

SHEN YUAN
Qinghua University, Beijing

The Reemergence of Grass-roots State An Ethnography on Town Governments

Abstract: The author supplies the reader with important information about Chinese self-organisation and self-government. In his analysis, employed is an interesting category—the grass-roots state, as the idea closest to the reality and tradition of Chinese rural self-government. The reader will notice some resemblance of the Chinese conception to the republican political idea of Europe. The text based on pioneer research will give the reader information about the attitudes of social researchers to problems of society's sovereignty with respect to the state. This text is also meant to turn Western sociologist's attention to the great diversity of government systems in China today.

Keywords: grass-roots state; township governments; solid state; financial state.

As is agreed by Chinese scholars the state has been—before and after the reform—a ubiquitous power shedding lights more or less on every field including economy, society and cultural life. However, since 1990s an alternative opinion has emerged. According to this opinion, the basic-level power—at least in rural areas—is undergoing significant transformation, every phrase of which is driven by the pressures of market reform. This transformation is heading toward what is much desired by sociologists, that is, the loosening of the restrictions on society and the permission even fostering of social self-organizations. The power of the state has been withdrawn from the rural areas since the implementation of contract system with remuneration linked to output at the beginning of the reform and subsequent advocacy of rural democratic election system (Yongnian Zheng 1996), following by the development of township enterprises, resulting in the township governments' copying the operative logics of enterprises and acting completely like companies (Andrew Walder 1996). At last, because of the termination of agricultural tax, the basic-level power of the state has finished its last step of withdrawal, starting to fly up and “float” (Feizhou Zhou 2007). In a word, the optimism of state power departing from the rural life is spreading.

Nevertheless, my ethnographic studies in four towns in the suburban areas of BJ city raise my serious doubts about the optimism. Contrary to the optimistic views, my finding reveals that the rural areas are now witnessing an overall reemergence of the power of the state. To put it specifically, I confine the definition of basic-level power as “grass-roots state.” Then I will support my above findings through my accounts of the four major changes of “grass-roots state.”

By “grass-roots state” I mean township governments in rural areas. I avoid using the term “basic-level power” out of following concerns. First of all, the term “basic-level power” basically belongs to “governmental terminology,” which repeatedly appear in the official documents talking about the “reinforcement of the construction of basic-level power.” Therefore I choose another term to avert suspicion. Second, the notion of “basic-level power” is too broad: sometimes it refers to the town-level organizations, sometimes to institutions and sometimes to the township governments. In order to be precise, I use the term of “grass-roots state” instead. Thirdly, as I have found out, the town-level power has been back and rooted deeply in the rural life, which can be vividly described by the term of “grass-roots state.”

To be honest, my focus on the township governments is actually resulted from the importance of towns in the overall structure of China. As far as I am concerned, the extraordinary significance of towns derives from following three facts: first of all, a town is often regarded as the “tail of the city and the head of the village,” indicating its role as a joint linking the urban and the rural; secondly, town governments are the tips of the state power reaching into the rural areas, linking the formal authority of the state and the informal life of the rural areas; thirdly, a town often composes of tens of villages, holding a considerable population, involving many fields such as political party, administration, industry, agriculture, scholarship and commerce, and covering manifolds of institutions and professional associations. Therefore the towns suffice to manifest the diversity and complexity of Chinese society. In this light, focusing on the towns and doing ethnographic studies on township governments is like probing a giant building through its base, which enables us to reach its fundamental part at once.

My ethnography shows that the “grass-roots state” has changed in at least in four aspects.

First of all, “grass-roots state” has further consolidate its basis and has increasingly become a solid state. This proposition is made primarily based on the relationship between the township government and the subordinate villages, that is, from the membership of grass-roots cadres. As is often believed, the cadres of “two committees” before—the party committee and the village committee—took on a double-character because the state was not responsible for their payroll. On one hand, these cadres used to be the only group of people that the state could rely on to carry out tasks of collecting agricultural tax, collecting public produces and implementing the policy of birth control. On the other hand, these rural cadres are not state-paid and state-staffed, so their “informality” often hampered their effectiveness. In this way, the “grass-roots state” used to be quite troubled by how to introduce incentives to courage cadets but it somehow left much space for the autonomy of the villages. Now we see a quite different picture. In recent five years, along with the growth of the financial capability of the state, BJ municipal government has begun to pay cadres salaries, which is included into the municipal budget. This mounts to acknowledge these cadres as formal members. Besides, governments on county and town levels subsidize cadres according to their working performances. Among the four towns I have studied on, the monthly salary of a village secretary is 2000 yuan, while that of a village dean is

1800 yuan. The salary of individual cadre decreases in a hierarchical manner. If the annual tasks assigned to a cadre are all finished, the township government will credit him/her with bonus, which might equal the annual salary or even more. This way, the income of a rural cadre is comparable to his/her urban counterpart, hence the incentives for these cadres to work hard for the state. Therefore, "grass-roots state" managed to become a "solid state" by way of recruiting rural cadres as state-staffed members—the solid foundation of the state.

Secondly, "grass-roots state" manages to grow up into financial state through the reform of the property rights in the rural economy. Since the threshold of the new century, the rural "property rights reform" project has been implemented in the suburban areas. Specifically, this project includes three aspects. The first aspect is the estimation of properties, namely, to check and ratify all the rural properties since the establishment of cooperative associations in 1956, including the added values. No doubt that this would be a complicated and long process, which has to rely on the rural account books as well as the memory of the elderly of who registered a trike or a donkey from the community. The second aspect is "distributing shares," which means to distribute the properties in terms of shares. There are four types of share: household share, distributed according to one's registration status of the household—rural or urban; labor seniority shares, distributed according to the time period one has participated in the rural labor; the confirmed land property shares, distributed according to the area of the land one owns after the implementation of contract system with remuneration linked to output; and the bonus shares for one-child families, distributed according to how well a family has complied to the birth control. The last aspect is the dividends. Specifically, after the annual final accounting, the dividends are distribute according to the number of shares one holds. Now the property right reform in BJ urban areas has finished, whose real meaning is the fundamental transformation of peasant's relationships with the land, with the rural communities and with the state. Currently, the overall area resembles a giant joint-stock company. All the traditional social arrangements have faded out of the picture, leaving a economic unit whose property and staff are under the strict control of the state. In this way, the grass-roots state has somehow become a "financial state"—a state manageable by mere financial measures.

Thirdly, the grass-roots state turns into a welfare state. The grass-roots state used to be a "absorbing" one, absorbing sources by means of collecting agricultural tax and taxes in other forms. These years, to the contrary, the state has terminated the agricultural tax and even probably will make various investments in the rural areas. Thus the grass-roots turns into a welfare state. In the towns in BJ suburban area, under the name of "building the new countryside" the grass-roots state has continuously introduced financial resources into the rural area. "Pathway project" transformed the rural earth roads into asphalt ones, hardening the surface; "bright project" brings light poles along the roads; "garbage project" builds up a public landfill, keeping the residents from littering; "toilet project" improves the toilets and decrease the number of flies. Generally, one project like this costs no more than 150 or 200 thousand yuan, which requires the application of cadres directly from the grass-roots state. But the

accumulative effects of such projects suffice to change the whole image of the rural area. Now we can see the grass-roots state is no longer a predator but a distributor of social welfare.

Last but not least, the grass-roots state has become a digital state thanks to the wide spread of computers and internet technology. The digital technology serves as a promoter of rural informatization as well as the governance tools of the grass-roots state. The financial insecurity raised by “the town takes care of the property of the villages” is erased by the new technology. At least in BJ, we see the financial autonomy is gradually decreasing. In one town, the funds belonging to the village itself are all deposited in the banks which could not be drawn without the certificates from the town economic management institute. As for daily use such as payment for the electricity or telephone bills, bigger villages with the population of 300 to 500 households could keep 50 thousand yuan as back-up funds while smaller ones with one hundred population or so could keep 30 thousand yuan. The computers in the villages are linked to those in the town. When the funds are appropriated and registered the computer on the town side will show. The number of computers in different economic management institutes differs according to the economic development and the size of the institutes. According to my own observation, one of the bigger institutes is equipped with one server and 40 computers, staffed with 30 professionals with degrees higher than junior college, managing the economic activities in more than 20 subordinate villages. One director of one institute even positioned and marked the pieces of land of the villages under the control of the town with Google Earth. The lease and trade of the land will show clearly on the computer in the economic management institute. Thus info technology helps the grass-roots state to realize what it might have not imagined itself—to surveil the subordinate villages and watch each economic move of theirs.

As is can be seen from the above, my ethnography on grass-roots state reveals something special. Different from the views that stress the reform of the power in villages and towns and the withdrawal of the power of the state from the “basic level,” what I have found is that the grass-roots relies no more on the “haunting” cadre groups but on real teams of paid cadres to carry out its tasks; it no more relies on absorbing rural resources but now injects resources into rural areas; it gradually transforms the villages into share-holding enterprises which could be easily managed according to market logics regardless of traditional and ancient ethics and morals; at last, it permeates its control through digital technology which more secretive but more acceptable because it has something to do with “science.”

Admittedly, Chinese rural areas are broad and diverse, thus the capacity and manifestation of grass-roots state differ here and there. But what we can still conclude is that in some parts of China, the state is not withdrawing itself as what is stated by the optimism. To the contrary, it is coming back to the rural areas—it permeates into the daily rural economic more deeply and secretly through the rural institutional management. The reform of the market supplies the state with more resources, making the town governments truly capable of rooting in the villages, just as what the term “grass-roots state” tells us.

References

- Wald er, Andrew. 1996. "Local Governments As Industrial Firms—Organizational Analysis on Chinese transitional Economy." *Foreign Sociology*, vol. 5–6, translated by Xing Ying, Beijing.
- Zh en g, Yongnian. 1996. "Rural Democracy and Chinese Political Development." *21 century*, vol. 6, Honkong.
- Zh o u, Feizhou. 2007. "Town Governments as Empty Shells and the Floating of Power." *Chinese Reform*, vol. 4, Beijing.

Biographical Note: Shen Yuan is the Associate Professor and deputy director of the Department of Sociology, Tsinghua University Beijing, P.R. China.

His latest book *Market, Class and Society* was published in October by Social Science Academic Press (China) and the latest article "Production of Society" was published in *Society*, No 3, Shanghai. Other recent works include: Intervention forte et Intervention faible: deux voies d'intervention sociologique, in *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie, special Issue*; Social Transformation and the Reformation of Working Class, *Journal of Sociological Research*, No 5.

Address: Department of Sociology, Qinghua University; Beijing, 100084; P.R. China.