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The decade leading up to Deng Xiaoping's death produced few headlines announcing breakthroughs in political reform. Now, a host of outside observers, including the U.S. Vice President and Speaker of the House, have been quoted praising China's village elections. Is the long drought over? Has meaningful political reform begun -- not in Beijing, but in China's one million villages?

There are indeed signs that democratic reform is taking root in the countryside. For one, efforts have been made to increase the popular accountability of grassroots leaders. In 1987 the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees established villagers' committees as mass organizations of self-government through which villagers manage their own affairs, educate themselves, and meet their own needs. These committees are composed of three to seven members, each of whom serve for three years. Committee members are chosen in popular elections, in which all adult, registered villagers have the right to vote and stand for office. Under the Law, elected cadres have prescribed powers and limited but real autonomy from township officials directly above them. Township leaders are no longer, for example, permitted to order village cadres about; instead, they can only guide (zhidao) them in their work. Since the Organic Law came into effect in 1988, self-government has been rolled out in several waves. In parts of the countryside, villagers have now participated in as many as four elections.¹

These reforms have received much attention outside China. The Carter Center, the International Republican Institute, and various embassies have sent observers to monitor village elections. At the same time, the Ford Foundation, the United Nations
Development Program, and the Asia Foundation have worked with Chinese authorities to standardize election procedures and to train local election officials.

Western scholars, for their part, have examined both the rationale behind the Organic Law and the Law's implementation. Kevin O'Brien has described village self-government as an effort to exchange limited democratic rights for popular compliance with state policies.² Daniel Kelliher has suggested that elections are designed to improve the quality of village leadership and are regarded, even by their proponents, as a way to implicate villagers in the execution of unpopular policies.³ Survey research by Melanie Manion has shown that well-run, competitive elections can improve congruence between cadres and villagers.⁴

Meanwhile, a number of conjectures about the relationship between economic development and the spread of self-government have been put forward -- often based on research in different regions. Susan Lawrence has suggested that poor, agricultural villages may be the pacesetters in village democracy; O'Brien has argued that autonomy is easiest to promote in villages that are not among the poorest and, in fact, have prospering collective enterprises; Amy Epstein has hypothesized that free elections are most likely to occur in middle-income, developing villages; and Jean Oi has found some evidence that as income increases, participation in villagers' assemblies and the competitiveness of elections generally decreases.⁵

Why would an authoritarian regime promote grassroots democratic reform? Where has opposition to village self-government appeared and how, if at all, has it been overcome? What effects do elections have on village governance? Using interviews, leadership speeches, and archival sources, this chapter examines the struggle over
village elections. It starts by explaining how and why several Party elders championed the Organic Law in the face of widespread opposition. Then, it outlines why some local leaders, from the province down to the village, have doubts about village elections. Next, it shows that in many places ordinary villagers have played an unusually active part in implementing the Law, including engaging in open conflict with rural officials who deprive them of their rights. It concludes by discussing the impact free and fair elections can have on rural governance.

**Peng Zhen's Vision (and Bo Yibo's Timely Support)**

It is well-known that the Organic Law was hotly debated in the National People’s Congress and was literally pushed through by Peng Zhen, then Chairman of the NPC Standing Committee. But why Peng was so committed to villagers’ autonomy remains to be explored. Excerpts of several of his speeches suggest that Peng’s sponsorship of the Law sprung from his understanding of how to construct “socialist democracy.”

According to Peng, inasmuch as China has almost no tradition of self-rule, democratic habits must be cultivated among both Party leaders and ordinary citizens. Realizing socialist democracy thus has two dimensions. For the leadership, regard for democracy is to be nurtured by strengthening people’s congresses; for the masses, democratic ways of thinking are to be inculcated by self-governance. The heart of “democratic training” in the countryside is the promotion of villagers’ autonomy (cunmin zizhi). By electing their own leaders and participating in grassroots decision making, 900 million Chinese villagers will learn how to manage village affairs. After rural residents have become skilled at running their own villages, Peng has said, they may then move on to
govern townships and counties.\textsuperscript{7}

Behind Peng's desire to boost the nation's democratic consciousness lay a concern that worsening relations between cadres and farmers might cripple the Party's ability to rule. Peng expressed this fear most clearly when the Organic Law met with unexpectedly strong opposition at the 1987 NPC. Though few legislators questioned the Law's overall rationale, many said that Chinese villagers were not ready for self-government and that elections would make it more difficult for township officials to enforce state policies; some NPC deputies even predicted that the Law would lead to an immediate breakdown of political control.\textsuperscript{8} Peng agreed that villagers' autonomy might “make rural cadres' life a little harder” (i.e. it might complicate policy implementation in the short run), but he also insisted that self-government would not produce chaos because “the masses accept what is reasonable.” In response to the argument that villagers' autonomy was premature, Peng countered that grassroots democracy was in fact urgently needed. He lamented how relations between cadres and villagers had deteriorated since the 1950s, noting that some rural leaders had become “local emperors” (tu huangdi) -- cadres who flattered officials at higher levels but “used excessive force against villagers and even illegally jailed them.” If such trends were not checked, he warned, villagers would “sooner or later attack our rural cadres with their shoulder poles.” To prevent a further decline in cadre-mass relations, according to Peng, top-down supervision was not enough: “Who supervises rural cadres? Can we supervise them? No, not even if we had 48 hours a day.” The only solution, Peng concluded, was to promote village self-government, so that China's rural masses themselves could select and oversee village cadres.\textsuperscript{9}
A belief that grassroots elections would reduce the risk of rural unrest is even more apparent in Party elder's Bo Yibo's defense of village self-rule. One year after the Organic Law went into effect, it again became a center of controversy, as political reforms stalled following the suppression of the 1989 protest movement. Opponents of villagers' autonomy demanded that the Law be scrapped, arguing that it was an example of the “bourgeois liberalization” condoned by fallen Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. Some critics even credited the Law to Zhao, who in fact had no great sympathy for grassroots democracy.10

To resolve the debate, a high-level team was dispatched to study how village-level political organizations were functioning at the end of 1989. A subsequent report prepared by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) made an especially strong case for village democracy. With unusual frankness, Ministry participants in the investigation wrote: “The evidence indicates that the political situation in the countryside is extremely serious. It is entirely possible that an even greater crisis may be triggered if erroneous policies regarding the construction of basic-level rural government are adopted.” In their view, to deter instability, the relationship between the Party, government and China's rural population needed to be modified. The leadership had already attempted to resuscitate basic-level political organizations using various methods, and elections had proven to be the best way to improve relations between cadres and villagers.11

But the MoCA report only fueled the controversy further. As late as early 1990, supporters of tighter Party control and other skeptics who worried about instability remained unconvinced that villagers would vote for cadres who enforced unpopular state policies. As the debate dragged on, efforts to implement the Law nationwide were
suspended.\textsuperscript{12}

Then Bo Yibo came to the rescue. Bo's staff obtained a copy of the Ministry's report, and after Bo read it he declared that it was "brilliant."\textsuperscript{13} As a Party elder and one of Deng Xiaoping's closest allies, Bo's backing for villagers' autonomy was decisive. Shortly after Bo threw his support behind the reforms, Song Ping, then a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, put the controversy over the Organic Law to an end. At a National Conference on the Construction of Village-Level Organizations in August 1990, Song instructed that the Law should be implemented rather than debated. The summary report of the Conference accordingly affirmed that the Law should be enforced throughout the nation.\textsuperscript{14} Four months later, the Central Committee issued the Conference report as CCP Document No. 19 (1990). With these endorsements in hand, the MoCA resumed its efforts to implement village self-government and directed provincial governments to set up "demonstration villages."

Bo Yibo's support for grassroots democratization was no accident. After communes were abolished in the mid-1980s, relations between cadres and villagers had worsened in many places, largely because villagers became more knowledgeable about their exploitation and less dependent on village cadres. Like Peng Zhen, Bo was deeply concerned with rural political decay, and he agreed with Mao when Mao said that people's democracy was the surest way to maintain the Party's popular base. In his 1991 memoirs, Bo recalled Mao's 1945 conversation with the historian Huang Yanpei, in which Mao argued that the Party could escape the historical cycle of rapid rise followed by quick decline by letting the people oversee the government.\textsuperscript{15} Then Bo added: "More than forty years have passed. . . . Today we cannot say we have
completely escaped this 'cycle;' . . . The task remains undone; the whole Party must
work hard!”16 Considering how tense relations between cadres and villagers had
become by the late 1980s, it is not surprising that advocates of village self-government
found a sympathizer in Bo Yibo.

It should be noted, however, that the text of the Organic Law does not make it
obvious that grassroots elections are the linchpin of the villagers' autonomy program. In
fact, the Law only mentions elections twice and it places self-management on a par with
self-education and self-service. This is most likely due to Peng Zhen's failure to
disclose his reasoning when the MoCA began drafting the Law in 1984. Until the Law
drew fire at the 1987 NPC, Peng's commentary on the Law usually centered on how
villagers' autonomy would improve public order by curbing gambling, preventing theft,
and reforming idlers, and how it would enhance self-service by enabling cadres to
extract the sums required for paving roads, building schools, and maintaining irrigation
systems.17 Only when NPC deputies (many of whom were local officials themselves)
insisted that self-rule would interfere with policy implementation and lead to rural unrest,
did Peng shift to arguing that village elections were precisely what was needed to
reinvigorate grassroots governance and to ward off political instability.18

Implementing Village Elections: Local Opposition

Since the Organic Law, as passed in 1987, is brief and vaguely worded, even
Ministry of Civil Affairs officials were at first unsure how to enforce it. The first director
of the Ministry’s Rural Division of the Bureau of Basic-Level Governance Construction,
which is responsible for implementing the Law, admitted that it took two years for the
MoCA to realize that the core of villagers’ autonomy was electing village cadres.  

Because of this uncertainty, the Ministry's first circular (26 February 1988) on the Law did not even mention elections. Not until the end of 1989 did Lian Yin, Deputy Minister of Civil Affairs, announce that village elections were the crux of implementation. And it was only on 26 September 1990 that the Ministry decreed that village elections must be held.

From the start, self-government met with local opposition. Even before the Law was placed in the Ministry's hands, while it was awaiting final approval by the Standing Committee of the NPC, several provinces established village administrative offices (cun gong suo). These offices were de facto arms of the state staffed by township appointees; they were subordinate to townships much as brigades had been to communes. Zhao Ziyang had praised their formation in Guangxi, but the MoCA attempted to brake their spread by arguing that this experiment should be limited to Guangxi. In practice, however, Yunnan, Guangdong, and Hainan ignored the Ministry's edict and set up village administrative offices.

Provincial misgivings were also made clear by the sluggish rate at which provincial people's congresses enacted legislation concerning the Organic Law. Of the 24 provincial implementation regulations promulgated so far, only two were approved in 1988, the year the Law came into effect. Notably, Guangdong, Beijing, and Shanghai remain among six provincial-level governments that have failed to pass enforcement guidelines. And even in provinces where implementing statutes exist, top provincial officials have often communicated their lack of enthusiasm for village self-governance by failing to say a single word in support of the Law.
Opposition to grassroots elections appears to be most intense in the lower reaches of the state hierarchy. It is here that concerns about policy implementation and potential instability are most immediate. County resistance to village self-rule, for example, is visibly stronger than that of provinces. Before the Central Committee endorsed the Organic Law in 1990, some county leaders warned that any official who dared to implement it would be subject to disciplinary action.24 Even when provincial leaders, such as deputy governors responsible for rural work, have actively promoted villagers' autonomy, county Party chiefs and government heads have often flouted the Law. Particularly in locations where the “cadre responsibility system” (ganbu gangwei mubiao guanli zerenzhi) has been introduced, many county leaders go to extraordinary lengths to enforce “hard targets,” such as birth control and tax collection, but ignore “soft targets” such as village elections. These officials sometimes transmit provincial election regulations to townships, but then fail to monitor their enforcement.25

When county leaders show little interest in villagers' autonomy, townships often do not convene elections. A 1989 survey in Shandong, for instance, revealed that over 60 percent of township leaders disapproved of village self-government.26 In Hebei, a township official bluntly told a Xinhua reporter that “presently, villagers don't know how to govern themselves, and we won't allow them to govern themselves!”27 Even when county officials instruct them to enforce the Law, township leaders often hold elections only if they believe the incumbents will win. They may also feign compliance with the Law or impose onerous restrictions on nominees proposed by ordinary citizens. They frequently, for instance, monopolize nominations, ban unapproved candidates, or conduct snap elections, in the hope of catching challengers unprepared.28
The aversion township cadres feel to village elections is not, as some Chinese observers claim, entirely a product of their “low democratic consciousness.”29 It arises partly because township leaders rely on village cadres to carry out unpopular policies and they fear that elections may cost them their most dependable agents. In the words of a township Party secretary in Hebei, “I already have difficulty leading (lingdao) village cadres, I guarantee that guiding (zhidao) them will not work.”30 Why? Township governments have dozens of ongoing responsibilities, including arduous, time-consuming jobs such as enforcing birth control, procuring grain, and collecting taxes and fees. They are also assigned many extraordinary tasks such as conducting the “strike-hard,” anti-crime campaign. Township leaders often complain they are overburdened and must count on village cadres to be their “legs.”31 In one, large Hebei township, where few villages had paved roads and several did not have a single telephone, the township had only 24 staff members; with “one thousand strings above threading one needle below,” the township Party secretary felt that unless all village cadres were firmly on his side, he could not meet the county’s expectations.32

Almost all township officials are initially skeptical that free elections will produce dutiful village leaders.33 Decollectivization and the end of class labelling have weakened the ability of village cadres to elicit compliance from reluctant villagers. Under the commune system, village leaders “could use a chicken feather to issue an order. Now, even when they have a real order, some villagers ignore it as if it were a chicken feather.”34 At the same time, township leaders have few rewards to offer their most conscientious “underlings”; they generally cannot, for example, make them state officials (i.e. promote them out of the village) or increase their salary much. Townships
thus find it necessary to wink at grasping or corrupt behavior by cooperative “local emperors” who are willing to do their bidding. Insofar as the township’s most dutiful agents are often allowed to be predatory and are despised by many of the villagers they rule, township officials resist exposing them to elections they would certainly lose.

Some local bosses, who are sure they have popular support, have little to fear from self-rule. But few village cadres brave elections eagerly. Instead, they often grumble that they alone confront the masses at the ballot box: village self-government subjects them to risks that cadres above them do not face. In the words of one cadre in Shandong: “elections at higher levels are all scams, why should village elections be taken any more seriously?” When they suspect they will be voted out of office, village cadres may go so far as to bribe township officials to subvert the Organic Law. They may, for instance, coax township leaders to cancel or fix an election by offering gifts, hosting banquets, or purposefully losing at Mahjong.

**Popular Demands for Village Elections**

That village elections have not been thwarted by local opposition, according to one MoCA official, is largely a consequence of actions taken by ordinary villagers. Rural residents have been quick to recognize that grassroots elections give them a way to dislodge corrupt, partial and incompetent cadres. As a villager in Hebei said when he first heard about elections: “We didn’t know there was a law that permits us to speak up and take charge. Had we known, we would have long ago voted out cadres who do nothing but wine and dine.” Given that township Party and government officials are usually willing to tolerate very unpopular village leaders so long as they meet their hard
targets, clashes between villagers and township leaders over elections often occur.

In some cases, when township officials fail to organize an election, villagers may refuse to cooperate with revenue collection, grain procurement, or family planning. In a Hebei village, for instance, several township appointees were corrupt and managed the community’s collective enterprises poorly. A group of villagers protested by withholding their taxes and fees. Although local police were dispatched to pressure the recalcitrant villagers to pay up, they were unable to collect the outstanding sums. The township then reshuffled the village leadership twice, but both “operations miscarried” because the resulting blend of new and old appointees failed to investigate the complaints of financial irregularities. After nine rounds of consultation, the township Party secretary conceded that the village had lost faith in whomever he appointed. As a last resort, he called an election, which produced a wholly new leadership that had credibility with the local population and was able to extract revenues and promote economic development. From the township's vantage point, the “worst plan had turned into the best plan.”

Besides turning their backs on appointed cadres, villagers often confront township leaders who fail to comply with the **Organic Law**. In one, poor Hebei village, for instance, a group of farmers lodged a series of complaints requesting the dismissal of several inept cadres. After the township rejected their appeals, the villagers stationed rotating groups of petitioners in the township to pursue their complaints. One day, one of the villagers came across a copy of the **Organic Law** lying on a desk in a township office. Immediately realizing its import, he showed it to his fellow petitioners. After they studied the Law, they resolved to “lodge complaints against the township government for violating the **Organic Law** by not holding democratic elections.” The complainants
then came up with a scheme to ensure that their pressure would not be ignored. They divided themselves into three “teams,” two of which went to the township government and the county civil affairs bureau, while a third composed of village Party members traveled to the county organization department. Facing the indignation of villagers demanding enforcement of a law that had been casually ignored, the township government promptly agreed to convene an election. In the subsequent balloting, the villager who had originally discovered the Organic Law was elected villagers' committee director.43 In a similar case, when township officials in Shanxi publicized the Organic Law but refused to carry out an election, farmers from two villages occupied a township office and would not end their “sit-in” until officials agreed to conduct free elections in which unpopular cadres could be voted out.44

To enhance their bargaining position, resourceful villagers often seek support from higher level officials in the expectation that they will take village self-government seriously.45 When defying township leaders who fix elections, villagers often lodge complaints at the county or even higher levels. In one case, after a township in Liaoning forbade unapproved candidates from running for office and did not allow secret balloting, over a dozen villagers traveled at their own expense to the county town, then the provincial capital, and finally Beijing to lodge complaints. They knew the Organic Law by heart and recited it when petitioning officials for a new election.46 In 1996, a group of villagers from Yixian County, Hebei, went all the way to the MoCA to protest unfair elections. The widely-watched television program Focus/Interview broadcast three reports on their complaint and its origins. Finally, at the instruction of the MoCA, civil affairs officials from Hebei and Baoding City were sent to organize new elections.
Soon after this collective complaint became public knowledge, the director of the Hebei bureau of basic-level government construction, who had not been keen on village self-rule, was transferred to another position. And Hebei’s Party chief then made grassroots elections a key element of his “fish-water project” (yu shui gongcheng) -- an effort to improve cadre-mass relations so that leaders and ordinary people are no longer separate like “oil and water” or antagonistic like “fire and water.”

As these examples reveal, the implementation of village self-government has generally been somewhat sluggish. The Organic Law has encountered much opposition, especially at the township. Unless the incumbents are likely to be returned to office or village government has collapsed, township leaders are strongly inclined to prevent or to sabotage elections. Consequently, villagers almost invariably need to apply pressure and locate elite allies in order to realize their electoral rights.

How many of China’s one million villages have conducted free and fair elections? Estimates vary widely. Ministry officials claim that “at least one round of relatively democratic elections have been carried out in about 80 percent of China’s villages,” the U.S. State Department estimates that the correct figure is one quarter to one third, and the editor of a Chinese magazine that focuses on township affairs puts the number at “no more than ten percent.”

The Impact of Village Elections

Grassroots elections have been welcomed by many villagers and tolerated by a growing number of local leaders. It is true that in some places “local bullies” (eba) have bought elections or coerced villagers to vote for them, while electoral competition has
also, at times, intensified lineage conflict, particularly in the southern provinces of Jiangxi, Hunan, Zhejiang, and Guizhou. Nevertheless, village self-government has often made cadres more accountable to villagers. Where elections are the norm, village cadres live in a different world than officials above them. As one villagers' committee director explained: “We village cadres depend on the 'ground line' (dixian) (i.e. villagers' votes), those at higher levels depend on the 'antenna' (tianxian) (i.e. appointment by higher levels). If we wish to be cadres, we must win the masses' support. Unless the masses raise their hands, we can't be cadres.”

At the same time, village elections have not noticeably reduced the responsiveness of village cadres to lawful instructions received from township leaders. To the surprise of many township officials, village cadres who identify with villagers are generally scrupulous about carrying out township-assigned tasks. Closer relations with villagers, in other words, can actually smooth policy implementation. In order to ensure that election committees, which are ordinarily chaired by a representative of the township or by the village Party secretary, do not disqualify them, nominees as a rule announce that they will execute all state policies. To win popular support, challengers may pledge fairer policy implementation, but few pander to villagers by vowing to defy all demands from above. Moreover, after they are elected, village cadres often take the lead in complying with state policies, especially family planning. Insofar as they can then induce most villagers to follow suit, the village leadership is in a strong position to apply pressure on the few remaining hold-outs. They may, for example, threaten to single out recalcitrants for public humiliation. In Shandong's Zhaoyuan County, elected cadres assign up to ten “stars” to every household. This system has reportedly been
remarkably effective in stigmatizing villagers who violate state policies or village rules, such as allowing livestock to graze their neighbors' crops. Young women, for instance, have refused to marry into households that receive eight stars or fewer.53

Elections can also produce material benefits for a community.54 When putting together a platform, candidates invariably promise to “do good things for fellow villagers.” Opening village accounts to public inspection and developing the collective economy are two common pledges. Other platform promises include impartially allocating land for house-building and paying more attention to schools, roads, and the provision of running water. Often, elected cadres are able to deliver on their pledges. They are, for example, well-placed to enlist mass support for public projects. In two remote villages in Fujian, newly-elected cadres, who said villagers now respected their authority, raised funds and mobilized labor to complete a 15km road that had been started and abandoned on three occasions under township supervision.55 In a Hebei village, appointed cadres had been unable to repair a run-down school because villagers suspected that their “donations” would end up in the cadres’ pockets. After free elections, however, the new leadership was able to collect nearly 40,000 yuan, with which they promptly rebuilt the school.56

In addition to improving ties between cadres and villagers, grassroots elections have also helped restructure relations between villagers’ committees and village Party branches. This relationship was not addressed in the original Organic Law and all indications are that it will not be clarified in the revised law awaiting State Council approval.57 In some locations, nevertheless, elected cadres openly try to undermine the village Party secretary.58 In a Hebei village, for example, as soon as a non-Party
member was elected director of the villagers’ representative assembly (VRA), he made the following announcement over the village loudspeaker: “I was elected by the whole village, the Party secretary was elected solely by Party members. From now on, I am the number one leader in the village. You should come to see me when you have problems.”

According to an MoCA official, “contradictions” of this sort are increasingly common; in fact, “challenging the Party secretary is one of the first things many villagers’ committee directors do.”

Where a Party branch enjoys little support, villagers in some areas have disputed its right to nominate individuals to run in villagers’ committee elections. Recently, in response to popular demands, a “double-ballot system” (liang piao zhi) was introduced in selected locations. In one Shanxi county, all villagers can now vote in Party primaries; Party members who do not win over half the votes are then barred from standing for membership in the Party branch. The Central Organization Department has recommended that all provinces experiment with this remarkable and largely unreported reform.

While there is little evidence that grassroots democratic reform, as Peng Zhen envisioned, is expanding from villages to townships, elections are transforming the relationship between village cadres and township officials. Elected cadres may be willing to meet township quotas, but they are also more willing to, in the name of their constituents’ lawful interests, confront township officials who concoct unauthorized “local policies” (tu zhengce). An elected cadre in Hebei, for instance, proudly said that he would resist township meddling in the management of a village orchard because “this is the masses’ business and it falls within the scope of villagers' autonomy.”
cadres are also becoming more courageous in standing up to grasping township officials. In one township, granary cadres offered villagers below-market prices and demanded that the agricultural tax be paid in cash rather than beans. A group of angry farmers went to the home of the director of the villagers’ representative assembly and brought this to his attention. The VRA head immediately went to the township, where he persuaded the township Party secretary to halt the granary’s effort to inflate its own profits. His actions, according to one of the members of the VRA, would have been inconceivable if the VRA director had been appointed by the township.65

Conclusion

Grassroots political reform makes it possible for villagers to hold officials accountable in exchange for their compliance with state policies. But this exchange, even in the best of circumstances, is not self-implementing. Enforcement of the Organic Law often involves a struggle between villagers who demand improved accountability and township leaders who, initially at least, refuse to cede their authority to appoint village cadres.

Because villagers must often fight for their rights, they tend to be realistic about what can be gained from basic-level elections. On the one hand, they exploit any opportunity to rid themselves of unfair, corrupt, or self-serving village cadres. On the other hand, they typically do not vote for candidates who run “against the state.” Though some villagers, for instance, have threatened to vote out village leaders who enforce family planning, most reports suggest that cadres do not lose elections if they are fair and honest when allocating birth control quotas.66 Villagers seem to be similarly
practical about local fees. In a Shandong village, a candidate for villagers’ committee
director promised to resist all new impositions, saying: “If I am elected committee
director, you don’t have to pay any fees. If any township official dares to ask me for
fees, I'll beat him up.” He was not elected.67

Though implementing village elections remains a challenge, the reforms are
picking up momentum. Both Li Peng’s Government Work Report at the 1997 NPC and
Jiang Zemin’s report to the 15th Party Congress reaffirmed Beijing’s commitment to
“grassroots mass autonomy.”68 Provincial people’s congresses, for their part, continue
to enact legislation detailing election procedures. In Fujian, a provincial pacesetter,
primaries became mandatory in 1997 and elections for all villagers’ committee positions
were, for the first time, slated to be competitive.69

At the same time, popular demands to hold free and fair elections continue to
grow. Under pressure from villagers, more and more county leaders have urged
township leaders to hold multi-candidate, village elections.70 Some township officials
have also recognized that failing to permit free elections often produces a flood of
complaints and may risk collective action.71 Some township cadres have even come to
appreciate the benefits that village elections offer to officials such as themselves.
Although the Organic Law still is a trial law, MoCA officials are confident that “the
spread of free village elections, just like the household responsibility system, has
become an irreversible trend.”72 It is not yet clear if they are right.

Notes

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1 For reports on the implementation of the Organic Law, see Zhongguo Jiceng Zhengquan Jianshe Yanjiuhui, ed., Zhongguo nongcun cunmin weiyuanhui huanjie xuanju zhidu (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1994); and Minzhengbu Jiceng Zhengquan Jianshesi, comp. Quanguo cunmin zizhi zhifan jingyan jiaoliu ji chengxiang jiceng xianjin ji he xianjin geren biaozhang huiyi wenjian huibian (Beijing, Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996).


3 Daniel Kelliher, “The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government,” The China Journal, no. 37, pp. 67-75 (January 1997). Kelliher also argues (pp. 75-78) that elections are a foreign propaganda bonanza.


7 See Peng Zhen, “Woguo jumin weiyuanhui cunmin weiyuanhui diwei he zuoyong lieru le xianfa” (The status and role of residents' committees and villagers' committees in our country have been confirmed by the Constitution) (Speech at the Fifth Session of the Fifth NPC, 26 December 1982; “Cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa shi guojia zhongyao falü zhi yi” (The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees is one of the nation's important basic laws) (Speech at the 20th group meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh NPC, 16 March 1987); “Cunmin
Weiyuanhui shi nongcun jiceng cunmin de zizhi zuzhi (Villagers' committees are a rural grassroots autonomous organization of villagers) (Speech at the 20th group meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh NPC, 18 March 1987); and “Qunzhong zizhi shi fazhan shehuizhuyi minzhu de zhongyao yi huan” (Mass autonomy is an important link in the development of socialist democracy) (Speech at the chairmanship meeting of the Standing Committee of the Sixth NPC, 23 November 1987). Excerpts of these speeches can be found in Bai Yihua, Zhongguo jiceng zhengquan de gaige yu tansuo (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996), pp. 294-306.

Interview, Beijing, November 1993.

Peng Zhen, “Fandui qiangpo mingling, jianchi qunzhong zizhi” (Against coercion and commandism, uphold mass autonomy) (Speech at the fifth joint meeting of delegation leaders and members of the Law Committee of the Sixth NPC, 6 April 1987) and “Yao jianchi cunweihui zizhi zuzhi de xingzhi” (The autonomous nature of villagers' committee should be upheld) (Speech at the chairmanship meeting of the Standing Committee of the Sixth NPC, 9 April 1987). For excerpts, see Bai Yihua, pp. 294-306. For a discussion of Peng's understanding of the relationship of Party leadership to democracy and law, see Pitman B. Potter, From Leninist Discipline to Socialist Legalism: Peng Zhen on Law and Political Authority in the PRC (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 1995). Peng’s advocacy of villagers' autonomy may be traced to his experiences with “filtered democracy” in Jin Cha Ji” (Potter, p. 14), where village elections were first held in 1938. In a report delivered to the Politburo in 1941, Peng explained why and how village elections were conducted and suggested establishing village representative congresses to supervise elected village leaders. See “Report on the Work of the Party and Specific Policies in the Jin Cha Ji Border Region,” in Tony Saich, ed., The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party: Documents and Analysis (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 1017-1038.

Zhao apparently favored establishing village administrative offices nationwide. Peng reportedly said that one of his major disagreements with Zhao was that Peng believed in mass line democracy while Zhao was an elitist. Interviews, Beijing, November 1993, January 1997.

Wang Zhenyao and Wang Shihao, “Guanjian zaiyu jishi tiaozheng dang he guojia yu nongmin de zhengzhi guanxi -- Heilongjiang cunji zuzhi jianshe diaocha” (The key is to adjust the political relationship between the Party, state and peasants -- an investigation into constructing village-level organizations in Heilongjiang), Shehui gongzuo yanjiu, no. 3, p. 12 (May 1990).

Interview, Beijing, November 1993.


See “Quanguo cunji zuzhi jianshe gongzuo zuotanhui jiyao” (Summary report of the national workshop on constructing village-level organizations), in Minzhengbu, 1991, p. 7.

For Mao's original statement, see Huang Yanpei, “Yan'an guilai” (Upon returning from Yan'an), in Bashi nianlai (Beijing: Wenshi ziliao chubanshe, 1982), p. 149.

17 Peng Zhen, “Cunmin weiyuanhui he jumin weiyuanhui shi qunzhongxing zizhi zuzhi” (Villagers’ committees and residents’ committees are mass autonomous organizations) (Speech at the 20th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Fifth NPC, 22 April 1982); “Jiji fahui jumin weiyuanhui, cunmin weiyuanhui de zuoyong” (Give full play to residents' committees and villagers' committees) (Speech at the enlarged meeting of the Central Political-Legal Committee, 2 February 1983).

18 Peng Zhen, 6 April 1987; 9 April 1987. On the relationship between elections and rural unrest, see Kelliher, p. 66; Epstein, pp. 415-16.


21 Interview, Beijing, January 1997.

22 The Ministry's report (Zhongguo Jiceng, 1996, pp. 77-78) made it appear that a central leader (i.e. Zhao Ziyang) opposed further experiments with village administrative offices. In fact, there are indications that he supported additional test sites. Interview, Beijing, February 1997.

23 The other three provinces are Hainan, Guangxi, and Yunnan. Jean Oi (p. 137) has noted the dominance of party secretaries in industrialized villages and that: "Rich Guangdong province is notable for its unenthusiastic response to carrying out the Organic Law."

24 See Wang Zhenyao, p. 225.


27 See Bao Yonghui, “Cunmin zizhi fuhe bu fuhe Zhongguo guoqing?” (Does villagers' autonomy accord with China's conditions?), Xiangzhen luntan, no. 6, p. 12 (June 1991).

28 Interviews, Hebei, May 1994; December 1995. Reports of rigged village elections can be found in Zhongguo Jiceng, 1989; Zhongguo Jiceng Zhengquan Jianshe Yanjiu Hui, comp., Shijian yu sikao (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1992);


Interviews, Hebei, October-November, 1993. See also Lu Xiaozhang, “Qing gei tamen jianqing dian fudan ba” (Please reduce their burden a little bit), Xiangzhen luntan, no. 4, p. 24 (April 1994); Interviews, Shandong, July 1994.

See Kelliher, p. 78; Manion, pp. 737-38; O'Brien, pp. 54-57.


See Lin Chen and Zhang Yun, “Qiancun zhengquan shi zenyang lan diao de?” (How did governance in Qiancun become rotten?), Banyuetan (neibuban), no. 8, p. 21 (August 1996); Hua Bing, “Tiao longmen de guanjian he zai?” (Where is the key to jump through the dragon's door?), Xiangzhen luntan, no. 4, pp. 10-11 (April 1992); and Zhang Chenggong, “Cunzhang si yu chunjie” (Village heads die at spring festival), Landun, no. 3, pp. 23-27 (March 1993).

Interview, Hebei, October 1993.

Amy Epstein (pp. 418-19) argues that boss politics is most common in wealthy villages where, however, elections are not particularly competitive.


Interviews, Hebei, October-November 1993; May and August 1994; December
Interview, Beijing, February 1997.

See Zhengdingxian Minzhengju, “Shixing cunmin daibiao huiyi zhidu jiakuai nongcun jiceng minzhu jincheng” (Implement the villagers’ representative assembly system, quicken the construction of rural grassroots democracy), unpublished report, 1991, p. 3.

See Bao Yonghui, “Shenhua nongcun dierbu gaige de qiji” (The turning point in deepening the second stage of rural reform), Xiangzhen luntan, no. 5, p. 18 (May 1991). For similar stories, see Wang Zhenyao, p. 298; Interviews, Hebei, October, 1993.

Bao Yonghui, p. 17.


See Tian Yuan, “Zhongguo nongcun jiceng de minzhu zhilu” (The pathway to grassroots democracy in rural China), Xiangzhen luntan, no. 6, pp. 3-4 (June 1993).

Interviews, Beijing, January-February 1997; Interviews, Hebei, October-November 1993; August 1994; and December 1995.

For a discussion of this dynamic, see Wu Liming, “Shang qian xuanmin taohui xuanju quan” (Nearly one thousand voters regained their right to vote), Minzhu yu fazhi, no. 4, pp. 4-5 (21 February 1996).

Interviews, Beijing, February 1997; the State Department estimate is found in International Republican Institute, “China’s Economic Future: Challenges to U.S. Policy” (Study Papers submitted to the Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, August 1996), p. 3; The magazine editor offered his assessment in an interview, Beijing, February 1997.

See Gao Zhongyi, “Guanxi wang, baohu san, nanbatian” (Relationship networks, protective umbrellas, and a local bully), Landun, no. 11, pp. 4-7 (November 1994); Cheng Tongshun, “Nongcun jiceng xuanju zai changshi zhong jianguan” (Grassroots rural elections are being perfected through trials), Zhongguo nongmin, no. 11, p. 31 (November 1996); Zhongguo Jiceng, 1994; Zhang Houan and Meng Guilan, “Wanshan cunmin weiyuanhui de minzhu zhidu, tuijin nongcun zhengzhi wending yu fazhan” (Perfect the democratic electoral system of villagers' committees, advance rural political stability and development), Shehuizhuyi yanjiu, no. 4, p. 41 (August 1993).
51 Interview, Hebei, October 1993.
52 Interview, Hebei, October 1993.
54 See Epstein, pp. 414-15.
56 Interview, Hebei, October, 1993. Kelliher (pp. 73-75) agrees that elected cadres may distribute burdens more fairly, but downplays the practical benefits that village self-government offers.
57 Interviews, Beijing, July 1994.
58 Interviews, Hebei, October 1993; Beijing, February 1997.
59 Interview, Hebei, October 1993. For a similar report, see Deng Baoquan and Zhao Yiyun, “Zengqiang minzhu yishi gaohao cunmin zizhi” (Enhance democratic consciousness, do village autonomy well), in Zhongguo Jiceng, 1992, p. 108. On VRAs, see Lawrence, pp. 61-68.
60 Interview, Beijing, February 1997. Jean Oi (p. 141) has suggested that one weakness of the Law is that “it does not include the accountability of the party secretary to the villagers.” Daniel Kelliher (p. 84), largely agrees, though he also points out that “concurrent office-holding may lead to popular control over the local Party.”
61 Interviews, Beijing, June 1994.
62 See Zhou Ziqing and Zhao Zhenji, “Liangpiao zhi -- nongcun dangzuzhi jianshe de youyi changshi” (The two-ballot system -- a useful experiment in the construction of rural party organizations.), Xiangzhen luntan, no. 6, pp. 6-7 (June 1992).
63 Interview, Beijing, December 1995.
64 Interview, Hebei, October 1993.
65 Interview, Hebei, October 1993.
66 On villagers’ threatening to vote out cadres who enforce birth control, see Wang Kean, “Cunmin weiyuanhui de xianzhuang yu gaige” (The present situation and reform of villagers’ committees), in Zhang Houan, Bai Yihua and Wu Zhilong, p. 188. On such cadres surviving an election, see Fei Yuncheng, “Minzhu xuanju de linghun” (The soul of democratic elections), Xiangzhen luntan, no. 8, p. 3 (August 1993); Zhongguo Jiceng, 1994, pp. 91-92.
See Jiang Zemin, “Gaoju Deng Xiaoping lilun weida qizhi, ba jianshe you Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi shiyi quanmian tui xiang 21 shiji” (Hold high the great banner of Deng Xiaoping theory in order to advance the cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics into the 21st century), (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1997), p. 36; Li Peng, Zhengfu gongzuobaogao, delivered at the Fifth session of the Eighth NPC, 1 March 1997.

International Republican Institute, p. 8.

See, for example, Yuan Genbo, Helian Xidian, and Yang Jianmin, “Rang nongmin deng shang zhengzhi wutai chang zhujiao” (Let farmers come on the political stage and play the role of heroes), Zhongguominzheng, no. 9, pp. 4-7 (September 1996).

Interviews, Hebei, October-November 1993.

Interviews, Beijing, January 1997.