

VILLAGER SELF-GOVERNANCE IN CHINA: A CASE
STUDY OF LUOCHENG COUNTY

Jiansi Li


A research report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Public Administration in the School of Government
Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
University of the Western Cape

October 2005

Supervisor

Professor Christo de Coning

ABSTRACT

VILLAGER SELF-GOVERNANCE IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY OF LUOCHENG COUNTY

This research report examines the implementation of villager self-governance in China, of which the election of village leader is the most distinct feature. Unlike previous studies of villager self-governance, which focused on policy intentions of the Chinese leadership or the speculation of scholars about what may happen, this study attempts to examine whether or not the elections are competitive and what the consequences of self-governance are.

The study argues that the practice of village self-governance was promoted by the Chinese Communist Party to cope with the dual crises of legitimacy and ability to govern it had faced in the countryside. With continuous adjustments, the rural political institutions have shown their flexibility by being more accommodating towards social changes and democratic developments. The establishment of democratic institutions does not necessarily mean the spread of democratic politics. The democratic practice is still at its early stage, developing unevenly and facing many problems in the authoritarian state that lack a democratic political culture. Despite the unevenness and limitations, however, there is emerging evidence that the system of village elections has begun to bring about substantial changes in rural politics. A growing village democracy not only raises some fundamental challenges to the authoritarian power structure at the grassroots, but also brings some significant impacts on higher-level politics.

DECLARATION

I declare that *Villager self-governance in China: a case study of Luocheng County* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Jiansi Li

October 2005

Signed:



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the School of Government for the opportunity to complete this degree and to the academics who helped to shape my knowledge on the issue of public administration. Special thanks go to Professors Christo De Coning and John Bardill who, very ably and willingly, offered their time and knowledge to guide me through this study.

Special thanks are due to all the lecturers at the School of Government that I was privileged to work with. Special thanks are also due to the administrative staff of the school, for the work environment and friendship, which were so essential to conduct the study.



I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Denise Howell and Sophia Loren who spent their precious time for the language promotion in this report.

Lastly, I dedicate this study to my wife Guangling Lu for everything she has sacrificed to make my education possible and for her patience, love and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgement	iv
Table of contents	v
List of tables	viii
Abbreviations and acronyms	ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	2
1.2 THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	3
1.3 THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY	4
1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	6
1.5 THE STUDY OUTLINE	7
	
CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 INTRODUCTION	8
2.2 AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNANCE	9
2.2.1 Literature on governance	9
2.2.2 Good governance	11
2.2.3 Self-organizing networks	13
2.3 DEMOCRATIZATION FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE	16
2.3.1 Elections as the foundation of democratization	16
2.3.2 Democratization and political culture	18
2.3.3 Democratization in an authoritarian state	20
2.4 LITERATURE REVIEW ON CHINA'S VILLAGER SELF-GOVERNANCE	23

2.5	APPROACH OF THE STUDY	29
2.6	CONCLUSION	31

CHAPTER THREE: VILLAGER SELF-GOVERNANCE: BACKGROUND,		
THE ORGANIC LAW AND INSTITUTIONS		33
3.1	INTRODUCTION	33
3.2	EMERGENCE OF NEW INSTITUTIONS AT VILLAGE-LEVEL	34
3.2.1	Development strategy of the CCP	34
3.2.2	Democracy and rural governance	36
3.3	THE ORGANIC LAW ON VILLAGER COMMITTEES	39
3.4	INSTITUTIONS OF VILLAGE SELF-GOVERNANCE	43
3.5	CONCLUSION	47

CHAPTER FOUR: PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY:		
A CASE STUDY OF LUOCHENG COUNTY		48
4.1	INTRODUCTION	48
4.2	1987-1998: A DECADE OF ELECTION EXPERIMENTATION	48
4.3	EVALUATION ON ELECTORAL PROCESS	51
4.3.1	Nomination of candidates	51
4.3.2	Election campaign	56
4.3.3	Voting	58
4.3.4	Counting votes	61
4.4	CONCLUSION	62

CHAPTER FIVE: GOVERNANCE DYNAMICS AT VILLAGE LEVEL		64
5.1	INTRODUCTION	64
5.2	ATTITUDES TOWARD DEMOCARCY	65
5.3	IMPEDIMENTS	67
5.3.1	Hostility of peasants to local authority	67

5.3.2	Intervention of the Party	70
5.3.3	Opposition and intervention from township authorities	74
5.4	CONCLUSION	80
 CHAPTER SIX: ELECTION AT VILLAGES: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONSEQUENCES		 81
6.1	INTRODCUTION	81
6.2	ACHIEVEMENTS	81
6.3	CONSEQUENCES OF VILLAGE SELF-GOVERNANCE	84
6.3.1	Improved consciousness of democracy	85
6.3.2	Improved accountability of village leaders	88
6.3.3	Changes in power distribution in villager committees	91
6.4	LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS	95
6.5	NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN INSTITUTIONS	99
6.5.1	“TWO-BALLOT” SYSTEMS	99
6.5.2	THE “ONE SHOULDER BEARS” SYSTEM	101
6.6	CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	103
 CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS		 105
 BIBLIOGRAPHY		 113

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF VILLAGES TAKING DIRECT ELECTIONS	59
TABLE 2: RESPONSES TO SIX QUESTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN RURAL CHINA	66
TABLE 3: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VILLAGE HEADS AND PARTY SECRETARIES	74
TABLE 4: ATTITUDE OF TOWNSHIP CADRES TO DIRECTED ELECTION	76
TABLE 5: ATTITUDE OF TOWNSHIP CADRES TO VILLAGE SELF-GOVERNANCE	76
TABLE 6: STRATEGIES OF VILLAGE HEADS FOR RE-ELECTION	89



ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CBCA	County Bureau of Civil Affairs
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CVC	Chairman of Village Committee
NMCA	National Ministry of Civil Affairs
NPC	National People's Congress
OLVC	Organic Law on Villager Committees
PRC	 People's Republic of China
SVPB	Secretary of Village Party Branch
VC	Village Committee
VCM	Village Committee Member
VPB	Village Party Branch
VRA	Village Representative Assembly

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study is about villager self-governance in China, of which the election of the Village Committee Members (VCM) is the most distinct feature. There are 238 million households and 0.922 billion people living in the rural areas of China, accounting for 70% of the country's total population. Households are organized into villages (China Statistical Yearbook, 2002). Currently, there are approximately one million villages in China, each with an average of about 1,200 - 1,300 people. Before the 1980s, villages worked as an extension of the state and leaders were generally appointed by the higher-level authorities in China. In the early 1980s, in response to the abolition of people communes, and the shift of production from collective farming to the household system, a new form of governance - the Village Committee (VC) - gradually emerged, initiating in Luocheng County of Guangxi Autonomous Region. In November 1987 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) approved the 'Organic Law on Villager Committees' (OLVC) stipulating that villagers elect village committees and administer the village's affairs themselves. Eleven years later, in November 1998, the Law was made permanent, granting villager committees relatively broad autonomy in both economical and political terms. The implementation of villager self-governance has been regarded as the beginning of democratization. Since the holding of competition, free and fair elections is essential to democracy, this study focuses on elections while discussing villager

self-governance, by using Luocheng County that has gained a reputation for having the first villager committee in China, as a case study.

1.1 THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rapid economic liberalization and development have opened Chinese society, impinging on politics in many ways, and put more and more pressure on the process of political liberalization. The introduction of self-governance in the villages, with the mechanisms to enforce accountability through recall and term elections as well as legal and administrative remedies, is supposed to build blocks for the spread of democracy, government accountability, and rule of law to higher levels and other sectors of the Chinese society. The history of China's struggle for democracy, however, has proved that establishing a healthy democracy is the most difficult problem in the country. China is a country lacking a democratic tradition. In ancient China, people believed that all power should emanate from above, from the central government, or from a single supreme ruler. This ideology is still popular in rural China, and actually acts as a big obstacle for villager self-governance. Furthermore, the ruling party has so far consistently ruled out democratization as a future political goal and exhibited a high sense of insecurity toward signs of organized political opposition. In this context, a series of questions emerge: Why did an authoritarian government on its own accord set in motion a political process which will, with all probability, undermine its authority in the long run? How has this important reform policy been implemented, given the formidable structural constraints inherent in a

Leninist regime? What are the key impediments to village democracy? To what extent has this democratic practice brought about real changes in the power structure and local governance in rural areas? Now that village elections have become national policy, can the electoral process be prevented from spreading to townships and counties? This research report attempts to answer these important questions concerning the political fate of the most populous country in the world.

1.2 THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to make a comprehensive evaluation of villager self-governance, which is the beginning of democratization in the authoritarian state.

The specific objectives of this study include:

- 
- To discuss the theories related to China's rural democratization, thereby providing a theoretical framework for the research report;
 - To explore the origin of the state-led democracy practice;
 - To analyze the Organic Law and its institutions with a purpose to indicate if the law offers a democratic framework;
 - To evaluate the process of election in China and to find out the current limitations of the process;
 - To examine the impediments of village elections;
 - To explore the achievements and consequences of the village elections after 18 years of implementation;

- To explore the current institutional adjustments affected by village elections, thereby investigating the achievements and limitations of the new effort.

1.3 THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The approach adopted in this study is the combination of institutional analysis of the reform process and an in-depth case study of Luocheng County. In preparing for this study the following are used as sources of information.

An intensive study of the existing literature, relevant books, articles, official publications, reports, academic papers, conference papers and newspaper reports was undertaken to present the facts and to substantiate the arguments.



Fieldwork has played a significant role in validating the study. In the past five years, the researcher has conducted surveys, interviews and observations about villager self-governance with many officials, village cadres and villagers. In 1999, he was sent by the Guangxi Regional Government to work in Luocheng County for one year as a vice-secretary of the county government. He took part in five village elections as an election officer in person in 1999. In December 2002 he went back to Luocheng County to continue the investigation when a new village election was being carried out. During the fieldwork he closely collaborated with officials from the County Bureau of Civil Affairs (CBCA) and township/town officials. First-hand materials about villager self-governance were obtained through on-the-spot observations, interviews and discussions with many villagers, local officers and villager cadres.

Furthermore, as an official, he had the opportunities to participate in official surveys of village self-governance. In 1999 and 2002, when the elections were finished, the County Bureau of Civil Affair (CBCA), an organization responsible for managing the villager self-governance, established teams for making post-election surveys in the county. The purpose of the surveys was to evaluate the implementation of villager self-governance. In the 1999 survey, the four towns/townships: Longang Town, Siba Town, Qiaotou Township and Xiali Township, were selected as samples according to their development situations. Longang was the richest area in the county while Xiali was the poorest one. The other two were at the middle level. In the survey, a total of 800 villagers out of 24 villages were involved. Four teams that consisted of officials from the CBCA and the town/township governments were established. There were 4-5 officials in each team conducting the survey. The writer participated in the survey as the supervisor of the Longang team. 800 questionnaires were distributed to the cadres and villagers chosen randomly without reference to their race, religion, sex, age, and political and ethnical affiliation in the whole survey. The questionnaire focused on the four issues: the attitude of the villagers and the local cadres toward the self-governance; the comments on the implementation of the self-governance policy; the comments on the Organic Law on Villager Committees (OLVC); the suggestions for the future implementation of self-governance. In 2002, the CBCA conducted an identical survey in the same villages again in order to evaluate the ongoing implementation of self-governance. The researcher processed and analyzed the data independently for conducting this research, based on the data collected by the CBCA

in the two surveys mentioned above.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Given China's huge population and its growing importance in the world, any political reform that may affect its long-term stability and its possible transition to democracy deserves the scrutiny of political scientists. Peasants make up a dominant proportion of China's population. Democracy at the national level would not be realized without the experiments and practice of village democracy. Only when the nine hundred million Chinese peasants have got used to the process and methods of democracy can democracy have a solid base. The mechanism for training peasants in terms of building a base of democracy must firstly be established so as to enable the peasants to speak for themselves and to govern themselves. Villager self-governance is regarded as one of the most effective ways to plant the seed of democracy in the most conservative area in China. Although the issue of self-governance has become a steady reference point in almost all studies reporting on the latest developments in contemporary Chinese politics since the late of 1990s, few empirical studies have been conducted to examine what has happened and what is actually going on. This study, with a purpose of contributing to building democracy in China, will make a realistic evaluation of the implementation of villager self-governance based on an adequate field study.

1.5 THE STUDY OUTLINE

The study is divided into 7 chapters. Following this introductory Chapter, Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the definitions of governance and some theoretical issues concerning good governance, self-governance and political culture related to democratization in an authoritarian state. Then, the current literature on the study of village self-governance is reviewed. Chapter 3 discusses the emergence of the villager self-governance concept and its institutions. It especially discusses the Organic Law that is vital to institutionalize rural democracy. Chapter 4 evaluates the election process based on the four principles of the National Ministry of Civil Affairs (NMCA), using Luocheng County as a case. Chapter 5 examines the dynamics of the village elections. Chapter 6 discusses the achievements and consequences of the village elections and what the rural democracy implies to the further democracy in China. At this stage, the current institutional adjustments of the village elections, the ‘Two-Ballot’ system and the ‘One Shoulder Bears’ system, will also be discussed. Chapter 7 concludes on the empirical findings of the previous chapters and provides some practical recommendations for the further adjustment of the villager self-governance concept.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Recently the terms ‘governance’ and ‘good governance’ have been increasingly used in development literature. The introduction of self-governance in rural areas signifies the initiation of institutional changes, which intend to influence the relationship between the state and the society with a purpose of improving the governance in China. But the state is categorized as an authoritarian one: a single party system under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. Authoritarianism is the rule by a dominant group which represses opponents in order to maintain its own wealth and power. We can see that authoritarian rule is quite different from democratic rule. In this context, before discussing democratization in the authoritarian state, it is important to discuss the meanings of governance and the way to place good governance in a universal perspective. A critical question still remains: can good governance in terms of democratization occur under authoritarian regimes? In order to answer this question, this Chapter first addresses some theories of governance and democratization, offering a theoretical guideline to the further discussion of villager self-governance in China. The researcher will give a systematic overview of existing trends in publications, summarizing some major findings about the self-governance.

2.2 AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOVERNANCE

2.2.1 Literature on governance

Governance is rooted in Latin 'cybern' which means 'steering'. This gives us a strong idea of what is entailed in notions of governance. Governance essentially refers to two of the most basic questions posed by political scientists since the foundation of their discipline: 'Who governs?' and 'How well?' While the former question focuses on problems of distribution and redistribution, the latter points to the problems of 'good governance', that are related to institutional effectiveness and performance. The term 'governance', however, poses problems for those who want an all-encompassing shorthand definition because the perspective of governance is still a much dispersed area of research and there is no definition of governance agreed on. Governance is the exercise of power and authority by political institutions through rules and processes with a view of controlling resources (World Bank, 1992). Frischtak (1994: vii) argues that the capacity of governance is defined as "... the ability to coordinate the aggregation of diverging interests and thus promote policy that can be credibly taken to represent the public interest". Bratton and van de Walle (1997: 27-55) take governance as "... an interactive process by which state and social actors reciprocally probe for a consensus on the rules of the political game". Lynn et al (2001: 7) defines governance as "Regimes of laws, rules, judicial decisions, and administrative practices that constrain, prescribe, and enable the provision of publicly supported goods and services". To Pierre and Peters (2000), governance is about how to 'steer'

economics and society in order to reach collective goals. Chazan (1992: 121-142) defines that governance is the “Capacity to establish and sustain workable relations between individuals and institutional actors in order to promote collective goals”.

In his widely-referenced work, “Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability” R.A.M. Rhodes (1997) describes six usages of the term ‘governance’ found in the recent literature: (1) as a minimal state. The minimal state used by Rhodes refers to, “Redefining the extent and form of public intervention and the use of markets and quasi-markets to deliver ‘public services’” (Rhodes, 1997: 47). Pierre and Peters (2000) discuss governance from a state perspective and separate between four governance structures: hierarchies, markets, networks and communities. These structures or models differ in many respects, for example, concerning the role of the state, the power conditions between institutions/actors and the conditions for accountability. (2) as corporate governance. Rhodes argues that corporate governance refers to the system by which organizations are directed and controlled and thus, “The governance role is not concerned with running the business of the company, per se, but with giving overall direction to the enterprise, with overseeing and controlling the executive actions of management and regulation by the interests beyond the corporate boundaries” (Rhodes, 1997: 48). (3) as new public management. This use relates directly to Rhodes’ use of minimal state, “NPM is relevant to this discussion of governance because steering is central to the analysis of public management and steering is a synonym for governance” (Rhodes, 1997: 49). This relationship shows that NPM and government share a concern with

competition, markets, and customers. Thus “... this transformation of the public sector involves ‘less government’ (or less rowing) but ‘more governance’ (or more steering)” (Rhodes, 1997: 49). (4) as good governance. According to Rhodes, good governance marries the new public management to the advocacy of liberal democracy. (5) as socio-cybernetic system. In this system, “... governance is the result of interactive social-political forms of governing” (Rhodes, 1997: 51). Central government is no longer supreme because the centre may pass a law but subsequently it interacts with local government, the private sector. There is no longer a single sovereign authority. (6) as self-organizing networks.

From the literature on governance we know that governance has multiple meanings and is an umbrella concept referring both to a new analytic framework for analysing different modes of steering and coordination, and a concept referring to different modes of governing where public and private institutions and actors are involved (Anders, 2004). This research report, based on the main purpose of discussing villager self-governance in China, restricts its focus to two specific types of governance: good governance and self-organizing networks.

2.2.2 Good governance

In the 1990s, the World Bank embraced ‘good governance’ as a set of principles to guide its objectives in member countries. In 1992, the World Bank published a report on Governance and Development. For the World Bank, good governance involves “An efficient public service, an independent judicial system and legal framework to

enforce contracts; the accountable administration of public funds; an independent public auditor, responsible to a representative legislature; respect for the law and human rights at all levels of government; a pluralistic institutional structure, and free press” (World Bank, 1992 cited in Rhodes, 1997: 49). Based on the definition of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank identifies four key elements: accessibility, accountability, predictability and transparency (ADB, 2001).

From then on, good governance has become a popular term in politics science. V.K. Chopra (1997: 37) defines good governance as “A system of governance that is able to unambiguously identify the basic values of the society where values are economic, political and socio-cultural issues including human rights, and pursue these values through an accountable and honest administration”. CIDA (2002) argues that good governance is the exercise of power by various levels of government that is effective, honest, equitable, transparent and accountable. In views of the United Nation (2004), governance is the process whereby public institutions conduct public affairs, manage public resources and guarantee the realization of human rights. Good governance accomplishes this in a manner essentially free of abuse and corruption, and with due regard for the rule of law.

The definitions focus on different aspects of governance, but they all share one important common feature, that is, when talking of good governance the authors are referring to the elimination of malgovernance and the establishment of governance through democratic processes that citizens do not suffer. Doubtlessly, the key to

building successful governance is democracy. On the one hand, by relying on democratic institutions, good governance holds government and government officials accountable on a daily basis. On the other hand, good democratic governance helps citizens to ensure that the government upholds its promises and implements policies swiftly, correctly, and consistently. Democratic governance also provides mechanisms through which citizens can routinely and inexpensively seek redress for grievances committed by the government. Democracy and good governance are mutually reinforcing: when they develop together, resources are used to advance the public good (USAID, 1995). In the good governance discourse, democracy emerges as the necessary political framework for successful economic development, and within this discourse democracy and economic liberalism are conceptually linked: bad governance equals state intervention, while good governance equals democracy and economic liberalism (Abrahamsen, 2000).

2.2.3 Self-organizing networks

Many scholars have recognized the importance of self-organizing networks which are at the heart of the current literature of governance (Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 1998; Rosenau, 1995). In his final use of the term ‘governance’, Rhodes identifies governance as ‘self-organizing networks’. In this sense, governance is about ‘network management’. He makes the useful distinction between networks, markets and hierarchies, noting that, “Networks are an alternative to, not a hybrid of markets and hierarchies, and they span the boundaries of public, private and voluntary sectors”

(Rhodes, 1996: 658). Rhodes' concept of self-organizing networks includes the notions of autonomy and self-governance, "This use of governance also suggests that networks are self-organizing. At its simplest, self-organizing means that a network is autonomous and self-governing" (Rhodes, 1997: 52). As such he concludes that, "In short, integrated networks resist government steering, develop their own policies and mould their environments" (Rhodes, 1997: 52). Stoker also defines governance as 'self-governing networks of actors'. Stoker describes regimes as 'informal yet stable' groups of individuals often with connections to institutional bases. These regimes seemingly self-organize in response to a specific policy or issue. These "Self-organized systems of control among the key participants are seen as more effective than government-imposed regulation" (Stoker, 1998: 23). In a similar vein, Rosenau (1995: 14) takes governance as "A more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces government, but also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms". Thus "It is possible to conceive of governance without government - of regulatory mechanisms in a sphere of activity which function effectively even though they are not endowed with formal authority". In other words, governance recognizes the capacity of the citizens to get things done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority. In order to achieve sound self-governance, Rosenau argues that conditions have to be appropriate, people have to be ready, the history of the system has to be amenable to it, and the context must be ripe for self-organization to occur. In this sense governance is less about the development of institutions but a " ... continuous process of evolution, a becoming

that fluctuates between order and disorder as conditions change and emergent properties consolidate and solidify” (Rosenau, 1995: 18). What most of the model of self-organizing networks is interested in, is a change from state-centric governance to society-centric governance. The institutions of the networks largely control themselves instead of being controlled by others such as political party and government. Autonomy implies not only freedom but also self-responsibility. Self-organizing networks as autonomous system “... have a much larger degree of freedom of self-governance. Deregulation, government withdrawal and steering at a distance” (Kickert, 1993: 275).

The model of self-organizing networks offers a theoretical framework to establish self-governance in a community. It especially reinforces the concept of participatory democracy, where people are given an opportunity to participate in public policy, and policymakers are allowed to correctly identify the needs and concerns of the population so that policies address the real problems. According to Dahl (1971), the term of self-governance refers to representativeness and popular access. The former is based on elections and elected leaders who take responsibility for decisions in the light of their electoral support. The latter demands adequate communication between leaders and villagers so that the local residents know what is done in their name and have equal means of getting their grievances remedied. Hill refers to self-government as local government that is, “... uniquely able to respond to rising demands for services - such as education, welfare and so on - without succumbing to bureaucracy or the ‘incipient syndicalism’ of professionals set on their own objectives ... unless

effective services can be achieved, and operated justly and fairly, then establishment of local self-government gives way to bureaucracy” (Hill, 1974 cited in Kennedy, 2002: 8). The establishment of local self-government gives people a common purpose in the exercise of power to influence what is done and to accept the consequences of their actions. But if the operation of self-governance is ineffective or unfair, citizens may have no faith in the self-government institution and succumb to bureaucrats.

2.3 DEMOCRATIZATION FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE

2.3.1 Election as the foundation of democratization

Within the democratization literature there is a debate surrounding the definition of a democratic nation, that is, at what stage of democratization do we define a nation to be democratic? Although there is a distinction between democracy and non-democracy, the former develops in stages with no clear cut-off point (Kennedy, 2002). For Dahl (1971) democracy or what he calls ‘polyarchy’ is a continuous process, and given the procedural definition of democracy, elections can be at various stages of institutional development. While studying the politics of authoritarian states such as China, Cuba and North Korea, students should examine democratization rather than democracy. Democracy is the end result while democratization is the means to that end. Struggling for a fair, competitive election is the beginning of democratization.

The definition of democratization ranges from the minimalist definition of Joseph

Schumpeter to Robert Dall's more complete conception of democracy. According to Schumpeter (1942: 260), democracy is the "... institutional arrangement for arriving at a political decision in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." It is the competition between leaders. Przeworski (1996) argues that the holding of competitive, free and fair elections is essential to the meaning of democracy. This includes acceptance of the rule of law so there is legal administration of elections and procedures for resolving electoral disputes. Unless different political views can be competed in the electoral arena, and the electoral outcomes structure government policy to a substantial degree, a political system cannot claim to be a democracy. The democratic process has many facets such as freedom of expression, the freedom to organize and the right to vote. One of the most important factors in the democratic process, however, is competition. In his classic work on democratization, *Polyarchy*, Dahl (1971) lists eight requirements for democracy, two of which are directly related to political competition - the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes, and equal eligibility for public office. Competition, regular elections and equal eligibility (i.e. open nomination) are associated with democratic accountability. Uncontested elections reduce the accountability of leaders to their constituents. Similarly, Huntington (1991: 174-192) discusses how viable opposition groups and independent social interests are important in assuring that governments will actually tolerate electoral opposition and run fair elections. Thus freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association are essential elements of democracy. Therefore, it is widely accepted that

one of the most basic elements of democratization is the establishment of free and fair elections. Electoral democracy represents a minimal threshold for defining democracy.

Democracy defined as free, fair, and competitive elections is not strictly necessary for good governance. And it is quite possible to have bad governance under the formal structures of democracy. But when competitive elections are truly free and fair, they do provide an instrument for removing bad, corrupt, or merely ineffectual leaders. They thus provide an incentive for political leaders to govern more effectively in the public interest and improve the motivation of citizens to participate in governance. Regular contested elections for local government official/representatives give people a common purpose in the exercise of power, to influence what is done, and to accept the consequences of their actions (Hill, 1974; Dahl, 1971). Frey and Stutzer (2002) empirically show that individuals derive substantial procedural utility from having political participation rights. When citizens are not involved in decisions they reckon to be important, they become frustrated. Leaders in a democracy have more incentives (and more institutional means and obligations) to explain and justify their decisions and to consult a broad range of constituencies before making decisions (USAID, 1995).

2.3.2 Democratization and political culture

When we discuss the process of democratization in a specific country we must consider the political culture of that country. Much of the literature on the third wave

of democratization in Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America tend to regard the growth of democratic political culture as a critical factor for democratization. Political culture was defined by Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba as “The political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population” (Almond and Verba, 1989: 468). Prominent theories of democracy, both classical and modern, claim that democracy requires a distinctive set of political values and orientations from its citizens: moderation, tolerance, civility, efficacy, knowledge, and participation. Aristotle argues that political culture theory has inherited concerns for the importance of moderation and tolerance and for the dangers of political extremism and unfettered populism, which continue to resonate in the contemporary literature (Diamond, 1999). Gibson, Dutch, and Tedin (1992) identify that democratic political culture involves cognitions and feelings toward democratic values or principles such as political tolerance, appreciation of liberty, consciousness of civic/political rights, support for an independent media, and support for competitive elections. They believe that these orientations in political culture are necessary for the development and maintenance of democracy, to cope with one of the central dilemmas of democracy: to balance cleavage and conflict with the need for consensus.

Countries differ significantly in their patterns of politically relevant beliefs, values, and attitudes and that within nations these elements of political culture are clearly shaped by life experiences, education, and social class (Almond and Verba, 1989). At the core of China’s political culture is Confucianism, shorthand for a cluster of institutions and practices that give great weight to order, harmony, virtue, and

hierarchy. There has always been serious debate about whether traditional Chinese political culture is inherently authoritarian and incompatible with modern democratic values. Pye (1985) argues that Confucian values producing an allegiance to authority that appears inconsistent with democratic norms. Scalapino (1989) similarly stresses the limited potential for democratic development in East Asia because of cultural traditions that emphasizes communalism with limited toleration for opposition groups. Fukuyama (1995) sees Confucian social orientations as undercutting the social capital and interpersonal trust that is widely linked to democratic politics. Chinese peasants in particular are suspected as carriers of authoritarian culture. In fact, the absence of democratization in China is often blamed on the Chinese peasants who are believed to have a low level of democratic political culture and lack democratic traditions. In discussing self-governance in the rural China, we must have an understanding of the Chinese culture.

2.3.3 Democratization in an authoritarian state

Diamond (1999) argues that when authoritarian rule has been highly personalistic and decadent, the real impetus for democratic change tends to originate outside of the regime in the mobilization of civil society. But how about a country that is ruled by a single party which is, to some degree, democratic within the party? In studies of democratization, authors such as Huntington (1991) and Geddes (1994) find that democratic transitions, particularly non-violent transitions, occur more frequently in single party systems than in military or personal regimes. The reason for the relatively

smooth transition is that single party system that allows for greater political competition implemented under an authoritarian regime can lead to a relatively smooth democratic transition at the national level. It is important to point out, however, that many of these early reforms were not intended to democratize the regime (Kennedy, 2002). As the authors suggest, party leaders may allow for greater competition in local and national elections in order to legitimize the party/government, especially, in many cases, it is in the consideration of fighting political corruption.

In the definition shared by most political scientists, political corruption is any transaction between private and public sector actors through which collective goods are illegitimately converted into private-regarding payoffs (Heidenheimer et. al., 1993). Political corruption occurs when a state loses "... its specific competence through failure to identify a task and strategy that practically distinguish between, rather than equate or confuse, (particular) members with (general) organizational interests" (Jowitt, 1992: 34). As the gap between the general interests of the organization and the particular interests of its component parts increases due to the diminution of both the state's capacity of coercion and ideological commitment on the parts of the agents, the state inevitably suffers from a fatal problem of organizational distintegrity and, as a result, a growing crisis of governability (Wang Xu, 2001). According to Amundsen (1999), political corruption should be considered as one of the basic modes of operation of authoritarian regimes. It is one of the mechanisms through which the authoritarian power-holders enrich themselves. In an authoritarian regime, political corruption is rarely a disease that the responsible politicians are

eager to avoid, it is a deliberate, wanted and applied practice; it is one of the rulers' modes of enrichment and economic control. Therefore, "Political corruption is consequently a 'normal' condition in authoritarian countries, although showing a great variety according to the various forms of authoritarianism" (Amundsen, 1999: 9). When facing a crisis of governability, an authoritarian state may make some efforts to reform itself in order to regain its institutional capacity to govern. Some of these efforts for restoration, in turn, might eventually trigger unanticipated political changes.

Democratization from bottom to top in an authoritarian state faces a difficulty that is the attitude of the effected officials. According to Knight (1992: 186), "If an actor doubts that he will be sanctioned for noncompliance, he will prefer to comply with the rule if it would otherwise give him a higher expected utility". If the local leader doubts that he or she will be sanctioned for noncompliance then he or she will maintain the old system to protect his or her own interests. Thus, it is a common phenomenon that the national leaders may create very clear and unambiguous reforms, but without a consistent enforcement and threat of sanctions local leaders may ignore the new reforms. Without effective and swift enforcement of the new law, then "... these doubts threaten the efficacy of formalization by diminishing the probability that the new rule will be recognized and applied" (Knight, 1992: 197).

2.4 LITERATURE REVIEW ON CHINA'S VILLAGER SELF-GOVERNANCE

Before the 1990s, western and Chinese scholars had showed little interest in the village self-governance concept as they regarded it as a trick by the ruling party. Indeed previous studies have shown that elections in socialist democracy were usually motivated by the desire to legitimize the regime and strengthen the authoritarian state. Although from time to time some reform did intend to introduce some limited electoral reforms to make the state more inclusive and rational-legal, the structural constraints built into a Leninist system were so formidable that no reform effort of this kind could bring about any real change in the power structure of the party-state (Barrett, 1990). Thus, when the Organic Law emerged, some urban Chinese intellectuals remained skeptical that 'uneducated peasants' were really capable of understanding the democratic process and regarded the reform as merely a propaganda effort to boost the regime's legitimacy both among Chinese peasants and to the outside world. Some foreigners feared that village elections were largely show, designed to convince overseas critics that China had begun a process of genuine political reform. Such critics argued that China's villages were so peripheral to the larger political system that reforms at that level were meaningless. Since the early 1990s, with more and more villagers casting ballots to elect their governments, the quality of the electoral process gradually improving and first signs of genuine political mobilization among the peasants being noticed, the village self-governance and election began to attract the attention of the students of Chinese politics. Although the

number of scholars doing regular fieldwork is still quite small, the issue of local direct elections has become a steady reference point in almost all studies reporting on the latest developments in contemporary Chinese politics.

Some scholars have explored how village elections may contribute to regime change. O'Brien (1994) regarded the village self-governance as the centerpiece of a central program designed to enhance cadre accountability and village autonomy. Lawrence (1994) at about the same time produced a case study to illustrate how village elections were conducted and how village committees worked. She indicated a kind of real local autonomy seemed to set in and the party branch began to be put under the VC supervision in her article. In a recent account, O'Brien and Li (1999) again claimed that the introduction of village elections in China represented an endeavor to accommodate democracy in a one-party state. They believed that important progress had been made along the path of grassroots democratization. An even more optimistic view was expressed by Howell (1998), who evaluated positively the various potential contributions that village self-governance could make towards democratization, in particular the dissemination of democratic values and ideas in China. The above review indicates one thing very clearly. In spite of divergent opinions that probably existed among the concerned scholars and observers with respect to the background, the development and the achievement of village self-governance, they nevertheless shared the belief that the latter was an important force for democratization.

Nevertheless, Kin-Sheun Louie (2001) argued that only a small part of China's vast

countryside implemented self-governance and village self-governance could easily be subverted by the local communist cadres. These limitations and deficiencies seriously curtailed or even overwhelmed the possible contribution village self-governance could make. And he concluded that if a breakthrough in democratization appear in the near future to break the present stalemate, it is not likely to come from village self-governance and election. The latter can, at best, only contribute to this peripherally. Some other scholars also argued that it is a practical blunder and a formalist sham that has been politically romanticized and theoretically distorted (Thurston, 1998; Shen, 2003). Some scholars even suggest that the Chinese countryside may end up leading democratization to the rest of China (White, 1996).



Which side is correct? As a matter of fact, democracy is a process in terms of not only the operation of democratic politics, but also the formation of a democratic system. On one hand, it is unrealistic to expect a full development of democracy in China in some ten years, given the historical background of China that is burdened by a rural population of nine hundred million, extreme economic polarization and a deep-rooted legacy of feudalism. At this point, it is both simplistic and unrealistic to deny the value of the village elections simply on the basis of existing problems in the practice of village self-government. On the other hand, excessively optimism is unrealistic as well; at least until recently, resistance to the Organic Law by both village cadres and their superiors was common and may still persist. This resistance impedes the implementation of the democratic and electoral reforms stipulated by the law. What are the contributions that the village election has made to democracy in China if the

village election does spread democracy seeds in the rural area? If village election is simply a trick of the state, what is actually impeding the practice of democracy? None of the authors from different camps make a very systematic analysis to answer these critical questions in their works. Moreover, how the elections really work is often sketchy in their works. Since the authors all come from western countries, thus they have difficulty getting trustful election data from local cadres and made continuous observations. In order to make a substantial evaluation, I think a realistic evaluation of the value of village elections requires a careful and truthful review of its actual situation.

Some scholars have focused on the role that elections play in raising popular rights consciousness. Wang Zhenyao (2001) and Shi Tianjian (1999), for instance, argue that after villagers have realized that they can defend their rights and interests by voting out corrupt and coercive village cadres, they may want to do the same at the township level, and thus demand that township heads be popularly elected. Wang Xu (2001) and Thurston (1998) have also argued that village elections may give villagers a sense of empowerment because they can now remove unpopular cadres through the ballot box. Howell (1998) has suggested that villager's self-governance may create a 'discursive opening' for Chinese villagers to demand more democratic reform. More recently, Schubert (2002) has compared village elections to a 'Trojan horse of democracy', in the sense that peasants who feel empowered by the right to vote in village elections may demand additional avenues for political participation.

Other scholars have tended to look at village elections the other way around. In the vein of classical modernization theories of democratization, some of these authors tried to link the adoption of VC elections to economic development. In an often-quoted article of 1994, O'Brien argued that economic development could contribute positively to village elections, since the economically more successful leaders are less afraid of elections and have more incentives in keeping their positions and resources to win the elections. O'Brien's seemed to verify the general modernist assumption that democratization directly depends on the level of economic development: Material resources in the villages are used by the cadres for redistribution, so that the delegitimizing use of force to execute state policies is unnecessary and elections can be easily won. Consequently, there is no reason for the local cadre bureaucracy to hamper the implementation of the Organic Law. On the contrary, Lawrence (1994) argued after fieldwork in a village in Hebei Province that the less-developed local governments have more incentives to promote elections and experiment with new modes of governance with the goal of promoting local economic development. The village she studied was notoriously mismanaged. However, when a new Village Representative Assembly (VRA) was elected in 1990 and took control of the VC, the VRA soon became the driving force for a new work style in the village, ending its administrative paralysis. So Lawrence concluded that it was not economic development, but institutional efficiency that spurred political change. Oi Jean (1996: 137) also found that "... high levels of economic development do not necessarily bring enthusiasm for implementing democratic reforms". In the more developed

villages, it is usually the case that the non-elected Party Secretary plays a major role in public and economic decision-making, which may significantly retard the progress of village elections. However, in the view of Epstein (1996) the poorest and the richest villages are more unlikely to have village elections of a given quality, whereas the villages most likely to conduct those elections are in the middle ground of economic development since in poor areas, local cadres tend to be less aware of the value of elections and pay less attention to improving transparency although farmers' democratic demands are large, whereas in relatively rich areas local cadres with strong power and control usually act as obstacles to free elections.

The problem with the modernization theory literature in China is that it tends to link economic development and grass-root democracy developments in an over-simplistic way without a theoretically rigorous and logically coherent framework. As a matter of fact, successful elections can be found both in developed and in less developed regions and the relationship between economic development and elections that has been established is not linear in rural China. Several notable scholars such as Huntington (1991) and Przeworski (1996) do note that democracy becomes quite stable in countries with per capita GDPs at around \$6,000. Przeworski observes that democracy becomes 'impregnable' at \$8,000 (converted to 1998 international dollars). However, the per capita GDP in China is still far below the threshold for change. In 2003 it was only \$ 1,038. The per capita is still too low to make any sense with the prosperity theory even in the richest villages in China. Moreover, the theory predicts that democratic change should occur in urban areas, but electoral reform in China has

taken place in rural areas. In fact, so many other factors came to be integrated in these models that economic development even tended to look a minor contributing factor in explaining the adoption and qualities of elections. Actually, bureaucratic influences from outside or situational factors within the villages, like personal authority of a Party-secretary, tended to be more influential.

2.5 APPROACH OF THE STUDY

This Report will conduct a systematic empirical study of the process of election and the impact of village elections on village power structures by using the institutional approach. Theories of institutionalism begin with a general definition of an institution, which is a set of rules that structure social interactions in particular ways. An institution is a system of rules that define behavior (Knight, 1992). In addition, members of the relevant community or society must have shared knowledge of these rules (North, 1990; Knight, 1992). Institutionalism identifies an autonomous role for political institutions, without denying the importance of both social and individual motives (Knight, 1998). It regards political institutions as having relatively casual autonomy in terms of their affections upon institutional needs. They are important keys to understanding the decisions of individuals. According to North (1990), institutions are the constraints that human beings impose on human interaction. They consist of formal rules (constitutions, state law, common law and regulations) and informal constraints (conventions, norms and self-enforcing codes of conduct) and their enforcement characteristics. This suggests an interaction between government

regulations and societal norms. In addition, there are no black and white divisions between formal and informal rules. It is more a matter of degree than kind. In his Theory of Bargaining, Knight (1992) draws a clear distinction between formal and informal rules and then focuses on the relationship between them. The underlying mechanism for the institutional creation of formal rules is the intentional design such as constitutions and state laws, while informal rules are the result of more unintentional design such as conventions and norms. The institutional approach regards villager self-governance in China as a political process that is comprised of a set of democratic institutions, norms, and rules. The Organic Law, which gives villagers the power to choose local leaders, is the new formal rule and challenges the authority of higher officials who informally select or appoint local leaders. Knight also defines the relation between formal rule and informal rule, “Informal rules are the foundation on which formal rules are built ... informal rules persist when efforts at formal change are attempted. Most important, informal rules influence the distribution of resources, which in turn affect the power asymmetries in the conflict over the establishment of formal institutions” (Knight, 1992: 172). Institutional development means the efforts to constrain other social actors for the sake of distribution advantage. When informal institutions satisfy those efforts, the social institution remains relatively stable; however, when they fail to do so, some members of the society have an incentive to resort to the state (formal rules) to reinforce their particular interest (Kennedy, 2002). Using the institutional approach, the paper makes the argument that elections are the key institutions in rural democratization that are changing the village

political environment, but informal rule in the rural area is also impeding the implementation of the formal rule villager self-governance.

2.6 SUMMARY

Governance is a concept that involves the interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power is exercised, how decisions are made, and how citizens have their say. It is a value-neutral concept, which helps compare a wide variety of social coordination mechanisms including traditional paradigm of public administration. But only when the legitimate aspirations of people are represented and rights of people are respected, can we say the governance is good. Democracy is the core of good governance. In order to achieve good governance, it is crucial to establish a set of institutions to practice democracy. In an authoritarian state, democratization means a gradual process of strengthening both popular participation in the exercise of power and the accountability of governments to those they govern. It involves building democratic institutions and practices and deepening democratic political culture in societies. Programming for democratic development includes a range of activities which reinforce each other as they work toward a common end, but the implementation of free, fair multiparty elections is often the first step in this process. Self-governance is a great effort of the CCP to practice good governance in China. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which peasants articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their rights

and obligation. Until today, however, expectations of arguments about what villager self-governance may introduce have remained largely either policy intentions of the Chinese leadership or scholars' speculations about what may happen. Few empirical studies have been conducted to examine what has happened and what is actually going on. A realistic evaluation of the implementation of villager self-governance requires a careful and truthful review of its actual situation.



CHAPTER THREE: VILLAGER SELF-GOVERNANCE: BACKGROUND, THE ORGANIC LAW AND INSTITUTIONS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Despite substantial opposition from its local officials and cadres, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated the villager self-governance concept and pushed hard for free and competitive local elections and for granting more autonomy to the newly elected VCs. The effort to reconstitute its grassroots political institutions through democratic means and to grant them more authority in local affair is especially challenging and paradoxical for an authoritarian state which has long been struggling for deep penetration and arbitrary control of rural local society. Why did an authoritarian government on its own accord set in motion a democratization process? What is the current situation of villager self-governance? In this Chapter, the researcher will try to answer these critical questions by discussing the background of the emergence of the Organic Law and the way it has institutionalized democracy in Chinese rural areas.

3.2 EMERGENCE OF THE NEW INSTITUTIONS AT VILLAGE-LEVEL

3.2.1 Development Strategy of the CCP

Without a clear understanding of the Chinese way of economic and political reform, it is difficult to make sense of the emergence of village self-governance and the implications of the rural democracy. It should be noted that the Chinese people have a special fear of chaos after experiencing centuries of upheavals, revolutions, and instabilities. The chaotic Cultural Revolution is still fresh in people's minds. Having learned bitter lessons from radicalism, China follows a transition characterized by gradualism. The Chinese reforms have been deepening and widening not because there has been a grand plan to pursue a complete transformation from a planned economy to a market economy, but rather because reforms have been pushed forward when the economic, political and social climates have permitted and were propitious, and when altered expectations and the urgency of readdressing newly emerging problems have required actions. According to this transition strategy, political reform of China is not suddenly to open the political process to the general public, but should be seen as a managed process of institutional adjustment. It will aim at continuously adjusting its institutional framework to guarantee economic reforms and political stability on one hand, and accommodating drastic changes resulting from socioeconomic development on the other.

In practice, the CCP leadership places emphasis on different reform practices rather than theories. The central leadership implements various policy experiments and, once

a given policy succeed, the leadership legitimates it. More importantly, the leadership also allows government organizations at lower levels and social forces to practice their own ways of reforming old institutions. Once these reform practices are proved to be in alignment with central lines, the leadership will be willing to legitimate them. It makes little sense to argue that the democratic reorganization of village self-governance reflects a well-designed strategy by the Chinese party-state to democratize the entire polity from bottom up. The original purpose of villager self-governance is not to establish western style of democracy in China, but to resolve the problems emerging as a result of implementing household responsibility system in rural area. However, through continuous institutional adjustments, the villager self-governance has become more accommodative to democratic factors. Gradual reform is the only means to democratize China without major, probably violent, upheaval and a long period of destructive political chaos. It is a commonplace to point out here that, as White (1996) argues, in comparative historical terms, liberal democracy, in its full-fledged form, is primarily a characteristic of the advanced industrialized societies and is more a product of socioeconomic modernization than its cause. Moreover, it is the cumulative result of a prolonged and often conflictual process of political development. Higher-level reform is essential but village election is the first step in a long process of democratization. Political collapse would be disastrous for the Chinese people. China, at present, simply has no organization, or set of organizations, capable of setting up a new government except for the CCP.

3.2.2 Democracy and rural governance

The arguments of Huntington (1991) and Geddes (1994) about democratization in an authoritarian state exactly explain the social transition in China. During its first thirty years in power, the CCP resembled in every aspect a classic case of a totalitarian state. Through a series of large-scale social transforming programs such as land reform, collectivization, and the Great Leap Forward, the state extended its administrative power deeply into every corner of rural society. The country was completely integrated into the larger polity with a new set of effective administrative arrangement based on a command economy. The rigid institutional structure destroyed peasants' incentives for agricultural production and led to tremendous waste of economic and human resources. This increasingly worsening economic and political situation weakened the capacity of the state to mobilize social support and posed a serious threat to the legitimacy of the state. Under these circumstances, the state eventually gave up rigid totalitarianism and embarked upon a dramatically new program to decentralize rural China.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the central government initiated an historical rural reform policy to decentralize agricultural production from the communal system to individual households. Through the household responsibility system farmers were allowed to farm their own plots and decide for themselves what to do with the surplus. The effectiveness of this reform was dramatic. Agricultural output soared, as did rural industrial production. Rural residents' incomes increased nearly four-fold between

1978 and 1985.

However, unexpectedly, the household responsibility system fundamentally changed the relationship between state and society in the countryside. The rapid spread of this system soon led to the collapse of the old system of governance, i.e. the production brigade system, and eventually, the collapse of the commune system. Economic reforms created alternative resources and opportunities outside the bureaucratic institutions and attenuated the conditions that made villagers so dependent on cadres. De-collectivization of agricultural production, the reopening of rural free markets, and increased job opportunities outside the village community all undermined the most important basis of cadre power: monopoly of resources. Deprived of the power to make decisions about the economy, local cadres began to lose their capacity to achieve political mobilization and demand compliance.



As a result, the countryside slid into anarchy and chaos. An authority vacuum occurred at the village level. In some villages, village leaders were able to take advantage of the new economic opportunities offered by de-collectivisation and left their positions of leadership for other, more lucrative pursuits. Villages were often left with a vacuum of leadership, resulting in turn in a breakdown of social order for example the rise of banditry and lawlessness, and an increase in violence, as a result. In some villages, cadres continued to issue directives as they had during the commune period, even though the new system of rural organization gave peasants the freedom to farm their land without interference and to market their produce on the open market.

In other cases, villages came under control of what the Chinese call 'local emperors', evil strong men capable of exploiting and bullying and generally making life miserable for ordinary people within their control. The new system that allowed freedom to pursue personal wealth also created a new set of problems, including rampant corruption among rural officials and worsening relations between villagers and cadres. The influence of the state decayed quickly. Before the 1987 experimental law on villager committee was implemented, the village official institution of both VC and village party branch (VPB) for the most part functioned poorly or existed in name only. A survey conducted by the Organization Ministry of the CCP in 1997 indicated that in many rural areas, local party organizations failed to recruit a single member since the beginning of reform in 1978.



In response to the sudden abolition of people's communes, and the shift of production from collective farming to the household system, a new form of governance - the village committee - gradually emerged, beginning in Luocheng County of the Guangxi Autonomous Region. The villager leaders in the committees, instead of being appointed by the higher authorities as was previously the case, were elected by VRAs, which were composed of members coming from families and the VPBs. The central government did not pay much attention to this development at the beginning, although VCs were mentioned in the constitution of 1982 as the administrative organ at village level that should be elected by the villagers in public elections. But a hot debate on the election of VCs took place among some officials and scholars. Proponents of elections argued that these would enhance a feeling of solidarity

between village cadres and voters so that policy implementation would be aided as villagers accepted even unpopular policies as their own. At the same time, elections would provide villagers with leverage against corrupt cadres thus ensuring a more just implementation and preventing social instability. Opponents, on the other hand, feared that elected VCs would not co-operate with township administrations in policy implementation and villages would become even more unruly, worsening social instability. Proponents won the argument. The CCP was increasingly worried about the potential for instability, and thus chaos, in rural areas and the Organic Law on Villager self-governance (experimental) was passed in 1987 to cope with the dual crises of legitimacy and governing ability it had faced in the countryside after more than ten years of economic reforms.



3.3 THE ORGANIC LAW ON VILLAGER COMMITTEES

The drafting of the law, which authorizes VCs began in 1982 and continued through 1985, undergoing dozens of revisions. The State Council approved a draft Organic Law on Villagers Committees (OLVC) as an experimental measure in 1986, and in November 1987, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress enacted the Law. At each step of the process, the provisions of the law underwent sustained debate, and the measures themselves were re-drafted until acceptable compromise was achieved.

The Organic Law provided a legal framework for reorganizing rural grassroots political institutions. It defined the VC as a civic organization of self-governance at

the grassroots level through which villagers managed their own affairs, educated themselves, and served their own needs. The VC consisted of 3 to 7 members. The chairman, vice chairman and members of the VC should be directly elected by the villagers. The tenure of the members of the villagers' committees would be three years. The villagers' committees were responsible for managing village land and collective properties, offering village public welfare services, mediating disputes among villagers, assisting in maintaining public order, and conveying villagers' opinions to town and township governments. The law also gave the VC a substantial role in implementing economic reforms, requiring them to support and organize the villagers in various forms of cooperative economic undertakings, such as those for production, supply and marketing, credit or consumption, and to provide services and coordination for production and construction.



The law laid out comprehensive provisions on the organization, function, and election of VCs and assemblies. However, the Organic Law was too vague and simplistic and could not provide enough legal support for many of the peasants' spontaneous democratic practices; especially the guidelines on how elections were to be carried out were unclear. Moreover, the 1987 OLVC promoted village elections on an experimental basis. Elections were not mandatory under the law. Local levels were encouraged but not required to implement it. Thus, this situation also emboldened those conservative local officials to refuse to organize democratic elections or to subvert democratically established village self-governments. The villager self-governance policy, however, was introduced in many places of the country as a

result of the law. By the end of 1989, experimental village elections had been held in 14 provinces. Based on the results of these experiments, the central government called for widespread implementation of village elections in 1990. By 1998, when the law was revised, all provinces of the country had launched villager self-governance.

In order to consolidate and popularize peasants' great institutional innovations and to strengthen the legal authority of village self-government, the central government set out in 1994 to revise the OLVC with the goal of changing its status from an 'experimental' law to a formal one. By 1998, the experiments had been going on long enough and with sufficient success. The central government decided to revise and mandate the law officially. In 1998, the standing committee of the NPC passed the new OLVC. In the revised law the guidelines for villager self-governance were more thoroughly spelled out.



The revised Organic Law stipulates that the functions of a VC is to "... practice democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic supervision" in rural areas (Article 2), besides reconfirming the nature of the VC as "... civic organizations of self-governance at the grassroots level through which villagers manage their own affairs, educate themselves, and serve their own needs". The VC is to be independent in relation to the state administration. In order to strengthen the authority of the VC against arbitrary intervention from township authority, the law specifically states that the township government "... may guide, help and support village committees, but must not intervene in affairs that are in the

purview of the villagers' committee.” (Article 4) Township or county governments are allowed to offer support and advice but they are not supposed to interfere in issues that are considered to be within the scope of the village self-governance. It identifies the relationship between VPBs and VCs more clearly. While acknowledging their leading role in rural political life, the law requires that “Local party organizations should support and ensure villagers in developing self-governance and directly exercising their democratic rights” (Article 3) and “No organizations or individuals are allowed to appoint designate, remove, or replace the villager committee members” (Article 11). The law also ensures that villagers have the right to report to higher-level authorities any illegal intervention in village elections through such means as threat, bribery, and forged ballots and states that any manipulated election should be annulled (Article 5).



Unlike the experimental law that only set out the principle of direct election briefly in general terms, the revised law has provided detailed regulations on the procedures of VC elections and designed important democratic elements to ensure that the villagers truly have a choice in selecting their leaders. There include:

- Open, direct nominations by individuals rather than groups;
- Multiple candidates;
- Secret ballots;
- The mandatory use of secret voting booths to ensure the integrity of the individual vote;

- A public count of the votes;
- Immediate announcement of election results;
- Recall procedures.

Under the new law, villagers themselves shall nominate the candidates to the VC and the number of candidates must exceed the number of positions in the VC and candidates need not be members of the CCP. Secret balloting is ensured as a strong arm against the intervention of clan, the party and township authority. All people have the equal right to be elected as candidates, “Any villager over 18 years of age has the right to vote and be elected, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, occupation, family background, education, financial situation and length of residence” (Article 12) .The new law is strikingly more explicit than its predecessor in the areas of village autonomy, election procedure, and oversight of village government. The most significant contribution of the new law is that competitive elections are now mandatory for all of China’s villages, thus putting an end to the foot-dragging of the earlier years.

3.4 INSTITUTIONS OF VILLAGE SELF-GOVERNANCE

Although institutions do not necessarily mean the spread of democratic politics, institutional arrangement is obviously the first step to practicing democracy. The institutions of villager self-governance are especially vital for rural democracy since the majority of peasants know nothing about democratic politics. Generally, there are three primary components in villager self-governance: the village assembly, the

villager representative assembly and the VC.

The village assembly is the supreme decision-making body, deciding all major affairs of a village. It is composed either of all adult villagers or of one representative from each household. The village assembly has the power to draw up village charters and codes of conduct, to review the accounts of all revenues and expenditures of the VC, and to dismiss incompetent committee members. The revised Organic Law strengthens the village assembly in some aspects. First, it clearly stipulates that the village assembly should examine the VCs' work report every year and evaluate the performance of VC members. Second, it requires that the village assembly should be convened upon a request of over one-tenth of the villagers in a village, thus enhance the villagers' direct participation. Third, in order to strengthen the power of the village assembly to supervise VC, the law guarantees that important issues of the village must get the approval from the village assembly before action. The village assembly is thus designed as a system of direct democracy at grassroots level in rural areas. However, in practice, it is extremely difficult for the village assembly to be summoned and take on its responsibilities. Chinese villages generally range in size from 1,000 to 3,000 people, and the logistics of calling so many people together for discussion and decision-making have generally proved unworkable. In some villages where they do, nothing can be deeply discussed as the assemblies often contain too many people. Moreover, many villagers work outside for much of the year and some villages are scattered geographically. As a result, in some areas this important body for self-governance is simply non-existent and in others it only exists in name.

Instead, many villages have organized village representative assemblies, which is actually the congress of village. Villager representatives are directly elected by vote or by informal consultation among the villagers as their spokesmen. Usually it consists of heads of village small groups, members of VPB, village committee members and delegates from the local women's federation, the Youth League, and the militia. Villager representative assemblies are initially designed to oversee the work of VC. In many villagers, however, besides supervising the VC, villager representative assemblies also take on the functions of making decisions on important issues that affect the village, removing corrupt members of VC, helping village leaders to fulfill the villagers' obligations to the state, and even supervising the VPBs. The villagers' representative assembly represents a critically important institutional innovation in the villager self-governance movement. It provides new institutional channels for ordinary villagers to periodically participate in the decision-making process and in the everyday management of the village affairs. It also indicates that the concept of democracy among peasants has been developed beyond the simple content of democratic elections and toward somethings including democratic management, democratic supervision, and democratic policy-making. Moreover, the establishment of the villagers' representative assembly has fundamentally changed the way VPBs maintain their leadership in the village. In those areas where village representative assemblies have been well established and worked efficiently, the VPB must implement and abide by the resolutions of these assemblies, which are now the supreme authorities. As the CCP members only account for about one-third of villager

representatives in most villages, when faced with problems, the VPB can only play leading roles by convincing the villager representatives and winning the support of the majority within the villagers' representative assemblies. This institutional arrangement represents a great step toward substantial grassroots democracy. The problem with the organization and operation of this important institution in practice is the excessive influence of political elites. In many cases some assembly members are not directly elected by the villagers. Instead, they obtain membership simply because they are already members of the political elites who can usually wield dominant influence in the assemblies with their political resources.

The VC is the administrative body of village affairs. As discussed in the previous chapter, village committee members are elected directly by all eligible villagers for three-year terms of office. By law, VCs are to include an 'appropriate number' of national minorities and women. VC membership is not a full-time or salaried occupation, although members generally receive some compensation for the time they spend on VC work. The duty of VCs generally is to oversee all administrative matters of a village, including budget management, public utilities, dispute resolution, public safety matters, social security, health issues, and local business management. According to the Organic Law, the VC should be responsible for the village assembly. But it is actually responsible for the villager representative assembly since the village assembly does not work well in most villages. The role of VC is dual and sometimes contradictory. The Organic Law requires VC to be accountable to villager representative assembly, but at the same time demands that the VC be responsible for

publicizing government policies and persuading villagers to follow them, even when those policies may not be entirely popular. But the VC, despite its limited and sometimes contradictory power, is the only basic level organization that is chosen by popular election.

3.5 SUMMARY

The resulting decay of basic-level political institutions and drastic increase of cadre-peasant conflicts posed a great political threat to the regime. To change this adverse situation and to maintain political stability, the state had to rejuvenate grassroots political institutions. It was clear that totalitarian rule could not complete such a mission alone. Village self-governance represented an effort by the CCP to establish limited but real democratic self-governance at the grassroots level. The original purpose of self-governance is not to spread democracy in rural areas but to cope with the governability and legitimacy crises in the countryside as a result of economic reform. Even though what the leadership has done is not aimed at democratizing the country, with continuous adjustments, the rural political institutions have shown their flexibility by being more accommodating towards social changes and democratic developments. The Organic Law and its institutions have offered a democratic framework in the rural area. With the rise of elections, politics and the reconstruction of the VC, a set of new grassroots democratic and political institutions has been widely established.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY: A CASE STUDY OF LUOCHENG COUNTY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Institutions are sometimes referred to as determining the ‘rules of the game’ and the effort of establishing villager self-governance is to build democratic institutions in the authoritarian state. The questions are, then, have new institutions of villager self-governance applied the rules of the game? What are the conflicts between formal rules and informal rules in the rural democracy practice? In order to access the problems that have confronted the implementation of self-governance, this chapter will provide an overview of democratic practice in Luocheng County by examining the process of the village election in the County.

4.2 1987-1998: A DECADE OF ELECTION EXPERIMENTATION

Luocheng, a county of the Guangxi Autonomous Region, is a nationally defined ‘poverty-stricken county’ with an insignificant industrial base and revenue sources. With a population of 350,000 and 170,000 registered rural voters, there are 13 townships/towns and 237 villages, with an average of about 1,200 - 1,300 people in each village (Bureau of Statistics of Luocheng, 2003) in the county. The laws and regulations governing VC elections in Luocheng County include the OLVC, and the *Electoral Code of the Village Committee of Guangxi Autonomous Region* and

Regulation on Village Election of Luocheng County that were approved in 1999.

It can be claimed proudly that Luocheng had the first VC in China in 1980. But the following effort to further village democracy was not too impressive. Before 1986 it was the people's commune-system with its production brigades that was used overwhelmingly. From 1986 to 1989 the original production brigades and production teams were reorganized into VCs and villagers' groups. Some production teams were put together to form small natural villages (villagers' group) and on this foundation the VC was organized (big village). The designation of the 1987 Organic Law as 'experimental' meant that local authorities could ignore the law with impunity. While the active support of township and county level officials was essential to successful village elections, these were the same officials whose power was most likely to be undermined by village reform. So it is quite common that local officials' cooperation was hard to get. In Luocheng, the county government did not introduce the village committees at the time the Organic Law was enacted. Thus, villages continued to be administered directly by township authorities and did not hold elections at all. Before 1996, all of VCs in the county were established through uncontested elections by empowering villager representative assemblies. Candidates were chosen through indirect means or by outright appointment, and the villager representative assembly voted only on committee members, then the elected members nominated their chairs and vice chairs. These VCs, although theoretically autonomous, were controlled by the authority of the township governments and VPBs, thus the influence coming from ordinary villagers was very limited. In 1996 the direct election of VCs was urged by

the Department of Civil Affairs of Guangxi Autonomous Region on a trial basis throughout the Region. Some villages started to elect the chairman of the villager committee (CVC) through a new village representative assembly that was composed by representatives of household or nominated by villagers while others still preferred indirect means to choose CVCs. In April 1999, responding to the promulgation of the Organic Law, the sixth meeting of the Ninth People's Congress in the county passed the *Regulation on Village Election of Luocheng County* that requires all villages to conduct elections based on the law. In May 1999, the CBCA demanded, according to the Regulation, in its *Notice of Organizing the 1999 Round Villager Election*, that all positions on the VCs were directly elected, multiple candidates were mandatory for each and every position and voters could freely associate and nominate candidates. That marked the starting point of Luocheng's change from an indirect to a direct election system and thereby said a real yes to self-governance. Since 1998, two elections have been conducted in the county with one in 1999 and the other in 2002. The attitude of local officials was vital to villager self-governance. Villages where elections were successfully carried out according to the guidelines of the law usually had the support of particularly progressive or reform-minded officials at the county and townships. Initially, most villagers were extremely skeptical about the electoral reform. Only after the first election did they realize that they truly were empowered to vote unpopular, incompetent and corrupt leaders out of office. The attitude of villagers is changing dramatically even though the reality of the village self-governance and direct elections leaves much to be desired from both popular

expectations and legal requirements.

4.3 EVALUATION ON ELECTORAL PROCESS

For Dahl (1971), elections need to be inclusive as well as competitive. For a system to be inclusive, citizens must be able to fully participate in the election process including the selection of candidates (i.e. the nomination process). In order to make village election inclusive and competitive, the National Ministry of Civil Affairs (NMCA), according to the Organic Law, codified standards for villager election accounting to four principles: one, there must be more candidates than positions to be filled. Two, villagers must have the right to nominate the final candidates. Three, candidates pursuing the post of villager chairman must be given a chance to publicly air their views before the voting takes place. Four, secret balloting and public counting of the votes must be ensured. According to the four principles, the writer will make an evaluation of the electoral process in Luocheng.

4.3.1 Nomination of candidates

The nomination of primary candidates and selection of the finalists for the ballot are the most critical stage of a village election. Open, direct nominations by individuals rather than groups is an important criteria of fair village election identified by the NMCA. For an election to be considered 'open', two conditions must be met: (1) No one can modify the outcome of the elections beforehand or ex-post facto, and (2) all participants must openly subject their interests to competition and uncertainty

(Przeworski, 1991). Although an open nomination process is the key part of a 'free and fair' election, there is significant heterogeneity across villages in China. A variety of nomination methods have been used in the village elections. For instance, Bai Gang (2001), a senior professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a consultant of National People's Congress (NPC), finds three types of nomination methods that are prevalent throughout his case studies: villager, party branch and township government. In some villages, the election committees and the villager representative assemblies play the decisive role in nomination. According to the law, "No organization or individual is allowed to appoint, designate ... members of the villager committee," (Article 11) and "Candidates should be nominated directly by villagers who are eligible to vote" (Article 14). Thus, the village party branch, township government, village election committee, and villager representative assembly should all be stripped of the power of nominating candidates. As a matter of fact, however, the influence of VPBs and township authorities is very strong at the nomination process generally (Bai Gang, 2001).

Since early 1999, the 'sea election', an arrangement that allows villagers to nominate candidates directly and without restriction in the voting, has been introduced by the NMCA. It has become the main method in village election nomination ever since. In some places where this system is used in the nomination process, those candidates who have received the highest numbers of nomination votes often automatically become the formal candidates for the final election. Here, the 'sea election' can actually be regarded as a direct primary election.

The county government of Luocheng, according to the spirit of the regional regulation, has promoted ‘sea elections’ as the legal method in nominating candidates. This method was stipulated officially in the *Regulations on Village Election of Luocheng*. Before 1998, candidates were nominated generally by VPBs and township/town authorities. By the regulation, all eligible villagers can be nominated freely through the new nomination method. The Party Committee and the Government of Luocheng County have made great efforts to enforce this method since 1998. The CBCA even exclaimed in *Notice of Enforcing 2002 Round Villager Committee Election* that they wouldn’t recognize any appointed candidates. According to the reports of township authorities to the CBCA, in the 1999 election, the number of villages adopting the method of ‘sea nomination’ accounted for 69.5 percent and 81.3 percent of the villages used the method in the 2002 election.



However, according to my observations, only a few villages conducted the strict ‘sea elections’ in the surveyed villages. As a matter of fact, the township authorities and VPBs strongly intervened in the nomination. Before village elections were to be held, an election committee would be constituted by township authorities to oversee planning and implementation of the upcoming election. Generally, election committee members were nominated by the current VC and VPB, or nominated by the Township People’s Congress with the subsequent approval of the VRA. The election committee would administrate all the election affairs. The director of the election committee was usually the secretary of village party branch (SVPB). In the four surveyed townships/towns, the election committee usually offered a list of nominations to

villagers in the process of nomination and persuaded them to nominate the people they suggested rather than allowing the villagers to make their own decision freely. In some villages such as Wenquan Village of Changan and Baoping Village of Longang, formal candidates were determined in an indirect election in which the village representative assemblies selected formal candidates. Nominations suggested by township authorities and VPBs were usually those who had good relationship with them or those who had bribed them. In Shansan Village of Siba Town, the SVPB wanted to occupy the CVC position. He gave gifts to the town leaders and invited them to have nice dinners. With the acquiescence of the town authority, he appointed 39 villagers to constitute the so-called representative assembly. To make sure he would be elected to be the chairman of the village committee, he proclaimed himself leader of the election committee. Then he himself appointed the candidates to the vice chair and the members of the VC. In Daqi Village in Changan Township, the township leaders manipulated the nomination process, by illegally appointing a villager Wan, the SVPB, as the candidate for the CVC position. In order to make sure Wan can be elected, township leaders selected an old illiterate as his competitor. This dubious village election was approved by the township authorities as ‘corresponding to legal procedures’. If favored candidates were at risk for not getting elected, the township authority and VPB would encourage other competitors to drop out of the election process. In most cases, it was predetermined who got elected to which positions before ‘sea election’, and elections were just a formality.

Even in villages where the ‘sea election’ is conducted strictly, the candidates who won

nominations were subject to a review by township and election committees to determine their qualifications for the office. One major concern was that the law and regulations on villager self-governance leave the qualifications vague and undefined. Usually for elections to VCs, the township requires that candidates exhibit certain key characteristics - willingness to report to and carry out the work of the township government, namely tax collection. Once township authorities felt that a candidate would be out of their control, they would try to kick him out of the election. In Baoping Village in 2002, a man named Tang Zhenqi decided to campaign for the village chairman election, and he refused the nomination proposed by the incumbent village administration, which attempted to retain all the incumbents in the new village committee. He also refused to accept nomination through illegal procedures. Two days later, the township authority repealed his candidacy, with the excuse that he had been detained by the police for ten days the year before. However, it was not a valid excuse.

Multi-candidate election has constituted a significant innovation against a long-term practice in China's pseudo-democratic elections in the past in which voters were presented with a list of candidates exactly as long as the list of offices to be filled. The survey showed that, multiple nominators were accepted in all election in 1999 and 2002. Even if candidates were appointed by the VPB and township authority, there were at least two candidates for one CVC position.

4.3.2 Election campaign

Although there are no rules for election campaigns in the Organic Law and the provincial regulations, two types of campaigning have been allowed: public campaigning by making campaign speeches in front of villagers and individuals and campaigning by visiting individual households. However, election campaigning is regarded as an awkward thing in China. On the one hand, for many Chinese, political campaigns with posters, discussion of individual candidates' strengths and weaknesses are a serious fight. Many candidates who have launched election campaigns are actually reluctant to admit that they have campaigned, as there is no concept of campaigning in traditional Chinese culture and people are still shy to acknowledge that they want to be 'officials'. Some field studies conducted by western scholars have found that except for campaign speeches, individual campaigning activities have been rare so far (Thurston, 1998). On the other hand, rallies evoke memories of the Cultural Revolution with its big character posters, denunciations, and struggle sessions. Given China's bitter experiences in the 1960s and 1970s, it is common in China that officials are reluctant to unleash campaigns even in a new context. The prevailing way is that candidates are allowed to make formal campaign speeches to all the villagers at designated meetings in which villagers can meet all candidates, and listen to and question their plans for running the villages once elected. But the door-to-door campaign usually is not encouraged by the local authority. There is an argument that the current limits on campaigns make it difficult to get to know candidates and their ideas (Shao, 2004). But actually, election campaigning is not

absolutely necessary as the village is an ‘acquaintance society’ in which everyone almost already knows one another well.

In the current case of Luocheng, election campaigns are also minimalist and the rules are stringent. But regulation requires that electoral meeting be held. At the meeting all candidates are given opportunities before balloting to make statements concerning what they would do if elected and to answer questions from the villagers. Candidates can freely solicit votes from villagers. In the 2002 election, only 3 villages of the 24, accounting for 14% of the total in the four surveyed towns/townships, held electoral meetings strictly and the majority of the voters turned up at the meetings. All these villages provided fair candidate opportunities in the addressing of the villagers. Four other villages held meetings but the mobilization was unsuccessful, thus many voters didn't turn up. Thirteen villages held meetings for the representative assemblies and election committee rather than for all voters. Four villages simply offered no chances for the candidates to address their voters. The principle that requires candidates be given a chance to publicly air their views is not implemented well. However, there was plenty of evidence that door-to-door campaigning did take place in most villages; even if the candidates were unhappy to recognize that they had done so. Therefore as a matter of fact, the competition was fierce and campaigning took various forms. In the 1999 election, for instance, in Baoshan there was no campaigning on the surface, but a candidate organized all his relatives to introduce his election program door by door and other candidates used the village public broadcasting to discuss how to develop the economy of the village.

4.3.3 Voting

The use of secret ballots and secret voting booths or private voting rooms is mandated by the Organic Law and regulations of the Region. The main form of secret ballots suggested by law and regulations is through the electoral meeting. Voters are required to go to a central location to cast ballots, and the election committee counts the ballots in public, and announces the election results on the spot. There were 7 villages in Luocheng County, which held electoral meetings in the 2002 election, counted the ballots and announced the result in accordance with the regulations. Fixed polling rooms were used. But in these villages roving ballot boxes were also used as an additional measure to collect votes in case some villagers did not attend the election meeting. Eight villages didn't hold electoral meetings but established fixed polling places and called on all voters to vote on the Election Day. Seven villages established fixed polling places but also used roving ballot boxes. Two simply used roving ballot boxes to collect votes village by village. In Changan Township, for example, more than 90% of the votes were cast in roving ballot boxes rather than at polling stations. Without electoral meetings, the votes were usually counted at the offices of the VC before villager representative assemblies or simply before election committees.

But direct election had been the dominant measure to vote. The following table (Table 1) illustrates the situation of voting in the county.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF VILLAGES TAKING DIRECT ELECTIONS

Year	No. of Villages	No. of Villages Using Direct Election	Percentage
1999	132	84	64%
2002	137	124	91%

Source: *Report on village election of Luocheng County, 2003*, the Bureau of Civil Affair of Luocheng

The most serious problem at this stage of election is the proxy voting and roving ballot boxes, which provide chances for people who have ulterior motives to monopolize the elections. The field study in Luocheng indicated that roving ballot and proxy ballot both brought out cheatings during the process of voting.

Roving ballot boxes, which were carried from house to house on Election Day by the election committee, were widely used in both elections in 1999 and 2002. The original function of these boxes is to help the sick and elderly vote. But in many villages roving boxes were used as a reason for the convenience of busy villagers. Roving boxes are, in principal, easier to stuff than a ballot box at a fixed polling place and households may be intimidated more easily at home than at a fixed public polling place. In fact, a lot of cheatings took place when election committee collected votes. In Tanliao Village of Qiaotou Township, villagers complained that to get elected some cadres did not give the election tickets to some villagers but filled them out themselves. In a village called Siba, villagers said that the voting tickets were brought and taken by the cadres, so there were opportunities for cheating. And there were not even any villagers who supervised the process except for village cadres, and the result

was not given on the spot after voting. They did not trust the election and disliked it. In Datan, a village in Xiali, the election committee carried the voting box from house to house and asked them to vote. If the voter did not want to obey, the members of the committee would vote for them. Villagers provided me with the following example: a cadre asked a man to cast his vote. The man replied: “The voting procedure is unreasonable, I won’t vote”. Then the cadre just filled in the man’s ticket on his behalf without his permission.

Proxy voting is another problem. It is well known that the use of proxies often compromises the principle of ballot secrecy, creates easy opportunities for clan influences and allows for township and village leaders to manipulate the electoral procedure (Shao, 2004). The *Electoral Code of the Village Committee of Guangxi Autonomous Region* (Regional People’s Congress, 1999) prohibits proxy voting by non-family members and stipulate that only immediate family members and near relatives may serve as a proxy. In practice, however, the restrictions on proxy voting by non-family members were observed in only slightly more than a third of the villages reporting. And the others did not mention it at all. Thus proxy voting happened widely. In all of the surveyed villages, absent residents were allowed to cast their votes by proxy. Even residents who were present in the village but unwilling to vote may have their votes cast by proxy. Some villages still balloted on a family basis although this measure had been banned by the code and regulation. In Cuitan Village of Xiali Township, the election committee claimed that people were too busy with their farm work and that every household should send a representative to VC office to

vote. This practice often placed a household's vote in the hands of a family patriarch and it was more convenient for cadres of township and VPB to manipulate the election.

4.3.4 Counting votes

In the villages where electoral meetings were held, the votes were counted openly and the results of the election were announced on the spot. The processes of voting were under strict inspection by the masses. There were still monitors who were appointed by election committee and candidates to oversee the election process. Most of the monitors came from different constituencies. In the 2002 election, for example, in Baopin and Baoheng villages of Longang Towns, both formal chairman candidates appointed their monitors to each polling station. These monitors went beyond the traditional role of monitors and assumed the role of election officials once voting began. In the villages where electoral meetings were held, the votes would be counted before the village representative assemblies or election committees. This process, generally speaking, is much more open and fairer than other processes.

In other parts of China, the reality of village self-governance has been far from the desirable situation in which peasants can engage in self government without too much interference from various levels. Critics have claimed the elections were often not conducted in accordance with democratic standards. According to *the Report on 2002 Village election* of the NMCA, there had been frequent incidences of illegal interventions to impede peasants from free voting in democratic elections. In some

cases, with candidate nomination being monopolized by local cadres, the election ended up a mere pretense. In other cases, the result of the election was not announced openly or was even negated by higher authorities. Some village committees were still appointed without election and there were still others that simply did not function. Bai Gang said (2001: 23) “About two percent of China’s villages have experienced totally democratic multi-candidate elections and in about 40 percent relatively well-arranged competitive elections have been held.” According to Bai Gang, more than half of China’s villages have not held elections or else only “... fake elections, which are purely for show”. The existence of these phenomena leads to the typical pessimism toward village elections, showing that many issues remain to be solved.

4.4 SUMMARY



In order to achieve good governance, it is crucial to establish a set of enabling institutions to support rural democracy. Establishing institutions are the first step to institutionalize democracy in rural China. The revised Organic Law gives the villagers extensive authority to elect and supervise their own executive power organ. Undoubtedly, the law contains the same democratic elements as those in the western countries. However, the establishment of democratic institutions does not necessarily mean the spread of democratic politics. Implementation of the law is a different matter in authoritarian states that lack a democratic political culture. Democratic practice is still at an early stage, developing unevenly. In some areas, the villages have had several competitive elections, while in others the elections have just started and in

many places the elections are still constrained and non-democratic. In many areas, the nomination process, the numbers of candidates, and the voting procedure have been seriously flawed and these elections are not even close to being competitive. All these flaws of election reflect the conflicts over the formal rules and the informal ones in the authoritarian state. The result of these conflicts is institutional change or maintaining the status quo. Without a consistent enforcement and threat of sanctions the informal rules may replace the formal rules and then the latter will just be a show.



CHAPTER FIVE: GOVERNANCE DYNAMICS

AT VILLAGE LEVEL

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The self-governance of villager committees is a new practice that is relatively close to peasants' interests, so it is assumed that peasants who are influenced by the Chinese utility culture will participate in it enthusiastically. However, on the contrary, peasants have generally shown indifference to it. Many scholars have tried to explain this phenomenon. Some of them said the Chinese people who have suffered poverty and chaos for a long time preferred order and economic development to democracy (Xing, 1998; Bi, 2002). Some scholars believed that the tradition in which the state has controlled rural society for a long time had kept ability of political participation within limits in rural areas (Du, 2003). But the widely accepted view is that the traditional Chinese political culture is inherently authoritarian and incompatible with modern democratic values (Goldman, 1994). Chinese peasants in particular are suspected as carriers of authoritarian culture. In fact, the absence of democratization in China is often blamed on the Chinese peasants who are believed to have a low level of democratic political culture and lack of democratic traditions. However, according to some on-the-spot surveys and the observations of the writer, democratic orientation is widely accepted in rural area. Then what are the real causes of the phenomenon? The indifference of villagers to self-governance is caused to great extent by the local

cadres' manipulation of villager self-governance. As Knight (1992) argues, if the actor doubts that he or she will be sanctioned for noncompliance then he or she will maintain the old system, in order to protect his or her own interests. This Chapter will discuss the dynamics of self-governance.

5.2 ATTITUDES TOWARD DEMOCRACY

David Zweig, a researcher of the United State Institute of Peace, interviewed 2,637 villagers and 360 cadres from 120 villages in four counties, in Anhui and Heilongjiang provinces in the summer of 1999 with the purpose of evaluating the democracy concept in China's rural areas. Zweig found that despite the low level of economic development in rural China, data from a survey in the summer of 1999 reveals strong support for the 'democratic idea' in rural China (Table 2).

These findings contradict the negative perception of low political democratic culture among Chinese peasantry. The assertion that Chinese people prefer order and economic development to democracy and peasants' lack of democracy consciousness may not hold true in these localities.

In order to find out why peasants were indifferent to village self-governance, the China's Institute of Reform and Development conducted a survey in 12 provinces and autonomous regions in 2002, which indicated that 64.7% of the respondents said they were concerned about village self-governance.

TABLE 2: RESPONSES TO SIX QUESTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN RURAL CHINA

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree somewhat	Disagree somewhat	Don't agree very much	Strongly disagree
Only people with specialized knowledge and ability have the right to speak during periods of decision making	12.1%	30.1%	12.9%	27.6%	17.3%
People who are economically better off should have more say in public affair than people who are less well off	7.3%	17.6%	10.7%	35.2%	29.2%
As long as village economic development is stable, there is no need to increase the level of democracy	6.6%	14.4%	13.6%	32.3%	33.1%
If the existing cadres are capable and trusted, there is no need for democratic elections	12.4%	23.9%	10%	32.7%	22%
If villagers disagree with local policies, they have the right to send accusatory petitions to higher levels	41.1%	40.3%	9.8%	6.4%	2.4%
I know what goes on in my village, therefore, I have the right to participate in village affairs	24.4%	39.3%	15.8%	14.4%	6.1%

(Zweig, 1999)

When asked why they were not interested in villager election, 52.3% of peasants thought that villager self-governance had not brought any change and effect to their life. And they said CVCs could not be accountable to villagers, or the CVCs were

determined in advance by VPBs and townships/towns government. 33.4% refused to vote because of monopolization of township/town government and VPBs. Therefore, the indifference of peasants to self-governance is caused mainly by peasants' disliking of false democracy and being hostile to the oppression local officials'.

5.3 IMPEDIMENTS

5.3.1 Hostility of Peasants to Local Authority

Relations between peasants and local cadres are frequently tense. Firstly, the burden of peasants is increasingly heavy. Extra fees, fines, and service charges levied by village cadres and township/town officials have been a source of serious contention in the countryside since the disbanding of the communes. In order to relieve the burden of peasants, the central government limited local government taxes to 5 percent of income, which in Luocheng is an average of ¥63 (Yuan) or \$7.6 per person per year. However, township/town governments have justified the extra taxation by asserting that the 5 percent limit on rural taxes is too low to enable villages and township/town governments to finance their administration and to carry out essential development projects. Thus, tax often exceeds 5 percent of income. In the survey of 2002, a total of 12 separate fees were being levied by Longang town government, 14 by Siba and 16 by Changan, including charges from animal inoculations, from schools, road, marriage licenses and from child birth. On average, the corrupt fees and levies in Luocheng County meant that peasants must pay \$14 a person, or nearly double the legal limit. Some levying fees are ridiculous. For instance, in Changan Township,

each household was charged ¥ 11 (Yuan) or \$1.3 fee for domestic animals slaughtering once per year even if they did not have an animal butchered. In Xiali Township, peasants also accused officials of levying fees for the production of 'special products' like nuts that were not grown.

Of the many burdens placed on China's peasants none were so weighty as the taxes and fees which town or township government exert on them. Some of the fees, to be sure, were used to run schools, build roads, and provide for the common good. But because so many taxes were locally generated and imposed, unscrupulous local leaders could devise a myriad of means to extract money. In the peasants' eyes, the tax and fee collecting officials were arbitrary, predatory, and brutal. This, to a significant extent, explains the sharp deterioration in cadre-peasant relations since the 1990s, which were so severe that some observers used the word 'enmity' to describe them (Zhong, 2003). The direct outcome of illegally heavy taxes and fees is that a basic distrust of peasants to local government dispread in rural areas.

Secondly, cadres of villages including members of the VCs and the VPBs are, unfortunately, responsible for enforcing birth control, procuring state grain and collecting taxes, in other words, doing the government's 'dirty work'. They are under intense pressure from their peers in the township governments to carry out these tasks, but find it increasingly difficult to persuade villagers to comply. Average farmers are no longer dependent on village cadres, as in the Mao era, when cadres exercised absolute control over peasant labor. Increased autonomy has meant a greater

unwillingness to obey orders, especially those deemed unreasonable. In order to charge taxes and fees successfully, brutal collecting methods are used. In 1987, the journal *Liaowang* warned that peasants were in a 'rebellious frame of mind' because local officials had resorted to extreme measures to fulfill the state grain quotas. Some township governments and VPBs even allowed 'local emperors' to dominate villages and even helped them to be elected as members of VC. This behavior has poisoned the trust of villagers in government.

Thirdly, rampant corruption is a common phenomenon in rural area. Economic reform provided cadres at village and town levels with opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities, which in turn led to widespread corruption. Many local cadres came to gain profits from the rearrangement of village life. Though leaders no longer exerted direct control over the daily working lives of the villages, the village projects, such as building a new school or road still provide them with opportunities for money making denied to ordinary villagers. Some local cadres become managers of the still collective enterprises, running the small industries as though they were privately owned and profiting accordingly.

Rural residents have become increasingly resentful about exploitation and corruption of local cadres. In some cases, farmers who have suffered from corrupt local cadres think that elections would not change this pattern (O'Brien, 1994). The peasants as exploitee naturally turn to distrust any policy advocated by local cadres who often act as exploiters, even if the policy offers more freedom for them to break away from

being exploited.

5.3.2 Intervention of the Party

A key problem in village self-governance is the interference from the VPBs. There are different legitimacy resources between the two village institutions: the VC and the VPB. According to the principle of party organization, the party secretary should be the number one person in the village. However, in the spirit of the governance of law, the village chairman, rather than the party secretary, should be in the top position. The revised Organic Law does not make too much progress. In the law, the distribution of power between the CVC and SVPB is still not entirely clear. The law confirms clearly that CVCs are responsible for all village affairs, but in Article 3, the law stipulates “The rural grassroots unit of the CCP should work under the Charter of the CCP and play a core role in leadership”. At the same time, this article reminds party officials of “Supporting and guaranteeing the rights of the villagers to develop self-governing activities and directly exercising their democratic rights.” The same clause had earlier been contained only in the Party constitution. The Communist Party is not mentioned in any of the other 29 articles again, while the rights and responsibilities of the villagers’ committee are spelled out in relative detail. This did little to clarify the relations between the two institutions in villages. The Organic Law actually allows local party officials to indulge in their traditional leadership roles through sufficiently vague responsibility statements of the two village-level institutions. In reality, the VPB itself is supposed to ‘lead’ the VC.

The flaws of the Organic Law lead to inevitable conflicts between VPBs and VCs, which are with different constituencies but in charge of the same tasks in villages. The winner will be the one who has natural predominance on this game. The field studies show that VPBs have obvious advantages in conflicts with the VCs. Firstly, most of the SVPBs have been in power in villages for quite a long time, and preferentially dominate public power and resources in the villages. Data by the CBCA of Lucoheng indicated that the average time span of secretaries in position is 11 years in the county. Secondly, VPBs, who are appointed by township/town authorities, often get strong support from them. Township/town administrations that can only ‘guide’ VCs can still rely on the direct leadership relation between the township Party committee and VPB. Thus, township administrations often encourage village Party secretaries to take over the direct management of village affairs and to treat the VC as a subsidiary agent in carrying out the secretary’s decisions. When VCs appeal to audit village accounts and execute democratic administration, the leaders of the town party committees and town governments will firmly be on the VPBs’ side. Thirdly, the strongest weapon in conflict between VPBs and VCs, of course, is not the support of town government but the powerful political slogan “Adherence to the leadership of the Party”. By shouting this slogan, VPBs can push VCs into an embarrassing position since China is a communist country, and the party leadership is still recognized widely in the country.

Therefore, despite the legal authority of VC and CVC, the party secretary is still the most powerful person in most villages. In many villages, the SVPBs continue to exercise unrestricted authority independent of the elected CVCs and VCs. The Party

secretary takes on ultimate responsibility for state-set tasks as well as village affairs, which means that even minor decisions need his approval. The VC and the CVC in particular, become completely sidelined in this process. The most direct result of the party interference is that VCs become appendages of VPBs. VCs seldom have final say over village political life (Kelliher, 1997; Howell, 1998). In many areas, as Oi (1996) argues, the influence of the village Party branch exceeds that of the VC, and real power remains in the hands of the Party secretary who makes the key economic decisions regarding industry.

The most common tactic of controlling VCs is to grab the cachet and account book of VCs that are vital to perform duty. According to *the Regulation on Cachet of Villager Committee* promulgated by the NMCA and the Ministry of Public Security, the cachet of VCs must be managed by VCs independently, and SVPBs cannot have a finger in the pie. However, on the contrary, the reality is that many SVPBs keep VC cachets and account books. For instance, when I conducted my research in Butou village of Xiali, I found that the new VC did not get the cachet and account book from the VPB after almost a year of election. Without the cachet and account book, the VC simply could not use any money to deliver services. Both cachet and account books were in the hands of the village accountant who was appointed by the party secretary and who claimed that he only followed the orders of the secretary, as the secretary, not by the VC, appointed him. When asked why he did not allow the VC to view the books, the secretary said it was the CCP who established the People's Republic of China (PRC) so that the party naturally had the last word in everything of the village. The secretary

of the town said if a secretary could not appoint a village accountant, how can they be expected to implement the principle of Party Managing Cadres? Some SVPBs refused to surrender cachets even after they lost their position. A secretary in a village of the county was voted off on May 3, 2001, but refused to hand over the cachet to the new secretary. During this time, the secretary had dinner at a restaurant more than once and stamped the bill with the village cachet and asked the manager of the restaurant to retrieve the money from the village. The manager failed to demand money back from the village and appealed to the court in the end. There are many such cases in which secretaries refuse to give up cachets in rural areas.

The direct result of the interference of the party is tension between VPBs and VCs. Although tensions certainly existed earlier, the relationship between the two village-level institutions became more serious after 1998 when the stricter enforcement of the Organic Law provided the newly elected VCs with more legitimacy and encouraged some of them to take a more confident posture against the Party committees. The tension between VPBs and VCs is a very common phenomenon in rural China. According to an investigation on village election conducted by the CBCA of Luocheng in 2003, there was tension between the village committee and the party branch (Table 3). Although 53.3% of SPBs and CVCs, according to the survey, were in good relationship, the actual situation is far worse as Chinese have a tradition to keep tension underground. 15% of the party secretaries were not on good terms with the village chairmen.

TABLE 3: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VILLAGE HEADS AND PARTY

SECRETARIES

	No of respondents	Percentage
In good relationship	73	53.2%
Average	44	32.1%
Being tense	15	10.9%
Being very tense	6	4.3%
Total	137	100%

Source: *Report on village election of Luocheng County in 2003*, the Bureau of Civil Affair of Luocheng

With the tension between these two groups of leaders, the village committees simply cannot play their full role. In the six villages that have a very tense relationship, village cadres were usually in two distinct factions, headed respectively by the village chairman and the party secretary. Decision-making was impossible whenever there was disagreement between the two sides.



5.3.3 Opposition and intervention From Township Authorities

The biggest obstacle to villager self-governance is the intervention of township/town authorities. The 1987 Organic Law called for the township governments to provide ‘guidance, support and help’ to the village committee and the revised Organic Law clarifies this relationship by warning that the township should not “Intervene in matters within the legal limits of village self-governance” (Article 4). The relationship between the VC and township/town government is defined as guidance in both version of the Organic Law. Under this guidance, the VC is required to assist the township administration in implementing state assigned tasks in the villages, while the township administration has to guide and help the VC in conducting

self-administration affairs, but is not allowed to interfere directly into this sphere. However, as numerous researchers have shown, the two spheres of 'state/public affairs' and 'village affairs' are often inseparably intertwined in practice causing in most cases a loss of space for self-governance of villages. The guidance by the township administration towards the VC and its implementation in practice leads to a major difficulty to village self-governance.

Many township level officials are reluctant to accept the village self-governance concept. In a town/township heads meeting about bettering grassroots organizations of Luo Cheng County in 2002, the party secretary of Tianhe Township complained that he could not see what was effective with the election of the VC and that the election had crippled the party's ability to rule the rural areas. A leader of Siba town told us he worried that the free election might be the first step toward the communist party's fall from power. According to the survey conducted by the writer in Longang and Siba in 2002, there were still many township cadres who held negative attitudes to village self-governance policy. Table 4 indicates the attitude of township cadres to direct election by asking, "Do you think members of village committee should be elected directly by villagers?" Table 5 indicates the attitude of township cadres to self-governance by asking, "Do you think villager self-governance is a good resolution to rural problems?"

TABLE 4: ATTITUDE OF TOWNSHIP CADRES TO DIRECTED ELECTION

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Should definitely	51	47.2%
Should but can't work well in reality	50	45.6%
Shouldn't be	2	1.7%
No answer	6	5.5%
Total	109	100%

TABLE 5: ATTITUDE OF TOWNSHIP CADRES TO VILLAGE SELF-GOVERNMENT

	No of respondents	Percentage
Agree	33	31.1%
Perfect in theory but unpractical	63	57.6%
Follow the decision of above authorities	6	5.1%
Deny strongly	2	1.3%
No answer	5	4.9%
Total	109	100%

The following are some of the causes of the opposition of Township/town cadres. Firstly, town administrations are themselves overloaded with tasks issued by higher-level governments and lack the resources to implement those in the villages. Therefore, they lean heavily on VCs to carry out those tasks and tightly control their behaviour at least regarding especially important policies since failing to get those implemented would lead to problems for the township cadres. In the survey, when asked, "What do you worry about the most in village elections?", 39.1% worried that the township could not meet the high goals assigned by the national governments since the elected CVCs listened to the villagers rather than the government. Secondly,

township cadres cared about losing privilege in villages that they had in the past. For instance, all the village party secretaries as well as the production brigade leaders were appointed by township authorities. Now, township authorities simply could not appoint a village leader. Township officials feared that they would no longer hold the same power over electing village officials as they had over appointing ones. In reality, in order to make higher levels of government feel that self-governance is impractical, township/town officials usually exaggerate the negative elements of villager self-governance with an intention to manipulate the governance. Thus it was not surprising to know that, when answering why self-governance was impractical in the survey, 58.6% of the township cadres said that the overall quality of the peasants was too low for them to implement self-government, and it was too early to conduct direct village committee elections. Indeed, O'Brien and Li (1999) argue that cadres at the county and township levels often derail local elections, since they gain no career benefits from supporting elections or dealing with newly-elected village committees.

Township/town authorities, besides the negative implementation of villager self-governance policy, also directly interfere with self-governance. Some township/town officials try to manipulate elections, designate candidates, impose their will on voters, and willfully dismiss village leaders elected by the villagers. Others turn a deaf ear to villagers' complaints of fake open administration of villager affairs. Still others pay little attention to village election issues and ignore the fact that many losing incumbents refuse to hand over power after elections. Village officials in these cases are so under the thumb of township officials that they have to request township

permission for all but the most minimal expenditures. Two aspects of this behaviour are particularly noteworthy. Firstly, townships exercise control over village financial affairs. According to *the Report on Village Election of Luocheng County in 2003*, the financial management of 15.3% villages in the county was taken over by township governments on the pretext of establishing a more rational management system and preventing corruption. A large number of VCs (67.7%) must submit monthly financial reports to township governments. All villages must sign contracts that outline township financial goals and village responsibilities. Most importantly, townships determine the salaries of village officials and make payment contingent upon their success in collecting taxes. Twenty-three VCs requested to resign in Luocheng in November 2000 since they were oppressed by both VPBs and town authorities. They could not get the cachets and account books of VCs back from secretaries after having been elected as members of VCS for almost one year. They complained that all decisions in the villages were made by secretaries according to the will of township/town governments. If they objected, township/town leaders would persuade them to quit.

Secondly, township authorities usually support VPBs strongly. According to the principle of the party managing cadre, officials in China are appointed by superiors specifically by higher party committee, but VCs are self-governance organization, so town governments cannot appoint CVCs directly. But SVPBs are appointed and removed by the party committees of township and must obey the order from higher committees following the organization principle of the party, so that VPBs offered

township authorities a good way of interfering in village affairs. Thus township cadres doubtlessly want SVPBs to take the first position in villages. When there are conflicts between CVC and SVPB, township authorities will definitely be in the SVPB side.

Thirdly, some township authorities ignore or overturn village voters' decisions and directly appoint, dismiss or replace VC-members at will. Although the Organic Law stated that the committee chairman, vice-chairman and members must be elected directly by villagers, and that "No organization or individual may appoint, designate or dismiss village committee members" (Article 11), the interference of township authorities in the context of personnel is very common in rural China. According to the survey conducted by Yao Lifa, a deputy of People's Congress of Qianjiang City in Hubei Province in 2003, 187 CVCs were dismissed by township/town authorities from September 1999 to May 2002, accounting for 57% of the newly elected CVCs. In addition 432 members of VCs who were forced to quit their jobs. All the successions were appointed by township/town authorities, none of them was elected. What needs to be mentioned is that Qianjiang City was rewarded as a 'National Model of Villager Self-governance' by the MCA in April 1999. We can imagine how heavily township authorities intervene in CVC appointment based on the survey of Yao Lifa.

Although there are illegal activities in villager self-governance, punishments are often of no importance. This is caused by the nature of the Organic Law, which is labeled as a 'soft law' by the National People's Congress because it has been difficult to

establish effective consequences for those who have violated it. The Law only defines the mechanism for ensuring villagers' self-government rights as follows: when someone makes a complaint, the county and township governments, the People's Congress, and other responsible agencies then investigate, criticize, and educate; and, finally, violators are expected to correct themselves. In the 1999 election, an elected villager head in Longang Township was found to bribe the SVPB and township leaders for nomination by giving them improper gifts. The villagers took the case to court, but the latter refused to handle the case because there was no law to follow.

5.4 SUMMARY

Marxist-Leninist ideology has taken a back seat, having lost its appeal among the populace. As a result, the controlling capacity of the state has been eroded dramatically. The state has begun to lose its capacity to monitor and sanction its local agents. Rural cadres gradually develop into a new group with their own interests, which is different from those of the village community and the state. In order to meet their own interest, local cadres manipulate state policies more to their own personal advantage than that of either the peasants or the state. In this context, if villager self-governance needs more healthy space to develop, a new rule, which forces local officials to be committed towards local communities, must be established first. At this stage, it is important to enlarge self-governance to the township/town level.

CHAPTER SIX: ELECTION AT VILLAGE LEVEL: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

6.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Diamond (1999), meaningful, representative local government fosters democratic vitality in five broad, overlapping ways. First, it helps to develop democratic values and skills among citizens. Second, it increases accountability and responsiveness to local interests and concerns. Third, it provides additional channels of access to power for historically marginalized groups and thus improves the representativeness of democracy. Fourth, it enhances checks and balances vis-à-vis power at the centre. Fifth, it provides opportunities for parties and factions in opposition at the centre to exercise some measure of political power. After implementing villager self-governance for 25 years, the questions that arise are: What is the major achievement of this democratic practice? Do elections make local leaders more accountable to villagers and affect villager's attitude towards local governance? Dose the villager self-governance concept institutionalize a system of checks and balance at the grass-roots level? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions.

6.2 ACHIEVEMENTS

For all its flaws, much progress has been made since the first experiment of villager elections. By the end of 1999, village elections had been technically held in almost all

of China's 930,000 villages. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, according to the four principles, announced to the People's Daily in 1998 that about 60% of all villages had convened democratic elections in 1998. The official assessment has been both confirmed and challenged by independent and outside researchers.

The most optimistic appraisal was from Duke University's political scientist Tianjian Shi (1993). Based on a nationwide survey of 336 villages conducted in 1993, Prof. Shi concluded that elections in 53.2% of villages in rural China were semi-competitive, which means, allowing multi-candidates for one position. Some other researchers, however, were much less positive about the recent development of village politics. A report from the International Republican Institute estimated in 1996 that the number of villagers that had held elections following the democratic principles outlined by the Ministry was around one quarter to one third (cited in Li Yonghua, 2004). Another research project conducted by Kevin O'Brien and Lianjian Li in 478 villages in seven provinces found that in late 1997 only 17% of the villages had held elections with primaries, which in their survey was the major indicator of real democracy (cited in Li Yonghua, 2004). The most pessimistic estimate was conducted by Bai Gang (2001: 23) who said in 2001 that "... about two percent of China's villages experienced totally democratic multi-candidate elections and about 40 percent experienced relatively well-arranged competitive elections". According to Bai Gang, more than half of China's villages have held no elections or else only "... fake elections, which are purely for show". The reasons why estimates of the quality of village elections vary so widely is that the process of implementing village

elections has been extremely uneven in different places and the understanding of democracy vary among researchers.

However, even under the most pessimistic estimates by Bai Gang that fair and competitive elections have occupied two percent of China's villages, it means that about 16 million Chinese have already been exposed to the inner workings of an honest democratic election for the first time in China's thousand-year-long history. About 320 million Chinese have now gained some personal experiences of what direct multi-candidate elections entail in practice. Most of the Chinese peasants have at least some idea of how democratic elections should be held. That is a great achievement.



The picture becomes even brighter if we take a developmental rather than static point of view. While democracy is an end, democratization is rather a process. As Robert Paster and Qinshan Tan (2000) have suggested in their research, in a developing country like China, a good election would not necessarily be perfect in terms of the procedures, but need only to be better than the last election or than what the country has had in order to insure progress. Although the reality of the village self-government practice and direct elections leaves much to be desired from both popular expectations and legal requirements, the quality of village elections has been improving step-by-step since the emergence of the Organic Law. Over the years, there has been an evolution from passive to active participation, from party nomination to popular nomination, from non-competitive election to multi-candidate competitive

election, and from appointment to free competition. Thus, there has been constant improvement in the design of the system, continuous increase in its encompass and gradual rise in the level of democracy. The post-election survey conducted by the writer in 1999 showed that 85.6% of the 763 respondents (both peasants and cadres) said the 1999 election was perceived to be more free and fair than the previous one. A large percentage 71.9% said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the conduct of the election, as compared to 65.8% who said the same about the 1996 election. The survey of 2002 indicated that 76.2% of the 728 respondents stated that the overall quality of 2002 election was better than that of 1999.

6.3 CONSEQUENCES OF VILLAGE SELF-GOVERNANCE



The villager self-governance practice is indeed fostering democratic vitality in rural China. The CCP has expanded the system of village elections step-by-step to the extent that, today, elections are contested and increasingly meaningful. With the rise of election politics and the democratic governance, a set of new grassroots political institutions have been widely established. There are already many indications that the grassroots democratic practice have begun to change the local power structure and the consciousness of rights has been rising among peasants and the idea of law has been taking root in the countryside. The key consequences of the villager self-governance practice are discussed in the following sections of this study.

6.3.1 Improved Consciousness of Democracy

The lack of democratic consciousness is a big obstacle to the development of China's democracy in rural areas. Unlike some Chinese intellectuals, who employ a different kind of rights discourse, there is little evidence that villagers consider rights to be inherent, natural, or inalienable; nor do most claimants break with the common Chinese practice of viewing rights as granted by the state mainly for societal purposes rather than to protect an individual's autonomous being (Edwards et al, 1986). But the impact of villager self-governance is changing the old conception significantly. Village self-governance is a process of practicing democracy as well as of educating and training peasants and village cadres, enhancing their consciousness of democracy and law while strengthening their ability to implement democracy. The Organic Law has been published and widely circulated at local levels. It has developed villagers' understanding of their rights. Furthermore, the experience of participating in the electoral process has begun to instill villagers with at least a rudimentary understanding of democracy. A new 'democratic consciousness' on the part of villagers as well as more active political involvement is growing. As discussed above, the democracy concept is now accepted widely in rural areas, in contrast to the idea that peasants do not desire democracy. Peasants increasingly care about VC elections. Villagers in many locations shower officials with complaints when their electoral rights are abridged.

In the case of Luocheng, the development of democratic consciousness is impressive

as well. The 1999 survey showed that 80% of 643 peasants who answered the questionnaire said they cared about the election of the members of the village committee, whilst 91 percent were concerned with the management of village affairs and especially its budget. The democratic consciousness was expressed through election activities. In areas where elections have become both standardized and institutionalized, voter turnouts are high. In the 2002 elections in Baoshan Village of Longang Town, 1324 eligible voters, representing 92 percent of the total, cast their ballots at the electoral meeting. Some voters working in the city came back to villages especially for voting, and many voters telephoned the voting commission in order to vote since they could not return in time. In other villages with well-organized elections, turnouts were also high. These high rates of participation could be regarded as an indication of the improved consciousness of citizen rights among peasants and of peasants' trust in honest democracy.



As the villager self-governance practice becomes institutionalised, villagers have started to realize that they have the right to participate in political decision-making, and that elections introduce them to notions of choice, open competition, government accountability, financial transparency and embryonic conceptions of human rights. Peasants are becoming more concerned about how the VC is working and how their interests can be protected in an appropriate institutional setting. They want to be informed on how village finances are managed, why roads should be built, when the village office building can be constructed, and what payment village leaders will get. Villagers learn that they can use democracy and law to fight for their interests and

rights. In the post-election survey of the CBCA in 2002, when asked “If cadres of the village do not abide by the laws strictly, what will you do?”, those who said that they would not vote for the villagers’ committee cadres in the next election, compared to the survey in 1999, rose from 63% to 84.5%. Those who said they would persuade other villagers not to vote for such cadres rose from 14.6% to 25.1%; and those who said they would join other villagers to make an impeachment motion rose from 7.8% to 15.5%. The significant change implies a progress of democracy consciousness in rural areas.

In reality, peasants will complain and even file lawsuits if their rights to self-government are violated. Baoping Village of Longang Town had successively established five enterprises in the name of the villagers. However, the village leaders, encouraged by town authorities, operated the village as a corporation, and the administration of village affairs and the management of the enterprise were subordinate to the corporation, which was only subject to an audit by the town government. It was therefore unnecessary to make the administration of village affairs and financial affairs open to the public since ordinary villagers had no rights to supervise an enterprise. The villagers complained to the town government and the county government, but could not get a satisfactory solution. In the end this issue crept into the VC election. In the 2002 election, the candidates who promised villagers to bring the corporation under the supervision of villagers received overwhelming support. Subsequently, the new committee reorganized the corporation according to the will of the villagers. In Shitou Village of Siba Town, four nominated

candidates, when facing an illegal snap election, organized their supporters to plaster posters around their village and recommended rejection of handpicked candidates and opposition to ‘dictatorial elections’. In a village in Xiali, more than one hundred villagers lodged complaints with the Regional Department of Civil Affairs concerning the township authority’s heavy intervention in the nomination of the village election. In each of these cases, villagers cited specific clauses or the spirit of the Organic Law to back up their charges.

6.3.2 Improved accountability of village leaders

One direct consequence of village self-governance is the increased emphasis on accountability and transparency in village governance. Before the village election system was adopted, village leaders would try all means to gain favor from township authorities, which they took as the primary guarantor of their posts. With an election every three years, however, votes become the primary concern of any would-be village chairman. Those who have cultivated relationships among township authorities felt less secure about their prospect of obtaining a post. Under the pressure of votes, CVCs are increasingly going back to the villagers’ side. Instead of looking upward to township authorities for their favor, they look downward to the village mass for their votes. In the survey of 2002, when asked about their strategy of re-election, most of CVCs favoured “Serve villagers well in hope of winning more votes” as their strategy (Table 6). Gone are the days when one could get a post through favorable relationships with the township authorities. The interference of

township authorities is still common in elections, especially in the process of nomination, but this interference is confronted with the potential opposition of villagers. When placed in the dilemma of losing support from the villagers or losing favor from the authorities, some village leaders prefer to lose the latter, because they think that villagers have a greater role in determining their political future.

TABLE 6: STRATEGIES OF VILLAGE HEADS FOR RE-ELECTION

Answer	No of respondents	Percentage
Serve villagers well in hope of winning more votes	57	52.3%
Remain in good relationship with the party secretary	18	16.2%
Work to best satisfy the township authorities	18	16.2%
No response	17	15.3%
Total	111	100%

Source: Report *on village election of Luocheng County in 2003*, the Bureau of Civil Affairs of Luocheng

As a result of competitive and transparent elections, the governance of villages has been improved as well. Officials appointed by the township government do not have to worry about what villagers think about them. Elected ones do. In villages where elections remain a formality, the necessity of going through the electoral process every three years has at least made officials more aware of their public image. Officials known to demand bribes are simply voted out of office. Even an unopposed candidate can lose face by receiving a large amount of blank ballots. The administrations of village affairs are more transparent and democratic. The practice of

requiring officials to regularly make public reports on the management of village funds and a whole range of policy measures is becoming institutionalized through local laws and regulations. The widely accepted measure for reporting the administration to villagers is to establish a Village Affairs Board that must include the main work and finance management of the village and be renewed regularly. Up to 1999, all villages in Luocheng set up Village Affairs Boards in the VC official location. The board is an important way for villagers to know what is going on in the village.

The most significant improvement in terms of accountability is that CVCs became more accountable to villagers instead of VPBs and township authorities. In the past, the VC was only an appendage of the VPB and township authorities. The Organic Law has entitled CVCs to have legitimate reasons not to take orders from the above. The VCs are responsible for the voters and are demanding to have a voice in the administration of the villages, and to determine how the village budget is produced, how funds are collected and expended, and how villagers' interest can be met. The CVCs who are elected by local residents turn to consider local interests first. In 2001, a CVC of Xiali refused to charge an education fee for the township authorities, as he believed that the fee was illegal. The township authorities threatened that if he did not implement the decisions of the government he would be dismissed. The CVC retorted: "The villagers trust me and vote for me. If I do not work for their interests, I fail to live up to their trust. As I was elected by villagers, you cannot dismiss me". The CVC appealed to the county government with villagers and at last the illegal fee was called off. In the 2002 survey, when asked "When there is a conflict between villagers and

the township authorities, on which side will you be?”, a large number (67.4%) of the respondents said they would be on the villagers’ side, while 23.1% chose the opposite one.

Several sources also indicated that elected village cadres are more accountable to villagers than appointed cadres. O’Brien and Li (1999) noted that cadres chosen in popular elections may also be more responsive to their constituents - at least in some regions. Oi and Rozelle (2000: 527) found that “In some villages where there have been elections, there is more open accounting of village spending.” Epstein (1996) has argued that where free and fair voting is the norm, village leaders live in a different world than the officials above them. A survey of four counties designed by political scientists from the University of Michigan and Beijing University showed that cadres in villages with competitive elections were closer to their constituents’ positions on the state’s role in the economy than cadres in villages that had not held competitive elections (Manion, 1996).

6.3.3 Changes in power distribution in villager committees

Villagers in China are barely aware of abstract concepts like democracy and human rights, and the notion of competing political parties does not exist in rural areas. What are important in villager elections, to villagers, are the qualities of the candidates. What villagers are concerned about are local, practical, and economic issues and the strong and affirmative sense of their self-interest. Villagers simply vote for those who can help them to meet their interests when conducting an election. The utilitarianism

in the practice of self-governance has led to a dramatic change in the power distribution in the villages.

Firstly, the age structure of committee members is changing. Before the implementation of self-governance, once the members of VCs and VPBs had been appointed, they would stay in the position for a long time if they did not make any serious mistakes. Therefore, it was common that villager leaders were usually the elderly. By implementing the self-governance practice, villagers have the freedom to choose their committees and they lean towards electing younger people to the committees since they believe that young people have more energy to work for the villages. Moreover, the young usually have better education, which means that they are more qualified to be leaders and know more about the rules of democratic elections. It is a common opinion in villages that the more young men in the committee, the more active policies the committee would have. In Luocheng, the ages of the newly elected village committee members are younger than those who were appointed in the past. According to a report of CBCA, the average age of the CVCs in 1996 was 51, and in 2002, the average age of the villager chairmen of the county was about 39, while the average age of villager committee members was about 36. The youngest villager chairman was 24 years old, while the youngest committee member was 19 years old. In Tianhe Township, the average age of villager chairmen was 35. The education level of the committers in the county was improved too. Sixty six percent (66.2%) of the committee members had a high school diploma and 23.4% had a college diploma.

Secondly, 'economic men' rose to power. Economic men refer to those who are successful in business or industry in villages. Villagers and government prefer to have these men in the CVCs. The strength of the rich is that they have more experience of management and know more about how to get rich and the wealthy elites in the countryside have close connections to the government and Communist Party, through which they can gain more support for the villages. The township authorities, on the one hand, believe that with these capable men in charge, village affairs will be better managed and tasks they set for the villages will be better accomplished. On the other hand villagers tend to nominate 'economic men' to be candidates of village committees, because they want some of the newly rich to take charge of village affairs so that the whole village will also become rich. Furthermore, 'economic men' now have developed an interest in village power and the more successful ones have become part of the rural political elite. According to the survey of CBCA in 2002, 23 percent of the village chairmen and secretaries of the county managed their own business or factories. The villager committees have always been good moneymakers, and their families are usually among the wealthiest in the villages. In Longang Town, 71 percent of the 2002-elected committee members were relatively wealthy people or so-called 'economic men'. The rise of 'economic men' probably implies a further political reform in rural areas.

Thirdly, non-party members are coming into power. In the past, only members of the communist party could be committee members, especially villager chairmen. By implementing a self-governance policy, communist membership is not necessary to be

a CVC. The component of VCs is increasingly changing. More and more non-party members are elected as committee members. Foreign observers of China's grassroots elections sometimes assume that party membership is a central issue in local campaigns, where the contest is one between party and non-party candidates, and a high percentage of village cadres as party members are considered an indication that the elections were manipulated by local party organizations. This is not the truth. As villagers can nominate candidates through 'sea election', the latter are not necessarily party members. Actually, there is no political conflict between party and non-party candidates. Villagers simply vote for their own interests instead of voting for political organizations. The high percentage of the village cadres as party members is simply because few members of the local elites are nowadays outside the party. After all, the party has been in power for more than 50 years and it has been focusing on recruiting the newly elected non-party elites in order to enhance its legitimacy. While it is true that in many cases local party organizations manipulate the elections by controlling the nominations and by intimidating the population, it is also true that party membership could be irrelevant during elections. Nevertheless, the percentage of non-communists on the village committee is high and this trend is continuing. In the post-election survey of 1999, among the 1297 committee members of the county, 40.2% were neither communist party members nor communist youth league members. In 2002, there were 1392 village committee members, of whom 942 (67.7%), were non-communist, and among the 137 village chairmen, 63 (46%) were non communist. The fact that more non-communists are taking up village posts certainly indicates an

important change in village power structures and rural power distribution. This can be seen as a sign of the erosion of communist power at the village level, although the Communist Party is accepted unquestioningly as the governing party of China in rural area.

6.4 LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

Improved democratic consciousness and the accountabilities of villager committee members are having an impact on democratic reform at higher levels of government and VPB. Villagers are employing the logic of the democratic election of village committee members to push for democratization in other areas of village life. The party has been one object of their efforts to practice democracy. Peasants are becoming more aggressive and begin to question the authority of the Party since its cadres in the villages are not elected by them. In the 1999 survey, 65.3% of the peasants who were interviewed thought party secretaries in the villages should be elected directly by villagers, while only 15.3% thought they should not be elected directly. The village party secretary is put onto the defensive by direct village elections, because it is confronted now with a stronger village committee. For that reason, the Party is increasingly forced to tie its appointment of party secretaries, at least indirectly, to the villagers' democratic vote (Li, 1999). The more elections take root in a village, the more the party loses its power to control the village committee and the more new democratic legitimacy it must give to its village party branch.

Township authorities cannot be an exception to the principles of democratization.

Villagers have started to question why there is no election for the head of the township while village heads are democratically elected. Everyone knows that the township, as the lowest level of government, continues to exercise considerable control over villages. If those responsible for governance at the village level have the right to be elected, some are arguing, so do officials at the township level. Actually, some township officials have felt that the realization of township governance is only a matter of time. When responding to the question “Do you think townships will conduct self-governance one day?” A large number (91%) of the township officials in Longang, Siba, Xiali, and Qiaotou thought that township leaders would be elected directly sooner or later. As a matter of fact, since late 1998, there have been at least three cases of direct election of township mayors conducted spontaneously by the local governments, either with or without the central government’s approval. These include the direct elections of the township mayor in Buyuan, Sichuan Province, the election of the town mayor through a two-ballot system in Dapeng, Shenzhen City, and the election of the town mayor and the town party secretary through a two-ballot system in Linyi County, Shanxi Province. And astonishingly, all these election results were accepted by the central government even though they were conducted without its approval first. Let us have a closer look at the case of Buyun Town (data from Southern Weekend, 1998).

On December 31, 1998, the people of Buyun County in Sichuan Province secretly held the country’s first direct election for the leader of the township. Buyun, like many of China’s rural areas, has seen a rise in protests against rampant official

corruption and tax burdens. In an effort to quell this unrest, Buyun's party officials - apparently lacking formal approval from Beijing but with the tacit support of high officials at the provincial and national government levels - decided to experiment with democracy. In the election, the township Party committee was allowed to nominate one of the three final candidates directly. The remaining two finalists were decided by a 162-person selection committee comprised of township officials and the village chiefs, village assembly chairmen and three representatives from each of the ten villages belonging to Buyun. Candidacy was open to one and all, the only prerequisite being endorsements from 30 residents of Buyun. From the start, there were 15 contenders for the position of township head, including several of the top township leaders. Before the selection committee voted, all the candidates were asked about their backgrounds and plans to develop the township. Based on the selection committee's vote, a schoolteacher (who is not a Party member) and a village chief (who is) were named final candidates. The township Party committee nominated Tan Xiaoci, a township official who was Buyun's deputy Party Secretary, as their candidate. During a ten-day campaign period, the three final candidates participated in 13 public debates, answering voters' questions. On the Election Day, 6236 of the 11,349 registered voters of Buyun cast their ballots in pouring rain at 11 polling stations. The Party's candidate, Tan Xiaoci, received a total of 3,130 votes (50.19% of votes cast), which were 1135 more votes than the village chief received. This innovation was criticized by 'The Legal Daily', a Party mouthpiece in Beijing, because it overstepped the current Constitution of the RPC, but the result of the

election was accepted by the central government.

Today, the pros and cons of elections and democracy are discussed at all level of the CCP. The leadership of the Communist Party has conceded that the most effective weapon in the struggle against despotism and corruption is the ballot box, implicitly acknowledging that leaders chosen directly by the people are more effective than appointed ones. In recent years, the Chinese leadership has begun to show strong support for the village political reform in public and urged local officials at all levels to implement village self-government without reservation. In September 1998, President and Former Party General Secretary of the CCP and President of the state Jiang Zemin (1998) publicly praised village self-governance as the Chinese peasant's great invention, and required that all village cadres be directly elected by peasants and that a secret ballot be compulsorily in village elections. Even the premier-turned chairman of the Standing Committee of the NPC Li Peng, generally a conservative, has expressed his sincere support for village self-governance by visiting Lishu County, the Number one national model demonstration county. It is said that Li played a positive role in the promulgation of the new Organic Law of Villagers Committee in 1998. The current President and General Secretary, Hu Jintao (2004), in an address to the governing Politburo, said the Communist Party must undertake a 'sweeping systemic project' to increase public participation in government and enforce the rule of law. "We must enrich the forms of democracy, make democratic procedures complete, expand citizen's orderly political participation, and ensure that the people can exercise democratic elections, democratic administration and democratic

scrutiny.” This appears to be a sign of progress towards a more democratic government.

6.5 NEW INSTITUTION DEVELOPMENTS

The practice of self-governance has made the CCP’s unquestioned domination both suspicious and vulnerable, which has led to a crisis of legitimacy in local party organizations and threatened the party’s leadership positions in rural society. In response to these serious challenges, in recent years local party organizations in some areas have begun to experiment with some democratic reforms on their own, trying to make local party secretaries accountable to ordinary villagers in order to enhance the legitimacy of the party in rural areas. A number of new institutions have evolved in the process. The most popular ones are the ‘Two-Ballot’ system and ‘One Shoulder Bears’ system, which were created by local organizations and are now being suffered and introduced by the central government.

6.5.1 The ‘Two-Ballot’ system

This system appeared first in Shanxi Province in 1991. The NMCA officially introduced this system to the governments all over the nation in 2001. The system requires that all villagers participate in the nomination of the position of party secretary. The final decision is still made by the party members, but they can only elect candidates that have received at least 50 percent of the confidence votes of the villagers. The election procedures are as the follows. Firstly, candidates are nominated

by the village Party committee, the township Party committee, and by village Party members themselves. Secondly, villagers (including non-Party members) vote for the candidates. Thirdly, the winner in the first round of voting is taken as the only formal candidate for the village Party secretary. Fourthly, Party members at that village vote for the candidate. The voting is carried out by secret ballot. The results of the voting are announced on the spot. Also, candidates have to give speeches and defend their ideas before the voting takes place. This is revolutionary because it opens the decision-making process of internal Party matters to participation by non-members. The villagers have an indirect say in the selection of their Party secretary, thus broadening the support base for the Party leadership and improve accountability of SVPBs to villagers at the village levels. In this way, villagers can make sure that some unpopular individuals will not become village party secretaries. This project has attracted much attention of the authorities in the country. All village-level Party secretaries in Fujian, for example, were elected in May 2000 by a process that involved an initial ‘confidence vote’ of candidates, in which all village voters participated, followed by a Party-members-only vote on final candidates. In 1999 Sichuan implemented a similar ‘public recommendation, direct Party member election’ system for electing its SVPB. Similar multi-stage Party elections have been tried at the village level in other places including Anhui Province, Henan Province and Shenzhen City.

Although the ‘Two-Ballot’ system is a milestone in village democracy, there are still some problems with this mechanism. Firstly, the township authority still controls the

process by issuing certain limiting criteria for the nominees. In this way, they can make their favorite people become nominees and the confidence vote may become a show. Secondly, a party secretary, failing to get along well with villages as a result of implementing orders of township authority by force, dare not confront voters. They may take advantage of the close relations with township authorities to persuade them to stop the voting or conduct the voting for show. Thirdly, it may cause an embarrassment that all party members fail to pass the confidence vote. Villagers who dislike oppression by township authorities may elect an ‘old good man’ who never hurts anybody but never does anything. Fourthly, once elected directly by villages, the phenomena in which a secretary stays in the position for ten or twenty years will end, thus more qualified party members need to be placed in the position, but fewer villagers want to join the party as they concentrate on their own living rather than on politics, thus there will be less qualified party secretary candidates. This will affect the overall quality of SVPBs.

6.5.2 ‘One Shoulder Bears’ system

Another mechanism is called ‘One Shoulder Bears’ which means that a person takes over Party and executive offices at the same time. This measure was first developed in Shandong Province. With this system, members of the Party Committee are encouraged to run in VC-elections, the Party Secretary should compete for the position of VC-head. If they win the support of the majority of villagers they can work in both positions simultaneously. If not, they should also step down from their

Party position to free the way for others with more support. The same result can in theory be obtained the other way around in that the successful VC-candidates who are also Party members run in subsequently held intra-Party elections, and that the CVC becomes the elected Party secretary. This mechanism became an official policy with a document issued jointly by the secretariats of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council in July 2002. This ensures that party secretaries have the popular support of the villagers and reduces the potential of conflict between the village constitutions. There are more than 40,000 villages in Guangxi Autonomous Region (Guangxi Statistics Year Book, 2003). One Shoulder Bear means potentially reducing 40,000 village cadres who need pay from peasants. If every cadre gets US\$364 dollar per year as allowance, it will save US\$14.5 million for the Region. More significant, the run of village party secretaries for CVC has heightened the idea among villagers that all political powers should be subject to democratic confirmation and supervision.

Needless to say, the 'One Shoulder Bears' is meaningful for enhancing democracy in rural China. But there are some problems in this system too. Firstly, as some researchers have pointed out, this measure that entitles significant authority to one person in undeveloped areas may lead to more serious corruption in the villages. Secondly, town authorities seemingly will jump at the chance to get rid of independently elected VCs in presenting the voters the new policy as if they were expected to elect the previously selected Party secretary to the position of CVC. Thirdly, the most serious problem is that the chairman as a party secretary must obey the orders coming from town authorities. It will be a legal excuse and easy way for

township cadres to interfere in village affairs, which will consequentially do harm to village self-governance, and in the end may go back to the era when the state controlled villages. Fourthly, some candidates who have won the chairman election may refuse to participate in party secretary elections or they simply are not party members, thus the ‘One Shoulder Bears’ is impossible. Fifthly, if the township authority insists on ‘One Shoulder Bears’, the free nomination before election will mean nothing because villagers must nominate party members for VC elections.

6.6 SUMMARY

Despite the unevenness and limitations, there is emerging evidence that the system of village elections has begun to bring about substantial changes in the rural politics. A set of new institutional frameworks has been established in rural areas that provide legal protection for peasants’ political rights and assures institutional channels for peasants’ participation in local politics. Many new political ideas and institutional arrangements, such as the tenure system, the idea of the rule of law, the election campaign, the primary, and secret voting booth have been introduced into rural political life. The monopoly of nominating candidates for elections by the party organizations has been broken, thus giving rise to a revolutionary change in the Chinese political system. Many corrupt and incompetent village cadres have been driven out of office and the elections have begun to enhance the responsiveness and accountability of village leaders to fellow villagers. These new institutions have increased the responsiveness of village party cadres to village needs and interest. The

‘One Shoulder Bears’ system and the ‘Two-Ballot’ system are both new administrative adjustments resulting from drastic socio-economic changes in rural democratic practice. This adjustment is a great leap forward in the process of China’s democratization. The composition of the VC is changing, reflecting a real change in local power relations and the power structure in rural areas. At this point, village elections may change the political landscape in rural China because these institutions can provide ambitious individuals with a certain degree of popular legitimacy and power to counter the dominance of the ruling communist party. Villager self-governance will undoubtedly have a far-reaching impact on China’s further democratic reforms at all levels.



CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this Report, the origin, process and impact of one of the most important political developments in contemporary China namely the self-governance of villages has been examined. The major empirical findings can be briefly summarized as the following: First, villager self-governance is an effort of the CCP to obtain good governance through democratization in rural China. One of the most important aspects of democratization is the establishment of new institutional rules, the process of which is often a gradual one, involving institutional changes to replace long-standing practices, entrenched interests, cultural habits, and social and even religious norms. China is a country lacking a democratic political culture. At the core of China's culture is Confucianism, shorthand for a cluster of institutions and practices that give great weight to order, harmony, virtue, and hierarchy. It is critical to establish a public commitment to democratic values and principles, and the extent of such orientations is essential for judging the potential for democratization in the region. The conflicts that occur during the implementation of self-governance indicate that it is not easy to spread democratic rules in an authoritarian state.

Second, the development of villager self-governance is fruitful and is changing the political landscape in China's rural areas. Village elections in this new wave of grassroots democratization have been both institutionalized and have been

substantially free and competitive. Peasants have been empowered for the first time in history to directly participate in every stage of the whole process of local elections. This new democratic institution gives them a legal right to elect and supervise their leaders, to stop them from committing corruption and to participate in village decision-making and day-to-day management of the local affairs. After several rounds of practice, village elections have been relatively standardized and the quality of elections has been greatly improved. The consciousness of rights has been rising among peasants and the idea of rule of law has been taking root in the countryside. Free and competitive elections have taught peasants that all powers come from the people and that all power holders should be subject to periodic popular confirmation. They have managed to break through the limits set by the state and forced the state to retreat more and more from its original stand. There are already many signs indicating that this grass-roots democratic practice has begun to change the local power structure and produce a positive impact on local governance. As more and more peasants devote themselves to this grass-roots democratic practice, local governance has been increasingly transformed toward greater transparency and efficiency.

Third, the villager self-governance concept is still at a very early stage. The pace of implementing village elections has been uneven across the country. Some villages are conducting sound direct elections while others still remain reminiscent of the Mao era. Contested elections have taken place in less than half of China's villages. Meanwhile, there are serious obstacles to the further development of village democracy. While some of the obstacles are political and situational, others are structural and more

deep-rooted. The passive resistance and various forms of subversion from local officials are key impediments to the rural democracy. As many county and township officials are suspicious and even hostile to self-governance, the state needs to curtail the arbitrary power of its local agents to some extent so as to give villager self-governance a chance to grow. The critical step is to enforce the Organic Law strictly. Without effective and swift enforcement of this law, the effort of building good governance in the rural area will remain nothing but hollow rhetoric and neither the local officials nor the peasants will believe in the legitimacy of the new law. The central government may create very clear and unambiguous reforms, but without a consistent enforcement and threat of sanctions local cadres may ignore the new law.



Fourth, democratization may reach a higher level in the Chinese context. As discussed in Chapter one, a single party system allows for greater political competition implemented under an authoritarian regime so that democratic transitions, particularly non-violent transitions, can occur frequently in single party systems than in military or personal regimes. Within a single party system, such as that of the CCP which works on the principle of democratic centralization, there are several powerful figures, none of whom has complete authority, and who disagree among themselves. The last strong man, Deng Xiaoping, has gone, and China will probably see no more. In this democratic authoritarian party, the impetus for democratic change can only come from the regime itself. Democracy or democratization was not a contributing factor in the emergence of village committees. The latter were established primarily as a reaction to the chaotic situation created by the collapse of the commune system. But

with continuous adjustments, the rural political institutions have shown its flexibility by being more accommodating towards social changes and democratic developments and thus far the democratization seems to have become an unstoppable process in rural China.

Whether the Chinese political system is moving towards democratization cannot be evaluated by whether or not direct measures of democratization have been initiated alone. Instead, it needs to be measured by whether the political system, through its continuous institutional adjustments, has become more accommodating to democratic factors. The CCP, according to the gradualism strategy, will continue to adjust the political system to promote social stability and economic development. The state is experiencing more and more serious political corruption and institutional dysfunction which have fundamentally weakened the mechanisms that the state has used to maintain its organizational integrity in rural areas. Local authorities, especially township/town authorities, are no longer a reliable instrument for carrying out the reform policies of the central government and managing the new system and have actually become troublemakers to the central government. After several attempts to restore self-discipline among local cadres have failed, it is not surprising to see that the state relies on democracy again, just as what have happened in Buyuan Township, Dapeng Town and towns/townships in Liyi County.

In this concluding chapter, a number of practical recommendations for village self-governance in China, based on the observations in Luocheng County, will be

offered.

Recommendation 1: Review the Organic Law

The National People's Congress (NPC), by virtue of declaring the Organic Law to be 'a soft law', did not wish to establish effective consequences for those who violated the Organic Law. In fact, laws in general should not be classified as 'hard' or 'soft'. A law is a law no matter what. These classifications were misleading and could lead to very negative outcomes. Further revisions of the law have become necessary. The most critical shortcoming of the Organic Law is that it clearly defines what is permissible but fails to define what penalties should be inflicted if this Law is not observed. Thus, further revision of the Organic Law has become necessary.



Recommendation 2: Clarify the role and responsibilities of village committees and party branches

It has become urgent to clarify the different responsibilities of the village committee and the party branch. Most of the conflicts between village heads and party secretaries arise from ambiguity surrounding their jurisdiction in village administration. By establishing or clarifying each group's jurisdiction, there would be fewer power conflicts and much more cooperation between the villager committee and the Party.

Recommendation 3: Define the role of the party clearly

Defining the role of VPBs, who are struggling to protect the old rules for their own interest, is critical in the process of the rural democratization. The Party plays a core

role in leadership according to the Organic Law. The question is: What does the core role in leadership mean in the practice of village elections and more importantly, in villager self-governance? It has been apparent that a clear jurisdiction is not enough since VPBs, with the help of town/township authorities can easily take over the direct management of village affairs and treat the VC as a subsidiary responsible for carrying out the secretary's decisions. The most critical way is to define clearly the role of VPBs and legitimize them through democracy. It is very important to apply the 'One Shoulder Bear' system and the 'Two-Ballot' system in all rural areas currently.

Recommendation 4: Change the attitude of township cadres

Since villager self-governance is supported by a set of new rules, it is natural that there is opposition among some township cadres. The question is how to change their attitude and improve their ability to implement the policy. Government at all levels need to launch a study movement to encourage and require local officials to study the Law and the Regulation of implementing the Organic Law stipulated by the government, to ensure that the stipulations of the Law are carried out without any negligence and that all the villagers' democratic rights are guaranteed without any exceptions. Fundamentally, however, only spreading democracy to town/township-level can change the attitudes of town/township officials toward villager self-governance.

Recommendation 5: Ensure adequate education for voters

Generally speaking, in the rural areas, voters receive instruction on election procedures through posters displayed in public areas, household group meetings with election officials, and public broadcasts at markets and from moving vehicles. This practice has been effective, to some extent, and many voters have been educated through these methods. However, mass education about self-governance is still inadequate. It is critical for the government to conduct aggressive civic education programmes on a more regular and on-going basis, not just for the period of time shortly before an election is scheduled. Programmes should be targeted to both eligible voters and younger citizens, including students in primary and secondary schools.



CONCLUSION

In this Report, the writer reviews a number of theories related to China's rural democratization and the academic literature on villager self-governance with the purpose of providing a theoretical framework to understand rural democratization. It is acknowledged that an authoritarian state with a single party system may allow for greater political competition in order to improve its governance ability. The villager self-governance concept was promoted by the CCP to cope with the dual crises of legitimacy and ability to govern it had faced in the countryside. Even though the actions of the leadership were not aimed at democratizing the country, with the

implementation of the Organic Law a set of new grassroots democratic political institutions have been widely established. The Organic Law is building democratic institutions and practices and deepening democratic values in societies. It is also acknowledged that it is not easy to establish democratic institutions in China because of historical factors and the fact that China lacks a democratic tradition. It is also true that the practice of villager self-governance has resulted in continuing, troublesome problems - widespread corruption of local cadres, usurpation of villagers' economic and political rights, and ongoing violations of the Organic Law. However, the CCP, in order to keep itself in power, will continue to adjust the political system to promote social stability and economic development. The current adjustments such as the 'Two-Ballot' system 'One Shoulder Bears' system indicate a great progress of the democratization, creating some far-reaching impact on China's further democratic reforms at higher-levels. The continuing adjustment may reach a breakthrough of democratization in the future. Although it is too early to talk about macro consequences of micro changes, villager self-governance, in the long run, is likely to be the first step towards Chinese democratization.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrahamsen, Rita. (2000). *Disciplining Democracy: Development Discourse and Good Governance in Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Almond, Gabriel & Verba, Sidney. (1989). Civic Culture: Political Attitudes in Five Nations. In *Capitalism and Democracy*. Almond, Gabriel. 1991. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. PS: Political Science and Politics 24(3):467–74.
- Amundsen, Inge. (1999). Political Corruption: An Introduction to the Issues. [Online]. Available: <http://www.cmi.no/publications/publication.cfm>. [2005, February 3].
- Anders, Hanberger. (2004). Democratic governance and evaluation. [Online]. Available: <http://www.ucer.umu.se/PDF/arbetsrapporter/Governance%20and%20democratic%20evaluation.pdf> [2005, January 12].
- Asia Development Bank (ADB). (2001). Governance. [Online]. Available: <http://www.adb.org/Governance/default.asp> [2005, March].
- Bai, Gang. (2001). *Report on Improving the Legislation of Villagers' Self-Governance. Research Working Paper*. Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Center for Public Policy.
- Barrett L McCormik. (1990). *Political Reform in Post-Mao China: Democracy and Bureaucracy in a Leninist State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bi, Yuxue. (2002). Stability and Democratic Village. Villager Self-governance of China. *Village Self Governance of China*, Spring, Issue 4. Beijing: NMCA Press.
- Bratton, Michael & van de Walle, Nicholas. (1997). *Toward Governance in Africa: Popular Demands and State Response*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp.27-55.
- Bureau of Civil Affair of Luocheng. (2003). *Report on village election of Luocheng county in 2003*. Luocheng, China: BCA Printing Section.
- Bureau of Statistics. (2003). The statistics Year Book of Luocheng County. Luocheng, China: County Government Printing Department.
- Canada International Development Agency (CIDA). (2002). *Good Governance*. [Online]. Available: http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/cida_ind.nsf/0/120E9700965D51CE85256919006BF1E5?OpenDocument [2004, November 16]
- Chazan, N. (1992), Liberalization, Governance and Political Space in Ghana. In G.

- Hydén and M. Bratton (eds.), *Governance and Politics in Africa*, pp.121-142. Boulder: Rienner.
- Chopra, V.K. (1997). The mirage of good governance. *Towards good governance*. Delhi: Chopra, S.K., Konark publishers Pvt. Ltd. p37.
- County People's Congress. (1999). *Regulation on Village Election of Luocheng County*. Luocheng, China: CPC Printing Section.
- Dahl, Robert A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- David, Zweig. (1999). Rural People, the Politicians, and Power. *The China Journal*, 38:153-168.
- Diamond, Larry. (1999). *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Du, Limin. (2003). Political Culture in Rural area in Guangxi. *Social Science of Guangxi*, Issue 4:23-26. Guangxi China: People's Press.
- Edwards, R. R., Henkin, L. & Nathan, A. J. (1986). *Human Rights in Contemporary China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Epstein, Amy B. (1996). Village Elections in China: Experimenting with Democracy. In *China's Economic Future: Challenges to U.S. Policy Study Papers* Joint Economic Committee. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congress. pp.414-418.
- Frey, Bruno S. & Stutzer, Alois. (2002). *Happiness and Economics*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Frischtak, L. L. (1994). Governance Capacity and Economic Reform in Developing Countries. *World Bank Technical Paper No.254*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- Fukuyama, Francis. (1995). Confucianism and democracy. *Journal of Democracy*. Vol. 6:2, April.
- Geddes, Barbara. (1994). *Politician's Dilemma: Building State Capacity in Latin America*. Berkeley USA: University of California Press.
- Gibson, James L., Duch, Raymond M. & Tedin, Kent L. (1992). Democratic Values and the Transformation of the Soviet Union. *The Journal of Politics*. 54(2):329-71.
- Goldman, Merle. (1994). *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China*. Cambridge, MA:

Harvard University Press.

- Heidenheimer, Arnold J., Johnston, Michael & LeVine, Victor T. (eds.). (1993). *Political Corruption. A Handbook*. New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Pub.
- Hill, Dilys M. (1974). *Democratic Theory and Local Government*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Howell, Jude. (1998). Prospect for Village Self-Governance in China. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Vol.25:3:77-78.
- Hu, Jintao. (2004). Speech at the conference of village issue. *People's Daily*. January 18th. Beijing: People's Daily Press.
- Huntington, Samuel P. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Jiang, Zemin. (1998). Deepen the Rural Reform and Develop Agriculture. *People's Daily*, September 25th. Beijing: People's Daily Press.
- Jowitt, Ken. (1992). *The Leninist Response to National Dependency*. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, p.34.
- Kelliher, Daniel. (1997). The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government. *The China Journal*, Issue 37:63-86.
- Kennedy, John James. (2002). *Formal Introductions: Institutional Change and Village Elections in China*. California: University of California Press.
- Kickert, Water J. M. (1993). Autopoiesis and the Science of (Public) Administration: Essence, Sense and Nonsense. *Organization Study*, 14:2.
- Kin-Sheun, Louie. (2001). Village Self-Governance and Democracy in China: An Evaluation. *Democratization*, Vol.8:4:134-154.
- Knight, Jack. (1992). *Institutions and Social Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knight, Jack. (1998). *Models, Interpretations and Theories: Constructing Explanations of Institutional Emergence and Change*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Lawrence, Susan. (1994). Village Representative Assemblies: Democracies Chinese Style. *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, pp.61-68.
- Li, Lianjiang. (1999). The Two Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Party

Secretaries to a Popular Vote. *China Journal*, 42:103-118.

Li, Yonghua. (2004). Contemporary Development of the Chinese politics and Grassroots Democracy. *Village Self Governance of China*, Issue 4. Beijing: NMCA Printing Department.

Lynn, Jr., Heinrich, L. C. & Hill, C. (2001). Improving Governance: A New Logic for Empirical Research. Washington. D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Manion, Melanie. (1996). The Electoral Connection in Chinese Countryside. *American Political Science Review*, Vol.90, December, pp.736-48.

National Ministry of Civil Affair. (2002). *The Report on 2002 Village election*. Beijing: NMCA Printing Department.

National People' Congress. (1998). The Organic Law of Villager Committee. [Online] Available: <http://www.npcnews.com.cn/gb/paper12/1/class001200006/hwz64679.htm> [2004, May 12]

National Bureau of Statistics. (2000). *China Statistical Year Book 1999*. Beijing: The People's Press Ltd.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2003). *China Statistical Year Book 2002*. Beijing: The People's Press Ltd.



National Ministry of Civil Affair. (2003). Report on 2002 Village Election. [Online]. Available: <http://www.chinarural.org/readnews.asp?newsid={A0C5E6CD-A9FC45A6-BBC2-8DE1D69ABFEF}> [2004, May 12]

North, Douglass C. (1990). Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Brien, Kevin. (1994). Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages. *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No.32.

O'Brien, Kevin & Li, Lianjian. (1999). Accommodating Democracy in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China. *The China Quarterly*, No.162:486.

Oi, Jean C. (1996). Economic Development, Stability and Democratic Village Self-governance. *China Review*, pp.125-144. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

Oi, Jean. & Rozelle, Scott. (2000). Election and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages. *The China Quarterly*, pp.513-539

- Organic Law on the Villagers Committees of the PR China (1988). [Online]. Available: <http://product.chinawe.com/cgi-bin/lawdetail.pl?LawID=76> [2004, March]
- People's Press. (1998). *Organic Law on the Villagers Committees of the People's Republic of China*. Naning, Guangxi, China: People's Press.
- Pierre, Jon & Peters, B. Guy. (2000). *Governance, Politics and the State*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Przeworski, Adam (1991). *Democracy and the Market*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski, Adam. (1996). *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pye, Lucian W. (1985). *Asian Power and Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Regional People's Congress. (1999). *The Electoral Code of the Village Committee of Guangxi Autonomous Region*. Guangxi, China: RPC Printing Department.
- Rhodes, R.A.M. (1996). The New Governance: Governing Without Government. *Political Studies*. XLIV: 652-667
- Rhodes, R.A.M. (1997). *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Rosenau, James N. (1995). Governance in the Twenty-First Century. *Global Governance*, Vol.1.
- Scalapino, Robert. (1989). *The Politics of Development: Perspectives on Twentieth Century Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schubert, Gunter. (2002). Village Elections in the PRC: A Trojan Horse of Democracy? [Online] Available: <http://www.uni-duisburg.de/Institute/OAWI/SS/download/doc/discuss19.pdf> [2004, March 3]
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. (1942). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Shao, Guangfang. (2004). Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside. *Village Self-governance of China*, Issue6, June. Beijing: NMCA Press.
- Shen, Dansheng. (2003). Critiques and Perspective of villager self-governance. *Village Self-governance of China*, Issue 2, February. Beijing: NMCA Press.

- Shi, Tianjian. (1993). Cultural Requisites for Democracy in China: Findings from a Survey. *Daedalus* 122:2 (Spring), 95-123.
- Shi, Tianjian. (1999). Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy. *World Politics*, No.51:385-412
- Southern Weekend. (1998). The Election in Buyun town. *Southern Weekend*, October 16th. Guangzhou: Southern Weekend Press.
- Stoker, Gerry. (1998). Governance as Theory: Five Proposition. *International Social Science Journal*, 155:17-28.
- Thurston, Anne. (1998). *Muddling toward Democracy: Political Change in Grass-roots China*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- United Nation. (2004). Development - Good governance. [Online]. Available: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/development/governance/> [2004, September 1].
- USAID. (1995). Promoting Freedom, Security and Opportunity. [Online]. Available: <http://www.usaid.gov/fani/ch01/> - 12k [2004, December 6].
- Wang, Xu. (2001). *Mutual Empowerment of State and Peasantry*. California, USA: Gingko Pr Inc.
- Wang, Zhenyao. (2001). Village Committees: The Foundation of the Chinese Democratization. *Village Elections: Democracy in Rural China, 2001*. Beijing: NMCA Press.
- White, Gordon. (1996). *Development and Democratization in China, Democracy and Development*. Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publisher Inc.
- World Bank. (1992). *Governance and Development*. Washington, D.C: World Bank.
- Xing, Guolin. (1998). Implementing Villager Self-governance in China's villages. *Village Self Governance of China*, Spring:4. Beijing: NMCA Press.
- Zhong, Yang. (2003). Political Culture and Participation in the Chinese Countryside: Some Empirical Evidence. [Online]. Available: [http://209.235.207.197/imgtest/zhong%20PS%20\(july%2004\).pdf](http://209.235.207.197/imgtest/zhong%20PS%20(july%2004).pdf). [2005, January 11].