

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Path to Democracy? Assessing village elections in China

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wg6t281>

Journal

Journal of Contemporary China, 18(60)

ISSN

1067-0564

Authors

O'Brien, Kevin J

Han, Rongbin

Publication Date

2009-06-01

DOI

10.1080/10670560902770206

Peer reviewed

Path to Democracy?
Assessing Village Elections in China

Kevin J. O'Brien
(corresponding author)
Travers Department of Political Science
210 Barrows Hall
University of California, Berkeley 94720
Berkeley, CA 9720-1950
kobrien@berkeley.edu

Rongbin Han
Travers Department of Political Science
210 Barrows Hall
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-1950
rongbin@berkeley.edu

January 1, 2008

Abstract:

Election procedures in rural China have improved greatly over the last twenty years and a good number of reasonably free and fair elections have been held. But changes in the “exercise of power” have not kept up with changes in the “access to power.” In many communities, township authorities, Party branches, and social forces (such as clans, religious groups, and underworld elements) continue to impede democratic rule. This suggests that a purely procedural definition of democracy is problematic and that democratization depends on the power configuration in which elected bodies are embedded. Putting grassroots democracy into place goes well beyond getting the procedures right, and “high quality” democracy rests on much more than convening good village elections every three years.

Path to Democracy?

Assessing Village Elections in China

The launch of village elections in China has passed its twentieth anniversary. Elections officially began with the enactment of the *Organic Law of Village Committees* (1987, amended 1998). This law promised “self-governance” (*zizhi*) via self-management, self-education, and self-service, which were soon reconceived as democratic election, decision making, management, and supervision. Since then, “grassroots democracy” has become a term freighted with controversy for those who study Chinese politics, and elections have attracted a great deal of attention both domestically and abroad.¹

Judging by procedures alone, village elections have achieved much. Balloting has been carried out in every province, with Guangdong, Hainan, and Yunnan finally conducting their first elections in 1999, and Tibet its first in 2002. Turnout rates have generally been high, in many locations reportedly over 90%.² Surveys and direct

¹ For review essays, see Gunter Schubert, “Village Elections in the PRC: A Trojan Horse of Democracy?” Project Discussion Paper No. 19, 2002, <http://www.uni-duisburg.de/Institute/OAWISS/neu/downloads/pdf/orange/discuss19.pdf>, accessed July 25, 2007; Björn Alpermann, “An Assessment of Research on Village Governance in China and Suggestions for Future Applied Research,” prepared for the China-EU Training Programme of Village Governance, Beijing, 2003. <http://www.china.uni-koeln.de/papers/No%202003-1.pdf>, accessed July 28, 2007.

² Tong Zhihui, “Cunji Xuanju de Lishi Fazhan he Xueshu Yanjiu” (Historical Development and Academic Research on Village Elections), in *Wusheng de Geming: Cunmin Zhixuan de Lishi Xianshi he Weilai (Silent Revolution: The History, Reality and Future of Village Elections)* eds., Liu Yawei (Xi’an: Xibei Daxue Chubanshe, 2002), p. 18. He Xuefeng, “Cunweihui Xuanju Zhuhuanjie de Diaocha yu Fenxi: Hunansheng Sishigexian Cunweihui Xuanju Xinxi Huifang Huodong Baogao” (An Investigation and Analysis of Procedures of Village Committee Elections: A Report on the Data

observation by international monitors also show that the conduct of elections (including nomination procedures, competitiveness, and secret balloting) has improved over time.³

By many indicators, the future of grassroots democracy in China is bright, much as Tianjian Shi foresaw some years ago.⁴ When tracing the introduction of village elections, Shi highlighted the role of democratically-committed midlevel officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs who employed an incremental approach that focused on extent first and quality later. This explanation accords nicely with most theories of democratization and its diffusion, and their emphasis on the role of leaders and their decisions.⁵

Verification of the Village Committee Election in 40 Counties in Hunan Province), http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1812&ID=11780, accessed December 1, 2006. On an 86% turnout rate in 120 villages in Heilongjiang and Anhui, see David Zweig and Chung Siu Fung, "Elections, Democratic Values, Economic Development in Rural China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 50 (February 2007), pp. 25-26. On 71% turnout in 12 Anhui villages, see Qingshan Tan and Xin Qiushui, "Village Election and Governance: Do Villagers Care?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 53 (November 2007), p. 585. For 48% turnout (excluding proxy votes) in 12 Jiangsu counties, see Yang Zhong and Jie Chen, "To Vote or Not to Vote: An Analysis of Peasants' Participation in Chinese Village Elections," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, No. 6 (August 2002), pp. 692-93.

³ See Qingshan Tan, "Building Institutional Rules and Procedures: Village Election in China" *Policy Sciences* 37, no. 1 (March 2004), pp. 1-22; Baogang He, *Rural Democracy in China: The Role of Village Elections* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 24, 39; Sun Long and Tong Zhihui, "The Standardization of Villager Committee Election Procedures," <http://www.cartercenter.org/documents/1096.pdf>, accessed March 29, 2007. "Election Observation Report: Fujian Province Village Elections, People's Republic of China," (Washington D.C.: International Republican Institute, 2003).

⁴ Tianjian Shi, "Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy," *World Politics* 51, no. 3 (April 1999), pp. 385-412.

⁵ See Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Lawrence Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), ix-x, also Chapter 3; Alfred Stepan, *Arguing Comparative Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapters 5 and 8.

Is rural China on the path to democracy that Shi and others have suggested?⁶

How should we assess the prospects for grassroots democracy in China? Viewing the mountain of evidence now available in light of the literature on democratization, we re-examine the practice of self-governance and suggest that the working definition of democracy adopted by most observers, which underscores its procedural components, is incomplete. This definition, in a word, leads analysts to over emphasize form at the expense of content. Instead, we follow Sebastian Mazucca⁷ and suggest a distinction between two dimensions of democratization, namely access to power and exercise of power. The introduction of elections has indeed begun to change the way in which village authorities gain power. But this has not necessarily transformed the way they exercise that power. Reducing rural democracy to well-run elections oversimplifies the complexity of the local power configuration and turns village governance into much less than it is.⁸

⁶ See also Qingshan Tan, *Village Elections in China: Democratizing the Countryside* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen, 2006); He, *Rural Democracy*; Jamie P. Horsley, "Village Elections: Training Ground for Democracy," *China Business Review* 28, no. 2 (March–April 2001), pp. 44–52.

⁷ Sebastian L. Mazucca, "Access to Power versus Exercise of Power: Reconceptualizing Democratization in Latin America," *Studies in Comparative International Development* (forthcoming).

⁸ On the relationship of village elections to temple associations, the tax-for-fee reform, and anti-corruption efforts, see Lily L. Tsai, "The Struggle for Village Public Goods Provision: Informal Institutions of Accountability in Rural China," John James Kennedy, "The Implementation of Village Elections and Tax-for-Fee Reform in Rural Northwest China," and Richard Levy, "Village Elections, Transparency, and Anticorruption: Henan and Guangdong Provinces," all in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For a discussion of the grassroots "public sphere" and the role village elections play in it, see Mao Dan and Ren Qiang, *Zhongguo Nongcun Gonggong Lingyu de Shengzhang: Zhengzhi Shehuixue Shiye li de Cunmin Zizhi zhu Wenti (The Growth of Public Sphere in Rural China: Village Self-Governance from the Perspective of Political*

Conceptualizing Democracy and Democratization

Though many observers speak of democracy when they examine self-governance in China, few of them have stopped to define the term. One reason for this may be that they seek to avoid courting controversy, as democracy is at root an “essentially contested concept.”⁹ Still, some efforts have been made by political theorists to standardize usage. For instance, many have taken Robert Dahl’s definition of polyarchy as the first, most straightforward characterization of democracy.¹⁰ Following Dahl and Schumpeter, they adopt a “procedural minimum” understanding of democracy, which “presumes fully contested elections with full suffrage and the absence of massive fraud, combined with effective guarantees of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association.”¹¹ Some analysts also add that elected governments must have the power to govern.¹²

The advantages of such a definition are clear. Above all, it facilitates measurement. But on the other hand, understanding democracy in a purely procedural fashion is problematic because it neglects the content of democracy. It does not answer the question of what democratic politics is, and instead focuses on how we might get it.

Sociology) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2006).

⁹ David Collier, Fernando Daniel Hidalgo, and Andra Olivia Maciuceanu, “Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 3 (October 2006).

¹⁰ Mazzuca, “Access to Power.”

¹¹ David Collier and Steven Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research,” *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (April 1997), p. 434; also Aurel Croissant and Wolfgang Merkel, “Introduction: Democratization in the Early Twenty-First Century;” Wolfgang Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies;” Leonardo Morlino, “What is a ‘Good’ Democracy?” all in *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (2004).

¹² Collier and Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives.”

Though choosing leaders through certain methods is an essential element of democracy, impeccable procedures do not guarantee democratic governance. This point is especially important because democracy does not simply denote majority rule,¹³ but instead is usually seen to be a congeries of institutions that guarantees rule of law, separation of powers, protection of minorities, and protection of civil liberties.

Analytically, there are also at least two drawbacks to the procedural definition. First, it impedes classification because it fails to capture diverse forms of democratic practice. Democratization waves have produced a striking variety of regimes, many of which share important attributes but differ from each other and from democracies in advanced industrial countries. The simple procedural minimum definition cannot comfortably embrace all these possibilities.¹⁴ Second, this definition encourages prioritizing easily observable dimensions of elections, and downplaying other important attributes of democracy which are not covered in a definition that, most notably, excludes what happens after the voting ends. Attaching so much importance to forms and procedures, especially elections, leads analysts to overlook the substance of democracy and to treat it solely as a way to access power while neglecting how that power is exercised.

Researchers have, of course, noticed the first drawback and a number of techniques have been adopted to address it. For instance, David Collier and Steven

¹³ Nowadays, few would say that democracy can be reduced to majority rule. However, a procedural minimum definition can encourage such a view.

¹⁴ Collier and Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives."

Levitsky, among others, have developed a tool called “diminished subtypes” to distinguish different types of democracy while avoiding concept-stretching.¹⁵ The second drawback — emphasizing readily-measurable election procedures — has received less attention, and this is one reason why the first two generations of democratization studies, which focus on transition and consolidation, have had difficulty explaining the “low quality” of new democratic regimes beset with corruption, cronyism, and weak accountability.¹⁶

Democracy, in our way of thinking, not only sets the rules for social forces to compete for political power; it also prescribes how power will be exerted to regulate those forces. Altering the way in which leaders are selected alone does not result in democratic rule, even with the presence of civil liberties. The mode in which political actors behave must also be democratized. And during the whole process, the citizenry must take up new responsibilities and play their role as well. Only with active participation can effective checks and balances be established that ensure the democratic operation of political power.¹⁷

Consider China’s *Organic Law of Village Committees* (1998). The Law promised

¹⁵ Ibid. For other research on “democracy with adjectives,” see Croissant and Merkel, “Introduction;” Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies;” Morlino, “What is a ‘Good’ Democracy?”

¹⁶ Mazucca, “Access to Power,” p. 1. We depart from Mazucca, however, and follow “third generation” theorists, by treating improvements in the “quality of democracy” as an element of democratization.

¹⁷ For similar “third generation” understandings of democratization, see Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, eds., *Assessing the Quality of Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) and Guillermo O’Donnell, Jorge Vargas Cullell, and Osvaldo M. Iazzetta, eds., *The Quality of Democracy: Theory and Applications* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

four democracies: election, decision making, management, and supervision. Whereas grassroots elections alter access to power, the latter three elements change the way power is exercised. However, of the four, access to power has attracted the bulk of attention. Most studies have centered on the introduction of elections, how elections have been conducted, how the quality of elections can be enhanced, and voting behavior of villagers.¹⁸ Of course, this research has taught us much. But might it be useful to assess grassroots political reform in China from a different perspective? In the next two sections, we evaluate the configuration of power in rural China using an approach that always keeps in mind the difference between accessing power and exercising power.

¹⁸ On the introduction of elections, see Schubert, "Village Elections;" Shi, "Village Committee Elections;" Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government," *China Journal* 37 (January 1997); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "'Accommodating 'Democracy' In a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China," *China Quarterly* 162 (June 2000). On voting behavior, see Zhong and Chen, "To Vote or Not to Vote"; Baogang He, "A Survey Study of Voting Behavior and Political Participation in Zhejiang," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 7, no. 3 (2006). Attempts have begun to explore the three other components of village self-governance. In his report to the EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance, Björn Alpermann suggested that more attention be paid to post-election administration, decision-making, and control. Alpermann, "An Assessment of Research." On the effects of elections, more generally, see Guo Zhenglin and Thomas Bernstein, "The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between Village Committees and Village Party Branches," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 39 (May 2004); Björn Alpermann, "The Post-Election Administration of Chinese Villages," *China Journal* 46 (July 2001); John James Kennedy, "The Face of 'Grassroots Democracy' in Rural China: Real Versus Cosmetic Elections," *Asian Survey* 42, no. 3 (May/June 2002); Lianjiang Li, "The Empowering Effect of Village Elections in China," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (July/August 2003); Loren Brandt and Matthew A. Turner, "The Usefulness of Corruptible Elections;" *Economics and Society* 19, no. 3 (November 2007); Melanie Manion, "Democracy, Community, Trust: The Impact of Elections in Rural China," *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 3 (April 2006).

Accessing Power in Chinese Villages

Election implementation in rural China has improved both in terms of coverage and procedures. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, balloting is now held every three years in over 600,000 villages in all 31 provinces, with nearly 600 million voters taking part.¹⁹ Since the revised *Organic Law* came into force in 1998, election procedures have also been spelled out by authorities at lower levels. By the mid 2000s, nearly every province had issued electoral regulations that matched, or went beyond, the national law, and detailed implementation guidelines had also been formulated by many prefectures, counties, and townships.²⁰

Electoral procedures, touching on issues as varied as setting up steering committees and limiting proxy voting, have been clarified both on paper and in practice. During the first decade after the provisional *Organic Law* was passed, the absence of regulations concerning “election steering committees” (*xuanju lingdao xiaozu*) drew much criticism.²¹ Since 1998, both the *Organic Law* and most provincial regulations have come to include stipulations about how new, more circumscribed committees are

¹⁹ “Zuohao Minzheng Gongzuo, Qieshi Weihui Renmin Hefa Quanyi: Fang Minzhengbu Buzhang Li Xueju” (Improve Civil Affairs Work and Earnestly Defend People’s Legal Rights: Interview with the Minister of Civil Affairs Li Xueju) *Renquan (Human Rights)*, no. 5 (2004), p. 6.

²⁰ Björn Alpermann, “Provincial Legislation on Village Elections,” *Zeitschrift für Chinesisches Recht*, no. 1 (2007); also Yuan Dayi, “Cunmin Zizhi de Xianzai” (The Current Situation of Village Self-Governance), paper prepared for EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance Conference, Beijing, April 5-7, 2006. <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=92565>, accessed August 2, 2007.

²¹ See Jorgen Elklit, “The Chinese Village Committee Electoral System,” *China Information* 11, no. 4 (1997), pp. 4-5; Kevin J. O’Brien, “Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 27, no. 4 (October 2001), p. 420

to be organized and what functions they are to perform.²² Of perhaps greatest importance, election committee members in the majority of villages are now selected by village assemblies, village groups, or village representative assemblies.²³ This should make them more independent and responsive, even though committees in most locations continue to be presided over by village Party secretaries or sitting committee directors.²⁴

Voter registration helps ensure voting rights and the validity of elections. Though both the *Organic Law* and provincial legislation remain murky about precisely who can vote, stipulations that require publication of a voters' list twenty days before an election offer an opportunity to raise objections, and in some cases have led to lawsuits by those

²² Alpermann, "Provincial Legislation."

²³ For data on election committees in 116 villages in six provinces, see Xu Zhigang, Liu Mingxing, and Tao Ran, "Cunzhuang Xuanju Zuiyou Guize de Fei Yizhixing" (Incongruence in Optimal Rules for Village Elections), *Zhongguo Nongcun Guancha (China Rural Survey)*, no. 6 (2006), pp. 62-71. In the 2002 elections, village assemblies, village groups, or village representative assemblies selected election committee members in 98% of Shaanxi's villages. "Table of 2002 Village Elections in Shaanxi," http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1810&ID=35295, accessed August 5, 2007.

²⁴ In Shaanxi's 2002 elections, for example, 79% of election committees were chaired by the Party secretary and 7% were chaired by the village committee director. "Table of 2002 Village Elections in Shaanxi." Similar rates were found in other provinces: 87% and 6% in Fujian's 2003 elections, 91% and 7% in Chongqing's 2004 elections. "Table of 2003 Village Elections in Fujian," http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1810&ID=35282; "Table of 2004 Village Elections in Chongqing," http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1811&ID=35745, both accessed August 11, 2007. On election committees in Jiangsu that are "usually" led by village Party secretaries, see Zhong and Chen, "To Vote or Not to Vote," p. 696. In some places, local leaders continue to impede election committees. For examples from Shaanxi and Jiangxi, see Mu Ge, "Xuanweihui he Cunweihui de Jiaoliang" (The Struggle between an Election Committee and the Village Committee), <http://www.96990.cn/Blog/3/11206.shtml>, accessed August 6, 2007; Xiao Tangbiao and Qiu Xinyou, "Cunweihui Xuanju Zhong de Xuanju Weiyuanhui" (Election Committees in Village Elections), *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)*, no. 2 (2002), pp. 60-62.

who felt they were excluded illegally.²⁵ In the 2002 Shaanxi elections, for example, voter lists were disputed in 7% of the province's villages, and although only 23% of villages published their list a full twenty days prior to the election, most villages issued theirs well before election day, as sometimes had occurred in the past.²⁶

Candidate nomination has received much attention because it is crucial to an election's competitiveness and fairness. Control over the nominating process has been gradually loosened over the last two decades. In particular, selection through "sea-elections" (*haixuan*), which entitles every voter to nominate primary candidates, has now spread to 26 provinces. Other forms of open nomination, such as joint or self-nomination, are also permitted in seven provinces.²⁷ At least four counties in Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Jiangxi and rural Chongqing went to new lengths in 2004 and 2005 and held direct elections without primaries or any prior selection of formal candidates.²⁸

²⁵ For disputes that resulted in lawsuits, see "Wu Shaohui Bufu Xuanmin Zige Chuli Jueding An" (The Case of Wu Shaohui Disagreeing with a Voter Eligibility Decision), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zuigao Renmin Fayuan Gongbao (Bulletin of People's Supreme Court, PRC)*, no. 6 (2003), p. 29; Zhang Xinguo and Chen Junxian, "Nongjiafei Jiafei le Xuanjuquan" (Losing Voter Eligibility Owing to Marriage to a Non-Rural Resident), *Jiangsu Nongcun Jingji (Jiangsu Rural Economy)*, no. 10 (2002), p. 34; "Chen Chengcai Xuanmin Zige An" (The Case of Cheng Chengcai's Voter Eligibility), http://www.gdcourts.gov.cn/alxc/ms/t20031225_2684.htm, accessed August 4, 2007.

²⁶ "Table of 2002 Village Elections in Shaanxi."

²⁷ Alpermann, "Provincial Legislation," p. 5. On opening the candidate selection process, see Kennedy, "The Implementation of Village Elections," pp. 63-64.

²⁸ Ma Fuyun, "Cunweihui Zhijie Xuanju de Moshi Yanjiu" (Research on the Election System of Village Committees), *Zhongguo Nongcun GuanCha (China Rural Survey)*, no. 4 (2006), pp. 65-72; "Zhejiang Jinhua Wu Houxuanren Xuanju Jiang Quanmian Tuiguang" (Elections in Jinhua, Zhejiang without Pre-Selected Candidates Will Be Popularized), *Lingdao Juece Xinxi (Information on Leadership Policy)*, no. 15 (April 2005), p. 22; Xiao Mei, "Tongzhou: Cunweihui Xuanju Jiang Changshi Wu Houxuanren Yicixing Zhijie Toupiao Xuanju" (Tongzhou: One Time Ballot without Pre-Selected Candidates Will Be Tried in Village Committee Elections), <http://www.tz.gov.cn/tzdz/showinfo/showInfo.aspx?InfoID=2edb6a04-178d-4553-95ad-5aeb18f0f8f8>, accessed August 6, 2007; Huang Hui and Li Qing, "Jiangxi Xuanchu

Number of candidates is another indicator of competitiveness. When village elections were first introduced, non-competitive elections (*deng'e xuanju*) were common.²⁹ Today, multi-candidate elections have become the rule. Most provincial regulations prescribe that there be two candidates for village committee director and vice-director, and that the number of candidates for ordinary committee members should outnumber the positions available by at least one. Though this permits minimal competition for ordinary committee spots, "sea-elections" and self-nomination can increase the number of primary and final candidates greatly.³⁰ In one southern village where only two formal candidates for director were put up, 25 additional individuals were nominated by villagers, and two of them made it to the list of final candidates. In the same election, villagers proposed 38 nominees for vice director and 66 for the four other seats on the village committee.³¹

Once nominees are set, campaigning, ballot secrecy, and the use of roving ballot

Shoupi Zijian Haixuan Cungan" (The First Village Officials by Self-Nominated Sea Election Are Elected in Jiangxi), *Fazhi Ribao (Legal Daily)*, October 31, 2005. In the 28 provinces in which it is allowed, write-in candidates have on occasion been elected. Pan Jia'en and Jiang Yunxiang, "Yuecun Beihou de Gushi" (Inside Story of Yue Village), *Zhongguo Gaige Nongcun Ban (China Reform Rural Edition)*, no. 3 (2003), pp. 39-41.

²⁹ Elklit, "The Chinese Village Committee;" O'Brien, "Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship;" Ma Wenquan, "Guanyu Cunmin Zizhi de Shijian yu Sikao" (Practice and Reflection on Village Self-Governance), <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=23806>, accessed August 6, 2007.

³⁰ Final candidates are usually chosen according to the number of nominating votes received, by a second round of voting, or by the village representative assembly or election committee. Xu Zhigang, Liu Mingxing, and Tao Ran, "Cunzhuang Xuanju," p. 68.

³¹ Dai Lichao, "Gaopingcun Xuanju Guancha" (Observation of Gaoping Village Election), in *Cunweihui Xuanju Guancha (Observation of Village Elections)*, eds., Lianjiang Li, Guo Zhenglin and Xiao Tangbiao (Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chubanshe, 2001), pp. 44-112.

boxes and proxy-voting are all important factors that affect whether villagers can express their preferences on election day. Elklit's early study found that campaigning amounted to little more than informal discussion among villagers because many local regulations failed to mention campaigning.³² This has changed. Despite continuing anxiety about candidates "pulling votes" (*lapiao*), candidates in most places are now given opportunities to deliver speeches or engage in other forms of campaigning. According to a 2000 survey conducted in 77 counties across Fujian, 90% of respondents said that candidates addressed either a village assembly or village representative assembly, and 27% reported that other campaign activities, including home visits and introductions by supporters, took place.³³ A similar survey in 40 Hunan counties showed that over 80% of voters reported that candidates spoke to village assemblies, village representative assemblies, or voters, either on election day or before.³⁴

Enhanced ballot secrecy and security is also evident. Secret balloting was not a

³² Elklit, "The Chinese Village Committee," p. 9.

³³ Song Yuehong, "Fujiansheng 2000 Niandu Cunweihui Xuanju Tongji yu Huifang Diaocha Shuju Bijiao" (Comparison of Statistics and Data Verification of 2000 Village Elections in Fujian Province), http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1812&ID=11774, accessed on August 6, 2007.

³⁴ He Xuefeng, "Cunweihui Xuanju." Campaign speeches have been encouraged by some local officials to combat unlawful campaign activities, such as attracting votes via coercion or buying votes with cash, gifts, or banquets. The logic is that institutionalizing campaigning will make elections less dependent on personal resources and also offer candidates regular channels to present themselves. Zhang Rongmin, "Qiantan Guifan he Zhili Cunweihui Xuanju zhong de Jingzheng Xingwei" (A Preliminary Discussion of Regulating and Managing Campaign Activities in Village Elections), paper prepared for EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance Conference, Beijing, April 5-7, 2006. <http://www.chinaelections.com/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=91176>, accessed on August 6, 2007.

common practice when elections were first introduced, but this is no longer the case. In Fujian, a national pacesetter, none of the 1989 elections employed a secret ballot, but by 1997 95 percent did.³⁵ The use of voting booths has been written into the *Organic Law* and efforts have been made to implement ballot secrecy nationwide, though with less than complete success.³⁶ A national survey conducted by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2005 found that 49% of villages made secret voting cubicles available.³⁷ Since many villagers are not accustomed to filling out votes in private or feel pressure from fellow voters not to do so, some localities have started to make use of a secret voting space mandatory. In Shaanxi's 2002 elections, for example, 96% of villages made such a space available and 5% made it compulsory.³⁸

Two more aspects of voting, namely the use of proxies and "roving ballot boxes" (*liudong piaoxiang*) deserve mention. As outside observers have long complained, these practices may have been designed to make elections more inclusive, but they also threaten ballot secrecy and are open to abuse.³⁹ Though neither practice has been

³⁵ The Carter Center, "Report of the Fifth Mission on Chinese Village Elections" (June 20-July 3, 1998), p. 4.

³⁶ Alpermann, "Provincial Legislation," p. 6. One source claimed that over 90% of villages in eleven provinces used secret ballot booths. Shi Weimin, "Zhongguo Cunmin Zizhi Zouxiang Weilai" (China Village Self-Governance in the Future), paper prepared for EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance Conference, Beijing, April 5-7, 2006. <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=92552>, accessed August 6, 2007. See also Fan Yu, "Cunweihui Xuanju Zhidu de Yanjin ji Tedian" ("Evolution and Characteristics of the Village Committee Electoral System"), *Zhongguo Nongcun GuanCha (China Rural Survey)*, no. 1 (2006), p. 63.

³⁷ He, *Rural Democracy*, p. 33.

³⁸ "Table of 2002 Village Elections in Shaanxi."

³⁹ O'Brien, "Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship," pp. 421-422; The Carter Center, "The Carter Center Delegation to Observe Village Elections in China" (March 4-16, 1997), p. 15; The Carter Center, "Carter Center Delegation Report: Village Elections in China and Agreement on Cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, People Republic of China"

banned nationwide, local regulations have limited both. For instance, in 2000 Fujian eliminated proxy-voting and introduced absentee balloting.⁴⁰ More recently, Chongqing and Gansu also banned proxy-voting.⁴¹ In the 28 provinces that still permit it, restrictions are now in place: all have limited the number of votes proxies can cast, five provinces require written authorizations, and fifteen require prior consent by the village election committee.⁴² And there is evidence that implementation has followed the law. Whereas in Fujian 15% of villages allowed proxy voting before 1998, now only 3% do. In Jilin and Hunan, far less than 1% of villages prohibited proxy voting before 1998; now, 18% and 8%, respectively, do.⁴³

Like proxy-voting, controls over roving ballot boxes are becoming stricter. Roving boxes are no longer an option in seven provinces including Hebei, Jilin, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Sichuan, and rural Shanghai and Chongqing. In Anhui and Hunan, voters using boxes must be registered with the election committee and a list of their names published. In Guangdong, consent from township authorities must be obtained before deploying roving boxes.⁴⁴ Reform here is evident even in provinces, such as Jiangxi,

(March 2-15, 1998), pp. 11-12; International Republican Institute, "Election Observation Report: Sichuan, People's Republic of China" (November 1998), p. 11.

⁴⁰ The Carter Center, "Observation of Village Elections in Fujian and the Conference to Revise The National Procedures on Villager Committee Elections" (August 1-7, 2000), p. 22.

⁴¹ Alpermann, "Provincial Legislation," p. 8.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Tan, *Village Elections in China*, pp. 234-250.

⁴⁴ Yu Weiliang, ed., "Cunmin Weiyuanhui Xuanju Guicheng Jiaopian Shuoming" (Overhead Transparencies on Village Elections: A Handbook), EU-China Training Programme on Village Governance, 2003, p. 58; Alpermann, "Provincial Legislation," p. 8.

which have villages that often sprawl over many square kilometers. In a survey of 40 Jiangxi communities following the 1999 elections, 40% of elections relied entirely on roving boxes, 53% used roving boxes in combination with other methods, and only 8% did not use them.⁴⁵ Province-wide statistics had changed significantly by 2002, with 29% of villages not employing roving boxes, and those only using them falling to less than 10%.⁴⁶

Village elections in China remain far from perfect. Many procedural failings identified by Chinese and international observers, including the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Carter Center, the International Republican Institute, and the European Union have not been fully addressed. New problems are also emerging, such as vote-buying, literacy tests for candidates, interference in recall efforts, and “hoodlum elections,” where local toughs secure votes (or influence ballot-counting) through threats and intimidation.⁴⁷ Still, electoral procedures have improved greatly in the last two decades

⁴⁵ Xiao Tangbiao, Qiu Xinyou, Tang Xiaoteng and et al, *Duwei Shijiao zhong de Cunmin Zhixuan (Direct Village Elections from Multiple Perspectives)* (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe, 2001), p. 27.

⁴⁶ Out of 19320 villages, 91% had election assemblies, 60% set up voting stations, 92% provided secret ballot booths and 71% used roving boxes. “Table of 2002 Village Elections in Jiangxi.” http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1810&ID=35270, accessed August 9, 2007.

⁴⁷ He, *Rural Democracy*, pp. 59, 150, 214. On screening candidates and circumscribed rights of recall, see Alpermann, “Provincial Legislation,” pp. 4-5, 10. For more on problematic recall efforts, see Xin Wang and Du Ke, “Bamian Nan, Nan Zai Hechu?” (Difficult to Recall: Where the Difficulties Lie?), *Zhongguo Gaige Nongcun Ban (China Reform Rural Edition)*, no. 10 (2004), pp. 26-27; Li Shan, “Minxuan Cunguan: Feifa Bamian Shifei Duo” (Elected Village Officials: Illegally Recalling Them Causes Many Problems), *Jiangsu Nongcun Jingji (Jiangsu Rural Economy)*, no. 1 (2003), pp. 42-43; “Cunmin Bamian Buliao Cunzhuren: Wenti Chuzai Nali?” (Villages Cannot Recall Village Committee Chairs: Where Are the Problems?), *Lingdao Juece Xinxi (Information on Leadership Policy)*, no 13 (April 2007), p. 22. On a “hoodlum election” in Shaanxi, see Kennedy, “The Face of ‘Grassroots Democracy,’” p. 479. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has

and a good number of competitive and reasonably fair elections have been held.

Access to power, in other words, has expanded. But have similar changes in the exercise of power occurred?

Exercising Power in Chinese Villages

Observers have rightly noted that village elections exert some influence over political life in the Chinese countryside. Lianjiang Li, among others, has found that balloting has an empowering effect: free and fair elections can produce more responsive leaders and make them more impartial when enforcing state policies; it also provides an opportunity to dislodge cadres whom villagers like least.⁴⁸ John Kennedy and his coauthors, based on a 2000-01 survey of 34 villages, likewise discovered that freely-elected leaders were more accountable to villagers and that their land management decisions reflected popular preferences for fair reallocation.⁴⁹ Along similar lines, Brandt and Turner have demonstrated that even corruptible elections can help curtail rent-seeking by local leaders,⁵⁰ while Baogang He has concluded that

acknowledged many of these problems. See Guan Xiaofeng, "Progress and Problems Mark Elections," http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-07/10/content_6142535.htm, accessed December 20, 2007; also Kevin J. O'Brien, "Improving Election Procedures: Some Modest Proposals," unpublished paper, April 23, 2006.

⁴⁸ Li, "The Empowering Effect of Village Elections;" also Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reform*, eds. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 140-143, and Lianjiang Li, "Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China," *China Information* 15, no. 2 (2001), pp. 10-18.

⁴⁹ John James Kennedy, Scott Rozelle, and Yaojiang Shi, "Elected Leaders and Collective Land: Farmers' Evaluation of Village Leaders' Performance in Rural China," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

⁵⁰ Brandt and Turner, "The Usefulness of Corruptible Elections." On elections, both competitive and non-competitive, increasing the share of public expenditure in a

elections often lead village committee directors to place voters' interests over those of townships and Party branches.⁵¹

Grassroots balloting has also had a perceptible effect on villagers' attitudes and citizenship consciousness.⁵² Kevin O'Brien has argued that elections are not only efforts to draw rural people into the local polity, but are also an avenue through which citizenship practices may emerge before full citizenship is recognized.⁵³ Lianjiang Li has shown that free and fair elections enhance feelings of political efficacy and can help implant the idea that political power derives from the consent of the people.⁵⁴ And in a recent study of a long-time "demonstration" (*shifan*) area, Gunter Schubert and Chen Xuelian suggest that elections can boost regime legitimacy, owing to a "rational trust" that villagers come to have in their leaders, in which elections assure voters that this trust will be honored.⁵⁵ Melanie Manion, based on two surveys and other data collected between 1990 and 1996 from 57 villages in Hebei, Hunan, Anhui, and Tianjin, has also

village's budget, see Shuna Wang and Yang Yao, "Grassroots Democracy and Local Governance: Evidence from Rural China," *World Development* 35, no. 10 (October 2007).

⁵¹ He, *Rural Democracy*, pp. 109-111.

⁵² Kennedy, "The Face of 'Grassroots Democracy.'" Jie Chen, "Popular Support for Village Self-Government in China: Intensity and Sources," *Asian Survey* 45, no. 6 (November/December 2005); Manion, "Democracy, Community, Trust."

⁵³ O'Brien, "Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship." See also, Susanne Brandstädter and Gunter Schubert, "Democratic Thought and Practice in Rural China," *Democratization* 12, no. 5 (December 2005), pp. 810-813; He, *Rural Democracy*, p. 50. On, however, villages with well-run elections in which civic consciousness has not noticeably increased, see Lily Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 198, 223-26.

⁵⁴ Li, "The Empowering Effect of Village Elections."

⁵⁵ Gunter Schubert and Chen Xuelian, "Village Elections in Contemporary China: New Spaces for Generating Regime Legitimacy? Experiences from Lishu County," *China Perspectives*, forthcoming.

found that there is a positive correlation between electoral quality and villagers' beliefs that leaders are trustworthy.⁵⁶

The impact of village elections cannot be denied. Elections, however, have not done away with several constraints that continue to impede democratic rule. Members of village committees may win their position through the ballot box, but once they gain office they still must take into account (and often compete with) township governments, village Party branches, and social forces, such as clans, religious organizations, and criminal gangs. In an ongoing struggle for power and legitimacy, tensions often arise between village committees and officials at the lowest rung of the state hierarchy, Party organs that remain the locus of power in a village, and societal groupings that possess their own sources of authority.⁵⁷ In many communities, village committees have failed to achieve their potential, and in some they control few resources and are close to insignificant.⁵⁸

Townships and Village Committees

⁵⁶ Manion, "Democracy, Community, Trust."

⁵⁷ See Mao Dan and Ren Qiang, *Zhongguo Nongcun*, pp. 53-68. Thomas P. Bernstein ("Village Democracy and Its Limits," *ASIEN* 99 (April 2006), p. 30) writes: "even when village elections work well, the power of elected village committees is limited because they necessarily function with an authoritarian political environment that is not structured to respond to the demands of constituents." On data that suggest that village committees "are still in the long shadow of township governments and village Party secretaries," see Tan and Xin, "Village Election and Governance," p. 596; also Wang and Yao, "Grassroots Democracy," pp. 1635-1636.

⁵⁸ In a suburban village outside Tianjin that O'Brien visited in 1999, it was clear that the Muslim elders who managed the mosque dominated community decision making. Much younger village committee members appeared to be little more than their errand boys.

Township governments, representing the formal state apparatus, are especially heavily implicated in efforts by village cadres to exercise power.⁵⁹ Björn Alpermann was among the first to note that “the Chinese Party-state has been using self-government as another way to control rural politics.”⁶⁰ Indeed, the *Organic Law* (Arts. 4, 6) states that village committee members not only manage village affairs; they also fulfill tasks assigned by higher levels. Although the Law (Art. 4) stipulates that townships only “guide” (*zhidao*) rather than “lead” (*lingdao*) village committees, in practice, committees are often treated as line-organs of a township in high-priority policy areas.⁶¹ Clashes, in these circumstances, become nearly inevitable when committee members dare to resist unpopular assignments, such as collecting levies, implementing costly “target-hitting” (*dabiao*) programs, or completing other delegated tasks.⁶² More often than not, when townships and village committees disagree, it is the village cadres who come out on the losing side.

⁵⁹ For a summary of reasons why local governments interfere in village affairs, see Alpermann, “An Assessment of Research;” also, Bernstein, “Village Democracy,” p. 33. On ways, however, that townships support free and fair elections, see He, *Rural Democracy*, pp. 142-46.

⁶⁰ Alpermann, “The Post-Election Administration,” p. 47.

⁶¹ Alpermann, “The Post-Election Administration,” p. 46; also Xu Wang, *Mutual Empowerment of State and Peasantry: Village Self-Government in Rural China* (New York: Nova Science, 2003), p. 67.

⁶² See Mao Dan and Ren Qiang, *Zhongguo Nongcun*, p. 52. For a collection of such cases, see Xu Yong and Xiang Jiquan eds., *Cunmin Zizhi Jincheng zhong de Xiangcun Guanxi (Township and Village Relations in the Process of Village Self-Governance)* (Wuhan: Huazhong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2003). For case studies and statistical analysis of weak village committees, and a conclusion that “even in villages with extremely good implementation of democratic reforms, citizens do not necessarily have a great deal of leverage over officials, accurate information about their activities, or a particularly strong sense of public duty,” see Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy*, chapter 7, quoted text on p. 190.

Consider assessing levies, a recurring source of conflict between townships and villages in the 1990s.⁶³ This thankless task put elected cadres in a difficult position, insofar as they had to choose between fulfilling orders from above and keeping financial burdens down for fellow villagers. This dilemma, combined with perennially low compensation, made office-holding in some villages so unattractive that some cadres refused to complete their terms. In one study of 29 Hubei villages, He Xuefeng and Wang Ximing learned that committee directors in seven villages, frustrated by difficulties surrounding revenue collection, resigned within one year of their election in 1999.⁶⁴

Unpopular target-hitting programs are another source of discord. Overly ambitious development schemes, image-building efforts, and fancifully high targets are often imposed on village committees.⁶⁵ Though the tax-for-fee reform and abolition of the agricultural tax simplified revenue collection, it did not free committee members from other duties assigned from above. Evidence from many locations suggests that to maintain and strengthen control over villages, some townships are turning “soft targets” (*ruan zhibiao*) into “hard tasks” (*ying renwu*) that cannot be downplayed or ignored. In

⁶³ Xu Liming, Zhang Linsheng and Wang Zhiheng, *Nongcun Shuifei Gaige Chuyi (Opinions on Rural Tax-for-Fee Reform)* (Beijing: Zhongguo Nongye Kexue Jishu Chubanshe, 2002), p. 158; also Xu Yong, “Cunmin Zizhi, Zhengfu Renwu ji Shuifei Gaige” (Village Self-Governance, Government Tasks and Tax-for-Fee Reform), *Zhongguo Nongcun Jingji (Chinese Rural Economy)*, no. 11 (2001).

⁶⁴ He Xuefeng and Wang Ximing, “Cunzu de Guimo yu Ganbu” (Scale of Village Groups and Their Cadres) in Xu Yong and Xiang Jiquan, *Cunmin Zizhi*, p. 502.

⁶⁵ Cho Soo-sung, “On the Relationship between Chinese Township/Town Governments and Villager Committees,” Zhang Guangxiu, “A Study of the Relationship between Villager Self-Government and Basic-Level Government,” and Cheng Tongshun, “The Relationship between the Township/Town Government and the Village in the Context of Villager Self-Government in China,” papers prepared for International Symposium on Villager Self-Government and the Development of Rural Society in China, Sponsored by the Carter Center and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Beijing, September 2-5, 2001.

Henan, for example, in the face of strong community opposition, villages have been saddled with target-hitting projects, such as building 40 methane-generating pits or 200 *mu* of vegetable sheds.⁶⁶ In another Henan county, higher-ups ordered that at least one collective enterprise be set up in every village within a year. Over a hundred paper mills were built, all of which went bankrupt, causing enormous losses, a chorus of popular complaint, and lasting environmental damage.⁶⁷

Unpopular tasks may also be foisted on villages by townships that encounter unexpected problems. For example, in order to develop the local economy, higher-ups sometimes compel villages to supply raw materials to or buy products from local enterprises. One committee director in Jiangxi explained how he felt “pressure from both sides” (*liangtou shouqi*): township authorities assigned him a high procurement quota to prop up a bamboo ware plant that was desperately short of cash, but villagers were unwilling to sell their bamboo unless they received timely and sufficient payment. The director felt trapped and could not satisfy both the township and voters who had elected him.⁶⁸

Townships often treat elected committees as if they were subordinates, and village leaders may find themselves squeezed, like the meat in an overstuffed

⁶⁶ Liu Tao, “Shuifei Gaige hou de Zhibiaohua: Chongxin Jiedu Xiang, Cun, Zu, Min Guanxi” (Target-Setting after Tax-for-Fee Reform: Rethinking Relations among Townships, Villages, Small Groups, and Villagers), <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-6758/page-1.html>, accessed October 2, 2007

⁶⁷ For this incident and county pressures placed on townships, which are then transmitted to villages, see Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China,” *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 2 (January 1999), p. 176.

⁶⁸ Lan Yuanjun, “Liangtou Shouqi hou Mo Chulai de Luzi” (A Way out of Pressure from Both Sides), *Xiangzhen Luntan (Township Forum)*, no. 11 (2001), p. 14.

sandwich, or as the Jiangxi director quoted above put it: “like a rat caught in the bellows” (*laoshu jin le fengxiang*). Sometimes, it does not even take much pressure to coax committee members to “voluntarily be responsible to higher levels” (*zijue duishang fuze*).⁶⁹ Fiscal realities and features of the cadre management system make it difficult to refuse jobs imposed by townships, whatever the views of voters.

To fulfill many of their responsibilities, such as providing public goods, committees often must rely on townships for help. The tax-for-fee reform deepened a fiscal crisis in many villages (and townships), as local leaders lost the ability to raise funds they had previously depended upon. Constructing and repairing roads, maintaining irrigation systems, and supporting the elderly and disabled, all have become more difficult, especially in agricultural areas and communities where other social institutions cannot pick up the slack.⁷⁰ In order to obtain needed resources, village cadres tend to be cooperative when townships assign them even highly unpopular tasks.

Personnel management regulations have also created incentives that spur cadres to respond to demands received from above. The “cadre responsibility system” (*ganbu guanli zenrenzhi*) links bonuses and punishment to higher level assessments of performance. In many locations, the salary and bonuses of village committee members

⁶⁹ Mao Dan and Ren Qiang, *Zhongguo Nongcun*, p. 53.

⁷⁰ See Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy*, chapter 7; also, Yuan Song, “Gonggongpin Gongji Zhikun: Fucun Diaocha Lianzai (9)” (Difficulties in Public Goods Provision: Ninth in a Series of Reports from the Investigation of Fu Village), <http://www.snzg.cn/article/show.php?itemid-7233/page-1.html>, accessed October 2, 2007.

are determined by township authorities, and levels are set in accord with how well important assignments are carried out.⁷¹ Some localities, in the wake of the tax-for-fee reform, have gone so far as to list village cadres on the township or county level payroll. This further empowers townships, and makes committee members more pliable in the face of demands from above.⁷²

Finally, some committees do not control their own budgets. Entrusting village accounts to township management has become a common means to strengthen supervision of rural finances. This has created opportunities for townships to appropriate village funds and may leave elected bodies with virtually nothing to manage.⁷³ Although this need not enhance compliance, it does diminish the role of committee members, and makes how democratically they were elected somewhat beside the point.

⁷¹ One countertrend, which should make elected cadres more accountable to voters, is that “villagers’ evaluations” (*minzhu pingchou*) are now sometimes consulted when township authorities decide on a village cadres’ salary. But even in these cases, baseline salary is usually set by the township according to its own criteria. Cheng Sinian, “Rang Cunmin Gei Cunguan Ping Gongzi de Banfa Hao” (It Is a Good Method to Let Villagers Grade Village Cadres’ Salary), *Nongcun Fazhan Luncong (Rural Development Forum)*, no. 10 (2000), p. 45. Tian Yuanxin, Qu Xuan, and Li Dao, “Cunmin Gei Cun Ganbu Ding Baochou” (Villagers Assess How Much Village Cadres Should Earn), *Xiangzhen Luntan (Township Forum)*, no. 3 (2005), p. 13; also Alpermann, “The Post-Election Administration,” p. 68.

⁷² This is not a nation-wide practice, though it has been implemented widely. For details, see Ning Zekui, Liu Hailiang, Wang Zhengbing, and Chai Haofang, “Cunganbu Xiang Hechu Qu” (Where Village Cadres Are Heading), *Zhongguo Nongcun Guancha (China Rural Survey)*, no. 1 (2005), p. 60; also Zhong and Chen, “To Vote or Not to Vote,” p. 698.

⁷³ Fubing Su and Dali Yang, “Elections, Governance, and Accountability in Rural China,” *Asian Perspective* 29, no. 4 (2005).

Party Branches and Village Committees

Village-level Party organizations are another obstacle to grassroots democratization. Though the *Organic Law* (Art. 3) states that Party branches should “support villagers in developing self-governance and exercising their democratic rights,” it also insists that branches are a village’s “leadership core” (*lingdao hexin*). This means that Party leaders play a dominant role in most locations, with the Party secretary usually considered the village “number one” (*yi ba shou*), and the committee director the village “number two” (*er ba shou*).⁷⁴

Fieldwork and surveys of grassroots cadres have confirmed the pre-eminence of Party secretaries. In 1999, Liang Kaijin and He Xuefeng estimated that 80% of secretaries nationwide were their village’s top power holder, whereas an in-depth study of eight communities in 2002-03 concluded that Party secretaries had the final word in

⁷⁴ Song Yuehong, “Cunmin Zizhi Zhong de Liangwei Guanxi” (Relations between Village Party Branches and Village Committees in Village Self-Governance), *Zhongguo Gaige Nongcun Ban (China Reform Rural Edition)*, no. 7 (2002), p. 47; Yang Jirong, “Lun Nongcun Jiceng Dangnei Minzhu yu Cunmin Zizhi de Xianjie yu Hudong” (On Grassroots Democracy within the Party and Its Connection and Interaction with Village Self-Governance), *Lilun yu Gaige (Theory and Reform)*, no. 6 (2003), pp. 33-36; Chu Zhi, “Cunzhishu Zenyang Danghao Yibashou” (How Can Village Party Secretaries Perform Well as Number One) *Dangyuan Ganbu Zhiyou (Party Members’ and Cadres’ Friend)*, no. 9 (2002), pp. 12-13; also Zhong and Chen, “To Vote or Not to Vote,” p. 697; Schubert and Chen, “Village Elections,” p. 13; He, *Rural Democracy*, p. 114. On the growing power of village committees, but their continuing secondary status, see Tan and Xin, “Village Election and Governance,” pp. 588-93; also Wang, *Mutual Empowerment*, pp. 143-47.

seven of them.⁷⁵ Baogang He likewise found that dominance of elected committees “only takes place in a limited number of cases.”⁷⁶ In a survey of 111 committee directors in four Zhejiang prefectures, 15% of He’s respondents said they had more power than the village Party secretary, while 71% reported that the secretary had more power.⁷⁷

Given the Party branch’s status as “leadership core,” it is often unclear what a village committee should take charge of: in what areas must the branch follow the committee’s lead? The *Organic Law* and implementing regulations that we have seen fail to specify a clear division of responsibilities between the two bodies. This often leads to clashes over, for instance, collective resources, as committees and branches struggle to secure final say over enterprises, economic cooperatives, and land.⁷⁸ When elected cadres lose these skirmishes, as they often do, some have become so frustrated that they have withdrawn from political life. In 2001, *People’s Daily* reported

⁷⁵ Liang Kaijin and He Xuefeng, *Cunji Zuzhi Zhidu Anpai yu Chuangzhi (Institutional Arrangements and Innovations in Village-Level Organizations)* (Beijing: Hongqi Chubanshe, 1999), p. 118; Dong Jiang’ai, “Cunji Xuanju zhong Xingcheng de Liangwei Guanxi Duili ji Chulu” (Outbreak of Rivalry between Party Branches and Village Committees in Village Elections and Its Solution), *Huazhong Shifan Daxue Xuebao, Sheke Ban (Journal of Huazhong Normal University, Social Sciences Edition)* 44, no. 1 (January 2005), p. 56.

⁷⁶ Baogang He, “The Theory and Practice of Chinese Grassroots Governance: Five Models,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 2 (2003), pp. 308-310.

⁷⁷ He, *Rural Democracy in China*, pp. 112-113. On the relative power of Party secretaries and committee directors hinging on control over income-producing enterprises and land, see Jean C. Oi and Scott Rozelle, “Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages,” *China Quarterly* 162 (June 2000), pp. 513-39.

⁷⁸ See Pan Jiawei and Zhou Xianri, *Cunmin Zizhi yu Xingzhengquan de Chongtu (Conflicts between Village Self-Governance and Administrative Power)* (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2004), pp.145-146; also Xu Zhiyong, “Xuanju Zhihou: Lijicun Cunmin Zizhi Diaocha” (Post-Election: Investigation of Village Self-Governance in Liji), *Zhongguo Gaike Nongcun Ban (China Reform: Rural Edition)*, no. 2 (2003), pp. 10-14; Bernstein, “Village Democracy,” p. 36; Zhang Jingping, “Jingxuan Cuguan de Jiaoliang” (Struggle in the Village Election), *Nanfeng Chuang (Southern Exposure)* no. 9 (May 2005), pp. 30-35.

that 57 committee members from four townships in Qixia Prefecture, Shandong, resigned in protest against Party branches that monopolized village politics. They charged that a full year after being elected, branches still refused to give them access to the account books and the official seal that symbolizes public power.⁷⁹ Such incidents are not rare. Guo Zhenglin found that in the two years after Guangdong introduced elections in 1998, over 800 committee members resigned, most often because they had been frozen out of decision making by Party branches.⁸⁰

Even fairly powerful village committees are vulnerable to Party influence, through personnel overlap. Surveys have shown that a large number of committee members, and directors in particular, belong to the Communist Party. For instance, following Jiangsu's balloting in 2006, almost 90% (15649 out of 17411) of committee directors were Party members.⁸¹ Figures for earlier rounds of voting in rural Shanghai (2002), Fujian (2003), and Shaanxi (2002) were 89%, 66%, and 66%, respectively.⁸² Party

⁷⁹ Cui Shixin, "Cunguan Weihe Yao Cizhi" (Why Village Heads Want to Resign), *Renmin Ribao (People's Daily)*, March 21, 2001; also Xu Zhiyong, "Xuanju Zhihou." For regulations concerning control of the village seal, see He, *Rural Democracy*, p. 112.

⁸⁰ Guo Zhenglin, "Cunmin Xuanju hou de Nongcun Dangzheng Eryuan Quanli Jiegou" (The Bicameral Power Structure of the Rural Party Apparatus and its Administration in the Wake of Villagers' Elections), paper prepared for the International Symposium on Villagers' Self-Government and the Development of Rural Society in China, Sponsored by the Carter Center and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Beijing, September 2-5, 2001, p. 253.

⁸¹ Summarizing Table of Seventh Round Village Elections in Jiangsu Province, http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1810&ID=35289, accessed December 12, 2006.

⁸² Percentages are calculated from the following tables: "Table of 2002 Village Elections in Shaanxi;" "Table of 2002 Village Elections in Shanghai," http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1810&ID=35331; "Table of 2003 Village Elections in Fujian;" all accessed Dec. 12, 2006. For similar statistics on earlier elections in a number of provinces, see Pastor and Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections," p. 140. For data, mostly from the 1990s, that show an increasing

penetration is important because, unlike elected cadres, whose legitimacy is based on popular votes, Party members who sit on village committees derive some of their authority from being agents of the Party-state.⁸³ This raises an obvious question: even when Party members have won a spot on a village committee in a free and fair election, will they stand with villagers when Party superiors instruct them to do otherwise?

Since the turn of the century, Party penetration of committees has taken a new, more institutionalized form, which, according to Sylvia Chan, strengthens over-representation of Party members and is a sign of the Party's intention "to re-concentrate its power in rural areas."⁸⁴ In July 2002, the Central Committee and State Council jointly issued a circular that endorsed "concurrent office-holding by village chiefs and Party secretaries" (*yijiantiao*) and "merging the Party branch and the village committee" (*liangwei heyi*).⁸⁵ This policy sometimes takes the form of village committees being elected first, and some of their members being placed on Party branches later (*xianzheng houdang*); at other times, it means the Party secretary and other Party branch members are encouraged to run in village committee elections at the first

number on non-communists on village committees, see He, *Rural Democracy in China*, pp. 107-08.

⁸³ Guo and Bernstein, "The Impact of Elections."

⁸⁴ Sylvia Chan, "Villagers' Representative Assemblies: Towards Democracy or Centralism?", *China: An International Journal* 1, no. 2 (2003), p. 192. Baogang He, ("The Theory and Practice," p. 309) also speaks of "a deliberate attempt to strengthen the Party branch."

⁸⁵ "Zhonggong Zhongyang Bangongting Guowuyuan Bangongting Guanyu Jinyibu Zuohao Cunmin Weiyuanhui Huanjie Xuanju Gongzuo de Tongzhi" (Circular by General Offices of Party Central Committee and State Council on Further Improving the Work of Next Round Village Committee Elections), July 14, 2002, http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2002/content_61679.htm, accessed December 1, 2007; also Bernstein, "Village Democracy," p. 37; Guo and Bernstein, "The Impact of Elections," pp. 272, 275; He, *Rural Democracy*, p. 119.

opportunity (*xiandang houzheng*). As a sure-fire way to reduce the size of the village payroll and mitigate tension between branches and committees, this initiative has been implemented widely.⁸⁶ In Shandong, authorities even prescribed that the overlap rate of the two top positions should exceed 80% and that of the full branch and village committee should reach 70%.⁸⁷ Having to face voters could make Party branch members more accountable,⁸⁸ but influence often flows the other way.⁸⁹ Overlapping membership, along with joint or consecutive meetings of the two organizations, can blur whether concurrent office-holders are responsible to their constituents or their Party masters.⁹⁰ Some Chinese researchers have even begun to wonder whether

⁸⁶ For Shandong, see *Dazhong Ribao (The Masses Daily)*, Sept. 25, 2004; for Henan, <http://news.sohu.com/20050715/n226325095.shtml>; for Hunan, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/news/2004year/2004-06-01/26/443107.shtml>; for Anhui, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/news/2004/2004-11-07/26/503213.shtml>; for Hainan, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/news/2004year/2004-07-23/26/463605.shtml>; for Guangdong, <http://www.southcn.com/news/gdnews/gdtodayimportant/200501250071.htm>; for Shanxi, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64100/5946051.html>; all accessed November 30, 2007.

⁸⁷ Wang Kequn, "Nongyeshui Quxiao hou Xiangzhen Guanli Tizhi Yudao de Wenti" (Problems Encountered in the Township Management System after Abolishing the Agricultural Tax), *Zhongguo Fazhan Guancha (China Development Observation)*, no. 5 (2005), pp. 38-40. Guangdong also advocates 70% overlap of branches and committees. See Richard Levy, "The Village Self-Government Movement," *China Information* 17, no. 1 (2003), p. 34.

⁸⁸ Dang Guoying, "Liangwei Heyi Shige Hao Banfa" (Concurrent Holding of Offices Is A Good Solution), *Zhongguo Gaike (Nongcun Ban) (China Reform (Rural Edition))*, no. 2 (2004), p. 28.

⁸⁹ Party members remain subject to Party discipline, and they may also be more accommodating to township leaders. Lu Fuxing, "Yijiantiao de Shixiao yu Lilun zhi Chayi" (Gaps between Real Effects and Theoretical Implications of Concurrent Office-Holding), *Hunan Gong'an Gaodeng Zhuanke Xuexiao Xuebao (Journal of Hunan Public Security College)* 16, no. 5 (October 2004), p. 17. Some researchers (Lianjiang Li, personal communication, November 2007) argue that what really matters is not who serves as both the secretary and director, but how one gets the two positions.

⁹⁰ Zhang Yuanhong, "Liangwei Heyi Qineng Tuiguang" (Concurrent Office-Holding Should Not Be Promoted), *Zhongguo Gaike (China Reform)*, no. 8 (2001), pp. 56-57; Chang Zizhong, "Cunliangwei Yijiantiao Wenti Baicun Tiaocha" (One-Hundred-Village

overlapping membership might lead to a return of unfettered rule by Party branches, especially Party secretaries, thus making village elections close to meaningless.⁹¹

Social Forces and Village Committees

In addition to Party branches and townships, lineage groups, religious organizations, and criminal elements play a role in some villages. These social forces may gain access to public power through elections, or have other means to become involved with decision making and policy implementation. Although informal institutions may enhance accountability and promote public goods provision,⁹² they also operate according to their own customs, norms, and rules, many of which have little to do with democracy.

Clans (*zongzu*), in particular, have experienced a resurgence in the reform era,

Survey on Concurrent Office-Holding in Village Committees and Party Branches), *Xiangzhen Luntan (Township Forum)*, no. 7 (2007), pp. 9-10; Qin Junbo, "Cunzhishu Jianren Cunzhuren Ying Huanxing" (Concurrent-Holding of Party Secretary and Village Head Positions Should Be Deferred), *Xiangzhen Luntan (Township Forum)*, no. 3 (2002), p. 12.

⁹¹ Chang Zizhong, "Cunliangwei;" Qin Junbo, "Cunzhishu." Some authors argue that concurrent office-holding will help resolve personal conflicts between party secretaries and village committee directors, but can not remedy organizational conflicts or reduce disputes over authority. Xu Zengyang and Ren Baoyu, "Yijiantiao Zhenneng Jiejue Liangwei Chongtu Ma: Cunzhibu yu Cunweihui Chongtu de Sanzhong Leixing ji Jiejue Silu" (Will Concurrent Office-Holding Resolve Conflicts between the Two Organizations? Three Types of Conflict between Village Committees and Party Branches and One Possible Resolution), *Zhongguo Nongcun GuanCha (China Rural Survey)* no. 1 (2002), pp. 69-74.

⁹² Lily L. Tsai, "Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (May 2007); Lily L. Tsai, "Cadres, Temple and Lineage Institutions, and Governance in Rural China," *China Journal*, no. 48 (July 2002).

and in some locations “are once again sources of power and authority.”⁹³ While kinship ties need not always have a baleful effect on democratic rule, strong lineage attachments can become a mechanism through which individual rights and minority protections are infringed.⁹⁴ Majority rule sometimes produces dominance of one clan, or disruptive, ongoing struggle between several clans, which leads to fierce conflict and makes governance nearly impossible. For example, the Li lineage in one Hunan community used elections to usurp the power of a village committee and transformed grassroots government into an armed tool of clan power.⁹⁵ In another “extreme case” focusing on disputed land adjustments in Shaanxi, open elections heightened clan tensions, turned a Party secretary against a committee director, and brought governance almost to a standstill.⁹⁶ Much more research is needed to learn how and when lineage ties affect village committees and the quality of democracy.

Religious organizations can also be obstacles to grassroots democratization when they compete with village committees for resources or leadership in community affairs. In one Shaanxi village, shortly after a committee and a Catholic church joined

⁹³ Bernstein, “Village Democracy,” p. 38. In Lishu County, Jilin, like much of the Northeast, clans are not important power-brokers. See Schubert and Chen, “Village Elections,” p. 16.

⁹⁴ Xu Yong, *Zhongguo Nongcun Cunmin Zizhi (Village Self-Government in Rural China)* (Wuhan: Huazhong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 1997), pp. 354-366.

⁹⁵ Yu Jianrong, “Yao Jingti Zongzu Shili dui Nongcun Jiceng Zhengquan de Yingxiang” (Be Alert to Clan Influences on Rural Grassroots Government), *Jiangsu Shehui Kexue (Jiangsu Social Sciences)*, no. 4 (2004), pp. 7-8.

⁹⁶ Kennedy, “The Face of ‘Grassroots Democracy,’” pp. 480-481. For evidence, however, that elections can also produce balanced village committees and mitigate lineage conflict, see Kennedy, “The Implementation of Village Elections,” pp. 67-68. On declining clan influence overall, but continuing relevance especially in poorer, agricultural, and single surname dominant villages, see He, *Rural Democracy*, pp. 177-94.

forces to build a primary school, wrangling over control of the school broke out. Instead of seeking a compromise, the church leaders publicized the conflict and mobilized their followers to challenge the elected cadres, resulting in a deep division in the village.⁹⁷

Local strongmen and gangsters pose a far more direct threat to democracy. Stories of “evil forces” (*hei’e shili*) undermining rural governance are increasingly common. Though some observers argue that imperfect election procedures make villages vulnerable to takeover by bullies and thugs,⁹⁸ others note that in some places representative of “black society” have obtained power by soliciting support from fellow lineage members, intimidating villagers, and promising decisive action.⁹⁹ Even when they fail to subvert a village committee, underworld forces can exert an influence by challenging, marginalizing or sidelining elected leaders.¹⁰⁰ Some gangs have gone so far as to set up “private police stations” (*minban paichusuo*) and “undergrounds courts” (*dixia fating*) to handle disputes over land, debt, and other conflicts.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Villagers claimed that this confrontation was even more intense than those that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Miao Yuexia, “Xiangcun Minjian Zongjiao yu Cunmin Zizhi: Yixiang Shehui Ziben Yanjiu” (Rural Religion and Village Self-Governance: Research on Social Capital), *Zhejiang Shehui Kexue (Zhejiang Social Sciences)*, no. 6 (November 2006), pp. 99-104. In some locations, temples and churches provide an alternative form of public accountability. Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy*.

⁹⁸ He Xuefeng, “Dangqian Cunmin Zizhi Yanjiu Zhong Xuyao Chengqing de Ruogan Wenti” (Some Problems in Current Studies of Villagers’ Self-Government) *Zhongguo Nongcun Guancha (China Rural Survey)*, no. 2 (2002), pp. 66-67.

⁹⁹ Yu Jianrong, “Jingtì Hei’e Shili Dui Nongcun Jiceng Zhengquan de Qinru” (Be Alert to the Invasion of Evil Forces into Rural Grassroots Government), *Juece Zixun (Policy Making Consultation)*, no. 8 (2003), pp. 34-35; Sun Chunlong, “Ruci Cunmin Zizhi” (What Village Self-Governance is Like), *Xin Xibu (New West)*, no. 9 (2004), pp. 8-11.

¹⁰⁰ Liu Lixin, Pao Jinxuan, and Zhang Lingzhi, “Hei’e Shili Ranzhi Nongcun Jiceng Zhengquan Toudi” (Investigation of Evil Forces Encroaching on Rural Grassroots Governance), *Sanyue Feng (March Wind)*, no. 4 (2004), pp. 7-9.

¹⁰¹ Xu Liming, “Cunmin Zizhi de Shehui Kunjing” (Social Predicament of Village Self-

The township, the Party branch, and an array of social forces constitute the local power configuration in which village committees are embedded. We have underscored the independent effect of each of these factors, but they can also work together to impede democratic governance. Strong clan ties combined with a powerful criminal sector can contribute to conflicts between a Party branch and a village committee;¹⁰² Party cadres, after losing a village committee election, may turn to township allies or the underworld to maintain their position as top person in the village.¹⁰³ Improved electoral procedures have enhanced access to power, but elected cadres cannot escape the broader political and social context in which they operate.

Conclusion

In a country like China, grassroots democratization is a multi-faceted process that involves much more than holding a good election every three years. Two decades after the *Organic Law* first came into force, election procedures have improved significantly, both on paper and on the ground. Meaningful changes touching on steering committees, voter registration, candidate nomination, campaigning, secret balloting, and proxy-voting have taken hold and begun to expand access to power. Yet

Governance), *Zhonggong Zhengzhou Shiwei Dangxiao Xuebao* (Journal of the Party School of Zhengzhou Municipal Committee), no. 3 (2005), p. 52.

¹⁰² Wang Jinhong, "Liangwei Maodun: Jingyan Fenxi yu Lilun Piping" (Conflict between Party Branches and Village Committees: Empirical Analysis and Theoretical Critique), *Huazhong Shifan Daxue Xuebao, Sheke Ban* (Journal of Huazhong Normal University, Social Sciences Edition) 44, no. 5 (September 2005), pp. 18-24.

¹⁰³ For an example, see "Nongcun Queshao Shenme?" (What Is Lacking in Rural Areas?), http://www.lwjx.com.cn/bbs/dv_rss.asp?s=xhtml&boardid=6&id=3210&page=15, accessed December 15, 2007.

the quality of democracy in much of the countryside remains stubbornly low, mainly because village committees, once an election is over, are situated in a socio-political environment that has changed surprisingly little.

Village committees are surrounded on all sides. First, the state, represented by township authorities, has many opportunities to influence grassroots governance. Elected cadres are expected to complete tasks assigned by higher levels, much as their appointed predecessors were. Unwelcome duties, such as collecting levies or meeting unreasonable targets, regularly force committee members to choose between fealty to the township and responsiveness to fellow villagers. Financial reliance on townships and the role that higher levels play in cadre assessment inclines even the most democratically-minded committee members to side with township superiors. Village committee members, in the end, are still subordinates — the place where state meets society — as much as they are the voice of voters who elected them.

Second, village Party branches have no small say in decision making and policy implementation. In most communities, Party branches remain the dominant force and village committees play a distinctly secondary role. The Party branch's status as "leadership core" is often evident in control over collective resources, such as land, economic cooperatives and enterprises, and also in overlapping membership on village committees. Despite efforts by many committee directors to assert their independence and exploit the legitimacy that elections confer, recent reforms that encourage

concurrent office-holding may dilute the “electoral connection”¹⁰⁴ by blurring whether committee members are responsible to their constituents or their Party superiors.¹⁰⁵

Finally, informal institutions, including lineage groups, religious organizations, and criminal gangs, can interfere with democratic governance. Clans, churches or temples, and Mafia-like groups, can be alternative sources of authority and competitors for control over community affairs. In some villages, this has resulted in serious splits that bring governance to a halt. In others, elected cadres have been pushed aside, or turned into figureheads. In still others, sectarian interests have deeply penetrated village committees, sometimes leading to a trampling of minority rights.

Village elections alone are clearly not enough to ensure democratic governance. To understand democratization in rural China, we need ask not only how procedures are introduced and improved, but also how the village committees interact with other actors in the local power configuration. Though improving elections is a critical aspect of democratization, good procedures alone cannot guarantee high quality democratic rule. Long-time students of democratization have recognized this, too, with Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, for example, arguing that a fully democratic regime not only satisfies popular expectations regarding “procedural quality,” but also allows citizens to

¹⁰⁴ The term was first made popular by David Mayhew and was brought to the China field by Melanie Manion. See David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Melanie Manion, “The Electoral Connection in the Chinese Countryside,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 4 (December 1996).

¹⁰⁵ As we discuss above, it is also possible that these reforms will help democratize Party branches. For experiments with subjecting Party branch members to a village-wide vote of confidence, see Lianjiang Li, “The Two-Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Village Party Secretaries to a Popular Vote,” *China Journal* 42 (July 1999).

enjoy “quality of content” and “quality of results.”¹⁰⁶

This suggests some limits of this study and an agenda for the future. Examining constraints that impede democratization is not the same as assessing post-election governance, or how power is exercised in villages. In other words, obstacles notwithstanding, increased responsiveness is appearing in some places. For every analyst who concludes “except in a few localities, elections have little positive impact on preventing rural authorities from abusing power,”¹⁰⁷ another finds that elections have empowered villagers or enhanced accountability.¹⁰⁸ Beyond specifying the obstacles to democratization, we need more studies that explain how, when, and where elections have changed the relationship between cadres and voters.

At the same, we also need more research on whether elections deter power holders from seeking personal gain above all else. The issue in some villages is not committee members who are pushed around by townships, Party branches, and social forces, but elected cadres who free themselves of all constraints and act only for themselves. Where does this occur? Why, in some places, are the constraints that we have emphasized and the ones that elections create both ineffective in preventing self-serving behavior? Are limited changes in governance after several rounds of elections a cause of increasing voter apathy,¹⁰⁹ as villagers conclude that whomever is in office

¹⁰⁶ Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, “The Quality of Democracy: An Overview,” *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (1994), p. 22.

¹⁰⁷ Zhang Jing, *Jiceng Zhengquan: Xiangcun Zhidu Zhu Wenti (Problems of Rural Level Governance in China)* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), p. 208.

¹⁰⁸ For examples, see the sources listed in footnotes 48-56.

¹⁰⁹ Wei Xinghe and Guo Yunhua, “Zhengzhi Lengmo: Nongmin dui Cunweihui Xuanju de Yizhong Xingwei” (Political Apathy: One Kind of Villagers’ Attitude towards Village

will be corrupt and abusive, because “all crows under heaven are equally black”¹¹⁰ or “it makes no sense to replace a full tiger with a hungry wolf?”¹¹¹

As Norbert Bobbio reminds us, democracy is subversive in a highly radical sense because it subverts the traditional and natural notion that power flows downward.¹¹²

Without denying the achievements of the last two decades, we have suggested that the process of putting democracy in place goes well beyond “getting the procedures right,” especially in an authoritarian setting where democracy is not the only game in town.

Much as a one-day trip to observe an election reveals something, but not everything,

about what the next three years will bring, changes in access to power can be trumped

by a non-democratic environment that encircles an election victor. Governance, even in

a single village, has many components and expanded access to power conditions, but

does not determine, how power is exercised. “High quality democracy” in rural China,

Committee Elections), *Qiushi (Seeking Facts)*, no. 10 (2003), pp. 60-62; Wang Xiaojun, “Zhixuan Lilian Zhihou de Cunweihui Xuanju Yanjiu: Yi Jiangxisheng T Xian 20 ge Cun Weili” (Study of Elections in 20 Jiangxi Villages in T County Which Have Experienced Direct Elections), *Yunnan Xingzheng Xueyuan Yuanbao (Journal of Yunnan Public Administration College)*, no. 1 (2007), pp. 82-85. But compare, Tan and Xin, “Village Election and Governance,” p. 597.

¹¹⁰ See, Xie Meili, “Wanshan Cunweihui Xuanju Zhidu, Cujin Xinnongcun Hexie Fazhan” (Improve Village Committee Electoral Institutions and Promote Harmonious Development of New Rural Areas), *Zhongguo Xingzheng Guanli (Chinese Public Administration)*, no. 11 (2006), p. 57; also see Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 125.

¹¹¹ For this remark, see Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China,” *Modern China* 22, no. 1 (January 1996), p. 34. For similar sayings involving famished wolves or tigers, see Xu Yong, “Qianghua Minzhu Jiandu, Cujin Zhili Zhuanxing” (Strengthen Democratic Supervision and Promote Governance Transition), *Xiangzhen Luntan (Township Forum)*, no. 4 (2001), p. 10; He Xuefeng, “Guanyu Cunzhuang Quanli KuoZHANxing de Taolun” (Discussion on the Expansion of Village Power Structure), *Yunnan Shehui Kexue (Yunnan Social Sciences)*, no. 6 (2000), p. 39.

¹¹² Norberto Bobbio, *Which Socialism? Marxism, Socialism, and Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 74.

let alone the whole nation, rests on much more than good village elections.