

# Performing State Boundaries: Participation, Corruption, and the Making of Policy in China

## FINDINGS

Performances of state boundaries in enactments of participation make practices appear as either 'proper' or 'improper' in front of different audiences. They decide about access to diverse kinds of resources such as grants for rural development projects, purchasing power of urban middle-class consumers, or labour contributions of, and welfare benefits for, rural citizens.

I grasp this form of making policy with the concept 'performative boundary work'. It identifies repertoires of stage designs, properties, characters and sequences as well as different ways of relating across state boundaries (conflict, competition, complementarity and compatibility). It also questions sub-disciplinary divisions between political anthropology and kinship studies. Exploring performed state boundaries not only opens new perspectives on the Chinese state beyond presumed authoritarian, socialist or cultural otherness but also invites a fresh look on participation in 'Western democracies' and elsewhere.

## RESEARCH TOPIC:

'Participation' has become a buzzword during the last decades. My ethnographic project asks how citizens make policy when they translate globally-traveling models of participation into practice. China offers a particularly fruitful field for this endeavour. Mass participation played a central role in Maoism, but declined under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 2000s, both state and non-governmental organizations brought citizen participation back on the agenda – along with discourses of corruption. In rural policy, calls for participation have become ubiquitous in the 2010s: ranging from liberal models of electoral democracy at the village level and socialist and humanitarian models of civic participation in care for certain groups to forms of participatory bureaucracy such as 'democratic appraisals' of applications for state assistance.



Stage design with a clearly separated front and back region at an agricultural training offered by the county level agricultural bureau. Photo by the author.



NGO workshop on ecological agriculture, co-organised by the township agronomist, with a circular stage design to perform the 'non-state' character of the event in contrast to trainings offered by 'the state'. Photo by the author.

## OBJECTIVES

'Participation' and 'corruption' have usually been studied separately. However, the line between these 'proper' and 'improper' ways of influencing state policy is neither clear nor stable. Therefore, certain practices by which officials and other citizens make policy have been overlooked. To uncover these practices, political anthropology provides useful concepts. In 1995, Akhil Gupta shifted anthropologists' attention to discourses of corruption and the 'blurred boundaries' of the Indian state. State boundaries are the markers of difference between what actors regard as 'the state' and its various non-state others, such as 'family,' 'civil society,' or 'community.' Anthropology has not yet fully exploited the potential of studying state boundaries, because both participation and the distancing of the state have not received enough attention.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Building on 'stategraphy' (Thelen et al. 2014), my project brings the concept of 'boundary work' from science and technology studies to the anthropology of the state. To grasp the efficacy of boundary work, I combine this relational approach with attentiveness to performance. Performances of state boundaries are best studied through participant observation. Between 2013 and 2015, I did 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork on participatory rural development in China, mainly in Sichuan Province. Taking the bureaucratic administration of state assistance for the poor as well as NGO initiatives that promote ecological agriculture and cooperation as cases, I examine how state officials and other citizens situationally perform the boundary between state and non-state.

## FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS AND AWARDS

2014–2015

Marietta Blau Grant for PhD research abroad

Grant of the Chinese Scholarship Council for Rural Studies at Renmin University of China, Beijing

2017

Fellowship at the ZiF–Research Group 'Kinship and Politics' at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF), Bielefeld University

Dissertation Completion Fellowship, University of Vienna

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