Election procedures in rural China have improved greatly over the last 20 years and a good number of reasonably free and fair elections have been held. But changes in the 'exercise of power' have not kept up with changes in the 'access to power'. In many communities, township authorities, Party branches, and social forces (such as clans, religious groups, and underworld elements) continue to impede democratic rule. This suggests that a purely procedural definition of democracy is problematic and that democratization depends on the power configuration in which elected bodies are embedded. Putting grassroots democracy into place goes well beyond getting the procedures right, and 'high quality' democracy rests on much more than convening good village elections every three years.

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

Judging by procedures alone, village elections have achieved much. Balloting has been carried out in every province, with Guangdong, Hainan, and Yunnan finally conducting their first elections in 1999, and Tibet its first in 2002. Turnout rates have
generally been high, in many locations reportedly over 90%. Surveys and direct observation by international monitors also show that the conduct of elections (including nomination procedures, competitiveness, and secret balloting) has improved over time.

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

Is rural China on the path to democracy that Shi and others have suggested? How should we assess the prospects for grassroots democracy in China? Viewing the mountain of evidence now available in light of the literature on democratization, we re-examine the practice of self-governance and suggest that the working definition of democracy adopted by most observers, which underscores its procedural components, is incomplete. This definition, in a word, leads analysts to overemphasize form at the expense of content. Instead, we follow Sebastian Mazzuca and suggest a distinction between two dimensions of democratization, namely access to power and exercise of power. The introduction of elections has indeed begun to change the way in which village authorities gain power, but this has not necessarily transformed the way they exercise that power. Reducing rural democracy to well-run

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elections oversimplifies the complexity of the local power configuration and turns village governance into much less than it is.  

Conceptualizing democracy and democratization

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

The advantages of such a definition are clear. Above all, it facilitates measurement. But on the other hand, understanding democracy in a purely procedural fashion is problematic because it neglects the content of democracy. It does not answer the question of what democratic politics is, and instead focuses on how we might get it. Though choosing leaders through certain methods is an essential element of democracy, impeccable procedures do not guarantee democratic governance. This point is especially important because democracy does not simply denote majority rule, but instead is usually seen to be a congeries of institutions that guarantees rule of law, separation of powers, protection of minorities, and protection of civil liberties.

Analytically, there are also at least two drawbacks to the procedural definition. First, it impedes classification because it fails to capture diverse forms of democratic practice. Democratization waves have produced a striking variety of regimes, many of which share important attributes but differ from each other and from democracies in advanced industrial countries. The simple procedural minimum definition cannot

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13. Nowadays, few would say that democracy can be reduced to majority rule. However, a procedural minimum definition can encourage such a view.
comfortably embrace all these possibilities. Second, this definition encourages prioritizing easily observable dimensions of elections, and downplaying other important attributes of democracy which are not covered in a definition that, most notably, excludes what happens after the voting ends. Attaching so much importance to forms and procedures, especially elections, leads analysts to overlook the substance of democracy and to treat it solely as a way to access power while neglecting how that power is exercised.

Researchers have, of course, noticed the first drawback and a number of techniques have been adopted to address it. For instance, David Collier and Steven Levitsky, among others, have developed a tool called ‘diminished subtypes’ to distinguish different types of democracy while avoiding concept-stretching. The second drawback—emphasizing readily-measurable election procedures—has received less attention, and this is one reason why the first two generations of democratization studies, which focus on transition and consolidation, have had difficulty explaining the ‘low quality’ of new democratic regimes beset with corruption, cronyism, and weak accountability.

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

Consider China’s Organic Law of Village Committees (1998). The Law promised four democracies: election, decision making, management, and supervision. Whereas grassroots elections alter access to power, the latter three elements change the way power is exercised. However, of the four, access to power has attracted the bulk of the attention. Most studies have centered on the introduction of elections, how elections have been conducted, how the quality of elections can be enhanced, and voting behavior of villagers. Of course, this research has taught us much, but might it be

15. Ibid. For other research on ‘democracy with adjectives’, see Croissant and Merkel, ‘Introduction’; Merkel, ‘Embedded and defective democracies’; and Morlino, ‘What is a “good” democracy?’.
useful to assess grassroots political reform in China from a different perspective? In the next two sections, we evaluate the configuration of power in rural China using an approach that always keeps in mind the difference between accessing power and exercising power.

**Accessing power in Chinese villages**

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

Electoral procedures, touching on issues as varied as setting up steering committees and limiting proxy voting, have been clarified both on paper and in practice. During the first decade after the provisional *Organic Law* was passed, the absence of regulations concerning ‘election steering committees’ (xuanju lingdao xiaozu) drew much criticism. Since 1998, both the *Organic Law* and most provincial regulations have come to include stipulations about how new, more circumscribed committees are to be organized and what functions they are to perform. Of perhaps greatest importance, election committee members in the majority of villages are now selected by village assemblies, village groups, or village representative assemblies. This should make them more independent and

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**Footnote 18 continued**


responsive, even though committees in most locations continue to be presided over by village Party secretaries or sitting committee directors.24

Voter registration helps ensure voting rights and the validity of elections. Though both the Organic Law and provincial legislation remain murky about precisely who can vote, stipulations that require publication of a voters’ list 20 days before an election offer an opportunity to raise objections, and in some cases have led to lawsuits by those who felt they were excluded illegally.25 In the 2002 Shaanxi elections, for example, voter lists were disputed in 7% of the province’s villages, and although only 23% of villages published their list a full 20 days prior to the election, most villages issued theirs well before election day, as sometimes had occurred in the past.26

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


26. ‘Table of 2002 village elections in Shaanxi’.


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

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

Enhanced ballot secrecy and security is also evident. Secret balloting was not a common practice when elections were first introduced, but this is no longer the case. In Fujian, a national pacesetter, none of the 1989 elections employed a secret

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30. Final candidates are usually chosen according to the number of nominating votes received, by a second round of voting, or by the village representative assembly or election committee. Xu Zhigang et al., ‘Cunzhuang Xuanju Zuyou Guize de Fei Yizhixing’, p. 68.
34. He Xuefeng, ‘Cunweihui Xuanju Zhuhuanjie de Diaocha yu Fenxi’. Campaign speeches have been encouraged by some local officials to combat unlawful campaign activities, such as attracting votes via coercion or buying votes with cash, gifts, or banquets. The logic is that institutionalizing campaigning will make elections less dependent on personal resources and also offer candidates regular channels to present themselves. Zhang Rongmin, ‘Quanqian Guifan he Zhili Cunweihui Xuanju zhong de Jingzheng Xingwei’ [‘A preliminary discussion of regulating and managing campaign activities in village elections’], paper prepared for EU–China Training Programme on Village Governance Conference, Beijing, 5–7 April 2006, available at: http://www.chinaelections.com/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=91176 (accessed 6 August 2007).
ballot, but by 1997 95% did. The use of voting booths has been written into the Organic Law and efforts have been made to implement ballot secrecy nationwide, though with less than complete success. A national survey conducted by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2005 found that 49% of villages made secret voting cubicles available. Since many villagers are not accustomed to filling out votes in private or feel pressure from fellow voters not to do so, some localities have started to make use of a secret voting space mandatory. In Shaanxi’s 2002 elections, for example, 96% of villages made such a space available and 5% made it compulsory.

Two more aspects of voting, namely the use of proxies and ‘roving ballot boxes’ (liudong piaoxiang) deserve mention. As outside observers have long complained, these practices may have been designed to make elections more inclusive, but they also threaten ballot secrecy and are open to abuse. Though neither practice has been banned nationwide, local regulations have limited both. For instance, in 2000 Fujian eliminated proxy-voting and introduced absentee balloting. More recently, Chongqing and Gansu also banned proxy-voting. In the 28 provinces that still permit it, restrictions are now in place: all have limited the number of votes proxies can cast, five provinces require written authorizations, and 15 require prior consent by the village election committee. And there is evidence that implementation has followed the law. Whereas in Fujian 15% of villages allowed proxy voting before 1998, now only 3% do. In Jilin and Hunan, far less than 1% of villages prohibited proxy voting before 1998; now, 18% and 8%, respectively, do.

Like proxy-voting, controls over roving ballot boxes are becoming stricter. Roving boxes are no longer an option in seven provinces including Hebei, Jilin, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Sichuan, and rural Shanghai and Chongqing. In Anhui and Hunan, voters using boxes must be registered with the election committee and a list of their names published. In Guangdong, consent from township authorities must be obtained before deploying roving boxes. Reform here is evident even in provinces, such as Hebei, Jilin, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Sichuan, and rural Shanghai and Chongqing.
as Jiangxi, which have villages that often sprawl over many square kilometers. In a survey of 40 Jiangxi communities following the 1999 elections, 40% of elections relied entirely on roving boxes, 53% used roving boxes in combination with other methods, and only 8% did not use them.45 Province-wide statistics had changed significantly by 2002, with 29% of villages not employing roving boxes, and those only using them falling to less than 10%.46

Village elections in China remain far from perfect. Many procedural failings identified by Chinese and international observers, including the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Carter Center, the International Republican Institute, and the European Union, have not been fully addressed. New problems are also emerging, such as vote-buying, literacy tests for candidates, interference in recall efforts, and ‘hoodlum elections’, where local toughs secure votes (or influence ballot-counting) through threats and intimidation.47 Still, electoral procedures have improved greatly in the last two decades and a good number of competitive and reasonably fair elections have been held. Access to power, in other words, has expanded. But have similar changes in the exercise of power occurred?

Exercising power in Chinese villages

Observers have rightly noted that village elections exert some influence over political life in the Chinese countryside. Lianjiang Li, among others, has found that balloting has an empowering effect: free and fair elections can produce more responsive leaders and make them more impartial when enforcing state policies; it also provides an opportunity to dislodge cadres whom villagers like least.48 John Kennedy and his coauthors, based on a 2000–2001 survey of 34 villages, likewise discovered that freely elected leaders were more accountable to villagers and that their land...

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


management decisions reflected popular preferences for fair reallocation. Along similar lines, Brandt and Turner have demonstrated that even corruptible elections can help curtail rent-seeking by local leaders, while Baogang He has concluded that elections often lead village committee directors to place voters’ interests over those of townships and Party branches.

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

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

51. He, Rural Democracy in China, pp. 109–111.
54. Li, ‘The empowering effect of village elections in China’.
56. Manion, ‘Democracy, community, trust’.
57. See Mao Dan and Ren Qiang, Zhongguo Nongcun Gonggong Lingyu de Shengzhang, pp. 53–68. Thomas P. Bernstein [‘Village democracy and its limits’, ASIEN 99, (April 2006), p. 30] writes: ‘even when village elections work well, the power of elected village committees is limited because they necessarily function within an authoritarian political environment that is not structured to respond to the demands of constituents’. On data that suggest that village committees ‘are still in the long shadow of township governments and village Party secretaries’, see Tan and Xin, ‘Village election and governance’, p. 596; also Wang and Yao, ‘Grassroots democracy and local governance’, pp. 1635–1636.
communities, village committees have failed to achieve their potential, and in some they control few resources and are close to insignificant.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{Townships and village committees}

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

Consider assessing levies, a recurring source of conflict between townships and villages in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{63} This thankless task put elected cadres in a difficult position, insofar as they had to choose between fulfilling orders from above and keeping financial burdens down for fellow villagers. This dilemma, combined with perennially low compensation, made office-holding in some villages so unattractive that some cadres refused to complete their terms. In one study of 29 Hubei villages, He Xuefeng and Wang Ximing learned that committee directors in seven villages, frustrated by difficulties surrounding revenue collection, resigned within one year of their election in 1999.\textsuperscript{64}

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

\textsuperscript{59} For a summary of reasons why local governments interfere in village affairs, see Alpermann, ‘An assessment of research on village governance in China’; also, Bernstein, ‘Village democracy and its limits’, p. 33. On ways, however, that townships support free and fair elections, see He, \textit{Rural Democracy in China}, pp. 142–146.

\textsuperscript{60} Alpermann, ‘The post-election administration of Chinese villages’, p. 47.


\textsuperscript{63} For case studies and statistical analysis of weak village committees, and a conclusion that ‘even in villages with extremely good implementation of democratic reforms, citizens do not necessarily have a great deal of leverage over officials, accurate information about their activities, or a particularly strong sense of public duty’, see Tsai, Accountability without Democracy, ch. 7, quoted text on p. 190.

\textsuperscript{64} He Xuefeng and Wang Ximing, ‘Cunzu de Guimo yu Ganbu’ [‘Scale of village groups and their cadres’], in Xu Yong and Xiang Jiquan, eds, \textit{Cunmin Zizhi Jincheng zhong de Xiangcun Guanxi}, p. 502.
Unpopular target-hitting programs are another source of discord. Overly ambitious development schemes, image-building efforts, and fancifully high targets are often imposed on village committees. Though the tax-for-fee reform and abolition of the agricultural tax simplified revenue collection, it did not free committee members from other duties assigned from above. Evidence from many locations suggests that to maintain and strengthen control over villages, some townships are turning ‘soft targets’ (ruan zhibiao) into ‘hard tasks’ (ying renwu) that cannot be downplayed or ignored. In Henan, for example, in the face of strong community opposition, villages have been saddled with target-hitting projects, such as building 40 methane-generating pits or 200 mu of vegetable sheds. In another Henan county, higher-ups ordered that at least one collective enterprise be set up in every village within a year. Over 100 paper mills were built, all of which went bankrupt, causing enormous losses, a chorus of popular complaint, and lasting environmental damage.

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

Townships often treat elected committees as if they were subordinates, and village leaders may find themselves squeezed, like the meat in an overstuffed sandwich, or as the Jiangxi director quoted above put it: ‘like a rat caught in the bellows’ (laoshu jin le fengxiang). Sometimes, it does not even take much pressure to coax committee members to ‘voluntarily be responsible to higher levels’ (zijue duishang fuze). Fiscal realities and features of the cadre management system make it difficult to refuse jobs imposed by townships, whatever the views of voters.

To fulfill many of their responsibilities, such as providing public goods, committees often must rely on townships for help. The tax-for-fee reform deepened a

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67. For this incident and county pressures placed on townships, which are then transmitted to villages, see Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, ‘Selective policy implementation in rural China’, Comparative Politics 31(2), (January 1999), p. 176.


69. Mao Dan and Ren Qiang, Zhongguo Nongcun Gonggong Lingyu de Shengchang, p. 53.
fiscal crisis in many villages (and townships), as local leaders lost the ability to raise funds they had previously depended upon. Constructing and repairing roads, maintaining irrigation systems, and supporting the elderly and disabled, all have become more difficult, especially in agricultural areas and communities where other social institutions cannot pick up the slack. In order to obtain needed resources, village cadres tend to be cooperative when townships assign them even highly unpopular tasks.

Personnel management regulations have also created incentives that spur cadres to respond to demands received from above. The ‘cadre responsibility system’ (ganbu guanli zerenzhi) links bonuses and punishment to higher level assessments of performance. In many locations, the salary and bonuses of village committee members are determined by township authorities, and levels are set in accord with how well important assignments are carried out. Some localities, in the wake of the tax-for-fee reform, have gone so far as to list village cadres on the township or county level payroll. This further empowers townships, and makes committee members more pliable in the face of demands from above.

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

Party branches and village committees

Village-level Party organizations are another obstacle to grassroots democratization. Though the Organic Law (Art. 3) states that Party branches should ‘support villagers in developing self-governance and exercising their democratic rights’, it also insists

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71. One counter-trend, which should make elected cadres more accountable to voters, is that ‘villagers’ evaluations’ (minzhu pingchou) are now sometimes consulted when township authorities decide on a village cadres’ salary. But even in these cases, baseline salary is usually set by the township according to its own criteria. Cheng Sini, ‘Rang Cunmin Gei Cunguan Ping Gongzi de Banfa Hao’ ['It is a good method to let villagers grade village cadres’ salary'], Nongcun Fazhan Lancong [Rural Development Forum] no. 10, (2000), p. 45. Tian Yuanshin, Qu Xuan and Li Dao, ‘Cunmin Gei Cun Ganbu Ding Baochou’ ['Villagers assess how much village cadres should earn'], Xiangzhen Luntan [Township Forum] no. 3, (2005), p. 13; also Alpermann, ‘The post-election administration of Chinese villages’, p. 68.

72. This is not a nationwide practice, though it has been implemented widely. For details, see Ning Zekui, Liu Hailiang, Wang Zhengbing and Chai Haofang, ‘Cunguanbu Xiang Hechu Qu’ ['Where village cadres are heading'], Zhongguo Nongcun Guancha [China Rural Survey] no. 1, (2005), p. 60; also Zhong and Chen, ‘To vote or not to vote’, p. 698.

that branches are a village’s ‘leadership core’ (lingdao hexin). This means that Party leaders play a dominant role in most locations, with the Party secretary usually considered the village ‘number one’ (yi ba shou), and the committee director the village ‘number two’ (er ba shou).74

Fieldwork and surveys of grassroots cadres have confirmed the pre-eminence of Party secretaries. In 1999, Liang Kajin and He Xuefeng estimated that 80% of secretaries nationwide were their village’s top power holder, whereas an in-depth study of eight communities in 2002–2003 concluded that Party secretaries had the final word in seven of them.75 Baogang He likewise found that dominance of elected committees ‘only takes place in a limited number of cases’.76 In a survey of 111 committee directors in four Zhejiang prefectures, 15% of He’s respondents said they had more power than the village Party secretary, while 71% reported that the secretary had more power.77

Given the Party branch’s status as ‘leadership core’, it is often unclear what a village committee should take charge of: in what areas must the branch follow the committee’s lead? The Organic Law and implementing regulations that we have seen fail to specify a clear division of responsibilities between the two bodies. This often leads to clashes over, for instance, collective resources, as committees and branches struggle to secure final say over enterprises, economic cooperatives, and land.78 When elected cadres lose these skirmishes, as they often do, some have become so frustrated that they have withdrawn from political life. In 2001, People’s Daily reported that 57 committee members from four townships in Qixia Prefecture, Shandong, resigned in protest against Party branches that monopolized village politics. They charged that a full year after being elected, branches still refused to give them access to the account books and the official seal that

symbolizes public power. Such incidents are not rare. Guo Zhenglin found that in the two years after Guangdong introduced elections in 1998, over 800 committee members resigned, most often because they had been frozen out of decision making by Party branches.

Even fairly powerful village committees are vulnerable to Party influence, through personnel overlap. Surveys have shown that a large number of committee members, and directors in particular, belong to the Communist Party. For instance, following Jiangsu’s balloting in 2006, almost 90% (15,649 out of 17,411) of committee directors were Party members. Figures for earlier rounds of voting in rural Shanghai (2002), Fujian (2003), and Shaanxi (2002) were 89%, 66%, and 66%, respectively. Party penetration is important because, unlike elected cadres, whose legitimacy is based on popular votes, Party members who sit on village committees derive some of their authority from being agents of the Party-state. This raises an obvious question: even when Party members have won a spot on a village committee in a free and fair election, will they stand with villagers when Party superiors instruct them to do otherwise?

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

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79. Cui Shixin, ‘Cunguan Weihe Yao Cizhi’ ['Why village heads want to resign'], Renmin Ribao [People’s Daily], (21 March 2001); also Xu Zhiyong, ‘Xuanju Zhihou’. For regulations concerning control of the village seal, see He, Rural Democracy in China, p. 112.


82. Percentages are calculated from the following tables: ‘Table of 2002 village elections in Shaanxi’; ‘Table of 2002 village elections in Shanghai’, available at: http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=1810&ID=35331; ‘Table of 2003 village elections in Fujian’, all accessed 12 December 2006. For similar statistics on earlier elections in a number of provinces, see Pastor and Tan, ‘The meaning of China’s village elections’, p. 140. For data, mostly from the 1990s, that show an increasing number on non-communists on village committees, see He, Rural Democracy in China, pp. 107–108.

83. Guo and Bernstein, ‘The impact of elections on the village structure of power’.


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initiative has been implemented widely. In Shandong, authorities even prescribed that the overlap rate of the two top positions should exceed 80% and that of the full branch and village committee should reach 70%. Having to face voters could make Party branch members more accountable, but influence often flows the other way. Overlapping membership, along with joint or consecutive meetings of the two organizations, can blur whether concurrent office-holders are responsible to their constituents or their Party masters. Some Chinese researchers have even begun to wonder whether overlapping membership might lead to a return of unfettered rule by Party branches, especially Party secretaries, thus making village elections close to meaningless.

Social forces and village committees

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

89. Party members remain subject to Party discipline, and they may also be more accommodating to township leaders. Lu Fuxing, ‘Yijiantiao de Shixiao yu Lilun zhi Chayi’ [‘Gaps between real effects and theoretical implications of concurrent office-holding’], Hunan Gong’an Gaodeng Zhuanke Xuexiao Xuebao [Journal of Hunan Public Security College] 16(5), (October 2004), p. 17. Some researchers (Lianjiang Li, personal communication, November 2007) argue that what really matters is not who serves as both the secretary and director, but how one gets the two positions.
Clans (zongzu), in particular, have experienced a resurgence in the reform era, and in some locations ‘are once again sources of power and authority’. While kinship ties need not always have a baleful effect on democratic rule, strong lineage attachments can become a mechanism through which individual rights and minority protections are infringed. Majority rule sometimes produces dominance of one clan, or disruptive, ongoing struggle between several clans, which leads to fierce conflict and makes governance nearly impossible. For example, the Li lineage in one Hunan community used elections to usurp the power of a village committee and transformed grassroots government into an armed tool of clan power. In another ‘extreme case’ focusing on disputed land adjustments in Shaanxi, open elections heightened clan tensions, turned a Party secretary against a committee director, and brought governance almost to a standstill. Much more research is needed to learn how and when lineage ties affect village committees and the quality of democracy.

Religious organizations can also be obstacles to grassroots democratization when they compete with village committees for resources or leadership in community affairs. In one Shaanxi village, shortly after a committee and a Catholic church joined forces to build a primary school, wrangling over control of the school broke out. Instead of seeking a compromise, the church leaders publicized the conflict and mobilized their followers to challenge the elected cadres, resulting in a deep division in the village.

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

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

Conclusion

In a country like China, grassroots democratization is a multi-faceted process that involves much more than holding a good election every three years. Two decades after the Organic Law first came into force, election procedures have improved significantly, both on paper and on the ground. Meaningful changes touching on steering committees, voter registration, candidate nomination, campaigning, secret balloting, and proxy-voting have taken hold and begun to expand access to power. Yet the quality of democracy in much of the countryside remains stubbornly low, mainly because village committees, once an election is over, are situated in a socio-political environment that has changed surprisingly little.

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


Second, village Party branches have no small say in decision making and policy implementation. In most communities, Party branches remain the dominant force and village committees play a distinctly secondary role. The Party branch’s status as ‘leadership core’ is often evident in control over collective resources, such as land, economic cooperatives and enterprises, and also in overlapping membership on village committees. Despite efforts by many committee directors to assert their independence and exploit the legitimacy that elections confer, recent reforms that encourage concurrent office-holding may dilute the ‘electoral connection’ by blurring whether committee members are responsible to their constituents or their Party superiors.

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

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

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

104. The term was first made popular by David Mayhew and was brought to the China field by Melanie Manion. See David R. Mayhew, Congress: The Electoral Connection (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Melanie Manion, ‘The electoral connection in the Chinese countryside’, American Political Science Review 90(4), (December 1996).

105. As we discuss above, it is also possible that these reforms will help democratize Party branches. For experiments with subjecting Party branch members to a village-wide vote of confidence, see Lianjiang Li, ‘The two-ballot system in Shanxi Province: subjecting village Party secretaries to a popular vote’, China Journal 42, (July 1999).


108. For examples, see the sources listed in footnotes 48–56.
At the same, we also need more research on whether elections deter power holders from seeking personal gain above all else. The issue in some villages is not committee members who are pushed around by townships, Party branches, and social forces, but elected cadres who free themselves of all constraints and act only for themselves. Where does this occur? Why, in some places, are the constraints that we have emphasized and the ones that elections create both ineffective in preventing self-serving behavior? Are limited changes in governance after several rounds of elections a cause of increasing voter apathy, as villagers conclude that whomever is in office will be corrupt and abusive, because ‘all crows under heaven are equally black’ or ‘it makes no sense to replace a full tiger with a hungry wolf?’

As Norbert Bobbio reminds us, democracy is subversive in a highly radical sense because it subverts the traditional and natural notion that power flows downward. Without denying the achievements of the last two decades, we have suggested that the process of putting democracy in place goes well beyond ‘getting the procedures right’, especially in an authoritarian setting where democracy is not the only game in town. Much as a one-day trip to observe an election reveals something, but not everything, about what the next three years will bring, changes in access to power can be trumped by a non-democratic environment that encircles an election victor. Governance, even in a single village, has many components and expanded access to power conditions, but does not determine how power is exercised. ‘High quality democracy’ in rural China, let alone the whole nation, rests on much more than good village elections.

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113. On placing elections in a comprehensive framework that goes beyond the village and also considers cadre behavior, villager awareness, and cultural context, see Gunter Schubert, ‘Studying “democratic” governance in contemporary China: looking at the village is not enough’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 18(60), (June 2009).