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

Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li

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

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

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

Origins

The earliest villagers’ committees emerged in two Guangxi counties (Yishan and Luocheng) in late 1980 and early 1981. Formed without the knowledge of local authorities, these somewhat makeshift organizations were created by village elders, former cadres and community-minded villagers. Their purpose was to address a decline in social order and a broader political crisis that was fast becoming apparent as family farming took hold and brigades and production teams stopped functioning. At this early stage, VCs were called “leadership groups for village public security” (*cun zhian lingdao xiaozu*) or “village management committees” (*cun guan hui*). The term “villagers’ committee” (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) only

* For generous financial support, we would like to thank the Asia Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, The Research and Writing Program of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Pacific Cultural Foundation, and the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong.

1. For remarks by President Jiang Zemin, see *Renmin ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 19 October 1998, p. 1.

appeared in Luocheng county in spring 1981. Within a matter of months, county administrators in Yishan and Luocheng had reported this development to their superiors in Hechi prefecture and had recommended its popularization. The prefectural Party committee then decided to establish VCs throughout the region and reported its plan to the provincial government, which in turn reported it to Beijing.²

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

2. Yu Xiangyang, "Woguo nongmin de weida chuangu" ("A great invention of Chinese peasants"), *Kexue shehuizhuyi cankao ziliao* (*Reference Materials on Scientific Socialism*), No. 14 (1984), pp. 26–27; also *Guangxi ribao* (*Guangxi Daily*), 30 December 1987, p. 3. For more on these early experiments, see Wang Zhongtian, "Zhongguo nongcun de jiceng minzhu fazhan yu nongmin de minzhu quanli baozhang" ("The development of grassroots democracy in the Chinese countryside and the guarantee of farmers' democratic rights"), paper presented at the Conference on the Construction of Village-Level Organizations in Mainland China, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 8–9 October 1998, p. 1. For brief mentions of Luocheng and Yishan, see Amy B. Epstein, "Village elections in China: experimenting with democracy," in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *China's Economic Future*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 406; Xu Wang, "Mutual empowerment of state and peasantry: grassroots democracy in rural China," *World Development*, Vol. 25, No. 9 (1997), p. 1436. In some sources, Luocheng county is mistaken for the non-existent Luoshan county.

3. Yu Xiangyang, "Cunmin weiyuanhui banle shier jian da shi," ("Villagers' committees do 12 jobs"), *Neibu wengao* (*Internal Manuscripts*), No. 20 (1983), pp. 17–24; also Xu Wang, "Mutual empowerment," p. 1436; Epstein, "Village elections," p. 406. On proto-VCs in Sichuan, Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Yunnan and other provinces, see Wang Zhongtian, "The development of grassroots democracy," p. 1; Bai Gang, "Zhongguo cunmin zizhi fazhi jianshe pingyi" ("Discussing legal construction concerning villagers' self-government in China"), *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (*Social Sciences in China*), No. 3 (May 1998), p. 88; and Liu Cheng and Dong Junming, "Dalemu cun minzhu xuanju cunzhang de diaocha" ("An investigation of the democratic election of village chiefs in Dalemu village"), *Nongcun jingji wenti* (*Rural Economic Issues*), No. 8 (1982), pp. 38–39.

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

When Guangxi's report on VCs reached Beijing, Peng Zhen, then vice-chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC), praised villagers' committees as the perfect vehicle for practising grassroots democracy. So impressed was Peng, he instructed the NPC and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) to send investigators to Guangxi to find out what was going on. At the same time, he encouraged other provinces to experiment with VCs.⁵ In a short time committees spread widely, especially in areas that had taken the lead in abolishing communes and establishing township governments. Reports suggest that pace-setting provinces included Anhui, Beijing, Fujian, Gansu, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shandong and Sichuan.⁶

In December 1982, thanks mainly to Peng's urging,⁷ villagers' committees were written into the Constitution as elected, mass organizations of self-government (article 111). A 1983 Central Committee circular also instructed that elected VCs should be set up, that they should actively promote public welfare and assist local governments, and that implementing regulations should be drawn up in light of local conditions.⁸ These directives generated some controversy, but opposition at this point was relatively muted. For one thing, the early 1980s were a time when far-reaching changes were taking place in all walks of political life. For another, the Party leadership was busy exploring political reform. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping had remarked that "we have not propagated and practised democracy enough, and our systems and institutions leave much to be desired."⁹ A year later, Deng specifically called for "practising people's democracy to the full," especially at the grassroots.¹⁰ And in June 1981, The Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party announced that it was the Party's aim to "gradually realize direct popular participation in the democratic process at the grassroots of political power and community life."¹¹

The 1980s were not the first time that the Party had experimented with basic-level elections. As early as the Jiangxi Soviet (1931–34), popular assemblies had been established to draw villagers and "enlightened gentry" into local government. Later, after the Japanese invasion, the so-called "three-thirds system" (*san san zhi*) had also played some part in

5. Bai Yihua, *Zhongguo jiceng zhengquan de gaige yu tansuo (Reform and Exploration of China's Basic-Level Governance)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1995), p. 284.

6. See Mi Youlu, "Villager participation in autonomy and its evaluation," paper presented at Conference on Local Self-Government in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Duke University, 2–3 May 1997, p. 3.

7. Bai Yihua, *Reform and Exploration*, pp. 284–85.

8. "Party Central Committee and State Council 'Circular on separating government administration and commune management and setting up township governments'," *Chinese Law and Government*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1986–87), p. 36.

9. Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975–1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), p. 183.

10. *Ibid.* p. 304. See also, Allen C. Choate, "Local governance in China: an assessment of villagers committees," Working Paper No. 1 (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 1997), p. 6.

11. In Harold C. Hinton (ed.), *The People's Republic of China 1979–1984* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1986), p. 108.

reducing the gap between leaders and led, making cadres accountable to their constituents and encouraging attention to the mass line.¹² In most of the communist-controlled districts, however, elections were first and foremost a device for winning over converts to the struggle against the Kuomintang and local power-holders. Making a show of granting country people political rights was designed to undermine the traditional elite, rein in the Party's ideologically suspect allies, and draw attention to the contrast between border region governments and the Kuomintang's "one-party dictatorship."¹³ For the Communists, war-time elections were state-building exercises in which controlled polarization and community building co-existed with democratization. Affording villagers a smidgeon of power served the Party's overriding aim of cementing its supremacy and deepening penetration into rural communities.¹⁴

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

Peng Zhen's singular enthusiasm for grassroots elections and villagers' committees can be traced to this era and his experiences in the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region.¹⁶ In a report delivered to the Politburo in 1941, Peng

12. Yung-fa Chen, *Making Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 256–57; also Mark Selden, *China in Revolution* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995). On assemblies in the Jiangxi Soviet, see Kevin J. O'Brien, *Reform Without Liberalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 20–21. The three-thirds system required that Party representation in assemblies be no more than one-third of the total, and that two-thirds be made up of "non-Party left-wing progressives" and "middle-of-the-roaders."

13. On various border regions, see Chen, *Making Revolution*, p. 223; Pauline B. Keating, *Two Revolutions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 131–35; Tetsuya Kataoka, *Resistance and Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 241; Steven I. Levine, *Anvil of Victory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 111–13; Peng Zhen, "Report on the work of the party and specific policies in the Jin Cha Ji border region," in Tony Saich (ed.), *The Rise to Power of the Chinese Communist Party* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 1035.

14. On Shaanbei, see Keating, *Two Revolutions* pp. 130–146. On "controlled polarization" more generally, see Chen, *Making Revolution*, pp. 11–12, 230; Although "strengthening the grip of the party over the entire region" is not his focus, see also Selden, *China in Revolution*, p. 128. In a first-person report that stresses the Party's democratic achievements, Jack Belden, *China Shakes the World* (New York: Harpers, 1949), p. 88, also notes: "in some villages, the various planks of all candidates contained a resolution to 'Support the Communist party and follow Mao Tze-tung,' illustrat[ing] clearly enough that the Communists are trying to establish not so much a utopian democracy as a support for themselves."

15. This paragraph is drawn from Selden, *China in Revolution*, p. 117; Apter and Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse*, pp. 206, 214; Chen, *Making Revolution*, pp. 255–56; and Keating, *Two Revolutions*, pp. 134–36. The quoted text refers to Suide and appears in Keating, p. 136.

16. Peng Zhen, "Cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa shi guojia zhongyao falü zhi yi" ("The organic law of villagers' committees is one of the nation's important basic laws"), speech at the 20th group meeting of the Sixth NPCSC, 16 March 1987, in *Peng Zhen tongzhi guanyu cunmin weiyuanhui jumin weiyuanhui de zhongyao jianghua* (Important Speeches of Comrade Peng Zhen on Villagers' Committees and Residents' Committees), unpublished compilation (Beijing: Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshesi, 1990), p. 10. Peng's comments on the 1930s are also alluded to in Foreign Broadcast Information Service: *Daily*

explained why and how local elections had been held and suggested establishing “district and village assemblies” (*qu cun daibiaohui*) to oversee elected, village cadres. In Peng’s view, elections were not only compatible with Party rule; they were the right instrument for tightening the Party’s grip in areas where its dominance was still uncertain.¹⁷ A measure of mass participation, in other words, would generate support for the Party’s revolutionary mission while serving its state-building aspirations. “Democracy” and governmental power could develop together.

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

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

footnote continued

Report (China) (hereafter, FBIS-CHI), No. 79 (1987), p. K10. On Peng and “filtered democracy” in Jin-Cha-Ji, see Pitman B. Potter, *From Leninist Discipline to Socialist Legalism* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 1995), p. 14.

17. See Peng Zhen, “Report on the work,” pp. 1017–38; Apter and Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse*, pp. 212–13.

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

19. Tianjian Shi, “Village committee elections in China: institutionalist tactics for democracy,” *World Politics* Vol. 51, No. 3 (1999), p. 329. Peng said in 1987: “We suffered greatly from failing to construct socialist democracy after the founding of our state. During the Cultural Revolution there was so-called big democracy, but in fact there was no democracy.” Peng Zhen, “The organic law,” p. 10.

became skilled at running their own villages, Peng argued, they might then move on to govern townships and counties.²⁰

Controversy, 1983–1987

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

Out of fears that committees would become "independent kingdoms," some critics of self-government even recommended transforming VCs into full-blown state organs.²³ Common proposals included turning them into "village administrative offices" (*cungongsuo*) or setting up administrative offices alongside them. These offices would be directly responsible to townships and their appointed heads would presumably be more

20. Peng Zhen, "Qunzhong zizhi shi fazhan shehuizhuyi minzhu de zhongyao yi huan" ("Mass autonomy is an important link in the development of socialist democracy"), speech at the chairmanship meeting of the Sixth NPCSC, 23 November 1987, in *Important Speeches*, p. 25. See also Cai Dingjian, "Tuijin nongcun de minzhu jianshe" ("Advance democratic construction in the countryside"), *Zhengzhi yu falü* (*Politics and Law*), No. 4 (1989), pp. 16–17.

21. Yu Xiangyang, "Villagers' committees," p. 24; Yu Xiangyang, "A great invention," p. 28. On Party branch leadership of VCs, see Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese debate over village self-government," *The China Journal*, No. 37 (1997), pp. 81–83, 85.

22. Cai Dingjian, "Advance democratic construction," p. 18; Yu Xiangyang, "Villagers' committees," p. 24; Yu Xiangyang, "A great invention," pp. 28–29; Chen Guanglong, "Guanyu 'cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa' de youguan wenti tantao" ("Exploration of issues related to the 'organic law of villagers' committees'"), *Fazhi yuekan* (*Legality Monthly*), No. 6 (1987), pp. 39–40. On a similar debate over leadership versus guidance relations in the legislative realm, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Laura M. Luehrmann, "Institutionalizing Chinese legislatures: trade-offs between autonomy and capacity," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1998), pp. 91–108.

23. Yu Xiangyang, "Villagers' committees," p. 24; Yu Xiangyang, "A great invention," pp. 28–29.

receptive to township orders than elected committee directors.²⁴ Some less ardent foes of self-government proposed a compromise: they recommended that if village administrative offices could not be established, a “specially appointed agent” (*tepaiyuan*) should be sent to every village to represent the township.²⁵

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

In spite of these disputes, VCs replaced brigades nearly as fast as family farming had replaced collective agriculture. In Yunnan and Guangdong, VCs took the place of production teams; in all other

24. See Deng Minjie, “Guangxi shixing cungongsuo de xianshi dingshi” (“Guangxi’s experimentation with village administrative offices”), in Zhongguo jiceng zhengquan jianshe yanjiu hui *et al.* (eds.), *Shijian yu sikao (Practice and Reflection)* (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1989), pp. 126–133. On *cungongsuo* thwarting the intent of the Organic Law, see Tyrene White, “Political reform and rural government,” in Deborah Davis and Ezra Vogel (eds.), *Chinese Society on the Eve of Tiananmen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 57.

25. Minzhengbu and Guowuyuan fazhiju, “Guanyu dui ‘Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa’ youguan tiaowen xiugai yijian de baogao” (“A report on revisions of some articles of the organic law of villagers’ committees of the People’s Republic of China”), mimeo (Beijing: Quanguo renda changweihui bangongting, 11 November 1987), p. 2.

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

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

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

provinces they supplanted brigades.²⁹ By the end of 1984, some 700,000 brigades had been transformed into nearly 950,000 villagers' committees. The transition proceeded smoothly because, at this point, it was little more than a change in name. Constitutional provisions notwithstanding, most committees were still appointed rather than popularly elected. Prior to 1987, although VCs were called "mass autonomous organizations," they were effectively extensions of township government.³⁰

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

As the Ministry solicited opinions in the course of revising the Rules, there was also some discussion of elections. Until officials from Sichuan, Jiangxi, Heilongjiang and Shaanxi pointed out that it was unconstitutional, one MoCA draft had permitted a murky mixture of elections, appointment and self-selection. Under this plan, a list of VC members would be popularly elected; then, from among the successful candidates, VC leaders would be "selected" (*tuixuan*) – perhaps by the township, perhaps by committee members themselves. Scholars and local administrators also found fault with draft articles dealing with recall procedures

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

30. Cai Dingjian, "Advance democratic construction," p. 15; Tang Jinsu, "Woguo cunweihui jianshe zhuangkuang yu zhanwang" ("Current conditions and prospects for construction of our country's villagers' committees") *Shehuizhuyi yanjiu* (*Studies in Socialism*), No. 6 (1992), p. 42. Wang Zhenyao, "Village committees: the basis for China's democratization," in Eduard B. Vermeer, Frank N. Pieke and Woei Lien Chong (eds.), *Cooperative and Collective in China's Rural Development* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 243.

31. Quanguo renda changweihui bangongting, "Qi ge sheng, zizhiqu, zhixiashi zhiding de 'cunmin weiyuanhui gongzuo jianze' qingkuang" ("Seven provinces, autonomous regions and cities have enacted working rules on villagers' committees"), mimeo, (Beijing: Quanguo renda changweihui bangongting, 12 January 1987), pp. 2–3.

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

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

and the length of VC terms, and some even proposed that committee members be subject to term limits.³⁴

Opposition to villagers' self-government turned out to be unexpectedly strong when the Ministry submitted its 13th draft of the Rules to the NPC in 1987. At the plenary session that spring, a number of legislators rose to argue that the time was not "ripe" for a full-fledged law to be passed. More than a few deputies said that Chinese villagers lacked the "democratic consciousness" to govern themselves. Others were concerned that the bill did not clarify (or even mention) the relationship between Party branches and villagers' committees. Speaking as long-time administrators, many deputies openly doubted whether township guidance of VCs would be enough to guarantee state interests in the countryside.³⁵

Although electoral matters did not receive much attention at the 1987 NPC, scepticism about enfranchising villagers lay just below the surface of many comments. Some critics questioned whether "cadres who truly work conscientiously will get elected" and instead supported combining "evaluation by higher-level authorities" with voting by villagers. Several deputies warned that cadres who did the township's bidding would certainly be defeated and that "complex problems will arise if cadres are selected merely through elections." Most opponents recommended that the draft be revised; some, echoing the anxiety of detractors outside the legislature, went so far as to advise that the Constitution be amended so that VCs were converted into government organs led by appointed directors.³⁶

Supporters of more autonomy argued the opposite. They thought that "the bill did not go far enough in empowering village cadres against the encroachments of township officials," and some "wanted to add a provision stipulating the right of village cadres to turn down any assignment not covered by the bill."³⁷ These legislators were concerned that township work would crowd out village concerns and preferred Guangxi-style, free-standing VCs to administrative appendages. The Law Department at the People's University even advised the NPC that any organization that assigned VC members administrative work should pay them for doing it.³⁸

As the chief justification for self-government, supporters of the Law argued that passing the bill would help curb arbitrary and predatory

34. Minzhengbu, Minzhengsi, "Suggestions on revision," pp. 4–5.

35. This paragraph is drawn from FBIS-CHI, No. 79 (1987), pp. K10–12; FBIS-CHI, No. 71 (1987), p. K24; FBIS-CHI, No. 66 (1987), p. K7; FBIS-CHI, No. 68 (1987), p. K17. Two NPCSC members also called for enhancing villagers' "educational and scientific level" before enacting the law. FBIS-CHI, No. 224 (1987), pp. 12–13.

36. Bai Yihua, *Reform and Exploration*, pp. 296–97; Interviews, Beijing, September 1993; also FBIS-CHI, No. 79 (1987), p. K11; FBIS-CHI, No. 71 (1987), p. K24. Quoted text in FBIS-CHI, No. 66 (1987) p. K7; FBIS-CHI, No. 68 (1987), p. K17.

37. Tyrene White, "Reforming the countryside," *Current History*, Vol. 91, No. 566 (1992), pp. 275–76. For the amendment suggested by Law Committee members, see FBIS-CHI, No. 47 (1987), pp. K3–4.

38. Minzhengbu, Minzhengsi, "Suggestions on revision," p. 2.

behaviour by rural cadres. They agreed that township leaders had to execute policies that villagers did not understand and did not readily accept, but stressed that this did not justify recourse to threats and coercion.³⁹ In their view, even the least popular measures (such as birth control and tax collection) could be implemented through persuasion and the mass line – things elected cadres would be more inclined to practise than township appointees. Proponents said that NPC deputies should show a little more faith in the masses and that villagers would not turn self-government into anarchy.⁴⁰ They also suggested that worries about the draft failing to mention the Party's role in the village were over-reactions. Party leadership had already been affirmed in the Constitution. "It would make the Party appear weak," a MoCA official who participated in drafting the Rules said, "if we had to place this mass organization under Party branch leadership."⁴¹ A confident Communist Party had no reason to fear that village self-government would lurch out of control.

The debate was so heated that Peng Zhen found it necessary to make three speeches within 48 hours to drum up support among NPC leaders.⁴² Peng's lobbying was characterized by nostalgic memories of how close Party-villager relations had been before 1949 and a warning that rural rebellion was possible if self-government was put off. In a speech to the heads of the NPC's provincial delegations, which according to MoCA officials "played a key role in unifying deputy thinking,"⁴³ Peng argued that village democracy was a matter of "life and death" for the Party. He acknowledged that self-government might "make rural cadres' life a little harder" (that is, it might complicate policy implementation in the short term), but insisted that it would not "produce chaos" (*gao luan*) because "the masses accept what is reasonable."⁴⁴ Clearly distressed and drawing on all his prestige as a Party elder, Peng went on to lament how relations between cadres and villagers had deteriorated over the years, noting that some rural cadres "resorted to coercion and commandism" while not a few had become corrupt and high-handed "local emperors" (*tu huangdi*). If such trends were not reversed, he cautioned, villagers would "sooner or later attack our rural cadres with their shoulder poles." To prevent further erosion in cadre-mass relations, Peng claimed that top-down supervision was not enough: "Who supervises rural cadres? Can we supervise

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

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

41. Interviews, Beijing, September 1993.

42. Bai Yihua, *Reform and Exploration*, pp. 298–302.

43. Zhongguo nongcun cunmin zizhi zhidu yanjiu ketizu, *The Legal System of Village Committees in China* (English version) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996), p. 23.

44. Peng Zhen, "Fandui qiangpo mingling, jianchi qunzhong zizhi" ("Against coercion and commandism, uphold mass autonomy"), speech at the fifth joint meeting of delegation leaders and members of the Law Committee of the Sixth NPC, 6 April 1987, in *Important Speeches*, p. 20.

them? No, not even if we had 48 hours a day.” The only solution, Peng proclaimed, was to promote self-government so that China’s rural masses could themselves select and oversee village cadres.⁴⁵

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

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

Implementation and Indecision, 1988–1990

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

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

46. FBIS-CHI, No. 79 (1987), p. K12.

47. On remaining opposition, see FBIS-CHI, No. 224 (1987), pp. 12–13.

48. Peng Zhen, *Lun xin shiqi de shehuizhuyi minzhu yu fazhi jianshe* (*On the Construction of Socialist Democracy and Legal System in the New Period*) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1989), p. 371.

49. “Guanyu guanche zhixing Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa de tongzhi” (“Circular on carrying out the People’s Republic of China’s organic law

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

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

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of villagers' committees"), Ministry of Civil Affairs Document No. 7 (1988), reprinted in Bai Yihua, *Reform and Exploration*, pp. 270–71. See also Zhongguo nongcun cunmin zizhi zhidu yanjiu ketizu, *Legal System*, p. 132.

50. Bai Gang, "'Liangpiaozhi' xuanju moshi fawei" ("An analysis of the 'two-ballot system'"), paper presented at the Conference on Construction of Village-Level Organizations in Mainland China, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 8–9 October 1998, p. 2. On the role of local civil affairs' bureaus, see Pei Minxin, "'Creeping democratization' in China," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (1995), p. 75.

51. Liaoning sheng minzhengting diaocha, "Jingzheng xuanju cunji ganbu tuidong nongcun shenhua gaige" ("Elect village cadres competitively and advance rural reforms"), *Zhongguo minzheng (Chinese Civil Affairs)*, No. 6 (1989), p. 4. The MoCA has also stressed how elections serve economic development. See Jude Howell, "Prospects for village self-governance in China," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (1998), pp. 91–92; Kelliher, "The Chinese debate," pp. 68–70. On the perceived need for self-rule in less developed villages, see Susan V. Lawrence, "Democracy, Chinese style," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (1994), p. 67; Jean C. Oi, "Economic development, stability and democratic village self-governance," in Maurice Brosseau, Suzanne Pepper and Tsang Shu-ki (eds.), *China Review 1996* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1996), pp. 127–28, 131; Epstein, "Village elections," pp. 411, 414–15.

52. See Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers and popular resistance in contemporary China," *Modern China*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1996), pp. 44–45; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The politics of lodging complaints in rural China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (1995), pp. 765–66; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful resistance," *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1996), pp. 38–39.

53. For the Liaoning official's remarks, see Hu Ke, "Tan guanche cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa de guanjian" ("The crux of implementing the organic law of villagers' committees"), in *Practice and Reflection*, pp. 134–36. On Lian Yin, see Zhongguo nongcun cunmin zizhi zhidu yanjiu ketizu, *Legal System*, pp. 133–34.

54. See Tang Jinsu, "Current conditions," p. 44; Sun Youfu, "Jianshe zhenzheng lüxing zizhi zhineng de cunweihui" ("Build villagers' committees that genuinely perform the

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

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

Around this time, Peng Zhen, nearly 90 years old and retired, also returned to the fray. In February 1990, according to accounts by two MoCA officials, Peng called Minister Cui Naifu to his home. When Cui reported that there was still much opposition to the Law, Peng purportedly sprang to his feet and asked what was Cui’s “attitude” towards self-government. Cui answered that he was “absolutely committed” to it. Peng was relieved and restated his case for grassroots democracy. He then went a step further than he had on earlier occasions: he said he regretted failing to shepherd an Organic Law of Township Government through the NPC so that township officials would be subject to mass supervision, too.⁵⁷

Then a second Party elder, Bo Yibo, intervened and spoke up in favour of self-government. After his staff obtained the MoCA report praising elections, Bo read it and called it “brilliant.”⁵⁸ As one of the “eight immortals” and a close ally of Deng Xiaoping, Bo’s backing proved decisive. Shortly after he added his voice to Peng’s, Politburo Standing

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function of self-government”), *Zhongguo minzheng*, No. 2, (1992), p. 7. Interviews, Beijing, September 1993, January 1997.

55. Li Xueju, *Zhongguo cheng xiang jiceng zhengquan jianshe gongzuo yanjiu* (*Research on Construction of Grassroots Governance in Urban and Rural China*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1994), pp. 69–72.

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

57. Bai Yihua, *Reform and Exploration*, pp. 223–24; also see Li Xueju, *Research on Construction*, p. 72. On Peng summoning (unnamed) opponents to his home to complain about foot-dragging on implementation, see White, “Reforming the countryside,” p. 277; also Shi, “Village committee,” n. 37.

58. Interviews, Beijing, November 1993, January 1997. On Bo Yibo’s role, see also Anne F. Thurston, *Muddling Toward Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1998), pp. 11–12; Choate, “Local governance,” p. 8; Wang Zhenyao, “Village committees,” p. 244.

Committee member Song Ping finally ended all the indecision. At a conference held in Laixi in August 1990, Song instructed that the Law should be implemented rather than debated.⁵⁹ The conference report, which was later issued as Central Committee Document No. 19 (1990), decreed that each of China's counties should establish "demonstration villages" (*shifan cun*) in areas that had "good working conditions," thereby seconding a 1989 MoCA decision to focus on better-off communities where cadre-mass relations were presumably reasonably harmonious.⁶⁰ Document No. 19 also accepted the MoCA's interpretation that popular elections were a key link in realizing self-government.

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

On the Ground: The Role of Local Officials

It was one thing for MoCA officials to decide that elections were a key link, but another to induce local authorities to hold free and fair votes.⁶³

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

60. See "Quanguo cunji zuzhi jianshe gongzuo zuotanhui jiyao" ("Summary report of the national workshop on constructing village-level organizations"), in Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshesi nongcunchu (comp.), *Cunmin zizhi shifan jiangxi ban shiyong jiaocai* (*Teaching Materials for the Study Group on Villagers' Autonomy Demonstration*) (Shandong: Laixishi niuxibu caiyinchang, 1991), p. 7. The ministry, at this point, was still permitting experimentation with village administrative offices in "economically backward areas where village organizations are paralysed." See Zhongguo nongcun cunmin zizhi zhidu yanjiu ketizu, *Legal System*, p. 132. For an argument that these initial elections seem to have improved "congruence" between cadres and villagers, see Melanie F. Manion, "The electoral connection in the Chinese countryside," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (1996), pp. 736–748.

61. Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshesi, "Guanyu zai quanguo nongcun kaizhan cunmin zizhi shifan huodong de tongzhi" ("Circular on launching demonstration of villagers' self-government nation-wide"), in *Teaching Materials*, pp. 19–21. For the quoted text, see "Summary report of the national workshop," pp. 11–12.

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

63. On the state's "becoming weak in protecting villagers, disciplining its agents and effectively implementing its policies," see Lü Xiaobo, "The politics of peasant burden in reform China," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1997), pp. 116, 134; also Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Selective policy implementation in rural China," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1999).

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

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

64. See Zhou Zuohan, "Guanyu cunmin weiyuanhui jianshe de jidian sikao" ("Some thoughts on the construction of villagers' committees"), *Hunan shifan daxue shehui kexue xuebao* (*Social Science Journal of Hunan Normal University*), No. 5 (1987), p. 18; Tang Jinsu, "Current conditions," p. 44; Sun Youfu, "Build villagers' committees," p. 7. This has also been a major theme for Western analysts. See O'Brien, "Implementing political reform," pp. 37–38, 51–58; Kelliher, "The Chinese debate," pp. 78–84; Xu Wang, "Mutual empowerment," p. 1436.

65. Li Buying, "Lintong xian Baimiao cun shixing cunmin zizhi caifang jishi" ("A report on the implementation of villagers' autonomy in Baimiao village of Lintong county"), *Zhongguo minzheng*, No. 4 (1989), p. 8. On opposition and feigned compliance in Shaanxi, Jiangxi and Hubei, see Kelliher, "The Chinese debate," pp. 79–81.

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

67. See Bao Yonghui, "Cunmin zizhi fuhe bu fuhe Zhongguo guoqing?" ("Does villagers' autonomy accord with China's conditions?"), *Xiangzhen luntan*, No. 6 (1991), p. 12.

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

69. See Ma Changshan, "Cunmin zizhi zuzhi jianshe de shidai yi yi jiqi shijian fancha" ("The epoch-making significance and the imperfect practice of building villagers' self-government organizations"), *Zhengzhi yu falü*, No. 2. (1994), pp. 19–20; Fan Yu, "Cunweihui xuanju weifa xu jiuzheng" ("Law-breaking activities in village elections must be corrected"), *Gaige neican* (*Internal Reference on Reforms*), No. 20 (1998), pp. 14–15.

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

Owing in large measure to the half-hearted support of top policy makers, which reached local leaders in the form of COD reservations, many county administrators discovered that championing self-government was at best thankless and at worst harmful to their careers.⁷² A county official in Jilin who pushed for open nominations and free campaigning acknowledged that he was taking a significant risk. What emboldened him, he said, was that he was not seeking further promotions, because he preferred serving in his home county over being transferred to a higher position elsewhere.⁷³ Indeed, a notable number of the early adopters of village elections were officials who had peaked in their careers and no longer cared much if the COD liked what they did.⁷⁴

Because it does not control appointments and promotions, even in local civil affairs bureaus, the MoCA is poorly positioned to reward those who co-operate and to motivate those who lag behind. Ministry leaders are aware that they lack meaningful inducements to give out, and have tried to counteract this by urging civil affairs officials to "gain status by producing achievements." In 1995, for example, an MoCA vice-minister suggested that Party and government leaders might start giving local civil

70. Interviews, Beijing, April 1997.

71. Personal communication with a researcher from Beijing, October 1998. On cadre incentive structures, see Shi, "Village committee;" O'Brien and Li, "Selective policy implementation," pp. 171–76; Susan H. Whiting, "Contract incentives and market discipline in China's rural industrial sector," in John McMillan and Barry Naughton (eds.), *Reforming Asian Socialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 72–77.

72. Interview, Taiyuan, August 1997.

73. Personal communication, October 1998.

74. Interviews, Beijing, December 1995; Fuzhou, July 1997; Taiyuan, September 1997. Other pioneers professed an ideological justification for their actions: they respected the mass line and shared Peng Zhen's vision of how to realize "socialist democracy." An official in Shandong, for instance, argued that "implementing villagers' self-government is returning power to the people" – a slogan that even an outspoken advocate of self-government in the MoCA deemed "not quite accurate." See Wang Zhenyao, "Cunmin zizhi yu cunweihui xuanju" ("Villagers' self-government and the election of villagers' committees"), in *Teaching Materials*, p. 155.

affairs workers their due if they could show that elections promoted stability, developed the economy and curbed corruption.⁷⁵

Some provincial civil affairs bureaus have also sought to overcome their lowly status by reaching out to more powerful organizations. Leaders of the Fujian civil affairs bureau, for instance, have always regarded the provincial people's congress to be an ally. For over a decade, after each round of elections, they have submitted legislative motions designed to standardize voter registration, nomination and voting procedures, the counting of ballots, and so on. When their proposals have been included in provincial laws, they then use these statutes to goad local leaders into running better elections. In this way, the civil affairs bureau has obtained support from the provincial legislature's leaders, who are delighted to exercise their lawmaking powers and to see their decisions enforced.⁷⁶ More recently, the bureau has also made overtures to the provincial Discipline Inspection Commission – which paid off when the Commission realized that corruption tended to be lower where well-run village elections took place. With influential backers working together with civil affairs staff, Fujian has become a national leader in implementing self-government. Among other firsts, it was the first province to require secret balloting, primaries and open nomination for all VC posts.⁷⁷

On the Ground: The Role of Villagers

Apart from obtaining help from other government organizations, the MoCA and its local bureaus have also found an ally in ordinary villagers. Rural people have been quick to recognize that elections provide a means to dislodge corrupt, imperious and incompetent cadres. And when they are deprived of their right to vote, villagers are not always indifferent. Over the past decade, resourceful farmers have frequently turned to what might be called “rightful resistance.”⁷⁸ Citing the Organic Law as well as provincial regulations, they demand fair elections, boycott rigged votes

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

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

77. Further evidence of the Fujian civil affairs bureau's influence came in 1997, when the bureau head identified, by name and at a provincial conference, several counties that had failed to hold elections in all their villages. Each county rapidly organized make-up elections. Interviews, Fuzhou, July 1997. On Fujian's place “at the forefront of electoral success,” see Thurston, *Muddling Toward Democracy*, pp. 33–34; “Report of the Fifth Mission on Chinese Elections” (Atlanta: Carter Center Working Paper Series, 20 June–3 July 1998), p. 4; Kelliher, “The Chinese debate,” p. 74.

78. See O'Brien, “Rightful resistance.” For what we then called “policy-based resistance,” see Li and O'Brien, “Villagers and popular resistance,” pp. 40–52. For examples involving election irregularities, see Li and O'Brien, “The struggle over village elections,” pp. 137–140; also Howell, “Prospects for village governance,” pp. 103–104.

and lodge complaints at higher levels. They adroitly use the language of power to defy “disloyal” local officials and call for scrupulous implementation of existing statutes and leadership promises. Engaging in disruptive but not quite unlawful collective action, rural rightful resisters have made their presence felt at government compounds throughout the nation.

People’s congresses and civil affairs bureaus are the most common targets for villagers upset with election irregularities. Provincial civil affairs officials from Shandong, Shanxi, Fujian, Henan and Hebei report that their offices always fill up around election time.⁷⁹ Angry villagers sometimes do not stop there but go all the way to Beijing searching for officials who might be willing to champion their claims.⁸⁰ In one widely-reported case, after a township in Liaoning prohibited several candidates from running and did not permit secret balloting, over a dozen villagers travelled at their own expense to the county town, the provincial capital and finally Beijing to lodge a complaint. They knew the Organic Law by heart and recited it at each stop while petitioning for a new election.⁸¹

In the last decade, local civil affairs bureaus and the MoCA have used popular pressure to prod local officials to hold high-quality elections. Provincial civil affairs officials acknowledge that mass complaints often help them detect procedural infractions and enable them to win over reluctant county and township officials by arguing that many appeals are just and cannot be ignored.⁸² MoCA officials have also given a sympathetic hearing to some delegations of villagers who seek honest elections. In 1994, for instance, when a group of Hebei farmers came to the capital to protest against a fraudulent vote, an MoCA official shouted “bravo!” (*tai haole*) upon hearing the news. He immediately dispatched two staff members to look into the charges.⁸³ In the course of a long investigation that ended with the election being annulled, MoCA officials appeared three times on a popular television programme devoted to investigative journalism; in front of a national audience, they openly supported the

79. Interviews, Ji’nan, July 1994; Fuzhou, July 1997. Personal communication with officials from Henan and Hebei, October 1998.

80. See Shao Xingliang, Cui Suozhi, Meng Baolin and Sun Xueliang, “Yi min wei tian” (“Regarding the people as sovereign”), *Xiangzhen luntan*, No. 4 (1994), pp. 10–11; Tian Yuan, “Zhongguo nongcun jiceng de minzhu zhilu” (“The pathway to grassroots democracy in rural China”), *Xiangzhen luntan*, No. 6 (1993), pp. 3–4; and Fan Yu, “Law-breaking activities,” p. 14. Survey data from four counties suggests that, when villagers contact officials, about two-fifths of all mentions concern elections. M. Kent Jennings, “Political participation in the Chinese countryside,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (1997), p. 366. Based on a nation-wide survey conducted in 1993, Shi, “Village committee,” p. 404, reports that more than 5% of rural residents have lodged complaints against election fraud.

81. See Tian Yuan, “The pathway to grassroots democracy,” pp. 3–4. Interviews, Beijing, July 1994. Needless to say, local officials have a strong incentive to keep villagers uninformed. In a case where complainants demanded to see documents that county leaders claimed restricted their rights and superseded the Organic Law, a county official in Hebei “snorted with contempt and said ‘you are not county officials, why would you think you have the right to read county documents.’” See *Nongmin ribao* (Shehui wenhua tekan), *Farmer’s Daily* (Special issue on society and culture), 25 July 1998, p. 1.

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

83. Personal observation, Beijing, July 1994.

complainants and warned other local officials to draw the appropriate lesson.⁸⁴

In siding with villagers and insisting that the Organic Law be enforced, MoCA officials have tried to persuade local leaders that infringing villagers' rights could damage their careers. Ministry officials sometimes even raise the spectre of social unrest, the notorious Renshou riots in particular, when trying to convince local officials to conform. Speaking to township officials in Hebei in 1996, one MoCA staff member advised: "I know that many of you oppose village elections. But isn't it mainly because the cadres that you've appointed offer you gifts [i.e. bribes]. If villagers file complaints against these corrupt cadres, they may also bring you down. You know what happened in Renshou. I think it's in your interest to calculate carefully the risks and rewards of refusing to hold good elections."⁸⁵

Appeals by rural people have done so much to spur cadre compliance that some ministry officials place "farmers' active participation" and "mass creativity" uppermost when assigning credit for the spread of village elections.⁸⁶ In the opinion of the MoCA official most closely associated with self-government, actions by ordinary villagers are the main reason that elections have not been thwarted by local opponents.⁸⁷ Western researchers, interestingly enough, have tended to apportion more credit to the ministry itself.

International Support

MoCA officials have also been adept at obtaining and deploying aid from abroad. In July 1989 the MoCA established a Research Society of Basic-Level Governance. Shortly thereafter, the Research Society won a

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

85. Interview, Beijing, January 1997. For another version of these remarks, see Wang Zhenyao, "Zai Hebei sheng di si jie cunmin weiyuanhui huanjie xuanju gongzuo gupan peixun ban shang de jianghua" ("Speech at the training class for key workers in the re-election of villagers' committees in Hebei province"), in *Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan jianshesi nongcunchu (comp.), 1995–1996 Niandu quanguo cunweihui huanjie xuanju ziliao huibian (Collected Materials on the 1995–1996 Re-election of Villagers' Committees Nation-wide)* (Beijing: December 1996), pp. 17–18. For more on Renshou, and a neighbouring county in which a highway levy was successfully collected by elected cadres who had permitted a vote on the tax, see Pei Minxin, "Creeping democratization," p. 76; Epstein, "Village elections," p. 416; Xu Wang, "Mutual empowerment," p. 1439; Shi, "Village committee," n. 38.

86. See, respectively, Wang Zhenyao, "Zhongguo cunmin weiyuanhui de jiben jinzhanyu lilun yiju" ("The basic experience and theoretical grounds of villagers' committees in China"), in Chen Mingtong and Zheng Yongnian (eds.), *Liang'an jiceng xuanju yu zhengzhi shehui bianqian (Grassroots Elections and Political-Social Transformation on Both Sides of the Strait)* (Taipei: Yuedan chubanshe gufen youxian gongsi, 1998), p. 313; Duoqi Cairang, "Jinyibu wanshan cunmin zizhi zhidu ba quanguo cunmin weiyuanhui jianshe gongzuo tuixiang xin de jieduan" ("Continue to perfect the villagers' self-government system and advance the construction of villagers' committees to a new stage"), in *Collected Documents*, p. 26.

87. Interview, Beijing, February 1997.

grant from the Ford Foundation to help promote self-government. On the heels of this first major influx of funds, a stream of foreign scholars, journalists and (later) election observers followed. As articles and reports brought China's experiment with "grassroots democracy" to the world, MoCA officials attracted even more overseas help. Since the early 1990s, the Asia Foundation, the International Republican Institute, the Carter Center, the United Nations' Development Agency and the European Union have all joined Ford in offering the MoCA financial and technical assistance.⁸⁸ Ministry officials have used these resources to convene a series of international conferences, publish dozens of books on self-government, and reward co-operative local officials (and themselves) with foreign trips, particularly to the United States. Although such visits are one-time perks and do not trump more enduring concerns, they did make lining up in support of elections more appealing to a number of early adopters.⁸⁹

Village elections have also drawn the attention of Western politicians, who in turn have encouraged Chinese leaders to support further democratic reform. In 1997 and 1998, for example, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton both lauded village elections in discussions with ranking Chinese officials. Eager to undo bad press about its human rights record and to head off social instability, the Chinese leadership has recently shown much interest in what previously was a low-profile programme left to the MoCA and NPC.⁹⁰ On an inspection tour to Anhui in September 1998, General Secretary Jiang Zemin, for instance, praised self-government as Chinese farmers' "third great invention" (along with the household responsibility system and township and village enterprises).⁹¹ Even the usually conservative NPCSC chairman Li Peng has stepped in to foster better village elections. While the Organic Law was being revised in 1998, Li visited a Jilin county known for its open nomination procedures. That same summer he also reportedly instructed *Renmin ribao* to publish the next-to-last draft of the revised Organic Law so that ordinary citizens could offer their comments and suggestions.⁹²

Where Implementation Stands

In how many of China's one million villages have democratic elections taken place? Estimates vary widely, as do definitions of what makes an

88. See Thurston, *Muddling Toward Democracy*, pp. iv-v, 45; Epstein, "Village elections," pp. 407-408; Choate, "Local governance," p. 3. For the MoCA using comments by foreign scholars to counter opposition to its efforts to improve election procedures, see Shi, "Village committee," pp. 408-410.

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

90. On burnishing China's democratic credentials and fending off foreign critiques of its human rights abuses, see Howell, "Prospects for village self-governance," pp. 87, 92, 103; Kelliher, "The Chinese debate," p. 75.

91. *Renmin ribao*, 25 September 1998, p. 1.

92. On Li Peng's inspection of Lishu county, see *Renmin ribao*, 8 July 1998, p. 1. On Li urging publication of the draft, personal communication with rural researchers from Beijing, October 1998.

election “democratic.” Since early 1995, the MoCA has required that in all VC elections voters be offered at least one more candidate than the number of available posts (*cha’e*). Using this standard, the editor of a Chinese magazine that focuses on rural affairs reckoned that “no more than 10 per cent” of Chinese villages had held well-run *cha’e* elections by early 1997.⁹³ Around the same time, “other experts” and ministry officials estimated that from one-quarter to one-third of China’s villages had conducted elections according to the rules (that is, the 1995 MoCA circular) and the Organic Law.⁹⁴ And by November 1998, Minister of Civil Affairs Duoji Cairang told a Xinhua reporter that 60 per cent of all villages had convened *cha’e* elections.⁹⁵

Assessments by overseas-based observers vary just as much. Duke University political scientist Tianjian Shi reported that in a 1993 nationwide survey of 336 villages as many as 51.6 per cent had held *cha’e* elections.⁹⁶ X. Drew Liu claimed that in the 1995 round of balloting 30 per cent of villages had allowed open nominations.⁹⁷ And the U.S. State Department estimated in 1996 that one-quarter to one-third of China’s villagers had “participated in elections that follow, to varying degrees of compliance, the guidelines.”⁹⁸

Our research tends to support estimates near the low end of the range. In late 1997 we surveyed 8,302 rural residents from 478 villages in seven provinces (Anhui, Beijing suburbs, Fujian, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jiangxi and Shandong). Respondents were asked if their VCs were elected and, if they were, how candidates were chosen. The research design focused on nomination procedures rather than the number of candidates because “in many ways, the process of nominations is as critical, if not more so, than the elections themselves.”⁹⁹ Moreover, given the limited degree of competition currently required, *cha’e* elections are readily susceptible to manipulation. An individual who will almost certainly lose, for example, can be listed alongside the incumbents to satisfy the letter of the law. And uncontested elections may not be as undemocratic as they seem. In villages where the final balloting is ostensibly non-competitive, preliminary nominees may become candidates only after winning a

93. Interview, Beijing, February 1997.

94. For these 1996 and 1997 estimates, see “Carter Center delegation report: village elections in China” (Atlanta: Carter Center Working Paper Series, 2–15 March 1998), p. 9; Howell, “Prospects for village self-governance,” p. 96; Epstein, “Village elections,” p. 410.

95. See *Renmin ribao*, 6 November 1998, p. 1. Duoji Cairang offered a similar estimate in July 1997 while acknowledging that he did not know for certain. Cited in “Carter Center delegation report,” p. 9.

96. Shi, “Village committee,” p. 386.

97. X. Drew Liu, “A harbinger of democracy: grassroots elections in rural China,” *China Strategic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1997), p. 71.

98. See International Republican Institute, “China’s economic future: challenges to U.S. policy,” study paper submitted to the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, August 1996, p. 3.

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

hotly-contested primary in which villagers or their representatives participate.

The resulting data showed that 45 per cent of the individuals surveyed in the 478 villages said that their VC was elected¹⁰⁰ and 26 per cent reported that candidates were selected either by villagers (15 per cent) or villagers' representatives (11 per cent). Correcting for the large number of respondents who happened to be from villages that had primaries, that would mean that approximately 82 of the 478 surveyed villages (17 per cent) had held elections with primaries.¹⁰¹

It ought to be noted, however, that our estimate applies only to these 478 villages, not the seven provinces, even less the whole country. The survey was distributed opportunistically in all but two provinces, and no effort was made to construct a nation-wide probability sample.¹⁰² We were not able to include, for example, four provinces that have lagged notably in introducing village elections – Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and Hainan.¹⁰³ And even within the seven provinces surveyed, this study suffers from the same problem that all survey research in China faces: on sensitive topics, it is comparatively easy to gain access where all is well but hard to win co-operation where much is awry, particularly when officials suspect that the results might contradict what they have reported to their superiors. For these reasons, we believe that it is more likely that our estimate is high rather than low.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, village elections have passed through three stages. When villagers' committees first appeared in the early 1980s, elected VCs enjoyed considerable autonomy and operated in what Tang

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

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

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

103. On these four provinces "dragging their feet in introducing village self-government," see Sylvia Chan, "Village self-government and civil society," in Joseph Y.S. Cheng (ed.), *China Review 1998* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998), p. 237. Guangdong did not start implementing the Organic Law province-wide until late 1998. Guangxi had the first villagers' committees, but even as recently as November 1995, only 61% of Guangxi's counties had completed converting village administrative offices into VCs. See *Collected Documents*, p. 136. MoCA officials also consider Yunnan and Hainan to be notable laggards. Interviews, Beijing, January 1997.

Tsou once called the “zone of indifference.”¹⁰⁴ Although committee members managed important neighbourhood affairs, their responsibilities did not extend to matters of state. During this phase, elections produced a kind of grassroots democracy, but it was uninstitutionalized and had a very limited scope.

This first stage ended when the 1982 Constitution recognized villagers’ committees and VCs began to replace production brigades. This new status increased the import of elections many fold, but it also made them more controversial, because committees now had many more responsibilities and resources. Administrators accustomed to the old ways quite naturally feared that letting villagers select cadres would interfere with carrying out unpopular state policies and might even lead to a breakdown of public order. Backers of self-government, on the other hand, felt that elections were a chance worth taking: they were the best way to dislodge second-rate cadres and consolidate Party rule. Neither side was able to persuade the other, and the Law that finally emerged from the NPCSC reflected this stand-off; among other things, it was maddeningly vague about how elections should be conducted. Throughout the next decade, partly through the efforts of the MoCA and partly through the efforts of certain local officials and villagers, voting for VC members has gradually spread through the countryside. Against a backdrop of determined opposition, and worries that self-government would “cut the legs off” township leaders, supporters of elections have been given a chance to prove that enhanced cadre accountability could improve governance without threatening Party rule.

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

Still, successful implementation of the Law remains far from certain. Open resistance to elections may decline, but feigned compliance will almost certainly increase. What is more, even where VC voting is free

104. Tang Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. xxiv.

and fair, there is not yet village democracy. Well-run, semi-competitive elections certainly make it possible to sideline some horribly unpopular cadres. But that says little about Party secretaries who need never face a popular vote. The new Law, in fact, includes one major concession to opponents who have all along said that grassroots democratization is a risk the Party can ill afford to take. Instead of omitting any mention of the Party branch as the 1987 Law did, the 1998 Law stipulates that the Party branch is the village's "leadership core" (*lingdao hexin*) (article 3). As long as VCs do not have final say over village political life, it must be recognized that however much VC election procedures are improved and put into practice, a rethinking of the Party's role must occur before there is real democracy in China's villages.¹⁰⁵

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

Democracy may one day appear in China, and an alliance between frustrated citizens and reformist elites may be the force that produces a leadership in which leaders from top to bottom are held accountable via periodic, free elections. But for now, if we limit ourselves to the goals of self-government and put aside unintended outcomes and accidents of history yet to come, Peng Zhen's original vision still rules the day. Elections are designed to increase mass support for the Party, and grassroots democracy is understood to be fully compatible with strong

105. On the role of non-democratically elected Party secretaries, see Oi, "Economic development," pp. 137–39. In over one third of Shanxi's prefectures there have been experiments with subjecting Party members to a popular vote of confidence before permitting them to stand for the Party branch. If this practice was to spread and develop further, the prospects for real village democracy would be greatly enhanced. See Lianjiang Li, "The two-ballot system in Shanxi: subjecting village party secretaries to a popular vote," *The China Journal*, No. 42 (1999), pp. 103–118.

106. See the introduction to this issue of *The China Quarterly*.

107. See *Nanfang zhoumo* (Southern Weekend), 15 January 1999, p. 2; *Yangcheng wanbao* (Yangcheng Evening News), 28 April 1999, p. 1.

108. For the initial Chinese report on an unapproved election in Buyun township, Suining city, Sichuan, see *Nanfang zhoumo*, 15 January 1999, p. 2. For Western reports, see *New York Times*, 26 January 1999, p. A8; *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 27 February 1999, p. A17. For criticism of the election, see *Fazhi ribao* (Legal Daily), 19 January 1999, p. 1.

state control.¹⁰⁹ In this context, the self-government programme is best seen as an effort to rejuvenate village leadership by cleaning out incompetent, corrupt and high-handed cadres, all for the purpose of consolidating the current regime.

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