Performing State Boundaries
A Stategraphy of Citizen Participation in China

Wien, 2018 / Vienna 2018

A 796 310 307
Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie
Social and Cultural Anthropology

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Tatjana Thelen, MA
# Contents

*Detailed contents*

**Introduction**
- The state and its boundaries: performative boundary work  

**Part I: Distancing the entangled state: performances of participation in a food network**  

**Chapter 1**
- Peasant participation as boundary work: performing state and NGO trainings on agriculture in an ecological village  

**Chapter 2**
- Consumer participation as boundary work: performing transparency, state certification and personal relations in a food network  

**Chapter 3**
- Participatory parenting as boundary work: performing state and community care for the rural left-behind child  

**Part II: Making policy by distancing the state: performances of participation in bureaucracy**  

**Chapter 4**
- List-making as boundary work: performing community in the democratic appraisal of eligibility for state assistance  

**Chapter 5**
- Standardisation as boundary work: performing bureaucracy, negotiating stupidity in public reapplications for state assistance  

**Chapter 6**
- Filial piety as boundary work: negotiating state welfare and workfare with performances of ‘traditional Chinese familism’  

**Conclusion**
- Performing state boundaries through participation  

**Bibliography**
Detailed contents

Tables vii
Acknowledgements viii

Introduction

The state and its boundaries: performative boundary work 1

Situating stategraphy in social science 4
After the origin of the state: an anthropology without the state 5
A wealth of competing state definitions 6
The blurred boundaries of the state 7
After the cultural turn: the new ethnography of the state and its critics 9

Stategraphy and other relational approaches 12
State relations in stategraphy and in neo-Marxism 13
Rejecting state-as-subject and state-as-object formulations 15
Strategic selectivity 16

Bringing performance to stategraphy 17
The boundary problem 18
Boundary work 19
The performance of state boundaries 23

Bringing stategraphy to China 28
The Chinese state: beyond authoritarian, socialist and cultural otherness 28
The case of citizen participation 32
‘Welcome to the ecological village’: ethnographic fieldwork 36

Overview 40

Part I: Distancing the entangled state: performances of participation in a food network 45

Chapter 1

Peasant participation as boundary work:
performing state and NGO trainings on agriculture in an ecological village 47

1.1 Introduction 47

A state official’s distancing of the state 48
Bringing stategraphy to Agro-Food Studies 49
1.2 Funding peasant participation in an ecological village

Strategic selectivity in rural governance in China
State support: peasant participants on lists
Consumer support: distancing the ecological from the state’s organic certification

1.3 Performing the state in the classroom

Recruiting peasants, waiting for the state
A stage for the state
Participation as paid work
Upholding a distance between state and peasant

1.4 Performing civil society in the classroom

Recruiting peasants and consumers as civil society
Participation as unpaid commitment
A stage for civil society
Naturalising consumer self and peasant other
The travel of Mao’s idea of the mass line

1.5 Conclusion: slippery state boundaries: from socialist blurring to liberal sharpening

Chapter 2

Consumer participation as boundary work:
performing transparency, state certification and personal relations in a food network

2.1 Introduction

Embeddedness in ‘alternative’ food networks
Instrumentalist personal relations in deficient (post-)socialisms

2.2 Performing transparency through consumer participation

Othering the organic grocery store next door
Three elements of transparency in a consumer association

2.3 Staging state certification

Affirming certification in the organic grocery store
Questioning certification in the consumer association’s shop
Negotiating certification for the ecological village
Crossing out the state: staging the personal as superior
Mirroring institutions: lacking state certification as transformative potential

2.4 Performing the ecological village

Justifying agricultural practices
Preparing the performance of transparency for consumer visits
Giving banquets without the taste of the state
Linking the non-ecological with the state
Defending the vegetable base as a stage for consumer participation

2.5 Conclusion: performing a safe distance: ‘good’ personal relations and ‘bad’ state institutions
Chapter 3

Participatory parenting as boundary work: performing state and community care for the rural left-behind child

3.1 Introduction 105

Liberal family images and the Chinese state’s otherness 107
The travel of the idea of participation across the state/family boundary 108

3.2 The construction of the ‘Chinese left-behind child’ 110

Numbers 110
A new Chinese phenomenon? 111
Worldwide expert language 112
Media reports and state documents 112

3.3 State and society as partners: splitting care responsibility 113

The state’s material care for the left-behind child 113
Society’s emotional care: compensating the absence of parents and state 115
Community care: activating rural resources 116
‘The nation is a family’: father state and mother society in China 118

3.4 Performances and artefacts of participatory parenting 120

Performing the difference of state and community education 120
Consumer associations as ‘mommies groups’ 124
Urban mommies’ self-sewn dolls: performing intensive parenting 125
Rural children’s drawings: staging the success of community education 126

3.5 Conclusion: upholding the state/family split through participatory parenting 127

Part II: Making policy by distorting the state: performances of participation in bureaucracy 131

Chapter 4

List-making as boundary work: performing community in the democratic appraisal of eligibility for state assistance 133

4.1 Introduction 133

Expanding state boundaries: citizen participation in bureaucracy 135
Seeing like a state and being seen through lists 136

4.2 State assistance in China: debating the Minimum Living Guarantee 137

‘Rational’ and ‘critical’ approaches: state for society or state versus society 137
The School of Rural Governance: the village as the ‘soil’ for state policy 139

4.3 Activating relational modalities: pushing the state ‘up’ and ‘out’ 140

Community volunteer modality 141
Paternalist modality 143

4.4 The ‘logic of not-offending’ 145

Questioning neediness and deservingness backstage 146
Untold memories: devaluing open confrontation 147
The abolition of agricultural tax and ‘peasant atomisation’ 148
Embeddedness in villagers’ groups: co-producing state and community 149

4.5 Conclusion: signatures of local belonging: lists as boundary objects 150
Chapter 5

**Standardisation as boundary work: performing bureaucracy, negotiating stupidity in public reapplications for state assistance** 155

5.1 Introduction 155

5.2 The standardisation of state assistance in stories and numbers 157

‘Scientific, accurate and just’: standardisation in central state documents 157

A township official’s history of the Minimum Living Guarantee in Qiuling Township 159

Reading state images into statistics: caring or economically unsuccessful 161

State assistance in local statistics: standardisation as masking social cuts 163

5.3 Talking standardisation: negotiating state standards and ‘stupidity’ 165

Rendering policy technical and citizens ‘stupid’ 166

‘Stupidity’ as a safe space: probing bureaucrats’ discretionary power 167

5.4 Performing standardisation: bureaucrats and submissive supplicants 170

Learning to perform as a ‘proper’ recipient of state assistance 170

Aid for suffering bodies: performing as submissive supplicant 172

Overcoming paternalism: performing a distance between citizens and bureaucrats 174

Making ‘standardised’ policy locally: discretion and unpredictability 175

5.5 Conclusion: making policy by performing the state as split in government and bureaucracy 177

Chapter 6

**Filial piety as boundary work: negotiating state welfare and workfare with performances of ‘traditional Chinese familism’** 181

6.1 Introduction 181

Filial participation in a state meeting: making familial care invisible 182

Studying traditional familism: beyond Chinese culture and the parasitic state 183

6.2 Ambivalences towards familism in the standardisation of state assistance 187

Curbing ‘human feeling allowances’: too much family in the ‘wrong’ place 187

Strengthening ‘household responsibility’: not enough family in the ‘right’ place 188

Familism by modern law: enforcing tradition against tradition 189

Self-reliance in state and NGO discourse: responsible units ‘below’ the state 190

6.3 Selective uses of familism: making local Minimum Living Guarantee politics 191

Demanding compensation: state assistance as a means for rural governance 191

Composing a Minimum Living Allowance household of needy individuals 193

Local workfare: making family members clean the ecological village 196

Reshuffling over- and under-implementation: the demise of local workfare 198

6.4 Claiming state assistance with familism 200

Making claims as a filial son of family and state 200

The poverty of not having a family 201

6.5 Conclusion: ‘tradition’ on the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ side of the state/family boundary 202