

Elite Capture: How Decentralization and Informal Institutions Weaken Property Rights in China

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Abstract: Political decentralization is often argued to strengthen political accountability by bringing government closer to the people. Social and civic institutions at the local level, such as lineage associations, temples, churches, or social clubs, can make it easier for citizens to monitor officials and hold them accountable. This article argues that strong social institutions also empower local elites who may use their informal influence to control their group and capture rents. Drawing on evidence from case studies of Chinese villages, the article shows that lineage group leaders who become village officials use their combination of social and political authority to confiscate villagers' land. Evidence from a survey experiment suggests that endorsement of a land confiscation plan by lineage elites elicits greater compliance with property seizures. A national survey indicates that when a lineage leader becomes a village cadre, it is associated with a 14 to 20 percent increase in the likelihood of a land expropriation. The findings demonstrate how informal institutions and local civil society can be tools of top-down political control.

Political decentralization is often argued to strengthen political accountability.¹ One common argument in favor of decentralization is that by placing power in the hands of local officials, it brings government “closer to the people.” When citizens and officials belong to the same social groups and organizations — from temples and clans to social clubs — it helps citizens to monitor officials sanction them when they perform poorly in office.² The informal rules and norms created by these social groups, often referred to as “informal institutions,” can encourage cooperation and accountability.³ Elinor Ostrom and others have shown that grassroots social organizations can protect group property rights, suggesting that these social organizations can be powerful tools of accountability in places where formal state institutions are weak.⁴

Important evidence for the benefits of grassroots social organizations comes from China, where scholars have found that lineage and temple organizations use informal in-

¹For helpful reviews see Bardhan 2002, Wibbels 2006, and Treisman 2007.

²Putnam 1994 and Fox 2015.

³Helmke and Levitsky 2004

⁴See Ostrom 1990; Greif 1993.

centives to hold village-level officials accountable. Influential work by Lily Tsai shows that lineages or clans reward village officials who perform well in office with increased “moral standing” in the group.⁵ The reward of increased social standing discourages officials from enriching themselves with public funds, and encourages them to use village money to pave roads, to mend schoolhouse roofs, and to strengthen other public services. Subsequent work on village-level public goods provision in China has reinforced these findings.⁶ This work suggests that where democratic institutions are weak, strong social institutions can substitute for formal institutions like free and fair elections.

In this article, however, I argue that strong informal institutions also empower local elites — who can use their influence to capture rents and confiscate property. I examine whether including the leaders of lineage groups in village political institutions in China not only improves public good provision, as the recent literature has established, but limits the power of local officials to appropriate villagers’ land. Land is often the most valuable asset owned by the poor throughout the developing world.⁷ In China, local leaders have in recent decades requisitioned village land from tens of millions of farmers in order to sell the use rights for more lucrative commercial, residential, and industrial development.⁸ These land expropriations supply a large portion of the tax base for many local governments. These transactions also redistribute the equivalent of a half trillion U.S. dollars of property each year from villagers to the state.⁹

⁵Tsai 2007*a,b*.

⁶Chen and Huhe 2013; Xu and Yao 2015

⁷Boone 2013; Holland 2014; Baldwin 2014.

⁸Hsing 2010; Rithmire 2013, 2015.

⁹That is, in 2012, the Chinese government generated over 600 billion U.S. dollars in revenue from the expropriation of land and the subsequent auctioning of land use rights. See *Chinese Land Resources Report 2013 (Zhongguo Guotu Ziyuan Gongbao)* 2014.

I find that the inclusion of lineage leaders in village political institutions *weakens* villagers' land rights. I draw on a unique mix of qualitative and quantitative evidence. Qualitative process tracing and a survey experiment demonstrate that villagers have a high degree of confidence in information supplied by their lineage group leaders. As a result, when lineage group leaders are incorporated into village political institutions, it gives local officials a powerful tool to elicit compliance from villagers for land expropriation policies.¹⁰ While village-level officials do not have the legal authority to confiscate land, they administer land expropriations and work to elicit villagers' compliance with them, and so they are a crucial part of the calculus of land deals. Using data from a national survey, I find that when lineage elites join village political institutions, it increases the likelihood of a land expropriation by 14 to 20 percent. These land requisitions by lineage leaders lead to widespread political dissatisfaction.

These findings show how strong social institutions can benefit citizens when it comes to public goods yet hurt them when it comes to property protection — suggesting that social institutions serve as both channels of bottom-up informal accountability *and* top-down political control. Whether these institutions are channels of accountability or control depends on the structure of incentives. The provision of public goods might be thought of as a repeated game with relatively low stakes, a structure which allows a cooperative equilibrium to emerge. However, the one-shot opportunity to profit from land development raises the payoff from defecting from this cooperative equilibrium by an order of magnitude or more. In China, the average village spends around \$15,000 per year on public goods, while

¹⁰This is consistent with work by Unger 1989, Kelliher 1997, and others who note that village committees were introduced in rural China in the wake of de-collectivization partly in order to select leaders who can elicit compliance with state policies. It is also consistent with a recent study by Deng and O'Brien 2013 who show that the Chinese state uses bureaucrats' family ties with protesters to demobilize them.

a single acre of expropriated land yields on order of magnitude more in rents for local governments.¹¹ The focus on public goods in the recent literature has led scholars to conclude that strong informal institutions constrain officials. Yet land and local development are arguably more consequential than public services for the distribution of wealth, and in this context elites have incentives to use social institutions as tools of political control.

Elite capture of local politics is, in light of these findings, about more than simply control over formal political institutions. Local elites can exploit a combination of formal official power and informal social power to elicit compliance from local populations and extract rents. A number of other scholars have also noted the danger of elite capture of decentralized institutions in contexts as varied as Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹² However, these studies sometimes struggle to explain precisely why local populations fail to hold these local elites accountable, either at the ballot box or through protest or some other type of collective action. I suggest that local elites can exploit their control over group social networks to encourage compliance with extractive policies.

Grassroots social organizations are therefore no substitute for strong formal institutions of accountability. When social elites join village political institutions in China it creates the illusion of voice — group members can reward village officials who perform well in office with increased moral standing and respect, but these local elites are also at risk of being co-opted by the state. This suggests a limit to the idea that grassroots social organizations can replace formal state institutions of accountability, at least so long as these institutions are linked to the state. Instead, the rawer politics of collective action and protest are more

¹¹Data on public goods from Martinez-Bravo et al. 2011. Data on expropriated land from *Landesa China Survey* 2011.

¹²Bardhan 2002; Campos and Hellman 2005; Acemoglu, Reed and Robinson 2014; Malesky, Nguyen and Tran 2014.

effective curbs on official behavior.

1 Land Rights and Decentralized Institutions

Land rights are central to China's recent political history. Mao's promises to collectivize rural land and eliminate the landlords swept the Communists to power in 1949, and experiments with collective agriculture defined the early years of Communist rule over rural China. The subsequent reversal of land reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s — farmers now have long-term use rights to private plots of land, which is still owned by village and sub-village collectives (*jiti*) — led to an increase in grain production and what may be the largest reduction of poverty in human history. More recently, the Land Management Law of 1986 sanctioned the legal transfer of land use rights, leading to the emergence of a state-controlled land market that helped spark the last decade of China's explosive urban growth.¹³

Unlike a typical land market, in China the state monopolizes the lucrative rights to develop agricultural land. The right to convert land's legal status from "agricultural land" (*nong yong di*) to "construction land" (*jianshe yong di*) belongs to solely to the state, and specifically to county and higher levels of government. To develop land, county and higher governments have the authority to expropriate land from village collectives and then transfer the ownership rights to the state. Once the land's status has been transferred to the state and converted from agricultural to construction use, governments can auction the land use rights, typically for an order of magnitude more than they compensated farmers. The profits from land expropriation and conversion have come to account for between 30

¹³Rithmire 2015

to 70 percent government revenue ¹⁴ According to an official report from the Ministry of Land and Resources (MLR), in 2012 sales of land use rights generated 4.2 trillion yuan (or 682 billion U.S. dollars) in revenue, a figure that may if anything underestimate the actual amount.¹⁵

Table 1: Key village institutions of self-government in China. Data on leader tenure and institution size from Martinez-Bravo et al. (2011).

	Communist Party Branch	Village Committee
Leader:	Party Secretary	Village Chief
Average Leader Tenure:	10 years	7 years
Average Size:	7 Party Cadres	4 Members
Selectorate:	Communist Party	Villagers

It is important to underscore that officials at the county level and higher have final authority over decisions about land use in China. Nevertheless, village collectives' ownership of rural land make village officials important players in land politics. There are two key groups of cadres in Chinese villages, each of whom exert some control over village land and other collective property (see Table 1). An elected village committee formally holds a great deal of *de jure* power, and often administers the allocation of village land in conjunction with the heads of the landholding "small groups" (*xiaozu*). The elections for these committee posts have become gradually more competitive over the last two decades, although electoral manipulation by township governments remains common.¹⁶ In princi-

¹⁴See Cai 2003. More recent estimates are similar in magnitude, though there is significant uncertainty. As Rithmire 2015 notes, officials treat data on revenue generated from land as extremely sensitive.

¹⁵See Peoples' Republic of China, Ministry of Land and Resources. "Chinese Land Resources Report 2013."

¹⁶See Manion 2006 and O'Brien and Han 2009 for helpful discussions about the impact and history of

ple, village committees are autonomous organizations with no formal connection to the rest of the government hierarchy. However, an unelected village Communist Party Secretary, who is generally appointed by the township, often wields more *de facto* power over village policy than the village committee.¹⁷ As a result, despite the autonomy of village political institutions from the government, in practice higher levels of the Party-state exert considerable power over villages through Party appointments and Party discipline.

Village officials play important roles in land expropriations. First, they serve as representatives of the landholding village collectives during negotiations with higher levels of government over land use planning. They frequently work directly with firms and higher level officials to attract investment to their village.¹⁸ If they succeed, they bargain with higher levels of government or firms over the amount of compensation the village will receive in return for their land. One study found that in 39 percent of cases, village political institutions retained some portion of the compensation, in some instances more than 50 percent of it.¹⁹

Second, village officials sometimes use their power to reallocate land within the village and set aside land for smaller-scale industrial and real estate projects. As Jean Oi notes, village political institutions are essentially “socialist landlords.”²⁰ In the 1980s and 1990s, local officials used their power over land rights to ensure that collectively owned enterprises had preferential access to village land.²¹ Through the mid-2000s, large scale land reallocations — in which village officials redistributed the land holdings of a large

village elections.

¹⁷Oi and Rozelle 2000.

¹⁸Cai 2003.

¹⁹Deininger and Jin 2009.

²⁰Oi 1991, 193.

²¹Oi 1999, 133n72.

numbers of villagers — were the “preferred avenue” for land expropriations because they could be accomplished by making each villagers’ land holding slightly smaller with no direct compensation.²² However, the Rural Land Contracting Law 2003 placed tighter controls on when village officials could undertake such large scale land reallocations, curbing though not eliminating land takings by village officials for the purpose of land development.²³

Village officials and village political institutions often benefit directly from land expropriations. One survey found that 37 percent of village income comes from land expropriation.²⁴ Land sales are also important opportunities for corruption for local authorities.²⁵ In one three year period in China between 1999 and 2002, the Ministry of Land and Resources investigated over half a million illegal land transactions, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that village officials can make many times their annual salary in kickbacks from land deals.²⁶

Villagers can potentially benefit from land expropriations as well. Below, I present quantitative evidence on the consequences of land expropriations. The results show that land seizures are in general not correlated with a significant increase in collective petitioning, suggesting that in most cases villagers remain relatively satisfied with the political status quo after expropriations. Yet the results also show that when lineage leaders confiscate land, the amount of petitioning surges. This suggests dissatisfaction with village officials after the land seizure, and that land seizures undertaken by lineage leaders are

²²Deiningger and Jin p. 23 2009.

²³Deiningger and Jin 2009; Hsing 2010.

²⁴Deiningger and Jin 2009.

²⁵Chen and Kung 2015

²⁶Zhu 2005; Cai 2003.

unusually extractive — villagers are getting a raw deal. The evidence is discussed in more detail below.

2 Informal Institutions and Lineage Groups

I focus in this article on the political role of a specific type of local elite — the leaders of lineage groups, also sometimes referred to as clans. Members of the same lineage group have a common surname and are descended from a common known ancestor. Villages in China can vary in the degree to which villagers consciously identify with their lineage; even within the same region, lineage ties can be of marginal importance in one village and highly salient in the next.²⁷ Nevertheless, as Yiqing Xu and Yang Yao note, lineage groups are regarded by most scholars “as the most important social group in Chinese villages.”²⁸

Lineage groups are important in part because they create shared norms, sometimes referred to as “informal institutions,” that influence group behavior. Lineages encourage cooperation among their members by conferring higher social status on members who provide aid to the lineage. As Tsai demonstrates, this norm provides incentives for village cadres to increase village public goods expenditures.²⁹

At the same time, lineage group norms also encourage compliance with lineage elders and other authority figures — making these groups potential channels of political control. Prasenjit Duara notes that officials in imperial China promoted lineage institutions for this very reason:

The presence of lineage groups and patrilineal ideology in northern villages was in

²⁷Freedman 1966; Duara 1988; Tsai 2007*a*.

²⁸Xu and Yao 2015, 371.

²⁹Tsai 2007*a*.

no small measure a result of their vigorous propagation by scholars, officials, and the imperial center from the Song through the Qing. Regarded as embodying the principles of classical antiquity, the ideology of descent was seen as an ideal moral and ritual medium for regulating behavior and social order.³⁰

Today, the rules and norms created by lineage groups still encourage respect for lineage group elites. Lineage leaders have three important characteristics: (1) their advice and counsel is often required within the lineage for life events (*dashi*) like funerals or weddings; (2) they informally resolve disputes between group members; and (3) they are central nodes in village social networks, and important sources of information (and gossip) about village politics and society. Different villages have different ways of referring to these leaders. These range from lineage chiefs (*zongli*),³¹ to lineage elders (*zhanglao*) and lineage heads (*zuzhang*). Lineage elites broadly construed help protect the group's property, mobilize the group in protests, and influence village politics more generally.³²

3 A Theory of Political Control

I argue that when local elites with significant social power are included in decentralized political institutions, it strengthens the state's control over local society, and it allows officials to confiscate property. The logic of the theory relies the informal power wielded by these elites. Informal norms encourage members of social groups like clans to trust their leaders and defer to them.

These norms are reinforced through years of repeated interaction between leaders and

³⁰Duara 1988, 92.

³¹Yan 2012

³²Perry 1980; Li and O'Brien 2008; He and Tong 2002

group members. In game theoretic terms, public goods provision might be thought of as a repeated prisoner's dilemma. The budget for public goods and services must be set every year, but the payoffs do not change very much and are fairly predictable. Repeated interaction creates incentives for clan elites and clan members to play a cooperative strategy. This kind of repeat play is more or less the basis of the traditional village "moral economy."³³

Yet with land development, the stakes are much larger than with public goods and information is very opaque. Returning to the game theory analogy, suppose in the context of this repeated prisoner's dilemma that after many periods of playing cooperate, one player privately observe a one-shot chance to pocket a windfall gain if they defect from the cooperative equilibrium. If both parties are playing the grim trigger strategy, this player will play defect even while the opponent continues to play cooperate. Under the grim trigger strategy, both would play defect in each subsequent periods of the game. We might, as a result, expect to see some amount of political dissatisfaction or protest directed against these lineage leaders following the revelation they have defected from the cooperative equilibrium.

3.1 Case Study Illustration of the Theory

Two structured case studies illuminate the role that lineage elites play in exerting political control over their members. The case studies I present here are from villages in the same prefecture in Eastern Guangdong. No two villages can represent a country as large and diverse as China; I present them here because they illustrate the causal process at work in relatively clear terms, and provide some intuition for the basis for the theory.

³³Scott 1977.

As Table 2 shows, these two villages are “most-similar”³⁴ cases, with comparable economic, social, and political conditions. I originally selected these two villages from the survey data, presented in later sections of the paper, because Headwater Village represented an interesting “off-the-line”³⁵ case — it lies along a major road to the prefectural capital, is reasonably well off, and yet in defiance of expectations no land expropriations have occurred. Nearby Peng Village village had nearly identical characteristics. The key difference is that in Headwater Village, influential members of the village lineage group have remained independent from village political institutions, whereas in Peng Village they have joined it.

Table 2: Characteristics of structured case study

	Headwater Village	Peng Village
Annual income in yuan, median	12,000	10,000
Years schooling, mean	5.7	5.9
Competitive elections	No	No
Distance to city	20 km	26 km
Annual religious festival	Yes	Yes
Lineage groups	Yes	Yes
Lineage group elites	<i>Not village cadres</i>	<i>Village cadres</i>
Property expropriations	No	Yes

Peng Village has a single dominant lineage group, with resources including an ancestral hall and a record of common ancestors called a *zupu*. The village chief has for years been an unofficial leader of the kinship group. Even before he took his position, he had emerged as someone to whom others would go to for information, to resolve disputes, and

³⁴Przeworski and Teune 1970

³⁵Lieberman 2005

to consult with on matters like weddings. When asked who the most influential member of the kinship group currently is, villagers generally mentioned the village chief; when asked who the leader was in the years before he joined the village committee, most still named him.

In 2009 the village chief and Party Secretary used their power over the land reallocations to distribute, probably illegally, about 30 plots of farmland to an entrepreneur from a nearby city. The leaders used what one villager called “dirty tricks” (*bianxiang shoufa*) to prevent immediate mobilization against the plan, taking advantage of the village’s dense social networks and others’ lack of information about the development plan. First, they persuaded other lineage leaders – the heads of the village’s “big families” (*dahu renwu*) – that the expropriation scheme would benefit everyone. Once they had the backing of these key allies, they moved on to persuading the “little families” (*xiaohu renwu*) to support the plan. Officials then collected several thousand dollars from nearly every household as a down payment on a new apartment, an amount which for many farmers represented most of their savings.

However, the housing never materialized, leaving villagers with bulldozed farmland and empty bank accounts.³⁶ The leaders fled to the nearby township. Villagers suspected township officials protected them because they, too, had benefitted from the scheme. As one villager lamented, the committee chief and Party Secretary treated their kin group members like “lackeys” (*zhushou*) and then betrayed them.

When lineage group elites are included in village political institutions, they use their social power to pressure villagers to support land and other expropriation schemes. Vil-

³⁶Deininger and Jin 2009 find that in about a third of land takings, the project is not completed.

lagers face steep costs to organizing against the local state. They also face high levels of uncertainty about the value of any expropriation deal on the table. Overcoming the collective action problem is difficult under these conditions of uncertainty, especially when socially influential villagers have expressed support for the plan.

However, in the hamlet of Headwater, a few miles down the road, the influential members of the village's dominant lineage group have not joined the government. When asked who the most influential members of the lineage group are, most villagers named one of a small group of men who are not members of the village committee. The key village committee members and Party officers have little social authority or "prestige" (*weiwang*) within the lineage group.

The core of lineage group elites plays an almost daily role in bargaining with the government and even providing private governance. They gather funds to provide a modest stipend for retirees and the poor, and put on a religious festival that requires a high degree of collective organization. When asked villagers who they would go to if they had a dispute with the local government, villagers frequently mentioned one of the lineage leaders. Despite a favorable location near a highway to the prefecture's administrative seat, there have been no land requisitions by village officials in Headwater.

The threat of violent collective action organized by independent kinship group leaders is not an abstract threat for village cadres in Headwater. Indeed, a half hour's drive down the road from Headwater is a village whose tight-knit lineage groups forced the Party Secretary and village committee to flee during violent protests over land expropriations; another hour or so down the road is the village of Wukan, whose lineage leaders organized a similar protest that ousted leaders. As a village committee member in a nearby village

put it, “You can’t do anything around here without coordinating (*xietiao*) with the lineage leaders first.”

3.2 Observable Implications

The theory outlined above suggests that when lineage leaders join village political institutions, they are likely to use their informal influence to pressure villagers to comply with land expropriations. On the other hand, where lineage leaders remain autonomous, the threat of collective action organized by these leaders restrains officials. This theory has several observable implications.

1. Lineage group leaders’ endorsement of land expropriation plans should increase villagers’ support for these plans.
2. When lineage elites become village cadres, land expropriations should be more likely to occur.
3. Land expropriations undertaken by lineage elites should be more exploitative, leading to more protests and other collective action after the fact.

In what follows, I test each of these observable implications using quantitative data.

4 Lineage Leader Endorsement Increases Support for Land Expropriations

What underpins the power of kin group leaders? The existing literature suggests that collective action is easier within identity groups because group members share common cultural symbols; because they are more “findable” in social networks; and because they

can socially sanction each other.³⁷ However, I highlight a different mechanism. Informal institutions encourage deference to group elites and as a consequence other members of their group have a high degree of confidence in information supplied by these elites.

Uncertainty about important information is a key feature of land requisitions in China. Villagers lack information about whether they are being offered a good deal. Villagers do not know whether the state is willing to bargain over the terms of the expropriation, and they do not know when officials will turn to coercion. To some extent, villagers may also lack information about the willingness of others to engage in collective action.

Under conditions of uncertainty, lineage group leaders can provide valuable information. When a kinship group leader declares that a property confiscation plan is exploitative, this may persuade villagers that this is indeed the case, and it also signals that a wide range of others in their group may be willing to take costly collective action to protect their property. Yet when they endorse a land expropriation plan, villagers receive a signal that the offer may in fact be the best available, and that other members of their group may be not be willing to engage in collective action.

To test this proposition, I conducted an experiment in a rapidly urbanizing municipality in southern China. This municipality had recently announced a plan to “redevelop” (*gaizao*) dozens of surrounding villages, some of them still agricultural and others highly urban “villages in the city” (*chengzhongcun*). The redevelopment plans called for seizing villagers’ land and homes in most of these villages, and the plan had received extensive local media coverage.

Villages were randomly selected using a multistage procedure, stratifying on whether

³⁷Habyarimana et al. 2007

or not the village was on the land seizure list, and by district. Within each randomly selected village the enumeration team canvassed door-to-door and in public spaces. It is important to note that the canvassing did not produce a random draw of households, but the resulting sample nonetheless closely matches the characteristics of the population that remains in these villages. The sample was 49.8 percent female, had on average a lower middle school (*chuzhong*) education, with a mean age of 54. The age of the sample reflects a slightly higher degree of out-migration by young villagers than is typical, but if anything this age bias weakens the results presented below; conditioning on age increases the statistical significance of the estimates.

An experimental manipulation measured whether villagers would be more likely to have confidence in information that came from kinship group leaders about property seizures. The prompt was meant to elicit opinions about the very real possibility that the government would act to seize their property. I randomized whether a statement supporting a property seizure plan was endorsed by either a village official, a lineage group leader, or a villager (which served as a baseline condition). Enumerators read villagers the following statement:

This municipality has plans to “redevelop” dozens of villages by 2020. Suppose a [villager] [lineage leader] [village official] from your village said: “This redevelopment plan benefits us, we should all support it.” Do you have confidence (*xinxin*) in this [villager’s] [lineage leader’s] [village official’s] statement? [Yes] [No] [Don’t know]³⁸

³⁸In the prompt, the term used for village official was *cun ganbu* and the term used for kinship leaders was *jiazu zhanglao*, or “lineage elder.” Extensive pre-survey interviews suggested that in these villages the influential members of lineage groups were referred to this way. The precise number of villages to be redeveloped has been slightly altered here to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Each respondent only saw one prompt, so it was impossible for them to compare the identities of endorsers.³⁹

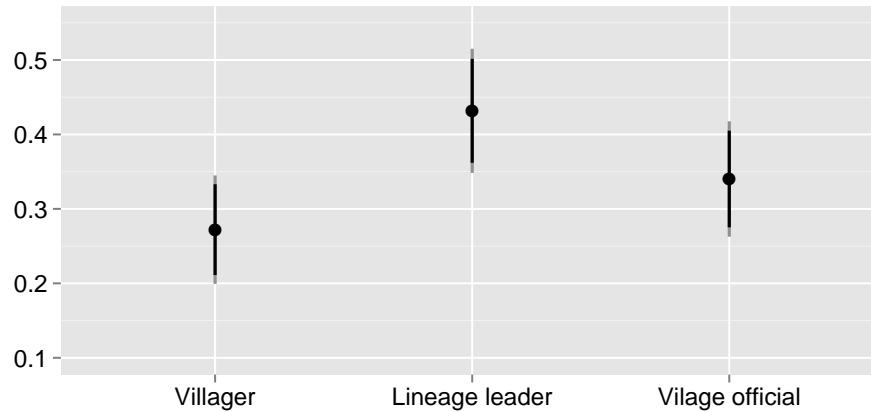
There were several reasons to suspect that the endorsement experiment would not change respondents' confidence in the statement. Respondents faced the real likelihood that their property would be seized, and may have already had solidified attitudes towards existing plans. Respondents lived in an environment where lineage group ties were not particularly strong. In this municipality, lineage groups are salient features of local society, but only weakly so. Seventy percent of respondents reported they had no active ancestral hall or that they did not visit it. Moreover, respondents were presented with a prompt that did not mention a specific kinship group leader whom they knew and respected.

Even with these hurdles, villagers were significantly more confident in messages supplied by hypothetical kinship group leaders. Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents that express confidence the endorsement made by each type of figure. Respondents were sixteen percentage points more likely to be confident in the endorsement of a kinship group leader when compared against a baseline condition, that of an anonymous villager. This difference is statistically significant at the $p = 0.05$ level. Villagers are also more nine percentage points more confident in statements made by lineage leaders than village officials. This difference is suggestive but is not statistically significant at the $p = 0.05$ level, though arguably the political sensitivity of the village official condition may have created a floor effect for this endorsement.

The results of the experiment suggest that villagers are more likely to have confidence in information about property takings from lineage group elites than villagers or officials.

³⁹The prompt is similar to a “confidence experiment” implemented by Chhibber and Sekhon 2014 in India.

Figure 1: *Survey experiment*: Percentage expressing confidence in statement supporting expropriation plan, by type of leader endorsement. Dark lines show 90 percent confidence intervals and light lines 95 percent confidence intervals.



In an online appendix, I provide additional evidence showing that the endorsement effect of lineage group leaders is strongest in villages where lineage elites are in office and land expropriations have been announced; this provides suggestive though by no means conclusive evidence that a process of elite-led persuasion is in fact at work in villages where expropriation plans have been announced. I now turn to quantitative evidence that shows that including lineage group leaders in village political institutions is associated with an increase in land expropriations in villages throughout China.

5 National Data and Variables

The primary data for the analysis of national data come from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). The survey was conducted in 2005 by researchers from the Hong Kong

University of Science and Technology and the Peoples' University of China. The survey's rural sample was created by stratifying among three regions (east, central, and west), then sampling 75 county-level units; within each county, the survey randomly sampled 4 townships, and within each township 2 villages. A total of 408 villages were sampled. The CGSS provides high-quality data, especially in comparison to state-generated statistical yearbooks about land, which contain incomplete and likely falsified data.⁴⁰ I also used the survey data to select several case studies, such as those presented above, which provided additional assurance about the survey's accuracy.

I draw on the CGSS for data about village-level lineage institutions. One attractive quality of the CGSS was that it measured the presence of lineage groups by asking villagers directly about their salience. Some recent studies have measured the presence of lineage groups in China by coding for the presence or absence of lineage group ancestral halls or written lineage histories (*zupu*). The chief advantage of this approach is that the measure is simple and objective. Unfortunately, many active lineage groups lack ancestral halls or written lineage histories. This is particularly common in areas with low levels of literacy prior to the Communist revolution, where members did not have the ability to record family histories or the resources to build ancestral halls. Yet lacking these resources does not indicate the irrelevance of lineages. To the contrary, in these villages lineages groups can still play a central role in conflicts over village resources and in village elections. Most surveys show that less than 20 percent of villages have active lineages with resources like ancestral halls or lineage histories; yet one report estimated that lineage groups exert influence in elections in 40 percent of villages.⁴¹ Relying on ances-

⁴⁰Bian and Li 2012

⁴¹Kelliher 1997

tral halls or lineage histories to measure lineage group presence likely undercounts lineage groups, and so it would be valuable to have an additional measure that relies on a villager opinion about the influence of these informal groups.

The CGSS asks villagers directly whether “there is a lineage group network (*jiazu wangluo*) in the village” and if there is, whether “the leaders or most influential members of the lineage network [are] also village cadres.” The disadvantage of this approach is that it relies on respondents’ understanding of what constitutes a lineage group. But the approach also captures villages where lineage groups are a salient social feature but lack either ancestral halls or family histories. In the analysis presented in the main body of the paper, I create a dummy variable for the presence of lineage groups and lineage leader composition, coded 1 when at least one respondent affirms that a lineage group is present. There are drawbacks to this approach, but I present these results because the estimates provide conservative estimates, and because qualitative research suggests it captures the underlying concept well. In the appendix, I show the results are robust to several different ways of coding these variables. I also show that if I restrict the analysis to lineage groups that have formal organizations and ancestral halls and written family histories, the estimated effects are even larger.

I also draw on the CGSS for data on the main dependent variable, land expropriations. In the main body of the paper, I use an indicator variable for whether villagers report that village leaders reallocated land due to a “state land expropriation” (*guojia zhengyong tudi*) or the expropriation of land for “development of an enterprise” (*fazhan qiye yongdi*). One advantage of this survey-based measure is that it does not rely on village administrative records, which field research showed do not capture many smaller land expropriations, in

part because many villages do not have the capacity to conduct regular cadastral surveys, and in part because village officials sometimes wish to conceal land conversions of unclear legality.⁴² I restrict this measure to expropriations that occurred during the tenure of the current village leadership.⁴³ In the appendix, I present results from two alternate measures: village revenue from land sales — as discussed above, land expropriations generally involve the transfer of compensation directly to village bodies — and the amount of cultivated land in the village. These results are consistent with the results in the main body of the paper.

I combined data from the CGSS with outside sources to create a unique dataset with a rich set of village characteristics. These covariates include a measure of economic activity using nighttime luminosity data from 1992, which is a plausibly pre-treatment measure of wealth for nearly all villages. I also created measures of the village's distance from the township and county seats, agricultural suitability, and terrain roughness. I drew on the CGSS for measures of surname and ethnic fragmentation, township control over elections, and the number of households. In the appendix, I present a detailed breakdown of how each variable was constructed.

⁴²This is part of a larger problem of manipulation of official statistics in China. See Wallace 2016 for an overview and Tsai 2008 for a discussion of falsification of village-level statistics.

⁴³I used the year the village cadre module respondent became a village cadre as a proxy for the last turnover in village leadership. This respondent was either the current village head or Party Secretary. Dates of land expropriations were reported by villagers. I then excluded all land expropriations that occurred before the current leader became a cadre. To the extent that recall errors are random, this will downward-bias the estimates.

6 Lineage Leader Inclusion Leads to Land Expropriations

This section tests the second observable implication of the theory — when lineage groups join village political institutions it increases the likelihood of land expropriations, all else being equal. The implicit counterfactual are villages with active lineage groups, but where lineage leaders do not join village political institutions. Of course, the argument is not that these social institutions are the only determinant of land expropriations, only that they exert an independent causal effect.

I use the national data to estimate the likelihood of land requisitions when lineage elites join village political institutions. No observational study can conclusively demonstrate a causal effect. However, the evidence shows a strong correlation between lineage leader incorporation and more land expropriations. The association holds when using different sets of control variables and regional fixed effects. The results also pass a placebo test, weakening the case that unobserved characteristics of villages drive the results.

I present least squares regression results that adjust for some of the most important potential confounders. In the appendix, I also present results using matching and entropy balancing. Here, the general model I use is:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta x_i + \mu z_i + \gamma_i W_i + \theta_j + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

For each village i in the dataset, y_i is the dummy variable for a land expropriation. The variable z_i is an indicator for whether or not an active lineage group exists in the village, and the variable x_i is an indicator for whether or not the leader of the lineage group is also a village cadre. In most specifications, I also include a matrix of conditioning vari-

ables γ_i and province fixed effects, θ_j for each province j . The coefficient of interest is β , which captures the difference between villages with and without incorporated lineage group leaders, conditional on an active lineage group being present.

In column one of Table 3, I present results without any of the conditioning variables or fixed effects. Note that the coefficient estimate is the same as a difference in means estimate (this is because all villages with incorporated elites also have an active lineage group). Villages where lineage elites are cadres are 16 percentage points more likely to experience a land seizure than villages where lineage elites remain autonomous. This simple test is important because it demonstrates that the results do not depend on using a specific set of conditioning variables, or indeed any conditioning variables at all.

One rival explanation for the results is that economic and geographic characteristics drive both land expropriations and leader incorporation. For instance, it might be the case that lineage leaders have incentives to join the government in wealthier villages, where it may be more lucrative to be a village official; however, the government would expropriate land in these wealthy villages regardless of whether lineage leaders join the government. Or as work by Scott suggests, it could be the case that the state generally wishes to assimilate social groups and their elites, but it has better information about villages close to population centers and in areas with flatter terrain.⁴⁴ These villages are also more likely to experience land expropriations because land close to population centers is more valuable.

A related concern is that the results may be limited to specific regions of China. For example, the results may be driven by southern provinces, which have flourishing lineage groups and local civil societies.⁴⁵ To address this, the remaining specifications include

⁴⁴Scott 2009.

⁴⁵Hurst et al. 2014

Table 3: *Regression results.* Least squares regression estimates, where the dependent variable is an dummy variable for land expropriation occurring in the village.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lineage leader is cadre	0.164** (0.069)	0.142** (0.072)	0.140** (0.071)	0.141** (0.072)
Active lineage	-0.091* (0.055)	-0.057 (0.059)	-0.044 (0.059)	-0.034 (0.058)
Wealth (nighttime lights proxy)		0.004 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)
Distance to county seat (km)		-0.001 (0.001)	0.00004 (0.001)	0.0004 (0.001)
Terrain roughness		0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)
Agricultural suitability index		0.054* (0.029)	0.044 (0.029)	0.035 (0.030)
Township control over elections			0.128 (0.094)	0.108 (0.097)
Distance to township (km)			-0.010*** (0.004)	-0.010** (0.004)
Surname fragmentation index				0.159* (0.090)
Ethnic fragmentation index				-0.134 (0.193)
Number of households (logged)				0.039 (0.034)
Constant	0.151*** (0.021)	-0.001 (0.094)	0.021 (0.095)	-0.287 (0.223)
Province fixed effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	392	390	390	376
R ²	0.014	0.124	0.145	0.141
Adjusted R ²	0.009	0.056	0.074	0.058

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

province fixed effects.

Column (2) of the table presents results that condition on geographic and economic variables. It shows that including province fixed effects and conditioning on wealth (using the nighttime lights proxy), on distance from county seat, on terrain roughness, and on agricultural suitability changes the estimates only slightly. In these specifications, the inclusion of lineage elites in village political institutions is correlated with a 14 percentage point increase in the likelihood of a land expropriation.

Another explanation for the results is that they are the result of differences in the degree to which higher levels of government, especially townships, exert control over villages. Township governments that have high levels of capacity can gather information about villages and then appoint lineage leaders to government; but these may also be the sorts of townships that have the coercive capacity to implement land expropriations. Were this the case, it could be that lineage leaders have no independent causal effect on land expropriations. Instead, township leaders might appoint leaders for some other reason, like increasing popular approval of the township government.

The third specification adds controls for the distance to the township government, as well as a measure of township control over village elections. (This measure is the percent of villagers who report that the village committee was appointed by township governments instead of through a fair and free election.) The measure of township control over elections should also to some degree capture control by higher levels of government, since townships implement policy decisions by higher administrative units. The estimate remains essentially unchanged and is statistically significant.

In addition, it could be the case that the social characteristics determine both land

seizures and lineage leader incorporation. The fourth specification includes a measure of surname fragmentation, which is a frequently used proxy for fragmentation among different lineage groups.⁴⁶ This measure is only an approximation because one surname group can potentially contain multiple lineage segments. The index captures the likelihood that two randomly selected villagers will belong to different surname groups.⁴⁷ This specification also includes a measure of ethnic group fragmentation, which captures the likelihood that two randomly selected villagers will belong to the Han majority and a minority group.⁴⁸ Finally, it includes a control for the number of households in a village. Again, these results remain essentially unchanged, with an estimate of a 14 percent marginal effect.

Table 4: *Strength of lineage institutions*. Least squares regression estimates, where the dependent variable is an indicator for land expropriation occurring in the village

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lineage leader is cadre	0.216*** (0.083)	0.217** (0.085)	0.209** (0.085)	0.193** (0.086)
Active lineage with ancestral hall or zupu	-0.103* (0.059)	-0.058 (0.065)	-0.052 (0.064)	-0.049 (0.064)
Economic controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Political controls	No	No	Yes	Yes
Social controls	No	No	No	Yes
Province fixed effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	392	390	390	376

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

One might be concerned that the results are driven by lineage groups that lack formal

⁴⁶Tsai 2007b; Xu and Yao 2015.

⁴⁷The surname fragmentation index is: $1 - (\text{percent of village in largest surname group})^2 - (\text{percent of village in second largest surname group})^2 - (\text{percent of village in third largest surname group})^2$.

⁴⁸It is calculated as: $1 - (\text{percent villagers Han ethnicity})^2 - (\text{percent villagers non-Han ethnicity})^2$.

resources like ancestral halls, which other studies have used to measure lineage group presence. In Table 4 I re-run the analysis focusing on lineages that have lineage halls or family histories. The results show that if we restrict our attention to lineage groups that possess these formal resources, the estimated effects are even larger, between 19 and 22 percent depending on the set of conditioning variables.

I include in the appendix additional tests using non-parametric tests like matching and entropy balancing. The estimates remain consistent, and show that the results do not depend on the functional form of the regression model or linear extrapolations. I also include in the appendix tests using alternate measures of the dependent and explanatory variables.

7 Placebo Test

Because of the observational nature of the data, an important concern is that unobserved differences between villages drive the results. For example, it could be the case that some places villager have more entrepreneurial residents than others; or it could be the case that local political bosses (*tuhuangdi*) have strong control over some subset of villages.⁴⁹ Such differences might be difficult to observe and account for in the quantitative analysis, but might plausibly drive land expropriation and development.

As an additional test, I examine whether the inclusion of lineage leaders has an effect on land expropriations *before* the leader takes office. If some unobserved, time-invariant characteristic of villages drives the results, like an entrepreneurial village culture, we would expect to find a positive estimate, reflecting the fact that the inclusion of lineage

⁴⁹Hurst et al. 2014

leaders does not drive results. On the other hand, if my argument is correct, we would expect the estimate to be close to zero, since lineage leader incorporation in the present cannot influence events in the past.

Table 5: *Placebo tests*. Least squares regression, where the dependent variable is an indicator for land expropriations *before* the current leadership took office.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lineage leader is cadre	0.009 (0.042)	-0.003 (0.041)	-0.006 (0.042)	-0.005 (0.043)
Active lineage	0.018 (0.033)	0.041 (0.034)	0.044 (0.034)	0.045 (0.035)
Economic controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Political controls	No	No	Yes	Yes
Social controls	No	No	No	Yes
Province fixed effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	392	390	390	376

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Consistent with my theory, Table 5 shows that a lineage leader being a village cadre has no effect on land expropriations in the years prior to their taking office. In this table I use the same specifications as the main results in Table 3. However, the dependent variable is whether the village experienced the land expropriation prior to the current leadership joining the government. To construct this variable I relied on villagers' reports for the year that land expropriations occurred, as well as the year of the last leadership turnover. Recall that in the analysis above I excluded land expropriations that occurred prior to the last leadership turnover.

The estimates are very close to zero and change sign depending on the set of conditioning covariates I use. Note also that the standard errors are *smaller* than in the main

results, so it is not the case that the results are not significant because the estimates are less precise. Overall, these results are inconsistent with idea that unobserved time-invariant differences between villages drive the results.

Like a panel design, the vulnerability of this placebo test lies in the possibility of unobserved time varying differences within units. The most plausible alternative explanation of this sort relates to the onset of urbanization, which might coincide with lineage leaders taking office. However, the main results control for factors including distance to the county and township, nighttime luminosity, and terrain roughness, casting doubt on the likelihood that this rival hypothesis drives the results.

8 Expropriations by Lineage Leaders Lead to Protest

The third observable implication of this theory is that villages where lineage leaders have expropriated land will experience more protests than other villages that have experienced land expropriations. When lineage leaders join the village government, it reduces the bargaining power of villagers and, as a result, the expropriations are more extractive. After the land taking occurs, villagers will be upset to discover its unequal terms and will be likely to lodge some sort of complaint against the village government. At this point, the lineage leaders' influence will be unlikely to quash the collective action, because trust has been broken (in game theoretic terms, villagers are in the punishment phase of a grim trigger strategy). Since the local state has already profited from the land deal, and since local officials may have personally benefited, the complaints of villagers may fall on deaf ears.

In Table 6 I present evidence showing a strong correlation between land takings by

Table 6: *Petitioning and land expropriations*. Dependent variable is an indicator for whether or not villagers have participated in a collective petitioning incident.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lineage leader is cadre	0.000 (0.051)	-0.011 (0.055)	-0.017 (0.055)	-0.016 (0.055)
Land seizure	-0.046 (0.050)	-0.082 (0.053)	-0.088* (0.053)	-0.088 (0.055)
Lineage leader X Land seizure	0.319*** (0.111)	0.362*** (0.114)	0.378*** (0.114)	0.352*** (0.118)
Constant	0.111*** (0.019)	-0.021 (0.084)	-0.025 (0.086)	-0.489** (0.204)
Observations	392	390	390	376
Economic controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Political controls	No	No	Yes	Yes
Social controls	No	No	No	Yes
Province fixed effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

lineage leaders and petitioning. The dependent variable is an indicator for whether or not villagers report having participated in a collective petitioning incident, which are most often directed towards lower-level officials. On the right hand side, I interact whether or not a land seizure has occurred with whether or not a lineage leader is a cadre. I include the same set of controls as with the previous analysis.

Two striking features of land takings emerge. First, land seizures in general are not associated with petitioning. The second row in the table shows that villages where lineage elites are not in office do not on average experience more protests. This hints at the fact that villagers may often find the terms of land seizures to be agreeable, and that land development brings ancillary benefits like increased non-farm employment.

Second, in villages where lineage elites are cadres, experiencing a land seizure is correlated with a sharp increase in the likelihood of experiencing a protest. The interaction term in the third row is positive and statistically significant across all of the specifications. When lineage elites are not in office, protests occur in only 7 percent of villages where land has been expropriated. Where lineage elites are on office, protests occur in 38 percent of villages where land has been expropriated. It is important to note that the survey does not include information about the content of the petition, so it is possible that these petitions may be about other matters, but the most straightforward explanation of the strong association between the two is that the petitions result from the land expropriations.

In the appendix, I present additional evidence on the correlation between land takings and economic outcomes. The results suggest that most land expropriations lead to improvements in employment and income. However, when these land expropriations are undertaken by lineage elites, there is no increase in employment and income.

9 Conclusion

The lesson of this article is simple: grassroots social groups often serve as tools of political control. These groups cannot replace formal institutions of accountability. As work by Elinor Ostrom and Lily Tsai shows, these groups can to a certain extent help members police themselves, especially in the context of repeated interaction.⁵⁰ When these groups are truly autonomous, they can even help curb state predation. For example, similar to the findings presented here, Timothy Frye finds that business organizations in Russia can help protect private property.⁵¹ Yet the incorporation of the leaders of these groups into state institutions does not represent real political inclusion, but rather a form of co-optation.

These findings show how seemingly democratic institutions can serve as institutions of cooptation even at the lowest level of politics. The literature to date has shown how regimes co-opt elites in national legislatures,⁵² and how authoritarian institutions help the regime distribute rents and resolve conflict between political factions.⁵³ Scholars of Chinese politics have also investigated how the regime has experimented with feedback mechanisms, transparency, and limited press freedoms to gather information about the behavior of lower-level officials.⁵⁴ Yet the logic of political co-optation in local politics is comparatively unexplored.

Future work might examine whether co-opting local elites is an effective long-run strategy. It may well not be, since once local elites have used their power to capture

⁵⁰Ostrom 1990; Greif 1993; Tsai 2007*a*. See also Evans 1995 on the benefits of “embedded autonomy” and Lierl 2015 for a contrary perspective.

⁵¹See Frye 2000, 2016. See also Grossman 2016 for further discussion of informal institutions and property rights.

⁵²See for example Blaydes 2010; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Svobik 2012.

⁵³Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012; Truex 2014; Hou 2015

⁵⁴Lorentzen 2014; Chen, Pan and Xu 2015; Distelhorst 2015

rents from land development they lose their moral authority. In the short term, this may not matter to local officials as long as they can extract enough from each village to fill local coffers (as well as their own pockets). Yet there are only so many villages in which this strategy can be repeated, and so this governance strategy may trade short-term gains for long-term problems — much as has arguably occurred with social service policies or efforts to strengthen rule of law without an independent judiciary or civil society.⁵⁵

These findings stand in stark contrast to a number of recent studies that have linked strong informal institutions in rural China to high levels of public goods provision.⁵⁶ This raises the question of whether there is a tradeoff between public goods and property rights. A bargain in which villagers receive more public goods but have weaker land rights might well benefit local elites. Future work on distributive politics in rural China should examine public goods alongside local development policies.

Outside of China, there are intriguing parallels between the role of lineage leaders in China and other types of local political brokers. The most obvious parallel may be with traditional leaders like tribal chiefs. Daron Acemoglu, Tristan Reed, and James Robinson find that chiefs in Sierra Leone exploit their control over local civil society to control local politics and development.⁵⁷ Kate Baldwin shows how national leaders cede control over land to traditional chiefs in order to increase electoral support among non-coethnics.⁵⁸ Interestingly, Baldwin also finds that voters tend to cast their ballots for political candidates endorsed by chiefs because they infer, correctly, that politicians with connections to chiefs

⁵⁵See Lü 2014, Wang 2014, Birney 2014, and Fu N.d. for important discussions.

⁵⁶See Newland 2016 for a helpful overview of the literature on local public goods provision in China.

⁵⁷Acemoglu, Reed and Robinson 2014

⁵⁸Baldwin 2014

will provide higher levels of public goods.⁵⁹ This is broadly consistent with the idea that traditional kinship institutions can help buttress public goods provision, which occurs in a context of repeated interaction and relatively low stakes. But it leaves open the question of what role these elites might play in large-scale land requisitions. Recent work by Lauren Honig finds that it is *autonomous* chiefs with power that is independent of the state that protect their constituents from land confiscation.⁶⁰

A second parallel is with other types of brokers in the developing world. There is intriguing evidence that outside of China, local brokers also trade targeted benefits in return for support for political elites, who sometimes gain much more in the bargain.⁶¹ For example, Tariq Thachil shows how elite parties in India use nonstate groups to supply services to the poor; in return, the poor vote for parties whose policies disproportionately benefit the elite.⁶² Other types of brokers, like the leaders of informal settlements,⁶³ could potentially play a similar role in other contexts.

Elite capture of decentralized institutions is likely widespread. For example, Edmund Malesky, Cuong Viet Nguyen and Anh Tran show how in Vietnam local councils were captured by existing political elites, who diverted public resources for their own benefit.⁶⁴ As a consequence, the abolition of local councils led to a surprising improvement in public service provision.

However, this study shows that elite capture is not inevitable. When village officials in China face competition from lineage elites who have not joined local political institutions,

⁵⁹Baldwin 2013

⁶⁰Honig 2015

⁶¹De La O 2015; Stokes 2005

⁶²Thachil 2011

⁶³See for example Auerbach 2016.

⁶⁴Malesky, Nguyen and Tran 2014.

their behavior is constrained and land requisitions are less likely. In this way, rival elites can play a positive role, acting as informal watchdogs — using their informal authority to encourage collective action when local officials bend the law.

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