

Blazing New Trails:
Villagers' Committee Elections in P.R. China

by

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(All comments welcome!)

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Introduction: Revolutionary Political Reform*

“...when the masses are allowed to elect the cadres they trust, those cadres who have many new ideas and approaches, have the courage to think and act, and dare to blaze new trails are usually among the first to be elected.”

Renmin Ribao, mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party,

November 20, 1997

Though the Chinese Communist Party clings to its monopoly on power and fully intends to avoid “walking down the road of the Soviet Union,”¹ it is implementing revolutionary political reform in the countryside. For the past decade, multi-candidate elections, in which candidates need not be members of the Communist Party, have been held in hundreds of thousands of Chinese villages. Abdicating its prerogative to appoint village chiefs, the Party has conceded that elected ones are more effective. The grassroots-level governance reform (*jiceng zhengquan gaige*) not only empowers ordinary citizens and encourages them to take part in the decision-making process. It also institutionalizes the concepts of accountability and transparency.

Though the openness and fairness of village elections vary considerably, they constitute a potential foothold for Chinese democratization. But will that first step lead to a second? Across China, government officials and ordinary citizens have begun to demand open elections for the heads of townships.² The first such election was held -- without the knowledge of the central government -- in the township of Buyun in December 1998. Since

* This paper was written following Linda Jakobson’s three-week research trip to Beijing in June 1999 during which she conducted interviews with officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs as well as researchers and journalists focusing on grassroots political reform. The author lived in the P.R. China for the greater part of a decade (1987-1997) and initially conducted research on village elections in Liaoning in March 1995, and has since done field work in Shandong (August 1996) and Fujian (September 1998). The author is grateful to Susan Lawrence, James McEnteer and Hanna Ojanen for their comments on an earlier draft.

¹ In China during the 1990s, “walking down the road of the Soviet Union” (*zou Sulian de lu*) became an expression that besides meaning the demise of the Soviet Union signifies ‘instability’ or ‘chaos’.

² There are about 930,000 villages (*cun*) in China. On average approximately 20 villages are under the jurisdiction of a township (*xiang*) or town (*zhen*) government, which constitute the lowest level of government in P.R. China. Township (*xiang*) and town (*zhen*) are administratively of equal rank. A township or town, in turn, is administratively under a county (*xian*). There are in total 47,100 township/town governments, and 2,143 county governments, meaning that on average about 22 township/towns belong to one county. (State Statistical Bureau, *China Statistical Yearbook 1997* [Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1997], p. 3, 19). For simplicity, ‘township’ is hereafter used to signify both township and town.

then at least two other townships have experimented with direct elections. Despite the top leadership's fury over the Buyun election, after which it categorically forbade direct township elections,³ pressure is mounting to expand grass-roots political reform and institutionalize a competitive electoral process in townships and even counties. After the experimental law on villagers' committees was granted permanent status in November, 1998, several government officials and researchers dealing with political reform shifted their focus and are now preoccupied with studying ways to introduce direct elections of township and county leaders.

Why did the Chinese Communist Party decide to pursue political reform at the village level? Now that village elections have become national policy, can the electoral process be prevented from spreading to townships and counties? After reviewing the status of village elections as of mid-1999, this paper will briefly examine the reasons behind the Chinese Communist Party's decision to allow multi-candidate elections for villagers' committee posts. It will then describe how proponents of the law pushed through self-governance reform despite harsh opposition. Finally, the paper will explore the consequences and implications of village elections in China.

The Law on Villagers' Committees and Its Implementation

In November 1987 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress approved an experimental law stipulating how villages should be governed. Eleven years later, in November, 1998, the status of the "Organic Law on Villagers' Committees" was made permanent, ending an intense political debate about how much independence villagers' committees should be given to manage village affairs and to what extent villagers should be allowed to choose their leaders.

The law grants villagers' committees relatively broad autonomy, particularly in matters regarding the village economy. The law specifically states that the township government "may guide, help and support village committees, but must not intervene in affairs that are in the purview of the villagers' committee."⁴ According to the law, multi-

³ Author's interview with official at Ministry of Civil Affairs in Beijing, June 8, 1999.

⁴ For the text of the law, see e.g. *Cunmin Weiyuanhui Zuzhifa Xuexi Duben* [Studying Booklet of Organic Law on Villagers' Committees] (Beijing: Zhongguo Minzhu Fazhi Chubanshe, 1998), pp. 154-159. For an English translation of the law, see e.g. Internet site: http://www.emory.edu/CARTER_CENTER/CHINA/online.law.htm

candidate elections must be held every three years for the post of villagers' committee chair (hereafter called 'village chief') and other positions on the committee. Every adult has one vote. Secret balloting must be ensured. More importantly, there must be more candidates than positions and candidates need not be members of the Communist Party. Hence, opposing a Party member -- by either running against one or openly supporting a non-Party candidate -- is no longer a crime. Nor does it carry the stigma of "enemy of the people," as it did twenty years ago. Article 12 stipulates that "any villager over 18 years of age has the right to vote and be elected, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, occupation, family background, education, financial situation and length of residence, with the exception of those who are deprived of political rights by law."⁵

Proponents of villagers' committee elections were especially pleased that the law, upon becoming permanent, was revised to specify that "secret voting booths should be set up during the election" and that "candidates should be nominated directly by villagers who are eligible to vote."⁶ The method of candidate selection remains controversial for township and county officials. As of mid-1999, the so-called *haixuan* -method,⁷ allowing villagers to nominate the final candidates, had been adopted in only a fraction of villagers' committee elections. In most village elections, candidates were put forward either by the villagers' committee, the village representative assembly⁸ or a selection committee made up of the village's Party secretary, villagers' committee members, township officials and/or members of the village's influential families.

How many villages have held genuinely competitive elections? No accurate answer is available. Reliable statistics about China are difficult to obtain. In the case of village elections, no national data exists. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, which has charge of the electoral reform, compiles data based on reports of provincial officials as well as surveys conducted by Chinese and foreign researchers or sponsor organization representatives. There are roughly 930,000 villages in China. In July 1997, the Minister of Civil Affairs, confessing

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Haixuan* literally means 'sea election', meaning every villager has the right to nominate a candidate.

⁸ Villagers' representative assemblies (*cunmin daibiao huiyi*) are made up of villagers who each represent 10-15 households. They were designed to oversee the work of villagers' committees. See Susan V. Lawrence, "Democracy, Chinese Style," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994), pp. 61-68 and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994), pp. 42-44.

to uncertainty, estimated that 50 to 60 percent of elections had proceeded according to the law.⁹

Chinese and foreign observers agree that direct elections have been unevenly implemented. Some villages are “conducting technically sound elections”¹⁰ while others are not. The situation can vary even within the same county. A portion of a county’s villages may have already held two or three rounds of elections in scrupulous accord with the law, while elections in other villages in the county remain reminiscent of the Mao era: the village Party secretary nominates the one and only candidate for village chief, after which the villagers are expected to cast their ballots. In some villages no committee elections have been held.

What is known for certain is that by the end of 1997, 25 of China’s 31 provincial administrative regions had promulgated local laws and regulations to facilitate implementation of the law on villagers’ committees.¹¹ After the law became permanent in late 1998, most Chinese villages held elections. But no one knows how many of the elections met the four basic requirements of the Ministry of Civil Affairs: there must be more candidates than positions to be filled; villagers must have the right to nominate the final candidates; candidates pursuing the post of village chief must be given a chance to publicly air their views before the voting takes place; and secret balloting must be ensured.

Further complicating any accurate evaluation of the village electoral process were the acknowledgements by a Ministry of Civil Affairs official and a senior scholar that, prior to the experimental law becoming permanent, they had sometimes provided interviewers with a slightly more optimistic overview of the situation than reality warranted.¹² This was done to attract positive publicity, direly needed by advocates of the villagers’ committee law to convince their opponents of the merits of direct elections. One trump they played was the “international card,”¹³ a subject discussed below.

Hence, all evaluations of genuine village electoral reform made prior to late 1998 must

⁹ Carter Center, *Carter Center Delegation Report: Village Elections in China* (Atlanta, Ga: Carter Center, 1998), p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹¹ Bai, Gang, *Report on Improving the Legislation of Villagers’ Self-Governance. Research Working Paper no. 971103* (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Center for Public Policy, 1997), p. 55. Since the publication of this report at least one of the 6 inactive provinces, Guangdong, passed a local law regarding implementation of the law on villagers’ committees (author’s interview with Bai Gang in Beijing, June 9, 1999).

¹² Author’s interview with Wang Zhenyao in Beijing, June 5, 1999 and author’s interview with Bai Gang, June 9, 1999.

¹³ Tianjian Shi, “Village Committee Elections in China. Institutional Tactics for Democracy,” *World Politics*, vol. 51, no. 3 (April 1999), p. 407.

be regarded critically. It is legitimate to ask whether advocates of the villagers' committee law still feel the need to make rosier than realistic assessments. In June 1999, two respected authorities on the subject of village elections, Bai Gang and Wang Zhenyao, said they believed that stretching the truth was no longer beneficial. Both admitted having done so previously for tactical reasons, but said that a more realistic portrayal of the situation was to everyone's advantage now that the battle over the status of the villagers' committee law had been won.¹⁴ Procedural problems and organizational weaknesses need to be addressed.

The assessments made by Wang Zhenyao and Bai Gang in June, 1999 shed light on how the villagers' committees law has been carried out. For almost a decade, Wang Zhenyao, a mid-level official in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, was responsible for the nationwide implementation of the electoral reform. He estimated that elections had been held "totally or nearly totally in accordance with the law" in over 50 percent of China's villages.¹⁵ Wang Zhenyao's has been an influential advocate of village elections, within the central government and among county and provincial officials.

Bai Gang, a senior professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*Zhongguo Shehui kexueyuan*), said in June, 1999 that "about two percent of China's villages have experienced totally democratic multi-candidate elections and in about 40 percent relatively well-arranged competitive elections have been held."¹⁶ Bai Gang was one of the scholars who persistently submitted suggestions concerning revisions of the villagers' committee law to the Chinese government. As a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi*), he was among the most prominent supporters of electoral reform in its early stages. According to Bai Gang, more than half of China's villages have held no elections or else only "fake elections, which are purely for show."¹⁷

Determining how many village chiefs have been elected from outside the Chinese Communist Party is even more problematic. Estimates vary from 30 to 50 percent.¹⁸ In Fujian province, 44 percent of the elected village chiefs were not Party members when a

¹⁴ Author's interview with Wang Zhenyao, June 5, 1999; and author's interview with Bai Gang, June 9, 1999.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Wang Zhenyao, June 5, 1999.

¹⁶ Author's interview with Bai Gang, June 9, 1999.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Wang Zhenyao, "Village Committees: The Foundation of the Chinese Democratization," in Department of Basic-Level Governance, Ministry of Civil Affairs, comp., *Village Elections: Democracy in Rural China. Commentaries*, 1996, pp. 300-301.

fourth round of villagers' committee elections was held in 1997.¹⁹ The position of village chief changed hands in 48 percent of Fujian's 14,801 villages. Only two percent of village chiefs also served as Party secretary. Fujian, home to more than 32 million people, has been among the most active provinces in pursuing electoral reform. Candidates were nominated directly by villagers in Fujian as early as in 1992.

In June 1999, Bai Gang predicted that it would take another ten years before 90 percent of Chinese villages held multi-candidate elections. By that time, he said, 50 to 60 percent of villages would experience "completely democratic elections."²⁰ Bai Gang and Wang Zhenyao were both confident that, following the National People's Congress's decision to make the villagers' committee law permanent, the electoral reform would eventually be implemented in villages throughout the country. However, Wang Zhenyao admitted that officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs have an immense amount of work to do. Several million local officials still need to be trained in the practicalities of arranging competitive elections. An equally daunting task is persuading local leaders to accept the law. Opposition to the law has been especially strong among township officials. For this reason implementation of the experimental law was sluggish and sporadic. Nevertheless, by June 1999, both Bai and Wang had already shifted their attention to exploring ways of pursuing electoral reform at the township and county levels. According to Wang Zhenyao, "there is no stopping free and fair village elections anymore."²¹

An Attempt to Curb Chaos in the Countryside

Why did an authoritarian government on its own accord set in motion a political process which will, with all probability, undermine its authority in the long run? The decision to allow villagers the right to choose their own leaders must be examined in light of the situation

¹⁹ Author's interview with Zhang Xiaogan, Section Chief of Basic-Level Governance Section of Civil Affairs Department in Fujian province, in Fuzhou, Sept. 21, 1998. All data in this paragraph regarding villagers' committee elections in Fujian province was provided by Zhang Xiaogan.

²⁰ Author's interview with Bai Gang, June 9, 1999.

²¹ Author's interview with Wang Zhenyao, June 5, 1999.

in the countryside in the mid-1980s. Reforms initiated in 1978 shifted the balance of power between cadres and peasants, changing the political landscape of rural China.

By freeing the peasants from the shackles of the communes, Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms revolutionized one sector of rural life. Agricultural output soared, as did rural industrial production. Rural residents' incomes increased nearly five-fold between 1978 and 1990.²² But the disbanding of the communes and the freedom to pursue personal wealth created a new set of problems, including rampant corruption among rural officials and worsening relations between villagers and cadres.

After the three-tier, commune-brigade-team system was broken down, town and township governments replaced the old commune administrations, while brigades were converted into autonomous villages. 'Villagers' committees' were supposed to be established as grass-roots organs to manage village affairs, especially those related to economic management. But before the 1987 experimental law on villagers' committees was implemented, these organs for the most part functioned poorly or existed in name only. Township governments "typically regarded existing committees as administrative appendages."²³ The 1.3 million grassroots organizations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were also weak. In reality, few of them functioned. According to Wang Xu, writing in 1997, CCP surveys suggested that in many rural areas local Party organizations had failed to recruit a single member since the beginning of reform in 1978.²⁴

Though the authority of village cadres was unclear, they were responsible for enforcing birth control, procuring state grain and collecting taxes, in other words, doing the central government's "dirty work." They were under intense pressure from their peers in the township governments to carry out these tasks, but found it increasingly difficult to persuade villagers to comply. Average farmers were no longer dependent on village officials, as in the Mao era, when cadres exercised absolute control over peasant labor. Increased autonomy meant a greater unwillingness to obey orders, especially those deemed unreasonable. Extra fees, fines, and service charges levied by village and township officials have been a source of

²² Between 1978 and 1990 rural incomes rose from 133 yuan to 629 yuan. Tyrene White, "Reforming the Countryside," *Current History*, vol. 91, no. 566 (September 1992), p. 273.

²³ Kevin J. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform," p. 37.

²⁴ Xu Wang, "Mutual Empowerment of State and Peasantry: Grassroots Democracy in Rural China," *World Development*, vol. 25, no. 9 (September 1997), p. 1433. See also Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government," *China Journal*, no. 37 (January 1997), pp. 66-67.

serious contention in the countryside since the disbanding of the communes.²⁵ Because villages receive no public revenues from higher governmental levels, they must raise their own money, not only for taxes which are passed up the ladder to the township, county, and so on, but also for village projects, e.g. building a new school or road.²⁶

Simultaneously, economic reform provided cadres at all levels with opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities, which in turn led to widespread corruption. Rural residents became increasingly resentful and defiant of cadre power. Especially in villages with collectively-owned factories or enterprises, residents had vested interests in the management of collectively-owned enterprises and the way in which profits were used. Starting in the late 1980s, the official Chinese press reported cases of villagers' retaliation against corrupt leaders for concocting arbitrary levies and unofficial taxes. Village leaders were beaten and sometimes murdered. Riots broke out in several localities. In 1987, the journal *Liaowang* warned that peasants were in a "rebellious frame of mind" because local officials had resorted to extreme measures to fulfil the state grain quotas.²⁷ In Shandong province alone, five tax collectors were murdered and over 3500 wounded in 1989.²⁸ Four years later, the Chinese countryside witnessed 1.7 million cases of resistance, of which 6,230 were so-called disturbances that resulted in severe damage to persons or property. Nationwide, 8200 township and county officials were injured or killed, 560 county-level offices were ransacked, and 385 public security personnel lost their lives.²⁹

In sum, grass-roots political institutions were in disarray. Relations between villagers and village officials were rapidly deteriorating, leading to outbreaks of violence. Rural lawlessness was a serious problem. Arbitrary control by clans and secret societies was on the rise. With good reason, Communist Party leaders' feared that rural tensions jeopardized the Party's hold on power. A State Council report in early 1992 warned that 30 percent of the Party cells in the countryside had collapsed. Another 60 percent were extremely weak and disorganized.³⁰ From the point of view of the central government, trustworthy and competent officials were vital at the local level, not only to ensure the success of economic reforms, but

²⁵ See e.g. "Decision on Alleviating Peasants' Burdens," Xinhua Domestic Service, March 31, 1997 (translated into English by Foreign Broadcasting Information Service, FBIS-CHI-97-065).

²⁶ See e.g. Allen Choate, "Local Governance in China," talk delivered at seminar "Asian Perspectives: Focus on China," arranged by Asia Foundation in Washington D.C., March 20, 1997, p. 11.

²⁷ "Zhengque kandai shichang liangjia shangzhang wenti" [Correctly examine the rise of the grain market price], *Liaowang*, no. 8 (February 23, 1987), p.23.

²⁸ Marc Blecher, *China against the Tides* (London: Pinter, 1997), p. 219 (citing *China News Digest*, October 6, 1990).

²⁹ Elizabeth J. Perry, "Crime, Corruption and Contention," in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds., *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 314-315.

³⁰ Wang, "Mutual Empowerment," p. 1433.

also to collect grain and taxes and to supervise birth control. But village leaders were increasingly either unwilling or unable to fulfil these obligations. Grass-roots democratic reform was introduced “to cope with the crises of both legitimacy and governability in the countryside.”³¹

How the Unthinkable Became Reality

Though leaders at all levels were aware that political restructuring in the countryside was necessary to cope with the new problems brought about by decollectivization and establishment of the household responsibility system, there were substantial disagreements over what kind of grass-roots reform should be implemented. A prolonged and heated political debate preceded the approval of the experimental villagers’ committee law of 1987.³² The essence of this debate continues today as officials and researchers promoting direct elections in townships and counties struggle to win over opponents of expanding political reform.

Especially noteworthy was the strong action taken by two so-called conservative Communist Party elders in support of rural self-government and democratic elections. The issue of political reform in the countryside has confounded the usual division between so-called conservative and reformist Chinese leaders. Veteran Communists Peng Zhen and Bo Yibo, known for their conservative stands during other reform-era political debates, both believed that cadre-villager relations could be improved, and rural unrest reduced, if villagers were responsible for governing themselves and choosing their own leaders. On the other hand, Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang, considered the leading voice of political reform, opposed giving too much autonomy to the villagers because he was reportedly afraid that township officials would no longer be able to enforce state policies. With the backing of several National People’s Congress delegates, he proposed establishing village administrative offices (*cungongsuo*) under township leadership. Though he objected to democratic elections in the countryside, Zhao Ziyang advocated experimenting with political reform among educated

³¹ Ibid.

³² On the debate preceding the approval of the experimental law on villagers’ committees, see e.g. O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform,” pp. 35-41; Li and O’Brien, “The Struggle over Village Elections,” in Goldman and MacFarquhar, *The Paradox of China’s Post Mao Reforms*, pp. 131-137; and Shi, “Village Committee Elections,” pp. 387-388, 392-393.

urbanites.³³ This view was endorsed by many intellectuals versed in political theory, who held fast to the Marxist approach according to which “peasants are obstacles to democracy progressing.”³⁴

Peng Zhen’s stance was based on his personal experiences in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region where he had experimented with village elections and villagers’ councils in the late 1930s and early 1940s. His detailed report to the Politburo in September 1941 took a positive view of the usefulness of popular elections. Peng’s report said that “policies such as... popular elections had allowed the Party to penetrate into local society and increase its influence.”³⁵ Reinstating Party prestige and making village cadres more accountable to rural residents were precisely what Peng Zhen hoped to achieve with the 1987 law on villagers’ committees.³⁶ He presumed that villagers would be more willing to accept decisions made by elected cadres, which in turn would make carrying out state tasks easier. Peng Zhen also believed that self-governance would lead to the acceptance and cultivation of democratic ideas.³⁷ In the 1941 report, he says that “...if we conduct popular elections, we should seriously follow democratic principles and the spirit of rule of law in doing so... This will enable the majority of people to understand, from their own personal lives, that democratic politics is far better than authoritarian politics.”³⁸

Passage of the experimental law on villagers’ committees was but the first step in the long march undertaken by proponents of village self-governance. From the point of view of research on political change and democratization, the struggle over village elections is an enlightening example of how the “unthinkable”³⁹ was turned into reality against all odds. Tianjian Shi has charted the course and tactics of reform-minded officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the main protagonists in implementing the experimental law on villagers’

³³ Author’s interview with official at Ministry of Civil Affairs, June 8, 1999.

³⁴ Author’s interview with associate professor at Renmin Daxue (People’s University) in Beijing, Jan. 6, 1997. Author’s interview with researcher at Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) in Beijing, Jan. 7, 1997. Both interviewees used the same expression “peasants are obstacles to democracy progressing” (*nongmin shi minzhu jincheng de zhangai*). See also Shi, “Village Committee Elections,” p. 388, fn 16.

³⁵ Tony Saich, ed., *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party. Documents and Analysis* (Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 1996), p. 975. Quote from Saich’s commentary.

³⁶ For Peng Zhen’s comments on village self-government from 1982 to 1987, see “Peng Zhen tongzhi guanyu cunmin weiyuanhui jumin weiyuanhui de zhongyao jianghua” [Important Speeches by Comrade Peng Zhen on Villagers’ Committees and Residents’ Committees], mimeograph compiled and printed by Department of Basic-Level Governance, Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1990.

³⁷ Li and O’Brien, “The Struggle over Village Elections,” p. 131.

³⁸ Saich, ed. *The Rise to Power*, p. 1028. Quote from Peng’s report. In his report, Peng states that “...the representative body should be the fully empowered representative body. The administrative committees of governments at all levels or their leaders should be elected or removed by the representative bodies. The government has the duty to obey absolutely the decisions of the representative bodies...” p. 1022.

³⁹ Shi, “Village Committee Elections,” p. 388.

committees, once Peng Zhen had pushed it through the National People's Congress.⁴⁰ These officials, men in their thirties and forties, led by Wang Zhenyao, believed in incremental reform. They put into practice Huntington's "foot-in-the-door approach of concealing aims, separating reforms from each other, and pushing for only one change at a time."⁴¹ Each step in the gradual process was arranged "to appear to be a natural response to the interaction between the initial reform policy and unforeseen consequences brought about by the previous policy."⁴² To secure the crucial support and cooperation of officials in the provincial bureaus of civil affairs, the Ministry of Civil Affairs created special incentives, including trips abroad. At conferences held to explain the law on villagers' committees, ministry officials announced publicly that in provinces where elections were held according to the rules, the bureau chief would be given the opportunity to go abroad to study how self-government and elections were implemented in other countries.⁴³ Foreign travel is still today a novelty held in high esteem among Chinese officials, especially those working at the provincial level or below.

Knowing full well that any elaboration on the merits of democracy would be used by conservatives as proof of bourgeois liberalization or peaceful evolution,⁴⁴ officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs steered clear of ideological debates, stressing the practical benefits of village self-governance. In interviews and written reports they stuck to their instrumentalist theme: By encouraging villagers to take part in village affairs and allowing them to choose their own leaders, tensions between cadres and villagers would be eased, which in turn would make villages more governable.⁴⁵ After the experimental law was passed in 1987, the controversy over the pros and cons of village committee elections continued, but it was no longer confined to closed-door meetings. A lively debate took place during the 1990s in Chinese academic and legal journals, in so-called "internal newspapers" with

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 385-412. See also Li and O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections."

⁴¹ Shi, "Village Committee Elections," p. 396.

⁴² Ibid, p. iii (abstract).

⁴³ Ibid., p. 400. According to Shi, the Ministry of Civil Affairs had sent all the leaders of so-called model counties abroad by 1995 (ibid., fn 67).

⁴⁴ Bourgeois liberalization and peaceful evolution are expressions used by conservative ideologues when attacking liberals for deviating from the Marxist Leninist line and being influenced too much by Western values. Bourgeois liberalization is often mentioned as the cause of ills in society that the reforms have brought about. Peaceful evolution -- the imperialist Western world's attempt to bring down socialism by infiltrating society with Western values -- is cited by the Chinese Communist Party as one of the reasons for Communism unravelling in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. See e.g. Roderick MacFarquhar, ed. *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 340-341, 401-407, 478, 485.

⁴⁵ See e.g. Research Group on the System of Village Self-government in Rural China and the China Research Society of Basic-Level Governance, *Study on the Election of Villagers' Committees in Rural China* (Beijing: China Society Publishing House, 1994) and Cao, Guoying and Zhang, Houan, "The Villagers' Self-government in Lishu County, Jilin Province of the People's Republic of China," in *Village Elections: Democracy in Rural China. Commentaries*, p. 253-257.

restricted circulation, as well as in publications put out by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and various Communist Party organs. Numerous articles began with vivid descriptions of murders and robberies or attacks on corrupt officials.⁴⁶ Proponents of the experimental law argued that making officials accountable to villagers by introducing direct elections was the most effective way to avoid outright chaos from erupting in the countryside. “The more frequent the peasant uprisings and the more serious the problems become in the countryside, the more willing the higher authorities will be to endorse the village election process,” Wang Zhenyao said in March 1995.⁴⁷

As Daniel Kelliher has noted, the “disintegrating order” is “the backdrop alluded to in nearly all writing” on the subject of self-government.⁴⁸ Over the years, officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs enlisted researchers to conduct surveys in some of the so-called demonstration villages and model counties⁴⁹ that they set up across the country. Survey results were distributed to county officials. Glowing accounts were published about improvements in village life after the adoption of electoral reform. Describing the effects of competitive elections for the post of village chief in Xinmi county, Henan province, researcher Gao Xinjun writes: “The democratic atmosphere has been lively... Relations between officials and the people have become closer... Society has become more stable... Economic development has been very good. Finally, the fastest rate of growth in collected taxes was recorded in Xinmi in the first half of 1998.”⁵⁰

The ingenuity of the tactics employed by Wang Zhenyao and his colleagues can not be overstated. Opposition to the genuine implementation of the law on villagers’ committees was widespread. Incumbent village chiefs were not eager to measure their popularity in open elections; township officials feared that they would no longer hold the same power over elected village officials as they had over appointed ones; county officials worried that elected village leaders would be uncontrollable and would not fulfil their duties to the state. Before

⁴⁶ For a list of some of these articles, see Linda Jakobson, *A Million Truths. A Decade in China* (New York: M.Evans, 1998), p. 310 (fn 2).

⁴⁷ Jakobson, *A Million Truths*, p. 132-133.

⁴⁸ Kelliher, “The Chinese Debate,” p. 67.

⁴⁹ During the period from 1990 to 1995, 63 counties, 3917 towns and 82,266 villages were set up as demonstration sites (Jiang Wandu, “Grassroots Democracy Taking Root,” *Beijing Review*, March 11-17, 1996). In mid-1999 there were over 300 so-called model counties (author’s interview by telephone with Wang Zhenyao, August 23, 1999).

⁵⁰ Gao Xinjun, “Woguo xian xiang liang ji zhengzhi tizhi gaige de shuguang -- Henan sheng Xinmi shi cunji minzhu zhengzhi zhidu jianshe diaocha [Dawn of the Reform of the Political System at the Two Levels of County and Township in our Country - Survey on the Establishment of the Democratic Political System at the Village Level in Xinmi City, Henan Province],” *Jingji shehui tizhi bijiao*, no. 6 (1998), p. 12. Xinmi is not a ministry-designated model county. A research project focusing on system of governance was conducted in Xinmi county in 1996 by a team led by Professors Rong Jiben and Cui Zhiyuan with the funding of the Ford Foundation.

1990, when the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party endorsed the experimental law on villagers' committees, some county leaders even threatened officials who contemplated implementation of the law with disciplinary action.⁵¹ A few provincial leaders told Wang Zhenyao that village elections were "too much of a bother."⁵² Wang interpreted their words to mean that these leaders were not willing to put their authority on the line to persuade dubious, and in some cases vehemently opposed, county officials to introduce electoral reform.⁵³

Foreigners Had a Role of Their Own

Foreign journalists, scholars, and foundations have also played a role in the political struggle over village elections. Once pilot projects had been established and a first round of elections was held in demonstration villages, the Ministry of Civil Affairs decided to enlist the support of foreigners for their mammoth project. First and foremost, the ministry needed money to train hundreds of thousands of officials to organize multi-candidate elections. Materials explaining the law on villagers' committees had to be printed. Funding was also necessary to arrange conferences to compare the electoral experiences of different provinces. It is important to bear in mind that the process of implementing the law on villagers' committees has been -- and continues to be -- a gigantic educational undertaking.

In 1993, the Ford Foundation provided the first foreign grant. Since then, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has received financial support from the International Republican Institute, Asia Foundation, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Carter Center for Democracy and the European Union, among others. As of 1992, the Ministry of Civil Affairs has arranged for foreign observer teams to witness villagers' committee elections.⁵⁴ When Wang Zhenyao took to inviting foreign journalists along on his tours to the provinces a few years later, Chinese village elections became a popular subject in newspapers and scholarly

⁵¹ Author's interview with Wang Zhenyao in Beijing, January 3, 1997.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ For more about imperfect policy implementation in China, see e.g. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform," p. 33; and Melanie Manion, "Policy Implementation in the People's Republic of China: Authoritative Decisions versus Individual Interests," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2 (May 1991), p. 253-279.

⁵⁴ Individual researchers, e.g. Tyrene White, conducted field work on village elections before 1992.

journals worldwide.⁵⁵ On the whole, “village democracy,” as the self-government reform has been dubbed in the West, has drawn approving and cautiously enthusiastic comments.⁵⁶

Financial support was not the only reason the Ministry of Civil Affairs wanted to arouse foreign interest in the electoral reform. Proponents of the villagers’ committees law also used the favorable publicity as ammunition in debates with their opponents, claiming that the elections were improving China’s international image and useful in countering foreign criticism of China’s human rights record.⁵⁷ Such claims were not entirely groundless. Accounts of villagers voting corrupt leaders out of office offer a distinctly different kind of image of the goings-on in China than reports of arms proliferation, forced abortions, dissident detentions and arbitrary justice, to mention a few of the issues which receive attention in Western media coverage of China. Several Western heads of state, including Bill Clinton, have been quoted praising China’s elections.

Wang Zhenyao offers another reason why the interest of foreign journalists and scholars was important. Foreigners “did not automatically reject the notion of democratic reform taking place in the countryside.”⁵⁸ They were willing (and eager) to go to villages and see for themselves. Not only the intellectuals, with their knowledge of political theory, but the vast majority of Chinese urban residents were -- and still are -- extremely skeptical about peasants being intellectually capable of governing themselves, let alone understanding principles of democracy.⁵⁹

A huge gulf separates urban and rural Chinese. In 1995, preparing to observe elections for the first time in Liaoning, I was warned by Beijing friends: “Now don’t go thinking that genuine elections are being held in the countryside. It’s all just put on for your benefit... How could country bumpkins possibly understand anything about democracy?”⁶⁰ As late as 1999, when several top Chinese leaders had endorsed the grassroots-level

⁵⁵ When the author and a group of other Western journalists accompanied Wang Zhenyao to Liaoning in March 1999, the foreign visitors’ presence made news in the local media. The reason for the trip – villagers’ committee elections – was mentioned in passing.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Frank Gibney, “Breaking New Ground in Farm Country,” *Newsweek*, February 15, 1993; Lincoln Kaye, “Flourishing Grassroots: Village-Level Democracy Blooms,” *Far East Economic Review*, January 19, 1995; Steven Mufson, “China Dabbles in Democracy to Run Village, Reform Party,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 1995; Anthony Spaeth, “Surprise: Democracy is Taking Root in China Too,” *Time*, April 1, 1996; and “China’s grassroots democracy,” *Economist*, November 2, 1996.

⁵⁷ See e.g. Kelliher, “The Chinese Debate,” pp. 75-77; and Shi, “Village Committee Elections,” p. 407. Kelliher points out that the value of village elections as a tool for improving China’s international image was not initially a motivation of self-government, but “something proponents stumbled upon” after the experimental law was passed.

⁵⁸ Author’s interview with Wang Zhenyao in Beijing, September 19, 1998.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Kelliher, “The Chinese Debate,” p. 80; and Li and O’Brien, “The Struggle over Village Elections,” p. 136.

⁶⁰ Jakobson, *A Million Truths*, p. 131.

governance reform in public, a mid-level official affiliated with the National People's Congress retorted at an official lunch, "Teaching democracy to peasants is like playing the piano to cows!"⁶¹ County and township officials, who seldom have contact with foreigners, were both surprised and honored when foreigners arrived to witness electoral proceedings. In some cases, according to Wang Zhenyao, foreign interest woke local officials to the idea that perhaps elections are worthy and important after all. Similarly, articles published abroad on the subject of village elections evoked interest among hitherto doubtful Chinese researchers.

The way in which village elections were called to the attention of President Jiang Zemin is an illuminating example of how foreigners can be used in political struggles in China. When the Carter Center delegation visited China in 1996, one of the many topics discussed by delegation members and officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs was the status of the experimental law and the efforts being made to have the law made permanent by the National People's Congress. Ministry officials mentioned that public endorsement of the experimental law by China's top leadership would be beneficial to the cause. At that point, Jiang Zemin had not commented in public on competitive village elections. Ministry officials presumed it possible that he had not been properly briefed about the progress of the grassroots-level governance reform.⁶²

Ministry officials let it be known that a statement by the Carter Center's founder, former United States president Jimmy Carter, might be advantageous.⁶³ When the delegation returned to the United States, Jimmy Carter wrote a letter on behalf of the Center to President Jiang Zemin, praising the delegation's experiences. Jiang Zemin, reportedly taken by surprise, promptly requested a thorough report on the implementation of the experimental law on villagers' committees.⁶⁴ On his next trips to the provinces he inquired about village elections, asking local officials about implementation of the law in their area. According to an official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, "after that, local leaders had no choice than to start taking the self-government reform seriously."⁶⁵ Since then, several Chinese leaders have given their full support to villagers' committees elections. Even the conservative Li Peng, upon becoming Chairman of the National People's Congress, "started to hold high the banner

⁶¹ Author's interview on June 18, 1999 with a guest at the lunch, held in Beijing on June 18, 1999.

⁶² Author's interview with official at Ministry of Civil Affairs, June 8, 1999. The interviewee stressed that though top leaders, including Jiang Zemin, had spoken publicly about the importance of strengthening the work of grass-roots organizations they had not specifically mentioned competitive villagers' committee elections.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

of village elections.”⁶⁶ It is evident that also the Chinese leadership has come to realize the public relations value of grass-roots democracy in the international arena.

What Have Been the Consequences?

What have been the consequences of political reform at the village level?

One direct consequence is the increased emphasis on accountability and transparency in village governance. Several sources indicate that elected village cadres are more accountable to villagers than appointed cadres.⁶⁷ The public posting of village finances has become the norm in villages where the grassroots-level governance reform has been implemented. The practice of requiring officials to regularly make public reports on the management of village funds and a whole range of policy measures is becoming institutionalized through local laws and regulations. (Article 22 of the law on villagers’ committees requires publicizing financial issues every six months.) As one villager in Liaoning put it: “Elected officials have a harder time pocketing our money or dining and wining at our expense now that all the figures are put up on the village notice board.”⁶⁸ This, in turn, is beginning to have an effect on township governance; not only ordinary villagers but also village officials have demanded the right to know how township funds are being used.⁶⁹ Irrational investment projects are protested; new roads and health clinics are demanded. Elections have also helped to curb corruption. Officials appointed by the township government did not have to worry about what villagers thought about them. Elected ones do. Officials known to demand bribes are simply voted out of office. In villages where elections remain a formality, the necessity of going through the electoral process every three years has at least made officials more aware of their public image.⁷⁰ Even an unopposed candidate can lose face by receiving a large amount of blank ballots.

⁶⁶ Author’s interview with Wang Zhenyao, September 19, 1998.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Yue Yan and Zhen Hai, “China: System of Self-Rule by Village Explained,” *Renmin Ribao* [People’s Daily], November 20, 1997, p. 9 (FBIS-CHI-97-358); Kelliher, “The Chinese Debate,” p. 75; and Li and O’Brien, “The Struggle over Village Elections,” pp. 140-143.

⁶⁸ Author’s interview in Liaoning, March 1995.

⁶⁹ Author’s interviews with township official in Liaoning, March 1995.

⁷⁰ White, “Reforming the Countryside,” p. 274.

To the surprise of many doubtful local leaders, elected village chiefs have faithfully executed state policies. Subsequently, some of the previously suspicious township and county officials began to support village elections. Many articles provide statistics showing that the governance reform results in higher fulfillment of grain quotas, more taxes and fewer breaches of the family planning regulations.⁷¹ No doubt this is the main reason that the central government approved of the experimental law being given permanent status.

For example, in Fujian province, a pioneer in villagers' committee elections, 99 percent of 1200 villages surveyed in 1994 had fulfilled their grain procurement quotas; 92 percent had not exceeded their birth targets; and 82 percent had paid their taxes.⁷² It is well to remember that elected village officials have no power to change central government directives. They only have the authority to find the best means possible to implement them. But villagers are more willing to accept policies when they feel that they are being carried out fairly. Elected leaders have proven more impartial than appointed leaders. In addition, elected officials, who rely on villagers' votes, are less apt to accept demands of extra levies or taxes from bullying township officials. Elected village officials have a greater degree of independence than appointed ones vis-à-vis township officials and have no need to "bow and scrape" before them. As one township official lamented, "Before I was served a good meal, and sent off with a few gifts, when I visited the villages. No longer."⁷³

Another clear consequence of self-governance reform is the political activation of rural residents.⁷⁴ Initially, most residents in so-called demonstration villages were extremely skeptical about the electoral reform. Only after the first or second round did they realize that they truly were empowered to vote unpopular, incompetent and corrupt leaders out of office. In many places ordinary villagers took the initiative to draw up more detailed election rules and were quick to lodge complaints with township or county officials about any breaches of

⁷¹ Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate," p. 74 (fn 46); see also e.g. Rong Jiben *et al.*, *Cong yali xing tizhi xiang minzhu hezuo tizhi de zhuanbian* [Transformation of the Pressurized System to the Democratic System of Cooperation] (Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe, 1998), pp. 408-412; and Li and O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," pp. 140-141.

⁷² "Cunweihui yi xianshi chu qi shengmingli: cunweihui zuzhifa diaocha baogao zhi yi" [Villagers Have Already Demonstrated Their Vitality: Investigative Report on the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees], *Zhongguo dalu yanjiu jiaoxue tongxun*, no. 10 (1995), p. 16.

⁷³ Author's interview in Zibo, Shandong, September 1996.

⁷⁴ The noticeable increase in villagers' political activation has been pointed out in nearly every interview related to village elections which the author has conducted since 1995 with officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs and researchers who have acted as consultants to the Ministry's Department of Grassroots Administration (in charge of the grassroots-level governance reform). In addition, villagers and township officials have mentioned it during the author's research trips to Liaoning, Shandong and Fujian provinces. See also e.g. Sylvia Chan, "Research Notes on Villagers' Committee Election: Chinese-style democracy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 7, no. 19 (November 1998), p. 519.

the law on villagers' committees.⁷⁵ Word of competitive elections spread to other villages, creating a snowball effect.⁷⁶ According to officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs and researchers working on rural affairs, actions taken by ordinary villagers have been a decisive factor in the struggle over village elections. By persistently pressuring higher officials and demanding that elections be carried out according to the law, rural residents have advanced the reform process.

Those who are skeptical about grassroots-level governance reform are quick to point out that the village Party secretary, not the village chief, is the most influential person in the village. These claims, in part, are true, though the situation varies greatly from place to place. In some provinces the villagers' committee, headed by the village chief, is in charge of the village's economy, while in others the village Party branch makes the decisions about industry-related issues and the villagers' committee is responsible for agriculture. There are also villages in which power is concentrated in the hands of one man, who serves as both village chief and Party secretary. According to officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the authority of the village chief has increased in places where competitive elections are the norm. When a conflict has arisen between the village chief and the Party secretary, the elected village chief has been known to defend his position by saying, "The residents of this village have chosen me for this job. Next time, you can stand for elections."⁷⁷ The distribution of power between the village chief and Party secretary is not entirely clear. According to article 3 of the law on villagers' committees, "the rural grassroots unit of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) should work under the Charter of the CCP and play a core role in leadership."⁷⁸ This expression is routinely used when referring to the Party's role in official statements. The Communist Party is not mentioned in any of the other 29 articles, while the rights and responsibilities of the villagers' committee are spelled out in relative detail.

The Party has not, however, remained immune to the effects of grassroots-level governance reform. The notion of competitive elections with secret balloting is spreading to

⁷⁵ For example in Fujian, 4331 complaints about election irregularities were made following the 1997 elections. Of these complaints, 86.2 percent were dealt with (Bai Gang, "1998-1999: Zhongguo cunmin zizhi buru guifanhua fazhan xin jueguan," in *Shihui lanpinshu: 1999 Zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce* [Blue Book of Society: 1999 Analysis and Forecast of the State of Chinese Society] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1999), p. 182.

⁷⁶ See e.g. *Zhongguo nongcun cunmin weiyuanhui huanjie zhidu* [The system of change of office and elections in China's rural village committees] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1994), pp. 78-79. The use of the word 'snowball' derives from a comment by Wang Zhenyao; "Building democracy is like rolling snowballs" (author's interview with Wang Zhenyao, January 3, 1997).

⁷⁷ Jakobson, *A Million Truths*, p. 129.

⁷⁸ See English translation of the law (http://www.emory.edu/CARTER_CENTER/CHINA/online.law.htm).

the Party itself. Though Party secretaries are usually appointed by the township Party branch, Party members in several villages have demanded -- and on occasion been granted -- the right to choose the village Party secretary by voting among themselves.⁷⁹ The Shanxi Province Party Organization Department has gone a step further, promoting a two-ballot system with which Party secretaries are elected.⁸⁰ In the first round, all villagers -- not only Party members -- participate in choosing the candidates for the post of Party secretary, after which only Party members vote for the final choice. This is revolutionary because it opens the decision-making process of internal Party matters to participation by non-members. On the other hand, according to Lianjiang Li, who did fieldwork in Shanxi province, township leaders face fewer complaints than they did in the past, and villagers have "secured a measure of control over the key political figure in the village."⁸¹

Lastly, and as far as the political development of the nation is concerned, perhaps the most significant consequence of villagers' committee elections is the demand brewing in townships that the township head should be elected by direct competitive elections. In interviews conducted in June 1999, researchers involved with political reform and officials working in the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Council expressed their belief that the pressure from below is enormous, though the Chinese Communist Party leadership has forbidden direct multi-candidate elections at the township level.

The officials of one township took the law into their own hands in December 1998 and arranged direct, relatively competitive elections for the post of township head. A man by the name of Tan Xiaoqiu became the first township head on the Chinese mainland to be chosen by the ballots of the township's residents. According to the law, the township people's congress should elect the township head. In practice, the township Party committee often appoints the sole candidate.

The township in question, Buyun, an administrative part of Shizhong district (*qu*) in Suining city (*shi*) in Sichuan province, is small by Chinese standards. There are only 16,000 inhabitants in Buyun, while a large Chinese township can have a population of 100,000. There are altogether 37 townships in Shizhong district with a total population of 1.37

⁷⁹ Jakobson, *A Million Truths*, p. 129.

⁸⁰ Lianjiang Li, "The Two Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Party Secretaries to a Popular Vote," *China Journal*, no. 42 (July 1999), pp. 103-118.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

million.⁸² The plans for the election were kept secret from higher authorities until a few days before the voting was due to take place. Officials in Suining reportedly gave their quiet consent to the experiment upon being notified.⁸³ Though several Chinese observers were enthusiastic in their comments about the Buyun election, it is important to note that the primary election was not as open as in villagers' committee elections in which the *haixuan* - method of nominating candidates is used.

In Buyun, the township Party committee was allowed to nominate directly one of the three final candidates. The remaining two finalists were decided by a 162-person selection committee comprised of township officials and the village chiefs, village assembly chairmen and three representatives from each of the ten villages belonging to Buyun. Candidacy was open to one and all, the only prerequisite being endorsements from 30 residents of Buyun. From the start, there were 15 contenders for the position of township head, including several of the top township leaders. Before the selection committee voted, all of the candidates were asked about their backgrounds and plans to develop the township. Based on the selection committee's vote, a schoolteacher (who is not a Party member) and a village chief (who is) were named final candidates. They beat all the so-called township official corps. The township Party committee nominated Tan Xiaoqiu, a township official who was Buyun's deputy Party Secretary, as their candidate. During a ten-day campaign period, the three final candidates participated in 13 public debates, answering voters' questions. The campaign activities were reminiscent of "an American election campaign with candidates and their entourages travelling from place to place."⁸⁴ On election day, 6236 of the 11,349 registered voters of Buyun cast their ballots in the pouring rain at 11 polling stations. The Party's candidate, Tan Xiaoqiu, received a total of 3,130 votes (50,19% of votes cast) which was 1135 more votes than the village chief received. According to the rules, if Tan had received 12 votes less, there would have had to be a run-off between him and the village chief.

The Buyun election became public knowledge two weeks later when a Guangdong newspaper, *Nanfang Zhoumo*, with a circulation of about 200,000, published a conspicuous report of the event.⁸⁵ The article, accompanied by photos, explained the electoral process in

⁸² Report on the Buyun township head election compiled by China Elections Watch, in collaboration with the Carter Center for Democracy (<http://www.gpc.peachnet.edu/~yliu/watch/local.htm>).

⁸³ Author's interview with official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, June 8, 1999.

⁸⁴ Author's interview with researcher at an institute under the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Beijing, June 14, 1999. Both researchers and local officials in China often allude to American campaign practices in their descriptions of the electoral process in villages and, in this case, a township.

⁸⁵ "Zhi xuan xiangzhang," *Nanfang zhoumo* [Southern Weekend], January 15, 1999, p. 2.

detail and described the township residents' enthusiasm for direct elections. The central government reacted swiftly. Four days later, the mouthpiece of the Ministry of Justice, *Faxue Ribao*, published an editorial, "Democracy Should Not Overstep the Law," stating that the Buyun election "violated the Constitution and other laws."⁸⁶ Though the editorial's message was clear, its tone was gentle,⁸⁷ especially compared to the harsh language used to condemn so-called counter-revolutionaries or other "instigators of instability." The editorial pointed out that laws can be revised and that "there is no need for us to criticize too much the direct election" in Buyun township.⁸⁸

Another sign that the Communist Party top leadership was not unanimous on how to deal with the Buyun issue and did not want to -- at least publicly -- embark on a headlong confrontation with proponents of direct elections, was that the elections results in Buyun were not annulled.⁸⁹ As far as officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs knew, no one was punished because of the Buyun case,⁹⁰ though a *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily) reporter, who visited the township after the election, predicted that the initiator of the Buyun election, Zheng Jinping, had forfeited her chances of being promoted.⁹¹ Zheng, the Party Secretary of Shi Zhong district, is known as a "sharp-minded official in her forties."⁹² Daughter of a respected veteran Communist, she reportedly wanted Buyun to go down in history as the first place in China to arrange direct township head elections and be remembered in the same way that Xiaogangcun village in Anhui province is always mentioned as the place where farmers took the initiative in the late 1970s to start the household-responsibility system on their own. Scholars remain divided as to what degree the central government's adoption of the dramatic economic reforms in the countryside was part of a coherent plan or an inevitable result of pressure from below, i.e. farmers' demands.⁹³

⁸⁶ "Minzhu bu neng chaoyue falu," *Fazhi Ribao* [Legal Daily], 19.1.1999.

⁸⁷ Eric Ekholm, "Beijing Asks That an Electoral 'First' Also Be a Last," *International Herald Tribune*, January 27, 1999.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ A further indication that the degree with which Chinese top leaders opposed the Buyun election varied was the airing of a 15 minute documentary about the Buyun election on February 26, 1999 by the official China Central Television (CCTV). According to the *South China Morning Post*, "the footage, part of the Golden Land show on channel two, was transmitted four weeks after the State Press and Publication Administration and propaganda departments ordered a media blackout on the [Buyun] election." Though the documentary did not include official comments from any leaders, a researcher of the Legislative Affairs Commission of the National People's Congress was quoted as saying that the election "reflected a positive direction of rural democracy." CCTV officials reportedly consulted the Propaganda and Organization departments of the Central Committee and were given permission to air the program ("Beijing indicates recognition of landmark election," *South China Morning Post*, March 1, 1999).

⁹⁰ Author's interview with official at Ministry of Civil Affairs, June 8, 1999.

⁹¹ Author's interview with senior reporter at *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily] in Beijing, June 10, 1999.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ See e.g. Thomas Bernstein, "Farmer Discontent and Regime Responses," in Goldman and MacFarquhar, eds. *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, pp. 204-207; and David Zweig, "Rural People, the Politicians, and Power," *The China Journal*, no. 38 (July 1997), pp. 153-168.

At least two other townships experimented during the first half of 1999 with direct elections for the post of township head. However, in neither of them were citizens given as much power to influence the final outcome as in Buyun. In Zhuoli township, Shanxi province, the process of selecting the candidates “left a lot to be desired.”⁹⁴ Voters were given a choice of three established township officials, all of whom had previously held leadership positions. In Dapeng township, in Shenzhen, a double-ballot system was used. Residents first cast their ballots in a preliminary election to determine the most popular candidates. Then the deputies of the township’s people’s congress voted on the top two candidates, determining the final township head. In both Zhuoli and Dapeng, candidates had to be endorsed by the township Party committee before being eligible to run.⁹⁵

In March 1999, a proposed revision of the law on the election of a township head was submitted by the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference to the National People’s Congress’s committee on legislative work (*falu gongzuo weiyuanhui*). Bai Gang, one of the scholars who drew up the proposal, expected the proposal to be rejected and returned with the comment: “Your suggestions were very interesting, but at present, conditions are not yet suitable to revise the law.”⁹⁶ In June 1999, Bai Gang predicted that direct elections of the township head would be permitted in 15 to 20 years.⁹⁷ Wang Zhenyao was more optimistic. He believed that within five years the central government would allow experimenting with direct elections in predesignated townships.⁹⁸ According to Tony Saich, “what is crucial is that everybody believes that it [direct township elections] will take place at some point. The process has already been set in motion.”⁹⁹ Several scholars foresee significant political reform taking place, at the earliest, after 2002, when the term of present Party Secretary Jiang Zemin comes to an end.

⁹⁴ Author’s interview with Wang Zhenyao, June 5, 1999.

⁹⁵ Ibid. See also “Historic township vote in Shenzhen,” *South China Morning Post*, April 30, 1999.

⁹⁶ Author’s interview with Bai Gang, June 9, 1999.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Author’s interview with Wang Zhenyao, June 5, 1999.

⁹⁹ Author’s interview with Tony Saich, Ford Foundation’s China Director, in Beijing, June 10, 1999.

From the point of view of the Communist Party, permitting direct elections for the post of township head would mean forfeiting a substantial portion of genuine power. There are about 47,100 townships in China. Township heads have the authority to make considerably more critical financial decisions than village chiefs. Though the township Party secretary wields more power than the township head, pressure would rapidly mount to change the process of nominating the township Party secretary as well, to make it as open as the election of township head. Then it would only be a matter of time before direct elections at the county level would be demanded.

When the Buyun election became public, Jiang Zemin reportedly gave explicit instructions to prohibit any mention of direct township elections in the media and to forbid them in practice.¹⁰⁰ It is highly unlikely that he will change his stance during his term as Party Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. In the words of one Party member working for the State Council, “Jiang and the other top leaders fear that all the Party members would be voted out of office” if such elections were allowed.¹⁰¹ This assertion, however, might not necessarily hold true. To quote Bai Gang, “ordinary citizens do not distinguish between people on the basis of Party membership when they contemplate who should be a leader. They want fair, honest, and competent people as decision-makers.”¹⁰²

In the townships, Party members are often the best educated and the most experienced in administrative work. Also, as Bai Gang and several other researchers point out, even after direct township elections are allowed, the central government will almost certainly continue to restrict the nomination process. The chances for candidates who are not members of the Communist Party to make it to the final round will remain slim. Even in the proposal of Bai Gang and his colleagues, considered progressive in the People’s Republic, a 9- to 15-member selection committee would decide which two candidates go to the final round. Though the proposal would allow non-Party members to be candidates, it suggested barring anyone who, for example, opposes China’s family planning policy.¹⁰³

An even more compelling reason for the top leadership to fear direct township elections is that these elections would encourage political activism on a much larger scale

¹⁰⁰ Author’s interview with official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, June 8, 1999. See also “Media blackout ordered on poll,” *South China Morning Post*, January 31, 1999.

¹⁰¹ Author’s interview in Beijing with researcher working in an organization directly under the State Council, June 14, 1999.

¹⁰² Author’s interview with Bai Gang, June 9, 1999.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

than in villages. Elections naturally cause people to organize, if not into new parties (forbidden by law), then at least into ad hoc lobbying groups. Campaigns would inevitably precipitate large-scale gatherings, which could turn into protest meetings. The leadership's sensitivity to any organization outside Communist Party control was evident when it banned the Falun Gong movement in July 1999. Though the vast majority of Falun Gong followers are known to be apolitical, their web-like organization of general offices, teaching stations and practice areas is looked upon by China's leaders as potential breeding ground for political opposition.¹⁰⁴

Long-Term Implications

In the long-term, the grass-roots governance reform has far-reaching implications. For all its flaws, the reform is institutionalizing a system of checks and balances at the grass-roots level. The leadership of the Communist Party has conceded that the most effective weapon in the struggle against despotism and corruption is the ballot box, implicitly acknowledging that leaders chosen directly by the people are more effective than appointed ones. The Party has also accepted that a person who does not belong to the Communist Party is eligible to lead his or her community. These are fundamentally important principles upon which open-minded officials and researchers can base their arguments when pushing for more substantial political reform.

At least one hundred million Chinese have now gained personal experiences of what direct multi-candidate elections entail in practice. Using the most pessimistic estimates, presuming that fair and competitive elections have been arranged in only 10 to 20 percent of China's villages, it means that 86 to 172 million Chinese have already been exposed to the inner workings of a democratic electoral process.¹⁰⁵ Several hundred million more have at least some idea of how meaningful elections should be held. Mechanisms for the implementation of democratic rule are being put into place "to await the day that they are

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Linda Jakobson, "China's Real Crisis is a Loss of Faith," *Washington Post*, August 1, 1999.

¹⁰⁵ These calculations are based on statistics provided by the State Statistical Bureau, according to which 70.9 percent of the population, i.e. 859 million people, officially resided in the countryside in 1995. Consequently, ten percent of the rural population is roughly 86 million; 20 percent is 172 million. State Statistical Bureau, *China Statistical Yearbook 1997* (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1997), p. 69.

needed.”¹⁰⁶ Giving villagers a genuine choice is unprecedented in Chinese history.

As Wang Zhenyao points out, “Less than ten years ago, running for office (*jingxuan*) was a dirty word, as was “democracy” (*minzhu*).¹⁰⁷ Today, the pros and cons of elections and democracy are discussed at all levels of the Chinese Communist Party. At the Fifteenth Party Congress in September 1997, Jiang Zemin declared that by the middle of the next century when the People's Republic celebrates its centenary, “China will have become a prosperous, strong, democratic and culturally advanced socialist country.”¹⁰⁸ Though he has avoided specifying what he means by “democratic,” by talking about China eventually evolving into a democracy Jiang Zemin has helped to make “democracy” a “word of acceptable currency” among both leaders and populace.¹⁰⁹ The notion that rulers need to be made accountable has not only become part of Chinese official discourse; laws are being passed to institutionalize methods that force transparency upon ways of governing.

The cautious steps taken by the Chinese leadership in recent years to establish a rule of law have increased the pressure from below to open up the political process to mass participation. By passing legions of new laws and then spreading knowledge of their content through the media, the government has promoted the concept of a citizen's rights. As a result -- and also because of the flow of information streaming in from abroad -- Chinese in both urban and rural areas are more aware of their legal and civil rights than ever before.

Since enforcement of the Administrative Litigation Law in 1990, citizens from all walks of life have seized the opportunity to bring suit against government officials for legal violations and grossly unfair procedures. The media regularly carry reports about ordinary farmers and workers who file legal complaints and seek protection against despotism and arbitrary justice. “Rightful resistance,” to use a term coined by Kevin O'Brien, is becoming a legitimate model of behavior when leaders do not follow their own rules.¹¹⁰ In 1993, the central government actually openly encouraged rural residents to resist officials who abuse their power, by clearly stating in the law on agriculture that farmers have the “right to refuse”

¹⁰⁶ Author's interview with social scientist at Beijing University (Beijing Daxue) on June 4, 1999.

¹⁰⁷ Author's interview with Wang Zhenyao, June 5, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Jiang Zemin's report at the Fifteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, delivered on September 12, 1997, was translated by the English-language official newspaper, *China Daily*, and is available on the Internet (<http://www.chinadaily.net/cndy/history/15/fulltext.html>).

¹⁰⁹ Michel Oksenberg, “Will China Democratize? Confronting a Classic Dilemma,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 9, no. 1 (January 1998), p. 28.

¹¹⁰ Kevin O'Brien, “Rightful Resistance,” *World Politics*, vol. 49, no. 1 (October 1996), p. 33.

unauthorized fees and taxes.¹¹¹ According to the law on villagers' committees, one fifth of a village's residents can jointly file a petition and request a recall of a member of the villagers' committee. After the person being recalled is given a chance to appeal, the villagers should vote on the matter. If more than 50 percent of the village's eligible voters agree with the recall, the villagers' committee member in question loses his or her job.¹¹² This principle too has profound implications.

The loosening of political control, coupled with a rights consciousness, has led to the emergence of what could be called "sanctioned outspokenness." Against all odds, a growing number of Chinese dares to confront the authorities with the words, "According to the law I have the right to..." For decades, repeating the Party line was the safest way to stay out of trouble in the People's Republic. It still is, but because political, economical and social institutions are in a state of perpetual flux, the boundaries between the permissible and forbidden have become blurred. Armed with texts of official laws, which are unquestionably sanctioned, Chinese are becoming all the more adept at challenging preconceived norms. Only by trial and error can one know with certainty where the boundary line of the forbidden lies in Chinese society today. Consequently, urban residents, pointing to the law which empowers villagers to choose their own leaders and to throw incumbents out of office, have begun to ask, "If farmers are capable of self-rule, then why aren't we?"

Were the main elements of the law on villagers' committees to be applied to all levels of government, the relationship between rulers and citizens in China would be greatly transformed. The Party does not deny this. Commenting on the law of villagers' committees, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party claims that the "implementation of this democratic supervision system has put an end once and for all to the past practice whereby only cadres could supervise the masses, and has made it possible for the masses to supervise not only themselves but cadres as well. Today, this system has also become a major measure for promoting the building of clean and honest administration in rural areas."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Thomas P. Bernstein, "Farmer Discontent and Regime Responses," in Goldman and MacFarquhar, *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms*, p. 214.

¹¹² See English translation of the law (http://www.emory.edu/CARTER_CENTER/CHINA/online.law.htm).

¹¹³ "System of Self-Rule Explained," *Renmin Ribao*, November 20, 1997 (FBIS-CHI-97-358).

Several scholars of Chinese politics have noted the utilitarian approach that Chinese leaders, from the top down, have towards the concept of democracy.¹¹⁴ Democratic institutions are not regarded as ends in themselves. Rather, they are weighed by assessing their effectiveness in enhancing China's quest for wealth, power and stability or dealing with the pressing problems of corruption, lawlessness and inequality. Corruption is a major cause of the growing protests and a prime threat to the Party's legitimacy. Even the authorities acknowledge that corruption is "worse than at any other period since New China was founded in 1949. It has spread to the Party, government, administration and every part of society, including politics, economy, ideology and culture."¹¹⁵ So far, competitive elections have been praised in the official media above all as a means of curbing corruption and making leaders more accountable for their actions. For this reason, corruption might well be the catalyst that could entice the top leadership to voluntarily agree to direct township elections.

Over the past two decades, the character of Chinese politics has been slowly but steadily transforming. Dramatic social changes and rising official corruption have weakened the state's control. Marxist-Leninist ideology has taken a back seat, having lost its appeal among the populace. As a result, the Chinese system is in a permanent crisis of legitimacy. Violent protests are becoming commonplace.¹¹⁶ Growing social unrest will, at some point, force the Communist Party leadership to choose between continuing to repress dissent or seeking to bolster the regime's legitimacy by broadening opportunities for political participation. Though using brutal force to control disgruntled citizens is the more likely scenario, village elections have provided ample training ground for increased democracy to be a feasible option.

¹¹⁴ See e.g. Harry Harding, "Will China Democratize? The Road from Socialism," in *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 9, no. 1 (January 1998), p. 15. Associate Professor Jia Qingguo of Beijing University notes that "people want China to change so that we can be equal with the West and discard our second-class citizen status. If Western style procedural democracy does not bring China that longed-for equality, it will not appeal to the Chinese." Author's interview with Jia Qingguo in Beijing, June 9, 1999.

¹¹⁵ Perry, "Crime, Corruption and Contentment," p. 313. Quote by Deputy Procurator-General Liang Guoqing in 1993.

¹¹⁶ More than 5,000 protests took place in Chinese cities and the countryside in 1998, according to Communist Party sources. Bomb explosions are also becoming more frequent in China. During the first two weeks of 1999, the state-run media reported bomb attacks that killed more than 21 people ("Beijing's Law and Order Problem," *International Herald Tribune*, January 19, 1999). At least eight people were killed when a bomb went off outside the county government office in Yizhang, Hunan province on January 25, 1999, according to the evening newspaper, *Yangcheng Wanbao*. Moreover, in Daolin township near the provincial capital of Changsha, thousands of farmers held a series of protests in early January against what they perceived to be excessive taxes levied by corrupt officials. One protestor bled to death when police dispersed the crowd, using clubs and tear gas ("Bomb Kills 8 in China, But Beijing Remains Silent," *International Herald Tribune*, January 29, 1999).