

Conclusion

Unblurring the Multiplicity of State Boundaries

This book started with a profile of Dong Jie, who pursued a vision of sustainable rural development and ecological agriculture through peasant and consumer participation. My first description retrospectively compressed a selection of his situated activities into a state of blurriness. I represented him as an intermediary: an agronomist employed by the township government who cooperated closely with rural development NGOs to make Daxi an ecological village. Such descriptions are not uncommon throughout the social sciences, even if their interpretations vary. Based on an idealized model of the Weberian state, political science has often interpreted the absence of a clear state boundary as indicating failure in non-Western institutions or people. Anthropology, on the other hand, has localized failure in certain strands of Western state theory, declaring that the blurring of the state boundary is not exceptional but commonplace. I contend that similar epistemological practices underlie these divergent arguments and produce blurriness.

Diagnoses of a blurred state boundary are artefacts of academic research. This is not to argue that there really is one clear boundary of the state and that blurriness, like messiness,¹ only reveals methodological shortcomings in the research. On the contrary, I take diagnoses of blurriness to point to the multiplicity of state boundaries. Descriptions like my initial take on Dong Jie merely reify situated markers of state boundaries as substantial attributes that transcend time and place. This forecloses the possibility of exploring the multiplicity, materiality and temporality of performed state boundaries.

Therefore, this book suggests approaching the state not as substance but as its performed boundaries. This parallels a move from essentialized substance to boundaries in studying ethnic groups (Barth 1969) and redirects attention to ‘ways of signalling’ differences between state and non-state in performance. In particular, I have combined analysis of discursive boundary work with a focus on performance.

In this concluding chapter, I first argue that much social science research – including in anthropology – has approached the state as substance (albeit very different substances in different studies). Often, situationally relevant boundary markers have been mistaken for continuously relevant substantial attributes. I point out that what has been analysed as substance marks not only boundaries of the state but also disciplinary boundaries in the academic division of labour. Conversely, as state analyses have shifted from one substance to another, social science has contributed new scripts and markers to state boundary repertoires. While not all these contributions have been taken up, some have travelled around the world and informed performances of state boundaries in many places – including the ecological village that formed the stage for this book.

Mobilizing insights from my ethnography, this conclusion presents an analytical vocabulary to capture what often remains hidden behind diagnoses of a blurred state boundary: the multiplicity of state boundaries. Attention to the different dimensions of this multiplicity helps in understanding how conflicting in-between positions emerge, as well as those situations in which tensions do not emerge despite the absence of a single clear-cut boundary. Finally, I turn to the differences that performed state boundaries make in participatory development and democratic bureaucracy in the ecological village, but potentially also in the analysis of the state in China Studies, anthropology and the social sciences more broadly.

The State as Substance

Analyses of the substance of the state ask what the essence of the state is. Here, I assemble a host of different answers. Rather than offering a comprehensive overview, I concentrate on selected authors and exemplary approaches to map the broad variety of analysed state substances. To be sure, I am lumping together very diverse substances ranging from violence to ideas, from rationality to affect, from bureaucratic practices to images, from invisible structure to observable connections, and from rituals to infrastructures. Moreover,

some analyses, mainly anthropological, have explored substances that are not exclusive to the state but leaking into society. Yet despite these great differences, isolated analyses of the respective substances ultimately leave open the question of what makes these into substances of ‘the state’. The following brief summaries of a broad array of approaches to the state certainly cannot do justice to their complexity. Some studies (for example, those using the stategraphy approach) have combined analyses of selected state substances with explorations of boundary work and thus paved the ground for my approach to performative boundary work.

Solidity: Substances of Weberian and Marxist State Analyses

Although Max Weber never completed the systematic account of the state he had envisioned, fragments of his writings continue to inform much research on the state in history, political science, sociology and anthropology.² In particular, Weber identified the successful establishment of a monopoly of legitimate violence within a given territory as the defining characteristic of the modern state in the Occidental world. Furthermore, he saw monopolized violence as enabling another important attribute, rational domination. For Weber, the combination of monopolized violence and rationality made the modern state into an entity with a substantially different structure from other historical and contemporaneous forms of political association.

Weber’s methodological individualism made him regard the state and other entities as structured through human action. He clarified that in empirical reality the idea of the state corresponded to ‘an infinity of diffuse and discrete human actions . . . all bound together by an idea, namely the belief in the actual or normative validity of rules and of the authority-relationships of some human beings towards others’ (Weber 1949: 99). For Weber, legal specifications regulating how officeholders should act were thus a key feature of the modern state. Yet this insight did not make Weber examine actual processes of how violence was performed as state violence or how rationality was performed as state rationality in concrete situations. Instead, Weber was interested in the structural specificity of the state. He pursued structural-formal analysis because he thought that ‘combined action of a plurality of individuals results in something *sui generis*, which cannot be reduced to the action of the one’ (Dusza 1989: 73). While thus acknowledging that the state is embodied in the action of concrete individuals, Weber’s actual analysis reifies the state: monop-

olized violence and rationality become the essentialized substances that make the state a unitary subject with its own will.³

Marxist approaches, on the other hand, have reified the state as object (Bratsis 2006: 9–12). Instrumentalist state-as-object conceptions view the state as a ‘passive, or even neutral, tool which is so completely manipulated by one class or fraction that it is divested of any autonomy whatsoever’ (Poulantzas 1980: 129). Ralph Miliband (1969), for example, argues that the class position of those who people the state and especially the government, as well as their connections with other members of the bourgeoisie, make the state an instrument of capitalist class interests. Here, class power itself becomes the substance of the state.

Critical of emptying the state of all other substance, Nicos Poulantzas (1980: 128)⁴ and Bob Jessop (1990; 2008) have reformulated Marxist state theory to acknowledge the ‘relative autonomy of the capitalist state’.⁵ That formulation has often been misunderstood, with many regarding it as a limited version of the neo-Weberian claim for the complete autonomy of the state from society.⁶ However, relative autonomy points to the ‘institutional materiality of the State’ (Poulantzas 1980: 49) as the ‘*specific material condensation* of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions’ (ibid.: 129). Overcoming Poulantzas’ structuralism and class reductionism, Jessop (1990: 260) characterizes the state more broadly as ‘the site, the generator, and the product of strategies’. Although this thoroughly contingency-oriented approach denies the state any predetermined function or subjectivity, Peter Bratsis (2006: 20) criticizes it for still reducing the state to the institutional materiality of society. In these neo-Marxist state-as-relation conceptualizations, institutions – in Jessop’s threefold characterization – become the substance of the state. However, as Bratsis (ibid.: 20) also points out, the question of how to know which institutions are ‘state’ institutions and which are not remains unanswered.

Leakage: Substances of Anthropological State Analyses

Several authors have forcefully criticized the Weberian notion of the state existing as a ‘substantial entity separate from society’ (Abrams 1988: 61). For them, ‘the State’ only existed as a ‘fiction of the philosophers’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: xxiii), as an ‘ideological artefact’ (Abrams 1988: 81). What they acknowledged to exist was ‘an organization, i.e. a collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relations’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: xxiii),

the 'state-system' as a 'palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government' (Abrams 1988: 82). In a way, this critique thus comes surprisingly close to what Weber (1949: 99) himself highlighted: the importance of the idea of the state holding together discrete human actions. Still, this scepticism inspired anthropologists – latecomers to the study of states – to turn their attention to two quite different substances: state images and bureaucratic practices.

Two anthropological literatures developed, but largely separately from each other (Thelen, Veters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 3–6). Following Akhil Gupta's seminal article (1995), the new ethnography of the state explored the cultural construction of representations of the state (Herzfeld 1992; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Yang S. 2005; for a fierce criticism, see A. Marcus 2008). Other anthropologists studied bureaucratic practices (Heyman 1995, 2004; Kirsch 2003; Hull 2012; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014), often without labelling this 'anthropology of the state'. Neither found the state's boundaries particularly relevant, albeit for different reasons.

While the title of Gupta's article was 'blurred boundaries', he was criticizing the image of a clear-cut state boundary as a product of failed Western theory that was unable to grasp lived realities in the rest of the world (Gupta 1995: 384). Beyond that, the boundary question appears pointless: after all, the state is only imagined as an entity distinct from society. For those who examined how practices of 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) shaped policy, what mattered was the bureaucrats' face-to-face encounters with citizens and their embeddedness in different networks of connections (Gluckman, Mitchell and Barnes 1949; Kuper 1970; Bellér-Hann and Hann 1999; Von Benda-Beckmann and Von Benda-Beckmann 2007: 205–35). While these studies highlighted the challenges and opportunities of conflicting demands that bureaucrats faced due to these ambiguous positions, their (also) being state actors was never in question.

Relational approaches to the anthropology of the state deepened what the Manchester School had begun to explore decades earlier: state actors' embeddedness and cross-cutting ties (Thelen, Veters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018). As in neo-Marxist approaches, relations are explored as the substance of the state, yet these are very different kinds of relations. For Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop, the concept of social relations does not refer to concrete empirical phenomena. The relationship of forces in Poulantzas' definition of the state cannot be perceived directly, yet it is said to be productive and therefore real (Pühretmayer 2017). As these relations

are neither directly accessible to the actors themselves nor social scientists, both must infer what the relationship of forces might look like from observable events, interactions, patterns of interaction, material artefacts and so on. For the relational anthropology of the state, on the other hand, relations are empirically accessible personal connections (Alexander 2002: 92–93). Inspired by transactional approaches that understand the state as ‘aggregated patterns of interaction among individuals’ (Frödin 2012: 271), ‘concrete social relations’ in ‘recurring interactions’ are thought to ‘sediment into larger political formations and lend the state as a political formation an appearance of coherence through time’ (Thelen, Veters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 8–9). Approaching the state exclusively through connections as recurring interactions still means studying it as a substance, even if the acknowledgement of cross-cutting ties implies that this substance is leaking into society. Without additional concepts, the state as its boundaries remains unexamined.⁷

Beyond images, practices and connections, anthropological research has opened new perspectives on the state by shifting attention to substances that other approaches regarded as the opposite of the essence of the state: affects, feelings and emotions. Offering an important corrective to the Weberian analysis of rational authority, anthropologists have turned to ‘states of feeling’ (Andreetta et al. 2022) and ‘affective states’, arguing that affect is ‘the substance of politics’ (Stoler 2004: 6; Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017: 2). When ‘intensities’ are tied to political symbols and discourse, ‘the state acquires a tangible, affective, and spatial reality’ (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017: 6). In this stream of research, fear (Aretxaga 2003) and hope (Jansen 2014) become the substance of the state. Although the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ‘have explicitly contrasted the realm of “affect” as distinct from the realm of state practice’ (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017: 5), anthropologists have disagreed. They have found values and affect at the ‘heart of the state’ (Fassin 2015) and that affective labour can produce states of a different substance: intimate states (Vollebergh, De Koning and Marchesi 2021). Analysing affect and emotions as substances, the state no longer appears as a ‘bounded entity . . . that is set apart both from individuals and from “society”’ (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017: 10). Rather, ‘the ambivalence or indeterminacy of affect’ would help in understanding ‘the intrinsic indeterminacy of the state form itself’ (ibid.: 9). Understood as cross-cutting substances, affects and emotions again made anthropologists insist on the blurriness of the state boundary.

Besides the embodied materiality of affect, anthropologists have also explored the material substance of the state through studies of infrastructure (Harvey 2010; Dalakoglou 2012; Knox 2017; Thiemann 2024: chapter 2). These studies have explored ‘the ways in which [infrastructures such as] the road materialized the state [or not]’ (Harvey and Knox 2015: 3). Attending to the agency of nonhuman actors in the emergence of the state, they move beyond liberal conceptions of the political as being limited to negotiations between state and citizens (ibid.: 187). Some of these studies also found that infrastructures manifested volatility between ‘state presence’ and ‘state absence’ (Harvey and Knox 2015: 39). Yet diagnoses of absence and presence only become possible when the boundaries of the state are taken for granted. When the presence of central state authorities at inaugural ceremonies is understood as ‘mark[ing] the road as a state space’ (ibid.: 191), the analysis remains tautological until it answers what makes authorities into ‘state’ authorities at these events. Studying the state through infrastructure thus also requires attention to performative boundary work.

Reviving an old anthropological concern with ritual, anthropologists have turned performances into yet another substance for state analysis. In the introduction, I discussed old and new studies of performances of the state as an important inspiration for the approach presented in this book (Geertz 1980; Ahern 1981; Bloch 1987; Rasanayagam, Beyer and Reeves 2014; Sedlenieks 2020b). But I also pointed to the use of ‘mimicry’, ‘mimesis’, ‘imitation’, ‘camouflage’ and ‘state-like’ as problematic concepts for analysing the appearances of those assumed to be non-state actors. The underlying assumption of the truth of the state can only be avoided if the analyses do not understand performances of power as state substance but focus on the signalling of difference to some non-state other.

The limited attention to boundary work makes me pool this broad variety of anthropological approaches to the state and characterize them uniformly as analyses of substances. However, few anthropologists have actually thought about the state explicitly in terms of substance. One recent exception is Klāvs Sedlenieks (2020a), who proposes a liquid-crystal theory of the state. In this ambitious formulation, he uses the specificity of the substance of a liquid crystal to combine the analyses of ‘four aspects of the state’ (Sedlenieks 2020a: 497; or ‘four state substances’, as I would call them). He links structure and hierarchy with performance and elusiveness (ibid.: 498–500). Sedlenieks (2020a: 497) suggests that the state is a

three-dimensional space filled with a substance that is dotted with smaller or larger shapes of different transparency . . . These are areas where some effort has been made to modify the structure of the substance – they are either completely solid crystals or fluid liquid crystals, while the rest is completely transparent liquid with no structure at all.

The specific substance of the liquid crystal allows Sedlenieks (2020a: 501) to explain the emergence of a plurality of positioned perspectives on the state: ‘From each particular node inside the state, the pattern the other nodes are making will seem quite different.’ Bringing attention to this ‘multiplexity’ (ibid.: 498) is the major strength of the metaphor of the liquid crystal. It highlights the possibility that the same activities ‘align’ (ibid.: 497) for specific actors ‘to resemble an orchestrated effort’ (ibid.: 507) but not for differently positioned actors. I will return to this insight when discussing the multiplicity of performed state boundaries below.

Yet by combining four state substances, Sedlenieks’ powerful theoretical proposition inherits the shared limitation of the separate analyses. While bringing diverse substances together through the notion of a liquid crystal enables bundling the strengths and counterbalancing the weaknesses of the individual approaches, one general problem persists: the state boundary – taken for granted in either its sharpness or blurriness – remains unexamined. The state as liquid crystal has no outside, even though the bureaucracy does (ibid.: 508). Each perspective comes from a node ‘inside the state’ (ibid.: 501), and the vertical structures of bureaucracy are just ‘one among other nodes of crystallization [such as ‘kin and other networks’ (ibid.: 506)], all of which comprise the fabric of the state’ (ibid.: 508). Combining various substances as liquid crystal,⁸ ‘the totality of the state’ (ibid.: 500) remains indistinguishable from other structures, hierarchies, performances and illusions.

Overall, my rereading of the anthropology of the state suggests that anthropologists have greatly expanded the variety of analysed state substances. Their analyses have brought substances under scrutiny that were the apparent opposites of what other social science approaches treated as the essence of the state. Indeed, anthropologists have rarely thought about images and practices, connections and performances, emotions and infrastructures in terms of state substances. Rather, many have stressed the state’s ‘powerful insubstantiality’ (Taussig 1992: 113) and would most likely object to my representing them as having analysed the substances of the state. Indeed, most of the substances analysed by anthropologists have turned out to be

'leaking' into society. In critiques of mainstream state theory, this is typically conceptualized in terms of a blurred boundary, intermediation, embeddedness, entanglement or indeterminacy. Attention to leaking substances thus has produced a lopsided emphasis on blurriness that has left the multiplicity of state boundaries unexplored. Nonetheless, this attention to leaking substances has enabled the fundamental questioning of the state as a distinct solid entity and thereby opened the way for the later analysis of boundary work.

State Substances as Markers of Disciplinary Boundaries

Anthropology's potential to transform state analyses by directing attention first to leaking substances and later to boundary work has long been hindered by the disciplinary division of labour. Understanding the state as its boundaries enables rereading the history of the social-scientific study of the state to highlight how some markers of state boundaries (misunderstood as substantial attributes in state analysis) have also marked and reinforced disciplinary divisions. Depending on what kind of substance was considered the essence of the state, different disciplines were regarded as capable of state analysis or not. When this analysis was broadened to include new substances, the state was opened as a field of inquiry for new disciplines. In turn, disciplinary trends shaped which substances social scientists analysed when writing about the state.

During the formative period of anthropology during the second half of the nineteenth century, evolutionism made the origin of the modern state a subject for anthropologists such as Lewis Henry Morgan (1985 [1877]). Morgan's work started with the discovery of an apparently 'unusual system of naming kinsmen' and only later developed into a theory of cultural evolution with 'parallel sequences in the history of social, economic and political institutions' (Leacock 1972: 9–10). This holistic view that linked kinship with politics and economics informed Marxist approaches to the state. Karl Marx read Morgan's *Ancient Society* closely, and Friedrich Engels (1972 [1884]) used Marx's ethnological excerpts (Krader 1974) in writing *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. While anthropological interest in the origins of the state faded in the twentieth century (with a few exceptions like Lowie 1927; Krader 1968), early anthropological holism entered broader social science debates on the state through this trajectory. Traces of this holism can be found in neo-Marxist state-as-object and state-as-relation formulations that take class relations (or the institutional condensation of the relations

of forces) as the substance of the state. It also resurfaced when Antonio Gramsci (1971: 261) argued that ‘by “State” should be understood not only the apparatus of government, but also the “private” apparatus of “hegemony” or civil society’, and when Louis Althusser (1971: 144) included family and other institutions that liberalism considers to be ‘private’ in his empirical list of ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (see also Poulantzas 1980: 72–73).

Evolutionary thinking about historical stages also contributed to the emergence of the modernist academic division of labour between anthropology and sociology in the early twentieth century. Weber’s analysis of Western modernity turned the monopoly of violence and the rationality embodied in law and bureaucracy into the substances of the state. With the publication of *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), the academic division of labour further solidified. This foundational text of political anthropology introduced a fundamental distinction between kin-based and state-based societies. While the former were regarded as proper subjects for anthropology, the modern state was left to sociology and political science for the greater part of the twentieth century (Thelen, Vetter, and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 8; Thelen and Alber 2018: 7–8). By excluding kinship as a potential substance of the state, it became another marker of disciplinary boundaries. At that time, this made anthropology, with its key expertise in kinship and other ‘pre-modern’ forms of social organization, irrelevant for the study of contemporary states. The assumed universalism of rationality further exacerbated the uselessness of an anthropology that studied different ‘cultures’ and even their seemingly irrational mythologies. As the supposed substance of the state, rational bureaucracy thus also became a marker of disciplinary boundaries. Due to anthropology’s self-imposed limitations, ‘the functioning of the actual state – the colonial one – in that very context’ was long ignored (Das and Poole 2004: 4).

Only in the 1960s and 1970s did some anthropologists, such as those from the Manchester School, turn their attention to the colonial state, even as others continued to ignore it. Max Gluckman and his colleagues (1949) challenged the disciplinary division of academic labour by exploring cross-cutting ties. Prefiguring relations (as observable connections) as an alternative state substance, they ignored both kinship and rational bureaucracy as coinciding markers of state boundaries and disciplinary divisions.

In the 1990s, the cultural turn in the social sciences further eroded the relevance of these markers of difference. Surfing the wave of this

broader academic transformation, the new ethnography of the state has largely fulfilled other disciplines' expectations by making culturally constructed images the state substance to be analysed (Thelen, Vetter and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 3). Once the boundaries of anthropology had thus been opened for explorations of the state, anthropological trends of the 2000s and 2010s – like the affective turn and new materialism – enabled the production of new substances for state analyses.

Even if this shift in analysed state substances enabled anthropology's renewed entrance in social-scientific debates about the state, within the discipline the exploration of the state has often remained limited to political anthropology. Successful performances of state boundaries continue to convince social scientists and reinforce sub-disciplinary boundaries; for example, between kinship studies and political anthropology (or family sociology and political sociology). To be sure, state policies have increasingly received attention in kinship studies, but the focus is mainly on how the state above shapes families below.

Approaching the state as its boundaries offers a conceptual means to create further connections across the boundaries of different fields of study. This book has removed the anthropology of the state from the box of political anthropology by examining the boundaries between state and family (Chapters 3 and 6). In particular, it has linked analyses of kinship measurements with analyses of performative boundary work. Kinship measurements are not applied only in negotiations of belonging (Thelen and Lammer 2021), where they are used to settle questions of citizenship along external state borders (Papadaki 2018; Markó 2021), but also produce markers of internal state boundaries. These two concepts can thus help to create links between political anthropology (or political sociology), on the one hand, and kinship studies (or family sociology), on the other.

As state boundaries are performed in relation to multiple non-state others (see the section on domain multiplicity below), the notion of performative boundary work also promises to erode boundaries and strengthen links between political anthropology (or political sociology) and several other subfields. Exploring economy (Mitchell 1991) and religion (Kirsch 2003) as non-state others in performances of state boundaries, for example, reconnects the study of the state with the anthropology (or sociology) of economy and religion, respectively. Because markers of state boundaries that have been reified as substances have also come to mark and reinforce disciplinary boundaries, turning from an analysis of state substances to the relational

analysis of state boundaries allows new insights by crossing disciplinary boundaries and overcoming sub-disciplinary fragmentation.

State Substances as Markers of State Boundaries

Thus far, my rereading of the anthropology of the state from an understanding of the state as its boundaries has only reflected on academic debates. But attention to performative boundary work also offers a perspective for examining how analyses of the state feed back into the very processes they aim to study. I have argued that copresence during participant observation offers the opportunity to recognize performances of state boundaries in their situational relevance and multiplicity. This made me realize how social science analyses often mistake boundary markers for state substances. Yet one can also observe an opposite movement. What social science once established as an essential state substance can become translated into a new boundary marker and added to the available repertoire of state boundaries.

Most prominently, the idealized model of the Weberian state took on a life of its own as it spread globally and influenced state images around the world (Thelen, Vettters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 7). The figure of the distant, impersonal bureaucrat whose rationality is backed up by the threat of violence has become a positive marker of state boundaries – and thus an indicator of success in, for example, theory-led state building practice in the Global South (Anter 2019). On the other hand, it has also become a contrastive foil in the Global North – for example, for parenting support professionals tasked with governing poor, migrant families and their male members by establishing personalized relations with mothers (Vollebergh, De Koning and Marchesi 2021).

Anthropologists' analyses of alternative state substances have also affected how actors and audiences relate to the available state boundaries repertoire. Gupta's article (1995) on the imagined state has become 'an oft cited part of the new local participatory development movement that has been embraced by actors as different as Oxfam, the government of Indonesia, and the World Bank' (A. Marcus 2008: 66). Anthony Marcus (2008: 80–81) criticizes the poststructuralist deconstruction of the state for making the target of both revolutionary and reformist movements invisible. When development workers were convinced by the argument and accepted representations as alternative to the substances of Weberian and Marxist state analyses, rational bureaucracy and class difference lost relevance in their practices.

During fieldwork, I not only encountered the liberal repertoire of state boundaries but also Maoist (Chapter 1) and culturalist (Chapter 2) repertoires. Dong Jie's colleagues at the township invoked Mao's mass line that developed the Marxist idea of the state withering away on the way to communism. In this repertoire, good state officials 'go down to the countryside' to immerse themselves in the peasant masses and learn with them. Staff of rural development NGOs mobilized a culturalist repertoire that was informed by anthropologist Fei Xiaotong's argument about the absence of a clear-cut boundary between rural communities and the state in China. Here, Dong Jie's interactions with peasants in Daxi mattered, as dyadic interpersonal relations independent of his official title, which marked him as a state official according to the liberal repertoire.

The substances of more recent state analyses may also be turned into markers of state boundaries in future performances. In current attempts to legitimize or gain support for policies that benefit certain groups more directly than others, the notion of infrastructure has been applied to make the state responsible or justify the use of public resources. The European Commission (2013) attempted to use 'green infrastructure' to turn agricultural subsidies from large-scale direct support for private enterprises into remuneration for maintaining the public good. Similarly, leftist academics, politicians and activists in Germany and Austria have tried to renew the welfare state by reframing it as 'social infrastructure'. Anthropological studies that analyse infrastructure as a state substance may reinforce these recent uses of infrastructure as a marker of state boundaries. How other recent anthropological state analyses transform repertoires of markers of the boundaries between state and non-state remains to be seen. The analytical means for studying such feedback loops becomes available when the state is no longer approached as substance but acknowledged in the multiplicity of its performed boundaries.

Multiplying State Boundaries

In anthropology, Timothy Mitchell's (1991) 'boundary problem' can be read as highlighting that no clear-cut state boundary exists. This reading resulted in repeated diagnoses of blurriness. However, his attention to the generative force of the boundary was taken up by anthropologists trying to move beyond this one-sided overemphasis, to focus on actors switching between on- and off-state activities (Von Benda-Beckmann and Von Benda-Beckmann 2007: 205–35) or en-

gaging in discursive ‘boundary work’ (Beek 2017; Read 2018; Thelen, Vettters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018). The multiple state boundaries produced through this work have not yet received enough attention.

By moving beyond the discursive, one can begin to grasp the productivity of *multiple* state boundaries. The expanded notion of ‘performative boundary work’ spotlights boundary repertoires and a plethora of markers that signal the distinction between state and non-state. State boundaries are not mere ideas that share a discursive form and differ from each other only in content: they are associations that also include links with material elements such as buildings, uniforms, documents, statistics, or food, as this book’s introductory vignette about Dong Jie’s way of giving banquets for visitors to the ecological village showed. If one takes these different materialities into account, one is better equipped to understand the interaction between different versions of performed state boundaries over time.

I was intrigued that Dong Jie was simultaneously standing inside and outside of the state without causing any tension (see Chapter 1). In trying to grapple with this puzzling experience, I developed an analytical vocabulary to grasp different dimensions of state boundaries’ multiplicity. Domain multiplicity spotlights multiple non-state others. Segregated and anaglyphic multiplicity turn attention to multiple audiences. Furthermore, state boundaries multiply over time. On the one hand, this temporal multiplicity goes back to the past (folded multiplicity) or forward to the future (anticipative multiplicity). Finally, in some cases multiplicity becomes circular over time.

Domain Multiplicity

The state as its boundaries is relational in the sense that it only exists in relation to what is distinguished from it as non-state other and that these non-state domains are multiple. The domains examined in this book were family (Chapters 3 and 6), civil society (Chapters 1 to 3), community (Chapters 2 to 5) and bureaucracy (Chapter 5).

Sometimes, the simultaneity of domain multiplicity does not cause any tension between different versions of performed state boundaries because the markers are the same, even if the non-state others differ. In the consumer association in Chengdu, organic certification marked the state side of two boundaries: one with the anthropological model of the traditional Chinese rural community and another with the globally travelling model of alternative food networks and

community-supported agriculture. Informed by Fei Xiaotong, the former non-state other promised the flexibility of personal relations (*guanxi*) against the rigidity that the Chinese state had inherited by adopting the Western model of organic certification and that impeded the transformation to ecological agriculture. The latter non-state other promised transparency against the threat of personal relations between officials and producers corrupting organic certification when it travelled to China. Performances that distanced ‘state certification’ thus allowed urban middle-class consumers to hope for non-state others that both promised alternative ways to access safe and healthy food and protected the environment through ecological agriculture (Chapter 2).

When performed successively, state boundaries with different non-state others do not necessarily interfere with each other, either. At the democratic appraisal meeting for the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (*dibao*), village officials even shifted between staging themselves as bureaucrats at one moment inside of the state and at the next moment outside of it. When presenting written *dibao* regulations, village officials discursively distanced themselves from the state as the decision-making government above to make an appearance as the bureaucracy below that only implemented ‘state policy’ that ‘came down’. But when they directed applicants to speak for themselves to perform the overcoming of paternalism, they staged themselves as a part of the state from which citizens should be independent. Different markers were used to perform these two versions of the state boundary: written regulations and a stage design with separate front and back regions. In the process of standardization, this switching to the non-state domain allowed village officials to perform themselves out of the policy process, as if there were no decisions to be made by them (Chapter 5).

Domain multiplicity can also broaden repertoires of performed state boundaries when markers of distinction travel between non-state domains. What once marked one non-state other as different from the state can be transferred to mark other non-state others as well. In the case of the NGO’s rural community education for the left-behind child, intensive mothering ideals travelled from the domain of kinship to the domain of politics at the same time that calls for participation were travelling in the opposite direction. This resulted in a gendered division of parental care being transposed to the relation between father-state and mother-society, with material care marking the former and social and psychological care marking the latter (Chapter 3). But state boundaries are not only multiple because

of multiple non-state others in relation to which the state is marked as different.

Segregated Multiplicity

Beyond domain multiplicity, performed state boundaries are also multiple because of audiences' differentiated access to performances. The same actors can be state actors for some and non-state actors for others, even when audiences have a shared understanding about the markers of the distinction. As long as audiences stay segregated, different versions of a state boundary can be performed without producing tension or in-between positions. A common way of thinking about this segregation is to differentiate between backstage negotiations hidden behind closed doors and spectacular rituals on the front stage. But front stage and backstage are not two completely different spaces, with the front stage being about 'unauthentic' performance and backstage being free of performance and, hence, about 'authentic' self-expression. Rather, actors make different calculations about how to perform in each of them (Goffman 1956). Front stage and backstage are relative: what is the backstage for one audience is the front stage for another.

For the county's agricultural technology training in Daxi Village, Dong Jie did not discursively distance 'the state'. When he appeared in front of rural citizens and the county officials, he did not criticize the state for its 'top-down' education. He only did this backstage when he talked with me during a break. When preparing the workshop on sustainable living and ecological agriculture with NGO staff, this backstage became the front stage. Dong Jie and NGO staff articulated this critique to reassure each other which side of the boundary they were standing on. There, they planned the orchestration of the workshop on ecological agriculture. In front of urban middle-class consumers, the workshop was to be recognizably different from the 'top-down' trainings offered by 'the state'. Conversely, Dong Jie's performance as a township official directing village officials to enrol peasant participants in both the county's agricultural technology training and the NGO's workshop remained backstage and invisible for the urban middle-class participants of the latter workshop (Chapter 1).

This segregated multiplicity can be deliberately maintained. Hans Steinmüller (2010: 541; 2013) shows how 'communities of complicity' that 'cut across the boundary of state and society' switch between vernacular performances for insiders and official performances

for outsiders. Challenging the state–society dichotomy so prevalent in China Studies, he follows Michael Herzfeld (2005) to argue that local cadres and citizens share ‘cultural intimacy’: for example, both know modernist state discourses about impartiality and formal rules as well as the importance of personal relationships for getting things done. Only in private were rural reconstruction projects criticized as ‘face projects’ and personal relationships built to access these and other subsidies programmes; in public, rural reconstruction projects were called ‘models’ for emulation and ‘corruption’ was criticized. Through ‘face-work’ (Goffman 1955) at the boundary of the community of complicity, a clear state boundary was performed for outsiders (Steinmüller 2013: 198–222).

In retrospective analyses, the practical face-work that segregates audiences has often been overlooked, thereby construing multiplicity as blurriness that caused tension. Indeed, when the segregation between front stage and backstage is no longer successfully maintained in practice, gaps between ‘official’ and ‘vernacular’ representations must be negotiated through embarrassment, cynicism or irony (Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2016). Yet my analyses of performed state boundaries showed that multiplicity does not necessarily cause tension, even if audiences are not segregated physically or through covertness.

Anaglyphic Multiplicity

Because of actors’ differentiated access to repertoires of markers of distinction and audiences’ differentiated familiarity with those repertoires, the same practices may be state acts for some and non-state acts for others, or even altogether irrelevant for this distinction for yet others. The metaphor of anaglyphic three-dimensional images captures well this interplay between colour-coded markers of the state boundary and colour-decoding connoisseurship. For those without the proper glasses, the anaglyph boundary did not take a recognizable three-dimensional shape.

Dong Jie invested much effort teaching urban middle-class citizens (and also myself) the associations between ecological agriculture and civil society, on the one hand, and the non-ecological and the state, on the other. In visitor tours through the ecological village, he often linked material markers of the non-ecological (like concrete structures, monocultures, polytunnels, plastic sheeting, straw decomposition agents, animal husbandry) with a critique of ‘the state’, portraying it as supporting only productivist agriculture that aimed

to control nature. Dong Jie also taught consumers the distinction between ecological and organic agriculture and its overlap with the distinction between civil society and the state (Chapters 1 and 2).

While Bourdieu (1984) spoke of markers of ‘class’ as powerful mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality, I speak of markers of ‘the state’ as no less powerful resources of distinction. When familiar with the just-outlined boundary repertoire, Dong Jie’s simple style of hosting banquets in the ecological village made the state boundary a literal ‘judgement of taste’, with the lack of meat, alcohol and cigarettes becoming a marker of civil society’s alternative vision of rural development. For those not familiar with the critique of the state’s taste for meat-heavy, industrial agriculture, the largely vegetarian meals offered at the NGO workshop had nothing to do with the boundary between state and civil society, but only appeared as stingy or even disrespectful (see the Introduction).

This anaglyphic multiplicity of state boundaries made Dong Jie a committed proponent of global civil society’s participatory rural development and at the same time a good state official, a rare exemplar who still lived up to the positive side of Mao’s mass line and went down to the countryside to learn from the peasants. The performed state boundary here multiplied and made an actor stand simultaneously inside and outside of the state, embodying at the same time liberalism for a Western-oriented segment of the urban middle class and socialism for township officials familiar with Maoist ideals (Chapter 1). Anaglyphic multiplicity made physical segregation of audiences or repair mechanisms such as coyness, embarrassment, cynicism or irony superfluous. There was no broken boundary to be fixed and no tension to be resolved – for the moment.

Temporal Multiplicity

Performances of state boundaries do not just matter in the present. Future state boundaries are anticipated (Chapter 5) and past state boundaries get folded into objects that travel through time and can be unfolded and refolded in the future (Chapter 4). When examining the temporal multiplicity of state boundaries, it becomes obvious that their materiality matters. State boundaries do not just have different content, as a focus on discursive boundary work – especially in legal texts – might suggest. They also have different forms.

When distancing the ‘top-down’ approach of ‘the state’ from their ‘civil society’ performance in the workshop on ecological agriculture (Chapter 1), Dong Jie and NGO staff choose or avoided certain

stages (the office at the rice mill rather than the assembly hall of the village committee), stage designs (a circle rather than separation into front and back regions), props (empty flip charts symbolizing the openness of communication rather than prepared presentation slides; a lamp with soft diffuse light and a fog-producing function rather than red banners of socialism), characters (classifying invited participants as peasant friends, consumers and ecological producers to avoid the categories of officials and business owners) and sequences (asking participants to help with preparations rather than making them wait; community-building activities rather than registration rituals; free lunches rather than cash payments). Such rich performances shaped an urban middle-class audience's judgements about the side on which Dong Jie stood and were accessible for me as the ethnographer who participated in the event.

Retrospectively, these performances were only accessible through media such as photos and reports. One could, for example, collect the NGO's list of participants in which Dong Jie was classified as 'official'. Even though this list of participants was not used for performing a registration ritual or staging Dong Jie as representative of 'the state', one could take the organizations' legal status and Dong Jie's formal title as markers of the state boundary. The workshop would then become an instance of blurriness that could inform diagnoses of a 'weak' civil society in China being dominated by 'the state' and warrant certain political recommendations. Other aspects of the performed state boundary were documented in photos of the stage design and the props used. Yet other aspects, such as the performed sequences, could have been captured on video. Different elements of performed state boundaries thus have different durability. In particular, official titles (such as 'township agronomist') and legal categories are easily documented on paper and may appear as unequivocal markers of past state boundaries. For academics and bureaucrats alike, written documents play a particularly important role in their practices.

Folded Multiplicity

To grasp how past performed state boundaries are registered in material objects, I borrowed the term 'folded object' from Amade M'charek (2014). Folded multiplicity draws attention to the possibility that earlier state boundaries can be folded into objects and unfolded and refolded at later moments. Evidence of other markers of difference can be added or earlier evidence can be interpreted through different

scripts. Depending on the materiality of the markers and the object in which boundary performances are folded, different versions of the state boundary are accessible with greater or lesser efforts of unfolding (Chapter 4).

Since 2013, the township government had asked citizens to participate in the democratic administration of social policy. As temporary bureaucrats, they were to judge applications for *dibao* and confirm their support with their signature. This scripted temporary extension of the state boundary was to be marked with thumbprints in the red colour typically used on official documents. Those who collected the required signatures in the name of the applicants distanced the state by avoiding written regulations and instead turning list-making into a performance of belonging to the village community. While the effectiveness of their boundary work materialized in signatures and red thumbprints, the content of their performance was folded into the lists of signatures in a way that was later not immediately visible for bureaucrats at the township. Without further evidence, the list of signatures remained folded as a marker of democracy. Only later complaints by involved rural citizens could unfold the performances of community activism and paternalism registered in the lists of signatures (Chapter 4).

Here, folded multiplicity temporarily prevented tension between different versions of state boundaries emerging. Whether or not blurriness can be produced by unfolding earlier performances depends on the materiality of objects in which performed state boundaries have been folded. These mediating objects thus affect how earlier performances become accessible for temporally displaced audiences and what versions of state boundaries can be performed with these objects at a later point in time. After all, the material objects in which performed state boundaries get folded can wear off or be lost, manipulated or declared invalid, or even be destroyed on purpose.

Anticipative Multiplicity

The specific materiality of boundary markers also privileges certain versions of future state boundaries over others and thereby also shapes the effectiveness of boundary work in the present. Citizens' complaints about illegitimate *dibao* made the township government initiate a push for standardization. All existing allowances were cancelled, and former recipients had to reapply. The call for the standardized administration of *dibao* was not new, so rural citizens were uncertain how standardization would be enacted this time. Village

officials referred to written regulations when trying to dissuade some former recipients from withdrawing their reapplications. Rural citizens tried to anticipate what future state boundaries would look like when they assessed in the present whether the demands village officials made on them were within their discretion as street-level bureaucrats or deviated from ‘state policy’, yet in their anticipated versions of state boundaries only a limited set of boundary markers was applied. In particular, written regulations and official titles were expected to become permanent markers of the state. For example, villagers wondered whether township officials would come down to the village to conduct household investigations. Thus, future state boundaries’ continuing flexibility depended on the anticipated movement of those thus marked as ‘state actors’ (Chapter 5). That anticipated state boundaries become part of actors’ performances and audiences’ assessments of performed state boundaries in the present already points to the possibility of circularity.

Circular Multiplicity

What at one point serves as a marker of state boundaries can at another become the object whose placement on either side of the boundary between state and non-state is in question and be judged based on other markers. If one does not assume that the state has an essential substance, this circularity does not point to flaws in either people’s practices or in research but rather to the multiplicity of state boundaries.

In their justifications of *dibao* standardization, the central government, policy researchers and township officials lamented both the decline and the persistence of traditional Chinese familism, bolstering both claims with different kinship measurements. ‘Human feelings guarantees’ and ‘social connection guarantees’ were criticized as at once reflecting ‘too much’ kinship (‘corruption’) and ‘not enough’ kinship (loss of ‘traditional virtues’), which was backed up by comparisons between national statistics on *dibao* and social policies in other countries with a ‘shared East Asian Confucian culture’. Based on an assumed zero-sum game between state support and familial care, high numbers of social policy beneficiaries suggested a ‘lack of household responsibility’, while suspicions about ‘human feelings guarantees’ and ‘social connection guarantees’ materialized as a registry of *dibao* recipients who were measured as having kinship with responsible bureaucrats. This led to the question of whether receiving *dibao* actually did mark state support and indicate declining fa-

milism (as measured by the comparative research mentioned above) or rather too much kinship in the wrong place (Chapter 6).

This circularity can be understood as pointing to flawed methodologies that fail to measure the true essence of kinship and the true substance of the state. For an anthropology of the state, however, it is more productive to take this circular multiplicity seriously – not as something to be corrected but as something pointing to the generative force of kinship measurements in producing some of the markers used in the performances of state boundaries.

The Difference that Performed State Boundaries Make

The multiplicity of state boundaries deserves attention because this helps in understanding the difference that performative boundary work can make. Performed state boundaries produce contrasting judgements of practices when participatory politics are put on stage in a food network or in the bureaucratic administration of social policy in an ecological village; and their analysis can produce new questions for China Studies, the anthropology of the state and the social sciences more broadly.

The State Boundaries Effect: Contrasting Judgements

Rather than pointing to one state idea that holds diverse actions together (Weber 1949: 99), my research called attention to the multiplicity of state boundaries. While I found that the performance of state boundaries ‘generated resources of power’ (Mitchell 1991: 90), I did not observe that this always produced the ‘mysterious effect of the state, as a separate, self-willed entity’ (ibid.: 86). Rather, the consequences were more varied. Most notably, different ways of performing state boundaries could almost always turn assessments of specific practices into their apparent opposite.

In the making of Daxi as an ecological village, the anaglyphic multiplicity of state boundaries made Dong Jie’s participatory approach to agronomy resonate with both liberal and Maoist notions of peasant participation. This allowed him to mobilize resources for his vision of rural development from different sources, ranging from government grants to NGO funds and consumers’ purchasing power (Chapter 1). For the latter group, the urban middle-class consumers who were organized in a food network, personal relations on the side of the state threatened to corrupt the proper function-

ing of organic certification, while personal relations on the side of civil society and community as non-state others held the promise of transparency and a flexible transformation to ecological agriculture (Chapter 2). While many of these urban citizens were critical of state intervention in family life, instilling globally travelling ideals of intensive mothering in rural families appeared to them as caring rather than intrusive. Again, boundary work enabled this contrasting judgement. In Daxi, Dong Jie and an NGO performed rural community education as social and psychological care of mother-society in contrast to the formal education and financial support offered by father-state. Domain multiplicity allowed gendered parenting ideals to travel as a boundary marker from family to community as non-state other (Chapter 3), keeping the state at a safe distance from family life.

In the making of social policy in Daxi, the folded multiplicity of scripted, performed and documented state boundaries made it possible for the same practices of citizen participation in bureaucracy to appear as democracy or paternalism at different moments in time (Chapter 4). During the push for bureaucratic standardization, anticipative multiplicity made future state boundaries shape present assessments of performed state boundaries, thereby potentially turning legitimate bureaucratic leeway into illegitimate deviation from 'state policy'. These anticipated state boundaries thus shaped rural citizens' reactions to village officials' demands of withdrawing applications (Chapter 5). The push for standardization was justified with references to both 'too much' and 'not enough' kinship. This apparent paradox can be understood as the outcome of circular multiplicity. Kinship measurements produced markers of the state boundary and markers of the state boundary became indicators of kinship. Different measurements of kinship by researchers, bureaucrats and other citizens could thus turn *dibao*-related practices into expressions of either traditional Chinese familism or individualism as its modern opposite (Chapter 6).

Performed state boundaries affect how people judge other actors' practices. As these boundaries can make otherwise similar practices appear as opposites, they determine access to various resources such as political support (Chapters 1 and 3), purchasing power (Chapter 2) and access to grants, subsidies and cash benefits (Chapters 1, 4 to 6). Taken together, the ethnographic study of multiple performed state boundaries thus reveals often-overlooked human and nonhuman agencies that decisively shape the making of policy and the distribution of resources.

State Boundaries: A New Task for China Studies

Besides these insights into the political and economic consequences of performative boundary work, exploring performed state boundaries raises new questions in the study of Chinese politics. After the dominant state versus peasant perspective of the 1980s (J. Scott 1989; Zweig 1989; Kelliher 1992; Zhou X. 1993) and the increasing critique of this state versus society paradigm in the 1990s (Perry 1994; Pieke 2004), China Studies slowly started to challenge the assumption of the authoritarianism of the Chinese state (Lieberthal 1992; Mertha 2009). Based on interviews, studies of local governments developed an understanding of the complex challenges faced by county and township officials, pointing to ‘problems’ in the ‘policy design’ at the centre rather than solely in ‘implementation’ (Li L. 2007; Kennedy 2013). Despite its efforts to disaggregate the state, this critique silently reproduced the state versus society framework except for replacing peasants with local officials as the non-state other. At the same time, this critical view of the central government inverted what Xiang Biao (2010) called ‘the state theory of the ordinary people’ and what Guo Xiaolin (2001) has called rural citizens’ ‘image of the bifurcated state’: a benevolent centre above with coercive and corrupt local governments below.

More recently, analyses have used the concept of ‘governance’ and identified an ‘increased horizontality and pluralization’ of Chinese politics, pointing to ‘the limited inclusion of non-governmental actors [that] arguably helps to better adapt public policy to local needs and preferences’ (Ahlers, Heberer and Schubert 2016: 56, 69). Political science thus tells us that China is ‘finally’ becoming like the West, emphasizing the pluralization of politics by pointing to the appearance of non-state actors on the political stage. Yet, even before news about strict pandemic measures and human rights violations in Xinjiang again reinforced the Western image of an authoritarian state, such arguments had often been relativized by adding what I call the ‘authoritarianism clause’,⁹ reassuring Western readers that China was ultimately still authoritarian, and therefore completely different from ‘our democracies’.

The important question here is why pluralization was evaluated positively and understood as liberalization: why does it matter so much that so-called ‘non-state’ actors participate in politics? The ideal of a clear boundary between state and civil society clearly played a crucial role in this positive assessment. As the first part of this book shows, this ideal was shared by a Western-oriented urban

middle-class audience that Dong Jie successfully enrolled in his project of rural development by distancing the state.

My book cannot contribute to China Studies by questioning whether non-state actors had indeed entered the political stage, and whether China was becoming less authoritarian and moving closer to the West and debating whether this was positive. This is because my key argument is that state and non-state are not substantially different entities but situationally performed distinctions. Sometimes, actors even stand on both sides without having to juggle the tension of in-between positions. Therefore, my contribution to the anthropology of China is to draw attention to how different versions of China (whether as increasingly liberal or still authoritarian, socialist or cultural other) themselves can become generative in making policy because they are part of boundary repertoires (see Chapter 1 on Maoist China, Chapter 2 on earthbound China, and Chapter 6 on traditional Chinese familism).

Pointing one last time to how Dong Jie's participatory approach to rural development could fit both liberal and Maoist versions as long as state boundaries were properly performed for different audiences (Chapter 1),¹⁰ I want to suggest that it is worthwhile to start not from an assumption of China's otherness but with thinking about strategies for generating surprising similarities. My proposal is to stop looking for state and non-state actors in China (or other regional containers). This would produce versions of China based on taken-for-granted ideals about proper state boundaries. Instead, I argue for starting to examine how actors mobilize different versions of China in performances of state boundaries.

Boundary Performances and the Future Study of the State

Attention to performed state boundaries overcomes two limitations of analyses of state substances and diagnoses of a blurred boundary: first, the reification of boundary markers as substantial attributes in analyses of state substances and, second, the overemphasis on tension and ambiguity in diagnoses of blurriness. The absence of one clear-cut state boundary does not mean that there are no state boundaries at all. The notion of performative boundary work uncovers multiplicity as producing apparent blurriness. It also draws attention to a series of translation processes between overlapping boundary repertoires that mark the dividing line not only between state and non-state but also between different disciplines studying the state and even between different 'cultures' and 'political regimes'. Therefore,

studies of performed state boundaries can contribute to overcoming taken-for-granted disciplinary divisions and challenging culturalist othering and political polarization.

Taken together, the state as its boundaries is produced through performance in front of audiences based on repertoires of markers of difference. The state as its boundaries is material, with different elements serving as stage, stage designs, props and costume. Access to these materials is differentiated, as is the connoisseurship of different boundary repertoires. The state as its boundaries is relational because situationally performed difference always implies a non-state other and it is multiple due to the plethora of markers of difference available for actors, manifold non-state others and differentiated audiences past and present. This relational multiplicity of state boundaries is productive because boundary repertoires are linked with scripts of various academic and political projects. Therefore, performed state boundaries shape expectations against which actors and their practices are judged and thus configure access to resources.

Performed state boundaries inform judgements about ‘proper’ (for example, ‘participation’) and ‘improper’ (for example, ‘corruption’) ways of doing politics. The way state boundaries are performed when participation is put on stage can make similar practices appear as contributing to competing political projects. Performances of state boundaries decide if practices are celebrated as a liberal distancing of the state, its Marxist withering away, or the culturalist revival of a traditional society that does not recognize a boundary between state and community. In some cases, the multiplicity of boundary repertoires even can make actors stand simultaneously on the state and non-state sides. Dong Jie’s promotion of peasant participation in agronomy could thus appear as alternately prefiguring the eventual liberalization and pluralization of Chinese politics, reviving the Maoist mass politics that many liberals condemn as authoritarian or resurrecting a traditional earthbound China that both liberal and socialist modernism regard as backward. Maybe the difference made by performed state boundaries conceals a significant overlap between supposedly rival political projects. If participation has seemed in this book to be a duty rather than a right for peasants, parents and other rural citizens involved in a food network and democratic bureaucracy, this should not be traced back to ‘China’s authoritarianism’, ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ or ‘traditional Chinese culture’. Rather, the book hopes to inspire ethnographic explorations of how multiple state boundaries are performed when ‘Western democracy’ or other participatory projects are put on stage elsewhere.

Notes

1. John Law (2004) has argued that messiness in research findings does not necessarily indicate bad research but points to the fluidity, elusiveness and multiplicity of the world.
2. Here, I use Karl Duszka's (1989) reconstruction of Weber's sociology of the state.
3. In state-as-subject formulations, 'the State enjoys an absolute autonomy that refers to its will as the supposedly rationalizing instance of civil society' (Poulantzas 1980: 129). Poulantzas attributes this conceptualization not only to Hegel but also Max Weber and the functionalist-institutionalist mainstream in political sociology in the 1970s. Similarly, Bratsis (2006: 9) argues that '[s]tate-as-subject conceptualizations understand the state to be a social actor distinguished by a common subjectivity among the people who occupy state positions'. However, he gives that schema an interesting twist by pointing out that all instrumentalist theories that conceive of the state as a thing simultaneously presuppose that 'the state institutions must be unified by a given subjectivity for state power itself to gain coherence and unity'. Therefore, he places not only neo-Weberians like Theda Skocpol and Fred Block in the state-as-subject camp but also Ralph Miliband with his Leninist concept of the state (*ibid.*: 9–11).
4. Poulantzas' (1980: 129) theoretical formulation of the relative autonomy of the state has to be understood in the political context of his writings. He rejected the French Communist Party's analysis of state monopoly capitalism: 'If the State is apprehended as a tool or instrument, its materiality has no political relevance of its own: it is simply reducible to state power, that is, to the class which manipulates the instrument.'
5. Key to this 'relative autonomy' are Poulantzas' (1980) notion of 'structural selectivity' and Jessop's (2008) 'strategic selectivity'. Structural selectivity highlights how state institutions are more open to some laws and policies than to others. Strategic selectivity, in contrast, stresses that this selectivity is the 'product of the relationship between state forms and the strategies that different forces adopt toward the state' (Bratsis 2006: 19).
6. Mitchell (1991: 77), for example, seems to lump Poulantzas together with neo-Weberians when he generalizes in the introduction to his review essay that '[t]he new work on the state [since the 1970s] has defined the term in a variety of ways, most of which take it to be not just distinguishable from society, but partially or wholly autonomous from it'.
7. Stategyraphy presents itself as a relational approach to the state and suggests three analytical axes: embeddedness, relational modalities and boundary work (Thelen, Vettters and Von Benda-Beckmann 2018: 7–9). While the first two concepts are about relations (empirical accessible connections between actors) that substantiate the state, relationality acquires a very different meaning in the last. The notion of boundary work

moves stategraphy from studying relations as state substance to studying the state as its boundaries with various non-state others. This move has been a major inspiration for this book.

8. Different state substances are not easily combined. Sedlenieks' (2020a) combination leans towards preferences widely shared in anthropology, subordinating the clear-cut boundary of Weberian bureaucracy to the primacy of blurriness.
9. Both Ahlers, Heberer and Schubert (2016) and Mertha (2009) only seem to add the authoritarianism clause towards the end of their articles as a supplement, using formulations such as '[o]f course, one must be careful in taking this implication too far [‘that China provides both less and more influence on policy than would certain forms of democratization?’]’ (ibid.: 1012) or ‘our argument . . . does not disregard the current political system’s shortcomings in ensuring that public policies reflect all public demands, or entail . . . democratic participation’ (Ahlers, Heberer and Schubert 2016: 69–70).
10. In the case of an EU-funded NGO project for vocational colleges in Serbia, Tijana Morača (2017) pointed out how the promoted education model was labelled as ‘cooperative’ in Serbia to differentiate it from not only the German model of ‘dual education’ but also, importantly, from the ‘socialist vocation-directed training’ of the past. This is especially interesting, as those who today consider themselves leftists tend to criticize this new model as ‘the neoliberalization of education’, even though it has striking similarities to what was considered ‘socialist’ a few decades ago. During self-managed Yugoslav socialism, overcoming state bureaucratic decision making in the name of the ‘withering away of the state’ was highly valued. Making public education offered by the state more responsive to the needs of ‘productive labour’ (or ‘the economy’ in liberal terminology) was valued as a process of ‘socialization’ that blurred the state’s boundary.