

# Muddling toward Democracy

Political Change in  
Grassroots China

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## Summary

**A**mong the most significant political reforms implemented by the Chinese government since 1989 is the introduction of competitive elections into rural villages. This study, based largely on fieldwork conducted between 1995 and 1997, examines China's efforts to bring competitive elections to the country's rural areas and attempts to explain why local democracy has proved more successful in some places than in others. By focusing on the realities and complexities of rural China, the study also attempts to reintroduce China-as-China into public dialogue.

The basis for village elections is a law promulgated in 1987 by the National People's Congress, China's nominal legislature, which specifies that village leaders be directly elected by the villagers themselves for terms of three years. Elected village leaders are not government officials. Rather, they are transmission belts between the government and the villagers, reporting popular opinion and proposals to the government, helping to maintain social order, and mediating civil disputes. The election law is less the result of popular demand than of an unusual alliance between conservative party leaders, who believe that democratic elections will help maintain stability and thus preserve party authority, and younger government reformers, who have been influenced both by Western political values and by the success of democratic reform in Taiwan.

At the central level, the task of overseeing the nationwide implementation of village-level democracy has been assigned to the Ministry of Civil Affairs. For the foreseeable future, the evolution of the electoral process will be dictated by government officials rather than grassroots or nongovernmental organizations.

China has some 1 million villages, and they are remarkably diverse. We have no idea how many peasants live in villages with democratically elected leaders. International observers have witnessed, at most, only a few dozen elections. Village leadership must be seen along a broad continuum, from the least to the most democratic. At the least democratic end of the spectrum are villages where elections have failed and leadership has broken down, as well as villages that continue to be governed by "local emperors." At the most democratic end are villages with popular and innovative new leaders elected by majority vote, who work in tandem with village representative assemblies. In between are villages where elections are merely nominal. In some, candidates are chosen by higher-level authorities without regard to villagers' wishes. In others, the distribution of patronage guarantees a candidate's electoral success.

The best of China's village elections are very good, however, recognizably competitive even with their distinctly Chinese characteristics. There is no obvious correlation between the level of economic development and the level of rural democratization. Rather, the villages that have staged the most successful elections are those that have received the greatest attention from higher-level officials most committed to making village democracy work. Genuinely competitive elections seem to have a greater likelihood of success in more pluralistic villages—that is, villages where neither economic nor political power is

overly concentrated and where villagers engage in a multiplicity of associations: religious, political, economic, social, and familial. Thus, villages where wealth is created by many entrepreneurs are more likely to have competitive elections than villages where enterprises are ostensibly collectively owned but are in fact managed by one person or a small group of people. Many villages, though, are electing their most prosperous members to lead them.

Villages with strong and active representative assemblies are similarly more likely to foster a dispersion of power, and thus to encourage genuine political competition. The village representative assembly offers a check against the power of both the party branch and the village chief, providing villagers with a significant voice in those decisions that most directly affect them, and fostering greater transparency in village finances. Enormous organizational efforts will be required to expand competitive elections into all of China's villages. The details of election procedures must be taught, supervised, and learned. Training is one of the major challenges currently facing the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The ministry plans to train 12,000 national-, provincial-, and county-level officials and 3,330 prefectural-level trainers (for China's 333 prefectures), who in turn will train, within the prefectures, 1.5 million township-level officials. The ministry's goal is that by the year 2000 each prefecture will have one model county for village self-government, each county will have one model township, and each township will have one model village. These models, the ministry hopes, will have a demonstration effect that will spread to all of China's villages.

Longer-term development of basic-level democracy will require significant changes at both the bottom and the top. At the grassroots, democracy will remain stunted without the development of a more pluralistic, civil society. At the top, the development of democracy will ultimately require a major commitment at the highest reaches of Chinese political power. Key people at this level pay lip service to democratic reform, but no one has articulated a carefully considered long-term plan. Unless leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji begin soon to articulate a new rationale for democracy, that task is likely to be left to the generation of officials now in their forties and fifties, who will come to power early in the twenty-first century. These younger officials tend to be less tied to ideology than the Soviet-trained technocrats currently at the helm of Chinese politics, and they are more broadly educated and more attuned to ideas from the West—and, more importantly, from Taiwan. The passage of time will eventually give China a leadership more disposed by education and experience to favor democratic norms.

Foreign cooperation, sensitively tendered, can exert a positive influence on China's democratic process. Several international organizations and U.S. NGOs are already working closely with the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs to promote grassroots political change. In 1996, the United Nations Development Programme began contributing to a three-year program to develop curricula, training materials, and capacity for "training the trainers" at the ministry's new Rural Official Training Center on the outskirts of Beijing. The European Union is working out implementation of a \$12 million, multi-faceted project to assist the Beijing training center and to promote two-way academic exchanges between China and the European Union. Among U.S. organizations, the Ford Foundation, the International Republican Institute, the Asia Foundation, and the Carter

Center have all been active, supporting efforts by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and by grassroots reformers to implement the election law. This cooperation should be continued and expanded.

For the foreseeable future, the only way to influence the process of democratization in China is to work directly and cooperatively with the Chinese government. The process will be a long one, and Chinese democracy will necessarily look very different from ours. In the meantime, even minor, imperfect reforms are better than none. The competitive election of village committees is a major advance over higher-level appointments of village leaders, election by acclamation, and noncompetitive elections. The free and fair village elections now being fostered by the Ministry of Civil Affairs present rural people with choices they did not have before, give them a voice in the selection of their local leadership, allow (for the first time since 1949) for a peaceful transition between leaders, and provide a sense of political participation and empowerment. At their best, village elections introduce the notions of competition, choice, and justice into local societies where submission to authority and domination by local emperors have long been the norm.

At present, U.S. NGOs are better structured to cooperate with China than are government agencies, both because of the NGOs' longtime expertise at the grassroots and because they are better cushioned against Washington's changing, and often powerful, political winds. Cooperative efforts could benefit greatly from an infusion of funding, both governmental and private, however. A multiplicity of efforts by a variety of NGOs runs little risk of overlap. Potentially fruitful areas for NGO action include identifying reform-minded leaders at the provincial and local levels; tailoring training programs in local-level governance and election procedures to meet Chinese needs; and funding collaborative, policy-oriented research into the problems facing people in the Chinese countryside.

Even with the best of intentions, such cooperative programs carry no guarantees of success, and the hope of making China "more like us" is unlikely to be fulfilled. Furthermore, despite the best efforts of the Chinese government to confront the several crises that rapid economic development is bringing in its wake, some instability, even violence, is almost inevitable. Although fear of chaos led some in Beijing to support the introduction of grassroots elections, the outbreak of disorder could equally well spur attempts to reassert authoritarian control. These are dangerous times for China—and therefore dangerous for us all. This is thus a story without an ending. While there is room for significant cooperation between the United States and China as the story unfolds, it is a history that China and the Chinese people will largely write themselves.

## Foreword

There is a Chinese expression for the coexistence of contradictory forces in a given entity: “To sleep in the same bed while dreaming different dreams.” Democratic elections in China’s villages coexisting with a one-party dictatorship are such unlikely bedfellows. Even when the elections are limited, localized, and orchestrated by the dictatorship, the coexistence of popular, competitive voting and one-party control still strikes most Westerners as peculiar. Such contradictions, however, reflect life in today’s People’s Republic of China, a country being pulled in different directions by complex and competing forces: modernization and tradition, socialism and capitalism, centralization and localism, order and chaos. Contemporary China has a tendency to defy expectations and generalizations. For those of us in the West whose job or interest it is to understand the People’s Republic and to factor its likely future development into our own plans, it is imperative that we grasp the idiosyncracies and complexity of the world’s most populous—and potentially most economically formidable and politically explosive—nation.

To this end, Anne Thurston’s vivid account of the practice of village elections in China is an invaluable resource. A longtime student of China and a frequent visitor there, Thurston understands better than most the need to leave stereotypes at home when exploring the People’s Republic, and instead to bring an open mind, an ear attuned to cultural nuance, and a journalist’s eye for assessing what is really going on beneath surface appearances. Thus equipped, she has traveled several times to China to investigate village-level democracy and has returned with fresh information and rich insights. In this report, she offers a fascinating, first-hand look at village elections and village life in China today. Her account will provoke much speculation about the longer-term implications of Communist Party experimentation with local democracy for the party’s own future.

In early 1994, Thurston met Wang Zhenyao, a key official in the implementation of the nationally directed policy of holding elections for village assemblies and village committees. Wang belongs to the reform-minded generation that came of age during the Cultural Revolution—although, as the author explains, it is not only the reform-minded who have championed these elections. Confusingly, the policy of local democracy has been promoted, both before and since the violent suppression of mass demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in 1989, by aging conservatives fearful that the local party cadres had lost touch with the peasants and might further discredit Communist Party rule. Their hope was that the revolutionary tradition of the “mass line” could be revived with local elections—in contrast to the Maoist tradition of periodic “mass movements” and chaotic political purges.

Between January 1995 and March 1997, Thurston observed three rounds of village elections in nearly twenty villages spread throughout three provinces: Sichuan, in China’s southwest heartland; Jilin, in the northeast; and Fujian, on the coast opposite Taiwan. As *Muddling toward Democracy* makes abundantly clear, at every turn Thurston encountered



remarkable diversity in the character and extent of electoral democracy as practiced in today's China. She also saw great disparities among and within provinces in the type of leadership, economic development, and sense of community to be found in individual villages; indeed, even if her study did not mention democratization, this assessment would merit publication for providing an all-too-rare glimpse of contemporary life in China's villages, which seem as various as they are numerous.

Despite this diversity, Thurston has drawn several conclusions from her field research. "First, the best elections are very good indeed, recognizably democratic even with their distinctly Chinese characteristics. Second, enormous organizational efforts will be required to expand competitive elections into all of China's villages. Third, a core of people at the Ministry of Civil Affairs is determined to ensure that . . . the best examples of village elections become commonplace. . . . Fourth, key people at the highest reaches of the party publicly support the ministry's goals."

*Muddling toward Democracy* concludes with a recommendation that the United States support China's ongoing democratic experiment. The author counsels that, for the most part, assistance should not be provided directly by the U.S. government, and should instead be channeled through nongovernmental organizations suited to low-key, low-level cooperative efforts. This advice seems wise, both because of U.S. domestic considerations and because of the risk that high-profile support for democratization by the United States would weaken political backing in China for the process. China, as we have noted, is today being pulled in different directions by contradictory forces. Should the "Middle Kingdom" fracture under these strains, the results would be devastating—not just for China itself, nor just for East Asia, but for the entire international community. "These are dangerous times for China," the author remarks, "and therefore dangerous for us all." As Americans, we are idealistically inclined to support democratization whenever and wherever it occurs; our national interest also argues in favor of supporting political reform in China, on the grounds that we are likely to have more harmonious relations with a popularly supported government. But neither our idealism nor our national interest will be served if we embark on a course that threatens the stability of the Chinese body politic. Thurston allows the reader to draw broader lessons from her account. One such lesson would appear to be that while we are right to express our support for democratization in China, it would be counterproductive to insist on it.

The reader is sure to find *Muddling toward Democracy* an important contribution to the ongoing debate in the United States about U.S.-Sino relations. Highly illuminating, sometimes surprising, and invariably colorful and compelling, this report is likely to become required reading for those who wish to understand what is happening at China's grassroots. As such, it complements other recent reports issued by the United States Institute of Peace that focus on what is happening at the "rice roots" level of today's China. For instance, the Institute has just published *The China Challenge in the Twenty-First Century*, in which former Institute fellow Chen Jian examines the foreign policy behavior of the People's Republic from the perspective of those inside the country. The Institute has also supported significant work on broader trends in the East Asian region, as reflected in two recent Special Reports: *Beyond the Asian Financial Crisis*, published in April 1998; and *North Korea's Decline and China's Strategic Dilemmas*, issued in October 1997.



Like these Special Reports, *Muddling toward Democracy* seeks to provide foreign observers with the information and the analytical tools necessary to fashion a far-sighted policy toward a country that is full of surprises, tensions, and possibilities—and of enduring significance for America's interests.

RICHARD H. SOLOMON, PRESIDENT  
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## Introduction

*Without democracy there can be no modernization. We will ensure that our people hold democratic elections, make policy decisions democratically, carry out democratic management and supervision, and enjoy extensive rights and freedoms under the law. The overall goal of our political restructuring is to build socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics while upholding and improving our basic political system.*

—Jiang Zemin, October 30, 1997<sup>1</sup>

**T**his study examines the efforts of some people in China to bring competitive elections to the country's rural areas and attempts to explain why some places have been successful in introducing village elections and others have not.

The study is also an effort to reintroduce China-as-China into public dialogue. Since the People's Liberation Army moved forcibly into Beijing in June 1989, bringing a murderous end to weeks of peaceful protest, the bipartisan consensus on American foreign policy toward China has crumbled. Public debate often seems dominated by special interests—business, human rights, labor, right-to-life.<sup>2</sup> The realities and complexities of China itself—the most populous country in the world, with one of the oldest civilizations, in the throes of a profoundly unsettling economic and social transition—get lost in the debate.

The situation in rural China is in danger of becoming part of that debate. Proponents of a new partnership with that country are predisposed to exaggerate the success of village elections. Those who view twenty-first-century China as a potential threat are inclined to conclude that village elections are a sham and sympathetic foreign observers of them dupes. But if it is true that no relationship in the twenty-first century will be more important for the United States than the one we have with China,<sup>3</sup> then China must be understood for itself and not just as a tool of domestic political debate. As a recent evaluation of China's future points out, "Getting China right is a deadly serious matter. . . . Ambitious American politicians should place China off-limits as a subject of demagoguery."<sup>4</sup>

My introduction to China's village elections began with a chance meeting in February 1994 with Wang Zhenyao, then the deputy director of basic-level governance at China's Ministry of Civil Affairs. Wang was a visiting scholar at Harvard University that semester and had been in the audience during a presentation I made at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. My assigned topic was whether the United States should continue granting most favored nation status to China. I argued, on human rights grounds, that China's most favored nation status should continue and opposed any policy that might isolate the Chinese people. Wang Zhenyao liked what I had to say.

We met again several months later in Beijing. Wang was officially charged with nationwide implementation of competitive elections in China's villages, and he began telling me about his work. Until then, I had known little of these village elections or what village committees did.

Wang made clear that elections in rural China, though gaining wide acceptance among the peasants, were not the result of popular demand. Rather, village elections were the result of an unusual coalition between liberal political reformers and the country's most conservative party elders, who had come to fear a breakdown of rural order following the collapse of people's communes in the early 1980s. Far from heralding the introduction of competing political parties, elections were seen by conservatives as a way to preserve Communist Party rule—by bringing more honest, popular, and reform-minded leaders into positions of local power and thus forestalling dissent. Village elections were an example of “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics.”

Wang Zhenyao and the Ministry of Civil Affairs graciously helped arrange much of the field research for this study. In January 1995, I visited Fengyang county in Anhui province,<sup>5</sup> where the commune system first began disintegrating, thus setting the stage for the introduction of village self-governance. Between January 1995 and March 1997, I observed three rounds of village elections—in Jilin, Sichuan, and Fujian provinces, in nearly twenty villages.<sup>6</sup> To get a sense of the diversity of political organization in rural China, my friend Tong Yanqi, now a professor at the University of Utah, arranged for me to spend nearly a week with her, in November 1995, in a village we have agreed to call, pseudonymously, Bend in the River, where (admittedly half-hearted) attempts to hold elections have failed.<sup>7</sup> This study thus begins (after an opening description of a 1995 election in a Sichuan village) with an overview of Fengyang county, an explanation of the collapse of people's communes, and a discussion of the ensuing political uncertainty and of the debate over how to ensure both stability and legitimate political authority in the Chinese countryside. The second, and lengthiest, part of this study, based almost entirely on my field research, describes the range of village leadership in China today, on a continuum from least to most democratic.

Despite growing international interest in China's village elections and the enthusiasm with which some Americans have greeted them, the claims we can make about these elections are limited. We have no idea how many peasants live in villages with democratically elected leaders or how many still suffer under the rule of “local emperors.” China has some 1 million villages. International observers have witnessed, at most, only a few dozen elections. Although the quality of these contests varies considerably, foreigners are undoubtedly seeing the best of China's village elections, in relatively prosperous areas. Many of China's villages remain poor, and few of them are likely to be run democratically. This study emphasizes the diversity of rural China today—of village leadership, level of economic development, and sense of community—while exploring why some villages are more successful than others in progressing toward democratic rule. Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn is the need for further research by both Chinese and foreign scholars.

Our limited understanding nonetheless permits several relatively certain conclusions. First, the best elections are very good, recognizably competitive even with their distinctly Chinese characteristics. Second, enormous organizational efforts will be required to expand competitive elections into all of China's villages. Third, for the foreseeable future, the evolution of the electoral process will be dictated by government officials rather than grassroots or nongovernmental organizations. A core of people at all levels of the political

hierarchy—from the national-level Ministry of Civil Affairs, to the provincial civil affairs bureaus, to leaders in counties and townships—is determined to ensure that today's models, the best examples of village elections, become commonplace.

Longer-term development of basic-level democracy in China will require significant changes at both the bottom and the top. At the grassroots, democracy will remain stunted without the development of a more pluralistic, civil society. And the development of democracy will ultimately require a major commitment at the highest reaches of Chinese political power. Key people at this level pay public lip service to democratic reform, but no one has articulated a concrete vision. Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin, at the September 1997 meeting of the Fifteenth Party Congress and in his October 1997 visit to the United States, promised a future expansion of the electoral process.<sup>8</sup> China's recently selected premier, Zhu Rongji, has said that he is "in favor of democratic elections," and leaves open the possibility that the positions of president and premier might eventually be elected.<sup>9</sup> But he is cautious about timing. "We need some time to look at that," he is reported as saying, "and it's hard to predict when it will take place."<sup>10</sup> Much stronger, more explicit commitments will be necessary before major democratic progress can be made.

To conclude that village elections represent the first step in a long-term process of democratization in China may thus be wishful thinking. The final part of this study must be tentative, offering a few thoughts about the future course of democratic reform in China and highlighting cooperative efforts by American nongovernmental organizations.

China is in a period of tremendously rapid change, with underlying threats to stability and cohesion. The current Asian economic crisis has revealed how fragile rapid economic development can be, but few Americans fully appreciate how profoundly unsettling to ordinary people China's momentous economic and social changes have been and will continue to be. The government has yet to face the several crises that the transition is bringing in its wake—a seriously overextended banking sector, parasitic state enterprises, massive internal migration, increasing unemployment, widespread official corruption, and a collapse of old values.

This is thus a story without an ending. Although there is room for significant cooperation between the United States and China as the story unfolds, it is a history that China and the Chinese people will largely write themselves.

## One

## Muddling toward Democracy: Rural Sichuan Province, November 1995

*Most analyses of government and politics in China start at the top and concentrate on the Central Government. A more realistic picture can be obtained, however, if one starts at the bottom and examines how government and politics operate at the level where they touch the vast masses of China's rural population. What is the impact today, for example, of [government] rule on a farmer, a village, and a rural district in Szechwan?*

— A. Doak Barnett, 1948, reporting on a trip to rural Sichuan<sup>11</sup>

The villagers were listening, in evident boredom, to the droning instructions of higher-level authorities—officials from the county and township. The meeting was taking place in the school yard, and the peasants were sitting, row by row, on low wooden benches. They had carried the benches from their homes, across the raised earthen pathways that separate the paddy fields and connect the scattered clusters of houses that constitute the village. Sichuan villages are configured differently from those in other parts of China. Elsewhere, houses are usually clumped in a single concentration, the village is surrounded by fields, and the farmer must leave the village to reach his fields. The Sichuan village may have three or four houses in close proximity, but the inhabitants are scattered, their homes interspersed with rice paddies, vegetable plots, and fishponds. The province is green year-round, so the terraced fields, the bamboo groves, and the whitewashed houses with their dark tiled roofs paint a bucolic scene.

The communist leadership has always been fond of meetings, and this could have been any peasant meeting since the communist revolution of 1949. Even the familiar dark blue and gray cotton jackets and trousers, worn by the older peasants especially, were reminiscent of earlier eras. Villagers had gathered like this during the period of land reform in the early 1950s, when wealthy landlords were overthrown and their land and houses distributed to the poor tenant farmers. They had met during the Great Leap Forward that started in 1958, when collectively held land was amalgamated into gigantic communes and the energies of hundreds of millions of peasants were poured into useless backyard steel furnaces. They had come together again during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, when official authority was assaulted and the whole country seemed to implode. During the Cultural Revolution, such gatherings were often used to purge unwanted officials. That movement, like others before it, was brutal, leaving countless innocent victims and tearing at the fabric of Chinese society.

But this meeting was different. Some of the younger women were wearing colorful skirts and blouses, and a few of their male peers wore loose-fitting Western-style suits. Several officials—distinguished always by their pale, smooth skin and the cut of their

hair and their clothes—were wearing white shirts and ties. With the death of Mao in 1976, the destructive political campaigns had finally come to an end. In a dramatic departure from the Maoist tradition, these peasants were gathered to vote, in a direct and democratic election, for their village chief and village committee.

The incumbent chief, plump and round in a Western suit, his smooth, unwrinkled skin showing little sign of the sun, had first been elected three years earlier. Now he was running again. He had served as the village doctor for twenty years before assuming office in 1992 and attributed his victory then to the fact that everyone knew and trusted him. His younger, drabber challenger lacked the self-assurance of the sitting chief, promising in his campaign speech only to “try to make things better” without explaining how.

Things had already become much better under the administration of the incumbent. Even without meeting the contenders or listening to their campaign speeches, I would have bet on him. The road leading from the two-lane highway to the village had been newly paved, and our driver told us that the village chief had been responsible for bringing the project to fruition. In other villages, probing ineptly for the peasants’ conception of human rights, I had sometimes asked whether there was anything they felt was absolutely their right and something they deserved to have. The answer often came quickly and without hesitation: “Yes, roads.” A village chief who could take credit for paving a road, thus linking the peasants to their market, was likely to be reelected.

The 300,000 yuan to build the road (more than \$36,000 at the 1997 exchange rate) had come not from taxes but from the fruits of the village fishponds and a collectively owned factory. The collective coffers had been nearly depleted because of the project. Only 30,000 yuan remained. But average yearly income had increased from 600 yuan (approximately \$75) in 1992 to 1,050 yuan (\$130) in 1995. The doctor was doing much better than the average villager. His income was some 50,000 yuan (\$6,250) a year—from his medical practice and his private fishpond, he said.

When the authorities’ instructions had been delivered and the brief campaign speeches were over, the voting began. Taped music, ranging incongruously from the *Internationale* to Canto pop, blared from loudspeakers strategically placed around the school yard. The audience had been sitting according to plan in “small groups,” roughly equivalent to the old production team during the days of the people’s commune. In fact, the notion of a small group as an organizational unit can be traced back to well before 1949, to the *baojia* system. As described in C. K. Yang’s classic study of the Chinese village, the *baojia* system “was based on the family as the primary unit of collective responsibility for the proper and law-abiding conduct of all its members. Ten families formed a *bao*, and ten *bao* formed a *jia*. . . . Several *jia* formed a *xiang*, sometimes called an administrative village.”<sup>12</sup>

In front of each small group were a blackboard and three tables taken from the classrooms—the kind a teacher stands behind when lecturing. Election officials sat at one table, checking off voters as they were given their ballots, dipping each person’s thumb in the pasty red ink that is used for official stamps, and then pressing the reddened thumb against the appropriate name on the voter registration roll. The second table served as a secret ballot booth. Slim bamboo poles had been attached to each corner of the table, and festive red paper had been hung on three sides, affording the voter privacy. On the third

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table sat a cardboard ballot box, also covered in red paper. (Red is the color of joy and thus of weddings in China.)

As people began lining up to get their ballots, the voting was orderly. But queuing is not a Chinese custom (as anyone who has ever waited for a Chinese bus can attest) and soon people were crowded around the officials, pushing and shoving with laughing good humor, trying to grab their ballots. Privacy is not a Chinese concept, either (the word has been introduced into their language from outside), and as the ballots were given out faster than people could vote, two and three people began crowding into the ballot booth at a time as others hovered outside. People, women especially, began consulting on who was the better candidate and how to fill out the ballots. Some took their ballots to more private spots away from the crowd, and a few insisted on being left alone in the voting booth, but the process was often a consultative affair.

When the voting was complete, the ballots were counted by small group, and the results were tallied on each blackboard and then added together at the end. Some of the small groups were voting in bloc. Everyone stayed to watch the tallies. The villagers were being compensated for their time off from work.

The incumbent won by a landslide.



## Two

## The Roots of Political Reform in China's Villages

**A**sham, as some of China's critics claim? Or a major step forward in meaningful political reform, as many observers, commentators (and President Clinton, Vice President Gore, and House Speaker Gingrich) seem to believe?<sup>13</sup>

The political situation in China's 1 million villages has recently been added, if only as a footnote, to the public discourse on U.S. foreign policy toward China. Several American nongovernmental organizations are cooperating with Chinese officials working for grass-roots democracy, but few Americans have more than a rudimentary notion of what is happening in China's villages. Only a handful have witnessed village elections firsthand.

American perceptions of China are bifurcated. Focus on the current pace of economic growth (averaging some 10 percent a year for almost two decades) and the rapid rise in per capita income and conclude, as *The Economist* did in 1992, that China has "brought about the biggest improvements in human welfare anywhere at any time."<sup>14</sup> Believe that the night of June 3–4, 1989, when the Chinese People's Liberation Army moved into Beijing, brutally suppressing the peaceful popular demonstrations that had been going on for weeks, remains the defining moment of the regime, and agree with *New York Times* columnist A.M. Rosenthal that doing business with China is a form of "moral atrocity." Both extremes miss fundamental truths of contemporary China and ignore the vast majority of the Chinese people—the nearly 900 million who live in the countryside.<sup>15</sup>

The effort to bring democracy to China's villages has taken place so quietly, so tentatively, and so decidedly unevenly that even urban intellectuals in China are surprised to learn that peasants are being allowed to vote. Historically, demands for democracy have been urban based, led by students and intellectuals, many of whose hopes for democratization stop at the city gates.

"What about Sichuan, with its huge population, all those peasants?" a thirty-something protester asked me in Tiananmen Square in May 1989, as hundreds of other demonstrators gathered round. "How could they have democracy? Excuse me, but all those peasants . . ." The young man had graduated from Peking University in 1982. "We had a democratic movement there when I was a student," he said. "It was real democracy. We know what democracy is." Democracy was fine for urban, educated China, he thought, but the rest of the country, with its vast uneducated rural population, was not ready to govern itself.

After the People's Liberation Army swept into Beijing on the night of June 3–4, 1989, bringing weeks of peaceful protests to a bloody, brutal end, the hope for any speedy democratization of China died, too. Martial law cowed the once exuberant demonstrators into a sullen, stony silence, and leaders of the movement either fled, were arrested, or were driven underground. As Eastern Europe crumbled and the Soviet Union collapsed,

hope for China was briefly rekindled. A “tide of democratic change” seemed to sweep the world. Chinese dissidents abroad optimistically predicted that the revolutions from below were global in scope and hence contagious. The cries for democracy that once echoed from Tiananmen Square would soon be heard again, they argued. “The university students and people of China are no different from people in the rest of the world,” political analyst and exile Yan Jiaqi, a senior spokesman for the democratic movement abroad, asserted in 1990. “They hold the same convictions about democracy, freedom, the need for rule by law, and human rights.”<sup>16</sup>

But the dissidents’ hope was soon snuffed out. History in China seemed to stand still.

In fact, political reform in China has been moving tentatively forward—not publicly or by popular demand but quietly and from the top down. Article 111 of the new constitution promulgated in 1982 had stipulated that the “chairman, vice chairman and members of the . . . village committees shall be elected by the local residents.”<sup>17</sup> And in 1987, the National People’s Congress, the county’s nominal legislature, promulgated the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees (Experimental), further specifying that village leaders be directly elected by the villagers themselves for terms of three years. There is little evidence from the decade of the 1980s that many in the Chinese leadership hierarchy took that mandate seriously and much to suggest that the issue of how to select the village chief and village committee continued to be contentious.<sup>18</sup> Few, if any, democratic elections were actually held. But toward the end of decade, even as the debate continued, a critical core of Chinese officialdom, paradoxically, became convinced that democratic elections were essential to stability in the countryside and to the preservation of party authority.

### Fengyang County and the Collapse of People’s Communes

The story of village elections begins in 1978, two years after the death of party chairman Mao Zedong and the collapse of revolutionary radicalism but before the country’s new economic course had become clear.

One part of that story begins in Anhui province—in Anhui’s Fengyang county, to be precise. Anhui is an inland province and has always been one of China’s poorest. For Americans of a certain age, Anhui may be the best known of China’s provinces. Pearl Buck’s 1931 Pulitzer Prize–winning best-seller, *The Good Earth*, about a rural family in famine, is set in Anhui.<sup>19</sup> Anhui is known for its famines. The gap between the coastal cities of China and the countryside of the interior has always been vast, and even today, after twenty years of reform, the chasm is still immense. To leave Anhui’s provincial capital of Hefei and drive to its rural hinterlands (as I did in January 1995) is to enter another century, where the touch of modernity can be seen in bicycles and dim electric light bulbs but not much more. The homes are made of mud, and many of the roofs are thatch, and donkeys, pigs, and chickens live together with the people. Inside the car, we listen to a tape of *A Beijinger in New York*, and the driver uses his cellular phone to call both his wife and his mistress in Hefei. Outside, pigs, chickens, donkeys, and people scatter at our approach. “Heaven is high and the emperor is far away,” as the Chinese saying goes, and we seem to be in the middle of nowhere.

For centuries, Fengyang has been one of the poorest counties in Anhui and thus has a history of tragedy. Some of that tragedy is recent, tracing to Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward. Launched in 1958, the Great Leap Forward was heralded as the way for China to catch up with and overtake Great Britain in fifteen years, and the entire population was mobilized in frenzied effort. The peasant cooperatives that had been established only a few years before were amalgamated into gigantic people's communes where food was free, families no longer cooked at home, and everyone was fed in communal dining halls. Men were pulled from productive labor in the fields to stoke the backyard steel furnaces, which were touted as the route to modernization but produced nothing but worthless iron blobs, often melted from farmers' cooking utensils, doorknobs, and farm implements. Farmland was assaulted with new techniques, such as deep sowing and close planting, that were then carried to extremes. As local cadres made preposterous claims of ever-increasing output, production in fact was declining. In 1959, famine hit.

Fengyang suffered egregiously. In 1959 and 1960 alone, according to figures published in 1989 by a team of Chinese social scientists, 17.7 percent of Fengyang's population died.<sup>20</sup> In some villages, as many as half the people died. Many children were orphaned and many were abandoned, but local cadres ordered neighbors and friends not to take them in, fearing that if children without families found homes, more people would abandon their offspring.<sup>21</sup>

Sixty-three instances of cannibalism were reported in Fengyang in 1960, including the case of a couple who strangled their eight-year old son in order to eat him and that of a woman who sold two *jin* of human flesh as pork.<sup>22</sup> Jasper Becker, in *Hungry Ghosts*, notes the persistence of cannibalism throughout Chinese history, beginning some 2,000 years ago when, in the midst of famine, the founding emperor of the Han dynasty issued an edict permitting people to sell or eat their children if necessary.<sup>23</sup>

In 1960, the output of staple grain in Fengyang was 63.5 percent lower than in 1957, the result not of natural disaster, as the party has so often claimed, but of gross mismanagement of the newly formed people's communes.<sup>24</sup> In some parts of the country, the state granaries were full even as peasants went hungry.

Local cadres received much of the blame for what went wrong (for no better reason than that higher-level officials, with far greater actual responsibility, were writing the reports).<sup>25</sup> The report on Fengyang describes instances of local officials' gorging themselves on meat, fish, and alcohol while the peasants around them starved, of peasants in communal dining halls consuming all available rice in order to avoid having to turn it over to cadres and the state, and of brutal beatings during cadre searches for hidden grain.<sup>26</sup>

Anhui was the most devastated of China's provinces during the Great Leap Forward. A higher percentage of its population died than any other. Nationwide, the Great Leap Forward produced the worst disaster in the history of humankind. Somewhere between 27 million and 43 million people died above and beyond the norm.<sup>27</sup> Some observers contend that the figure is even higher.<sup>28</sup>

What is more, the disaster occurred without the knowledge of the outside world. Some specialists knew that the situation was bad, and a few, including officials at the U.S. consulate in Hong Kong, knew that it was horrible. But it was only twenty years later, in 1980, when China began cooperating with foreign demographers to conduct a new and

scientific census, that statistical evidence confirming the famine began coming inescapably to light.<sup>29</sup>

One of the great mysteries of rural China during the Maoist era is why the peasants, who provided the major support for the communist revolution, did not rebel, or even fight back, when the revolution first betrayed and then began devouring them. The answer from Fengyang in famine seems obvious. Starving people do not rebel. To the extent they move at all, it is to search for food.

Although Chinese peasants have been accused of excessive compliance with authoritarian rule and have often been persuaded, as during the Great Leap Forward, to act against their own best interests, they also have a tradition of violent rebellion. Fengyang county offers a lesson that China's central leadership cannot ignore. One of the greatest rebellions in Chinese history began there. Zhu Yuanzhang, the peasant *cum* Buddhist monk who led the rebellion that overthrew the Yuan dynasty and established the Ming was born in Fengyang county. Ruins of the imperial palace that Zhu Yuanzhang built when he became the first Ming emperor still stand on a lonely plain near where he was born and where his mother died of starvation. The communist revolution also began in the Chinese countryside. Mao Zedong, a peasant rebel himself, enjoyed being compared with Zhu Yuanzhang.

In 1978, twenty years after the formation of communes and the famine that resulted, Fengyang faced a terrible drought, said to be the worst in a hundred years. Experience had taught the peasants not to rely on the commune or village cadres to save them from another famine. They demanded that collective land be turned over to them to farm, as families. With the acquiescence first of the local party committee and then of the province, land was ceded to peasant households. The collective continued to own the land, but those who sowed it reaped the benefits, and the state did not demand grain as tax. The policy—known as *baochan daohu*, or contracting production to individual households—worked. Famine was avoided, and the commune in Fengyang county was dead.

Thus it was that Fengyang county served as a catalyst for the rural reforms that ended the Maoist era and began the transformation that continues today. Within a few years, the commune had disappeared everywhere in China. The impetus to its dissolution, as Kate Zhou persuasively argues, came not from reformist leaders at the center or in the provinces but from the peasants themselves. The movement was “spontaneous, unorganized, leaderless, non-ideological, and apolitical,” says Zhou,<sup>30</sup> who spent several of the Cultural Revolution years in the countryside. Only when the benefits of decollectivization, in the form of dramatically increased agricultural output, were obvious to such reform-minded provincial-level leaders as Wan Li in Anhui and Zhao Ziyang in Sichuan did they legitimize the movement. Only when the movement had spread through most of the country was it accepted by the center and Deng Xiaoping.<sup>31</sup> Within six years, grain output had increased by a third; peasant incomes tripled in eight. As one peasant saying declared, “Our direction was guided by our stomachs.”

As agricultural production soared and government controls were loosened, village life became richer and more diverse. Rural markets, long officially scorned as remnants of capitalism, reopened and old traditions revived. Funerals and weddings, traditionally elaborate but forced into austerity by the puritan side of Chinese socialism, came back. A visitor to the Chinese countryside in the early 1980s might chance upon a noisy

wedding caravan transporting the bride's dowry to her bridegroom's home or pass a funeral procession, mourners dressed in white, and note the new burial mounds, covered with paper wreaths, in family-farmed fields.

With agriculture thriving and stomachs full, issues of local governance were not yet pressing. The people's communes had been both economic and administrative units. With their demise, the name of the geographic area once encompassed by the commune reverted to what it had been before collectivization and before the communists came to power—the *xiang*, or township, which also became the lowest level of government administration.<sup>32</sup> The old production brigades, previously administered by the commune and generally coterminous with the natural village, were also dissolved. Villages became autonomous, self-governing units, subject to state policies but without the funding for health care, welfare, schools, and public security that had once been provided through the commune. The production teams, once the lowest-level unit within the commune, came to be known as "small groups," not dissimilar to the precommunist *bao*.

Small-scale rural industries often remained collectively owned, usually by either townships or villages, and thus are frequently referred to as town and village enterprises, or TVEs. The extent to which these enterprises continued to be run for the good of the collective, however, came to vary. In many, the manager came to behave nearly as owner, reaping profits accordingly. In other places, profits have been controlled by economic management committees.<sup>33</sup> In some places, profits from collective industry have been used to run schools and provide basic welfare for the destitute. Without insurance, however, most rural families had to pay for their own health care, with a consequent decline in the quality of rural health. Schools began charging tuition, unheard of under the commune, and in poorer areas the quality of schooling declined, together with enrollment, as the poorest children could no longer afford to go to school.

Even as the communes were dissolved, old officials often stayed on. Former commune leaders simply changed titles to become heads of townships, and former brigade leaders assumed the position of village chiefs. Some old brigade leaders questioned the reality of their power without economic resources, but the debate about how to administer China's 1 million natural villages took place behind closed doors, out of public earshot.

### Unintended Consequences: Rural Reform and the Chaos of Everyday Life

As the decade of the 1980s progressed, the burst of agricultural production peaked and then began leveling off. Some of the unintended consequences of rural reform became evident. Not all the consequences were good. Perhaps the most widely discomforting by-product of the economic transformation was an underlying sense of *luan*, or chaos—a feeling that too much was happening too quickly, that things might be spinning out of control. Chinese have almost as many ways to describe *luan* as Eskimos have to talk about snow, and fear of *luan* is pervasive, both within officialdom and among the population at large.

With the demise of the collective, as peasants began producing for themselves, free markets, so long suppressed, began springing up like the proverbial Chinese mushrooms after a spring rain. Markets appeared first in the countryside, but in the early 1980s, peasants began appearing cautiously in city suburbs selling their fruits and vegetables from the

backs of bicycle- or horse-drawn carts. When no one stopped them, and their goods were quickly bought up, they began moving closer to the center of the city, setting up more permanent facilities from which to sell their wares. As the rationing system broke down, they began to crowd the cities, and the scope of their activities expanded. Long moribund service industries were suddenly enlivened. Peasants opened family-style restaurants, beauty salons, furniture stores, tailors, and hostels. When the building industry began booming, they manned the construction sites. When new factories were established or old ones expanded, they staffed the assembly lines.

By 1992, some 100 million rural people had left the countryside for cities and county towns.<sup>34</sup> It was, and continues to be, the most massive rural to urban migration in history. It has also been the source of considerable *luan*, challenging the capacity of city administrators, social services, housing, and sanitation facilities to cope. Relations between urban residents and rural interlopers became strained, and those strains were often played out in the newly revived marketplace, as city dwellers who looked down upon peasants sought to take advantage of the country bumpkins, and the country bumpkins worked just as hard to cheat the city slickers. The markets, thus, were also a source of *luan*.

Reports began appearing of social disorder—of thefts, even murders, on trains, of highway banditry, of kidnappings of women and children, of apartments robbed and taxi drivers mugged.

Village leadership was also in a state of *luan*, though the effect of decollectivization on village leadership varied widely between two extremes. At one extreme, some places faced a vacuum of leadership as former cadres left their posts to seek their fortunes in new, or newly expanded, enterprises and no new leaders (or grossly ineffectual ones) replaced them. Such villages sometimes stagnated, pervaded by a sense of aimlessness and anomie. At the other extreme, many villagers continued to be exploited by corrupt and opportunistic leaders. Some villages were dominated by “local emperors,” a perennial problem in rural China.

In many parts of China, local leaders came to profit from the rearrangements of village life. Though leaders no longer exerted direct control over the daily working lives of the villagers, their extensive *guanxi*, or connections, brought them opportunities for money-making denied to ordinary villagers. Some became managers of the still collectively owned town or village enterprises, running the small industries as though they were privately owned and profiting accordingly. Some became corrupt.

As the market began to take hold, decision making also shifted naturally to lower levels. Although decentralization and decollectivization brought vast new freedoms to China's farmers, licenses still had to be obtained and permissions secured, for money that often went to line the pockets of cadres. The continuing decentralization of political power—from the center to the provinces and from the provinces to the localities—meant not a decrease in citizens' contact with the state but a multiplication of points of power and hence, for citizens trying to get something done, more authorities to deal with in the course of everyday life—more officials to be feted, more gifts to be given, more *guanxi* to nurture. Gift giving, particularly to people who can smooth the travails of daily life, has long been part of the Chinese tradition, and the line between etiquette and bribery is a fine one. But today, even routine stamps of approval regularly require bribes—from a carton of



cigarettes, to an extravagant banquet with karaoke, to generous kickbacks. The size of the “gift” depends on the nature of the service and the giver’s ability to pay.

Of the many new burdens placed on China’s peasants, none were so weighty as the taxes and fees to which many became subject. Some, to be sure, were used to run schools, build roads, and provide for the common good. But because so many taxes are locally generated and imposed, unscrupulous local leaders could devise a myriad of means to extract money from the peasants and call that extraction a tax or a fee. A 1993 report in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* cites instances in Anhui province where poor people were beaten and jailed for failing to pay “taxes” on their old radios and televisions.<sup>35</sup>

Many of these problems are not new. Socialist China has always faced difficulties guaranteeing the honesty and competence of local leaders. Following the famine of the Great Leap Forward, hundreds of thousands of educated urbanites were sent to the countryside, in a movement known as the Socialist Education Campaign, to investigate cadre corruption in the villages. “The Socialist Education Campaign made me see how terrible the unlimited power of the grassroots cadres could be,” Song Erli told me in 1982, when the communes were being disbanded.<sup>36</sup> As a university student in 1962, twenty years before, Song had been sent to the countryside as part of a team investigating cadre abuse. “The leaders in the countryside had a lot of power, and nearly every one of them had been corrupted by that power, and the majority of them had been corrupted very easily, very early. One of the reasons they are getting rid of the commune system now is that corruption has never been put right; it is impossible to wipe out corruption when cadres have so much power. The cadres became the local emperors of their small teams.”<sup>37</sup>

But the dissolution of the communes did not eliminate corruption. Power and exploitation continued to go hand in hand. Moreover, there was no regularized procedure for removing unpopular, dishonest, or dictatorial cadres.

### The Debate over Village Political Reform

The problem of corrupt and dictatorial local emperors and the perception of a countryside on the verge of *luan* were central issues in the higher-level debates over the administration of China’s villages. As Daniel Kelliher, critiquing the official rationale for village elections, points out, “Fear of chaos, rather than idealism, has driven the debate.”<sup>38</sup> But fear of chaos was a double-edged sword. Opponents of village self-government could argue that democracy would lead to the loss of political control and hence to *luan*. Advocates could argue that only democracy could prevent the advent of chaos and thus preserve the party’s legitimacy.

Many in China associate democracy with *luan*. Demands for democratization there, dating as far back as the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and as recently as the spring of 1989, have usually been voiced in the streets, by protesting demonstrators. Both the demonstrations and their suppression have plunged the country into turmoil. Similarly, the Cultural Revolution was touted as a great democracy, but every level of society was split into competing factions, each claiming to wear the legitimate mantle of Mao. With no institutionalized means of solving conflicting claims, disputes escalated into violence. The label *democracy* stuck to the Cultural Revolution, together with its association with violence.



For some, the *luan* of competing factions (or parties), the baggage of democracy, is thus to be avoided.

In the debate over village administration that took place in the 1980s, opponents of elections feared that democracy would bring an immediate end to the party's political control and argued that if the party lost control over the selection of village leaders, the task of enforcing state policies—such as family planning and grain procurement—would be much more difficult for township-level officials.<sup>39</sup> The village, after all, is the vital linchpin in any government policy, the place where policy actually gets carried out.

The upheavals in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union following the collapse of communism only bolstered the antidemocracy argument. Many in China believe that the collapse of the Soviet Union led to *luan*, the result of the end of party rule and the introduction of democracy.

Chaos could be avoided, the opponents of village democracy argued, if village officials were appointed by higher levels of the party bureaucracy. Alternatively, village committees could serve as the lowest level of government, appointed by government leaders from the townships or counties. In either case, party control would remain intact.

But the argument that the failure to introduce democracy could lead to chaos was also persuasive. Conservative party elder Peng Zhen—an early victim of the Cultural Revolution, former head of the National People's Congress and architect of the party's 1982 constitution—was the first of the senior leaders to predict a political breakdown without the introduction of democracy. In pushing for passage of the Organic Law in 1987, Peng pointed to the deterioration of relations between villagers and local leaders and noted the rise of “local emperors”—“cadres who flattered officials at higher levels but ‘used excessive force against villagers and even illegally jailed them.’”<sup>40</sup> Academic collaborators Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien have documented Peng's argument that if such trends were not checked, villagers would “sooner or later attack our rural cadres with their shoulder poles.”<sup>41</sup> Villagers, in short, might revolt. The only solution, Peng argued, was the promotion of village self-government so that rural inhabitants themselves could select and oversee village cadres. Peng Zhen was successful in pushing through the Organic Law on an experimental basis, but the controversy simmered.

When tanks and guns silenced demands for political reform in June 1989, the prospects for village self-governance seemed dim indeed. In 1990, the election provisions of the Organic Law came under renewed attack. This time, the case for village democracy was championed by another conservative party elder, Bo Yibo, who put his enthusiastic imprimatur on an investigation of village-level organization conducted by officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The report predicted a serious political crisis in the Chinese countryside if relations between villagers and basic-level cadres did not improve and argued that the only way to prevent such a crisis was the institution of village self-government and the direct election of village leaders.<sup>42</sup>

Wang Zhenyao was one of the authors of that report. “Lots of city people were opposed to my report on rural elections,” he says. “They think that peasants cannot have democracy. City intellectuals and students are too idealistic and abstract” when they talk about democracy, he says. They talk about democracy without really knowing what it is. “For peasants, things are very concrete. They are very practical. Their daily life is a constant

struggle. Peasants may not have any abstract concept of democracy, but they still want it. They want to elect the leaders who have control over their lives. It is not true that peasants are not ready for democracy. It is just that they have a much more concrete perception of it.”<sup>43</sup>

Party elder Bo Yibo agreed with Wang Zhenyao, calling his report “superb” (*jihao*).<sup>44</sup> With Bo’s official blessing, politburo standing committee member Song Ping declared the debate over village elections at an end and ordered the implementation of the Organic Law.<sup>45</sup>

Top-level supporters of village elections see basic-level democracy not as a threat to communist party rule but as a way of reviving it. No one even hints at introduction of a multiparty system. Rather, party elders can argue that the experiment in grassroots democracy is consistent with the party’s “mass line,” whereby legitimacy was presumed to derive from well-intentioned cadres who work closely with and in service to the people. Indeed, democratic experiments had been attempted in the communist-controlled base areas during the long struggle to obtain power. But the mass line eroded once the party came to rule. Even lip service to the concept disappeared when Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that getting rich was glorious and local cadres became the first to make their fortunes. For party conservatives, democratization was a way of reviving a failed revolutionary tradition.

But there was a more subtle subtext to the argument over village elections. Some of the younger and better-educated reformers have looked abroad for alternative models of local governance. To the warning that democracy had brought chaos to Russia, some would answer that the Soviet Union had little experience in grassroots democracy, and the disorder there was a consequence of too little preparation for democratic rule. Taiwan is where many have looked for a positive model for political development.

After the Chinese military began lobbing missiles in the direction of Taiwan in the spring of 1996 as the island was about to conduct its first democratic presidential election, the lively intellectual exchanges between Taiwan and mainland scholars ground to a halt. Until then, Taiwan scholars had been giving voice to alternatives that mainland reformers could not yet publicly express. At an international conference held in Beijing in July 1995, sponsored by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and attended by both national- and local-level civil affairs officials, scholars from Taiwan offered practical advice. They pointed out that grassroots elections began in Taiwan decades before those at the provincial and national levels. The evolution of a multiparty system there was gradual. Just as the Guomintang had to institute local elections in order to preserve its legitimacy, so, to preserve its legitimacy, the Communist Party would have to do the same. Further, just as the Guomintang had to institute internal party reform in order to stay in power, so the Communist Party would have to reform itself. In Taiwan, the legitimacy of the Guomintang depended finally, not only on internal party reform, but also on allowing competing political parties and the gradual expansion upward of competitive, multiparty elections. The introduction of competitive elections, the scholars noted, introduced the possibility that the Guomintang could be voted out of office. By instituting procedures that allow for a peaceful, if temporary, transfer of power, the Guomintang, thus far, has saved itself. Gift giving, vote buying, and creative constituency building were part of the game.<sup>46</sup>

The Taiwan representatives were certain that party reform and the introduction of competing parties were inevitable on the mainland, too. Under a Taiwan model, the

Communist Party would remain the governing party for the foreseeable future, while reformist and conservative factions within the party would openly vie for popular support. Democratic elections would gradually be pushed upward, from villages and townships to the county and then to the provincial level. The National People's Congress would evolve into a more powerful, more genuinely legislative body. The rule of law would gradually replace the capriciousness of rule by individuals.<sup>47</sup>

The arguments of the Taiwan compatriots elicited a spirited response. But open discussions about the possibility of competing political parties and higher-level competitive elections are still too sensitive in China. For now, "We act, not talk," says one party reformer. "We do not discuss the long-term goal. We talk about election procedures." He argues instead that democratic elections will produce a new, better-educated, more reformist and responsive, less ideologically motivated party.

Responsibility for overseeing the nationwide implementation of village elections has been assigned to the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The task is enormous. The 900 million people in China's rural areas live in nearly 1 million villages. Only five people at the Ministry of Civil Affairs have been assigned to work on what has come to be referred to officially as village self-governance.<sup>48</sup> However committed, even evangelical, some at the ministry may be, their power to ensure that village elections adhere to democratic principles is limited. Westerners often mistakenly assume a simple command-obedience relationship between the center and the provinces in China. The relationship is more complex. The Ministry of Civil Affairs provides "strong administrative guidance"<sup>49</sup> to provincial and local governments and is charged with laying down guidelines, with organizing training for local-level officials, and with appraising the organization of village elections. But each province is responsible for formulating its own regulations for implementing the Organic Law. Not only is the national election law sufficiently vague to allow wide interpretation in implementation, but provincial regulations are sometimes in marked contrast to both the spirit and specifics of the Organic Law. Even provincial- and local-level laws and regulations are not necessarily treated as mandatory. Officials from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, spread thin in any case, rely largely on persuasion to ensure that their suggestions are followed. The training of officials, often by people who either oppose or do not fully support election procedures, allows for the introduction of further deviation from national-level law.

Beginning in 1990, after Bo Yibo had praised his investigation, primary responsibility for nationwide implementation of village elections came to rest with Wang Zhenyao, then serving on the staff of the ministry's Department of Basic-Level Governance. Wang was well suited to his new task. The promotion of village democracy was his life's mission.

### **Wang Zhenyao: Official Champion of Grassroots Political Reform**

Wang Zhenyao is representative of many of the younger, educated reformists now occupying key positions in the middle ranks of the Chinese government. A member of the Communist Party since his youth, Wang is a 1981 graduate of Tianjin's Nankai University, one of China's finest liberal arts universities. (Zhou Enlai was a student there from 1913 to 1917.) Wang was chairman of the Nankai student body in 1980-81, when his university, like others throughout the country, was swept up in a democratic movement.

What makes Wang different from many other members of this Cultural Revolution generation are his rural roots. Most educated reformers his age are city born and bred. Wang Zhenyao's parents are peasants.

Wang Zhenyao was born on March 6, 1954, to one of the poorest families in one of the poorest villages in inland Henan province, a place called Bailiantang.<sup>50</sup> Both his parents were illiterate. As a child, Wang lived with his family in a two-room hut with mud walls, a straw-thatched roof, and a dirt floor. The village had no electricity and no running water.

Wang's first concrete memories begin in 1958, when he was four years old and Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward. Henan, under the leadership of Wu Zhifu, was at the fanatic forefront of the movement. The first of the country's communes was established there, and Mao Zedong, with whom rests final responsibility for the tragedy that followed, visited the province several times during the early, exuberant stages.<sup>51</sup> Jasper Becker, whose *Hungry Ghosts* offers the most comprehensive documentation of the famine that followed, credits the people of Henan with a tendency to millenarianism, thus explaining why the claims of the Henan leadership for advances made during the Great Leap Forward were on the far side of utopian. Wu Zhifu, Becker points out, "promised to make Henan the first province to achieve full literacy, complete irrigation and full Communization." The province was at the forefront of the disastrous policies of deep plowing and close planting, and its irrigation projects were the most ambitious in China.<sup>52</sup> Peasants like Wang Zhenyao's father were often forced to work around the clock. As a result, the leadership falsely claimed, agricultural output had shot up from some 330 pounds per *mu* (0.04 acres) to 3,300 and sometimes even 11,000 pounds.

It is the famine Wang remembers most—the hunger and his swollen belly, his mother foraging for cabbage roots and leaves, scraping the bark off trees, cooking it in a soup for her son. Many people in his village died—especially the elderly, the children, and the men being forced to labor such long hours with nothing to fill their stomachs.

The famine lasted three years, until 1962. Estimates of the provincial death toll range between 2 and 8 million people. Ironically, the provincial granaries were often full even as people starved. In Henan's Xinyang prefecture, where the death toll was highest, the famine ended when the central government ordered the People's Liberation Army to occupy the prefecture and distribute the grain.

Remarkably, Wang Zhenyao was able to go to school, despite the famine, and was consistently at the head of his class. He stayed in school even with the Cultural Revolution in full swing, graduating from high school in 1971 first in his class. He stayed in the village, first teaching primary school and then middle school. His father, an open and forthright man, was an object of attack during the Cultural Revolution, and the sins of the father were visited on the son. The village leaders refused to allow Wang to join the Youth League and prohibited him from taking the exam that could qualify him for a government position outside the village. "This left a deep impression on me," he says.

Wang escaped from the confines of his village only when army recruiters took him into the army.

There again he excelled.

In the summer of 1977, when college entrance exams were offered for the first time since the Cultural Revolution began some eleven years before, Wang Zhenyao was a

platoon leader in Nanning city, Guangxi province. He took the exam from there. He passed, entering Nankai University that fall.

The university introduced Wang Zhenyao to a whole new world of ideas. The restraints of the Cultural Revolution were loosening, and young people were optimistic, excited, full of hope for the future. The Cultural Revolution's slogans of class struggle were being replaced by new calls to "liberate thought" and "seek truth from facts." The faculty at Nankai, still traumatized by the persecution they had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, did not often stray from political orthodoxy. But the library was full of Western translations, and Wang, like many of his schoolmates, soon was reading about ancient Greece, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Rousseau, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu. He read Thomas Jefferson and the American Declaration of Independence in Chinese. He learned about the evolution of democracy in the West, beginning with local elections in ancient Greece. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was his favorite. Wang loved *The Social Contract's* opening sentence—"Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains"—and he appreciated Rousseau's focus on the common good rather than individual rights. He thought the notion of common good was consistent with China's collectivist thought.

He came to think that he and his generation could have an influence on the course of Chinese history. "Even after ten years of social turmoil," says Wang, "we still had ideals. I thought that my generation should take responsibility for our country, that we had to develop courage and the persistence to keep going.

"Nineteen seventy-nine was a very important time," he continues. "Everything was open. There were so many new opportunities. Those were my first golden years. I was becoming a new man." He met the foreign students who were beginning to come to the university. Until then, he had seen foreigners in the movies but never in the flesh. The first time foreign students visited his dormitory was a university "happening." Dozens of Chinese students crowded around the one Canadian and one Japanese student for what became an ongoing exchange of views and the beginning of friendships that persist even today. The meeting was held in Wang's room.

Again, Wang Zhenyao studied hard and excelled in school. He had been recruited into the Communist Party after joining the military and was selected to lead his history class. He organized discussion groups on rural reform, world history, Chinese history, the political reforms going on in Yugoslavia. He came to believe that China needed both modernization and democracy and began looking at how socialist countries like Yugoslavia were introducing political reform. When a senior scholar argued that the main danger facing China was capitalism, Wang Zhenyao wrote a retort. The main danger, he argued, was feudalism. The class of 1977 was rebellious, and when student activities began exceeding the limits of what school authorities could accept, the students threatened to strike. Wang Zhenyao was selected head of the student body.

Wang was still in the army when he began graduate studies in political science at Wuhan's Huazhong Normal University in 1983. He studied with Zhang Hou'an, in whom he found a kindred political spirit, and his research focused on political reform in socialist countries. Again, he was selected to lead his class, and again he organized discussion groups, inviting leading Chinese thinkers to speak. Liu Binyan, the county's leading and

most respected journalist, now in exile in the United States, was one of the people who visited Huazhong at Wang Zhenyao's request.

Wang's master's thesis focused on the possibilities for political reform in China. Some people in the office of Hu Yaobang (who lost his position as general secretary of the Communist Party in early 1987 and whose death in April 1989 set off the student demonstrations in Beijing) read and liked Wang's thesis. Wang was able to leave the military after graduating from Huazhong. In 1987, he was brought into the Rural Research Center under the Chinese State Council. Wang began doing surveys of rural areas. The communes had been disbanded by then, and problems in local-level leadership were beginning to appear. Wang's reports noted that the problem of corruption and power had not been solved with the dissolution of communes. The arbitrary exercise of power by local officials was creating dissatisfaction throughout the Chinese countryside. If local emperors were allowed to reign unchecked, the possibility for widespread unrest was real, Wang warned. Wang thought that village administration should be made more democratic.

People at the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs were reading Wang's proposals. In January 1989, when the ministry became responsible for implementing political reform in China's villages and established a new section on rural basic-level governance, they invited Wang Zhenyao to head the new division. The new section was charged with overseeing nationwide implementation of village self-governance, including the democratic election of village committees. Wang's rural roots, his educational background, and his commitment to political reform made him an ideal candidate for the post.



## Three

### The Varieties of Village Self-Governance

Active implementation of village elections specified by the 1987 Organic Law did not really begin until 1990, with wide variations from province to province and village to village. Generally, village self-government can be said to have three primary components: the village assembly, the village representative assembly, and the village committee.

***The Village Assembly and Village Representative Assembly.*** By law, the village assembly, similar in principle to the New England town meeting, is the supreme decision-making body, deciding all major village affairs. Village assemblies are composed either of all adult villagers or of one representative from each household. But they have rarely been convened. 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. Instead, many villages have organized village representative assemblies, and in 1990 the Ministry of Civil Affairs began promoting village representative assemblies nationwide. By 1994, according to ministry reports, about half of all villages had formed village representative assemblies.<sup>53</sup> Members of the representative assemblies are often heads or deputy heads of the village small groups, reminiscent again not only of the production teams but also of the old *baojia* system. Many representative assemblies also include village committee members and delegates from the local Women's Federation, the Youth League, and the militia and representatives of the elderly. The elected village chief generally presides over the meetings, though this varies widely from village to village.

Official reports say that members of these assemblies are elected by "all the people from a village." But no Westerners (or none that I know of) have witnessed these elections. Susan Lawrence, the former Beijing bureau chief for *U.S. News and World Report*, is the only China specialist to write about the village representative assembly.<sup>54</sup> Impressionist evidence, from both my own observations and official Chinese reports,<sup>55</sup> suggests that election procedures are often very informal, drawing on tradition rather than law. In Lishu county, Jilin province, the representatives seemed to be the villages' senior, most respected males, many of whom had been heads of production teams under the commune system. In Fujian, representatives were much younger, often in their thirties, consciously representing their constituencies.

Village representative assemblies have both more power and, often, greater moral authority than village committees. They have the right to decide important village affairs, to participate in the management of village affairs, to oversee and vote on major expenditures, to supervise village heads—and to veto decisions made by village committees.<sup>56</sup> They are presumed to be deeply imbedded in village life and in intimate contact with the popular will and to have the good of the villagers at heart.



Because foreign observation has been limited to elections of the village committee, most have overlooked the importance of the village representative assembly. Future evaluations of democratic government at the village level will need to focus on the representative assemblies as well. To equate the election of village committees with democracy is a mistake. The properly functioning village representative assembly serves, in essence, as a legislature, making decisions governing the villagers' everyday lives. The village committee is responsible for executing its decisions.

In March 1997, I had the opportunity to observe a meeting of the representative assembly in Xixi village, Fujian province, deep in the Jinggang mountains.

The meeting was convened to decide whether to spend limited village funds to establish a new periodic market or to replace a footbridge connecting one section of the village to its farmland. Assembly members were young, in their thirties and forties, and the debate was stilted and almost scripted at first. But as assembly members relaxed in the presence of foreigners, the discussion became more informal. Advocates of the footbridge argued both that the decaying beams on the existing bridge were life-threateningly dangerous and that the bridge was essential for peasants to reach their fields. Advocates of the market argued that the current market was dangerous, too. Because it was set up along either side of the two-lane highway that cut through the village, trucks rumbled by at high speed, threatening shoppers and vendors alike.

The discussion was too abstract for the visitors to grasp. We asked to visit the two sites. As we walked to the bridge accompanied by assembly delegates, the interests governing the debate quickly became clear. Assembly members representing small groups whose farms could be reached only by the footbridge were naturally championing the construction of a new bridge. Small groups whose fields were on the other side of the highway and accessible without the footbridge tended to favor a new market. The current market was indeed willy-nilly, with small, haphazardly placed produce stalls lining both sides of the road. But the bridge was in serious disrepair, and it was both a footbridge and an aqueduct, bringing water to irrigate the fields.

The representative assembly decided by a show of hands—25 to 14 with one abstention—in favor of the bridge. The village chief voted in favor of the market. The new market would be set up later, when the village coffers had been replenished.

***The Village Committee.*** The role of the village committee is dual and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, the village committee is charged with implementing decisions made by the representative assembly. On the other, it is responsible for publicizing government policies and persuading villagers to follow those policies, even (and sometimes particularly) when government policies are not entirely popular. By law, the village committee is responsible for mediating civil disputes, helping to maintain social order, and reporting popular opinion and proposals to the government.<sup>57</sup> Beyond that, specific functions of the village committee vary from place to place. The Ministry of Civil Affairs encourages village representative assemblies to draw up village pledges or village self-government charters further detailing the rights and obligations of, and rules and regulations for, villagers, the village committee, and the village representative assembly.

Even the official research arm of the Ministry of Civil Affairs recognizes that the committee's twofold function of implementing higher-level policy and responding to

village-based initiatives can be contradictory. “The village heads lack authoritativeness with the farmers,” says a 1994 official report.<sup>58</sup> “This is partly due to the fact that the village organization is more of an administrative body in reality. And village heads often act on behalf of the government, and cannot give too much consideration to the interests of the local community and farmers. Therefore, village heads are not always identified as one of the farmers themselves.”<sup>59</sup>

The village committee is the only organization required by law to be democratically elected. The ministry has set forth four principles essential to democracy: that the chairman, vice chairman, and members of village committees be directly elected by the villagers themselves; that the number of candidates exceed the number of positions; that voting be conducted by secret ballot; and that the winning candidate receive more than half the votes.<sup>60</sup>

Elections take place every three years, but the timing is not standardized, either nationwide, within provinces, or within counties and townships. Even within a single county, village elections may be spread over several months. Because implementation has proceeded slowly and piecemeal, some provinces, such as Fujian, have already held five rounds of elections, whereas other provinces have held only one or two—yet another reason for the remarkable diversity from province to province and county to county.

Credible estimates of how many village elections in China have been carried out in accordance with the ministry’s principles are impossible to make. Short of a massive, well-financed survey, the Chinese countryside is too large and diverse for any realistic assessment, even by the ministry. Reports from local areas are not always realistic, and norms for what constitutes “democracy” vary greatly. Local officials are not ordinarily comfortable reporting failures, and opposition to village elections is strongest among the county and township officials responsible for reporting. When one county official in Sichuan was asked when elections would be extended upward to the county level and whether he would be willing to stand for election, he responded that many different flowers make up a garden but the garden is no less beautiful for the differences. The county official was a flower who preferred not to run for election and was not so sure that village elections made much of a contribution to the garden, either.

The editor of a Chinese magazine focusing on township affairs, interviewed by Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, estimates that no more than 10 percent of village elections have been conducted according to democratic standards.<sup>61</sup> According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, elections have technically been held in 90 percent of China’s villages, but the ministry has designated only fifty-nine counties as models—localities where elections have been sufficiently well organized, democratic, and fair that their procedures are considered worthy of study and emulation by others.<sup>62</sup>

Nor is it easy to specify what variables influence the success of China’s village elections. For many Chinese, the most important question is whether the introduction of village democracy in fact staves off rural unrest. Some Westerners, by contrast, have attempted to test the proposition, taken by some as an article of faith, that economic (particularly capitalist) development leads inevitably to democratization. What has been proven thus far in the villages of China is only that the relationship cannot be demonstrated, or, as Jean Oi notes, that “the relationship between economic development and political change remains

a puzzle.”<sup>63</sup> Susan Lawrence, writing about village representative assemblies in Hebei province, argues that chronic mismanagement was the motivating force in Hebei’s experiments with new forms of local governance.<sup>64</sup> The representative assemblies were welcomed as an alternative to substandard leadership and unmanageable, impoverished villages. Kevin O’Brien suggests that the most democratically organized villages “appear disproportionately in wealthier demonstration villages and in those with large collective enterprises.”<sup>65</sup> Amy Gadsden, who joined the International Republican Institute in 1995 and has observed several rounds of elections, notes that one reason democratic elections have been applauded by villagers is the perception that elections can increase local prosperity. Villagers therefore tend to elect entrepreneurs who promise to help make them rich. She also notes paradoxically that village elections have met the greatest resistance in China’s richest and poorest provinces.<sup>66</sup>

Rural development in China has not yet progressed to the point where the relationship between political and economic development is evident. For the time being, we must look at different variables to explain the diversity of village political life. If the degree of democratization is taken as the single variable, village leadership runs along a broad continuum. At the least democratic end of the spectrum are villages where elections have failed and leadership has broken down and those that continue to be governed by the type of self-interested and dictatorial local emperors whom Peng Zhen saw as such a threat to the party’s legitimacy. On the most democratic end are villages with popular and innovative new leaders elected by majority vote and working in tandem with representative assemblies.

When the level of a village’s economic development is factored in, the spectrum becomes a matrix.<sup>67</sup> Some of China’s poorest and richest villages are also among the least democratic. While examples of relatively prosperous democratic villages abound, however, examples of poor democratic villages are few. The source of a village’s prosperity—whether from community enterprises or private entrepreneurship—may also affect the nature of grassroots democracy. Where collective enterprises allow for the dispensation of patronage, democracy may become corrupt. An infusion of “help” from higher-level authorities can either greatly promote the evolution of democracy or constrict the range of choice, as when popular village leaders are prohibited from running for election by township or county officials.

Taking a concrete look at villages at different points along the spectrum, or in different boxes within the grid, makes it possible to understand something of the complexity of village leadership in China today and to say something about why some villages have been so successful in implementing elections and others have so much further to go. Why do some villages succumb to the rule of local emperors? Why have democratic elections in Fujian province and Lishu county, Jilin, been so successful? And why has Bend in the River village failed in its efforts to elect anyone at all?

### **Bend in the River Village: No Development, No Democracy**

The Cultural Revolution was in full swing and Tong Yanqi was only fourteen years old when she was sent as an “educated youth” from Beijing to Bend in the River village, several hundred miles southwest of her home. She stayed ten years. In the fall of 1995, returning for

the first time since having left seventeen years before, Yanqi graciously allowed me to come along. Now a professor at the University of Utah, Yanqi had no idea what we would find. Bend in the River village had always been poor.

Indeed, the county town not far from Bend in the River had yet to share in the economic boom of the southern coast. The buildings were only one and two stories high, and they were not new. The taxis at the train station were tiny three-wheeled tractors, not much bigger than a motorcycle and open at the back. Few other motorized vehicles were to be seen.

Yanqi could tell from the road, long before we arrived, that Bend in the River village had not greatly developed since she left. Bend in the River is only a few kilometers from the county town, and the rutted, bumpy dirt road begins just where the town ends and the farmland begins.

Yanqi was right. The village had yet to see any real development. There were no collective enterprises, and no one in the village could properly be called an entrepreneur. The great majority of the villagers were much better off than they had been before, however, though Yanqi was curious to discover that people who had been poor under the collective were still poor and those who had been rich had only become richer. A few of the old mud-walled houses remained, but most people had built new brick homes. Everything about the new houses was more modern than before. Most had televisions, and in the wealthier families the televisions were color. Everyone agreed that they had more to eat today, and the point was proved repeatedly in the lavish meals we were served and the quantities of meat, *jiaozi* (dumplings), and alcohol consumed.

The higher incomes were the consequence of the decollectivization of land and the freedom to engage in small-scale moneymaking activities. Farming was more diversified than before, and people were cultivating cash crops and raising pigs and chickens. Many families had at least one member who worked in industry in the nearby county town, where their wages were higher than what they could make on a farm. There were no telephones or cars in the village, and running water—a spigot in every courtyard—had been introduced only in the past year or so, when pollution from nearby cement and fertilizer factories had poisoned village well water, rendering it undrinkable. People attributed the increase of cancer in the village to pollution, which was cause for considerable concern.

The old brigade headquarters and the adjacent village square were the only spots in the village that had not physically changed. The headquarters had once been the center of village activity. The collective's frequent meetings were held at the headquarters, and the village's first black-and-white television had been placed there. Villagers had gathered around it at night to watch and to talk.

The village square, a large plot of uncultivated land adjacent to the headquarters where the threshing used to be done at harvest time, had also been a gathering place. Together, the brigade headquarters and the village square had been the focal point of the village community, symbols of collective life. With decollectivization, the meetings stopped, and threshing became a family endeavor. The brigade headquarters was no longer used. It was just as it had been when Tong Yanqi was there, with the same tables and chairs in the meeting rooms, except that everything had fallen into disrepair. The place that had once been the center of village life was deserted and lonely. The whole village, in its public spaces,

had an unkempt, almost desolate, look, and the village blackboard, once used for public announcements and messages, was blank.

People missed the collective life. They even missed the meetings, which had been a chance for neighbors to meet and socialize, to feel part of the same community. They remembered how hard they had worked during the period of “learning from Dazhai,” which was how they referred to the Cultural Revolution. Dazhai was the nationwide model brigade then, and Bend in the River had become a model in learning from Dazhai, which meant that the villagers were busy year-round with one form of collective activity or another. No one really wanted to return to the backbreaking work. But people spoke of a feeling of emptiness (*kongxu*), a decline of community spirit, a certain lack of meaning to life, like being “a sheet of loose sand.”

Some people were turning to religion to fill the gap. At the edge of the village, just where the fields began, the villagers had recently constructed a new temple—a small brick structure with a ferocious-looking Buddhist god inside. The god was responsible for providing good weather and protecting the crops—a task he had not fulfilled very well that year. The main crop in the village was cabbage, and we were there at harvest time. But heavy rains in the weeks leading up to the harvest had destroyed the crop. The average income in the village would drop this year from an average of about 1,300–1,500 yuan to about 800 yuan—less than \$100 at the 1997 exchange rate.

We went to another temple some distance outside the county town—the Stone Drum Temple. Worshiping at places like Stone Drum Temple is officially considered superstitious and therefore discouraged, but several of the officials who accompanied us also prayed there, with no apparent embarrassment.

Christianity is also gaining new adherents. A church is under construction in the county town, and services are held regularly in a building near the train station. Some villagers are beginning to attend, and others express interest in going. The attraction is less specific religious doctrine than the promise of religion as comfort.

The family was still the most important social unit in the village, and the most troublesome. Intravillage marriages, based on love and entered into freely, are not the norm, and when they occur often run into trouble. In most cases, women marry out of the village, and the men find their wives in other places. These marriages are often arranged and are not based on love. The best the couple can hope for is to *he de qi lai*—get along well together. Couples were routinely permitted to have two children, but some had three or four. Families were supposed to pay fines for having more than two, but no one knew how much the fine was or whether it was actually collected. Village leadership was too weak for a concerted effort at enforcement of the family planning policies.

Crime was an increasing problem in the area. On one recent day, forty motorcycles had been stolen from the county town, and the buying and selling of babies and kidnapping and selling of women was a problem. A few days before our visit, three policemen had moved in to arrest a man accused of selling women. Knowing of his impending arrest, the alleged criminal had strapped dynamite around his waist. As the police surrounded him, he lit it, blowing himself and the police to bits.

The villagers had several explanations for Bend in the River’s failure to develop. The main reason was that the village has always been poor. Everyone agrees that the

introduction of community enterprises is the route to real prosperity, but the village has never been able to save enough money to invest in collective enterprise.

Another explanation was that all the smart and talented people had left or taken work outside the village. Our host, Mr. Wang, had been party secretary during Yanqi's time, and he remained one of the most respected men in the village. But he had been one of the first to leave when the opportunity arose. The county as a whole had a very low level of education. Until recently, of a countywide population of 400,000, only 90 people had graduated from high school. With one exception, everyone from Bend in the River with a high school education had left, usually to serve as county-level officials, and the one high school graduate who stayed steadfastly refused to assume a position of leadership. The best and the brightest with middle school educations were not willing to stay either and were clever enough to find jobs in other parts of the province or to join the ranks of the rural migrants flocking to the cities.

Village leadership was a problem. Bend in the River's party secretary was a nice but pathetically incompetent man, and he commanded scant respect. Party membership in the village was declining, as it was in many parts of China. Official reports several months after our visit said that party branches in a third of the country's 1 million villages had decayed, and a major drive to recruit new members and revive the party committees was under way.<sup>68</sup> The secretary in Bend in the River was attempting to recruit new members, but most of the villagers he had approached had just laughed him away.

Many villagers agreed that only a strong, dynamic, forward-looking leader can bring the village out of its doldrums and begin a process of economic development. Few held out much hope for an early solution to the leadership problem, and no one suggested that village democracy might be the answer. The only person to discuss democracy at length was an intellectual from the county town who had been sent to the village during the Cultural Revolution. He thought that the freedom associated with democracy would bring more chaos than China could manage. Democratic reform was not in the consciousness of these villagers.

Bend in the River had held elections for village chief not long before our visit, but they were unsuccessful. "Contradictions" tracing back for decades—lingering wounds from the antirightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution, as well as perceived inequities in the redistribution of land during decollectivization—prevented any of the several candidates from receiving a majority vote. The villagers lost interest in the election. The party head was serving temporarily as village chief, too.

Hospitable and gracious though the villagers were, Bend in the River nonetheless seemed pervaded by a sense of aimlessness, of waiting, as though something should be happening but is not.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the contrast between the anomie of Bend in the River, where halfhearted efforts to democratize have failed, and Guanjiang village, Fujian, where elections have succeeded (see pages 33–39), suggests that one unintended consequence of village elections is the restoration of the sense of community that disappeared with the collapse of the communes. Economic development might lift Bend in the River out of its doldrums, and villagers' faith in democracy might be kindled if they could be persuaded that democracy would bring economic development. But without a bold and innovative



leader, the introduction of democracy into the village will have to come from outside and higher up.

### Daqiu Village: Development with Dictatorship

If Bend in the River is an example of a village that is both undeveloped and still undemocratic, Daqiu village, not far from the city of Tianjin, is China's most famous and dramatic grassroots challenge to the hypothesis that economic development leads somehow inevitably to democratic reform. Until the ignominious downfall of its once nationally recognized leader, Daqiu had been very developed, very rich, and very undemocratic.

Since the mid-1980s, Daqiu had been touted in both the Chinese and the international press as one of the wealthiest villages in China and the number-one model for other villages to emulate. Its leader, Yu Zuomin, became one of ten nationwide models of peasant-turned-entrepreneur. Yu Zuomin had joined the Communist Party in 1958 and had been a village cadre for decades. With the beginning of economic reform in the late 1970s, Yu was credited both with having led his village to prosperity and with retaining the selfless devotion to public welfare that is the communist ideal. Even as villagers moved from their mud-walled, thatch-roofed huts to newly built brick homes, Yu stayed in his dilapidated house.<sup>70</sup>

Over time, however, Yu Zuomin became arrogant, corrupted by power, and began putting himself above the law. He became a classic example of a local emperor—the type of local leader Peng Zhen and others have credited with undermining the legitimacy of the Communist Party.<sup>71</sup> As leader of Daqiu village, not only did Yu become a multimillionaire, he transformed the village and made its inhabitants rich, too. But Chinese journalist friends who visited Daqiu village when it was a nationwide model confess that even then the place reeked with corruption. The visit was too carefully orchestrated, and the reporters were prevented from casual, spontaneous meetings with the villagers. The place was “not normal,” my friends told me. It was too rich. Too many people were driving Mercedes. No one got that rich without being corrupt—and without higher-level connections.

Yu's downfall began in 1990 when two of his close associates accused another village entrepreneur of seducing the daughter of Yu's cousin and then beat the father of the accused man to death. Two years later, several people under Yu Zuomin's command began interrogating senior personnel from one of the village's enterprises on suspicion of corruption. During the course of the investigation, a number of staff members were detained, and some were brutally clubbed and whipped. According to official accounts,<sup>72</sup> one of the staff members, Wei Fuhe, was stripped and beaten with clubs and whips for seven hours. Wei Fuhe died.

When the Tianjin Public Security Department learned of a possible murder in Daqiu village, they sent police to investigate. Yu Zuomin ordered the policemen detained. When Tianjin sent another team of investigators, backed by four hundred policemen, Yu Zuomin armed the villagers with steel bars and mobilized them to blockade the village.

Yu Zuomin was finally arrested, however, and in 1993 a court in nearby Tianjin sentenced him to twenty years' imprisonment for “harboring criminals, obstructing public security personnel in performing their duties, bribery, unlawfully detaining people and unlawfully putting people under control.”<sup>73</sup>



The full story of Yu Zuomin and Daqiu village has yet to be told. Reports of Yu's perfidy come from the official press, and my attempts to visit the village failed. Foreigners are no longer permitted to go there. But the case of Yu Zuomin surely challenges the assertion of any simple causative relationship between economic development and democratization. Daqiu village was one of the richest, most developed in China. The official account of Yu Zuomin's sentence reports a total production output for the village of 2.3 billion yuan and mentions such enterprises as an oxygen plant, a breeding farm, and automobile and furniture factories. But Yu Zuomin was a corrupt dictator.

Just as no one knows with certainty how many village leaders are democratically elected in China, so no one knows how many local emperors continue to rule. Although Yu Zuomin is surely extreme—for his brutality, the wealth he amassed for the village, and his earlier role as a nationwide model for peasant-entrepreneur—the phenomenon of the local emperor is still common in the Chinese countryside. Surely one explanation for why Yu's downfall was so long in coming may be the dictator's success in making sure that everyone shared in the village's prosperity. Local emperors may be accepted, even welcomed, as long as everyone shares in the spoils.

Indeed, local emperors may even be democratically elected—as Wang Weidong was in Sichuan province.

### Wugang Village: Democracy and Patronage in a Company Town

Sichuan's Wugang village is not as rich as Daqiu, but it is very rich indeed.<sup>74</sup> Income from collective enterprises was 40,000 yuan a year when Wang Weidong<sup>75</sup> was first appointed village chief in 1982. By 1995, income from collectively owned enterprises had reached 8 million yuan, and the democratically elected Wang Weidong was running for reelection. Wang Weidong's leadership was not the only factor contributing to Wugang's prosperity. The village's location helped. Wugang is on the outskirts of Wutongqiao, a prosperous county town that has been gradually spreading outward to encompass the village. As Wutongqiao has prospered, so has Wugang village, and today the village is visually indistinguishable from the town.

Since 1983, Wang Weidong has been both village chief and party secretary, and his positions give him a say in the distribution of the village's collective profits. In a pattern reminiscent of many countries, including the United States, in the early stages of democratic development, Wang has used those profits in a generous disbursement of patronage. Each year, some of the collective profits go into a special bank account to be distributed to villagers as bonuses at Chinese New Year. In 1995, the payout was 1,100 yuan a person. Wugang even has a pension plan—unheard of in most of rural China. In Wugang, everyone over sixty years old receives retirement pay of 70 yuan a month—up from 40 yuan a few years before. The village had invested 500,000 yuan to build a kindergarten, for which families were charged 70 yuan per semester per child, thus, according to the chief, contributing to the success of the one-child-per-family policy. Cadres and demobilized soldiers were given free health insurance, which paid 80 percent of their health costs. Wang Weidong has also set up training courses for farmers who want to work in industry. So many

villagers have left farming that much of the land has been recollectivized. Only 20 percent of the villagers still work in the fields.

Wang was reluctant to discuss his own income. He was so busy being party secretary and village chief that he has no time for work, he said. "My only desire is to make the village better." At first he said he made only 3,000 yuan a year plus an unspecified amount from renting out his land. When pressed, he admitted to making 4,000 yuan a month. It was his wife who made 3,000 yuan a year.

On election day in December 1995, the chief exuded self-confidence, and he was certain of the villagers' loyalty. "Elections are a test and also some pressure," he said. "They force us to do a good job. We have to be able to do good things for the villagers or we'll be replaced."

Wang Weidong's challenger was a twenty-eight-year-old middle school graduate and candidate for party membership who was one of the few farmers left in the village. "I don't have any particular plan if I am elected," he said. "Other people raised my name for the election." He had done no campaigning and had not tried to convince anyone to vote for him. He was still too young, he said, "and the current village head is very good." He could not honestly say that there was anything he could do better than the incumbent. He had no collective profits to share. He knew he had little hope of winning, but he had confidence in the democratic process and in the villagers' decision.

Not all the villagers gathered in the school yard to vote shared the challenger's confidence in the process. For some, the notion that village and party chief Wang Weidong could ever be voted out of office was so preposterous that the suggestion was greeted with gales of laughter. But the voters knew they were better off since Wang had come to power and were grateful that he had taken such good care of them. Some villagers did not particularly like the current chief, but they would vote for him anyway.

The election itself had the air of an amateur drama. The party and government, upper and lower administrative levels, were working together so closely to orchestrate the event that the division of responsibility disappeared. For the villagers gathered in the school yard, the election was a festive occasion, and they were being paid for their time. The wealthier, more economically successful villagers had stayed at home. They had business to attend to, several told me when I visited their homes, and they had sent someone to cast their vote by proxy. When the election was over and the tallies in, Wang Weidong was the overwhelming victor. The challenger got only a smattering of votes.

The selection of nominees is a vital, but often overlooked, part of the democratic process and continues in many places to be controlled by party committees or higher-level administrative organs. In Wugang, the conclusion that "other people" persuaded the challenger to run in order to ensure a two-candidate slate and present the semblance of a genuinely competitive election is difficult to avoid. By agreeing to run, the challenger demonstrated his loyalty to the party. His reward, presumably, was promotion from candidate to full member. But without a more open nomination process, genuine competition is hampered, and the introduction of new, innovative village leadership may be stifled. The election in Wugang was more form than essence.

The case of Wugang village also suggests what can happen when thriving collective enterprises permit the political use of patronage. Patronage has been (and still is in some

places) a powerful force in American electoral politics, too, and some would consider it an advance over no democracy at all. The question is whether elections in places such as Wugang will become more genuinely competitive before disillusionment with democracy sets in. Noncompetitive elections are nothing new in China. Plenty of pro forma voting continues to take place at all levels of the political hierarchy. Or will the villagers simply conclude that money, after all, buys power?

### Lishu County: The Nationwide Model

Democracy in Lishu county, Jilin, is further advanced than in Sichuan, offering an instructive contrast. Although Jilin villages are moderately well off (in 1995, per capita income was 1,168 yuan a year),<sup>76</sup> collective enterprise does not dominate, and patronage is therefore more difficult to dispense. Winning candidates are often the village's most prosperous entrepreneurs, who have promised to share their know-how (but not their money) with the village as a whole.

Moreover, Lishu was the first to recognize the importance of the nomination process and to take steps to introduce democratic procedures into candidate selection. Through an open primary known as the *haixuan*, or sea election, villagers in Lishu are given blank ballots containing only the positions available on the village committee, but no names. Voters then write in their choice of candidates. The result is generally many more names than positions available—an average of seventy-six people per village in 1994–95. The number of candidates is then winnowed to two each for the position of village chief and deputy and, generally, one more candidate for village committee than the number of positions on the committee. Thus, a three-person committee would have four candidates and a four-person committee would have five. In November 1995, Lishu's experiment with open primaries, and its innovative introduction of secret ballots, led to its selection as the nationwide model for village elections.<sup>77</sup>

Jilin province, together with Liaoning and Heilongjiang, is in China's far northeast (the area sometimes referred to in the West as Manchuria), one of the few places in settled China where the population does not press too closely on the land. Much of China's state-run heavy industry is located here, and China's state-run enterprises have run into difficult times. The hardest hit factories are shutting or slowing down production, sending all or a portion of their workers home at a fraction of their wages—usually around 300 yuan a month in the larger cities and 200 yuan a month in smaller ones—barely enough to buy food. *Xiagang* is the term used to describe this situation, which roughly translates as “furlough” and is short of being laid off but not quite employment, either. With the number of furloughed workers on the rise, some cities are witnessing the rise of mafia-like organizations known in Chinese as *hei shehui*, or “black societies.”

The black society is necessary, a young friend from the northeast told me, because “the government and police are not doing their jobs. So many state enterprises have gone bankrupt that lots of people are just at home, or on the streets. They don't have much money—maybe 200 yuan a month at the most. So crime is up, too. But if someone gets robbed of 200 *kuai*, it's his last 200 *kuai*. He goes to the police, and the police won't even bother to help. It's not enough money for them to be interested. But the black society has so many connections throughout society that they can find out who did it and administer their

own form of justice.” The black society also extracts protection money from many shopkeepers, promising them big payoffs if they encounter any trouble.<sup>78</sup>

The official Chinese press confirms the rise of these mafias, particularly in Heilongjiang province, describing gangs as “running rampant,” extorting money, organizing protection rackets, robbing cars and trains, and monopolizing the local pork market. According to one report, a mafia set up a self-styled underground public security bureau that “indiscriminately executed innocent people, posing a very serious threat to public order.” When the gang boss Han Jie was killed, allegedly during a shoot-out with a rival gang, his followers organized a 150-vehicle, four-hour-long procession through the Heilongjiang city of Jiamusi, taunting local officials and honking their horns in front of local government buildings, according to the official press.<sup>79</sup>

But the countryside of China’s northeast is more tranquil. Vast fields often stretch as far as the eye can see, interrupted only occasionally by scattered, far-flung villages. The rich black earth—*hei tudi*—is ideal for growing wheat and corn, and the local cuisine is unique and hearty—thick wheat noodles, fatty pork, spicy sauerkraut, chunky bean curd, and potato and corn dishes of great variety. The refined white rice of the south is rarely served here. Many of China’s large state farms are located in the northeast, and some believe that sometime in the next century, this vast expanse of fertile land will become a major source of China’s food.

Lishu county, 120 kilometers from Jilin’s capital of Changchun, first held village elections in 1988. In the winter of 1994–95, elections were being held for the third time. Winters in the northeast are searingly cold, and in early January the fields were bare and frozen, exposing the fertile black soil. The elections in Lishu were held in the winter, we were told, because farming comes to a halt during the coldest months. Peasants could take time to vote without interrupting their work.

But the villages in Lishu had no meeting halls large enough for candidates to speak to the entire village, and the weather was too cold to assemble everyone outdoors. Official campaign speeches were thus addressed to a meeting of the village representative assembly, generally convened in a school or at the village headquarters. Most of the representatives were heads of small groups and the village’s most senior, respected males—old men with wrinkled, weather-beaten faces and huge gnarled hands dressed in thick cotton-padded jackets and trousers. The representatives were charged with spreading the candidates’ views to the villagers.

Even after three rounds of elections, the notion of campaigning was still new to Lishu county and an occasional source of embarrassment. Some candidates admitted to campaigning informally door-to-door or within their small groups, but vying for votes was considered unseemly at best, and open competition for election was viewed as something of an affront to harmony and perhaps an outright invitation to *luan*. Harmonious relations with neighbors was an important value. Standing before the representative assembly, the room filled with smoke, a few younger candidates seemed reluctant to assert that they wanted to be elected and humbly declared instead that they were willing to accept the judgment of the masses.

But Lishu did have real competition, often between the older generation, who had run the collectives, and a younger, more entrepreneurial group that was promising to share

economic know-how with the wider community, and there were real differences between the candidates. In Gao Jiazi village, fifty-nine-year-old Yan Qinxue, a former brigade leader who had been forced by temporary ill health to resign his position as village chief, was attempting a comeback. He was the only candidate to note that a third of the farmers in Gao Jiazi had yet to benefit materially from economic reform, and he promised to work to reduce the percentage of disadvantaged families. His forty-two-year-old entrepreneur rival, Zheng Xiaoping, promised better prices for raw materials and closer ties with higher-level organs. When the speeches were over and the chairman called for questions, the room remained silent. "We all know the candidates and what they stand for," the assembly member sitting next to me explained. There was no need to ask questions. In truth, candidates were so well known to the villagers that speeches were probably superfluous. Their families had lived together for generations, even centuries.<sup>80</sup>

The final elections in Lishu were organized by small group, and the polling stations were usually in the homes of the small-group leaders. The layout of the typical Lishu house was ideal for the function. Homes are large and brick, all constructed in the same basic design. Piles of cornstalks dry against the courtyard walls, which enclose the families' vegetable plots and prevent their cows, horses, chickens, and pigs from running wild. The house is entered through the kitchen, where two brick cooking stoves face each other on either side of the door. The storage room is straight ahead, and there are two other rooms, one on either side of the kitchen. The stoves, fueled by dried cornstalks, are the family's only source of heat. Pipes run across the floor in opposite directions from each stove, through the walls to each room and under a raised brick platform, the *kang*. The family sleeps and often eats on the *kang* and entertains there during the winter. In the coldest months, hospitality toward guests is demonstrated by the invitation to *shang kang*, or "get on the *kang*." The poorest homes have little furniture, but most rooms have a table and chairs, a cabinet, family memorabilia, a television set, and sometimes a sofa.

As villagers arrived at the polling station, they assembled in one of the large *kang* rooms, women congregating on one side, men on the other, the room filling quickly with smoke. The *kang* was reserved for honored guests—higher-level officials and foreigners. As voters' names were called one by one, each went alone into the other *kang* room to sit at a table and fill out the secret ballot. In 1994, Lishu party secretary Fei Yuncheng had participated in a training session jointly sponsored by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Ford Foundation, during which IRI China specialist Lorraine Spiess and the Ford Foundation's Phyllis Chang built a secret ballot booth and directed the participating Chinese officials through a mock election. Fei had been impressed with the concept of a secret ballot and had adapted the notion to Lishu's specific conditions. Occasionally, a small child or an old granny could be found sleeping on the *kang* where villagers were voting, but everyone agreed that the secrecy of the ballot was not thereby violated.

Villagers in Lishu county were barely aware of abstract concepts like democracy and human rights, and the notion of competing political parties did not exist. Foreign observers of China's grassroots elections sometimes assume that party membership is a central issue in local campaigns, that the contest is one between party and nonparty candidates, and that a nonparty designation represents an incipient challenge to one-party rule. In Lishu county, to the contrary, the Communist Party was accepted unquestioningly as the

governing party of China, and if anyone imagined an alternative political arrangement, he never spoke about it openly. What was important in these elections, villagers said, were the qualities of the candidates. Their concerns were local, practical, and economic; and they had a strong and certain sense of their own self-interest. They wanted stones placed under their dirt roads so they could still be navigated in the rain. They wanted lower prices for plastic sheeting so they could build greenhouses to grow crops in the winter. They wanted better ties with the county seat so they could get more licenses to market their produce there. They wanted better schools and educational opportunities for their children. And they wanted their leaders to be people who could make those things happen.

Overwhelmingly, the candidates being elected were the villages' leading entrepreneurs—men who had been exceptionally successful economically and who promised to use their economic experience for the benefit of the entire village. In Gao Jiazi village, Zheng Xiaoping, the young entrepreneur challenging the former brigade leader, won resoundingly.

Both members and nonmembers of the party were running for office, and party members had an advantage. Much of what affects villagers' lives is determined by party officials in the township and county, and villagers naturally want their leader to have good *guanxi*, or "connections," with higher-level leaders. Party members are more likely to have established those connections. In Lishu's 1991–92 elections, 75 percent of the village committee members also belonged to the party. Nationwide statistics for party membership of village committees are not available. In some areas for which there are statistics, the percentage of nonmembers of the party being elected seems to have grown—from about 20 percent in 1993 to 40 percent in 1995.<sup>81</sup> Once elected, about half of the nonparty officials are then recruited into the party, thereby infusing it with talented, popular, younger, and probably more honest people, co-opting the best and the brightest of the rural populace.

Even in a model county like Lishu, some of the elections did not live up to the standards the county had set for itself. As our car drew up to one village, curious villagers, ruddy-faced from the wind and bundled against the cold, were lining the dirt path, waiting, completed ballots in hand. The ballots had been distributed earlier and filled out at home. Our arrival was the signal for the "election" to begin. The villagers simply lined up at the small-group leader's house and deposited their ballots in a red cardboard box.

In other villages, proxy votes were a problem. Between 10 and 15 percent of China's rural population have left their native villages to work in cities and county towns. Their official residency remains in their native place, however, and officials in many parts of China have grappled with the question of how to include the migrants in village elections. Lishu county's election procedures allowed three proxy votes per family for members who were away. In 1995, however, the use of the proxy far exceeded its original intent. Individuals were given proxy ballots upon request, regardless of whether they had family members working outside the village. One woman was given six. The concept of one person, one vote is foreign to Chinese tradition, where the family rather than the individual has been the basic unit of identity. The dominance of the senior male member of the family is so well established in rural China that few women or younger men would even think of casting an independent vote.



Implementation of the *haixuan*, or open primary, also sometimes falls short of the ideal. Although the *haixuan* allows villagers to nominate their favorite candidates, the process of determining whose names will be on the final ballot differs from place to place. Village-wide primaries, with the entire electorate participating, seem not to be the norm. More often, the village representative assembly decides the final list. In some cases, higher-level authorities continue to exercise veto power over popular choices, and nothing prevents the arbitrary exercise of that power.

The case of Ma Zhanlin is an example.



Ma Zhanlin's success could be measured in many ways. In 1995, Ma was in his early fifties and the richest entrepreneur in Lishu's Dongdaba village. He and his family raised rabbits in a sprawling, one-story brick shed adjacent to their home. More specifically, they raised California rabbits, which even in Lishu gave them a special cachet. Ma's sun-filled home, just at the edge of the village, was newer, neater, better furnished, and more spacious than others, and the Volkswagen Santana parked in his garage was the only privately owned car in Dongdaba.

Ma Zhanlin's family was further testimony to his success. His well-dressed, bright-eyed son had served in the military—still a major route for upward mobility in the countryside—and his gregarious, outgoing daughter was studying English as a university student in Changchun. A picture of Ma and his pigtailed wife taken at their Cultural Revolution–style wedding revealed a strikingly handsome couple. Time had only added character to the faces, leaving their intelligent good looks intact.

Ma was also an undisputed village leader. He had been elected village chief in 1992, and at the time of his election was simultaneously head of the village party branch. But in the winter of 1993–94, township authorities had removed Ma Zhanlin from office and appointed a younger, less experienced man, in his stead. Awkward and inarticulate, with a pudgy, inexpressive face, Ma's unlikely successor could not have been more different.

Everyone had a slightly different story about why Ma was removed. The new village chief said that Ma's son had lied about his age when he joined the army, claiming to be older than he really was. Demobilized and back home, the son had behaved as though the false age were true and had married before reaching the legal age of twenty-four.

The villagers were very upset by this violation of the family planning policy, the township official keeping a close watch on the young successor explained. Some had written to township headquarters complaining. "The family planning policy is very strict," the official continued. "It is the most basic policy of the party in the rural areas. So for a party secretary and village chief to violate the policy is a terrible breach of rules." The seriousness with which the family planning policy was being implemented was evident in the township office. The names of all the married couples of childbearing age were listed on a huge chart, covering an entire wall, together with the date of marriage, the date of birth of each child, and the date of each woman's last menstrual period. Township officials could not allow such a flagrant violator of the birth control policy to serve as village chief. That

Ma's son and daughter-in-law still had no child seemed not to diminish the crime. The marriage was the crime.

During a visit to his home, Ma Zhanlin readily admitted violating the party's family planning policy. With his wife, his daughter, and the offending son and his wife gathered around, the deposed chief explained why his son married early. In consulting a fortune teller's almanac, Ma's wife had discovered that a marriage in 1994, the year in which their son was legally permitted to take a wife, would be dangerous for both the bridegroom and his father. In fact, a marriage that year was so inauspicious that father, son, or both might die if the wedding took place. Ma Zhanlin claimed not to believe such superstitions and knew that a man in his position ought to set an example in family planning. But his wife, like many rural folk, could not make plans without consulting almanacs and fortune tellers. Trying to minimize the breach of family planning policy, the couple arranged for their son to get married two days before the start of the inauspicious year. The young couple would wait for a more propitious time to have children. The breach of the family planning regulations was thus not in having a child but in marrying too soon.

The search for a balance between folk tradition and party policy was a dilemma Ma's fellow villagers could easily have understood. But party officials in the township had removed him as both party and village chief.

In January 1995, when Dongdaba village was conducting another round of elections, Ma Zhanlin was permitted to run for membership on the village committee but not for village chief. His replacement was running as the incumbent chief, though he was not particularly enthusiastic about continuing to serve in Ma's post. His campaign speech was weak, as he promised only to rely on the suggestions of the masses. "If they want to elect me, fine," he said, as the ever-present township authorities hovered nearby. "If they don't, that's fine, too. I'll go back to farming, to what I was doing before." He was clearly the township level's choice, prepared to do their bidding.

The villagers were hardly angry with Ma Zhanlin. On election day, I walked with Ma from his home to the village office where the votes were being tabulated and sat next to him during the count. The incumbent chief, Ma's replacement, won handily, though not resoundingly, thereby giving the township leaders face. But Ma Zhanlin's votes for membership on the village committee far exceeded those of any other candidate. Virtually the entire electorate had voted for him. Would Ma Zhanlin also have been the runaway favorite had he been allowed to run for village chief? Such a conclusion was hard to avoid.

What was really behind the removal of Ma Zhanlin? Was it a case of "red-eye disease"—the pervasive envy of the fortunate rich? Ma was not only rich, but his children were successful, too. Had Ma used his *guanxi* and influence to get his son recruited into the army? Had he been too defiant as village chief, offending township-level authorities, usurping some of their control? Or was Ma really being removed for a violation of the family planning policy? Had villagers really petitioned the township government and complained that Ma's son had married too soon? And what had happened during the *haixuan*? Had villagers really not written in Ma's name?

The quiet struggle between Dongdaba and the township was likely to continue. It was easy to believe that once the township officials went home, Ma Zhanlin would be leading the village again, no matter who held the official position as village chief.<sup>82</sup>



Lishu's occasional failure to live up to its own ideals suggests that democracy there is not yet the natural state of affairs. Democratic norms have yet to take root. The case of Ma Zhanlin demonstrates that the nomination process is a crucial, but sometimes overlooked, element of the democratic process. The letter of the law can sometimes be followed without the spirit, testimony to the power of township and county authorities who are reluctant to grant full autonomy to the villages in their jurisdiction.

But the elections in Lishu county are among the best organized in the country, an accomplishment that can be attributed in no small measure to the extraordinary leadership of both Zeng Fanxu, the nonparty official in Jilin's Department of Civil Affairs responsible for overseeing provincial elections, and Fei Yuncheng, the party secretary of Lishu county. Both men are emphatically committed to making local democracy work. Lishu's designation as the national model is the result of the cumulative improvements they have introduced with each successive round of elections.

Both Zeng Fanxu and Fei Yuncheng encourage constructive criticism and have welcomed cooperation with foreign election specialists. Both have now visited the United States. Fei Yuncheng has taken to heart suggestions that elections could be held during the warmer, though busier, farming season so candidates can speak to all the villagers in outdoor meetings; the next round of elections were scheduled for June. Both officials understand outsiders' concerns that the proxy tends to give the senior male the right to decide the entire family's vote, thus discriminating against the admittedly small minority of women and younger males who might want to vote independently. Different ways of involving rural migrants in the electoral process are being explored.

Lishu's success is also a result of the structure of the village economy, which is prosperous but not wealthy and in which entrepreneurship is more important than collective enterprises. Absent the patronage to distribute from collective enterprise, the qualities of the candidate rather than the power of the purse seem to govern the vote.

The structure of the rural economy in Gutian county, Fujian, is not greatly different from that of Lishu, and Fujian has had both strong provincial leadership and long experience in the election process. But Fujian has held elections more recently than Lishu and continues to build on both its own and others' experience. As measured by the ministry's four principles of democracy—that the chairman, vice chairman, and members of village committees be directly elected by the villagers themselves; that the number of candidates exceed the number of positions; that voting be conducted by secret ballot; and that the winning candidate receive more than half the votes—the province is at the forefront of electoral success.

### **Fujian Province: Democratization with Development**

Village committees were still appointed by higher-level authorities in 1984, when Zhang Xiaogan left the military to head the office of basic-level government in the Fujian Civil Affairs Department. Since then, major responsibility for introducing village elections has rested with him. The province's accomplishments justifiably make him proud. A committed incrementalist, Zhang has used each new round of elections to build on the lessons of the last. When elections were first introduced less than a year after he took office, a single family member could vote on behalf of the entire household. In 1987, villagers voted for

members of the village committee, but the village chief and deputy chief were then elected by the committee as a whole. The notion of a secret ballot was introduced in 1990, but little was done to guarantee it, and elections continued to take place in large open meetings similar to those in Sichuan. Villagers first voted directly for village chief and deputy chief in 1994, the same year the principle of one person, one vote was implemented, and the number of candidates was required to exceed the number of positions available. In 1997, new measures were taken to guarantee the secrecy of the ballot, and a certain level of institutionalization set in.<sup>83</sup>

Coastal Fujian, some 100 miles across the straits from Taiwan, has long been prosperous without being greatly developed. Because of its strategic vulnerability to attack from Taiwan, few state industries were established there during the Maoist regime. But the coast has thrived under Deng Xiaoping's policy of reform and opening up. The Fujian city of Xiamen was one of the country's first special economic zones.

Much of the province's success is related to its special relationship with Taiwan. Most Taiwanese trace their ancestry to Fujian, and since the late 1980s, with a relaxation of prohibitions against cross-strait exchanges, businessmen from Taiwan, traveling via Hong Kong, have poured in to invest, often setting up new factories in their old hometowns, becoming Confucian-style patrons of the place they left decades before. The Taiwanese investors are often markedly different from the supranational class of sleek, impeccably tailored business-school graduates who have been key actors in the development of Hong Kong. The Taiwanese compatriots are often nouveau riche peasants: weathered, chain-smoking men in rumpled, ill-fitting suits. Their female counterparts attempt to cover the ravages of the sun with heavy applications of makeup, their clothes are garish and their costume jewelry ostentatious, and they wobble uncertainly on high-heeled shoes. Corruption has arrived together with rapid development, and Xiamen's foreign-owned hotels seethe with prostitution.<sup>84</sup>

In the countryside, the arrival of Taiwanese compatriots has been accompanied by a revival of traditional Fujianese culture. Relatives separated since 1949 have been reunited, and long-unused clan temples are undergoing repair. Local Buddhist temples, earlier assaulted by an antireligious socialism that reached its height with the Cultural Revolution, have been refurbished and reintegrated into the fabric of village life. Shrines to village gods dot the rural roads.

Not all of Fujian has always been prosperous, however. Traveling inland, toward the mountains that occupy most of the province and span the border between Fujian and Jiangxi, villages have traditionally been poor. Gutian county, four hours' drive from the capital city of Fuzhou at the foot of the Jinggang mountains, has long been one of the poorest. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gutian was incorporated for a while into the Jiangxi soviet, one of the earliest independent guerrilla base areas established by the struggling communists. In recent years, even Gutian has begun to prosper, largely, local officials proudly explain, because of the cultivation of edible fungus—delicacies that range from the readily identifiable mushroom to species that look more like soft white coral or chewy sponges. Believed in many parts of Asia to be both nutritious and medicinal, Gutian's edible fungi fetch a handsome price both domestically and abroad.

In Guanjiang village, a short fifteen-minute drive from the Gutian county seat and typical of others in the area, the fungi are cultivated at home.

Guanjiang village is cut in half by the two-lane highway linking it with distant Fuzhou and the several prosperous towns en route. Peasants in Guanjiang have no complaints about getting their produce to market; Fujian's roads are among the most extensive in China.

From the highway, Guanjiang seems composed almost entirely of newly built three-story brick homes. As elsewhere in China, Guanjiang homes follow a distinctive pattern. Fujian is semitropical, and homes are open to the elements and built to catch the breeze. A wide, open door facing the narrow dirt street reveals the family's public sitting room. The view inside to the inner courtyard is blocked by a narrow wall, open on either side and hung variously with posters depicting the ideograph for good fortune (often turned upside down to signify that good fortune has actually arrived—*fu dao le*) or pictures of such Communist Party luminaries as Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping. The outdoor courtyard serves as the family kitchen, with a propane-fueled stove, a tile sink, and a spigot for cold running water. The first-floor storage and bedrooms face the courtyard. The mushrooms are generally cultivated on the second floor, or in an adjacent shed, on layered shelves.

Many of the village leaders, both the elected village committee and members of the party branch, live in the newly constructed homes along the highway. Building does not begin without first consulting a local geomancer, the *feng shui* master, one villager told me. Homes with the best *feng shui* are located at the edge of the village fields, where an orchard-dotted hill stands in the background and a small stream separates the orchards from the village land.

But the view from the highway is deceptive. Tucked away in the interstices of the village, out of sight from the main road, are many older, traditional, single-storied buildings with mud-packed walls and gray-tiled roofs. In March 1997, the head of the Guanjiang Women's Federation, Wei Baozhu, took me by the hand to show me the village. She led me first to the traditional-style village temple—an eclectic combination of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism dedicated to a local goddess. There, she taught me how to light the incense, place it in the sand-filled incense burner, and bow three times before each of the dozen or so idols. The gods properly tended, she led me deeper into the village and up a hill to the old clan temple, then undergoing repair. The site belonged to the Chens, the larger of the village's two major clans, but the Weis were repairing their temple, too. The Communist Party has been trying to wipe out the lineage organizations since coming to power in 1949, but the clans are inevitably revived in periods of political relaxation. Their existence poses a peculiar problem for village democracy, because majority rule almost ensures that members of the numerically larger lineage will triumph over the smaller groups.

The village's official organizations—the party branch, the village committee, the Women's Federation, and the Youth League—are housed in a small office building adjacent to the primary school just off the main road. The building's first-floor sitting room, similar to those in private homes, is a gathering place for old people to watch television, play chess, or otherwise while away the day. The offices were upstairs. Outside, on the of-

face's outer walls and on the walls of adjacent buildings, were the village bulletin boards, decorated now in red and crammed with information about the upcoming election. One blackboard outlined the qualities of a good candidate, including an exemplary moral character and a commitment to carry out state policies; another listed the names of the candidates and their basic biographical data. Another contained an announcement of the election and gave the locations of the three polling places. The village committee's financial statement was posted, too, listing all income and expenditures for the previous year. A public announcement system, with a hookup in every home, broadcast election announcements, the candidates' speeches, and other essential news. The contrast between Guanjiang's public spaces and those in Bend in the River was dramatic.

Fujian had yet to introduce Lishu's *haixuan* primary method. The only way to become a candidate was through a petition signed by five or more villagers. Several days before the final election, the names of all candidates nominated through petition are placed before a meeting of the village representative assembly, which then selects the final slate by secret ballot. In March 1997, eleven names were put before the Guanjiang assembly, which winnowed the number to six. Zhang Xiaogan, the provincial-level civil affairs official charged with overseeing village elections, is not satisfied with this type of indirect primary. In the next round, he hopes to emulate and surpass Lishu's *haixuan*, with the entire electorate participating.

At the Guanjiang meeting to select the final candidates, Chen Bangxing, the sitting village chief, began with a year-end report on the village committee's activities. Chen Bangxing was proud of the committee's accomplishments. The village's living standard had improved. Average per capita income was 2,300 yuan a year. A new road, linking Guanjiang with the Gutian county seat, had been built under Chen Bangxing's leadership. Chen was proud of his ties with the township and county governments and was especially pleased to have been singled out for praise by county officials. Chen was leaving the village in good financial shape, as attested by a report on village finances by Chen Youdi, who was not a member of the committee but served as the assembly's accountant. Collective income, largely from raising chickens and ducks, was 270,000 yuan, and the budget was balanced.

Chen Bangxing was running for reelection, and the meeting was the opportunity for him and the other primary candidates to deliver their campaign speeches. Chen promised, if elected, to get permission to open up more land for villagers to build new houses, to get clean running water delivered to all the homes in the village, to inaugurate a beautification program, and to invest 30,000 yuan in a collective vegetable plot for the benefit of the villagers. He wanted to strengthen the collective economy in order to continue improving the villagers' standard of living, but he was still looking for the best way to do that and welcomed the encouragement and advice of the representative assembly. The committee's accomplishments depended on the villagers' support, Chen said, for which he thanked them. Despite the accomplishments, he continued, much had not been done well. He promised to try to improve himself and do more.

Guanjiang's villagewide elections were held three days later. The major procedural improvement, an innovation of provincial leader Zhang Xiaogan, was the introduction of polling places open from 6:30 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon.

The innovation was a direct outgrowth of Zhang Xiaogan's 1995 visit to the United States, where he had been particularly impressed with the organization of polling places. He tried in Gutian to duplicate their spirit, if not their exact construction. In the past, all the villagers had been gathered together at the same time for a "voting meeting," Zhang said. The result was a very high turnout—98.6 percent—but voting was not entirely secret and the high turnout was the result not of the voters' physical presence but of the proxy. One member of the family was allowed to vote for all.

On election day, polling stations were set up in the front sitting rooms of three Guanjiang family homes. At a table just beyond and to the left of the entrance, each voter presented his voter registration card and picked up his ballot as his name was checked off the official registration list. The voting booth was at another table to the left of the registration stop, shielded on three sides by bright red cloth suspended from bamboo poles attached to the table's four corners. A pair of reading glasses sat on each table for those who needed them, and high on the wall directly across from the voting booth, easily visible to the voter, was an enlarged mock-up of the ballot with a picture of each candidate above his name—an aid not only to those who could not read but to those who might know a candidate only by his family position—eldest son of Chen Weiguo, for instance—rather than by formal name. The sealed ballot box, covered in festive red, was just beyond the voting booth.

Each candidate was allowed one monitor in the room, and because Guanjiang was a demonstration village, higher-level officials and the four foreign observers wandered from place to place to comment and observe. Peak periods of voting required creative efforts at traffic control, but the process was remarkably smooth.

Shortly before four in the afternoon, when the voting was officially to close, election officials carried the ballot boxes to the homes of voters who were registered but had yet to come to the polls. The assumption was that the nonvoters would be elderly or disabled. In fact, the nonparticipants were generally younger and apathetic. Voter participation remained extremely high, however. Only 46 out of 1,022 voters did not cast ballots.

With the voting complete, the ballot boxes were carried to the school yard for the count. Villagers brought chairs into the yard to observe the process, and many people went to the school's second-floor balcony to watch from above. Each of the three boxes was emptied separately, and the ballots were counted to make sure the number of ballots equaled the number of people who had voted. Blank and spoiled ballots were set aside. The properly executed ballots were then mixed together, and the results were tallied on a large blackboard.

Chen Bangxing was reelected village chief by an overwhelming majority—787 to 179. His challenger was a member of the smaller Wei clan. Chen Youdi, the accountant who had read the financial report at the meeting to nominate final candidates, was elected to the village committee with more votes than the chief. Chen Youdi had run but lost in the last election, and he attributed his 1997 victory to the quiet campaign he had waged for the past three years. Not surprisingly, all the male victors were members of the dominant Chen clan, highlighting a problem in many parts of southern China where clans are still important and one lineage is often numerically and politically stronger than others.

Wei Baozhu, the thirty-something head of the Women's Federation who had shown me around the village, was also reelected. Indeed, regulations mandate that at least one woman be elected to the committee, though the mechanism guaranteeing that representation was never clear. Wei Baozhu gained face, and possibly votes, by showing a foreigner around, but the warmth of interaction between her and the villagers would have been difficult to feign.

There was a curious contradiction between Wei Baozhu's obvious popularity and the role she played as head of the Women's Federation. Her major responsibility was to ensure implementation of state policy on family planning.

"Why does everyone like you so much when your job is to limit the number of children they have?" I asked her in front of several villagers.

"Family planning is state policy," she responded, as the observers nodded.

"But isn't it unpopular?" I asked.

The question made no sense. The policy was necessary. The assumption of many foreigners that the family planning program is widely unpopular in the Chinese countryside is, perhaps, too simple. The policy, after all, has been accepted as necessary by many in the cities, and with proper education—and significant economic development—the policy may also be acceptable in many rural areas, too. And if the policy is accepted as necessary, surely its implementation by a warm-hearted, sympathetic woman of childbearing age is preferable to the granny brigades who have been known to patrol the cities.

The villagers of Guanjiang were richer—economically, politically, and spiritually—than those of Shanxi's Bend in the River. The natural environment seemed to favor Guanjiang, and so did the man-made system of roads and the attention being showered from above. One peasant, fresh from the fields, responded to my question about improvements in his standard of living with a wail that his life was not good. But most villagers of Guanjiang had found their path to prosperity—in the cultivation of mushrooms. Their challenge was not what to sell but how to expand their market both domestically and abroad.

Leadership had long since been passed from the old collective cadres to a new entrepreneurial elite, and the competition between the contenders was genuine. Wealth and power continued to be linked. The head of the party branch was one of the richest men in the village, and so were members of the village committee. But control over village resources did not appear to be the way to get and keep power, as it was in Sichuan's Wugang village. There was no patronage in Guanjiang—or none, at least, that was obvious. Collective enterprise supplemented family income but was not the major source.

To say that Guanjiang was a civil society in the making is perhaps an exaggeration, but the villagers had a multiplicity of associations—religious, political, economic, and familial—that together made up a community and mediated against the excesses of power that were characteristic of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution. One could argue about the relative power in Guanjiang of the party, the representative assembly, and the village committee, but the balance among them ensures that no single political institution can gain full control. No local emperor is likely to rise in Guanjiang.

Technically, Guanjiang's elections were close to flawless. For provincial leader Zhang Xiaogan, only a few issues remain. The question of how to include legal residents working



outside the village has yet to be solved. With the proxy abolished, absentee ballots had been mailed to people who were away. None had been returned. Final candidates were chosen only three days before the election, which did not leave enough time for the ballots to be printed, mailed, and returned.

How to duplicate Guanjiang's success in other parts of Fujian is also a vexing question. The task of training election officials and village leaders for the province's 15,000 villages is enormous.

Zhang was also wrestling with the more philosophical and long-term question of how to raise the villagers' "democratic consciousness." ("The most serious problem," Mao Zedong said a half century ago, "is the education of the peasantry.") Zhang recognized that the villagers' understanding of democracy increased with each succeeding election, but he thought that most peasants were still infected with "feudalist" thought, that they were too well adjusted to years of authoritarian rule. The process of democratic consciousness-raising would be lengthy, he thought.

The most powerful consciousness-raising tool in Gutian county is not likely to be elections for village committee but participation in the representative assemblies, which were strong and lively throughout the county. Major decisions affecting Gutian villages were decided not by the village committee but by the representative assembly. The primary responsibility of the village committee was to implement rather than initiate decisions. Indeed, future researchers of democratization in rural China will need to look more closely at the role and functions of the representative assemblies and guard against equating democratic elections of village committees with democracy itself.

In the end, the most impressive difference between Guanjiang and Bend in the River villages was Guanjiang's spirit of community in contrast to the sense in Bend in the River that something important was missing. Guanjiang was pervaded by optimism and a conviction that the future could only be better. Many factors contributed to Guanjiang's sense of community—the villagers' certainty that they were on the right path to economic development, the strength of the lineage, their religious revival, even the attention they were receiving from above. But the activity of organizing and conducting elections and the designation of the representative assembly as the major decision-making body also served to strengthen communal bonds.



## Four

### The Requisites for Success

This overview of village leadership in China today highlights the diversity of local governance in the countryside, the limitations of our understanding of the political situation there, and the folly of drawing early conclusions about how widespread or well run village elections may be. Although village elections may have improved local governance in some parts of the country, villages in other areas face a vacuum of leadership and some continue to be dominated by local emperors. The incidence of corruption, exploitation, and abuse of power remains high. In some areas, peasants have protested against burgeoning taxes and fees, government IOUs, and pervasive corruption. In 1993, some ten thousand peasants in Sichuan's Renshou county stormed county headquarters to protest taxes levied for the construction of a road. Similar sporadic outbursts of protest, sometimes violent, are liable to continue in many areas of the Chinese countryside, just as Peng Zhen and officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs predicted. Li and O'Brien also note the rise of what they call "policy based resistance," as villagers cite "laws, government policies, and other official communications" when challenging unjust and unfair treatment.<sup>85</sup> The summer of 1997 saw new reports of rural unrest. Some five hundred thousand peasants in Hubei and Jiangxi are said to have rioted over the corruption of county-level officials and the extraction of illegal and excessive taxes and fees.<sup>86</sup> The spring of 1998 witnessed a new wave of protests and renewed calls for order from the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee.<sup>87</sup>

Even where elections are held regularly, some are clearly a sham and others are badly managed. Local emperors with patronage to dispense can be democratically elected. Moreover, even in the most progressive villages, where elections are both well run and genuinely competitive, the impact of "democracy" on peasants' lives is limited. Nonelected, higher-level officials continue to make many decisions directly affecting the villagers' lives. Major policies continue to emanate from Beijing, and an important responsibility of elected village-level officials is to carry out policies that villagers had no part in making and that they may or may not support. Democracy, where it is being introduced, is thus circumscribed and limited in scope.

Moreover, whatever the long-term positive relationship between economic development and democratization, that relationship does not yet exist in rural China. Henry Rowen argues that "the transition to stable democracy correlates with mean incomes between \$5,000 and \$6,000 and becomes impregnable at the \$7,000 level."<sup>88</sup> Even the wealthiest rural areas are still too poor, or their wealth too new, for that correlation to work. Rowen predicts that at its current rate of growth, China, with a per capita GDP of \$2,500 in 1996, will become a democracy sometime around 2015. China's peasants are not yet demanding democracy. In their hierarchy of needs, material well-being still takes precedence over political reform, as the case of Bend in the River illustrates. Although

peasants may rebel against local emperors and villagers in poor areas may flee to the cities, the concept of democracy as an alternative form of government must come from outside. Private farming is part of the rural tradition, and hence peasants could spontaneously abandon the collective in favor of arrangements they knew and trusted. Exposure to new ideas that might introduce rural China to different modes of political organization—carried by returned migrants and the telecommunications revolution, for instance—is just beginning. For now, the impetus for democratization is coming from officials in Beijing and in the provinces.

At present, five factors seem most decisive in determining whether competitive elections can be successfully introduced into Chinese villages.

First, the most successfully democratic villages are those that have received the greatest attention from those higher-level officials most committed to making village democracy work.

Second, genuinely competitive elections have a greater likelihood of success in more pluralistic villages, that is, villages where neither economic nor political power is very concentrated and where villagers are engaged in a multiplicity of associations—religious, political, economic, social, and familial. Thus villages where wealth is created by many entrepreneurs are more likely to have competitive elections than villages where enterprises are ostensibly collectively owned but managed by one person or a small group of people. Many villages are electing their most prosperous members to lead them, but in a company town like Wugang, where flourishing community enterprises are controlled by a handful of people, the liberal use of patronage limits voter choice and corrupts the democratic process.

Villages with strong and active representative assemblies are similarly more likely to foster a dispersion of power and thus to encourage genuine political competition. The village representative assembly offers a check against the power of both the party branch and the village chief, providing villagers a significant voice in those decisions that most directly affect them and fostering greater transparency in village finances. Village representative assemblies are not always democratically chosen, however. In some cases, they are dominated by the village's senior, most experienced and respected men. Although it is tempting to argue that village democracy will be further strengthened with the democratic election of representative assemblies, the successful transition to grassroots democracy will also require accommodations to Chinese tradition, including respect for village elders. In many places, retired or defeated village leaders are given a place on the village assembly, where their voices are heard and proper respect is tendered but they are not at the same time granted great personal power. Such arrangements serve to give legitimacy to village-level political reform and may suggest what is meant by "democracy with Chinese characteristics."

Third, elections can succeed only in villages where election officials have been properly trained. Deeply ingrained in the American psyche is a belief that democracy is the natural state of affairs, that, given a choice, people everywhere will naturally set up electoral systems very much like our own. China's efforts thus far suggest otherwise. There is little that is intuitively obvious about the organization of democracy, and there are many ways to hold open and fair elections. The details of election procedures must be taught, supervised,

and learned. Training is one of the major challenges currently facing the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which estimates that in order to implement village democracy nationwide, at least 1.5 million township-level officials need to be trained. The ministry has opened a training center on the outskirts of Beijing to carry out this task. The goal is to train, in phases, 12,000 national-, provincial-, and county-level officials and 3,330 prefectural level trainers (for China's 333 prefectures), who in turn will train, within the prefectures, the township-level officials. By the year 2000, the ministry's goal is to have one model county for village self-government in each of the 333 prefectures, one model township per county, and one model village per township. The hope is that these models will have a demonstration effect that will spread to all of China's villages.

Fourth, experience is important to the long-term success of village elections. As the examples of Lishu and Gutian counties demonstrate, elections are a learning process for officials and villagers alike, improving through trial and error with each successive round. Although peasants are not initiating the movement towards democratization, rural people have demonstrated that they are quite capable of responsibly exercising their democratic rights when given the opportunity. Peasants have a strong sense of their own self-interest and can be depended upon to vote according to those interests when given a chance. City folk and intellectuals who argue that China's villages are not ready for democracy are wrong.

Finally, foreign cooperation, sensitively tendered, can exert a positive influence on the democratic process. At one level, the mere presence of foreign observers during the election process is a strong incentive to organize elections well. Foreigners are ordinarily invited to observe elections in demonstration or model districts, where official attention is greatest. Foreign training can also be useful, as programs by the Ford Foundation and the International Republican Institute attest. Opportunities for Chinese officials to observe local elections in the United States and other countries can also have a powerful effect. Wang Zhenyao, Zeng Fanxu, Zhang Xiaogan, and Fei Yuncheng—notable for their efforts to make the democratic process work—have all visited the United States.

The most important next step in China's process of grassroots democratization would be the institution of direct, competitive elections at the township and county levels. Whether and when this may happen remain to be seen. There is a fundamental logical flaw in the reformers' argument for the limited democratization now taking place. In the short run, no harm and much good is done by concentrating, as reformers insist, on action rather than talk, on election procedures rather than long-term goals. But the rationale for elections at the grassroots—to repair deteriorating relations between leaders and led, to check widespread official corruption, to restore failing legitimacy, and to quiet seething discontent—is equally applicable to higher levels. Gardens may indeed be planted with many flowers, but in the long run democracy at the bottom but not at the top does not make sense. Democracy and one-party rule are ultimately incompatible.

Unless leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji begin soon to articulate a new rationale for democracy, that task will likely be undertaken by the generation of officials now in their forties and fifties, who will come to power early in the twenty-first century. These younger officials tend to be less tied to ideology than the Soviet-trained technocrats currently at the pinnacle of Chinese political power, and they are more broadly educated

and more attuned to ideas from the West—and, more importantly, from Taiwan. The passage of time will eventually give China a leadership more disposed by education and experience to favor democratic norms.

For the moment, however, the outlook is less encouraging. Recent changes in personnel are matters of concern. In the spring of 1997, Wang Zhenyao, the young reformer at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, was, ostensibly for bureaucratic rather than for political reasons, laterally transferred from his position as head of rural basic-level governance to the ministry's department of disaster relief. Wang's replacement apparently does not yet share his predecessor's evangelical calling. Further personnel changes may soon follow as the political logic of the Communist Party congress plays itself out at both the national and provincial levels. These changes will be important, because the push for village elections thus far has come from key people within the national-level Ministry of Civil Affairs and its provincial departments. Whether new appointments at provincial levels will include champions of basic-level reform remains to be seen.

## Five

### The U.S. Response to Chinese Political Reform

**F**or all the sometimes strident American rhetoric on the need for political reform in China, official efforts to cooperate with the Chinese government have been limited. The nature of political reform in China presents some well-intentioned, democratic-minded organizations with a conundrum. Despite limited efforts at political reform, China today remains both fundamentally undemocratic and incapable of articulating a long-term plan for democratization. Competing political parties continue to be illegal, and one reason the Communist Party is implementing political reform is to strengthen its own legitimacy. Not only are democracy and one-party rule fundamentally incompatible, but there is no guarantee that even China's limited reforms will work or that grassroots democracy will spread.

Why, then, should American organizations committed to fostering democratization cooperate with China?

First, for the foreseeable future, the only way to influence the process of democratization in China is to work directly and cooperatively with the Chinese government. The process will be a long one, and Chinese democracy will necessarily look very different from ours. Second, cooperative efforts hold the promise of helping China pass through this very difficult transition period with a minimum of violence and upheaval. If it is true that rural unrest is rising in areas where democratic elections have yet to be introduced, minor reforms, peacefully implemented, can avert the risk of widespread violence.

Third, even minor, imperfect reforms are better than none. The competitive election of village committees is a major advance over higher-level appointments of village leaders, election by acclamation, and noncompetitive elections. The free and fair village elections now being fostered by the Ministry of Civil Affairs present rural people with choices they did not have before, give them a voice in the selection of their local leadership, allow (for the first time since 1949) for a peaceful transition of leaders, and provide a sense of political participation and empowerment. At their best, village elections introduce the notions of competition, choice, and justice into local societies where submission to authority and domination by local emperors have long been the norm; where cleavages often run along clan lines; where families are ruled by the senior male, and women lack even the concept of equality. In the most democratically organized villages, where elections are competitive and the village committee and representative assembly work in tandem, the sense of community that faltered with the demise of the production brigade is being restored, as the contrast between Bend in the River and Guanjiang has demonstrated.

Finally, while competitive elections at higher levels are a long way off, village elections are at least putting in place the mechanisms for elections of higher-level officials. When peasants are allowed to elect their township and county officials (and the Ministry of

Civil Affairs says that county elections will begin within five years), the villages will serve as precincts.

Several international organizations and American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are already working closely with the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs to promote grassroots political change. In 1996, the United Nations Development Programme began contributing to a three-year program to develop curricula, training materials, and capacity for “training the trainers” at the ministry’s new Rural Official Training Center on the outskirts of Beijing. The European Union is working out implementation of a \$12 million, multifaceted project that would include considerable personnel and curriculum support for the Beijing training center as well as two-way academic exchanges between China and the European Union.

Among American organizations, the Ford Foundation, whose Beijing office was established in the early 1980s, has been supporting the research arm of the Ministry of Civil Affairs department of basic-level governance since 1992 and has sponsored workshops and conferences on implementation of the Organic Law. The International Republican Institute has been cooperating with grassroots reformers since 1993, collaborating in the training of local-level officials, conducting workshops for election officials, and sending observers to witness and report on village-level elections. The Asia Foundation is also working with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, focusing particularly on providing training materials. The Carter Center has sent two delegations to observe village elections and is laying the groundwork for further cooperation.<sup>89</sup>

At present, U.S. NGOs are better structured to cooperate with China than are governmental agencies, both because of the NGOs’ longtime expertise at the grassroots and because they are better cushioned against Washington’s changing, and often powerful, political winds. Cooperative efforts could benefit greatly from an infusion of funding, both governmental and private, however. A multiplicity of efforts by a variety of NGOs runs little risk of overlap. Most of China’s thirty provinces are larger than most countries of the world. Several new programs, in addition to the ones already under way, could be fruitful.

First, NGOs need to identify reform-minded leaders at the provincial and local levels and to develop more direct, sustained contact with them. A few long-term, targeted programs at the provincial level might have a more lasting effect than scattered efforts in different parts of the country.

Second, training programs in local-level governance and election procedures, of several months’ duration and tailored directly to Chinese needs, could help alleviate China’s current problem of “training the trainers.”

Third, funding for collaborative, policy-oriented research in the Chinese countryside could begin to fill the huge lacunae in our understanding of the transformations taking place there and the problems rural people face.

Even with the best of intentions, such cooperative programs carry no guarantees of success, and the hope of making China “more like us” is not likely to be fulfilled. As the Chinese government confronts the several crises that rapid economic development is bringing in its wake—parasitic state enterprises, a dangerously overextended banking sector, massive internal migration, increasing unemployment, widespread official corruption, a collapse of old values—the country is in a race against itself. Some future instability,



even violence, is almost inevitable. Although fear of chaos led some in Beijing to support the introduction of grassroots elections, the outbreak of disorder could equally well spur attempts to reassert authoritarian control. The question is whether the forces of corruption and chaos will overwhelm the forces of reform, whether the disaffections engendered by the widening gap between the urban, coastal nouveaux riches and the hundreds of millions in the rural hinterlands will spill over into protest, violence, and political breakdown. Tocqueville's dictum that the most dangerous time for a bad government is when it starts to reform itself was proven in China with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, and with the fall of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union less than a decade ago. These are dangerous times for China—and therefore dangerous for us all.

## Notes

1. Jiang Zemin, "Speech by President Jiang Zemin of the People's Republic of China at Luncheon by the America-China Society and Five Other Organizations," October 30, 1997 (copy of speech distributed at luncheon, in the author's files).

2. See, for instance, Kenneth Lieberthal, "Domestic Forces and Sino-U.S. Relations," in Ezra Vogel, ed., *Living with China: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 254–276.

3. Several recent books with very different points of view nonetheless agree on China's importance. See, for example, Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); and Vogel, ed., *Living with China*.

4. Michel C. Oksenberg, Michael D. Swaine, and Daniel C. Lynch, *The Chinese Future* (Los Angeles and Santa Monica: Pacific Council on International Policy and RAND Center for Asia-Pacific Policy, n.d.), 3.

5. I am grateful to Bai Guangzhao, then at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, for arranging and accompanying me on this trip.

6. The January 1995 delegation to Lishu county, Jilin, was organized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and included Lincoln Kaye from the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Steve Mufson from the *Washington Post*, and Lorraine Spiess from the International Republican Institute. The delegation to Sichuan, in November and December 1995, also arranged by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, included longtime *Time* magazine Beijing bureau chief Jaime Florcruz, AP's Renée Schoof, and Lorraine Spiess. The delegation to Fujian province was organized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and sponsored by the Carter Center. Other delegation members were David Carroll from the Carter Center; Allen Choate from the Asia Foundation; Ian McKinnon, the president of Pacific Issues Partners in Canada; Robert Pastor from the Carter Center (delegation leader); and Qingshan Tan from Cleveland State University. Mary Brown Bullock, president of Agnes Scott College, accompanied several members of the delegation to Hebei.

7. Bend in the River is surely no worse politically than most Chinese villages. Its inhabitants were exceptionally gracious, and my visit was rewarding in every respect. We agreed to change the name because the village does not compare favorably with others where elections have been successful, and we do not want to embarrass Bend in River through this description.

8. See Jiang Zemin, "Political Report by CPC General Secretary Jiang Zemin at the Fifteenth CPC National Congress Held in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, September 12, 1997," *FBIS-China*, September 12, 1997; and Jiang Zemin, "Speech" (see n. 1 above).

9. *Hong Kong News*, March 24, 1998.

10. *New York Times*, March 20, 1998.

11. A. Doak Barnett, *China on the Eve of the Communist Takeover* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 108.

12. C. K. Yang, *Chinese Communist Society: The Family and the Village* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1959), 103.

13. For a smattering of articles and reports, see *The Carter Center Delegation to Observe Village Elections in China, March 4–16, 1997*, Working Paper Series (Atlanta: Carter Center of Emory University, 1997); Kathy Chen, “Chinese Villages Get a Taste of Democracy,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 1995; International Republican Institute, *People’s Republic of China: Election Observation Report* (May 15–31, 1994), *Village Committee Elections in the People’s Republic of China* (January 1997), and *Election Observation Report: Fujian, People’s Republic of China* (May 1997); Lincoln Kaye, “Flourishing Grassroots: Village Democracy Blooms,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 19, 1995, 23; Steven Mufson, “China Dabbles in Democracy to Run Villages, Reform Party,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 1995; Thomas L. Friedman, “It Takes a Village,” “Here Comes the Sun,” and “Get a Job,” *New York Times*, March 10, 14, and 17, 1998; and Yap Gee Poh, “Chinese Villages in for Changes,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), August 24, 1996. See also the *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 1 (January 1998), which includes ten short articles on the question of China’s possible democratization.

14. “China: The Titan Stirs,” *The Economist*, November 28, 1992, 3.

15. With massive rural to urban migration, the number of people who continue to live in the countryside is a matter of speculation. The Chinese often use the figure 900 million. The figure presented here is based on a calculation of a total population in China of 1.3 billion, of whom 70 percent live in the countryside.

16. See Yan Jiaqi’s preface to Han Minzhu, ed., *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), vii. See also Yan Jiaqi, *Toward a Democratic China: The Intellectual Autobiography of Yan Jiaqi*, trans. David S. K. Hong and Denis C. Mair, with a foreword by Andrew J. Nathan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992).

17. A copy of the constitution of the People’s Republic of China can be found in Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1995). See p. 377 for Article 111.

18. See especially Daniel Kelliher, “The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government,” *China Journal*, no. 37 (January 1997): 63–91; Kevin J. O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform in China’s Villages,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* (July 1996): 33–62; and Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “The Struggle over Village Elections” (unpublished paper prepared for the Conference on Self-Government in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, Duke University, N.C., May 2–3, 1997).

19. Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York: Pocket Books, 1939). See also Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

20. *Xiangcun Sanshi Nian: Fengyang Nongcun Shehui Jingji Fajan Shilu (1949–1983 nian)* [Thirty years in the countryside: A faithful record of Fengyang’s social and economic development, 1949–1983] (Beijing: Village Materials Press, 1989), 194–196.

21. *Ibid.*, 190.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts: China’s Secret Famine* (London: John Murray, 1996), 211–219.

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24. *Xiangcun Sanshi Nian*, 186–188.
25. I am grateful to Andrew J. Nathan for pointing this out.
26. *Xiangcun Sanshi Nian*, 198–200.
27. Becker's *Hungry Ghosts* is the best study of the famine and contains the most extensive consideration of the death figures. See pp. 266–274.
28. *Ibid.*, 272.
29. See, for instance, Basil Ashton, Kenneth Hill, Alan Piazza, and Robin Zeitz, "Famine in China, 1958–61," *Population and Development Review* 10, no. 4 (December 1984): 613–644.
30. Kate Xiao Zhou, *How the Farmers Changed China: Power of the People* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), 1.
31. *Ibid.*, 10.
32. See the description in Yang, *Chinese Communist Society*, 3.
33. The nature of enterprise management in the Chinese countryside is complex and unique. For a much fuller description, see William A. Byrd and Lin Qingsong, eds., *China's Rural Industry: Structure, Development, and Reform* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Allen Choate also gives a good description of the importance of economic management committees in "Local Governance in China: An Assessment of Villagers Committees," *Asia Foundation Working Paper Series*, no. 1 (February 1997).
34. Figures for rural migrants vary, and migrants are obviously exceedingly difficult to count. This figure is from Zhou, *How the Farmers Changed China.*, 7, citing Chinese sources. See also Cheng Li, *Tidal Wave of Migrant Laborers in China* (Hanover, N.H.: Institute of Current World Affairs, June 1994), who says that in 1994 110 million peasants had moved to urban areas and another 105 million had migrated to areas recently designated cities or townships.
35. Carl Goldstein, Lincoln Kaye, and Anthony Blass, "Get Off Our Backs," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 15, 1993, 68.
36. Anne F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People: The Ordeal of the Intellectuals in China's Great Cultural Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 81.
37. *Ibid.*, 81–82.
38. Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government," 66.
39. See, for instance, *ibid.*, 70–71; and Li and O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," 5.
40. *Ibid.*, 4.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
43. Interview with Wang Zhenyao, July 1994.
44. Interview with Wang Zhenyao, January 4, 1995.
45. Li and O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," 5.
46. This description is taken from my notes of the July 1995 meeting.

47. Ibid.

48. Research Group on the System of Village Self-Government in China, Chinese Research Society of Basic-Level Governance, *The Report on Villagers' Representative Assemblies in China* (December 1994), 162.

49. China Rural Villagers Self-Government Research Group, Chinese Research Society of Basic-Level Governance, *Study on the Election of Villagers Committees in Rural China* (December 1, 1993), i.

50. This brief description of Wang Zhenyao's life is based on a series of interviews conducted with him between 1994 and 1997.

51. For a description of the first trip, see Li Zhisui with Anne F. Thurston, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York: Random House, 1994), 268–271.

52. Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, 122, 112–129.

53. Research Group on the System of Village Self-Government in China, *The Report on Villagers' Representative Assemblies in China*, i.

54. Susan V. Lawrence, "Democracy, Chinese Style," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994). Choate, "Local Governance in China," also notes the long-term importance of the village representative assemblies.

55. Research Group on the System of Village Self-Government in China, *The Report on Villagers' Representative Assemblies in China*, passim.

56. Ibid.; and Lawrence, "Democracy, Chinese Style."

57. See Article 111 of the Chinese constitution in Lieberthal, *Governing China*, 377.

58. Research Group on the System of Village Self-Government in China, *The Report on Villagers' Representative Assemblies in China*, 11.

59. Ibid.

60. China Rural Villagers Self-Government Research Group, *Study on the Election of Villagers Committees in Rural China*, iii–iv.

61. Li and O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," 13–14.

62. Discussions with ministry officials, March 1997.

63. See Jean C. Oi, "Economic Development, Stability, and Democratic Village Self-Governance," in *China Review, 1996*, ed. Maurice Brousseau, Suzanne Pepper, and Tsang Shu-ki (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1996), 139–140.

64. See Lawrence, "Democracy, Chinese Style," 62.

65. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," 47.

66. Amy B. Epstein, "Village Elections in China: Experimenting with Democracy," in *China's Economic Future: Challenges to U.S. Policy—Study Papers* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, 1996), 414–418.

67. O'Brien—in "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages"—develops a very interesting matrix based on slightly different criteria than those used here: degree of political

participation and the effectiveness with which the village committee implements unpopular state policies. The matrix identifies as “run-away committees” those that have high political participation and ineffective execution of state policies. Such committees would make for fascinating study, but I have never seen such committees myself.

68. Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Cadres in Blitz on Rural Party Cells,” *South China Morning Post*, June 6, 1996.

69. O’Brien would describe it as “paralyzed.” See his analysis in “Implementing Political Reform in China’s Villages,” 41.

70. “The Record of Yu Zuomin’s Crime,” *Beijing Evening News*, August 23, 1993.

71. Ibid.

72. Most of this description is taken from “Former Daqui Leader Yu Zuomin Convicted,” *Xinhua*, August 27, 1993, reprinted in *FBIS-China*, August 30, 1993.

73. Ibid.

74. This description of Wugang village is taken from notes during my visit in November and December 1995.

75. I use a pseudonym here, largely out of respect for the Chinese concern over face.

76. Bureau of Civil Affairs, Lishu County, *How Did We Carry Out the Changing Session Election of the Villagers’ Committee* (Jilin Province, People’s Republic of China, January 1995), 11.

77. *The Villager Self-Government and the Rural Social Governance in China* (Lishu County, Jilin Province, People’s Republic of China, January 1995), 1.

78. Interview in Beijing, December 1994.

79. See Geoffrey Crothall, “Police Crack Mafia-Style Gang after Reign of Terror,” *South China Morning Post*, January 8, 1995.

80. This description is taken from notes of my visit in 1995. Lincoln Kaye was also at this meeting. See his report, “Flourishing Grassroots: Village Democracy Blooms,” in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 19, 1995, 23.

81. Interview with Wang Zhenyao, January 4, 1995.

82. This description is taken from notes of my visit in 1995. Mufson notes this election, from a different angle, in “China Dabbles in Democracy to Run Villages, Reform Party.”

83. Discussions with Zhang Xiaogan in Fujian, March 1997. See also the two reports on Fujian elections by the International Republican Institute: “People’s Republic of China: Election Observation Report, May 15–31, 1994”; and “Election Observation Report: Fujian, People’s Republic of China, May 1997.”

84. For a description, see Anne F. Thurston, “The Dragon Stirs,” *Wilson Quarterly* (spring 1993): 10–34.

85. Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 22, no. 1 (January 1996): 29.



**86.** See Cheng Mu, "Peasant Riots Erupt in Hubei and Jiangxi," *China Focus* 5, no. 10 (October 1, 1997): 1.

**87.** *Ming Pao*, April 29, 1998; and *South China Morning Post*, May 6, 1998.

**88.** Henry S. Rowen, "Elections in China," *National Interest*, no. 45 (fall 1996): 68–69. Rowen's use of the \$2,500 figure for per capita GDP is much higher than World Bank estimates, and many times higher than overall figures for the Chinese countryside.

**89.** See Carter Center, *Carter Center Delegation Report: Village Elections in China and Agreement on Cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs People's Republic*, Working Paper series (Atlanta: Carter Center of Emory University, 1998).

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