contrast to those households that received the *dibao* after standardization. Rather, *dibao* households were assembled through measurements both before and after standardization. What changed were only the indicators used to measure belonging to *dibao* households. The former assembled *dibao* households were based on measurements of need and the potential

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to cooperate on sharing resources, in particular the *dibao*. In these measurements, living together under one roof was not considered a relevant criterion. Post-standardization *dibao* households were also not necessarily living together under one roof most of the year. As detailed in Chapter 5, in applications for *dibao* the stated household income included that of those who were registered as belonging to one household, even if they migrated to other places to work most of the year. These latter *dibao* households were thus also assembled based on measurements of need and the potential to cooperate on sharing resources but used the household book as material evidence for measuring the latter. In both cases, the time spent together living under one roof and the amount of actually shared resources was not measured. Only one minute, yet consequential, difference in measuring kinship – the kind of admissible data for evidencing the potential for sharing resources – shaped where the boundaries of state responsibility and redistribution were performed before and after the standardization push. This shift in performed state boundaries turned the non-state other from assembled *dibao* households into problematic *dibao* individuals and, eventually, into individuals without *dibao*.

Measuring Kinship for Family Workfare

While cohabitation was not a relevant indicator when assembling *dibao* households in Daxi Village, recipients' kinship was measured as lived closeness for the workfare aspect of *dibao* prior to standardization. Workfare was another case of using the *dibao* as a means for rural governance because it could contribute to the village's development efforts of becoming a successful 'ecological village'. The roads in the village had to be kept free of trash not only for the rural citizens themselves but also to make a good impression on visitors. Here, I first look at the central government's statements concerning work in relation to the *dibao* before reconstructing workfare practices in Daxi based on conversations with villagers.

In 2007, the State Council, in Section One of Document No. 19, stressed that the government aimed to help those who needed social assistance and those among the poor who had the capacity to work to actively work themselves out of poverty and to become rich. In Section Two, the document emphasized that assistance should promote jobs being taken up and reiterated that those with the capacity to work should be encouraged and supported in fending for themselves (State Council 2007).

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In 2012, in Document No. 45 of the State Council, the central government emphasized that the standard for the rural *dibao* needed to be set below the minimum wage. This shows the primacy given to wage labour as the proper way to earn a living. As Document No. 45 was (unlike Document No. 19 in 2007) concerned with urban *dibao* as well as rural, a difference becomes more visible. In urban areas, the State Council called for connecting *dibao* with employment: unemployed urban poor are expected to first register for unemployment at the public employment service organization, which was not the case in rural areas; however, an active search for employment was still to be encouraged.

In December 2009, the People's Government of Sichuan Province published the guidelines for the implementation of the rural *dibao* policy (Department of Civil Affairs of Sichuan Province 2009). While the central government did not mention community service as a condition for receiving *dibao*, this issue appears in Section Three of the equivalent provincial document. One paragraph specifies the conditions under which a recipient's *dibao* had to be terminated, stating that those who had the normal capacity to work and without proper reason refused to accept wage employment offered by the government or participate in work for the social and public good twice within one year would lose their right to *dibao*.

Having looked at *dibao* policy in relation to work requirements in the central government and provincial government documents, I now turn to practices of workfare in Daxi Village. As discussed in the first part of this book, the village positioned itself as an ecological village and 'environmental sanitation' (*huanjing weisheng* 环境卫生) was regarded as one way of making the ecological visible to outsiders. Since the tax reform in the early 2000s, collection of taxes and levying of fees had been severely restricted. Villages had been faced with funding shortfalls, and trash collection presented a challenge to village governance. The village committee requested some *dibao* recipients to pick up trash along the village roads.

Li Yongkang and his cousin Li Yongde had both received *dibao* before the standardization in 2015. As they lived next to the concrete public road at the edge of the village, the group leader had asked them to pick up the trash in cases when outside visitors were expected. The village officials informed them shortly before higher-level officials visited. In another villagers' group, an old man – whom a poster at the office building of the village committee praised as a 'good party member' – was asked to pick up the trash alongside the road and keep the village square clean in exchange for *dibao*. He was

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also contacted when urban middle-class consumers came to visit the vegetable unit of the peasant cooperative, which was located close to the village committee building. In yet another group, which was more remote and rarely visited by outsiders, the group leader did not ask the elderly people for whom he had arranged *dibao* to pick up trash. Instead, a middle-aged deaf man kept the road clean. Until recently, he had also received *dibao*, but now he received another kind of allowance, the so-called 'five guarantee support' (*wubao gongyang* 五保供养).[13]

As already mentioned, Li Yongkang's cousin Li Yongde was blind. Therefore, village officials called on his wife, who did not receive the *dibao*, to clean in his stead. The 'good party member' did not personally receive *dibao* either – village officials asked him to perform the task on behalf of his wife, to whom they had granted *dibao* because she had a leg disability. Rather than emphasizing compelling poor people with labour capacity to actively work for their *dibao*, workfare was only selectively required in exchange for *dibao* when labour was needed to overcome budget shortages and fulfil necessary tasks in village governance.

This workfare aspect of *dibao* policy also changed due to standardization in April 2015. Li Yongkang, whose *dibao* had been cancelled, was critical of the earlier workfare obligations. He doubted that a state regulation existed that obliged the recipients of the *dibao* to perform community work. During an interview, he expressed his opinion that those who received the *dibao* were relatively poor people and should be respected and valued. They should be looked after by the state. He told me that he did not believe the village officials who claimed during a meeting that the township government had said that the *dibao* would be withdrawn if someone refused to pick up trash: workfare had been imposed on him by the village officials rather than state policy. Guo Xiaolin (2001) has called this 'the image of the bifurcated state'. In the eyes of villagers 'the central state stands for justice and the local state for injustice' (Guo 2001: 439).

One group leader who was directly involved in mobilizing the *dibao* recipients in his group for such work also thought that the village committee's acts were not in accordance with state regulations. One day in May 2015, I was picking up trash with the group leader, the above-mentioned 'good party member' and the husband of a former *dibao* recipient. His wife's *dibao* had been cancelled some months earlier, before the big standardization push. Now the village committee had promised to pay for the work at the end of the year. The group leader explained that the township now had a small budget for

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such simple tasks within the village. When I asked the group leader about the *dibao* households who had previously been responsible for carrying out this task, he responded that there had been no such duty to perform work according to state regulations. It had once been organized like that, but it was no longer possible to do it that way. The standardization push in April 2015 ended this practice of workfare. Community work was no longer required of *dibao* recipients in Daxi Village.

The village committee of Daxi Village had assembled *dibao* individuals into *dibao* households without taking cohabitation into account. Despite this rejection of the discourse of responsibility in traditional Chinese familism, they measured kinship as lived closeness when determining who should carry out workfare that helped solve the problem of removing trash from along the roads given a limited village budget. Here they performed cohabitation as the relevant marker of the family and selectively activated a discourse of familial duty to make citizens carry out public tasks for the village community. Kinship measurements thus shaped the boundaries of both state responsibility and duties to the state, both before and during standardization.

Conclusion: Circular Multiplicity

This chapter dealt with the relationship between traditional Chinese familism and social policy. While family and policy are often studied separately by specialized disciplines and subdisciplines – kinship studies and family sociology on the one hand; political science, political sociology and political anthropology on the other – China Studies has long explored the relationship between the two. Having presented two prevalent approaches in China Studies – culturalism and statism, I examined the relationship between family and *dibao* policy through kinship measurements that produce and use markers of the boundary between state and non-state.

This generative capacity of measurements and the flexible uses of different indicators of kinship put into question arguments about the persistence of traditional familism as a stable essence of 'Chinese culture' that limits the political possibilities for change regarding social policy in China. In the cases presented here, Chinese familism does not appear as a set of deeply entrenched values of family duty that can readily be exploited by the Chinese state, as some have suggested. Nor is it the intentional product of the intervention of a monolithic

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state, as others have argued. Rather, one can see how differently embedded actors with divergent interests apply kinship measurements as they pursue diverse goals. In these processes, the boundaries of 'the state' and 'the family' or 'the household' are performed and thus responsibilities are negotiated. Thereby, *dibao* practices of bureaucrats and applicants are either made visible as familial care that corrupts state policy or turned into the apparent opposite of filial piety – modern individualism – that fails to comply with state policy.

While alternative indicators for assembling *dibao* households and demanding family workfare could be developed and applied, such measurements could compete with others that prescribe certain methodologies and insist on the use of evidence of a specific format (such as registration in the household book). The multiple versions of state boundaries that these different kinship measurements produce are neither 'true' nor 'false': all produce distinct effects and consequences. Even divergent kinship measurements can work together. Seemingly circular measurements attested both to too much familism (so-called 'human feelings guarantees' and 'social connection guarantees') and not enough familism (the much-criticized weakening of 'household responsibility'). Together, the central government and township officials used this circular multiplicity of state boundaries to justify *dibao* standardization.

Approaching the relationship between family and social policy through the lens of kinship measurements and performed state boundaries avoids essentializing the substances of both kinship and the state. It takes the agency of human actors seriously without taking for granted what they regard as 'true' family and state and without reducing family and state to mere ideas. Instead, it shifts attention to the multiplicity of indicators and methodologies, as well as to the materiality of technologies and evidence. This attention to measurement thus helps in understanding both the flexibility and stability of multiple state boundaries.

Notes

* An earlier version of this chapter was published as 'Care Scales: Dibao Allowances, State and Family in China', *The China Quarterly* 254: 310–24, Copyright © 2023 The Author, published by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission. This chapter has been significantly revised and adapted for this book. It introduces the notion of circular multiplicity to further develop the ethnographic theorization of performed state boundaries.

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1. More powerful actors, such as insurance companies, appear to be more successful at reframing certain actions in the supposedly 'public' realm of the economy as familial care; for example, in representing the purchase of commercial insurance products as a 'modern' form of showing 'traditional' filial piety (Zhang H. 2017).
2. A growing body of microhistories that contradicts the thesis of the decline of kinship in the West has not yet diminished the importance of this ideological claim for certain formulations of Western self-identity (Sabean and Teuscher 2013: 1) – nor, I would add, for certain formulations of East Asian self-identity that reflect them.
3. Yet it would be worth querying whether 'classic' Chinese familism has ever existed in the form it is imagined today. A volume on Chinese patriarchy by Gonçalo Santos and Stevan Harrell (2017) offers interesting insights and nuanced reflections on contemporary families in China, but I regard their adoption of a 'working model of Chinese classic patriarchal structures before 1949' (Harrell and Santos 2017: 11) for the purpose of historical comparison as problematic. While most of the propositions they derive from this comparison appear sensible at first sight, some appear less convincing when one notes astonishing parallels with Fei Xiaotong's writings about Chinese familism from more than seventy years earlier. The two editors suggest the following statements, for example. 'The generational axis of the classic patriarchal configuration has not disappeared completely, but has weakened in some ways, flipped in others, and twisted its lineality in still others' (Harrell and Santos 2017: 32). '[O]pportunities to earn income through labor migration have put much more power in the hands of the junior generations, transforming but not eliminating the generational axis of inequality' (ibid.: 19). From a functionalist perspective, Fei Xiaotong (1946) similarly argued on this topic: 'Although the Chinese peasants usually live with their parents who are too old to work and depend on the younger generation for support, the rule of the old is not deep-rooted. An adult son who tills the land and brings back necessities for the household is not living under the thumb of his father' (ibid.: 4). One may thus doubt whether the claimed weakening of the generational axis of Chinese patriarchy is all that new, or even begin to wonder if classical Chinese familism ever existed as a structure.
4. There are a few exceptions. Zhang Hong (2017), for example, looks not only at the 'private' realm of the family but also at the 'modern' reconfiguration of 'traditional' filial piety as it enters the 'public' realm of the economy through an emerging elder-care industry with fee-based elder homes and commercial insurance schemes for elders. She focuses on slogans and campaigns rather than on bureaucratic practices and negotiations on the ground.
5. See a *Caixin Global* article, http://china.caixin.com/2013-12-25/100621878.html (accessed 18 November 2023).

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6. When wet fields lay fallow, weeds become a major issue. Lena Kaufmann (2021) describes various techno-social strategies of rural citizens to preserve the productivity of their wet fields while pursuing off-farm migration.
7. This social insurance was essentially an old-age pension scheme organized by the state. One had to pay contributions for at least fifteen years. After reaching the age of sixty, one received monthly benefits, with the amount depending on the level of past contributions. The benefits from this scheme were substantially higher than those of *dibao*.
8. Scalar imaginaries developed in early social science continue to influence policymaking in the presence. Many bipolar concepts were once developed based on assumptions about the consequences of differences in scale. Hence, while anthropology was made responsible for small (and 'simple') societies, large (and 'complex') societies were the competence of sociology. Criticisms of both the persistence and decline of familism in justifications of *dibao* standardization reveal persistent scalar imaginaries about care at different levels. Following contemporary social science research that examines actors' scale-making projects, my research shows that scale (e.g. 'small' family and 'large' state) is not a given that influences the quantity and quality of care but an achievement of kinship measurements and performances of state boundaries in negotiations and practices of care (Lammer 2023a).
9. Despite the omnipresence of the discourse of elderly parents' rights, there was still space for negotiation and maneuver. One township official described a conversation between officials about a woman in a village where he had been sent to implement the standardization push. This 82-year-old woman did indeed have children, but they had not visited her in more than twenty years. In this case, the officials decided to accept the application and forwarded it to the higher levels, who eventually approved it.
10. 'The process of measurement tends to produce the phenomenon it claims to measure' (Merry 2016: 12).
11. Such practices have also been documented in other places in China, where '*dibao* has effectively been converted . . . to a tax-based, universal pension . . . perceived to be available to everyone' (Yang, Walker and Xie 2020: 671).
12. While Li Yongkang retrospectively accepted written regulations as marking 'state policy', this marker remained irrelevant for Li Jiazheng.
13. The five guarantees are said to cover food, clothing, housing, medical care and burial expenses for recipients who are classified as having no supporting family members, no ability to work and no source of income.

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