

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Contention to Clientelism: Evidence from the Ten-Year Fishing Ban in China

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Abstract

How do ordinary Chinese people circumvent unpopular state policies? The existing literature primarily focuses on resistance against local bureaucrats. Drawing on ethnographic research on the ten-year fishing ban in the Yangtze River Basin, this article finds that fishermen (clients) continue to fish by maintaining patron–client relationships with the enforcers of the fishing ban (patrons). Ordinary fishermen seek the protection of enforcers through bribery. Enhanced state monitoring under the fishing ban facilitates bribery-based clientelism by weakening the fishermen’s everyday resistance, but it also constrains the power of enforcers by increasing the risk that their corruption will be discovered by upper-level authorities. For extremely poor fishermen, who are barely able to afford to pay bribes, their daily acts of resistance are morally justified by the need for subsistence safety, presenting enforcers with a dilemma: they must fulfil their law enforcement duties while also ensuring the survival of these individuals to maintain social stability. Therefore, cultivating a clientelist relationship with impoverished fishermen enables enforcers to manage their noncompliance, thereby balancing these conflicting goals. While clientelism protects people from unpopular policies to some extent, it more fundamentally strengthens the power of local bureaucrats, creating the potential for greater exploitation and larger-scale popular grievances in the long run.

摘要

中国民众如何规避不受欢迎的国家政策？现有文献主要关注民众对地方官僚的反抗。基于对长江流域十年禁渔的民族志研究，我发现渔民与禁渔令的执法者维持着一种庇护关系。首先，普通渔民通过贿赂来寻求执法者的庇护。禁渔令下国家增强的监管能力，一方面透过削弱渔民日常的反抗助长了这种以贿赂为基础的庇护主义，另一方面却透过增加腐败被上级政府发现的风险限制了庇护人的权力。对于极度贫困的渔民来说，虽然他们几乎无力支付贿赂，但是他们日常的反抗具有维系生存安全的道德正当性。这给执法者造成了两难：既要完成执法目标，又要保护他们的生存安全以维持社会稳定。因此，与这些穷人建立庇护关系成为了平衡这两种相互冲突的目标的重要方式。尽管庇护主义在一定程度上保护了民众免受不受欢迎的政策的影响，但从根本上来说它增强了地方官僚的权力。从长远来看，这可能会对民众造成更大的剥削从而引发更大规模的社会不稳定。

Keywords: clientelism; conservation enforcement; everyday resistance; rightful resistance; authoritarian stability

关键词: 庇护主义; 保育; 日常的反抗; 依法抗争; 威权稳定

How do ordinary Chinese people circumvent unpopular state policies? The existing literature primarily focuses on resistance against local bureaucrats. Rightful resistance, one of the most widely discussed models, posits that people exploit the popular policies and discourse of the central government to resist the unpopular policies of local governments. This division within the state provides a

significant political opportunity for mobilizing collective actions.¹ Rightful resistance and the divided state have been substantiated by extensive research on contentious politics in China and beyond.²

In addition to formal, collective and overt forms of resistance, everyday resistance, which is informal, individual and typically covert, is also widespread, especially among subordinate groups such as peasants and workers.³ This form of resistance addresses the lack of mobilization resources and helps the weak to avoid the risks of repression.⁴

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted in a central province county (H county hereafter) on a recent conservation policy, a ten-year fishing ban. It finds that fishermen (clients) were able to continue fishing by maintaining patron–client linkages with the enforcers of the fishing ban (patrons). In contrast to contentious relationships, clientelism refers to a kind of “friendship” in which “an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.”⁵ Clientelist linkages are characterized by hierarchy, reciprocity and face-to-face contact.⁶

My research reveals that enforcers of the fishing ban protected fishermen by exercising discretion in routinized law enforcement. Street-level bureaucrats, such as law enforcers, inherently possess discretion.⁷ The use of discretion in conservation enforcement is particularly common and indeed necessary because of the complexity of law infringement activities and the various challenges that may arise on-site.⁸ The protection offered by the enforcers of the fishing ban took the form of non-enforcement, including feigned enforcement, delayed enforcement and wilful ignorance, as well as the moderation of sanctions – for example, reducing penalties from incarceration to fines, or from confiscating gear to issuing verbal warnings. In exchange for this protection, fishermen paid bribes and demonstrated obedience.

Under Xi Jinping 习近平, conservation has been recentralized.⁹ Thus, the fishing ban is a top-down mandate from the central government that aligns with the national goals of conserving the Changjiang 长江 (Yangtze River hereafter) Basin and developing the Yangtze River Economic Belt.¹⁰ In 2019, the central government announced a ten-year ban on all productive fishing activities in key water areas across 14 provincial-level administrative jurisdictions, including the mainstream, major tributaries and large lakes of the basin. This ban was subsequently formalized when the Yangtze River Protection Law took effect in 2021. According to official statistics, the fishing ban has forced approximately 280,000 fishermen, along with more than 110,000 legal fishing vessels, to quit the fishing industry in ten provincial-level administrative jurisdictions.¹¹ Alongside banning fishing in the key water areas, the central government has granted provincial and municipal governments the discretion to ban fishing in smaller and less important water areas under their jurisdiction. In H county, the provincial government banned fishing in a first-level tributary of the Yangtze River in 2020, and the municipal government subsequently banned fishing in a second-level tributary in 2021.

As an important part of the top-down mandate, compensation for displaced fishermen likewise resulted from unified policymaking from central to local levels. In the communist era, the state

1 O'Brien and Li 2006.

2 Cai 2008; Chuang 2014; Kerkvliet 2014; Li, Lianjiang 2004.

3 Scott 1985.

4 Feng 2015; Fu 2016; Herrold-Menzies 2009; Li, Ju 2012; Wang, Xinxin, and Lo 2022; Yeh 2013.

5 Scott 1972.

6 Powell 1970.

7 Lipsky 2010.

8 Lo 2021.

9 Liang et al. 2024.

10 Han, Xiao, and Sheng 2024.

11 “Changjiang zuihou de yumin: jinyu 10 nian 280,000 yumin ruhe qi shui shang'an” (The last fishermen in the Yangtze River: how will 280,000 fishermen transition to life ashore with the 10-year fishing ban?). www.chinanews.com, 10 December 2019, <https://www.chinanews.com/sh/2019/12-10/9029332.shtml>. Accessed 9 March 2026.

categorized rural labour into different professions and assigned each with a different household registration (*hukou* 户口). Farmers were entitled to an agriculture *hukou*, while fishermen to a non-agricultural *hukou*. Although with the market reform the state lifted the restrictions on access to fishing and agriculture, under the fishing ban *hukou* was still used by the state as a decisive criterion for targeting fishermen for compensation. Fishermen with an agricultural *hukou* in H county were undercompensated; however, the unified policymaking undermined the effectiveness of their rightful resistance in demanding more compensation.

The muted rightful resistance of the fishermen resulted in their noncompliance with routine law enforcement. As seen in other areas of China and beyond, everyday forms of resistance, such as spreading malicious rumours, pilfering, arson and exaggerated claims, are the most common forms of resistance against conservation enforcement.¹² In this case, the state's enhanced monitoring of the fishing ban through institutions and the use of surveillance technologies significantly disempowered the everyday resistance of the fishermen. Consequently, they were forced to seek the protection of enforcers through bribery. Chinese people commonly seek particularistic favour from government authorities using bribes,¹³ which, in this case, were intended to establish and maintain a long-term clientelist relationship. However, while the state's enhanced monitoring resulted in increased bribery-based clientelism, it also constrained the power of patrons by raising the risks of the corruption being discovered by upper-level authorities. It was, therefore, necessary for patrons to screen the recruitment of clients carefully and avoid overcharging them to prevent their betrayal.

Notably, the meanings and leverage of everyday resistance varied according to the economic conditions of the fishermen, which shaped different forms of clientelist linkages with enforcers. The linkages were also identified among the extremely poor fishermen who could barely afford bribes. The everyday resistance of the extremely poor against law enforcement was grounded in the ethics of subsistence safety, which rendered their resistance remarkably resilient and sometimes even overt. This presented enforcers with a dilemma between enforcement and stability maintenance, as ensuring the subsistence of the poor is an important source of legitimacy for the Chinese state.¹⁴

In this context, while clientelism with ordinary fishermen emerged from their agency to advance their interests, clientelism with the extremely poor arose from enforcers' need to reconcile these conflicting goals. By providing protection for the extremely poor, enforcers were able to manage instances of noncompliance. They demanded that the poor conceal their noncompliance or asked them to surrender when necessary, thereby "fulfilling" their enforcement targets. This resonates with studies that find similar protective enforcement by local bureaucrats in other policy areas, such as family planning, taxation and the governance of street vendors.¹⁵

Clientelism is not a novel political phenomenon in China. However, compared to the extensive literature on clientelism as a relationship among political elites or between political and economic elites,¹⁶ as well as clientelism as endogenous to the social networks and communal ethics in traditional rural societies,¹⁷ there is scant research on clientelism as an informal state–society relationship. In fact, prior studies have pointed to its importance as both an informal political means for people to advance their interests and a mechanism through which political elites control society. Andrew Walder conceptualizes the clientelism between factory workers and their superiors in the communist era as neotraditionalism to suggest historical continuity and, more importantly, the influence of communist politics on this relationship.¹⁸ In rural areas, Jean Oi also provides important insights

12 Holmes 2007; Yeh 2013.

13 Li, Ling 2011; Ruan 2019; Wang, Peng 2016; Zhan 2012.

14 Tong 2011.

15 Chen and Liu 2021; Dai, Zhong and Scott 2019.

16 See, e.g., Jiang, Junyan 2018; Ong 2012; Wank 2002.

17 See, e.g., Chen and Liu 2021; Liu 2022; Paik 2014.

18 Walder 1988.

into the interplay between communist politics and clientelism between ordinary peasants and team cadres.¹⁹

These discussions on clientelism primarily focus on the distribution of resources. When market reforms were introduced, state control over resources relaxed, resulting in a more limited distribution of clientelist resources. In urban areas, clientelism mostly exists within the *danwei* 单位 system.²⁰ In the countryside, this form of clientelism became more common, particularly after the state increased its investment in rural development in the mid-2000s.²¹

This study reveals that clientelism as an informal state–society relationship in contemporary China exists not only in resource distribution but also in the enforcement of unpopular policies and laws. The study outlines a few distinct dynamics of clientelist enforcement compared to clientelist resource distribution. First, while clientelist resource distribution is “almost legal,”²² clientelist enforcement is more legally controversial and therefore more subject to the attitudes of upper-level governments. Here, I highlight how the disapproval of superiors towards bribery-based clientelism constrained the power of patrons over their clients. I also show how the tolerance of upper-level authorities facilitated clientelism with the impoverished, as superiors did not have an institutional solution that balanced unpopular law enforcement with stability maintenance.

Second, when clientelist enforcement concerns conservation, it is less stable for being constantly shaped by competition for limited but relatively accessible natural resources. The article highlights how competition for fishery resources among clients and between clients and nonclients (including not only fishermen but also anglers) increased the instability of clientelism by affecting relations with patrons and prompting reports to upper-level authorities.

The shift from contention to clientelism in the relationship between local bureaucrats and the people has significant implications for policy effectiveness and authoritarian stability. While social contention is among the most important monitoring mechanisms for the Chinese state to constrain the power of local bureaucrats,²³ clientelism enhances this power on an everyday basis. Subordination to enforcers in H county forced fishermen to acquiesce in or become complicit with the misconduct of enforcers and other local elites. In conservation enforcement, the absence of monitoring by traditional resource users is particularly alarming, as their geographic proximity, professional knowledge and skills are valuable. The increased power of local bureaucrats has the potential to facilitate greater exploitation of the people and natural resources in the long run, thereby undermining policy effectiveness to a more significant degree and provoking larger-scale popular grievances.

This study also engages with recent studies focusing on how Chinese people have moved beyond rightful resistance to claim interests and rights unsanctioned by the central government. Cross-regional mobilizations of social protests have led to demands for national policy changes.²⁴ In many other cases, claim making has taken the form of local complicity between people and local bureaucrats that is hidden from the central government. Citizens have allied with local governments that have a shared interest in defying the central government²⁵ or have engaged in “opportunistic bargaining” with local governments in pursuit of property rights unrecognized by the central government.²⁶ Clientelism adds important nuances to this model of local complicity, which is characterized by a more unequal and everyday power relationship between local bureaucrats and the people, with more far-reaching implications for policy effectiveness.

19 Oi 1985.

20 Lee and Zhang 2013.

21 Liu 2022.

22 Oi 1985.

23 O'Brien and Li 2006.

24 Yang 2023.

25 Paik and Lee 2012.

26 Han, Rongbin, Du and Shao 2023.

Last but not least, this research is one of the few to bridge the study of conservation and Chinese authoritarian politics. As a struggle over natural resources between the state and rural population, conservation is one of the central themes of rural politics. However, the existing discussions regarding conservation in China are largely technical and depoliticized.²⁷ A few studies have paid attention to conservation enforcement²⁸ and the resistance of local communities,²⁹ but these studies remain inadequate for capturing local conservation practices within the broader context of Chinese authoritarian politics and communist histories. This context has become increasingly significant with the rise of authoritarian environmentalism³⁰ and recentralized conservation in the Xi Jinping era.³¹ By focusing on the fishing ban, this research highlights the interplay between conservation enforcement and authoritarian politics, revealing significant implications for the welfare of rural communities and authoritarian stability in the countryside.

This article is organized into six sections. It begins with an account of my ethnographic work in H county. The second section illustrates how unified policymaking muted the rightful resistance of fishermen seeking equal compensation. The following two sections examine law enforcement, explaining bribery-based clientelism and clientelism involving the extremely poor in enforcement. The article then illustrates the resulting increase in the enforcers' power over the fishermen. Finally, it discusses the research implications and outlines directions for future research.

Research Methods and Data

I conducted ethnographic work during the summers of 2023 and 2024 in H county, a county in a central province through which flow a first-level tributary and a second-level tributary of the Yangtze River. All productive fishing activities have been banned in the two rivers. I selected this county based on my personal networks and prior ethnographic research experience. One of the greatest challenges in qualitative research on law enforcement is the lack of access to data, as information disclosure by both law-violating social actors and enforcers can be considered politically risky.³² As such, contextual knowledge of researchers and trust between researchers and their subjects are critical for acquiring reliable data.

My research centres on the county-level fishery law enforcement team and a group of artisanal fishermen within the enforcement team's primary jurisdiction water area. Alongside the enforcement team, the police, including the county-level forest police and township police, also play a major enforcement role in the county. A team of rangers, under the supervision of the enforcement team, was recruited from among the villagers living along the rivers; however, these rangers do not have law enforcement authority and are not counted as official enforcers. As geographic proximity is crucial for catching illegal fishing activities in the act, the enforcement team's major jurisdiction water area is located near the county seat. In more remote water areas, local township police share more enforcement duties.

This research draws on data gathered through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations and documentary collection. I interviewed the incumbent captain and vice-captain of the enforcement team, the former captain who stepped down in 2023, and two township policemen regarding their understanding of the fishing ban, enforcement process and challenges of enforcement. I also joined the enforcement team to observe its enforcement actions. In addition, I obtained internal and public government documents on the fishing ban, the standards for evaluating law

27 Yeh 2013.

28 Lo 2021.

29 Herrold-Menzie 2006; Herrold-Menzie 2009; Wang, Xinxin, and Lo 2022.

30 Beeson 2010; Gilley 2012.

31 Liang et al. 2024.

32 Keane et al. 2008. It is for this reason that I have omitted the names of the county and the tributaries to protect the confidentiality of my interviewees. This does not compromise the quality of the data.

enforcement, records of law enforcement activity and the mass reporting of fishing activities from the county government.

Using snowball sampling, I interviewed 15 fishermen. Of these, three quit fishing when the fishing ban was implemented, while the rest continued to fish occasionally or regularly. Although the fishermen were generally poor, three were extremely poor, having disabilities or disabled family members. Their varying economic conditions suggest that the ban had distinct effects on their livelihoods, which affected their clientelist relationships with enforcers. To assess the reliability of the data, all fishermen were asked a similar set of questions covering their fishing history, relationships with other fishermen, perceptions of the fishing ban, reasons for either continuing or quitting fishing, strategies to avoid legal sanctions, and their views on changes in fishery resources and water quality since the ban was enacted. Additionally, I connected with a village leader who facilitated contact with fishermen in his community. I also interviewed two anglers. Anglers have become important witnesses to law enforcement since the ban, as they are now nearly the sole legal users of the river.

Apart from law enforcement, it was also crucial to understand the compensation policy for displaced fishermen. I interviewed two county-level officials in charge of allocating compensation and collected records on compensation distribution from the county government. I visited another type of fishing community that received most of the compensation in H county, while the group of fishermen I focus on was mostly undercompensated. Given very limited historical accounts of Chinese inland fishermen, these visits provided valuable historical and comparative perspectives for understanding the compensation policy. Furthermore, I visited a national environmental non-governmental organization (ENGO) that served as an important adviser in the policy formulation process and interviewed a conservation officer from that organization.

Unified Policymaking on Compensation

As a significant component of the fishing ban, compensation for displaced fishermen is a major source of fishermen's grievances with the ban. In H county, compensation was largely distorted because it was based on fishermen's *hukou*. Subsidies, welfare and job opportunities were provided to fishermen with a non-agricultural *hukou*, most of whom had in fact either quit fishing or had never relied on it for their livelihood. In contrast, fishermen with an agricultural *hukou*, whom I focus on, were nearly excluded from compensation, receiving only a one-time payment for their destroyed boats.

This distortion in targeting resulted from a unified and unequal compensation policy for fishermen with agricultural *hukou*, implemented from central to local levels. I compared government documents related to compensation in this province with those in other provinces. Although they differed in terms of compensation standards and distribution methods, household registration was consistently used as a decisive criterion for targeting fishermen for compensation.³³ Fishermen with non-agricultural *hukou* were officially termed professional fishermen (*zhuan ye yu min* 专业渔民), while fishermen with agricultural *hukou* were officially considered as part-time fishermen (*jian ye yu min* 兼业渔民). The thresholds for compensation eligibility were higher for part-time fishermen, and compensation standards were lower. Although I could not find a central policy document that

33 See, e.g., the policy in Jiangxi province: "Zhegang xiang Poyang hu zhongdian shuiyu jinbu tuibu gongzuo shishi fang'an" (Implementation plan for the fishing ban in key waters of Poyang Lake, Poyang county, Zhegang town). *Poyang.gov.cn*, 22 April 2020, <http://www.poyang.gov.cn/pyxtgx/guifanxingwenjian5mxaiv/202004/98307b25a2ce4288b2d9a8940ce409a7.shtml>. Accessed 16 March 2026, and the policy in Hubei province: "Luoshi shinian jinyu tuibu yumin tuibu zhengce jiedu" (Interpretation of the compensation policy for fishermen in the ten-year fishing ban). *Tianmen.gov.cn*, 10 December 2021, https://www.tianmen.gov.cn/zwgk/bmhxxzxxgkml/bm/snyncj/zfxxgk/zc/zcjd/202112/t20211210_3907189.shtml. Accessed 9 March 2026. See also the official reply to complaints about the unequal policy sent via the mayor's "mailbox" in a city in Hunan province: "Yumin zhuan chan butie zaoyu bugong" (Fisherman encountered unfair compensation). *Changde.gov.cn*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.changde.gov.cn/petition/55144>. Accessed 16 March 2026.

explicitly stated this inequality, the consistency of the local policies and their coverage in national state media both implied the central government's endorsement.³⁴

The unified unequal policy is rooted in Chinese communist history. Some rural labour was designated to work exclusively in farming, whereas some labour was designated to work only in fishing. This state-imposed labour specialization was believed to boost production efficiency.³⁵ This categorization was supported by the designation of distinct household registration types: professional farmers were entitled to an agricultural *hukou* and farmland, whereas professional fishermen were entitled to non-agricultural *hukou* and no farmland.

Fishing in the reform era was no longer limited to former fishermen; it became a vital means of support for many former farmers. In many cases, the farmland owned by these former farmers near the river was too small to sustain their families and was often rendered inarable due to seasonal flooding and water pollution. Moreover, migrating to urban areas was difficult owing to their age, lack of skills, the burden of caring for family members or disability. As a result, small-scale fishing became their primary and, in some cases, their only means of livelihood.

Despite the gap between state knowledge and local knowledge regarding who qualified as a fisherman, state knowledge remained a crucial rationality in the policymaking on compensation. This state rationality was reflected in the mindset of people ranging from national policymakers, local authorities and some locals. Echoing a conservationist officer from the national ENGO, the county-level officials responsible for compensation also drew a clear line between farmers and fishermen, asserting that "farmers are not authentic fishermen."³⁶ The importance of fishing for farmers' livelihoods was downplayed: "they fished just to earn extra money."³⁷ The officials more bluntly explained that the real intention behind the state's compensation policy was to address the communist legacy. This kind of state rationality was shared by some of the former professional fishermen, who described themselves as "orphans" abandoned by the state while rejecting the notion of farmers being authentic fishermen.³⁸

Faced with financial constraints, the county government used this unified unequal policy to disqualify all fishermen with an agricultural *hukou* from receiving compensation. Although the fishing ban was initiated by the central government, the responsibility for providing compensation largely fell to local finances, with only limited rewards and subsidies coming from central funds.³⁹ Consequently, simplified compensation schemes were commonly introduced as a means to reduce local financial burdens, particularly in less developed areas such as H county. Additionally, the central government fostered competition among local governments by offering financial rewards to those who completed the compensation process the fastest, which further incentivized the adoption of simplified compensation schemes at the local level.

The unified policymaking severely limited the effectiveness of fishermen's rightful resistance when seeking equal compensation.⁴⁰ Insisting that they were authentic fishermen with the same entitlement to compensation, some of the fishermen expressed a desire to petition. However, they

34 "Yumin shang'an zhihou, jiuye wenti ruhe jie jue? Haiyou naxie xianshi wenti?" (How do fishermen find employment after they come ashore? What other practical problems are there?). CCTV News, 18 May 2024, https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item_id=11283208591471060221&t=1716071866676&toc_style_id=feeds_default&share_to=wechat&track_id=20be8e90-d21c-4e8a-8867-8cd1a930891f. Accessed 9 March 2026.

35 Gao 2023.

36 Interview with county-level official, H county, 21 July 2023.

37 Ibid.

38 Interview with fisherman, H county, 22 July 2023.

39 "Guowuyuan bangongting guanyu qieshi zuohao Changjiang liuyu jinbu xiangguan gongzuo de tongzhi" (Notice of the General Office of the State Council on effectively carrying out the work related to the fishing ban in the Yangtze River Basin). www.gov.cn, 8 July 2020, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2020-07/08/content_5525124.htm. Accessed 9 March 2026.

40 O'Brien and Li 2006.

stepped back as they believed it would have little effect. Local officials repeatedly emphasized that the local compensation policy aligned with that of the upper-level governments. This dismissal by the local authorities was further highlighted by their response to a group of fishermen who had gathered outside the government building seeking more compensation. Their collective action was simply ignored, with no response from the authorities.

The undercompensated fishermen, therefore, had no option but to continue to fish to maintain their livelihoods if they could not find better jobs; the extremely poor had to continue to fish just to meet their basic needs. This behaviour was in sharp contrast with the greater compliance among fishermen with non-agricultural *hukou* who received more compensation. Clientelist connections with enforcers of the fishing ban became a key means for fishermen to avoid legal sanctions.

Bribery-based Clientelism: State Monitoring to Facilitate and Constrain

Fishermen commonly resorted to paying bribes, or what some referred to as a “protection fee,” to avoid legal sanctions. Payments could range from a pack of cigarettes, treats or gifts to cash. Enhanced state monitoring of the fishing ban not only facilitated bribery-based clientelism but also limited the power of patrons.

The fishing ban itself represented a rupture from the conventional practice of conservation in that it was characterized by “blunt-force enforcement,” a term used by Denise van der Kamp to describe the Chinese state’s approach to combating air pollution from industrial production.⁴¹ Instead of routinely monitoring fishing activities with a temporary closed season, the state imposed a complete ban on fishing all year round. Moreover, both illegal and legal fishing activities in the conventional sense were banned indiscriminately. This blunt-force enforcement significantly reduced the state’s monitoring costs.

However, blunt-force enforcement in nature conservation differs from its application in pollution control. Bans on using natural resources are less likely to be one-off solutions and require routinized enforcement. Compared with industrial production, resource use, such as fishing, is more likely to resume, and the lower costs of acquiring gear, the relatively open access to natural resources and the geographic complexity of the natural environment make monitoring more challenging.

The state has, therefore, made wide use of technologies and institutions to enhance its capacity to monitor the fishing ban. Surveillance technologies and big data (such as Skynet technology), grid management and both regular and irregular inspections by upper-level governments, state media and ENGOs have facilitated the collection of local information. Notably, the state has taken measures to mobilize the masses to report on fishing activity. The system for mass reporting has been expanded and refined through various communication platforms, from townships (the 110 hotline to township police stations) to counties (the 12345 hotline) and up to the central government (the National Fisheries Reporting Platform). Monetary rewards for information about fishing ban violations have also been promoted nationally and implemented in select areas. In addition to the economic incentives and public spirit commonly found in other settings,⁴² reporting has been further incentivized by competition for fishery resources. In H county, most reports of fishing activities came from anglers.

The enhanced capacity of the state to monitor these activities initially facilitated bribery-based clientelism by undermining the everyday resistance of fishermen. Various forms of such resistance, such as spreading rumours, false compliance and the theft of confiscated catch and gear, were observed. In some cases, this resistance even escalated into confrontations and physical altercations during enforcement processes. Although the enforcers complained that the disruptive behaviour of the fishermen increased their workload or reduced their morale, it had little impact on their enforcement capabilities and even backfired on occasion. Improved state monitoring allowed enforcers to more easily detect illegal fishing activities. For example, during a patrol, the enforcement team

41 Van der Kamp 2021.

42 Jiang, Jue 2021; Su and Xing 2018.

encountered a fisherman who was deliberately blocking the road, prompting some team members to threaten harsher sanctions in revenge if he was caught fishing in the future.

To avoid clashing with the enforcers, the fishermen in H county often felt compelled to nurture an amicable clientelist relationship with them. Since most of the fishermen did not initially have connections with enforcers, bribery became a primary means of establishing and maintaining these clientelist relationships. For example, many fishermen viewed their first encounters with enforcement positively, seeing them as valuable opportunities to become acquainted with the enforcers. This intention to seek long-term protection through bribery was particularly evident when I followed the enforcement team during one of their operations. The enforcement team set light to some fishermen's traps and confiscated the catch inside. Then, they temporarily left the catch on the riverside to break for dinner. When they returned to collect it, they found that it had been stolen by the fishermen. Surprisingly, the fishermen left part of their catch for the enforcers as a clear gesture – a bribe in exchange for leniency the next time they were caught.

Notably, the reliability of bribery-based clientelism varied depending on how clients paid bribes. One type of client paid regular bribes to maintain a “friendship” with patrons. A case in point was the well-established “friendship” between the enforcers and a fisherman who had no prior social relations with them. By paying regular bribes, he enjoyed the considerable protection of the enforcers, who often ignored reports from fellow villagers about his illegal fishing activities. At times, he even fished during the early morning, whereas most fishermen had to fish at night to hide from the enforcers.

Another type of client paid bribes only when caught. Compared with the previous ongoing exchange, this relationship was more instrumental and specific.⁴³ Although it also sought to establish a long-term clientelist bond, it proved to be less reliable. One fisherman explained: “Unlike them [the first type of fishermen who paid regular bribes], we do not truly count the enforcers as friends; we just know each other. Once we were caught, we paid some money, and then we could continue to fish in the future.”⁴⁴

While pressuring fishermen to bribe enforcers, the state's enhanced monitoring nonetheless limited the power of patrons by increasing the likelihood of their corruption being discovered by upper-level authorities. Patrons had to avoid being reported by non-clients driven by a sense of injustice and competition for fishery resources. To mitigate these risks, patrons had to carefully screen potential clients. Fishermen who were involved in high-profile cases of law infringement, those deemed untrustworthy or those more empowered were less likely to be recruited. For example, after being caught, a fisherman offered a bribe to enforcers in exchange for long-term protection. The enforcers, however, rejected his offer and insisted on following the legal regulations. The fisherman was well known for acting as a representative of the fishermen in the county, which made his case high profile, with notable risks of being reported by fellow fishermen. Additionally, his close relationships with local political elites increased his untrustworthiness in the eyes of the enforcers, particularly when he threatened to enlist the elites' support to report the enforcers' corruption after his bribe was rejected.

In addition to reporting by non-clients, the self-disclosure of clients posed an even more alarming risk for patrons. Such self-disclosure could be driven by grievances about the arbitrary greed of patrons. Grievances were also linked to a distrust of patrons. Some fishermen were uncertain about whether patrons would uphold their end of the deal and suspected that bribes exceeded legal fines. For example, some of the fishermen questioned whether enforcers exaggerated the legal sanctions to charge higher bribes, admitting that they had little knowledge of the legal regulations. The grievances were particularly salient among the second type of client who engaged in more specific exchanges

43 Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980.

44 Interview with fisherman, H county, 23 June 2024.

with patrons. While the first type of client described enforcers as sympathetic, the second type was more willing to disclose the bribery to me.

Patrons had to be careful not to overcharge their clients and invite more grievances. In this context, patrons relied on the first type of client to provide information about the fishing hauls of the second type of client. This information was a crucial reference for patrons in deciding when and how much of a bribe to demand. However, in some cases, the information provided was unreliable and even backfired to cause more grievances. Since the fishing ban, relationships between the fishermen have become more competitive due to the harsher working environment. Relying on the protection offered by his regular bribes, one fisherman, for example, started to claim the watershed near his house as his own. To drive out his fellow fishermen, he gave exaggerated reports about their catches to the patrons, which soured relations between his fellow fishermen and the patrons.

Clientelism with the Extremely Poor: Enforcement versus Stability

Aside from the fishermen who offered bribes, clientelist relationships with enforcers were also observed among impoverished fishermen who could barely afford to pay bribes. While bribery-based clientelism arose from the fishermen's agency to advance their own interests, this other form of clientelism stemmed from the enforcers' need to balance enforcement with stability maintenance.

For most of the fishermen, fishing was an important source of income, but they were still able to find alternative jobs or receive support from family. However, for the extremely poor and often disabled fishermen, fishing was vital for their basic survival. The role of fishing as a subsistence safety net for the poor globally is widely recognized.⁴⁵ Due to the open access of the river and low skill and equipment requirements, even the disabled fishermen were still able to catch enough fish to meet their everyday basic needs. They relied on the cash income from fishing to overcome unexpected crises that threatened their subsistence. In China, the distorted distribution of state welfare due to elite capture and stability maintenance renders fishing even more important for their survival.⁴⁶ Notably, none of the extremely poor fishermen whom I interviewed had minimum living insurance before the fishing ban.

The everyday resistance of the extremely poor against law enforcement was grounded in the ethics of subsistence safety. This resistance proved remarkably resilient and was even overt, despite legal sanctions. For example, one fisherman, a single father who was raising two disabled children and had no proper house, resorted to electrofishing and regularly fished during the daytime. He justified his actions on the grounds that he needed to fish to survive: "I will continue to fish regardless of the sanctions. Even if I were sentenced to jail, I would fish again as soon as I was released. I need to survive. There's no way the government will not let me survive."⁴⁷

The leverage of subsistence safety-based resistance lies in creating a dilemma for enforcers between enforcement and social stability. Suppressing this resistance risks generating social instability. When caught, the impoverished fishermen often attempted to appeal to the enforcers' sympathy. Alternatively, they threatened the enforcers with everyday harassment (such as taking the whole family to the enforcers' houses to live) or drastic grievance actions. This performative behaviour, aimed at asserting their right to subsistence, could undermine the legitimacy of the regime, which is largely based on the paternalistic ideology that the state is responsible for taking care of the people, especially poor people.⁴⁸

The enforcers' focus on stability maintenance was reinforced by their government colleagues. Village leaders, for example, tended to appeal on behalf of the poor in their villages, reasoning that if the poor did not have the means to survive, they would be more likely to cause trouble in the

⁴⁵ Virdin, et al. 2023.

⁴⁶ Han, Huawei, and Gao 2019; Pan 2020.

⁴⁷ Interview with fisherman, H county, 4 July 2024.

⁴⁸ Tong 2011.

village. Therefore, some of the enforcers told me frankly that they had to allow the extremely poor to continue to fish for the sake of social stability. As one enforcer suggested: “If the poor man cannot fish, he must do other things to obtain food. He may not commit a crime in this place, but he may commit a crime in another place. We cannot plug this hole and cause that hole to leak. This is a problem that we need to consider comprehensively.”⁴⁹

However, the enforcers’ concern with stability maintenance did not mean that they turned a blind eye to the noncompliance of the poor fishermen. Enforcers were under pressure to meet enforcement targets. The tension between stability maintenance and enforcement increased as the persistent and sometimes overt fishing activities of the poor significantly raised the risk of being reported. Higher-level authorities regarded a high number of mass reports of illegal fishing as a key indicator of unsatisfactory enforcement performance. Additionally, enforcers were required to prosecute a minimum number of criminal cases, in line with a quota set by their superiors. Some of the enforcers complained, saying that the evaluation standards forced them to choose between enforcing the law and maintaining stability, without considering the local circumstances.

Enforcers balanced these conflicting goals by cultivating clientelist relationships with the poor fishermen. By offering the fishermen protection, enforcers were able to manage their noncompliance. The enforcers regulated when and where the poor fishermen could fish to minimize the risk of them getting caught. For instance, they demanded that the poor reduce fishing in the daytime and during government inspection periods, or else fish in the jurisdiction areas of the adjacent county. Occasionally, enforcers asked the fishermen to surrender themselves when they needed to meet their quota of criminal cases. In this way, enforcers “fulfilled” their enforcement goals without undermining social stability.

The clientelist exchange of protection for the poor’s obedience was not always reliable. For instance, the poor preferred to fish during daylight hours because it was safer and there was better visibility. When the poor broke this informal agreement, the nature of the exchange relationship became more explicit. When enforcers received frequent mass reports of illegal fishing activities, for example, they responded by harassing the fishermen, confiscating their gear and catches, or issuing minor fines as a warning. Therefore, in most cases, the poor said that they would “try to cooperate with the work of the enforcers.”⁵⁰

While bribery-based clientelism was constrained by the risks of exposure to superiors, clientelism involving the extremely poor was facilitated by a tolerance from above. This tolerance stemmed from the absence of institutional solutions to the enforcement–stability maintenance dilemma under authoritarianism. For example, one extremely poor fisherman built his clientelist relationship with the enforcers after his case was referred multiple times to the municipal and provincial courts. His frequent law violations attracted the courts’ attention, especially when the local and national media reported on his situation. After learning of his extreme poverty through in-person visits, the courts decided to allow him to serve his sentence outside of prison and pressured the county government to find a local resolution. Ultimately, the county government granted him minimum living insurance and other welfare benefits. However, as this welfare was still insufficient to meet his family’s basic needs, the enforcers had to continue protecting his fishing activities on the condition that he avoided drawing the attention of the higher-level authorities.

Increased Power of Enforcers in Consequence

While the clientelist relationships protected fishermen’s access to the river to some extent, they more fundamentally increased the power of enforcers over fishermen, leading to acquiescence and complicity among fishermen in the misconduct of enforcers and other local elites.

⁴⁹ Interview with enforcer, H county, 27 June 2024.

⁵⁰ Interview with fisherman, H county, 19 July 2024.

Many fishermen accused the enforcers and other local elites of involvement in commercial fishing, recreational fishing or industrial pollution in the river; yet these fishermen did not take any action, for example by reporting these issues to the upper-level authorities. Based on the limited substantive evidence I accessed, I cannot claim that all of the fishermen's accusations were true or fair. Nevertheless, their inaction, despite their grievances, suggests a degree of acquiescence towards the alleged misconduct by local elites. This acquiescence resulted from fear of reprisals by patrons, such as higher bribe payments, increased harassment or even the termination of the clientelist relationship. One fisherman explained why he would not report the enforcers to the upper-level authorities: "Why should I report the enforcers? If I report them, they will retaliate by keeping an eye on me every day."⁵¹

In addition to acquiescence, clientelism furthermore led to complicity in hiding the misconduct of local elites from the upper-level authorities. During my fieldwork, there was a major fish kill in the river. Despite their grievances about the county government's irresponsible regulation of industrial pollution, a group of fishermen assisted the government in clearing up the dead fish. Their assistance was vital for the government to quell public anger and reduce media exposure within a short time-frame. One fisherman attributed their complicity to their clientelist relationship with the enforcers: "Only the fishery law enforcement team could ask us for favours. When other government departments took over the case, we just ignored them. Without us professionals, the government would take much longer to resolve the problem."⁵²

Both the acquiescence and complicity of the fishermen stood in sharp contrast to the role of guardians that some of them had undertaken prior to the fishing ban, when they did not need the protection of enforcers to fish. For example, some used moral condemnation, collective actions or reporting to upper-level authorities to challenge commercial fishing and expose the corruption of enforcers.

In the long run, the increased power of enforcers is likely to facilitate more local elite capture of the river, potentially leading to more disastrous effects on fishery resources. A common perception shared by nearly all the fishermen and anglers I interviewed was that they were catching increasingly fewer fish since the implementation of the fishing ban. As some of them remarked critically, "The more fishing is banned, the fewer fish there are."⁵³

Implications and Discussions: To Reach a State–Society Understanding

How do ordinary Chinese people circumvent the state's unpopular policies? This article shifts the focus away from the much-discussed contention with local bureaucrats towards a more amicable relationship, namely, the clientelist exchange of bribery and obedience for protection against the enforcement of unpopular policies.

The shift from contention to clientelism is partly facilitated by the disempowered social resistance. The case of the fishing ban in H county points to how the recent changes in Chinese politics, including increased state centralization⁵⁴ and enhanced state surveillance capacity,⁵⁵ disempowered the rightful and everyday resistance of people, driving them to seek the protection of local bureaucrats against unpopular policies. This shift also partly arises from the authoritarian dilemma of balancing unpopular policy goals with the need to maintain social stability. If social resistance to these unpopular policies is morally justified, the costs of repression will increase in terms of both social stability and regime legitimacy.

51 Interview with fisherman, H county, 25 July 2023.

52 Interview with fisherman, H county, 4 July 2024.

53 Interviews with fisherman and angler, H county, 26 June 2024, 19 July 2024.

54 Bulman and Jaros 2021; Lee 2017.

55 Pei 2024; Qiang 2019.

The research also demonstrates how the social stratification of ordinary people, the attitudes of upper-level authorities and the competition for resources among clients, nonclients and even patrons act as important forces shaping clientelism. As a result, this informal state–society relationship features remarkable bargaining leverage, instability and the latent potential for self-undermining. The greatest danger of this clientelism lies in self-undermining; over the long term, the power relations could facilitate greater exploitation of local people and thus larger-scale popular grievances and social instability.

Although this case study on conservation enforcement cannot be generalized nationwide, it highlights several important conditions for clientelist enforcement. The everyday power relations are contingent on, for instance, routinized enforcement, the considerable discretion of enforcers and a relatively stable community in terms of population mobility and turnover. Future studies should pay more attention to the variations in clientelist enforcement and their distinct implications for policy effectiveness and authoritarian stability across different policy fields and social settings.

Finally, this study calls for empowering ordinary Chinese people to participate in policymaking and for establishing more institutionalized channels through which people can resolve their grievances about unpopular policies, rather than seeking the protection of local bureaucrats. Only in this way can the state and society reach a mutual understanding and reconcile their goals.

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