

A Mixed Bag of Results: Village Elections in Contemporary China

Hang Lin

Institute for Cultural Studies East- and South Asia - Sinology, University of Würzburg

Am Hubland, 97074 Würzburg, Germany

Tel: 49-931-318-5571 E-mail: hang.lin@uni-wuerzburg.de

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Graduate School of the Humanities, University of Würzburg

Sanderring 2, 97070 Würzburg, Germany

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Abstract

While there is only little transformation to the absolute power of the party-state to be detected, some grassroots democratic experiments, however, are receiving enormous attention of the world, especially village elections. Nevertheless, this preliminary exercise of democracy is widely characterized as a mixed bag of results. Since its first conduction, it has experienced immense development and brought great impact not only on different rural political institutions, but also on common mass villagers, as well as changes to the local governance. But at the same time, the limitations of the factual effectiveness of these elections can hardly be underestimated and such aspects as the standardization of electoral procedures are still to be further improved. Moreover, given the wide variations across Chinese countryside and the strong oppositions from all levels, the future of China's village elections remain hard to gauge.

Keywords: Chinese politics, Village election, Local governance, Rural politics

1. Introduction

As the Chinese economy has been enjoying a continuous development at an amazing speed during the last 30 years, many people believe that China is a nation with significant importance whose economic prosperity, domestic stability and international responsibility will directly impact the Asia-Pacific region and even the whole world. At the same time, the expectation on expanding the so far successful reform from economic into political fields is also substantially rising, with a common anticipation that China, according to modernisation theory, will along with its global economic emergence inevitably adopt a more democratic model of governance as well.

In contrast to the keen anticipations of many outside observers at the beginning of the 1990s, the political system of China experienced only remarkably little transformation during the last decade of the 20th century. Unlike the USSR and other communist east European countries, the succession of authority from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin, as well as from the latter to Hu Jintao have not induced a crisis leading the functioning of the political system into chaos. Against this seeming backdrop of stability, however, there has been more subtle and noteworthy changes to the system on which a number of scholars have expressed their hopes for a more tranquil political transformation, such as China's transition to a highly level of rule of law, new reform trends and new challenges under new leadership, as well as a larger scope of "democratic" governance at basic administrative levels in China.

One of the aspects attracting more and more attention in recent years has been the continuing reform in the Chinese countryside, taking the already established direct elections of villagers' committees (VCs, *cunmin weiyuanhui*) and a few cases of direct elections for township mayors as an example. Rural China is often the subject of incongruous and paradoxical descriptions ranging from peasant resistance, cadre corruption, social disorder and, surprisingly, deepening democratisation processes. Each depiction contains only a partial truth

individually or collectively, yet with the focus on that part of the picture, the rural democracy through elections or contrarily the lack of it, a holistic understanding of other phenomena is more easily to be arrived at.

Village elections in China have been the focus of much excitement among Western scholars. To many, such elections hold out the promise of genuine democracy taking hold in China, starting at the village level and, as both Western and Chinese democrats hope, one day moving up even to the national level. Others are more cautiously skeptical, suggesting that such elections only entrench the leadership of the Communist Party. There has been an interesting debate around the meaning of village elections ever since their introduction in 1988. Björn Alpermann (2009), John J. Kennedy (2002, 2007), Li Lianjiang and Kevin O'Brien (2008), and Melanie Manion (2009) have all presented analyses of village elections, including observations of actual electoral practice, and more importantly, reflection on the relationship of such elections to Communist Party leadership. Recent examples of elections of township heads and township party secretaries have caused further debate. Kevin O'Brien and Han Rongbin (2009), Tan Qingshan (2006), as well as He Baogang (2007) examine the politics conducting village elections and introducing township elections, again with a view toward prospects for further democratization in rural China. Most of the sources above provide nuanced commentary on the relationship of elections in China to a transformed manner of rural governance, or further to the possible emergence of democracy. Based on a survey of recent Western literature on village elections in China and an evaluation of some of the arguments made, this essay will argue that the village elections in China have imposed great impact on various political grassroots institutions, mass villagers, as well as the local governance in general.

2. Transformation and Development Since the Last Decades

During the years of the reform era, Chinese rural society has undergone dramatic transformations, ranging from urbanization, emergence of the new rich, increasing of the income gap and social conflicts to plural economical and political interests. In the context of these changes, rural politics has also inevitably experienced great development and modification, including the conduction of VC elections, the formation of self-governing committees, the enhancement of people's awareness of political participation and the changing relationship between villages, townships, as well as village Party branches.

Historically, rural China can be seen as lacking a democratic tradition. Even though governance in the countryside was already largely autonomous since imperial time, local politics was actually dominated by elites and was shaped by the gentry, clans and kinship. Mao tried to establish a communistic rural political mechanism by settling up people's communes, which did not exist long. After de-collectivization by the end of the Mao-Era, some villagers in Guangxi decided to elect their own leaders to fill the organizational vacuum and reestablish local order. This turned out to be the first village election in the history of China. Along with the fact that the central leadership also had the intention to integrate this new institution of VCs into the hierarchy under the township which somehow replaced the abolished people's communes (Note 1), this initiative of self-governance has then come a long way since the initial experiments commenced some thirty years ago.

Notwithstanding enormous opposition encountered, the first national law providing for the election of VC officials, the Organic Law of Village Committee was formally introduced in 1987. Facing strong oppositions from all levels and in particular from some leading personals of the Party, a great deal of compromise had to be made and the law could therefore only be on a provisional basis. According to the decision made on a national meeting held jointly by the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee and the Ministry of Civic Affairs in 1990, village elections were stipulated to be held nationwide. Yet it should be noticed that even after the promulgation of this law, the system of villagers' self-governing remained only limitedly realized and the requirement of holding democratic VC elections was actually widely ignored, for the reason that this law fell far short of creating a functional electoral institution, as well as of proscribing election principles and rules which confirm to international election standards.

Only with the passage of the revised version of the Organic Law of Village Committee in 1998 did the village elections and self-governance enter a new stage. Much more concrete than the older version, this law specifies, "the villagers' committee is a grassroots autonomous organization of people for self-management, self-education and self-service. It is formed by democratic elections and democratic policy-making, democratic management and democratic supervision." (Note 2) The articles of this new law introduced a number of detailed and universally recognized electoral procedures that guaranteed electoral openness, fairness and competitiveness, such as publication of the voter list before voting, free nomination, multiple candidacy, secret booths and reduction of proxy voting.

Whereas the 1987 Organic Law did not have the legal authority to take on provinces that refused to comply with village elections, this new law mandated provinces to implement village elections and to adopt supplementary regulations, which helped promote and regulate elections throughout the countryside. Though to some extent still strongly intervened or affected by township governments or Party branches, today in almost all Chinese provinces, this sort of elections of VCs has already completed at least 5 rounds. (Note 3) It took nearly 20 years since the first villagers' committee emerged in Guangxi, notwithstanding this tardy change of terms did reflect a positive step in the development of the village elections and village democracy.

Despite many "grey blanks" which still remain somehow vague in the new regulations about the VC election, there are some valuable improvements and innovations to be detected, particularly concerning the electoral procedure. A good example is that the method *haixuan* (direct domination of candidates) is more and more widely adopted during the procedure of nomination after 1998. From a fieldwork conducted by Richard Levy (2007), we can learn that in Guangdong great attention is paid to the procedural aspects such as the selection of village election committee, voting proxies secret ballots and secret voting booths. In Zhejiang, starting from 1998, villagers increasingly nominate candidates directly and the number of candidates also increase accordingly. In the 2005 village elections, the *haixuan* method is adopted by 16,546 villages, which constitutes 48.8% of the total voting area; some counties even achieve 100% rate. By observing several VC elections in Jiangsu and Jiangxi in both 1999 and 2002, Xiaoteng Tang (2007, 158-162) confirms that during the process of nomination, there is a significant transformation from appointment of townships or Party branches to a higher level of competition to be detected, during which the *haixuan* method plays the most important role.

3. Political Outcomes of the Village Elections

3.1 Institutional Outcomes

With the introduction of village elections, village politics has experienced an enormous change in various ways. These changes have accordingly affected the political behavior of 3 million "village officials" and the welfare of about 650,000 villages all over China. (Note 4) A growing body of literature has studied the nature of village elections and considered the political outcomes of the elections in depth, such as their impact on village power structure, village governance and even daily life of normal mass villagers. Among them, there are actually immense debates about the democratic quality and the factual effects these elections brought on. Despite the different viewpoints and verdicts, this body of literature does provide useful firsthand data and insights into the subject of village-level elections. One of the most remarkable features attracting the focus of many observers is the institutional impact of these elections.

Through the years, village elections have undergone different stages, well from a non-competitive to a semi-competitive, and gradually to a competitive stage. A survey shows that most elections have multi-candidates in most areas of Zhejiang and in some cases the elections are often even unable to produce a full VC thanks of the high degree of competitiveness. (Note 5) Based on a nationwide sample surveys of villager opinions, Shi Tianjian (2006) indicates that 53% of the villagers polled report that in their villages more than one candidate runs for office in the 1993 election, whereas in 2002, the percentage rises to 70. Apart from that, 26 provinces have explicitly adopted the above mentioned method of *haixuan* as a required nomination process, which makes up another step toward the standardization of the elections.

The creation of this new democratic mechanism has provided gradual but great changes to traditional rural political relationship and offered new ways of conducting politics. Regardless of wide variations and many contradictions across China's countryside, the so far great efforts made by the Chinese party-state and the innovative participation of villagers have contributed to the fact, that many elements of democratic elections and village self-governance are becoming increasingly standardized and institutionalized. With the implementation of the Organic Law and other provincial supplementary regulations, such aspects as voter privacy and freedom of choice are at least to some extent strengthened. Since 1987, when the Organic Law first institutionalized village elections, electoral rights have steadily been refined. For the first time, new concepts like open nomination, election campaigns, secret voting and open counts are required and set in the law. The significance of these concepts are not just several lines in the code, but moreover also an affirmation of people's democratic rights.

Giving the common view that there has been a long absence of democracy and self governance in rural China, the contemporary village election then carries deeper meanings concerning the political culture. As Liu Yawei (2009) highlights, this preliminary exercise of democracy has "notably introduced legal procedures of elections into a culture that never entertained open and free elections". (Liu, pp. 3-4) In this new context, the execution of village elections is gradually accepted as a valuable alternative to the otherwise opaque and mysterious methods

of selecting local leaders. Yes the limitation of these elections can never be underestimated, but once promised to the people, taking away this democratic right that has been previously denied to any particular group would be enormously hard.

3.2 Impact on Different Rural Political Organizations

The introduction of the new electoral practice has brought fresh air into the basic-level power hierarchy, which was previously dominated by the higher-level governments or local Party branches. First, the relationship between VCs and township governments becomes complicated and equally equivocal, for the reason that the Organic Law supports the VCs to act and administrate autonomously, while VCs also have the obligation to implement the disciplined tasks which the state and Party hand down. To the fact that all administrative activities related to village elections are organized by local governments, township leaders belong to the most important determinators of the variation in village democracy. Thus, to a large extent, the success of village elections depends on whether township leaders support or oppose them. As Kennedy categorizes in his study based on a research of 18 village elections conducted in three counties between 2002 and 2004, there are 3 different attitudes of township authorities toward VC elections, which are those of support, of support but not whole-heartedly and of opposition. Nevertheless, village elections have to some degree changed the source of rural power as the legitimacy of the governing power in the village now comes from voters rather than from direct appointments of the township governments. Although a series of practical problems show no evidence of a total abolishment of township governments in the near future, this reduction of mid-level authority can still directly lead to a simplification of the size of township governments.

Second, this basic-level democratic practice also makes the position and function of local Party branches more vague and sophisticated. The new Organic Law in 1998 gives specific power to VCs while just defines the Party branches vaguely as the “leadership core” among village-level organizations. For some time, the village Party branches have lost their absolute influence in local governance to the elected VCs. The occasions are not seldom that these two parts come into hard confrontations. To deal with this issue, Party branches have to adapt to the new division of power and find a new way to share it with VCs. The most common method to be seen is to practice their strong influence or even to intervene during the nomination process, as both Shi and Kennedy suggest in their works. A more newly emerging phenomenon shows that some local governments and officials increasingly encourage village cadres to conduct the *yijiantiao* (hold concurrent positions in both committees). In his research Levy takes note of a significant high percentage of party members on the VCs in Guangdong, especially as VC leaders. As possible reason he considers it to be highly connected to the fact that the elected non-party leaders are often recruited into the Party, with the hope of maintaining control of VCs. Another feature attracting greater attention is the so-called two-ballot system, a system that allows even those villagers who are not in the Party to participate in nominating candidates for Party branch positions. Even though not stipulated by national regulations, in many places passing this popularity test is well accepted as a requirement for the qualified nominees. Thomas Bernstein (2006) also notices this new transformation and finds out that if a Party secretary runs for VC office and does not win, he will be replaced by someone in whom villagers have greater confidence as demonstrated in a kind of open primary election. Conversely, a winning VC chair who is still not a Party member will be recruited into the CCP and eventually promoted to the secretarial post.

3.3 Impact on Village Leaders and Villagers

The implementation of direct elections involves several hundred million Chinese peasants, who have hardly experienced any democracy. The introduction of VC elections opens up an evolutionary path leading to a brand new political atmosphere in the Chinese countryside, just as quite a number of scholarship based on fieldworks and surveys shows. One of the most obvious perspectives is the effect on the grassroots leaders and their relationship to ordinary villagers is to be and grassroots leaders. Through the elections of VCs, changes have been inevitably brought to the village power structure and rural leaders as well. According to He, these elections transfer and redistribute power in favor of the elected VCs and have thus a direct effect on the political behavior of those elected village leaders. Though they still receive pressure from higher-level authorities, they eventually become more responsible and accountable to villagers. He also takes a view that the village power has shifted from old cadres to new village chiefs, which are younger and better educated, equipped with better financial understanding, and also quite noteworthy, a larger amount of them are non-communists. Somewhat contrary to He's last point, Levy observes that Guangdong has the highest rate of village leaders who are also party secretaries or hold a position in the Party branch. But concurrently, he agrees that there has been a trend of the rise of *nengren* (rural entrepreneurial strata) into the VC through elections, which he thinks reflects the combination of struggle and cooperation between two groups of rural elites, of the new, more economically based one and the other the old, more politically based one. A common view is shared that village officials with

extensive family and personal ties with officials at higher levels may better protect their village from pressures from above or get villagers jobs in township enterprises.

The effects and influence of these elections on the villagers have indeed attracted huge bulk of international attention devoted to political reforms in rural China. Almost all the observers agree that the enthusiasm of villagers toward elections has increased and they impressively participate in politics with more awareness and right sense. This exercise of democracy has gradually cultivated a sense of political ownership as well as a new value system among the Chinese villagers, who barely had any leverage in bargaining with the powerful government. Kennedy observes through the surface of an unexpected universal dissatisfaction with elected leaders and discovers that though the approval ratings of those elected leaders are considerably unstable and low, rural people still exhibit strong support for the electoral process. Kevin O'Brien (2006) meanwhile puts his attention on the relation between village elections and the emerging concept of citizenship. He takes the view that villagers are more and more eager to become involved in local politics, with the Organic law they are empowered to induce resistance to leaders and fight for their political rights. He describes the VC election as "a breeding ground for citizenship rights" (O'Brien, pp. 388), while the villagers are best thought of as occupying an intermediate position between subjects and citizens. O'Brien's viewpoint of citizenship is to some extent supported by He, as he furthermore lays emphasize on various linkages of the elections with citizenship and rural political economy. The rational intension of villagers to protect and develop their interests and benefits, which are closely binded to the collective wealth controlled by the VCs, drives them to be more participated in the local politics. Thus, village elections can take roots and subsequently transform villagers into modern citizens.

Another feature to be noted, even usually not considered overly important, concerns the women in the villages. Many old and new factors make it traditionally difficult for women to be considerably involved in the rural politics in China. A number of both Western and Chinese scholars have devoted their focus on the political participation of women at the local level and assessed the impact of elections on women's lives. In his study on some VC elections in Guangdong and Henan, Levy takes highlights an obvious percentage of women on VCs, despite controversial suggestions to increase female representation, such as replacing a male victor if no woman is elected, or simply being appointed by the above authorities. Levy's view is supported by He, as he analyses the data he collected based on his field-work in Zhejiang. However by deepening the research, he indicates that there is an evident gap between men and women concerning the political attitudes and enthusiasm. Women are still disadvantaged through an inadequate representation in the VCs and the few representatives are mostly allocated secondary roles. (Note 6) But at the same time he also acknowledges a gradual improvement of women's political status and increasing positive attitudes toward politics with the help of legal force and even various forms of political intervention.

3.4 Influences on Rural Governance

Given its authoritarian character in China, this kind of "pre-democratic" elections in a Leninist party-state seems quite spectacular. It is estimated that China's leaders have opted not just to keep elections but also to strengthen the electoral system so villagers will realize that it is their own elected village leaders, not the central leadership or the Party, who bear responsibility for problems at the local level. Cases of rural resistance and tension involving large number of people, which the Chinese government calls "collective incidents", have been increasing amazingly in the last years. (Note 7) Yet the fact that almost all of the demonstrations and riots take place in the countryside are directed at local leaders, not at the central leadership, is evidence that elections have indeed made villagers feel the fault for their problems lies with the local leadership.

The emergence of the new democratic mechanism has brought up new compliance and cooperations mode to the old rural hierarchy, which has traditionally been much simpler with the character of just order and obey. Kennedy develops a selective policy implementation hypothesis, in which he compares the implementation of VC elections with other responsibilities of local cadres such as burden reduction, revenue collection or birth control, applying the concepts of "hard targets" and "soft targets" raised by Li and O'Brien. (Note 8) Based on interviews and analysis he argues that whether or not the implementation of the Organic Law belongs to the hard targets of rural cadres would have immense effect on the quality of the elections. The local cadres in townships or Party branches are obliged to fulfill the targets, but they may have no idea who they will be dealing with after the election in villages, so they will certainly either try to interfere in the elections, or adapt themselves to the newly elected VCs. For this reason, the working relationship between VCs, townships and Party branches is redefined.

Theories of democracy argue that these grassroots elections can open an access to the power for common rural citizens. In their recent assessment of village elections O'Brien and Han propose a distinction between "access to

power” and “exercise of power” and suggest laying more emphasis on the complementary transformation of exercising power. One of the most important features is the financial management and transparency supervision of the rural administration. In order to enhance transparency and thus raise trust in the probity of village leaders, the 1998 Organic Law already mandates that certain village affairs need to be publicized at least twice a year, with the focus on financial matters. In his recent research Alpermann examines the specialized control groups consisting of villagers in different provinces, with the aim of supervising veracity of published items and in particular financial aspects of village governance. Based on the research conducted in Guangdong and Henan, Levy also takes a view at the quality of increasing democratic supervision and reducing corruption in rural China. Nonetheless, both Alpermann and Levy somehow acknowledge the low levels of villagers’ trust in the accuracy of transparency-related publications, as well as limitation of the effects of different village-level systems of combating corruption.

4. Relative Limitations

Since the first experiment of village election, China’s rural grassroots democratic reform has experienced significant transformation in recent years, especially after the promulgation and the revision of the Organic Law. While it appears understandable to explain the attention paid to the improvements and positive impact of this basic-level political reform in rural China, the factual effectiveness and outcomes can never be easily overestimated. From the very beginning of the appearance of these basic-level elections, critical and skeptical voices have been expressed at various sections throughout the legislation process and the implementation. Since the Organic Law is written in broad language, the room for interpretation is quite large. Again given the wide variations existing between different localities of the Chinese countryside, there is not surprisingly a wide variation in the quality and character of village governments throughout China and the extent of those changes and their impacts remain furthermore somehow hard to gauge.

In the 1987 Organic Law, there is an obvious absence of enforcement and adjudication. Detailed articles are still hard to be found in the revised new Organic Law, nor in the provincial regulations. Because of that, many of the rules of village elections are inconsistent and hardly conform to universal election standards. Quite noteworthy is that the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) at the top play a key role in supervising and promoting the election implementation, while its subordinates, the provincial and local civil affairs officials, are at the same time responsible for conducting elections. Despite their great efforts to promote village democracy, putting the MoCA and its local bureaus at the center of the electoral process seems problematic. As a result, such institutions as an independent electoral commission is absent, which makes one of the greatest importance of the standardization of a democratic election. This absence makes the MoCA accordingly impossible to effectively supervise and promote the implementation of elections in the Chinese countryside. Meanwhile, the MoCA is in fact one of the least powerful ministries in the central government and its local bureaus are actually more dependent on the local authorities. (Note 9) The multi-role of MoCA puts itself in a difficult situation if occasions of conflicts of interests occur, which are unfortunately not rare.

Even where VC elections are considerably democratically conducted, given the traditional political culture in China, they still can not escape the influence or intervention of the higher-level authorities and the Party. Violations of election rules occur because townships and Party branches have a vital interest in the outcome of village elections. This interference in village elections is one way in which township officials have weakened the competitiveness of the elections in order to restrict campaigns and to manipulate the electoral process. The occasion that the candidates are appointed by township governments or by party secretaries is often to be encountered. But this kind of appointment faces inevitably resistance from villagers, for instance through not voting for the official nominated candidates or making the elections fail to produce any leader. As an empirical study shows, only about 35% of respondents were satisfied with the nomination process when the candidates were directly appointed by townships or the Party, while the figure went up to 70% if the villagers were able to elect candidates. (Note 10)

Another feature demonstrating the drawback in the elections is the increase of vote-buying. Distinguished from *lapiao* (canvass for votes through appropriate channels), *maipiao* (offer money to voters) is illegitimate but a de facto increasingly wide-spread phenomena during the electoral process. In several counties in Zhejiang, for example, almost a third of the interviewees reported that they witnessed various activities of vote-buying. (Note 11) In a famous case which happened in Shanxi, the winner promised and did pay approximately 145,000 RMB for the office of a vice leader. The vote-buying exists more often not in form of cash, but rather in the forms of distributing cigarettes, small gifts, offering free meals and sometimes even promising of free seeds or cable TV hook-up to the villagers. This sort of “unhealthy practices” have caught since long academic as well as official attentions, yet there seems to be no obvious solution to this problem until now, particularly since there is no

unambiguous definition of vote-buying in the law and the regulations dealing with electoral violations do not cover village-level elections.

It is almost common knowledge that the traditional rural Chinese society was and still is a one with prevalent kinship culture. Therefore, the elections not only receive influence from the township and the Party, but the lineage also plays a role not to be underestimated, particularly in those poorer villages without multi-surnames. This culture of kinship expresses its influence on the villagers' voting behaviour, in which they may nominate and elect inefficient or incapable leaders in order to protect the benefits of their own lineage. Once in power, the elected leaders are more likely to represent only their own clan's interests, in issues like land distribution or birth control. For this reason, the lineage division in the villages expresses a relatively high degree of effect on the procedure and results of the elections, resulting to an exacerbation of this division through the elections and leading to a less efficient village governance, as well as difficulties of bringing more common wealth to all villagers or better co-operation with higher authorities and the Party branches.

5. Tentative Conclusion and Prospect

Over the past thirty years, great economic, political and social transformations have taken place in rural China. In the context of those changes, rural politics has also experienced enormous development, while the village elections attract most of the domestic and international focus on China's democratic reform. With the highlights of the promulgation and the revision of the Organic Law, which sets up a milestone in the institutionalization process of the basic-level elections, village-level elections, together with the crucial improvement of village governance they brought on, have already placed China on an irreversible track toward more democratic and transparent rural politics. The village election, seen against China's long tradition of rural elitism and authoritarianism, is believed to be only the start of a long democratic transition from the grassroots. After studying the cases and analysing the data he collected, Kennedy concludes "that democratic practices have become more widespread and institutionalized." (Kennedy, 2009, pp. 393) This idea is shared by O'Brien and Han as they acknowledge that village elections have to some extent made policies and leaders more acceptable to voters, enhanced trust in local cadres, increased popular political awareness, and even nurtured a sense of citizenship.

Yet, the limitations and drawbacks of the contemporary elections should by no means be neglected and one could hardly exaggerate their actual impact. The urgency of continued improvements to village elections ought to be considerably valued, as Tan writes in his recent essay: "Village elections are presently at a crossroad: processes and rules still must be improved and further delays will only undermine the credibility of the entire reform effort." (Tan, 2009, pp. 415) As suggestions to improve the institutionalization and the standardization of these elections, he asks for the introduction of independent and separate electoral commissions instead of elections being arranged by MoCA, allowing higher level of candidate-initiated nomination in the form of such as the *haixuan*, as well as the synchronization of elections dates in order to make the conduction of elections more cost-effective and avoid chaos which may occur during the balloting.

After a decade of elections in the Chinese countryside, increasing numbers of scholars, government officials and election practitioners tend to hope that this democratic mechanism should have wider and deeper meaning for China's ongoing political reform, for instance the extension of direct elections to village party secretaries, to urban politics, and in particular, to the next higher administrative level of townships. Confronted by the challenges of elected village leaders and the resistance of villagers they receive, some local leaders are motivated to employ election in townships as a new way of political ruling. With the inspiration of the 1998 Buyun election in Sichuan, many local experiments continued all over China, including electing the township government leaders, party secretaries, and even county magistrate. All these progresses are being made in the context of direct village elections. Despite those successful pioneers, the anticipated boom of this political experiments did not take place since the opposition from national leaders and the existing structural institutions are far greater than the driving forces. In a well-received speech at Harvard University in late 2003, Premier Wen claimed that China did not have the prerequisites for holding higher-level elections. (Note 12) By expressing this point of view, a clear signal was given that the Hu-Wen leading team had no plans to upgrade the elections above village-level on a regular basis or on a large scale.

Just like a lot of other reforms in the Chinese history, the village elections in contemporary China is to be characterized as a mixed bag of results. Truly this democratic exercise of village elections in contemporary China is not the first one in the Chinese history. The briefly experimented grassroots political reforms of the late Qing and Republic could not be completed due to the war environment and social disorder. Ironically they exacerbated the social tension, triggered greater instability and even revolutions which finally led to the collapse

of the regimes. Certainly history does not repeat itself, but it may hold lesson for the future. The practice of direct village elections involves several hundred million Chinese voters who have already experienced these procedures and are getting increasingly familiar with the standardized procedures. This can be indeed a democracy seminar promised by Peng Zhen, China's leading advocate of direct village democracy. (Note 13) So which direction to go from here? Given all the improvements and also contradictories of the village elections, a definitive answer can hardly be reached and of course there is still a long march for China toward democracy and self-governance.

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Notes

Note 1. For the transformation of the people's communes to village committees, see John Burns, pp. 88; Fan Jie, Thomas Heberer, & Wolfgang Taubmann, pp. 194-196.

Note 2. This is from article 2 of the Organic Law of the Villagers Committee of the People's Republic of China. Translated from the original Chinese version.

Note 3. For detailed information of the observation, see Richard Levy, pp. 24-25.

Note 4. While Willy Wo-Lap Lam states the figure as "more than 90% of the nation's 680,000 VCs", see Willy Wo-Lap Lam, pp. 113.

Note 5. The survey is conducted by He Baogang and Lang Youxing, see He Baogang and Lang Youxing, pp. 248-257.

Note 6. For a concrete study on women's participation in the elections and their roles in the VCs, see Kevin O'Brien, pp. 390.

Note 7. "The number jumped from 8,706 in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005, with about 40 per cent of them occurring in the countryside." From: Li Lianjiang and Kevin J. O'Brien, pp. 4

Note 8. These concepts are announced by Li Lianjiang and Kevin O'Brien. John J. Kennedy agreed with them and adopted them in his study.

Note 9. This view of the MoCA is held by Tianjian Shi, see Shi Tianjian, pp. 357.

Note 10. For a detailed listing of the figures, see John J. Kennedy (2002), pp. 476-478.

Note 11. Various case of vote buying are recorded in He Baogang, pp. 58-59; He Baogang and Lang Youxing, pp. 270-274.

Note 12. Part of the content of this speech is translated and interpreted in Willy Wo-Lap Lam, pp. 109.

Note 13. For Peng Zhen's attitude towards China's democratic future, see Tan Qingshan (2006), pp. 84-86.