

The Ningbo Odyssey: Reflection Paper

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My field trip started in early April 2019. Initially, I hoped to find out the relationship between rural land ownership and local public goods provision, with a focus on grassroots politics, but I soon discovered that my goal would be difficult to achieve. At the beginning of my journey, I visited the chosen villages and met directly with ordinary local villagers to carry out conversations. Soon enough, I realized that it was difficult to find younger generations, as many of them working elsewhere and only returned to their rural homes late at night; additionally, lots of young people have moved out of the villages for better work or educational opportunities. I noticed that most rural areas are hollowing out, left with elderlies and sometimes migrants from other provinces. Another issue for the research was due to the migrant's weak connections with the local villages, they usually had no ideas on local public affairs. These people were still tied with their original household registrations; hence, they couldn't get involved with the new villages where they currently live, let alone to own any property in the rural communities. Meanwhile, I tried to talk to local elderlies for inquiring on local affairs. Many of them only spoke Ningbonese, the local dialect, that I cannot understand. The language obstacle made it impossible for me to communicate with them freely. I had to wonder in the villages, looking for local villagers who can speak Standard Mandarin.

One more issue arose when even when I found ideal local villagers who could communicate with me. Sometimes, they refused to share any information. In general, I was lucky enough to find the proper villagers to share with me some local insights. At times, some local villagers would share with me critical information of the adjacent villages, with that unexpected information, I was able to visit the unplanned sites. After visiting 10 villages, I observed the inaccurate or vague information that I collected from the local villagers, as they were not clear on the quantity and quality of local public goods and local services. They had no clue on who funded and organized such public goods and services. Although, they were well recognized of the usage situations of local lands, such as the lands to be sold by the local governments, idled, self-deployed or rent out to some large plantation family.

Due to the lack of awareness on local public goods, I quickly switched my interview targets from villagers to village officials. Therefore, I started to visit local village offices instead of talking to people on the streets. Most of the time, village officials/ administrators would answer my interview questions; occasionally, they refused to share any information. However, I did realize one issue: the working hours of village offices are very different from the modern, urban schedules. Instead of having a 9 to 5 working schedule, rural village office buildings open their door from 8 to 10:30 am and barely no one works in the afternoon, not even the people who are on duty. I often walked into empty office buildings in rural Ningbo. Luckily, I was able to find out a contact list on the public bulletin board and call the numbers listed on it. People were kind enough to talk to me over the phone, or they would show up in person. If I failed to hold on somebody via phone, I usually wondered around in the village and asked local villagers to make

connections with local officials or they would lead me to officials' homes. My good luck didn't always come with me. There are several villages where I was turned down by the local officials. Often, they would ask for permission or paperwork issued by the upper government (in my case, the township government).

Unfortunately, because of these obstacles, I didn't find any causal connection between my research variables. There seems to be no variation of those public goods offered in the rural sites. Each village shares a similar "package" of public goods, namely hard public infrastructures like public toilets, paved roads, basketball courts, senior center, and soft public goods such as related auditoriums or cultural galleries. These existing public goods were guided and funded by the upper levels of government. Based on my close observation of rural local affairs, I believe that central and provincial governments still play an important role in providing and guiding local public goods, whereas local, especially the village government, follows. Hence, I believe that the central/upper governments are still powerful when examining local politics and affairs.