

The Roads in Sun Village Popular Authority in the State-society Pattern

In the rural areas in China, roads are like the arteries and veins in the organism of basic-level society, connecting relatively individual villages together as the economic (market) regions and cultural circles where people live in compact communities. Although building roads is always regarded as the cause of the public good, many difficulties still occur since it involves in purchasing lands on a requisition basis, cleaning up seedlings and investment of funds and labor. In rural areas with limited material resources, road-building initiators need to mobilize various social resources and harmonize the conflict of interest in rural communities. Building roads provides rural leaders of different historical periods with a stage to display their abilities and to enhance their influence. Focusing on the road building in countryside is a proper perspective of analyzing what role “popular authority” plays in the society.

Before 1949, the only cause of the public good in Sun village was to build “Gukeng Bridge”. Located at the edge of Sun village, “Gukeng” was the outlet of the stream formed by rainwater. The “Gukeng Bridge” has long existed. With a length of only two meters and a width of less than one meter, it was a symbolic architecture with a function of blocking the way of the “dragon water” in order to make the villagers earn money easily, as legend had it. In the 1930s, “Gukeng Bridge” collapsed. At that time, Sun Village was experiencing drought, in which the public thought was caused by the failure to block the “dragon water”. A “devil head” named “Wu gou si” was the first one to collect money from Wu families on the basis of per man to repair the bridge. Later, He and Lin family were worried about no contribution to blocking the “dragon water” and therefore the “devil heads” in these two families took the chance to follow Wu’s example. An old person in Wu families recalled, “Wu gou si embezzled at least half of the money he collected.”

In the 1920s and 1930s, the active players in the social stage in Sun village and the

surrounding areas were almost the local tyrants and bandits. Among the local armed bandits, the “Dai tou yu” was the most powerful. At the time when the local bandits acted rampantly, the Sun villagers were forced to build a 10-kilometer road from Dai tou (where the higher-level administrative office of Sun village is located now) to Bei Gao. This road was built under coercion imposed by “Dai tou yu”. The “Dai tou yu” compelled the villagers along the route to work and made no compensations to those whose lands were taken for the road and whoever would dare to disobey would be captured. As a result, it only took half a year to finish the road. The aged in Sun village recalled that, after the completion of the road, “Dai tou yu” found an old car from somewhere unknown. The car was driven for only one or two times and later on, the road was deserted since no car went by.

In 1951, land reform movement was carried out in Sun Village. At that time, the Party branch of Communist Party of China had not been established yet. Therefore, the Peasant Association had such high authority that almost all the villagers responded supportively to every call it made. The Sun Village was located on the southeast coast in Fujian Province, with a distance of less than 10 sea miles from the “enemies-occupied island” Wuqiu (the Taiwanese troops now still occupy the island). The troops from Nationalist Party often harassed around Sun Village, with a tendency to “counterattack the mainland”. During September and October in 1951, the higher-level authority suddenly ordered to build a 50-kilometer road (from the town to the coastline) as a preparation road for war within a short period. The tasks were assigned to different villages and the Peasant Association was in charge of allocating the work. The chairman of Peasant Association in Sun Village recalled:” I gave a literally opposite notice, telling them only the “the landlords, the rich landowners, the counter-revolutionaries and evil people can not take part in building road.”And it turned out that except those people just mentioned, almost all the adults got up before dawn to go to build the road with their own tools and within three days, a road of about 500 meters was finished.(the task assigned to Sun Village). During the construction, the

chairman also made a record of the people who went to work, but the villagers didn't care at all whether there was a pay for the work or not.

In 1956, Sun Village stepped into High-grade Commune period but also went through another unsuccessful road building experience. The Sun Village was located in a peninsula, facing northward and southward to the sea, (the parts facing northward and southward were called "front sea" and "back sea" respectively). "Front sea" was the largest salt producing area in Fujian province. The way to transport the sea salt produced in "front sea" had to pass "back sea", hence, a land route to connect "front sea" and "back sea" was needed. At that time, the person in charge in saltern office talked to the former chairman of Peasant Association (after the land reform, the Peasant Association was dissolved), hoping the former chairman could consult with the villagers about the salt pan borrowing some valuable lands (about 2.5 acres of farmlands) to build that land route. The saltern would offer a compensation that the Sun Villagers could carry three thousands of "salt's sedans" (that was to carry sea salt with a shoulder pole and buckets) everyday from "front sea" to "back sea" (a distance of around 3 kilometers). The payment of per sedan was 0.5 RMB, which was a substantial amount at that time. (Villagers could only earn 0.2 RMB per day when doing the odd jobs with the same intensity at slack season). However, when encouraging the villagers to build the road, the former chairman of Peasant Association encountered obstacle. Some people thought that salt industry had waxed and waned and sometime, the salt was even cheaper than the soil. If the industry failed, then they would have lost their farmlands for nothing. The former chairman believed that it should have been a great opportunity for the villagers to earn some good money but he met opposition instead so that being angry, he gave up mobilizing.

It was the same person to initiate those two road-building projects, but because of the change of the initiator's status, different consequences were resulted. This demonstrated that at that time, the operation of a project in rural society entirely depended on the forces of political integration and had no necessary connection with

organizers' ability or popular prestige. Meanwhile, it also indicated that there was no stage and opportunity for popular authority. Whether the political integration could succeed or not seemed to depend on the villagers' "political consciousness", but in fact, there was powerful deterrent behind the political integration. The former chairman of Peasant Association said, "It was not because that the public had high political awareness, but that after the movement of repressing the counter-reactionaries during land reform period, people began to fear the authority. He who disobeyed the authority would be denounced in public meeting or listed as migrants whose whole families would be forced to move to mountain areas or put into the "learning-to-be-good team" to do voluntary work that actually was to be reformed through labor. If the disobedient still did not behave themselves in the team, they would be grouped into "the landlords, the rich landowners, the counter-revolutionaries and evil people", the so-called "four groups of bad elements". At that time, it was an easy job to be an official. As long as the power was exerted, nobody dared to challenge the authority, so the popular authority was unnecessary."

In 1958, the Sun village conducted another road building project which responded to the call of "realization of replacing the labor work with carts" proposed by higher authority in the Party. The so-called "replacing the labor work with carts" aimed to free the peasants' shoulders which were burdened when people carried buckets of fertilizers, water or grain, instead, they would use "rooster-carts" (a cart with one wheel driven by labor) to do the work. At that time, the farmlands belonged to the collectives so that no purchase of lands was involved. Owing to the centralized assignment of the tasks by the leader of production team, a muddy road with a width of less than one meter and a length of about 500 meters was soon be built by Sun villagers. Because all the villages competed with each other for the speed of building the road in responding to the Party's call, it was so hasty to complete the road that even the roadbed was absent. When the rain came, the road was washed and lost its form as a road. In fact, this muddy road built during that time did not mark the cart trace.

In the 1980s, with the legalization and comprehensive promotion of the household contract responsibility system, the organizational structure of the production brigade existed in name only while the social space among the people had an obvious expansion. In 1982, Sun Village finally held publicly an activity of entertaining the Chinese gods in the lantern festival and based on the old practice, two “prestigious fellow villagers” and four “headmen” were elected, who were responsible for collecting and managing the fund used for holding the annual temple fair in the village. Since 1995, the Sun Villagers had created a piece of new practice that was worshipping the major god “Yang gong taishi” by hanging the “lucky money” on it in every lantern festival. This new practice had a profound influence on the social life in Sun Village.

On the 11th and 12th in the first month of the lunar year, the villagers would carry the statue of “Yang gong taishi” to visit each household in the village. Each family received the arrival of “Yang gong taishi” by setting off firecrackers and hanging a red string that tied several pieces of notes of different value (ranging from 20RMB to 100RMB) around the neck of the statues (villagers also called it “hanging the red”), in the hope that the “ Yang gong taishi” would bless the whole family. The money people hung on “Yang gong taishi” was only about 1000 RMB in 1995 and it increased by years, totaling 2000 RMB in 1996 while about 3000RMB in 1997, and surpassing 4000 RMB in 1998. Since the funds for annual temple activity were collected separately, the money hung on the “Yang gong taishi” became extra fund whose right to use it belonged to “Yang gong taishi” himself as well as the “prestigious fellow villagers” and the “headmen” who would use the money properly. They mainly spent the money on building facilities related to the activities of temple fair and entertaining the god. Therefore, after 60 years when the event that villagers collected money for rebuilding the “ Gu keng Bridge” in 1930s had become history, today the Sun village again started a public project with pure popular character—to rebuild the “ god’s road” which was for parade when entertaining the gods in lantern festival. Because part of the “god’s road” was damaged when some people were

building their new houses, which caused dissatisfaction of other villagers. Those families happened to encounter some “bad luck” after the completion of their new houses. (Some fell sick and had to stay in bed, some were injured in accidents, some suffered mental problem). Therefore, the villagers believed that the “Bodhisattva” in the temple made its power felt and punished those families. In order to comply with the will of the god and common aspirations of the people, the “prestigious fellow villagers” decided to rebuild the “god’s road”. For once informed of the news by “headmen”, the villagers participated actively in this work voluntarily. On the day before the lantern festival in 1999, the “god’s road” with a width of only 1 meter and a length of less than 400 meters was finally completed. In this event, we can see that the appeal of personal benefits, the mobilization of family force, the deterrence of the god’s power, the pressure from public opinions as well as the organizing capabilities and the wisdom of the “prestigious fellow villagers” worked together to constitute the community of rural areas. Among all those factors, what impresses us most is that the popular authority not only attained its source by hosting village-wide temple activities but also used the deference of gods as a judgment of the benefit appeals to villagers.

The “prestigious fellow villagers” had built up their prestige when they hosted the public affairs with religious background in village and the prestige could also be made use of by the political authority at the grassroots-level that carried the characters of state brokerage system. At the same time, the “prestigious fellow villagers” could therefore further expand the space for social activities.

Since the collapse of the people’s commune system, the country had started to levy taxes directly on each family, which resulted in the increase of costs that were unavoidable for making profits from basic-level society. The nation experienced an unprecedented overexpansion of administration in the basic-level society, and the first-level administrative personnel in the counties and villages greatly exceeded manning quota. Take “Dai tou” county which sun village belonged to as an example, its administrative staff had amounted to 200, and even the small Sun Village had 20 “members from 2 committees” (Chinese Communist Party Branch Committee and

Villagers Committee). From 1980s, Sun Villagers had to pay for more than 10 kinds of taxes, including agricultural tax, water charges, engagement highway tolls, highway funding, money raised to set up new schools, funds for overall planning, funds raised for rewarding the people who are ready to take up the cudgels for a just cause, insurance premium, education surcharge, conscription charges and so on. Because the village officials decided to collect the taxes at the time just after summer harvest (when the farmers had the grain to sell), the collection of taxes was also called “summer collection”. Apart from that, the villagers had to pay the fine if they violated the one-child policy. Since the officials were so busy in collecting taxes from villagers that they did not have time or energy to settle down the dispute among villagers or organize the public activities, some chances to come forward in gainless affairs were left to the “prestigious fellow villagers”. Therefore, space and opportunities for popular authority to display capability and gain further reputation were created.

Furthermore, Villagers Committee set up the “civilized group” and there was one group leader and a deputy plus two or three group members in it, who were all non-administrative staff but had certain reputation among people, such as “prestigious fellow villagers”, retired teachers, and the former officials of production team and so on. An official in the Villagers Committee said, “We hope the old comrades can still exert their capacity for work.” He expected their reputation could play an important role in resolving a dispute. This non-government organization actually functioned as a substitute for the Villagers Committee. According to *The Chinese People country and country Organic Law of Villagers' Committees*, the function of the Villagers Committee should be “handling village public affairs and cause of the public good , mediating a dispute among the people , helping to defend public security, reflecting villager's idea , demanding and putting forward a proposal to the People Government.”

Under the state brokerage system, as the group leaders of “civilized group”, the “prestigious fellow villagers” had gained the new source of authority, and their stages for social activities increasingly expanded and prestige was greatly enhanced. This

situation was not the result of redistribution of social power in basic-level society caused by deliberate competition but of state brokerage system, yet which would not affect “the prestigious fellow villagers” seeking support from the villagers’ committee.

In the early 1999, the “prestigious fellow villagers” proposed to rebuild the village road so that it could connect with the road built in 1951 as a preparation road for war (the major road in town and county). To rebuild this 1-kilometer road was a plan brewing for a long time. However, because the purchase of farmlands and a lot of labor were needed, the “prestigious fellow villagers” did not want to propose to rebuild the road without thorough consideration. Their worry was not based on nothing. The complicated process of building the “god’s road” revealed that the benefits villagers gained from the public goods were imbalanced. When some people realized that the cause of public good could not help gain their benefits, then the popular authority could not easily make people obey only by individual capability and morality appeal. Because building the “god’s road” was a public good activity as well as a religious activity, the “prestigious fellow villagers” could transform the deference of the god’s power to mandatory public opinion pressure so that the road could be completed. However, if that was just a public good activity without any religious background, the authority could have only sought support from formal state power system.

In February 1999, the Villagers Committee invited the “prestigious fellow villagers” to the tea party of spring festival. In the party, the prestigious fellow villagers agreed to initiate rebuilding the village road but expected the officials in Villagers Committee to spill the whitewash (to distinguish the farmlands to be purchased). To emphasize the formality and great concern from Villagers Committee, all of the administrative staff appeared to spill the whitewash. Upon the beginning of the construction, some people who reclaimed the wastelands in that road and gained no direct benefits from the road building went to hinder the construction. The “prestigious fellow villagers” said, “That is the whitewash the officials spilt. It means

the officials are in charge of this. If you are opposed to the project, you should talk to them instead of sabotaging here.” However, still some people pushed the roadbed over. A village official went to rebuke them, saying, “If you continue to sabotage, I will ask the police station to send some police officers for you.” After one month, two roads were connected, and the Sun villagers could finally step on the road leading to a county town.

From the standpoint that the nation and society are dualistic and opposite, the extension and expansion of the state power on such a large scale that the basic-level society should have resulted in the great extrusion of social space and popular authority, but actually the popular authority was unprecedentedly active, which could not be explained by that dualism. However, if from the perception that the relation of state power and basic-level society is the relation of the balance of benefits, the huge administration the country set up in basic-level society is nothing but an entrepreneurial brokerage system operated by increasingly rich rural areas. When various types of taxes were levied, in order to minimize the cost, the reputation of popular authority was needed to enhance the ability of mobilization of state brokerage, which objectively made room for the establishment and development of popular authority. Meanwhile, the popular authority can also make use of the validity of state power to attain the source of authority supported by the regime and therefore the interaction of popular authority and state brokerage was formed

Open Times, november 2000



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/fr/deed.fr>