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Thugs-for-Hire: The Rise and Fall of Political–Criminal Co-Governance in Rural China

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In political–criminal co-governance, governments and gangs share authority and collaborate to implement policy. This article draws on empirical data to investigate partnerships between local governments and rural gangs in many Chinese villages. It argues that insufficient finance, limited compliance from villagers and public policy that lacks social legitimacy have compelled township and village governments to use informal coercion via gangsters and adopt political–criminal co-governance to implement unpopular policies and pursue local interests. It also explores how far China's most recent anti-crime campaign has led to the demise of this type of co-governance in the countryside, enhancing understanding of thugs-for-hire and state–crime relations.

KEYWORDS: political–criminal co-governance, rural gangs, thugs-for-hire, informal coercion, state–crime relations, China

INTRODUCTION

Gangs in China are 'largely viewed and considered through the lens of organized crime' (Atkinson-Sheppard and Hayward 2019: 629). The Chinese government and Chinese academics use different terms to refer to gangs and organized crime groups, and they divide crime groups into three categories based on the developmental stage of their organizational structure. 'An ordinary crime group' (*yiban fanzui jituan*) is the earliest stage of development. This usually has a clear but unsophisticated structure, and its economic gain from criminal activity is usually small, because it lacks the ability or ambition to control a territory or market sector. 'An evil force' (*e shili*) is seen as a transitional phase in the evolution of an ordinary crime group into a black society. 'A black society or a criminal organization with the character of a black society' (*heishehui* or *heishehui xingzhi zuzhi*) is the most advanced stage. These are well-structured criminal groups that make a lot of money through controlling or influencing territories and/or sizable market sectors (Wang and Wang 2025). Drawing on Varese's (2010: 17) definition of the mafia as 'a type of organized crime group attempting to control the supply of protection', a

black society—or a criminal organization with the character of a black society—can be understood as a mafia group that serves as a form of economic governance, attempting to control the supply of protection and extra-legal enforcement in a given territory or market sector.

Under Xi Jinping, China's central government adopted a zero-tolerance attitude towards criminal elements and consolidated Party control of all aspects of Chinese society. From 2018 to 2020, the government carried out its 'Sweep Away Black Societies and Eliminate Evil Forces' campaign (*saohei chu'e zhuanxiang douzheng*; hereafter, the Sweep Away Black campaign). One objective of this campaign was to strengthen Party control of the countryside by targeting rural gangs and gang infiltration of the grassroots political system (Wang 2020a; 2020b; Hillman 2021; Wang and Mou 2021). The Xinhua News Agency (2021) reported that the campaign led to the destruction of 1,289 black societies or criminal organizations with the character of a black society in the countryside, which constituted 35.4 per cent of all black societies destroyed nationwide, and that 14,027 evil forces and ordinary crime groups were disbanded, with over 42,700 village cadres[1] with criminal records and gang affiliations removed from office. This indicates that a significant number of gangsters had either become or assisted village cadres, implying widespread collaboration between local authorities and gangs in rural China.

China's Sweep Away Black campaign inspired us to investigate the following questions: what allows gangs to infiltrate the grassroots political system? What is the relationship between gangs and the state? Drawing on interview data and published materials, this article investigates local governments' use of non-state agents, especially gangs or thuggish groups, to pursue state objectives and lower the costs of state control. In the Chinese context, 'thugs-for-hire' refers to non-state actors, mostly gangsters, who are employed by local authorities to force compliance from a reluctant population and implement local policies that lack social legitimacy. The article relates this phenomenon to China's three decades of fiscal reforms, which have caused significant financial difficulties for county, township, and village governments and undermined the legitimacy of these governments. We argue that China's fiscal reforms in the 1990s and 2000s severely weakened state infrastructural power[2] in the countryside, where the grassroots state[3] faced scarce financial resources and widespread resistance to unpopular policies. These issues encouraged local governments to cooperate with and delegate coercion to thugs and gangsters, who used coercion and violence to collect agricultural fees and taxes, enforce housing demolitions and implement village development projects. As a result, rural gangsters evolved from hooligans and street-fighting gangs in the 1980s and early 1990s to illegal enforcers and even village cadres who, at least until the 2018–2020 Sweep Away Black campaign started, enforced residents' compliance with local government orders.

This examination of collaborative governance also enhances understanding of the relationship between the central state, the grassroots state and criminal organizations. This article argues that China's fiscal reforms have intensified the divergence of interests between the central state and the grassroots state (Lee 2007: 11–13), encouraging the two entities to adopt different approaches to gangs. The central state, which is mostly concerned with the legitimacy of the party–state, adopts a zero-tolerance approach to gang infiltration of grassroots political systems, whereas the grassroots state 'single-mindedly pursues economic development' (Chen 2017: 75) and mobilizes all available resources, including informal coercion provided by thugs,

1 In mainland China, 'village cadres' are village party secretaries and committee heads.

2 'State infrastructural power' refers to a state's capacity to enforce policies across its territory. The central state relies on its radiating institutions—local cadres—to extract revenue, implement policies and provide public goods; see Mann (2008) and Soifer (2008).

3 In this article, grassroots state means town (*zhen*), township (*xiang*) and village governments. Towns and townships are at the same level, and townships are usually less industrialized than towns. To avoid confusion, the term 'township' refers to both town and township. 'Village government' refers to village self-government, because the Chinese Organic Law of Villagers' Committees allows villagers to establish their own village government; see Lee and Zhang (2013: 1482), Li (2002: 706), and Kelliher (1997).

to implement often unpopular policies and pursue local interests (e.g. economic growth and government revenues). The different attitudes to gangs adopted by central and local governments reflect the complexity of state–crime relations—the relationship between the state and criminal organizations.

This article is inspired by the criminology and political science literature on thugs-for-hire. Varese and Wong's (2018) theoretical distinction between thugs-for-hire and mafiosi, Ong's (2022) argument about the 'outsourcing of repression' and Chen's (2017) notion of 'informal coercion' have been particularly helpful in generating three hypotheses about why and how the grassroots state in China uses thugs-for-hire. This article uses empirical data, combined with published materials, to test these hypotheses in our research sites. Our study enriches the existing literature by not only examining the use of gang coercion by grassroots state authorities in the daily governance of villages but also by investigating gangsters as village governors and the development of political–criminal co-governance. This article draws on first-hand empirical data to reveal two closely related phenomena: the decline of local governments' fiscal capacity and legitimacy, and gangs' infiltration of grassroots political systems. This article also suggests that China's 2018–2020 anti-crime campaign and recent strategies to promote rural revitalization have led to the decline of political–criminal co-governance in rural China.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

This section reviews the distinction Varese and Wong (2018) made between thugs-for-hire and mafiosi, thus providing a theoretical foundation for this article. It then discusses Ong's theory concerning the outsourcing of repression and Chen's framework for informal coercion, both of which are particularly useful for generating hypotheses concerning local governments' use of thugs-for-hire to establish control over society in rural China. Drawing on the existing literature, this section develops the concept of political–criminal co-governance, in which local authorities and gangs share authority and collaborate to implement policy.

Thugs-for-hire versus mafiosi

Gangs can be viewed as durable street youth groups involved in illegal activities (Van Gemert 2005), as the lower tiers within the hierarchy of organized crime groups (Lo 2012), or as 'a transitional phase whereby gangs evolve into more organized criminality' (Atkinson-Sheppard and Hayward 2019: 615). Organized crime can be understood in various ways: as illegal activity, as an organizational or network structure, as an illicit enterprise, or as a form of governance, that is, extra-legal governance (see Varese 2010: 14; von Lampe 2016; Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou 2018: 5). Notably, Varese (2010: 17) considered organized crime to be part of economic governance and defined a mafia group as a special type of organized crime group or illicit enterprise that 'attempts to regulate and control the supply of protection' (see also Breuer and Varese 2023). Although the concepts of gangs, organized crime and mafias offer valuable insights for understanding the notion of thugs-for-hire, it does not align neatly with these concepts. Varese and Wong (2018: 24) define thugs-for-hire as 'non-state actors used by authorities to impose policies and decisions upon a reluctant population'. Thugs-for-hire can therefore be viewed as a unique crime configuration that transcends existing definitional boundaries.

Varese and Wong (2018) offered one of the first theoretical discussions in the field of criminology of the concept of thugs-for-hire and how they are distinct from mafiosi. They suggest that the relationships between authorities and these thugs often mirror principal–agent relationships, although the former are generally concealed and informal while the latter are open and formal. Although both thugs-for-hire and mafiosi are willing to use violence, they differ in one significant way: mafiosi have the capacity to control the business of private protection and extra-legal enforcement, and they govern clearly defined territories or illegal markets (Gambetta 1993; Varese 2001;

2010; 2011; Wang 2017; Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou 2018). In contrast, thugs-for-hire have neither ability nor aspiration to control a specific area or market (Varese and Wong 2018).

Outsourced repression and informal coercion

Thugs-for-hire in China have also gained scholarly attention from political scientists. For example, Ong (2022: 2) used urbanization to demonstrate that everyday state power has been practiced by 'outsourcing repression to non-state agents who use violent and non-violent strategies' in order to enforce compliance and silence dissent. Subcontracting violence to third-party agents known as 'thugs-for-hire', such as local gangsters and hooligans, helps the state implement unpopular and illegitimate policies (Ong 2018a); it also allows it to evade political accountability for the illegal violent acts conducted by these agents (Ong 2018b).

Ong argued that the practice of outsourcing repression exhibits regional variations (Ong 2022: 74). In cities, non-violent means of control, such as 'carrots' (material incentives), are prominent. This is because the cost of using 'sticks' (violent repression) in these areas is too high for the local government. On the other hand, in the urban peripheries and the countryside, where financial resources are scarce, violent means of coercion persist. To ensure that the cost of using violent methods is affordable, local authorities subcontract to gangsters. These thugs-for-hire offer 'violence as a form of service for profit or in exchange for in-kind benefits' (Ong 2018b: 682). These benefits include not only business opportunities but also tolerance of thugs' exploitation of collectively owned resources, corrupt acts during the implementation of publicly funded projects, and illegal enterprises.

Chen (2017: 68) developed the concept of informal coercion, defined as 'coercion not by formal state agents, but by non-state or semi-official actors such as vigilantes, thugs, or paramilitary forces'. Where state power is limited, local officials have to deal with problems caused by the gap between efficient policy implementation and insufficient finance or political legitimacy. This gap may be filled by non-state actors—vigilantes, hooligans or professionalized security and paramilitary forces—supplying cost-effective informal coercion (Chen 2017). Moreover, informal or privatized coercion is a preferred solution for authorities facing 'strong international pressure to adhere to global norms [such as human rights]', because the use of informal coercion reduces the need to use state violence and makes state agents invisible (Chen 2017: 68).

The paradox of China is that the state at national level is strong, with many arbitrary powers and powerful fiscal resources (Mann 2008), but local states, which are responsible for policy implementation and public goods provision, 'are weak in their capacity, and their autonomy is frequently usurped by key societal forces' (Ong 2018b: 681). Unlike officials in other countries, who may use informal coercion to avoid international sanctions, local officials in China use informal coercion for different reasons. First, local officials seek to 'pursue local or private interests that diverge from central interests', because informal coercive tactics help them 'overcome procedural barriers and avoid scrutiny from above' (Chen 2017: 67). Second, local authorities delegate coercion to third parties when a project requires strong coercion but their use of force is severely restricted by central government and other upper-level authorities. Pursuing local interests in a cost-effective manner and evading constraints on the use of force create incentives for local officials to adopt informal coercive tactics.

Fiscal resources, social legitimacy of policies, and political–criminal co-governance: hypotheses

Ong noted that if a government has few financial resources, it will be unable to offer material incentives to ensure compliance, so outsourcing violence to gangs will become its preferred choice. Ong's argument clarified the rationale behind township and village governments' hiring of rural gangs for informal coercive tasks. Her research prompted us to examine how the lack of fiscal resources encouraged local officials to use repressive tactics. This gives rise to Hypothesis 1:

When thugs-for-hire have a cost advantage, they will be attractive to a grassroots state suffering significant financial shortfall.

Ong's and Chen's findings also suggest the need to investigate the popularity and social legitimacy of government policy, which determines how far local implementation will be resisted or inhibited by social actors. When state directives and government policies lack social legitimacy or are unlawful, the use of persuasion is not cost-effective, and thugs-for-hire are probably the only remaining option. This gives rise to Hypothesis 2:

When a policy is unpopular among residents, the grassroots state will encounter civil disobedience and resistance, which increases state use of informal coercion to achieve compliance.

Ong's research on thugs-for-hire and Chen's concept of informal coercion are helpful for explaining why local authorities, especially those in the countryside, use gangsters to deliver enforcement; but their research does not investigate the evolution of gangsters from informal enforcers to governors (grassroots cadres) in the management of public affairs. To address the gap in the literature, this article develops a new concept, *political–criminal co-governance*, to illustrate the collaboration between political entities and criminal organizations in policy implementation, management of collectively owned resources and maintenance of social stability. Our argument is that political–criminal co-governance is an innovative practice developed by the grassroots state in its daily governance of local communities, and the level of collaboration largely depends on the fiscal capacity of local authorities and the popularity of their policies. As Hypotheses 1 and 2 suggest, when the local state lacks money, and its citizens resist unpopular policies, it may use local gangs to implement policies and extract resources. This discussion is developed through Hypothesis 3:

When the local state is too weak to be functional, high-level collaboration occurs between local officials and nonstate actors, and gangsters become grassroots cadres.

Varese and Wong's (2018) conceptual distinction between thugs-for-hire and mafiosi can be used to analyse political–criminal co-governance: thugs who become village cadres not only serve as enforcers for local authorities but also eventually become mafiosi who govern a clearly defined territory, such as a village. These thugs can then regulate the daily economic and social activity of all villagers as well as outsiders who do business in their territory. However, the differences between these thugs and mafiosi in general should not be ignored. First, these thugs are not only capable of threatening or using violence; they can also use the political power given by the state to govern villages, whereas mafiosi typically do not use such formal state-granted power. Second, while mafias are 'entities autonomous from the State and in principle opposed to it' (Varese and Wong 2018: 26), these thugs support government policy and are highly integrated in grassroots political systems. Ultimately, the study of political–criminal co-governance in rural China contributes to the understanding of thugs-for-hire, mafiosi and state–crime relations.

METHODS AND DATA

This article is based on 74 in-depth semi-structured interviews and a review of Chinese-language materials. The interview data were collected in several rounds. The first was carried out in 2012 in a county-level city in Shandong Province, where we conducted 14 interviews with local businesspeople, construction company owners, construction project managers and police officers. Local businesspeople, construction company owners and project managers interacted with rural gangs in their daily work; most were either victims of gang extortion or beneficiaries of

gang protection. We were able to access these interviewees because our relatives managed a private construction company in the city, allowing us to make use of existing social connections to approach potential interviewees who interacted with local gangs on a daily basis and were willing to trust us. All interviews were conducted in the interviewees' offices. To ensure confidentiality, we did not audio-record the interviews. Instead, we took detailed notes. We found that gangs were particularly active in urban–rural fringe areas, where collectively owned lands were being expropriated to sell on the open market. Valuable information was collected concerning gang extortion of private enterprises and local states' use of thugs-for-hire in land expropriation.

The second round of data collection was conducted during China's Sweep Away Black campaign (2018–2020; see Figure 1). This nationwide campaign against gangs and organized crime focused not only on gangs and their official protectors but also on 'a wide range of social and political threats to the Chinese Communist Party' (Hillman 2021: 1). Rural gangs that had infiltrated the grassroots political system were key targets of this campaign (Wang 2020a: 430). We conducted 56 interviews with police officers, lawyers, prosecutors and judges who dealt with cases involving gangs and organized crime; businesspeople who had experience of interacting with local gangsters; and local researchers who studied organized crime and gangs in mainland China. Both authors graduated from law schools in mainland China, and many of our classmates have become judges, police officers and lawyers. During the second round of fieldwork, the first author was teaching at the law faculty of a top university in mainland China, where most graduates became lawyers and judges. These connections helped us to recruit interviewees. We also recruited a part-time research assistant who was a lawyer to help us find appropriate interviewees. Our social connections and affiliation with top law schools enabled us to gain the trust

Fig. 1. Anti-crime slogan used by local government

of our interviewees, allowing us to collect rich interview data despite the politically sensitive nature of the research.

When interviewees did not allow us to record the interviews, we took detailed notes instead. Most interviews were conducted in the interviewees' offices. Interview questions focused on China's current criminal justice policy and cases reported by state-owned media. Interviewees were encouraged to share their views about gangs, organized crime, the anti-crime campaign and their daily experience of handling gang-related cases or interacting with gangsters, but we did not allow them to reveal any confidential information, such as cases that were not yet publicized or confidential government documents. Of 56 interviews, 19 included information about rural gangs and the rural anti-crime campaign. In addition, we conducted four interviews in 2023 and 2024 to gather up-to-date information on rural gangs and their relationships with township and village governments after the Sweep Away Black campaign.

To offer a comprehensive account of gang change in rural China, researchers would ideally interview gang members who serve as enforcers for demolition projects and/or village cadres. Through family social networks, we knew several senior gang leaders who acted as informal enforcers or village cadres, including one who was a close relative of ours. We conducted informal conversations rather than formal interviews to avoid ethical dilemmas and prevent possible trouble for our families. Although the informal conversations are not directly cited in this research, they were extremely helpful for verifying data collected through formal interviews and published materials. The combination of these sources allowed us to accurately portray the role of gangsters as enforcers and village cadres in our research sites.

China is a giant country with significant regional disparities in social and economic development. Even though the qualitative data are from different towns and cities, it is not statistically representative, so we used government documents and news articles about gangs and anti-crime campaigns as supplementary material. Published materials on this topic are abundant because local governments and police forces are keen to show the success of anti-crime campaigns. Nevertheless, we primarily tested our hypotheses within our research sites, acknowledging the limitations of geography and the small pool of interviews. Another limitation is that our empirical data are helpful for understanding what happened in the last decade, whereas we have limited first-hand data on gangs and their relationship to the state from the 1980s to the early 2000s. We address this limitation by taking a close look at Chinese-language academic articles that examined rural gangs in these periods. We searched the CNKI, China's most comprehensive academic database, for relevant journal articles and doctoral and master's dissertations using keywords such as rural gangsters (*xiangcun hunhun*), black societies and evil forces in the countryside (*xiangcun heie*), and evil power (*huise shili*). This search yielded 46 journal articles and dissertations. Although this number is not large, the material in question provided valuable information about the development of rural gangs and their changing role in post-Mao China. We also consulted Chinese scholars working in the field of village studies, who pointed to the work of He Xuefeng, Chen Baifeng and Huang Hai. These researchers have spent many years investigating rural governance and gangs. The combination of primary data and publicly available information provided a comprehensive longitudinal view of informal coercion by rural gangs, political–criminal co-governance and state–crime relations in post-Mao China.

DIMINISHED FISCAL CAPACITY, UNPOPULAR POLICIES AND THE INCREASING USE OF INFORMAL COERCION BY THE GRASSROOTS STATE

The first hypothesis posits that grassroots governments are willing to recruit thugs-for-hire to enforce policies when they face significant financial shortfalls. This article, therefore, evaluates local

authorities' ability to implement policies and provide government functions by examining their fiscal resources. This section provides a longitudinal study of the use of informal coercion by the grassroots state in rural China since 1994, when China embarked on fiscal reform by establishing a tax-sharing system between central and local governments. This reform largely 'increased tax revenues for the central government, at the cost of local governments' (Chen 2014: 59). A consequence of this reform was a reduction in the collective funds at township governments' disposal (Wang 1997), which led to the declining ability of local governments to provide public goods and the gradual withdrawal of party–state power in rural China. To handle financial deficits caused by central government taking an increasing share of local tax revenue, township governments were forced to impose local fees and levies, many of which were 'not legally based but arbitrarily imposed' (Chen 2014: 62). The expansion of non-tax revenues placed a huge burden on peasants; resistance grew.

The second hypothesis suggests that disobedience and resistance caused by unpopular policies led to local governments increasingly using informal coercion via thugs-for-hire to force villagers' compliance. This article, therefore, examines local policies and practices that led to resistance and disobedience. The widespread resistance to these local polices prompted village cadres and township officials to form alliances with thugs. These long-term collaborative relationships enabled gang members to infiltrate rural politics, even becoming village cadres.

In 2006, the central government abolished all agricultural taxes to reduce the financial burden on peasants, but this policy did not help local governments overcome the financial shortfall caused by the 1994 tax reform. Prohibited from collecting illegal fees and levies from farmers, local governments instead became highly dependent on land finance. As Liu (2022: 585) argued, since 2006, the state–peasant relationship has changed from 'state extraction based on taxes to state provision of economic subsidies … [and] state extraction through land expropriation'. Expropriating villagers' land with insufficient compensation and selling it to developers constitutes an important part of local government revenue, but this practice gives rise to widespread conflicts over land. To carry out demolition jobs cost-effectively and tackle collective resistance and social protests, a grassroots state suffering from 'the local legitimacy deficit' becomes more repressive (Dickson et al. 2017: 123). Confronted with a significant financial shortfall and widespread resistance from villagers, local governments become dependent on informal coercion provided by non-state actors to expropriate land, quell protests and govern villages, which is consistent with the first and second hypotheses.

Gangsters as revenue collectors from 1994 to 2006

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government under Chairman Mao launched several nationwide campaigns to eradicate organized crime (Xia 2006). The establishment of a planned economy, restriction of citizens' freedom of movement and the banning of private property and free markets led to the disappearance of organized crime groups during the Mao era (Wang 2017). However, once China began its economic reform and opening-up, organized crime surged. Post-Mao China witnessed the rise of hooligan groups in the 1980s and early 1990s. These groups had relatively stable membership and clear leadership. Most members were young men who sought the thrill of lawbreaking, including 'assembling crowds to have brawls', 'stirring up fights and causing trouble', and humiliating women (Tanner 2000: 20).

The rise of hooligan groups in the 1980s was closely related to a high number of school dropouts. The educational system was destroyed during China's 10 years of cultural revolution (1966–1976), when the government sent 'nearly twenty million youths from the cities "up to the mountains and down to the villages" (*shangshan xiaxiang*)' (Bakken 1993: 44). With the death of Chairman Mao and the end of the cultural revolution, many young people returned to cities and towns, but most of them failed to find jobs (Bakken 1993). The educational system at

that time emphasized quality over quantity, leading to high dropout rates in secondary schools, especially in rural areas (Bakken 1988). In the countryside, many hooligan groups were based on lineage groups (He 1997). Group members with many brothers and cousins had advantages in terms of using organized violence, establishing their reputations, and creating connections with township officials and local police officers, who helped them avoid arrest. Group members not supported by large families were less likely to remain alive. Hooligan groups fulfilled a variety of functions, such as thrill-seeking, peer affiliation and revenge, and they were also profit-oriented enterprises, frequently committing extortion and theft (Chen 2011).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, when the socialist market was still in its infancy and market transactions were not frequent, private entrepreneurs sought to create trust relationships with government officials who controlled state resources. These entrepreneurs were able to make enormous profits by buying goods at state-controlled prices and selling them at market prices, a typical strategy developed in China's dual-track system, which was abolished in 1989 (Wedeman 2012). During this period, local authorities did not recruit gangsters to enforce policy and address market conflicts.

Gang leaders and members who were active in the 1980s reached middle age in the mid-1990s. Their reputation of being tough and savvy and their experience of incarceration made them influential in local communities. Local governments recruited senior gang members to implement unpopular policies. Local governments' use of rural gangs was closely related to the decline of state income caused by the erosion of local government finance.

The Chinese government implemented a tax-sharing reform in 1994 to alleviate the central government budget deficit, but this increased the financial burden on local governments (see Figure 2). The figure reveals a significant decline in the local share of total revenue since 1994, which led to significant deficits for local governments. Under the new tax distribution system, local governments 'tried desperately to shift revenue losses and expenditure responsibilities down the administrative ladder', and township governments that were 'given the least tax resources but bore most of the spending burden' had to squeeze village finance to mitigate the shortfall (Chen 2014: 19). The lack of money deeply affected the redistributive and administrative powers of village governments. They became unable to provide public goods and welfare benefits, forcing villagers to pay formal and informal taxes, levies and fees. As Liu (2022: 589) notes, 'from 1989 to 1997, taxes, levies, and fees across the nation rose from 74 to 108 RMB per capita, a rate greater than the increase in income'. The collection of these unpopular taxes by local cadres weakened rural party–state power, because the grassroots state lost social legitimacy and local cadres faced great resistance to these taxes.

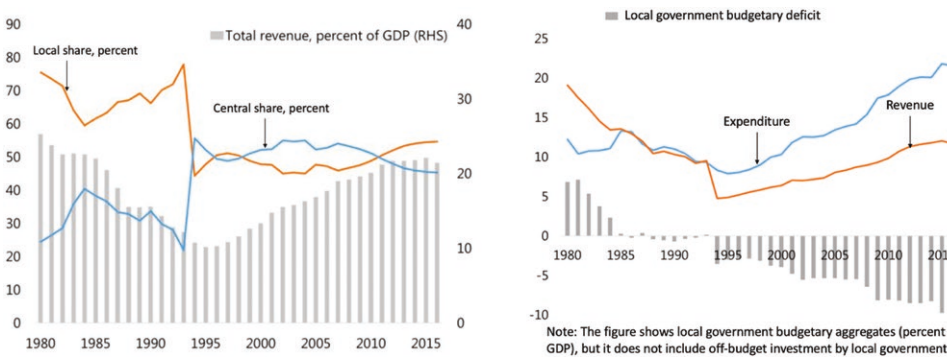

Fig. 2 The impact of the 1994 fiscal reform on China's allocation of intergovernmental fiscal resources (Wingender 2018: 4–5)

The decline of village government powers and the increased burden placed on villagers shifted power relations; as Chen (2014: 246) observed, 'cadres were often pressured into requesting fellow villagers' cooperation to collect taxes and fees that in some measure decided their own salaries and bonuses'. Although village cadres used intense emotional persuasion (Liu 2022), villagers frequently rebelled, leading to confrontation. To combat this, gang members were invited to form enforcement teams and some senior gang members were even included in village committees and became party members. This verifies the second hypothesis. Gang members working as enforcement agents or village cadres helped local governments collect revenue. As Chen (2011: 228) observed,

> Since the 1990s, the more talented and virtuous village cadres are, the more often they cannot cope with thugs and elderly villagers ... [because] they are commonly unwilling to cooperate with village cadres in aspects of paying agricultural taxes and fees and contributing to uncompensated tasks. They cannot be persuaded because they do not listen, and they simply ignore legal reasoning. These village cadres are not able to solve the problem with their fists … as a result, village cadres can do nothing but tolerate these disobedient behaviours [this causes the feeling of unfairness among villagers and encourages more villagers to disobey their tax and fee obligations] … The employment of thugs as village cadres or the use of thugs as revenue collectors usually helps the village government complete state tasks in an efficient manner because they are ruthless and powerful and because their use of violence and threats is supported by formal institutions (such as village committees and township government) … Therefore, if gangsters/thugs are mobilized or absorbed by the [bureaucratic] system to manage village affairs, it often produces a better outcome.

This use of gangs to provide informal coercion caused several problems. First, ties between gangsters and local cadres encouraged local governments and police to tolerate gangs' criminal acts. Second, gangsters' infiltration of village governments allowed them to withhold funds from upper-level governments (Chen 2011). Third, gangster cadres made money from imposing unjustified fees and selling off collectively owned resources below market price (Chen 2014). The financial deficit caused by the 1994 tax-sharing reform prevented township governments from using material incentives to control village cadres. Townships instead chose to tolerate gangster cadres' illicit money-making and use of coercion. This, however, led to a decline in the social legitimacy of the grassroots state and in villagers' trust in their local government (He 2011).

Gangsters as facilitators in local government land finance since 2006

While the abolition of the agricultural tax in 2006 stopped gangsters collecting state taxes, the influence of gangs in rural China did not decline, and local governments did not stop using informal coercion.[4] Rural gangs infiltrated the grassroots political system and became very active in villages at the rural–urban fringe, where collectively owned lands were expropriated by local governments.[5] The increasing power of gangs in rural communities results from the continuing decline of fiscal capacity in the grassroots state, which is consistent with the first hypothesis. The abolition of agricultural tax, which was designed to obtain villagers' support and maintain stability, 'further worsened the fiscal crisis at the village level and drastically reduced village governments' responsibilities and thus administrative power' (Chen 2014: 5). A local township party secretary explained:

> The impact of the reform was very significant. After the agricultural tax reform, the village had almost no income. It's said that the [village government] fiscal revenue gap should be closed through transfer payments from central [government], but the efficiency of transfer payments

> is low. The gap can be more than 100,000 yuan in some villages, and hundreds of thousands in others. The government compensates each village with 30,000 yuan a year. However, for many villages, the fiscal gap is still significant. This means that fiscal capacity at village level is essentially paralysed, and fiscal resources at township level are also [adversely] affected.[6]

Village cadres' status became marginal after the 2006 reform; many of their duties were taken on by township governments. Worse, township governments have been subject to thorough administrative streamlining and are now 'hollow shells' unable to supply basic administrative services (Smith 2010). Township governments have been exhausted by having to deal with inspections and annual assessments conducted by upper-level governments, attracting investment, maintaining social stability and enforcing family planning policy (Smith 2010: 601).

The 2006 tax reform withdrew an essential source of revenue from local governments, and since then, leasing land-use rights has become a way for local governments to ease their financial burden (Lin 2014). Over one-third of local government revenue is now raised by seizing land from villagers and selling land-use rights to developers. Because local governments must bear the cost of demolition and relocation, which can only be recovered when land is sold to developers, they are keen to persuade and even force residents to accept the compensation and leave their homes. As a result, land expropriation has 'replaced taxation as the major source of grievances' in the countryside (Liu 2022: 593). Dispossessed villagers will protest when the disparity between their compensation and the land's market value is large (Cai *et al.* 2020). Based on a database of news articles about social protest events in China, Chen (2020: 1327) found there were 'over 1500 protests against land expropriation' between 2000 and 2018, and 'social conflicts over land seizures continue to be the leading cause of protests in rural China'. Local governments frequently hire gangsters to evict homeowners and subdue protestors (Ong 2018b), which verifies the second hypothesis. As an owner of a private construction company revealed,

> The government used gangs in a demolition project located in village NC … some residents who did not accept the compensation standard at the beginning were forced to accept it eventually … an old lady wanted to argue with local cadres about compensation standards. When she went out of her home, she had to wear a mask and cover her face. On her way to the meeting venue, she was scared of being stalked by gangsters, and she frequently turned around and looked back … If the police got involved in the demolition project, such stalking would not happen at all, but the demolition process would certainly not go so smoothly.[7]

After weeks of being stalked by local gangsters, residents who had refused to accept the compensation would sign the agreement and quickly move out of their homes.[8] Our fieldwork data shows that local police officers usually tolerate the involvement of gangs in demolition projects. An interviewee shared their experience of being compelled to sign:

> [The gang leader told me,] 'If you don't sign, I will come every day, and you will be treated like this every day.' I threatened to call the police, but the gang leader claimed that calling the police was useless and that he knew all the local officers very well. [He said] police officers did not care, because it was not their responsibility [to handle these disputes]. … These incidents had never been addressed [by law enforcement] before, and the police never came to maintain law and order. In a situation like this, where do we go for help?[9]

4 Interview, criminology professor, 11 October 2018.
5 Interview, policing researcher, 16 October 2018; interview, local prosecutor, 3 November 2018.
6 Interview, local cadre, 1 August 2023.
7 Interview, owner of private construction company A, 7 February 2012.
8 Interview, owner of private construction company A, 26 March 2012.
9 Interview, villager who was compelled by local gangsters to sign an agreement to relocate, 26 December 2018.

Another example concerned a retired policeman who refused to be relocated. The authorities first tried intensive persuasion, then cut off his water and electricity. When these tactics proved ineffective, the authorities adopted the real estate developer's suggestion of informal coercion:

> The developer knew the retired policeman went to school to pick up his grandson every day. After school, the developer's subordinate picked up the grandson on the pretext of inviting his family for dinner. The kid was then brought to a hotel, where he received toys and candy. The developer asked a local gangster to inform the retired policeman, the 'nail household',[10] that his grandson had been kidnapped, and he must move out by a specific time. He called the police for help, but no one answered. Then he asked local government officials for help, but the officials ignored his request. He became very frightened. He compromised by telling the gangster that he required nothing else as long as his grandson was safe. Shortly after, he moved out.[11]

These interviews show that (1) criminal coercion is used if formal legal means do not work; (2) to reduce legal risk, gangsters prefer stalking and threats to actually causing physical damage;[12] (3) collusion among local authorities, developers and gangsters puts residents in a powerless position.

THUGS AS VILLAGE CADRES AND THEIR IMPACT ON LOCAL ENTERPRISES

Published materials and our empirical data show that grassroots governments are too weak in terms of financial capacity and political legitimacy and gang coercion is effective for enforcing compliance among local residents. As a result, gang leaders have become village heads or party branch secretaries. This finding is consistent with our third hypothesis, which posits that gangsters infiltrate the grassroots political system by becoming local cadres when the grassroots state is too weak to function effectively. The removal of 42,700 village cadres affiliated with gangs during China's 2018–2020 Sweep Away Black campaign revealed widespread political–criminal co-governance and suggested that gangs had deeply penetrated the grassroots political system. Journalists from *Southern Weekly*, one of the most widely read newspapers in China, examined 146 criminal cases from 1992 to 2014 involving village cadres as leaders of criminal organizations with the character of a black society. These journalists found that 22.5 per cent of these cases involved thugs/gangsters becoming village cadres, while 67.5 per cent involved village cadres who were not gangsters when elected but eventually used gang coercion to control villages and make money. Among these cases, 42.5 per cent featured the use of violence and vote-buying to win village elections (Xi *et al.* 2014).

Our empirical evidence is consistent with the above finding that vote-buying was commonly used to win elections before 2018. As an interviewee noted, 'although village heads are elected by villagers, they are not clean [because they buy votes]; they know all about [vote buying] and they manage it with ease'.[13] Another participant added:

10 A 'nail household' refers to a person who refuses to sell his property to the government or a developer.

11 Interview, owner of private construction company B, 7 February 2012.

12 Interview data shows that gangsters learn to use coercion without violence to offer private protection and quasi-law enforcement to individuals and local authorities and reduce the risk of prosecution. Gangsters who achieve compliance through violence face a higher risk of incarceration than those who coerce without violence. This information is from an interview with a Beijing criminal justice professor, 24 December 2018.

13 Interview, researcher focusing on policing, 16 October 2018; see also Zhao (2018) and Ruan and Wang (2023).

> Here are the weak points of villagers. First, they fear offending others and being threatened [by thugs]. Second, they look for bribes during [village] elections, such as a barrel of oil, a bag of flour, or between 200 and 500 yuan. Hooligans often use illegal methods, such as bribes, to win elections. What villagers care about is immediate benefits, not whether [a candidate] is good or bad. As long as there are immediate benefits, they will vote [for the vote buyer]. … Villagers generally don't consider the negative impact these gangsters will have on the village.[14]

Township officials usually do not see buying votes as a serious problem because incorporating gang leaders in rural governance helps local authorities overcome obstacles to rural development. As a former township party secretary told us, township governments used to allow thugs as village cadres because 'they are very effective in implementing polices and [township governments] do not care much about their [criminal records]'.[15] Another interviewee stated:

> In our local development zone, people without gang membership cannot be [competent] village secretaries; this is because [many] villagers are not of good moral character. If village party secretaries are kind, they cannot do a good job and they usually mess up … but these bad guys, I mean gangsters, can rule villages in an effective way … many projects have been secured in the development zone, which needs a lot of agricultural land to be converted into industrial or commercial land. [Gang members'] involvement leads to fewer petitions, fewer nail households and less trouble.[16]

Once thugs become village cadres, they profit from misusing collectively owned resources. A local police officer explained that to gain villagers' support, an informal policy had been introduced in most villages: villagers whose collectively owned lands are expropriated can supply materials such as crushed stone, sand and gravel to the construction project.[17] In reality, village cadres, not villagers, are the only beneficiaries of this policy. As a construction company employee revealed:

> Village party secretaries and local gang leaders benefit greatly [from the monopolization of the supply of construction materials to projects]; it is a one-off business, but the benefits gained from it are enough for several generations … villagers usually cannot benefit from it. Villagers dare not speak out; there is nothing to be done, so they just endure it … local authorities often acquiesce and even support this phenomenon, [because] gang leaders help the local government resolve problems [that cannot be easily solved by local officials].[18]

Thugs who are village cadres also make money by extorting local enterprises, especially private construction companies. In an interview, a government official mentioned several instances of local gangsters who obstructed the construction process in order to force companies to allow them to supply materials.[19] A police officer revealed a common strategy used by local gangs:

> [Local gangsters] typically avoid using violence. [Instead,] they may bring people to interfere with the progress of a project by disrupting the work or occupying the construction site. This

14 Interview, owner of town-based private construction company, 20 October 2018.
15 Interview, former township party secretary, 25 August 2024.
16 Interview, private construction company owner, 17 February 2012.
17 Interview, police officer, 9 January 2012.
18 Interview, construction company employee, 9 January 2012.
19 Interview, senior government official, 24 September 2018.

> can force the local contractor to assign part of the project to these gangsters. The company must also use construction and raw materials [supplied by the gangsters].[20]

Another interviewee mentioned that the company he worked for had frequently encountered extortion by local gangsters, most of whom were subordinates of village party secretaries:

> Once construction starts, the construction team will be intimidated by local gangs many times, which even halts the construction process. The construction company can only end the trouble with money … sharing profits with local gangsters becomes the second major burden for the construction company [after] paying taxes and fees. Gang extortion has had a big impact on construction companies, especially in recent years. It has led to the closure of some local construction companies.[21]

Private construction companies are forced to pay much higher prices for materials. As a construction company manager said, 'the market price of one cubic metre of sand is 40 RMB, but we have to pay [the gangsters] around 50 RMB'.[22] As materials constitute a significant portion of construction costs, companies lose a significant part of their profits. Project managers who do not comply with gangsters' demands are repeatedly threatened and their projects are disrupted by these gangsters, but police officers usually do nothing until significant physical damage is caused. As one project manager noted, 'We want the police [to arrest the gangsters], but officers say, "what can we do? You have no evidence"'.[23] Lack of solid evidence of criminal acts is a major justification used by local police for not enforcing the law.[24]

To sum up, thugs become village cadres because their informal coercion is highly valued by local authorities. These thugs misuse collectively owned resources and extort private construction companies. These companies cannot get protection from the township government and its police force, because township governments have become hollow shells and township cadres and local police officers need these thugs to address problems such as forced demolition.

STATE–CRIME RELATIONS: THE LATEST ANTI-CRIME CAMPAIGN AND THE DECLINE OF POLITICAL–CRIMINAL CO-GOVERNANCE

To gain a deeper understanding of the state–crime relationship, it is crucial to examine the links between three actors: central government, local authorities and criminal organizations. The indirect relationship between central government and criminal organizations can be very different from the direct relationship between local governments and criminal organizations, because 'the gap between the interests of central and local governments has been substantially widened in the reform era' (Chen 2017: 69). Local governments that have long suffered from lack of finance and villagers' resistance to unpopular policies need to mobilize all available resources, including gangs. By contrast, central government is principally concerned about regime legitimacy and has therefore adopted a zero-tolerance attitude towards criminal elements. Wang (2020a: 430) called the Sweep Away Black campaign launched in 2018 'a statement of political power and legitimacy rather than a response to the rising crime rate'. Meanwhile, central government issued the 2018–2022 Strategic Plan for Revitalization of Rural Areas (*xiangcun zhenxing zhanlüe guihua*) to promote socioeconomic development.

20 Interview, police officer, 23 December 2018.
21 Interview, construction company employee, 9 January 2012.
22 Interview, construction company manager, 9 February 2012.
23 Interview, construction project manager, 9 February 2012.
24 Interview, police officer, 9 January 2012.

Local governments' attitude towards gangs has shifted from high tolerance before the launch of the 2018 anti-crime campaign to low tolerance today. The anti-crime campaign made the eradication of criminal organizations a primary political task for local governments, so if local cadres, police officers, prosecutors and judges wish to gain promotion and avoid criticism, they must complete this task in an effective and enthusiastic manner. As a senior government official explained, during the 2020 village elections, most leaders at mayoral level were assigned to supervise village elections in districts, and most senior officials at district level were assigned to supervise elections in towns and problematic villages.[25] As a consequence, any village cadres who were affiliated with gangs and had criminal records were disqualified (Ruan and Wang 2023). Local criminal justice agencies also faced enormous pressure from upper-level agencies to expedite cases relating to evil forces and black societies. As a judge revealed, 'the time limit for handling a case is set by the local political and legal affairs committee and the next-higher-level court. They are all closely monitoring [us]. If we deal with a case too slowly, we will be publicly criticized'.[26]

Since 2018, the gradual return of party–state power in the countryside has inevitably led to the decreased power of gangs. We observed that village heads and village Party secretaries who have criminal records and are affiliated with local gangs have already been removed from office, but many of them still serve on the village Party committee and the elected village committee.[27] China's 3-year 'zero-COVID' policy slowed the country's economic growth and further weakened local authorities' fiscal capacity. This may mean that local officials will reconnect with gangsters, who can continue to work as informal enforcers for township governments. However, our interview data suggests a different scenario. A senior local government official explained that thugs will not be able to infiltrate the grassroots political system in future: current policy prohibits thugs from participating in village elections, and increased inspections from upper-level governments, coupled with heightened attention from social media regarding the misuse of power by village cadres, have further deterred such infiltration.[28]

The owner of a private construction company with extensive links to both township officials and gang bosses also predicted that the connection will not be restored in the foreseeable future: 'Local governments no longer rely on the previous development model to grow the economy; they no longer stimulate it through demolitions, land sales and large-scale construction. Therefore, officials no longer rely on gangsters to deal with disputes and forced evictions'.[29] A criminologist working on rural gangs noted that before 2018, it was common for senior gang members to become village cadres. However, this is no longer the case. Some senior gang members have been imprisoned, and others have turned their illegal businesses into legal ones.[30] Township officials are no longer willing to take the political risk of maintaining obvious collaborative relations with thugs, and thugs are unwilling to risk criminal prosecution to compete for village cadre positions. This is unlikely to change until central government changes its policy.

Although data suggests that China's recent anti-crime campaign has led to a decline in rural gangs, central and local governments still need to address local authorities' lack of fiscal capacity and social legitimacy. The central government should therefore restructure the distribution of resources to subnational territories and allocate sufficient funds to the grassroots state for effective governance. This should empower local authorities to exercise control by non-violent means rather than by relying on thugs-for-hire.

25 Interview, senior government official, 24 September 2018.
26 Interview, judge, 5 January 2019.
27 Thugs who previously held positions as village heads and village party secretaries have been removed from office, but many still managed to join the village committee.
28 Interview, former township party secretary, 25 August 2024.
29 Interview, private construction company owner, 17 July 2023. The company owner's arguments are consistent with other interviewees, including a local cadre interviewed on 1 August 2023.
30 Interview, criminologist, 18 July 2023.

CONCLUSION

The notion of thugs-for-hire does not align neatly with existing criminological concepts such as gangs, organized crime groups, or mafiosi. It specifically refers to non-state actors, including thugs and gangsters, who provide informal coercion to help local authorities implement unpopular policies and suppress local resistance. Drawing on the existing literature and empirical evidence collected in China, this article introduces the concept of political–criminal co-governance to explore how rural gangsters became thugs-for-hire and infiltrated the grassroots political system, and it examines the rise and fall of collaboration between gangs and rural grassroots governments. It argues that post-Mao rural China has witnessed an increasing demand for efficient policy implementation, whereas township and village governments suffer from a lack of fiscal resources for policy delivery, and their policies and practices lack social legitimacy. This mismatch led to a rise in informal coercion supplied by thugs and the emergence of political–criminal co-governance.

The article examines how China's fiscal policies after 1994 undermined the ability of local governments to supply public goods and services, significantly eroding their legitimacy. It also explores how lack of fiscal resources compelled rural local authorities to use thugs-for-hire to enforce compliance and implement unpopular policies. A series of central government fiscal reforms eroded the state's power and penetration in the countryside; for example, the 1994 tax-sharing reform and the 2006 abolition of agricultural taxes caused a fiscal crisis for local governments. The lower the level of government, the heavier the fiscal burden they faced. Three decades of such reform made the central state powerful and resourceful but weakened local states, especially in peripheral and rural areas. Village governments' redistributive and administrative powers have been seriously weakened and township governments have become hollow shells.

The grassroots state encounters enormous challenges when attempting to implement policies, including lack of money and resistance from residents. China's cadre responsibility and evaluation systems motivated local officials only to 'consider the reactions of their superiors' so they 'lose sight of public needs and demands and carry out projects [and implement policies] that can be measured' (Ahlers and Schubert 2015: 374). This creates a vicious circle: the more the central government appropriates local revenue and the more local governments are forced to shoulder expenditure responsibilities, the greater the fiscal deficit faced by local governments and the greater their need to create informal or illegal revenue streams. The consequence is an increase in collective resistance and social protest, which leads to yet more informal coercion by local governments, giving rise to more resistance from residents, and on it goes.

Before China's 2018–2020 Sweep Away Black campaign, the gradual decline of party–state power in the countryside had facilitated the formation of cooperative arrangements between rural gangs and governments at township and village levels. Local governments and gangs formed alliances for mutual benefit: local cadres hired thugs to implement unpopular policies, and in return gang leaders demanded tolerance of their illicit activities. The decline in state power in rural areas also led to the integration of rural gangsters into the Party and village-level governments. Gangsters became village cadres, filling the power vacuum created by decreased party–state power in the countryside. Gangster cadres used both legitimate political power and illegitimate criminal coercion to secure compliance from villagers; gang leaders also used them to extort private companies, withhold funds transferred from upper-level governments, and abuse collectively owned resources.

China's latest anti-crime campaign and strategic planning for revitalizing rural areas represent central government's efforts to tackle a series of problems, such as local governments' tolerance of corruption, political–criminal co-governance and the daily use of informal coercion in policy implementation and rural governance, because all of them undermine public confidence in the government. Although central government has used the campaign to reduce rural gangs' power and grassroots corruption, continuous long-term effort will be required to reform the country's

fiscal system. The central government would allocate more resources to township and village-level governments and improve the ability of local anti-corruption agencies to monitor cadres' behaviour during non-campaign periods. These long-term efforts should prevent the resurgence of grassroots corruption, informal coercion and political–criminal co-governance in rural China.

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