LUEBBERT ARTICLE PRIZE


What caused you to embark on this project?
I have always been interested in how hierarchical organizations work and what makes them work. When I was in graduate school, I read a lot of work about the importance of state and bureaucracy in economic development. For those studies, the ideal bureaucracy is usually one with strong Weberian characteristics—impersonal, meritocratic, and professionally run. This Weberian model clearly does not fit with the Chinese reality, but the Chinese bureaucracy is nonetheless still a reasonably capable and effective one. This contradiction has puzzled me for many years and it prompted me to write a dissertation – of which this article is a part – to better understand factors that can contribute to bureaucratic effectiveness but are often overlooked by the Weberian paradigm.

What is one main thing you want the project to be remembered for ten years from now?
I hope that it will be this: bureaucracy requires a personal input to work well. An effective bureaucracy is not a soulless machine in which every agent is a cog, but one that combines impersonal rules with human emotions and relations. The human aspect can be accounted for in a number of different ways, but it needs to be there.

What in your data or findings surprised you the most? Why?
It would be the result that patron-client ties to the higher-ups can make local leaders do a better job. The received view in our discipline is that patronage only leads corruption and perverse incentives, but my project suggests that under the right circumstances, it can also be used to achieve more benevolent outcomes.

What would you change or do differently if you went back and did this project again?
I wish that I could have a better measure of local economic performance. In the article, I used the official GDP growth as the main measure. The advantage of the official data is that they are systematic and extensive, but there is the well-known problem of statistical falsification, which could bias the finding if we think that having a connection may intensify the incentive to falsify data. I did several tests in the paper to address this problem and the evidence so far suggests that falsification, even if present, is unlikely to be driving the main results. However, I still wish
that I could have a more direct way to gauge cities’ actual economic performance net of the falsified component. Luckily, there are methods and data to do that now, and my collaborators and I are working to construct such a measure. If I were to write this paper now, this would be an area that I would make some changes.

What is the biggest still unanswered question that emerges from your research?

If you buy the paper’s main argument, which is that intra-elite patronage can somehow be a good thing for bureaucratic performance, then it opens up a number of interesting new questions. For instance, what would be the optimal political structure for promoting development and governance? The common prescription from the international development agencies is to build a meritocratic, Weberian-style civil service system, but this may not be the most ideal one if we think that the personal element is also important in making a bureaucracy work. Another question is: What exactly is the cause of underdevelopment? We social scientists tend to see underdevelopment mainly as a problem of bad institutions. But if a conspicuously “bad” institution like patron-client ties can still sometimes be good for development, then it suggests that we may need to rethink our criteria for classifying the “good” versus the “bad” institutions, and the root cause of underdevelopment may go much deeper than the mere lack of certain institutions.

If another scholar does the same project ten years from now, do you think their findings would be different from yours? And if yes, in which ways?

I honestly do not know, but it would be very interesting to see. In the case of China, I do not think the way the government does things will be fundamentally different in ten years’ time, so my results will probably hold. However, it would be fascinating to see projects investigating similar phenomena in other countries in other historical periods. Many of episodes of economic growth in history—England in the 17-18th century, the U.S in the 19th century, and South Korea in the 1960s and 70s, just to name few—actually happened under the watch of bureaucracies that contained significant patronage elements. I am curious to know what effect political patron-client networks have had on the economy in those cases and whether the effects are similar or different to those in the Chinese case.