Title
Accommodating “Democracy” in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2rw557pw

Authors
O'Brien, KJ
Li, L

Publication Date
2009-02-12

DOI
10.1017/S0305741000008213

Peer reviewed
Accommodating "Democracy" in a One-Party State: 
Introducing Village Elections in China

Kevin J. O'Brien
Department of Political Science
210 Barrows Hall
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720
kobrien@uclink4.berkeley.edu

Department of Political Science
2140 Derby Hall, 154 North Oval Mall
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210-1373
(after August 1, 1999)

Lianjiang Li
Department of Government and International Studies
Hong Kong Baptist University
Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong
lianli@ctsc.hkbc.hk

May 26, 1999
Accommodating “Democracy” in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China

When residents of a few Guangxi villages decided to elect their own leaders in late 1980 and early 1981, none of them could have known they were touching off a historic reform. What began as a stopgap effort to fill a political vacuum, after much debate and two decades of uneven implementation, is now enshrined in a national law. Procedures for holding elections have been spelled out and implementing regulations are being formulated at all levels. Voting is now mandatory every three years in every village, bar none.

Meanwhile, insofar as they bear on the nation’s democratic prospects, village (and now township) elections have become one of China’s most talked-about political reforms. Scholars examine them to gauge the likelihood of regime transition. Journalists visit villages to figure out if this experiment with political competition is real. Prominent political figures in the West have applauded Beijing’s willingness to subject some officials to the people’s will. Even China’s top leaders, after years of relative silence, have praised “villagers’ self-government” (cunmin zizhi) as one of the “great inventions” of Chinese farmers.¹

Where and how did village elections begin? What was at stake and why were they so controversial? Who took part in the spread of elections and what role did they play? Using interviews, leadership speeches, and archival materials, this paper gives an account of the origins and implementation of villagers’ self-government. After tracing various ups and downs, it concludes with some thoughts on whether villagers’ committee (VC) elections have brought real democracy to China’s countryside.

Origins

The earliest villagers’ committees emerged in two Guangxi counties (Yishan and Luocheng) in late 1980 and early 1981. Formed without the knowledge of local authorities, these somewhat makeshift organizations were created by village elders, former cadres and community-minded villagers. Their purpose was to address a decline in social order and a broader political crisis that was fast becoming apparent as family farming took hold and brigades and production teams stopped functioning. At this early stage, VCs were called “leadership groups for village public security” (cun zhi’an lingdao.
xiaozu) or “village management committees” (cun guan hui). The actual term “villagers’ committee” (cunmin weiyuanhui) only appeared in Luocheng County in Spring 1981. Within a matter of months, county administrators in Yishan and Luocheng had reported this development to their superiors in Hechi Prefecture and had recommended its popularization. The prefectural Party committee then decided to establish VCs throughout the region and reported its plan to the provincial government, which in turn reported it to Beijing.\(^2\)

In the early 1980s, villagers’ committees were genuine, if circumscribed, organs of self-government. Committee members were elected (though rather informally), and their responsibilities were confined to managing neighborhood affairs in natural villages (ziran cun). VCs at this point were free-standing and relatively autonomous non-governmental bodies that did not take part in the allocation of state resources, such as land or quotas. Typical undertakings included enacting codes of conduct banning gambling and theft, maintaining irrigation ditches, paving roads and repairing bridges, and mediating disputes. VCs might also raise funds and mobilize labor to rebuild schools, run day-care centers, and look after the poor, the elderly, and relatives of soldiers.\(^3\) Committees were not, however, expected to help township governments enforce state policies (such as birth control and tax collection), nor did they rely on township assistance to conduct their work. If two farmers rejected a VC’s efforts to settle a dispute, for example, the committee might invite all adults in the village to assemble and decide (by secret ballot) who was in the right. Both parties would be required to pay a deposit before the hearing began; whoever received a two-thirds majority of the ballots cast would then receive his or her money back plus a portion of the loser’s deposit. The remaining funds would be used to compensate the “jury” for their time and efforts.\(^4\)

When Guangxi’s report on VCs reached Beijing, Peng Zhen, then vice-chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC), praised villagers’ committees as the perfect vehicle for practicing grassroots democracy. So impressed was Peng, he instructed the NPC and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) to send investigators to Guangxi to find out what was going on. At the same time, Peng encouraged other provinces to experiment with VCs.\(^5\) In short order, committees spread widely, especially in areas that had taken the lead in abolishing communes and establishing township governments. Reports suggest that pacesetting provinces included Anhui, Beijing, Fujian, Gansu, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shandong, and Sichuan.\(^6\)
In December 1982, thanks mainly to Peng's urging, villagers' committees were written into the Constitution as elected, mass organizations of self-government (Art. 111). A 1983 Central Committee circular also instructed that elected VCs should be set up, that they should actively promote public welfare and assist local governments, and that implementing regulations should be drawn up in light of local conditions. These directives generated some controversy, but opposition at this point was relatively muted. For one thing, the early 1980s were a time when far-reaching changes were taking place in all walks of political life. For another, the Party leadership was busy exploring political reform. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping had remarked that “we have not propagated and practiced democracy enough, and our systems and institutions leave much to be desired.” A year later, Deng specifically called for “practicing people's democracy to the full,” especially at the grassroots. And in June 1981, The Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party, announced that it was the Party's aim to "gradually realize direct popular participation in the democratic process at the grassroots of political power and community life.”

To be sure, the 1980s were not the first time that the Party had experimented with basic-level elections. As early as the Jiangxi Soviet (1931-34), popular assemblies had been established to draw villagers and "enlightened gentry" into local government. Later, after the Japanese invasion, the so-called "three-thirds system" (san san zhi) had also played some part in reducing the gap between leaders and led, making cadres accountable to their constituents, and encouraging attention to the mass line.

In most of the Communist-controlled districts, however, elections were first and foremost a device for winning over converts to the struggle against the Kuomintang and local power holders. Making a show of granting country folk political rights was designed to undermine the traditional elite, rein in the Party's ideologically suspect allies, and point up the contrast between border region governments and the Kuomintang's "one-party dictatorship." For the Communists, war-time elections were state-building exercises in which controlled polarization and community building co-existed with democratization. Affording villagers a smidgeon of power served the Party's overriding aim of cementing its supremacy and deepening penetration into rural communities.

Under these circumstances, popular assemblies in the border regions were inevitably "feeble and fleeting institutions" that were overshadowed by smaller, more efficient governing committees and the bureaucracy. The assemblies formed in Shaan-Gan-Ning, for example, met
infrequently and offered little guidance to the permanent organs of state. Moreover, Party domination of
elected bodies predictably increased as one approached the real locus of power.15

Peng Zhen's singular enthusiasm for grassroots elections and villagers' committees can be
traced to this era and his experiences in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region.16 In a report delivered to the
Politburo in 1941, Peng explained why and how local elections had been held and suggested
establishing "district and village assemblies" (qu cun daibiaohui) to oversee elected, village cadres. In
Peng's view, elections were not only compatible with Party rule; they were the right instrument for
tightening the Party's grip in areas where its dominance was still up in the air.17 A measure of mass
participation, in other words, would generate support for the Party's revolutionary mission while serving
its state-building aspirations. "Democracy" and governmental power could develop together.

In the years after the People's Republic was founded, Peng continued to show interest in
basic-level, mass organizations. In the early 1950's, for instance, Mao had ordered that urban residents
who did not belong to work units should be organized. Peng, then deputy director of the Central
Committee's Political-Legal Committee and Mayor of Beijing, suggested forming "residents' committees"
(jumin weiyuanhui). These would be "mass autonomous organizations, not political [i.e. government]
organizations." Their tasks, according to Peng, would center on improving public welfare, popularizing
policies and laws, mobilizing participation in state-sponsored activities, and reflecting opinions to
grassroots officials. Members of residents' committees were to be elected and to accept the guidance of
urban, basic-level authorities. Peng's proposal was later ratified by the Party's Central Committee and
resident's committees became an established feature of the urban landscape.18

Peng's later experience as one of the first victims of the Cultural Revolution only reinforced
his commitment to "socialist democracy" and prompted him to consider how it might be built in China.19
According to Peng, inasmuch as China had almost no tradition of self-government, democratic habits
had to be cultivated among both Party leaders and ordinary citizens. Realizing socialist democracy thus
involved a two-pronged approach. For the leadership, respect for democracy would be nurtured by
strengthening people's congresses; for the masses, democratic ways of thinking would be instilled
through self-government. The focus of "democratic training" in the countryside would be the
construction of villagers' committees. By electing their own leaders and participating in grassroots
decision making, 800 million Chinese villagers would learn how to manage their community's affairs.
After rural people became skilled at running their own villages, Peng argued, they might then move on to govern townships and counties.\textsuperscript{20}

**Controversy, 1983-1987**

From the very beginning, many local administrators harbored doubts about the role VCs might come to play. As early as 1983, questions were raised regarding the degree to which villagers’ committees would become autonomous from Party branches and township governments. While everyone agreed that Party branches ought to lead VCs, some skeptics felt that committee members should seek Party approval for each and every decision they made, while others thought the branch could exercise leadership merely by checking if a committee had strayed from the Party's line and policies.\textsuperscript{21} As for the relationship between VCs and township governments, some rural leaders thought informal “guidance” (zhidao) would suffice, but others (including many grassroots cadres), favored hierarchical, “leadership” (lingdao) relations. Township officials had an especially large stake in this debate: many believed that without tight control over VCs, and an ability to issue direct commands, village cadres would be tempted to ignore state interests and disregard township instructions. Elected VC members might, in a word, be inclined to take their cues from below rather than above. This could interfere with tax collection, grain procurement, and enforcing the birth control policy, and might ultimately cripple township authority.\textsuperscript{22}

Out of fears that committees would become “independent kingdoms,” some critics of self-government even recommended transforming VCs into full-blown state organs.\textsuperscript{23} Common proposals included turning VCs into “village administrative offices” (cungongsuo) or setting up administrative offices alongside VCs. These offices would be directly responsible to townships and their appointed heads would presumably be more receptive to township orders than elected committee directors.\textsuperscript{24} Some less ardent foes of self-government proposed a compromise: they recommended that if village administrative offices could not be established, a “specially appointed agent” (tepaiyuan) should be sent to every village to represent the township.\textsuperscript{25}

Reservations about VCs also existed at the top. Premier Zhao Ziyang, for one, suggested that replacing brigades with VCs could reduce the reach of townships and that large townships might find it beneficial to set up village administrative offices.\textsuperscript{26} Although these remarks have led some to conclude that Zhao was “the leading opponent of the reform,”\textsuperscript{27} the story is more complex. Zhao in fact
agreed that elected, autonomous committees should be established. It's just that while on an inspection tour in November 1986 he had concluded that VCs should not always take the place of brigades, because many brigades, particularly those in south China, were composed of up to a dozen natural villages. Zhao preferred forming VCs in natural villages, large or small, irrespective of whether previously the natural village had been a brigade or a production team.\textsuperscript{28} (This approach, incidentally, owed much to the Guangxi model of the early 1980s.) In this regard, rather than undermining self-government, Zhao's plan would have better enfranchised residents of small, remote settlements, who otherwise might find it difficult to win a seat on a committee based in a bigger "core village" (zhu cun).

In spite of these disputes, VCs replaced brigades nearly as fast as family farming had replaced collective agriculture. By the end of 1984, 700,000 brigades had been transformed into nearly 950,000 villagers' committees. In Yunnan and Guangdong, VCs took the place of production teams; in all other provinces VCs supplanted brigades.\textsuperscript{29} The transition proceeded smoothly because, at this point, it was little more than a change in name. Constitutional provisions notwithstanding, most committees were still appointed rather than popularly elected. Prior to 1987, although VCs were called "mass autonomous organizations," they were effectively extensions of township government.\textsuperscript{30}

Shortly after receiving the 1983 Central Committee circular on VCs, Tianjin and six other provincial-level units (Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Heilongjiang, Zhejiang and Ningxia), took the lead in enacting rules concerning the responsibilities, composition, and election of villagers' committees.\textsuperscript{31} The Ministry of Civil Affairs dutifully collected and reviewed these regulations, and in August 1984 it produced the first draft of \textit{The Organic Rules on Villagers' Committees}.\textsuperscript{32} At this stage, the main sticking point continued to be whether relations between township governments and committees should be ones of leadership, guidance, or some combination of both. Some provincial officials (particularly from Hebei and Jiangsu) favored turning VCs into cogs in the administrative machine, while legal drafters in the MoCA, citing the Constitution, defended autonomy and the status of VCs as elected, mass organizations.\textsuperscript{33}

As the Ministry solicited opinions in the course of revising the Rules, there was also some discussion of elections. Until officials from Sichuan, Jiangxi, Heilongjiang, and Shaanxi pointed out that it was unconstitutional, one MoCA draft had permitted a murky mixture of elections, appointment, and self-selection. Under this plan, a slate of VC members would be popularly elected; then, from among the successful candidates, VC leaders would be "selected" (tuixuan)-- perhaps by the township, perhaps by
committee members themselves. Scholars and local administrators also found fault with draft articles
dealing with recall procedures and the length of VC terms, and some even proposed that committee
members be subject to term limits. Opposite to villagers’ self-government turned out to be unexpectedly strong when the
Ministry submitted its thirteenth draft of the Rules to the NPC in 1987. At the plenary session that spring,
a number of legislators rose to argue that the time was not “ripe” for a full-fledged law to be passed.
More than a few deputies said that Chinese villagers lacked the “democratic consciousness” to govern
themselves. Others were concerned that the bill did not clarify (or even mention) the relationship
between Party branches and villagers’ committees. Speaking as long-time administrators, many
deputies openly doubted whether township guidance of VCs would be enough to guarantee state
interests in the countryside.

Although electoral matters did not receive much attention at the 1987 NPC, skepticism
about enfranchising villagers lay just below the surface of many comments. Some critics questioned
whether “cadres who truly work conscientiously will get elected” and instead supported combining
“evaluation by higher-level authorities” with voting by villagers. Several deputies warned that cadres
who did the township’s bidding would certainly be defeated and that “complex problems will arise if
cadres are selected merely through elections.” Most opponents recommended that the draft be revised;
some, echoing the anxiety of detractors outside the legislature, went so far as to advise that the
Constitution be amended so that VCs were converted into government organs led by appointed
directors.

Supporters of more autonomy argued quite the opposite. They thought that “the bill did not
go far enough in empowering village cadres against the encroachments of township officials,” and some
"wanted to add a provision stipulating the right of village cadres to turn down any assignment not
covered by the bill.” These legislators were concerned that township work would crowd out village
concerns and preferred Guangxi-style, free-standing VCs to administrative appendages. The Law
Department at People’s University even advised the NPC that any organization that assigned VC
members administrative work should pay them for doing it.

As the chief justification for self-government, supporters of the Law argued that passing the
bill would help curb arbitrary and predatory behavior by rural cadres. They agreed that township leaders
had to execute policies that villagers did not understand and did not readily accept, but stressed that this
did not justify recourse to threats and coercion.\textsuperscript{39} In their view, even the least popular measures (e.g. birth control, tax collection) could be implemented through persuasion and the mass line -- things elected cadres would be more inclined to practice than township appointees. Proponents said that NPC deputies should show a little more faith in the masses and that villagers would not turn self-government into anarchy.\textsuperscript{40} They also suggested that worries about the draft failing to mention the Party's role in the village were overblown. Party leadership had already been affirmed in the Constitution. "It would make the Party appear weak," a MoCA official who participated in drafting the Law said, "if we had to place this mass organization under Party branch leadership."\textsuperscript{41} A confident Communist Party had no reason to fear that village self-government would lurch out of control.

The debate was so heated that Peng Zhen found it necessary to make three speeches within 48 hours to drum up support among NPC leaders.\textsuperscript{42} Peng's lobbying was characterized by nostalgic memories of how close Party-villager relations had been before 1949 and a warning that rural rebellion was possible if self-government was put off. In a speech to the heads of the NPC's provincial delegations, which according to MoCA officials "played a key role in unifying deputy thinking,"\textsuperscript{43} Peng argued that village democracy was a matter of "life and death" for the Party. He acknowledged that self-government might "make rural cadres' life a little harder" (i.e. it might complicate policy implementation in the short term), but insisted that it would not "produce chaos" (gāo lüè) because "the masses accept what is reasonable."\textsuperscript{44}

Clearly distressed and drawing on all his prestige as a Party elder, Peng went on to lament how relations between cadres and villagers had deteriorated over the years, noting that some rural cadres "resorted to coercion and commandism" while not a few had become corrupt and high-handed "local emperors" (tu huángdì). If such trends were not reversed, he cautioned, villagers would "sooner or later attack our rural cadres with their shoulder poles." To prevent further erosion in cadre-mass relations, Peng claimed that 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 proclaimed, was to promote self-government so that China's rural masses could themselves select and oversee village cadres.\textsuperscript{45}

Despite Peng's impassioned words, opposition lingered on. As the session closed, the NPC Presidium decided it was "improper to force the draft law through the legislative procedure"\textsuperscript{46} and instead recommended that deputies approve the Law in principle and authorize the Standing Committee to make
further revisions before promulgating it. This motion was accepted and eight months later, in November 1987, after further spirited debate, and over the opposition of Standing Committee members who felt the Law was still premature, a trial Organic Law was passed.47

Although opponents in the NPC could not prevent the Law from being enacted, they did stir up worries that village elections might undermine policy implementation and jeopardize social order. This caused even the most steadfast supporters of self-government to agree that test sites should be developed before the program was rolled out nationwide. Peng himself, on the day the Law was passed, warned against enforcing it where conditions were not "ripe," on grounds that hasty implementation would set back self-government and ruin the reputation of the Law. He announced that so long as local officials worked toward creating a setting conducive to villagers' autonomy, they would not be considered derelict for failing to carry out the Law in the near future.48 Peng's preference for either good implementation or none at all provided just the opening that the many critics of self-government needed. They promptly shifted their efforts to blocking the trial Law's implementation.

Implementation and Indecision, 1988-1990

The same Ministry of Civil Affairs that had been in charge of drafting the Organic Law was entrusted with its execution. For this purpose, the Department of Basic-Level Governance was set up in early 1988, a few months before the Law went into effect. As a new department in a low-ranking ministry, the department at first did little to promote villagers' autonomy, which it knew was quite controversial. The earliest circular the bureau prepared (26 February 1988), for instance, stressed that VCs should become genuinely autonomous and that experiments with self-government should be conducted; but it did not say anything specific about elections.49

The first elections under the Law took place without much guidance from the MoCA. In some places, county administrators held elections after provincial civil affairs departments selected their counties for trial implementation of the Law.50 In other places, voting was introduced by county and township officials on their own, because they believed that popular involvement in cadre recruitment would turn up individuals who could lead a village to prosperity.51 In still others, elections began after villagers (who had somehow heard about the Law) pressured townships to let them nominate and vote for VC members.52
These local experiments attracted the attention of MoCA officials in Beijing. At a conference in July 1989, a member of the Liaoning provincial civil affairs department, while reviewing the record of an early test site for competitive elections, argued that a "key link" (guanjian) in implementing the Law was holding elections. By year-end, MoCA Deputy Minister Lian Yin was using precisely the same language to urge provincial civil affairs officials to convene elections, particularly for VC chairs.53

That the MoCA decided to make popular elections the heart of self-government was, ironically, occasioned by a conservative attempt to kill off the reform. After the suppression of the 1989 protest movement, opponents of villagers' autonomy had demanded that the Organic Law be repealed because it "was far ahead of its time." Some even alleged that the Organic Law was an example of the "bourgeois liberalization" condoned by disgraced Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang.54

To determine whether the Law should essentially be scrapped, the NPC, the Central Organization Department, the MoCA, and the Ministry of Personnel dispatched a team of investigators to report on the performance of village political organizations. But the team could not reach a consensus. Only a small majority favored implementing the Law, while the rest suggested that VCs be replaced by administrative offices or "share a sign board" (liang kuai paizi, yi tao renma) with such offices. With no agreement in sight, the NPC asked the MoCA to prepare a second report on its own, advising what should be done.55

Now the Ministry was in a stronger position to promote self-government. Under Minister Cui Naifu's supervision, MoCA staff members drew up a set of recommendations. Based largely on what they had found in Heilongjiang, where VCs were operating quite well, the Ministry investigators concluded that introducing village elections was the best way to reduce cadre-mass tensions and to prevent "an even larger crisis." Merely reorganizing Party branches or establishing village administrative offices, they argued, did not suffice or worked only for a short time.56

Around this time, Peng Zhen, nearly ninety years old and retired, also returned to the fray. In February 1990, according to accounts by two MoCA officials, Peng called Minister Cui Naifu to his home. When Cui reported that there was still much opposition to the Law, Peng purportedly sprang to his feet and asked what was Cui's "attitude" toward self-government. Cui answered that he was "absolutely committed" to it. Peng was relieved and restated his case for grassroots democracy. He then went a step further than he had on earlier occasions: he said he regretted failing to shepherd an
Organic Law of Township Government through the NPC so that township officials would be subject to mass supervision, too.\textsuperscript{57}

Then, a second Party elder, Bo Yibo, intervened and spoke up in favor of self-government. After Bo's staff obtained the MoCA report praising elections, Bo read it and called it "brilliant."\textsuperscript{58} As one of the "eight immortals" and a close ally of Deng Xiaoping, Bo's backing proved decisive. Shortly after Bo added his voice to Peng's, Politburo Standing Committee member Song Ping finally ended all the to-ing and fro-ing. At a conference held in Laixi in August 1990, Song instructed that the Law should be implemented rather than debated.\textsuperscript{59} The conference report, which was later issued as Central Committee Document No. 19 (1990), decreed that each of China's counties should establish "demonstration villages" (\textit{shifan cun}) in areas that had "good working conditions," thereby seconding a 1989 MoCA decision to focus on better-off communities where cadre-mass relations presumably were reasonably harmonious.\textsuperscript{60} Document No. 19 also accepted the MoCA's interpretation that popular elections were a key link in realizing self-government.

MoCA officials moved swiftly to use the Central Committee's endorsement to push self-government forward. Only six weeks after the Laixi conference report was written, the Ministry issued a circular directing that election showcases should be established throughout the nation. Moreover, the MoCA ignored a modest quota set in the conference report and substituted more ambitious goals. Instead of restricting pilot programs to "several or a dozen villages in every county," the Ministry instructed that full-scale demonstration townships and counties should also be set up.\textsuperscript{61} At this point, the MoCA also underscored the importance of elections, and enriched what Diamond and Myers call the "ideological marketplace," by redefining the core of villagers' autonomy from "self-government, self-service, and self-education" to "democratic elections, democratic decision-making, and democratic management."\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{On the Ground: The Role of Local Officials}

It was one thing for Ministry officials to decide that elections were a key link, but it was another to induce local authorities to hold free and fair votes.\textsuperscript{63} Many local administrators were loath to let villagers select grassroots cadres. Like earlier naysayers, they suspected that elections would interfere with policy execution, aggravate factional rivalries and intensify lineage conflict.\textsuperscript{64} When Xi'an began its experiments with the Organic Law in 1988, only one of its 13 counties agreed to participate.
One county Party secretary even cautioned that anyone who dared popularize the Law would be held responsible for causing chaos in the countryside.65 Township officials tended to be even more antagonistic. A 1989 survey in Shandong revealed that over 60 per cent of township leaders disapproved of self-government, while a 1991 survey of 150 township administrators in Hequ County, Shanxi showed that two-fifths opposed village elections.66 In Hebei, one township official bluntly told a Xinhua reporter: "presently, villagers don't know how to govern themselves. They don't even know what it means to govern themselves. And we won't let them govern themselves!"67

After the Central Committee endorsed the demonstration program in 1990, most local officials quit attacking self-government, but quite a few continued to delay or rig elections. Noting the trial status of the Law, some county leaders in Shandong claimed that they had the authority to decide if their counties were ready for villagers' self-government.68 Township administrators, for their part, often took advantage of the Law's vagueness concerning election procedures to restrict voters' freedom of choice. Among other tactics, they monopolized nominations, conducted snap elections, demanded that Party members vote for hand-picked nominees, banned unapproved candidates from making campaign speeches, annulled elections if the "wrong" candidates won, and insisted that voting be conducted by a show of hands.69

For much of the 1990s, local resistance was, at least in part, a result of the Central Organization Department's (COD) stance toward elections. Suspecting that grassroots democracy would weaken Party branches, and reflecting the low priority that many central leaders attached to village elections, the COD was not remarkably supportive of the Organic Law.70 This, according to some analysts in Beijing, created a strong disincentive for local authorities to throw their efforts into nurturing self-government. Since the COD controls performance evaluations and decides who is put up for promotion, most cadres are highly attentive to the Department's priorities. "After all," a researcher from the State Council explained, "local officials are most concerned with their own careers. If they figure that promoting village elections will not be rewarded, then they are unlikely to make much effort in this difficult work. And over the last few years, creators of well-known models of village democracy have not received the promotions they deserved."71

Owing in large measure to the half-hearted support of top policy makers, which reached local leaders in the form of COD reservations, many county administrators discovered that championing self-government was at best thankless and at worst harmful to their careers.72 A county official in Jilin
who pushed for open nominations and free campaigning acknowledged to us that he was taking a significant risk. What emboldened him, he said, was that he was not seeking further promotions, because he preferred serving in his home county over being transferred to a higher position elsewhere. Indeed, a notable number of the early adopters of village elections were officials who had peaked in their careers and no longer cared much if the COD liked what they did.

Because it does not control appointments and promotions, even in local civil affairs bureaus, the MoCA is poorly positioned to reward those who cooperate and to motivate those who lag behind. Ministry leaders are aware that they lack meaningful inducements to dole out, and have tried to counteract this by urging civil affairs officials to "gain status by producing achievements." In 1995, an MoCA vice-minister, for example, suggested that Party and government leaders might start giving local civil affairs workers their due if they could show that elections promoted stability, developed the economy, and curbed corruption.

Some provincial civil affairs bureaus have also sought to overcome their lowly status by reaching out to more powerful organizations. Leaders of the Fujian civil affairs bureau, for instance, have always regarded the provincial people's congress to be an ally. For over a decade, after each round of elections, they have submitted legislative motions designed to standardize voter registration, nomination and voting procedures, the counting of ballots, and so on. When their proposals have been included in provincial laws, they then use these statutes to goad local leaders into running better elections. In this way, the civil affairs bureau has obtained support from the provincial legislature's leaders, who are delighted to exercise their lawmakers' powers and to see their decisions enforced.

More recently, the bureau has also made overtures to the provincial Discipline Inspection Commission -- overtures that paid off when the Commission realized that corruption tended to be lower where well-run village elections took place. With influential backers working together with civil affairs staff, Fujian has become a national leader in implementing self-government. Among other firsts, it was the first province to require secret balloting, primaries, and open nomination for all VC posts.

**On the Ground: The Role of Villagers**

Aside from obtaining help from other government organizations, the MoCA and its local bureaus have also found an ally in ordinary villagers. Rural people have been quick to recognize that elections provide a means to dislodge corrupt, imperious and incompetent cadres. And when they are
deprived of their right to vote, villagers do not always slink away or shrug with indifference. Over the past decade, resourceful farmers have frequently turned to what might be called "rightful resistance." Citing the Organic Law as well as provincial regulations, they demand fair elections, boycott rigged votes, and lodge complaints at higher levels. They adroitly use the language of power to defy "disloyal" local officials and call for scrupulous implementation of existing statutes and leadership promises. Engaging in disruptive but not quite unlawful collective action, rural rightful resisters have made their presence felt at government compounds throughout the nation.

People’s congresses and civil affairs bureaus are the most common targets for villagers upset with election irregularities. Provincial civil affairs officials from Shandong, Shanxi, Fujian, Henan and Hebei have told us that their offices always fill up around election time. Angry villagers sometimes do not stop there; they occasionally trek all the way to Beijing searching for officials who might be willing to champion their claims. In one widely-reported case, after a township in Liaoning prohibited several candidates from running and did not permit secret balloting, over a dozen villagers traveled at their own expense to the county town, the provincial capital, and finally Beijing to lodge a complaint. They knew the Organic Law by heart and recited it at each stop while petitioning for a new election.

In the last decade, local civil affairs bureaus and the MoCA have used popular pressure to prod local officials to hold high-quality elections. Provincial civil affairs officials acknowledge that mass complaints often help them detect procedural infractions and enable them to win over reluctant county and township officials by arguing that many appeals are just and cannot be ignored. MoCA officials have also given a sympathetic hearing to some delegations of villagers who seek honest elections. In 1994, for instance, when a group of Hebei farmers came to the capital to protest a fraudulent vote, an MoCA official shouted "bravo!" (tai haole) upon hearing the news. He immediately dispatched two staff members to look into the charges. In the course of a long investigation that ended with the election being annulled, MoCA officials appeared three times on a popular television program devoted to investigative journalism; in front of a national audience, they openly supported the complainants and warned other local officials to draw the appropriate lesson.

In siding with villagers and insisting that the Organic Law be enforced, MoCA officials have tried to persuade local leaders that infringing on villagers' rights could damage their careers. Ministry officials sometimes even raise the specter of social unrest, the notorious Renshou riots in particular, when trying to convince local officials to shape up. Speaking to township officials in Hebei in 1996, one
MoCA staff member advised: "I know that many of you oppose village elections. But isn't it mainly because the cadres that you've appointed offer you gifts [i.e. bribes]. If villagers file complaints against these corrupt cadres, they may also bring you down. You know what happened in Renshou. I think it's in your interest to carefully calculate the risks and rewards of refusing to hold good elections."  

Appeals by rural people have done so much to spur cadre compliance that some Ministry officials place "farmers' active participation" and "mass creativity" uppermost when assigning credit for the spread of village elections. In the opinion of the MoCA official most closely associated with self-government, actions by ordinary villagers are the main reason that elections have not been thwarted by local opponents. Western researchers, interestingly enough, have tended to apportion more credit to the Ministry itself.

International Support

MoCA officials have also been adept at obtaining and deploying aid from abroad. In July 1989 the MoCA established a Research Society of Basic-level Governance. Shortly thereafter, the Research Society won a grant from the Ford Foundation to help promote self-government. On the heels of this first major influx of funds, a stream of foreign scholars, journalists, and (later) election observers soon followed. As articles and reports brought China's experiment with "grassroots democracy" to the world, MoCA officials attracted even more overseas help. Since the early 1990s, the Asia Foundation, the International Republican Institute, the Carter Center, the United Nations' Development Agency, and the European Union have all joined Ford in offering the MoCA financial and technical assistance. Ministry officials have used these resources to convene a series of international conferences, publish dozens of books on self-government, and reward cooperative local officials (and themselves) with foreign trips, particularly to the United States. Although such visits are one-time perks, and do not trump more enduring concerns, they did make lining up in support of elections more appealing to a number of early adopters.

Village elections have also drawn the attention of Western politicians, who in turn have encouraged Chinese leaders to support further democratic reform. In 1997 and 1998, for example, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton both lauded village elections in discussions with ranking Chinese officials. Eager to undo bad press about its human rights record and to head off social instability, the Chinese leadership has recently shown much interest in what previously was a low-profile program left to the
On an inspection tour to Anhui in September 1998, General Secretary Jiang Zemin, for instance, praised self-government as Chinese farmers' "third great invention" (along with the household responsibility system and township and village enterprises). Even the usually conservative NPCSC chairman Li Peng has stepped up to the plate to foster better village elections. While the Organic Law was being revised in 1998, Li visited a Jilin county known for its open nomination procedures. And that same summer Li also reportedly instructed People's Daily to publish the next-to-last draft of the revised Organic Law so that ordinary citizens could offer their comments and suggestions.

Where Implementation Stands

In how many of China's one million villages have democratic elections taken place? Estimates vary widely, as do definitions of what makes an election "democratic." Since early 1995, the MoCA has required that in all VC elections voters be offered at least one more candidate than the number of available posts (cha'e). Using this standard, the editor of a Chinese magazine that focuses on rural affairs reckoned that "no more than ten per cent" of Chinese villages had held well-run cha'e elections by early 1997. Around the same time, "other experts" and Ministry officials estimated that from one quarter to one third of China's villages had conducted elections according to the rules [i.e. the 1995 MoCA circular] and the Organic Law. And by November 1998, Minister of Civil Affairs Duoji Cairang told a Xinhua reporter that 60 per cent of all villages had convened democratic (i.e. cha'e) elections.

Assessments by overseas-based observers vary just as much. Duke University political scientist Tianjian Shi reported that in a 1993 nationwide survey of 336 villages as many as 51.6 per cent of villages had held semi-competitive (cha'e) elections. X. Drew Liu claimed that in the 1995 round of balloting 30 per cent of villages had allowed open nominations. And the U.S. State Department estimated in 1996 that one quarter to one third of China's villagers had "participated in elections that follow, to varying degrees of compliance, the guidelines."

Our research tends to support estimates near the low end of the range. In late 1997 we surveyed 8,302 rural residents from 478 villages in seven provinces (Anhui, Beijing suburbs, Fujian, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Shandong). Respondents were asked if their VCs were elected and, if they were, how candidates were chosen. The research design focused on nomination procedures rather than
the number of candidates because "in many ways, the process of nominations is as critical, if not more so, than the elections themselves." Moreover, given the limited degree of competition currently required, cha‘e elections are readily susceptible to manipulation. An individual who will almost certainly lose, for example, can be listed alongside the incumbents to satisfy the letter of the law. And uncontested elections may not be as undemocratic as they seem. In villages where the final balloting is ostensibly non-competitive, preliminary nominees may become candidates only after winning a hotly-contested primary in which villagers or their representatives participate.

The resulting data showed that 45 per cent of the individuals surveyed in the 478 villages said that their VC was elected and 26 per cent reported that candidates were selected either by villagers (15 per cent) or villagers’ representatives (11 per cent). Correcting for the large number of respondents who happened to be from villages that had primaries, that would mean that approximately 82 of the 478 surveyed villages (17 per cent) had held elections with primaries.

It ought to be noted, however, that our estimate applies only to these 478 villages, not the seven provinces, even less the whole country. The survey was distributed opportunistically in all but two provinces, and no effort was made to construct a nationwide probability sample. We were not able to include, for example, four provinces that have lagged notably in introducing village elections -- Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Hainan. And even within the seven provinces surveyed, this study suffers from the same problem that all survey research in China faces: on sensitive topics, it is comparatively easy to gain access where all is well, but hard to win cooperation where much is awry, particularly when officials suspect that the results might contradict what they have reported to their superiors. For these reasons, we believe that it is more likely that our estimate is high rather than low.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, village elections have passed through three stages. When villagers’ committees first appeared in the early 1980s, elected VCs enjoyed considerable autonomy and operated in what Tang Tsou once called the “zone of indifference.” Although committee members managed important neighborhood affairs, their responsibilities did not extend to matters of state. During this phase, elections produced a kind of grassroots democracy, but it was uninstitutionalized and had a very limited scope.
This first stage ended when the 1982 Constitution recognized villagers’ committees and VCs began to replace production brigades. This new status increased the import of elections many fold, but it also made them more controversial, because committees now had many more responsibilities and resources. Administrators accustomed to the old ways quite naturally feared that letting villagers select cadres would interfere with carrying out unpopular state policies and might even lead to a breakdown of public order. Backers of self-government, on the other hand, felt that elections were a chance worth taking: they were the best way to dislodge second-rate cadres and consolidate Party rule. Neither side was able to persuade the other, and the Law that finally emerged from the NPCSC reflected this standoff; among other things, it was maddeningly vague about how elections should be conducted. Throughout the next decade, partly through the efforts of the MoCA, and partly through the efforts of certain local officials and villagers, voting for VC members has gradually fanned out through the countryside. Against a backdrop of determined opposition, and worries that self-government would "cut the legs off" township leaders, supporters of elections have been given a chance to prove that enhanced cadre accountability could improve governance without threatening Party rule.

With the passage of the revised Organic Law in November 1998, elections have entered yet another stage. Self-government has finally shed its trial status and the pace of institutionalization has picked up. Election procedures have been clarified. Now, all VC candidates must be directly nominated by villagers, there must be more candidates than positions, and voting must be done in secret (Art. 14). The revised Law also takes into account continuing bureaucratic resistance and the need to strengthen the coalition pushing self-government. Toward this end, it not only encourages local people's congresses to enact implementing regulations and to do what is necessary to ensure that voters can exercise their democratic rights (Arts. 14, 28, 29), it also authorizes villagers to combat dishonest elections ("threats, bribes, forged ballots and other improper methods") by lodging "reports" (jubao) with local governments, people's congresses and other concerned departments [e.g. civil affairs offices] (Art. 15). Each of these clauses should do much to shore up the alliance that has been the driving force behind the spread of elections so far.

Still, successful implementation of the Law remains far from certain. Open resistance to elections may decline, but feigned compliance will almost certainly increase. What is more, even where VC voting is free and fair, we cannot yet speak of village democracy. Well-run, semi-competitive elections certainly make it possible to sideline some horribly unpopular cadres. But that says little about
Party secretaries who need never face a popular vote. The new Law, in fact, includes one major concession to opponents who have all along said that grassroots democratization is a risk the Party can ill afford to take. Instead of omitting any mention of the Party branch as the 1987 Law did, the 1998 Law stipulates that the Party branch is the village’s “leadership core” (lingdao hexin) (Art. 3). As long as VCs do not have final say over village political life, we must recognize that however much VC election procedures are improved and put into practice, a rethinking of the Party's role must occur before we can speak of real democracy in China's villages.\textsuperscript{105}

And if such a rethinking is important for village democracy, it is even more crucial for elections at higher levels. Diamond and Myers tell us that democratization depends on the emergence of an ideological marketplace that circulates norms and ideas supportive of popular rule.\textsuperscript{106} And there are tantalizing signs that, in China, such a marketplace is coming into being. Recent experiments with direct township elections, for example, indicate that the bounds of the permissible are being discussed, and that incentives to push elections higher may be growing.\textsuperscript{107} Nevertheless, "creeping up" is far from a foregone conclusion. The first open election of a township head, after initial positive reports, was quickly deemed unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{108} More fundamentally, many policy makers adamantly oppose democratic entrepreneurship by liberal intellectuals and reform-minded officials at the Center and below. They still feel that holding elections at higher levels is premature -- a step that would likely create more problems than it resolved.

Democracy may one day appear in China, and an alliance between frustrated citizens and reformist elites may be the force that produces a leadership in which leaders from top to bottom are held accountable via periodic, free elections. But for now, if we limit ourselves to the goals of self-government and put aside unintended outcomes and accidents of history yet to come, Peng Zhen's original vision still rules the day. Elections are designed to increase mass support for the Party, and grassroots democracy is understood to be fully compatible with strong state control.\textsuperscript{109} In this context, the self-government program is best seen as an effort to rejuvenate village leadership by cleaning out incompetent, corrupt, and high-handed cadres, all for the purpose of consolidating the current regime.
Notes

Kevin J. O’Brien is Associate Professor of Political Science at Ohio State University. Lianjiang Li is Assistant Professor of Government and International Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. For generous financial support, we would like to thank the Asia Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Pacific Cultural Foundation, and the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong.
For remarks by President Jiang Zemin, see Renmin ribao (People's Daily), 19 October 1998, p. 1.


Yu Xiangyang, "A great invention," p. 21. The author did not explain what would happen if the vote did not produce a two-thirds majority.


Bai Yihua, Reform and Exploration, pp. 284-85.


14 On Shaanbei, see Keating, *Two Revolutions* pp. 130-46. On "controlled polarization," more generally, see Chen, *Making Revolution*, pp. 11-12, 230; Although "strengthening the grip of the party over the entire region" is not his focus, see also Selden, *China in Revolution*, p. 128. In a first-person report that stresses the Party's democratic achievements, Jack Belden, *China Shakes the World* (New York: Harpers, 1949), p. 88, also notes: "in some villages, the various planks of all candidates contained a resolution to 'Support the Communist party and follow Mao Tse-tung,' illustrat[ing] clearly enough that the Communists are trying to establish not so much a utopian democracy as a support for themselves."


18 See Benkan Jizhe, “Cujin nongcun minzhuhua jianshe de zhongyao falü” ("An important law that promotes rural democratic construction"), Liaowang (Haiwaiban), (Outlook (Overseas Edition)), No. 51 (1987), p. 17.

Peng Zhen, “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 Sixth NPCSC, 23 November 1987, in *Important Speeches*, p. 25. See also Cai Dingjian, “Tuijin nongcun de minzhu jianshe” (“Advance democratic construction in the countryside”), *Zhengzhi yu falü* (*Politics and Law*), No. 4 (1989), pp. 16-17.


“Zhao zongli zai shiyiyue waichu shicha qijian dui ruogan juti wenti de zhishi” (“Premier Zhao's instructions on several concrete issues while on inspection tours in November [1986]”), unpublished transcript. Critics of Zhao, however, argued that establishing village administrative offices was unconstitutional and would enervate VCs. They also regarded his proposal to be impractical because the government could not afford to add several million cadres to the state payroll. Interviews, Beijing, January 1997.

Shi, “Village committee,” p. 393. Zhao’s alleged conflict with Peng has been mentioned in a number of sources. See, for example, Lin Changsheng, *Dalu nongcun cunmin zizhi zhidu yanjiu* (*A Study of the Villagers’ Self-Government System on the Mainland*), (Taipei: Xingzhengyuan dalu weiluianhui 1995), p. 40. We ourselves wrote
that Zhao Ziyang “in fact had no great sympathy for grassroots democracy.” Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “The struggle over village elections,” in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, (eds.). The Paradox of China’s Post-Mao Reforms (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 132. Based on a transcript of Zhao’s remarks (rather than our original interviews), we now regard this to be an oversimplification.

28“Premier Zhao’s instructions,” p. 1.

29Fa Gong Wei, “Quanguo cunmin weiyuanhui jiben qingkuang” (“Basic information on villagers’ committees throughout the country”), mimeo, (Beijing: Renda changweiweihui bangongting, March 1997), p. 1.


31Quanguo renda changweiweihui bangongting, “Qige sheng, zizhiqu, zhixiashi zhiding de ‘cunmin weiyuanhui gongzuo jianze’ qingkuang” (“Seven provinces, autonomous regions and cities have enacted working rules on villagers’ committees”), mimeo, (Beijing: Quanguo renda changweihui bangongting, 12 January 1987), pp. 2-3.

32Bai Yihua, Reform and Exploration, p. 287.

33Minzhengbu, Minzhengsi, “Ge di, ge bumen dui cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhi tiaoli (cao gao) de xiugai yijian” (“Suggestions on revision of the organic law of villagers’ committees (draft) from all places and departments”), in Minzhengsi (comp.), Qingkuang fanying (Reflecting the Situation), No. 11 (1985), p. 2. This issue also featured prominently in NPCSC deliberations. See, Bai Yihua, Reform and Exploration, pp. 291-95; also, more generally, Choate, “Local governance,” p. 8.

34Minzhengbu, Minzhengsi, “Suggestions on revision,” pp. 4-5.


39For arguments that bullying and violence were counterproductive, see Kelliher, “The Chinese debate,” p. 73.

40Bai Yihua, Reform and Exploration, pp. 296-97. For more on the NPC debates, see Kevin J. O’Brien, “Implementing political reform in China’s villages,” The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs, No. 32 (1994), pp. 36-
39. On the belief that “mass consciousness” was high enough that dutiful cadres would not be voted out, see Kelliher, “The Chinese debate,” p. 74.

41 Interviews, Beijing, September 1993.

42 Bai Yihua, Reform and Exploration, pp. 298-302.


44 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), in Important Speeches, p. 20.

45 Peng Zhen, “Against coercion and commandism,” p. 20. For excerpts, see Bai Yihua, Reform and Exploration, pp. 294-306. On this more generally, see Epstein, “Village elections,” p. 411. For Peng's understanding of the relationship between Party leadership, democracy and law, see Potter, From Leninist Discipline.


53 For the Liaoning official’s remarks, see Hu Ke, "Tan guanche cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhi fa de guanjian" ("The crux of implementing the organic law of villagers’ committees"), in Practice and Reflection, pp. 134-36. On Lian Yin, see Zhongguo Jiceng Zhengquan Jianshe Yanjiuhui Zhongguo Nongcun Cunmin Zizhi Zhiduan Jiejingsi Zhiduan Ketizu, Legal System, pp. 133-34.


56 For a synopsis, see Wang Zhenyao and Wang Shihao, "Guanjian zaiyu jishi tiaozheng dang he guojia yu nongmin de zhengzhi guanxi" ("The key is to adjust the political relationship between the party, state and peasants"), Shehui gongzuo yanjiu (Research in Social Work), No. 3 (1990), pp. 12-14.

57 Bai Yihua, Reform and Exploration, pp. 223-24; also see Li Xueju, Research on Construction, p. 72. On Peng summoning (unnamed) opponents to his home to complain about foot-dragging on implementation, see White, "Reforming the countryside," p. 277; also Shi, "Village committee," fn37.


59 Interview, Beijing, January 1997. For Song Ping’s remarks, see also Li Xueju, Research on Construction, p. 73.

60 See "Quanguo cunji zuzhi jianshe gongzuo zuotanxu jiyao" ("Summary report of the national workshop on constructing village-level organizations"), in Minzhenbu Jiceng Zhengquan Jianshe Nongcunchu, (comp.), Cunmin zizhi shifan jiangxi ban shiyong jiaocai (Teaching materials for the study group on villagers’ autonomy demonstration) (Shandong: Laixishi nixuxibai caiyinchang, 1991), p. 7. The Ministry, at this point, was still permitting experimentation with village administrative offices in "economically backward areas where village organizations are paralyzed." See Zhongguo Nongcun Cunmin Zizhi Zhiduan Yanjiu Ketizu, Legal System, p. 132. For an argument that these initial elections seem to have improved "congruence" between cadres and villagers, see Melanie F. Manion, "The electoral connection in the Chinese countryside," American Political Science Review, Vol. 90, No. 4 (1996), pp. 736-48.

62 See Li Xueju, *Research on Construction*, pp. 53-55. On the notion of an "ideological marketplace," see the introduction to this issue of *China Quarterly*.


66 On Shandong, see Yang Xuejun and Sun Xinmin, "Lishun xiang zhengfu yu cunmin weiyuanhui zhijian de guanxi" ("Rationalize relations between township governments and villagers' committees"), in *Practice and Reflection*, p. 113. On Shanxi, see Zuo Guocai and Liu Wenji, "Cunmin he jiceng ganbu de fanying ji qi fenxi" ("An analysis of the reaction of villagers and grassroots cadres to villagers' self-government"), *Xiangzhen luntan* (Township Forum), No. 10 (1991), p. 13.


68 Personal communication with a researcher from Shandong, October 1998.


70 Interviews, Beijing, April 1997.


72 Interview, Taiyuan, August 1997.

73 Personal communication, October 1998.

74 Interviews, Beijing, December 1995; Fuzhou, July 1997; Taiyuan, September 1997. Other pioneers professed an ideological justification for their actions: they respected the mass line and shared Peng Zhen's vision

75 Yan Mingfu’s closing speech in *Minzhengbu Jiceng Zhengquan Jianshesi* (comp.), *Quanguo cunmin zizhi shifan gongzuo jingyan jiaoliu ji chengxiang jiceng xianji he xianjin geren biaozhang huiyi wenjian huibian* (Collected Documents of the National Conference on Exchanging Experiences of Implementing Villagers’ Self-government and Commending Advanced Collectives and Individuals) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996), quoted text on pp. 43-44.

76 Interviews, Fuzhou, July 1997. On lobbying provincial people’s congresses to close election loopholes, see also Shi, “Village committee,” p. 405.


81 See Tian Yuan, “The pathway to grassroots democracy,” pp. 3-4. Interviews, Beijing, July 1994. Needless to say, local officials have a strong incentive to keep villagers uninformed. In a case where complainants demanded to see documents that county leaders claimed restricted their rights and superseded the Organic Law, a county official in Hebei “snorted with contempt and said ‘you are not county officials, why would you think you have the right to read county documents.’” See *Nongmin ribao* (Shehui wenhua tekan), *Farmer’s Daily* (Special issue on society and

82Interviews, Fuzhou, July 1997; and personal communication with officials from Henan and Hebei, October 1998.

83Personal observation, Beijing, July 1994.

84Interviews, Beijing, December 1995. However, a 1997 documentary about villagers petitioning for their electoral rights was abruptly canceled, according to one participant, because of fears it would raise unrealistic expectations. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 November 1997, pp. 56-58.


87Interview, Beijing, February, 1997.


89For a similar point, see Shi, “Village committee,” p. 400.


93Interview, Beijing, February 1997.


96 Shi, "Village committee," p. 386.


99 Choate, "Local governance," p. 10. On nomination procedures and their importance, see Jorgen Elklit, "The Chinese village committee electoral system," China Information, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1997), pp. 7-9. Anne Thurston, Muddling Toward Democracy, p. 26, has also concluded that "the selection of nominees is a vital, but often overlooked, part of the democratic process."

100 cf. Shi, "Village committee," p. 386. In Shi's 1990 and 1993 nationwide surveys about 75% of rural residents reported that VC elections had been held in their village.

101 In some provinces, over 100 residents were surveyed in each village, while in others only a dozen or fewer were drawn for interviews. In order to use individual-level responses to estimate the frequency of village elections, we assume that within each province the same number of respondents was drawn from each village.

102 Insofar as the questionnaire touched on a number of sensitive topics, household registration records were not sought from local public security bureaus. In Fujian and Jiangsu, however, the questionnaire was distributed in purposively selected villages. In both these provinces, after two days of intensive training and mock-interviewing, interviewers were dispatched to pre-selected poor, middle income, and rich villages, where they interviewed all available adults from a randomly selected villagers' group. Elsewhere, trained interviewers (most of whom were university or rural high school students) were instructed to return to their home villages and to interview available adults.


105 On the role of non-democratically elected Party secretaries, see, Oi, "Economic development," pp. 137-39. In over one third of Shanxi's prefectures there have been experiments with subjecting Party members to a popular vote of confidence before permitting them to stand for the Party branch. If this practice was to spread and develop
further, the prospects for real village democracy would be greatly enhanced. See Lianjiang Li, “The two-ballot

106 See the introduction to this issue of China Quarterly.

107 See Nanfang zhoumo (Southern Weekend), 15 January 1999, p. 2; Yangcheng wanbao (Yangcheng

108 For the initial Chinese report on an unapproved election in Buyun township, Suining city, Sichuan, see
Washington Post Foreign Service, 27 February 1999, p. A17. For criticism of the election, see Fazhi ribao (Legal

109 On similar understandings of “democracy” that trace to the May Fourth era and the fengjian tradition, see
Keating, Two Revolutions, pp. 5-6, 248. On the compatibility of state strengthening and grassroots elections in the
1930s and 1940s, see Apter and Saich, Revolutionary Discourse, p. 212, Chen, Making Revolution, pp. 240-41;
Keating, Two Revolutions, p. 133.