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Kevin J. O'Brien

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VILLAGERS' COMMITTEES

IMPLEMENTING POLITICAL REFORM IN CHINA'S VILLAGES*

Kevin J. O'Brien

Chinese policy makers frequently have to contend with imperfect policy implementation. Central officials may seek to curb provincial investment or to reduce local fees, but their efforts often founder when lower-level actors sabotage a policy or implement some aspects but not others. Despite periodic dispatch of work teams and liberal application of bureaucratic pressure, as well as increased reliance on newer instruments, such as laws, satisfactory enforcement of national policies often proves elusive. Many central programs are distorted beyond recognition or implemented only in part. And the range of local responses to central initiatives can be remarkably varied.¹

This article examines the ongoing tug-of-war between the centre and lower levels by analysing the implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers'

* I would like to thank the Ministry of Civil Affairs and Ford Foundation for making this research possible. Essential assistance in the field was provided by many individuals, including Li Xueju, Wang Zhenyao, Bai Guangzhao, Jonathan Hecht, Tyrene White, and numerous Fujian-based Ministry of Civil Affairs officials. Helpful comments on an earlier draft were provided by Lianjiang Li, Jon Unger, Anita Chan, Margaret Pearson, Bill Liddle, Judith Kullberg and Jonathan Hecht.

¹ Useful discussions of policy implementation in China include David M. Lampton (ed.), *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Melanie Manion, 'Policy Implementation in the People's Republic of China: Authoritative Decisions versus Individual Interests', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.50, no.2 (May 1991), pp.253-79; Alfred L. Chan, 'The Campaign for Agricultural Development in the Great Leap Forward: A Study of Policy-making and Implementation in Liaoning', *The China Quarterly*, no.129 (March 1992), pp.52-71; Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton (eds), *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

Committees. The law provides a framework for reorganizing China's villages and rejuvenating local political institutions and is the centrepiece of a central program designed to enhance cadre accountability and village autonomy while reaffirming state control over the countryside. Since its enactment, efforts to implement the law have scored some notable successes, particularly in demonstration villages (*shifan cun*); but success in a handful of localities cannot disguise the uneven progress of implementation in most of China's villages. To this point, some villagers' committees scarcely function and many operate in a fashion quite unlike that prescribed by the Organic Law.

Why has it been exceedingly difficult to restructure China's village-level political institutions? Why have certain villages been able to implement the Organic Law more successfully than others? In this article, I suggest that this has largely hinged on the amount of bureaucratic attention a village has received and on how villagers and local cadres have perceived their interests and understood their resources in relation to each other and to higher levels. I suggest that, in many localities, assorted forms of cadre resistance and villager skepticism have been important causes of patchy implementation, and that balancing demands both to complete state tasks and to increase popular participation have frequently impinged on the interests of cadres and villagers for separate but reinforcing reasons.

Research Sites and Sources

The field work for this study took place in the summer of 1992, when ten foreign academics were invited to participate in a joint Chinese-foreign research project on village self-government organized by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs. In addition to its many other responsibilities (e.g., managing flood relief, settling demobilized soldiers, organizing local people's congress elections, overseeing social welfare programs), the Ministry is also responsible for implementing the Organic Law.

The assembled researchers visited seven demonstration villages in Liaoning and eight demonstration villages in Fujian (I participated in the Fujian group). The two teams travelled first to provincial Civil Affairs bureaus with officials from the Ministry, and then with provincial officials to prefectural and county Civil Affairs offices, before visiting the villages. At each stop, we heard briefings, asked questions, and gathered data on villagers' committee elections, village budgets, leadership composition, and local priorities. In the villages, we typically spoke with the entire villagers' committee as well as with non-committee Party branch members. We were also supplied with various provincial, prefectural, and county circulars and regulations related to strengthening village organizations. The Ministry's primary purpose for organizing the field work was to assess achievements and shortcomings in policy implementation and to generate suggestions that might be of use when revising the Organic Law — a process scheduled to begin in 1993.

The trip culminated in a three-day conference in Beijing attended by Ministry and local Civil Affairs officials, several leaders of prefectures and counties, Chinese rural researchers, and the foreign scholars. Several of the Chinese conferees had previously conducted field research on implementation of the Organic Law, and beyond sharing their experiences with us, they also supplied us with the results of their investigations and the results of earlier conferences on village self-government organized in 1989, 1990 and 1991.²

Villagers' Committees

By the mid-1980s, grass-roots political institutions in much of China were in disarray. The dismantling of production brigades had left village cadres with unclear authority and limited resources at a time when economic reforms were increasing household income and autonomy. Farmers routinely defied village leaders, who typically controlled less collective property and provided fewer services than in the past, and many villagers came to feel that the local cadres were unnecessary, even parasitic.³ A decade after Mao's death, cadre-villager relations were deteriorating rapidly, and many village leaders were coming to doubt whether the benefits of being a cadre exceeded the grief.⁴

² Special note should be made of the *Shijian yu sikao* [Practice and Reflection] series (see note 3); these conference volumes were largely written by Ministry and local officials for other officials. They recount successes and failures in implementing the Organic Law nationwide, and the authors (including several Chinese academics) were assembled to act as consultants to the Ministry.

³ On the relationship between tense cadre-peasant relations and villagers' committee construction, see Wu Guimin, 'Cunmin zizhi shi huanjie ganqun maodun de yaoshi' [Villagers' autonomy is the key to resolving cadre-mass contradictions], pp.180-7, and Liu Chujiang, 'Ganqun maodun yu cunmin zizhi de sikao' [Reflections on cadre-mass contradictions and villagers' autonomy], pp.194-6, both in Zhongguo jiceng zhengquan jianshe yanjiuhui (ed.), *Shijian yu sikao* [Practice and Reflection] (hereafter, *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1992); Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui de xianzhuang yu gaige' [The Present Situation and Reform of Villagers' Committees], p.188, and Liu Xiaomin, 'Tanhuan yu bantanhuan cunweihui wenti tantao' [Exploration of Problems in Paralyzed and Semi-paralyzed Villagers' Committees], p.222, both in Zhang Houan, Bai Yihua and Wu Zhilong (eds), *Zhongguo xiangzhen zhengquan jianshe* [Power Construction of Chinese Towns and Townships] (Chengdu: Sichuan chubanshe, 1992); Wang Yongwu, 'Shitan cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa guanche nan de yuanyin' [Discussing the Reasons Why it is Difficult to Implement the Organic Law of Villagers' Committee], in Zhongguo jiceng zhengquan jianshe yanjiuhui (ed.), *Shijian yu sikao* [Practice and Reflection] (hereafter, *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1) (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1989), pp.169-70.

⁴ For a range of views on the extent to which local cadres have served as state agents since 1949, see Jonathan Unger, 'State and Peasant in Post-Revolution China', *Journal of*

In this environment, the National People's Congress' Legal Affairs Commission and the Ministry of Civil Affairs initiated discussions on how to halt further disintegration and how to rebuild rural political power. Important central leaders, most notably National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee chairman Peng Zhen, came to the conclusion that China needed comprehensive institutional reforms in order to regularize cadre-peasant relations. A means was needed to enable villagers to hold village cadres accountable, to define township authority within villages, and to specify the responsibilities of village cadres in completing state tasks.⁵ Peng and his allies agreed to grant limited democratic rights to villagers, in the hope that they would be more willing to accept decisions made by elected cadres, and to relieve township officials of burdensome, direct management responsibilities over villages. Peng and others also anticipated that meaningful elections and increased public disclosure would check cadre corruption and lineage resurgence and eliminate the need for periodic campaigns to rectify village leadership.⁶

Peasant Studies vol.17, no.1 (October 1989), pp.114-36; Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Helen F. Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

- 5 On leadership motives and Peng's support for villagers' committees after the Tiananmen suppression, see Tyrene White, 'Rural Politics in the 1990s: Rebuilding Grassroots Institutions', *Current History*, vol.91, no.566 (September 1992), pp.275-6. Peng's early promotion of villagers' committees can be seen in Peng Zhen, 'Zai zhongyang zhengfa weiyuanhui kuoda huiyishang de jianghua' [Speech to an Expanded Meeting of the Political-Legal Committee], in Quanguo renda changweihui bangongting yanjiushi (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo renmin daibiao dahui wenjian ziliao huibian, 1949-90* [Document and Materials Collection of People's Congresses, 1949-1990], (Beijing: Zhongguo minzhu fazhi chubanshe, 1990), p.582.
- 6 For central intentions, see the then Deputy Minister of Civil Affairs, Lian Yin, 'Guanyu shixing cunmin zizhi de ruogan wenti' [Some Questions Concerning Implementing Villagers' Autonomy], *Xiangzhen luntan*, no.7 (1992), pp.4-5; Wang Zhenyao and Tang Jinsu, 'Woguo cunmin zizhi de huigu yu zhanwang' [Review of and Prospects for Chinese Villages' Autonomy], *Xiangzhen luntan*, no.1 (1992), p.9. Appropriate township-village relations are described in Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan* [Political Power at China's Rural Basic Level], (Chengdu: Sichuan chubanshe, 1992), pp.389-93; Liu Zhenwei, 'Guanyu cunmin zizhi de liangge guanxi wenti' [Issues Concerning Two Relations in Villagers' Autonomy], pp.143-4, and Zhang Chengtang, 'Jiaqiang nongcun minzhu zhengzhi jianshe buduan tigao cunmin zizhi shuiping' [Strengthen Rural Democratic Political Construction and Unceasingly Improve the Level of Villagers' Autonomy], pp.261-2, both in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2. On using elections to reduce 'villager estrangement' and to guarantee villagers' participation in village affairs, see Xia Yueshun, 'Shixing cunmin zizhi shi huanjie nongcun ganqun

To achieve these ends, it was decided to restructure and improve villagers' committees — organizations that they had established and promoted with great fanfare several years earlier but had allowed to languish. The term 'villagers' committee' (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) had first appeared in the 1982 Constitution (Art. 111) and in a 1983 Central Committee circular on separating government administration and economic management. But except for a number of villages where committees were 'spontaneously' established to address problems such as irrigation disputes and the breakdown of public order, these early statements had had little impact in much of the nation. Prior to 1987, there were few documents or regulations explaining how to set them up, and township governments typically regarded existing committees as administrative appendages, much like the production brigades they had replaced.⁷

With Peng Zhen's prodding, efforts commenced to upgrade villagers' committees and to institutionalize their role. A team was formed to draft the new law, based largely within the National People's Congress' Legislative Affairs Commission, and several drafts were circulated. Although the need to formalize and standardize institutional arrangements was widely appreciated, hammering out the Organic Law's final content proved to be controversial. Deliberations within the NPC Standing Committee dragged on for over a year, and passage of the law at the 1987 NPC plenary session was postponed after considerable deputy opposition emerged.

Some critics of the draft disputed both the desirability and the feasibility of increased village autonomy. NPC deputies (including many rural cadres) questioned whether 'cadres who truly work conscientiously will get elected' and instead supported combining 'evaluation by higher-level authorities' with popular election. They suggested that the responsibilities of villagers' committees would be 'too heavy' and argued to reduce the committees' autonomy and to put them under the jurisdiction of township (formerly commune) governments. Doubts arose concerning the proposed relationship between villagers' committees and the village Party branches and township governments. Opponents of the bill feared that self-governing villagers' committees would ignore state interests and defy township instructions and

maodun de zhongyao tujing' [Realizing Villagers' Autonomy is an Important Way to Alleviate Contradictions Between Rural Cadres and Villagers], pp.190-1, in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2.

⁷ Rural Political Power Division, Ministry of Civil Affairs, 'An Introduction to Villagers' Self-Government in the Countryside of the People's Republic of China', p.2, materials prepared in July 1992; Also discussed in Fujian provincial civil affairs bureau briefing, 16 July 1992. On villagers' initiation of proto-villagers' committees as early as 1981, see an interview with NPC Legislative Affairs Commission member, Gu Angran, in Liu Jinghuai, 'Cujin nongcun minzhu shenghuo zhiduhua de zhongyao falü' [An Important Law that Promotes the Institutionalization of Rural Democratic Life], *Liaowang* (Overseas Edition), (14 December 1987), p.5.

said this might make it difficult to carry out rural conscription, family planning, public security work, and grain procurement.⁸

Advocates of more thorough democratization argued the opposite. Though equally committed to improved grass-roots governance, they pointed out that the government could not afford to subsidize village cadres from its own coffers and suggested that relations between villagers' committees and townships should be described in terms of informal guidance rather than hierarchical leadership and direct supervision. Moreover, they 'thought the bill did not go far enough in empowering village cadres against the encroachments of township officials', while some NPC Law Committee members 'wanted to add a provision stipulating the right of village cadres to turn down any assignment not covered by the bill'.⁹

In the end, the NPC Presidium decided it was 'improper to force the draft law through the legislative procedure',¹⁰ and instead proposed that deputies approve the Organic Law in principle and authorize the Standing Committee to make further revisions before promulgating it on a trial basis. This motion was accepted and eight months later, in November 1987, after further 'heated debate', a trial Organic Law was passed over the opposition of Standing Committee members who felt the law was premature and gave excessive power to villagers.¹¹

⁸ The quoted text appears in 'Village Committee Regulations', in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Daily Report-China* (hereafter, *FBIS DR-CHI*), 66 (7 April 1987), p.K7; See also 'Considers Village Regulations', *FBIS DR-CHI*, 68 (9 April 1987), p.K17; Gong Miao, 'Reform of Political Structure, Autonomy for Peasants — NPC Deputies Argue Over Draft of Villagers' Law', *FBIS DR-CHI*, 71 (14 April 1987), p.K24; Bao Xin, 'Concerning the Villagers' Committee Organization Law', *FBIS DR-CHI*, 79 (24 April 1987), p.K10-12, from *Liaowang* (Overseas Edition), no.16 (20 April 1987), p.1.

⁹ White, 'Rural Politics in the 1990s', pp.275-6. For the amendment suggested by Law Committee members, see 'Rules for Villagers Reviewed', *FBIS DR-CHI*, 47 (11 March 1987), pp.K3-4.

¹⁰ Bao Xin, 'Concerning the Villagers' Committee Organization Law', p.K12.

¹¹ On the remaining opposition, see 'NPC Standing Committee on Village Draft Law', *FBIS DR-CHI*, 224 (20 November 1987), pp.12-13. Some of this account of NPC deliberations is drawn from Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Is China's National People's Congress a "Conservative" Legislature?', *Asian Survey*, vol.30, no.8 (August 1990), p.788; See also White, 'Rural Politics in the 1990s', pp.275-6; Thomas P. Bernstein, 'The Limits of Rural Political Reform', in Victor C. Falkenheim and Ilpyong J. Kim (eds), *Chinese Politics from Mao to Deng* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), pp.311-13; Flemming Christiansen, 'Stability First! Chinese Rural Policy Issues, 1987-1990', in E. B. Vermeer (ed.), *From Peasant to Entrepreneur: Growth and Change in Rural China* (Wageningen, Netherlands: Pudoc, 1992), pp.36-7.

The trial law hewed a middle path, addressing many of the fears that had been expressed on both sides. It empowered villagers to elect villagers' committees comprised of 3-7 members that would serve for three years (Arts 8 and 9), and it defined villagers' committees as basic-level mass organizations of self-government through which villagers managed their own affairs, educated themselves, and served their own needs. Specifically, it highlighted committee responsibilities for village public welfare services, dispute mediation, maintenance of public order, and communication of villagers' opinions to township governments (Art. 2) and called on them to publicize laws and government policies and to persuade villagers to fulfill their legal obligations and respect public property (Art. 5). The Organic Law also gave villagers' committees the right to manage village lands and collective property (Art. 4). Significantly, the final draft did not place villagers' committees under the leadership of local Party or state organs, but only subjected them to government 'guidance, support and assistance' (Art. 3). The Organic Law did, however, call on the committees to help town and township governments to carry out their work (Art. 3).

The Organic Law also set up additional structures designed to foster cadre accountability and villagers' participation. It stipulated that the committees would be responsible to villagers' councils comprised of all adult villagers or a representative from each household. (Arts 10 and 11) Villagers' councils were to draw up village charters and codes of conduct (Art. 16) and to review accounts of all revenue and expenditures incurred by the villagers' committees (Art. 17). The brief 21-article law also instructed standing committees of provincial-level people's congresses to formulate measures that would ensure implementation of the law within their jurisdictions.

Although the Organic Law clearly enlarged village autonomy and offered new opportunities for political participation, it did not foreshadow a wholesale withdrawal of the state: even strong supporters of the law looked with disfavour on 'absolute, unlimited autonomy' and 'independent kingdoms'.¹² Instead, the law was to be implemented in a way that was compatible with continued Party branch leadership and township guidance. Policy formulators, then and since, downplayed the separation of Party and state and interpreted 'guidance, support, and assistance' to allow overlapping village Party branch and villagers' committee membership, or what is called 'two signboards on

¹² Huang Bailian, 'Dui kaizhan cunmin zizhi shifan huodong de sikao' [Thoughts on Unfolding Villagers' Autonomy Demonstration Activities], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, p.124; Xie Yuhua, 'Cunmin zizhi yu cunweihui gaige sikao' [Reflections on Villagers' Autonomy and Villagers' Committees], p.215, and Tang Jinsu and Wang Zhenyao, 'Jiaqiang nongcun jiceng qunzhongxing zizhi zuzhi jianshe' [Strengthen the Construction of Rural Basic-level Mass Self-government Organizations], pp.209-10, both in Zhang Houan, Bai Yihua and Wu Zhilong (eds), *Zhongguo xiangzhen zhengquan jianshe*.

one door'.¹³ Nor did concerned officials advocate fully delinking villages from townships. Strengthened villagers' committees were to help maintain public order and assist government bodies in their work, and this, it was anticipated, would improve realization of township targets and prevent village cadres or defiant villagers from changing birth control allocations, funeral regulations, tax quotas, and so on. Reformed villages would still rely on townships for aid and liaison, for example when a public security problem got out of hand, or when intra-village efforts at mediation failed,¹⁴ and they would still turn to Party branches for overall guidance and support.¹⁵ Party-state control of the countryside would simply become more indirect: with Party rule affected primarily by making villagers' committee cadres (many of whom are Party members) more accountable, and township leaders affected primarily by limiting the number and types of tasks they could assign.¹⁶

This complex and perhaps contradictory combination of goals suggests that we might best view the Organic Law as a two-pronged policy. First, we can identify cases in which participatory goals (e.g., free, fair and contested villagers' committee elections, active village councils, public disclosure of investment decisions and welfare expenditures) have been achieved to a greater or lesser extent. This has been displayed on the horizontal axis in Figure 1. Second, we can distinguish among villages in which largely

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- ¹³ Field research, July 1992. Overlap (which results in fewer village cadres) was often defended on grounds that it reduced financial burdens imposed on villagers. See also Tang Jinsu, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui jianshe zhong xuyao yanjiu de jige wenti' [Several Issues that Need to be Researched in Villagers' Committee Construction], in Zhang Houan, Bai Yihua and Wu Zhilong (eds), *Zhongguo Xiangzhen Zhengquan Jianshe*, p.182.
- ¹⁴ Desired and existing township-village relations are described in Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, pp.389-93; Liu Zhenwei, 'Guanyu cunmin zizhi...', pp.143-4; Zhang Chengtang, 'Jiaqiang nongcun minzhu...', pp.261-2.
- ¹⁵ Many Ministry of Civil Affairs officials argue that political reform will ultimately *strengthen* Party leadership. See Li Xueju, 'Cunmin zizhi sannian shijian de sikao' [Reflecting on Three Years' Experience with Villagers' Autonomy], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, pp.13-14. On relations between village Party branches and villagers' committees, see Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, pp.388-9; Zhang Chengtang, 'Jiaqiang nongcun minzhu...', p.262; Xie Yuhua, 'Cunmin zizhi yu cunweihui...', p.220.
- ¹⁶ Accountability of Party cadres who serve on villagers' committees was a central theme of the conference I attended. Limiting the number and type of tasks assigned by townships (rather than ending all leadership) is discussed in Liu Zhenwei, 'Guanyu cunmin zizhi...', pp.143-4; Song Genyuan, 'Cong zhengzhi zuobiao zhong shiji weizhi tantao xiang cun guanxi de duochongxing' [From the Perspective of Their Real Position in the Political System, Explore the Many Aspects of Township and Village Relations], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1, p.112.

unpopular state-assigned tasks (e.g., birth control, tax collection, mobilization of unpaid labour, below-market grain procurement, tree-felling limitations, funeral reform) are more or less successfully executed. This can be seen on the vertical axis.

Figure 1: Implementation Outcomes

		Political participation	
		High	Low
Execution of unpopular state tasks	Effective	'Up-to-Standard' Committees	'Authoritarian' Committees
	Ineffective	'Run-Away' Committees	'Paralyzed' Committees

What this typology illustrates is that the centre's desired outcome — an up-to-standard village in which democratic procedures are attended to and even unpopular tasks are accomplished — is just one of four alternatives. I will examine the type of villages that occupy each cell and tentatively suggest some factors that may help us to understand why a village falls into one category or another.

Implementation Success: Up-to-Standard Demonstration Villages

In some villages, the Organic Law has already altered the contour of political life, and institutional reforms have made perceptible progress. These up-to-standard (*dabiao*) villages are located almost exclusively in demonstration areas where the Ministry of Civil Affairs has devoted considerable bureaucratic attention and where careful initial selection has increased the probability of implementation success.

In the first two years after the Organic Law came into force (1988-90), pilot projects were launched in selected villages in 1,093 counties and the Ministry initiated publicity campaigns, election work, training classes, and provincial elaboration of rules and regulations. By the turn of 1990, rudimentary villagers' committees existed in virtually all of China's villages,

and six provincial people's congresses had passed detailed implementing regulations.¹⁷

The conservative backlash following the Tiananmen suppression slowed implementation of the Organic Law briefly, but within a year the central government was again pushing village reorganization. In August 1990 the Central Organization Department, the Central Policy Research Office, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Communist Youth League, and the All-China Women's Federation convened a conference on village-level political organizations. At this conference policy makers decided to establish the demonstration villages to provide models for others to emulate. Shortly after the conference ended, Ministry of Civil Affairs Notice No.24 and Central Committee Document No.19 instructed every county to establish 'from several to more than ten' such demonstration villages, while Ministry officials drafted criteria for assessing up-to-standard villagers' committees and urged Party committees, people's congresses and government bureaus to draw up local work rules and regulations.¹⁸

By mid-1992, four-fifths of China's villages had reportedly completed at least two rounds of elections.¹⁹ In one advanced province, Fujian, over 25 per cent of the villages had attained demonstration status and thousands of local implementing documents had been issued.²⁰

To this point, institutional reforms in demonstration villages have centred on three 'key links', the first of these being direct, semi-competitive elections. Ministry of Civil Affairs guidelines prescribe that the elections for villagers' committee members offer more candidates than positions and instruct regional authorities to enact regulations concerning voter registration, nomination and voting procedures, the counting of ballots, and so on. In several locations, the Ministry has also undertaken experiments with campaigning and fully competitive elections (two candidates for each position) rather than the usual listing of one or two more nominees than posts.

Second, the Ministry has encouraged the creation of villagers' representative assemblies (VRAs) (*cunmin daibiao huiyi*). VRAs are designed to oversee the work of villagers' committees. They are often compared to

17 Wang Zhenyao, 'Construction of Villagers' Committees: Background, Current Situation, and Guidance of the Government Policy', paper presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Washington, DC, pp.16-19; Rural Political Power Division, Ministry of Civil Affairs, 'An Introduction to Villagers' Self-Government', p.3.

18 Li Xueju, 'Cunmin zizhi sannian...', pp.11-12; Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, pp.403-04.

19 Lian Yin, 'Guanyu shixing cunmin zizhi...', p.4.

20 Fujian Civil Affairs Bureau briefing, 16 July 1992.

parliaments in a system where villagers' committees play the role of an executive.²¹

Although not mentioned in the Organic Law, VRAs have been formed in most of the demonstration villages. The villagers' councils that had been established by law, comprised of all adults in a village or a representative of each household, quickly proved unwieldy and difficult to convene, particularly in remote areas or in villages where the economy was developing quickly and many villagers were away on business. The Ministry of Civil Affairs thus now promotes smaller, more manageable VRAs, staffed by representatives 'recommended' by every 10 or 15 families, which meet two to six times each year and conduct oversight. They also hope that VRAs will prove more workable in villages with serious factional or lineage conflicts, where villagers' councils have often produced gridlock and even violence.²² (The VRA in one village is profiled in this issue of the *AJCA* in a paper by Susan V. Lawrence.)

Third, demonstration villages have taken the lead in promulgating village charters (*zhangcheng*) and codes of conduct (*cungui minyue*). Codes and charters are mutual compacts that establish behavioural norms for villagers and cadres and enable local residents to regulate village life. Their overriding purpose is to give villagers standards for supervising cadres and cadres standards for managing villagers. They aim to systematize cadre-villager relations, and to reduce the perception that cadres play favourites and that villagers 'intentionally emphasize cadre faults'.²³

Codes of conduct are to be discussed and decided on by villagers (often meaning the VRAs) and the ones I have seen usually include clauses on production, public security, public health, marriage and the family, neighbourly relations, and so on. They are more detailed than laws and lay out precise fines and punishments for stealing, gambling, harbouring criminals,

²¹ See Li Xueju, 'Cunmin zizhi sannian...', pp.8-9. On the role of VRAs, see Zhang Guixing and Ren Quanyue, 'Jianli cunmin daibiao huiyi zhidu shi shixian nongcun jiceng minzhu de yizhong hao xingshi' [Establishing VRAs is a Good Form for Realizing Rural Basic-level Democracy], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, pp.242-7.

²² On the origins of VRAs, see Zhang Guixing and Ren Quanyue, 'Jianli cunmin daibiao...', p.244; Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, pp.376-8.

²³ Guo Qingzheng and Yuan Jiashun, 'Qiantan cunmin zizhi de tiaojian' [Discussing Preconditions for Villagers' Autonomy], pp.80-1, and Lu Zongzhi, 'Yifa jianzhang, shixian cunmin ziwo guanli' [Set up Charters According to Law, Realize Villagers' Self-Management], pp.207-16, both in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2. Quoted text on p.215; see also Huang Bailian, 'Dui kaizhan cunmin zizhi...', p.123. That codes of conduct are designed to both broaden democratic participation and 'reconstitute the power they were intended to circumscribe' has been noted by Ann Anagnost, 'Socialist Ethics and the Legal System', in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), p.178.

hiding violators of family planning rules, diverting electricity, and the like.²⁴ Village charters (often called 'small constitutions') 'distill' codes of conduct and tend to be more general in content; charters typically include provisions detailing the rights and responsibilities of villagers and cadres and explaining the structure and powers of all village political institutions, as well as detailed clauses concerning procedures, such as financial disclosure requirements and how often the VRA is to meet. Charters also commonly address topics such as contracting fees, labour and land management, and the role of morality appraisal societies, women's anti-gambling groups and other local organizations that work under villagers' committees and assist them in their work.²⁵

The institutional innovations in these demonstration villages have undoubtedly enhanced accountability and political participation while also improving attainment of township targets. To a greater or lesser extent, the eight villages that I visited in Fujian had all attained up-to-standard status. In each locale, the elections for villagers' committees had included more candidates than positions (from 20 per cent to 75 per cent more in the 1991 election). Reasonably active oversight of villagers' committees appeared to take place; village charters and codes of conduct had been drawn up and circulated; and township and county authorities confirmed that unwelcome state assignments were performed better than in surrounding areas.

Moreover, it appears that success is not limited to a few showcase villages. Despite the many difficulties outlined below, early accounts report discernible progress in popularizing the Organic Law and in achieving up-to-standard status, especially in relatively well-off demonstration areas with a history of good leadership.²⁶ In an Anhui village, for example, villagers nominated 83 individuals to a villagers' committee and undertook five primaries to select five finalists. Villagers in many of the demonstration villages reportedly have voted down leaders with a 'crude work style' and extracted promises from successors concerning what they will do once in office. In one village outside Tieling city, villagers went so far as to require that candidates for villagers' committee director present full-fledged, competing, three-year economic and social plans.²⁷

²⁴ Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, pp.383-4.

²⁵ Lu Zongzhi, 'Yifa jianzhang...', pp.207-16; Li Xueju, 'Cunmin zizhi sannian...', pp.7, 9; Lian Yin, 'Guanyu shixing cunmin zizhi...', p.4; Huang Bailian, 'Dui kaizhan cunmin zizhi...', p.123.

²⁶ Zhang Houan, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui de xianzhuang, wenti yu duice' [The Current Situation of Villagers' Committees, Problems and Policies], in Zhang Houan, Bai Yihua and Wu Zhilong (eds), *Zhongguo xiangzhen zhengquan jianshe*, p.203.

²⁷ On Tieling, see Hu Ke, 'Tan guanche cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa de guanjian' [The Crux of Implementing the Villagers' Committee Law], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1, pp.134-6. The Anhui example is from Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng*

Some of the villagers in these up-to-standard demonstration villages have also opposed illegal meddling in the elections. There are stories of incensed peasants resisting township appointment of village cadres and protesting electoral irregularities, particularly manipulation of nominee lists. In one case, a villagers' committee director who was nominated by the township but who had offended villagers while implementing family planning and grain collection was rejected by voters who reportedly felt, 'The Party has been the ruling party for 40 years, and they still allow "warlords" to manage us. This is democracy?'. The township relented and accepted the voters' choice. In another case, Hebei villagers cited the Organic Law to defend their rights and defeated a slate of township-selected nominees who had sought to postpone a scheduled election.²⁸

Although electoral competition remains far from perfect even in most of the demonstration villages, there are tantalizing signs that these experiments with accountability may sometimes enhance governance. In two remote mountainous villages that I visited in Fujian, newly-elected cadres had used the authority conferred by elections to collect 85,000 yuan in long-overdue farm-family debts, and the cadres, who said their instructions were now harder to ignore, successfully mobilized the labour and funding to complete a 15km road that had been started and abandoned on three occasions under township direction.²⁹ VRAs in selected demonstration villages have also made headway in addressing difficulties in collecting fees, imposing grain levies, and carrying out the one-child policy.

Active VRAs review important financial decisions made by villagers' committees, including industrial and agricultural plans, contracts, budgetary outlays, construction decisions, use of collective property, allocation of relief funds, and deployment of donated labour. In many areas, VRAs must be consulted if an expense exceeds a given amount: for instance, in villages across Fujian, from 200 yuan in a less well-off area to 10,000 yuan in a very rich village.³⁰

Through well-functioning VRAs, villagers have occasionally moderated financial demands — in a Fujian village I heard how VRA members had

zhengquan, p.371. Removing cadres who have a 'crude work style' is discussed in Liu Zhenqi, 'Cunmin zhijie minzhu de you yici shijian' [Experiences of Villagers' Direct Democracy], *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, p.269.

²⁸ Both examples are drawn from Liu Zhenqi, *ibid*, p.268.

²⁹ Youxi County briefing, 17 July 1992; Ninghua County briefing, 19 July 1992.

³⁰ These figures were reported, respectively, in a mountain village with a yearly budget of 155,000 yuan and a Xiamen Special Economic Zone village with a yearly budget of over one million yuan. Tyrene White reported a limit of 1,000 yuan in Shougang County; see 'Political Reform and Rural Government', in Deborah Davis and Ezra F. Vogel (eds), *Chinese Society on the Eve of Tiananmen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.55.

reduced a road-building surcharge, and in a Henan village a villagers' committee halved a 10,000 yuan levy for a tractor garage after the VRA protested that the town had just collected funds for cultural and recreational improvement.³¹ But, much more commonly, VRAs allow villagers to communicate preferences concerning funds already in village hands — for instance, for improving electricity supply, constructing a fish pond, or building a school instead of erecting an office building; devoting village resources to rearing rabbits rather than constructing factories; developing collective rather than private mining.³²

Discussing and publicizing financial allocations and allotments of scarce resources apparently can defuse opposition and generate support for expensive (particularly zero-sum) decisions. VRA backing has helped demonstration-village cadres persuade five families to cede their courtyards to a school and has enabled leaders to reduce illegal land seizures and allocate subsidized building materials peaceably in villages where as many as half of the households include married children waiting to build homes. Effective VRAs have raised funds to defray a farmer's hospital charges and have generated 50,000 yuan overnight for a mechanical harvester by doubling per acre harvesting fees for a year. On a needed but costly irrigation project, VRA deliberations underscored common benefits and enabled village leaders to mobilize 250 uncompensated workers for 3,800 person/days to complete the project at limited public expense.³³

Village codes and charters, though often used primarily to control villagers, have also been utilized to settle water and irrigation disputes, to arrange compensation for damage caused by stray livestock, and to curb illegal tree felling. In one demonstration village where theft and tree felling were quite severe, illegal activities continued unabated until the VRA researched and enacted a code of conduct and established a village security organization.³⁴ Like elections and VRAs, charters and codes of conduct can help village cadres maintain social order, meet ambitious targets, and collect funds.

³¹ Interview, 20 July 1992; Ouyang Zhongkuan, 'Zhumadian diqu guanche cunweihui zuzhifa zhuangkuang fenxi' [Analysing the Implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees in Zhumadian District], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, pp.285-6.

³² Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.195-6; Fujian County briefings, July 1992.

³³ Wang Ke'an, *ibid.* pp.195-6; Shuidong Village interview notes, July 1992; Ninghua County briefing, July 1992; Zhang Guixing and Ren Quanyue, 'Jianli cunmin daibiao...', p.246; Zhang Hualiang, 'Zhaoyuan xian shixing cunmin daibiao huiyi zhidu de diaocha' [Investigation of Zhaoyuan County's Implementation of the Villagers' Representative Assembly System], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, p.232.

³⁴ Zhang Hualiang, *ibid.* p.234.

As should be clear, some villages have experienced at least moderate success; but which ones? My field research and Chinese accounts suggest that up-to-standard village organizations appear disproportionately in wealthier demonstration villages and in those with a large number of collective enterprises. In the six mountainous villages I visited in central and western Fujian, per capita incomes ranged from 1,015 yuan to 1,280 yuan at a time when rural Fujian's was approximately 850 yuan and Sanming Prefecture's was 991 yuan. Each of these villages was also characterized by a vibrant and profitable collective sector, said to be quite large because of the 'convenience' of running mines, forests, small factories, and orchards collectively.

Wealth and a flourishing collective economy appear to ease completion of state tasks and help prevent paralysis of local political organizations by lubricating inherently conflictual relationships and altering cadre and peasant interests. In more developed villages, where many cadres broker semi-marketized relationships and sometimes operate highly profitable enterprises themselves, cadre spirit and energy are generally higher. Implementation of the Organic Law in these areas creates opportunities as well as uncertainties and dangers. Cadres who have brought prosperity to their villages have fewer fears of electoral defeat and greater incentive to retain their positions, while greater autonomy confers power to distribute enormous sums of money, to provide popular social services, and to conduct successful development programs.³⁵

Cadres in developed villages may also be more tightly wedded to the state apparatus. Cadre subsidies typically rise with village income and higher compensation inspires cadres both to accomplish state-assigned tasks and to accept the bother of increased popular participation. (This contrasts with poorer villages where leaders have a more tenuous link to officialdom insofar as they often cannot draw their full subsidies, and spouses beg cadres to pay more attention to their families and less to public affairs.)³⁶ It is also

³⁵ In the two richest villages I visited, in rural Xiamen, all of the twelve villagers' committee cadres had been cadres for at least five years, and ten had been village cadres for more than ten years. They attributed their longevity to popularity engendered by their villages' economic development.

³⁶ On the relationship between cadre compensation and implementation of the Organic Law, see Zhang Houan, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', p.202; Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.186-7; and Li Xinhua, 'Cunmin zizhi xuyao jiti jingji de gonggu he fazhan' [Consolidating and Developing the Collective Economy is Needed for Villagers' Autonomy], p.182, Zhang Shouliang, 'Shixi yingxiang cunweihui fahui zizhi gongneng de zhiyue yinsu' [Analysing Restraining Factors that Influence Realizing the Autonomous Role of Villagers' Committees], pp.163-4, and Wu Di, 'Shilun cunmin weiyuanhui huansan de jiyin ji duice' [On the Roots of and Policies to Counter Lax Villagers' Committees], p.47, all in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1. In the villages I visited, cadre salaries typically comprised about 10 per cent of village expenditures. An early discussion of the range of villagers' committee member salaries can be found in J.

comparatively easy in rich villages to meet township targets without placing undue burdens on villagers, with the exception of birth control quotas — though even here prosperous villagers can better afford fines for excess births. Similarly, a profitable *collective* economy that swells village revenues without large, direct levies on villagers,³⁷ is apt to soften resistance to state duties. A flourishing collective industry also revitalizes villager dependence on cadres (or at least dependence on the village public sector) and may heighten villagers' interest in public affairs while defusing cadre-villager tensions.

In short, in wealthy villages and villages with large collective economies, cadres and villagers both have compelling motives to accept (or at least not frustrate) the institutional arrangements embodied in the Organic Law. Cadres have a large public sector to administer and to profit from (as well as reduced concern with electoral removal and humiliation) and peasants have an interest in ensuring that public funds (which in the villages I visited averaged over 15 per cent of village per capita income) are not misused or squandered.

Explanations for Imperfect Implementation

Outside the most successful demonstration villages, implementing the Organic Law has been much more problematic. In many villages, little has transpired after pilot projects were completed, and villagers have been slow to embrace their new rights.

Throughout the nation, many villagers' committees lie dormant while others are dominated by township governments or Party branches. Election

Bruce Jacobs, 'Political and Economic Organisational Changes and Continuities in Six Rural Chinese Localities', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no.14 (July 1985), pp.113-14.

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irregularities are commonplace and state tasks are often no easier to complete than in the past. More fundamentally, relations between the centre, township officials, village leaders, and farmers have only infrequently come to approximate the centre's ideal. In most villages they continue to resist state extraction and unpopular social and cultural reforms, while local cadres remain wedged between demanding superiors and reluctant or apathetic villagers — with some cadres either actively frustrating electoral reforms or forsaking their responsibilities to the state.³⁸

Why have relatively few villagers' committees and VRAs reached up-to-standard status? There are many reasons. For one, Ministry resources and goals are modest (e.g., each town or township is supposed to have 'one or more' demonstration villages by the year 2000) and policy makers and implementers speak knowledgeably of the failure of other institutional reforms introduced with much fanfare (and little preparation) through ill-advised and short-lived mass movements.³⁹

The comparatively slow progress of the new program can also be traced to bureaucratic competition, foot-dragging, and opposition. The Organic Law, it must be remembered, moved through the legislative process remarkably slowly, and Peng Zhen's personal intervention was needed to revive it in the wake of the Tiananmen suppression when opponents sought to rescind the law in the name of Party strengthening.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the law is vaguely phrased and the implementing regulations at provincial and lower levels are still incomplete, circumstances which make it difficult for lower-level officials to assess the 'spirit of the centre', and which encourage them to ignore the law rather than implement it with premature enthusiasm.⁴¹ The Ministry of Civil Affairs, moreover, is also relatively low-ranking in the Beijing pecking order and thus poorly positioned to lean on provincial Party committees and people's congresses or to muscle other bureaucracies (e.g., those in charge of taxation, agriculture, grain purchase, forestry) that question whether they will meet *their* targets if villages become more autonomous. Ministry representatives at lower levels are similarly handicapped insofar as they rarely

³⁸ On the low number of villagers' committees that 'operate reasonably well', see Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.186-8; Liu Xiaomin, 'Tanhuan yu bantanhuan...', p.221; Wu Di, 'Shilun cunmin weiyuanhui...', p.47. See also the discussion of paralyzed villages below.

³⁹ See remarks by Ministry officials — Lian Yin, 'Guanyu shixing cunmin...', p.5 and Li Xueju, 'Cunmin zizhi sannian...', p.12; also Zhang Houan, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', p.205.

⁴⁰ On Peng's actions in 1990, see White, 'Rural Politics in the 1990s', p.276.

⁴¹ This line of thought was suggested by Lianjiang Li, personal communication, July 1993.

serve on county or township Party committees, and their voice is easily drowned out by local representatives of other more powerful systems.⁴²

Each of these is an important consideration and none would surprise students of Chinese bureaucratic politics. But here I would like to draw attention to another set of factors, which are discussed again and again in conferences convened by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and which play a role in giving rise to paralyzed, run-away, and authoritarian villages — the importance of lower-level actors and their interests. Some of the greatest difficulties the Ministry faces arise because many grassroots cadres and villagers see little to be gained (and perhaps much to be lost) by throwing their support behind the Organic Law.

Imperfect Implementation: Paralyzed, Authoritarian, and Run-Away Villages

I am not arguing that implementation of the Organic Law *causes* villages to become authoritarian, paralyzed, or run-away. (Apart from up-to-standard demonstration villages, the law's effect has not been that decisive and many villages undoubtedly had tendencies of one sort or another long before villagers' committees existed.) What I am arguing is that when we view the law from the perspective of central policy makers we can see that implementation has drawn into sharp relief several ways of frustrating leadership intentions. In this sense, efforts to implement the law have crystallized differences in local response to central initiative, not so much 'created' four kinds of villages.

Implementing the Organic Law depends on securing cooperation from the people who live with it. Without support from cadres in county governments and below, Ministry documents simply pile up on officials' desks and reform amounts to little more than changing a few signboards and staging sham consultations and elections. And without villager acquiescence, self-government becomes hollow (or a facade that hides cadre domination). Unlike the revival of family farming in the early 1980s, implementation of the Organic Law cannot rely primarily on the self-interested decisions of villagers and cadres.⁴³ If the terms offered by the law are not sufficiently appealing,

⁴² For a useful discussion of the difficulties low-ranking civil affairs staff encounter when they seek to influence county and township officials, see Li Aofu, 'Wei fahui cunweihui...', pp.205-6.

⁴³ For nuanced and ultimately complementary views on whether agricultural de-collectivization was voluntarily undertaken or (at least partially) imposed from above, see Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp.233-8; David Zweig, 'Context and Content in Policy Implementation: Household Contracts and Decollectivization, 1977-1983', in David M. Lampton (ed.), *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China*, pp.256-7; Jonathan Unger, 'The Decollectivization

cadres and villagers in many locales opt to resist or evade it: for 'exit' over 'voice'.

Outside selected demonstration villages, in short, it is proving difficult to achieve the twin goals of the law. In authoritarian villages, unwelcome state targets are fulfilled reasonably well, but democratic procedures are ignored or subverted; in run-away villages the opposite pattern prevails — elections, consultation, and disclosure have improved, but village leaders and farmers band together to evade township targets. Finally, in paralyzed (*tanhuan*) villages, neither state tasks nor increased participation receive much attention.

1. *Paralyzed Villages*: Early Ministry estimates suggested in 1990 that about 15 per cent of villagers' committees operated reasonably well, another 65 per cent suffered from 'cadres with low spirit and energy who did not put their heart into village work', and an additional 20 per cent of the villagers' committees were paralyzed or semi-paralyzed and 'existed in name only'.⁴⁴ This latter situation is particularly prevalent in poor, remote areas with few collective enterprises, where village cadres often receive minimal compensation (sometimes below that of ordinary workers) and so are unwilling to take on state tasks. Grain levies and fees are often not collected, land and forest management are chaotic, families of martyrs and servicemen are ignored, public roads and water conservancy are in disrepair, boundary disputes and violations of the marriage law are common, gambling and superstitious activities are rampant, cadre instructions and appeals for voluntary labour are ignored, and cadre-villager relations remain very tense. In a striking number of villages, few assigned tasks are completed or are completed only with highly coercive methods and with the aid of government work teams dispatched from above.

In paralyzed villages, the 'compensation' offered for consent is deemed insufficient by both cadres and villagers. Villagers in such places remain unimpressed with the Organic Law, finding the promise of accountability false, the promise of autonomy unlikely, and the threat of strengthened control great. For many, the extractive and intrusive aspects of the law overshadow the potential gains derived from participation. Villagers remain wary of so-called three want cadres (*san yao ganbu*), who want their grain, their money, and to abort their wives' pregnancies, but who provide few services or benefits in return.⁴⁵ They recoil from villagers' councils or VRAs as occasions for

of the Chinese Countryside: A Survey of Twenty-Eight Villages', *Pacific Affairs*, vol.58, no.4 (Winter 1985-86), pp.585-606.

⁴⁴ Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.186-8; Liu Xiaomin, 'Tanhuan yu bantanhuan...', p.221; Wu Di, 'Shilun cunmin weiyuanhui...', p.47. A provincial Civil Affairs division head in Zhejiang suggested in 1989 that about 10-25 per cent of the villagers' committees in his province were paralyzed.

⁴⁵ *San yao ganbu* are discussed in Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.187-8. On villagers' committees that demand much of villagers but provide little, see Yang Xuejun and Sun Xinmin, 'Lishun xiang zhengfu yu cunmin weiyuanhui zhijian de guanxi'

cadres to collect funds in the new marketized environment, where villagers must now pay for items and services that were previously provided at no expense. Contrary to perceptions held by township and county officials, many villagers in paralyzed communities fear that village cadres could once again become effective extensions of higher levels, and they consider the proposed codes of conduct to be oppressive and invasive, having seen nearby villages where cadres absurdly specify dress codes, proscribe hair styles, and require communal weddings.⁴⁶

Many villagers also doubt the genuineness of accountability and question who will gain more autonomy. They commonly believe that elections are rigged and that restrictions on cadres outlined in codes of conduct and charters are ineffectual. Farmers in paralyzed (and many authoritarian) villages have all too frequently witnessed cadres who have gained greater autonomy under China's economic reforms pursuing their own private interests, eating and drinking well at public expense, engaging in nepotism, and usurping contractual rights. They see rampant financial mismanagement despite regulations that are supposed to enhance disclosure, with account books that are doctored or kept secret despite requirements to the contrary.⁴⁷

Not surprisingly, residents of paralyzed villages do not embrace villagers' committees as 'autonomous organs of self-government', and they typically refuse to participate in VRAs or other reform institutions. Some view the Organic Law as 'prescribed by higher levels' (*shangmian guiding de*), like innumerable other initiatives of years past. When elections are held, these individuals cannot be found, or they spoil their ballots, or fights break out and the township security bureau must be called in. Rather than aspiring to have rejuvenated village political organizations, residents of paralyzed villages often identify with clans, secret societies and religious groups. They display little interest in affairs outside private life, believing that cadres should be left to do what cadres do and that it is up to higher levels to decide who runs villages. In these villages, people scoff at the incentives offered for participation and may even demand to be paid to attend a meeting or appear only if a video movie is shown. Villagers with this outlook tend to stay at a

[Rationalize Relations Between Township Governments and Villagers' Committees], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1, p.114; Zhang Houan, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.204-5; Zhang Houan, 'Cong xingzhenghua zou xiang zizhi' [From Being Administrative in Nature Move Toward Autonomy], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1, p.139.

⁴⁶ Villager aversion to public meetings is discussed in Zhang Shouliang, 'Shixi yingxiang...', p.163, and Wang Yongwu, 'Shitan cunmin...', p.171. On 'excessive' codes of conduct, see Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, p.386.

⁴⁷ A thorough discussion of peasant doubts can be found in Jiang Zhihua, Li Zhihua and Ma Haijun, 'Xiaochu ganbu, qunzhong de sixiang yilu shi cunmin zizhi de zhongyao qianti' [Eliminating Cadre and Mass Misgivings is an Important Precondition of Villagers' Autonomy], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, pp.84-7. Wu Guimin, 'Cunmin zizhi...', pp.180-1, provides many examples of cadre misbehaviour.

respectful distance from cadres, avoid outright confrontation, and speak of continued rule by 'officials'.⁴⁸

Some of the residents of paralyzed villages go beyond wary submission and engage in petty intrigues or active defiance. They know that cadre power has declined and that cadres must come to villagers for funds and materials, and reports note that dissatisfied farmers boldly throw broken glass into the rice paddies of cadres or tear tiles off roofs of cadres who dare to carry out state policies. In many of the paralyzed villages, cadres will not approach villagers, and villagers will not obey instructions.⁴⁹ Many of the villagers who vigorously resist increases in economic exactions would be glad to do without participation, accountability, and government-sponsored autonomy so long as cadres keep their distance and soft-pedal their state duties.

Reports and conversations suggest, as noted, that paralysis is disproportionately prevalent in poor agricultural villages with few or unprofitable collective enterprises. With little to divide, villagers see only a grasping state and eye its presumed 'agents' suspiciously, while underpaid cadres identify with fellow villagers and see few reasons to alienate their neighbours and relatives by pressing state demands. Paralyzed villages also seem to appear where township control is particularly weak (perhaps because a village is remote) or where excessive township control combined with unrealistic expectations has induced village cadres to abandon their posts.

⁴⁸ Much of this paragraph is drawn from Jiang Zhihua, Li Zhihua, and Ma Haijun, 'Xiaochu ganbu...', pp.84-7, and the conference I attended in July 1992. On paying villagers to attend villagers' councils, see Wang Yongwu, 'Shitan cunmin...', p.171. 'Estranged' villagers who do not trust cadres are discussed in Xia Yueshun, 'Shixing cunmin...', pp.189-90, while a 'vicious circle' that contributes to 'low political activism' is explained in Xie Yuhua, 'Cunmin zizhi...', pp.218-19. For villagers ignoring or disrupting elections, see Deng Baoquan and Zhao Yiyun, 'Zengqiang minzhu yishi gaohao cunmin zizhi' [Enhance Democratic Consciousness, and Do a Good Job of Implementing Village Autonomy], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, pp.108-9, and Li Yushan and Zhang Baoshuan, 'Shixing cunmin zizhi de zhiyue yinsu' [Limiting Factors in Realizing Villagers' Autonomy], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1, pp.160-1. Villagers who remain silent at public gatherings or believe it is up to 'higher levels to decide' were discussed in Mingxi County briefings and Zhang Dingwei, 'Cunmin daibiao huiyi de ruogan sikao' [Reflections on VRA], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, p.239. For differing perspectives on peasant politicization, see Marc Blecher, 'The Contradictions of Grass-Roots Participation and Undemocratic Statism in Maoist China and Their Fate', in Brantly Womack (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Politics in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.138-9, 142, 146, and Edward Friedman, 'Deng Versus the Peasantry: Recollectivization in the Countryside', *Problems of Communism*, vol.39, no.5 (September-October 1990), pp.30-43.

⁴⁹ Liu Chujiang, 'Ganqun maodun...', pp.194-5. On destruction of cadre property, see Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.187-8.

2. *Authoritarian Villages*: Like paralyzed villages, authoritarian villages exhibit low popular participation, but they differ in that their cadres strive (with some success) to achieve township-assigned tasks.

In authoritarian villages, township power typically overwhelms participation and village self-government. Subsidies to village cadres (usually ample) rise and fall with attainment of township-assigned tasks, and townships by and large treat village organizations as their 'feet' when it comes to land management, cropping, and development decisions. Codes of conduct and charters are frequently prepared by townships (or counties) and blindly copied from village to village. Township officials even annul village elections when dissatisfied with the outcome. In many respects, in authoritarian villages expectations surrounding cadre performance have not changed much since the production brigade era; and the villagers' committee tasks are often indistinguishable from township tasks.⁵⁰

At the same time that ties with townships retain much of their pre-reform texture, organizational relationships within authoritarian villages also fail to conform fully with the Organic Law. The great majority of authoritarian villagers' committees are essentially tools of village Party branches in which 'necessary' Party guidance frequently becomes stifling Party domination. Even in the eight demonstration villages I visited, joint Party branch-villagers' committee meetings were the norm, and the director of a villagers' committee was often a Deputy Party Secretary, or even the first Party secretary.⁵¹ Ministry statistics show that 68 per cent of villagers' committee directors elected in Fujian in 1991 were Communist Party members and only about one-fourth of villagers' committee members nationwide did not belong to the Party.⁵²

⁵⁰ On linking cadre salaries with township assignments and treating villagers' committees as subordinate bodies subject to township orders, see Zhang Houan, 'Cong xingzhenghua...', pp.138-9; Wang Yongwu, 'Shitan cunmin...', pp.168-9; Chen Sixi, 'Lishun xiang zhengfu yu cunmin weiyuanhui de guanxi, luoshi jiceng qunzhong zizhi' [Rationalize Township Government Relations with Villagers' Committees, Carry out Basic-level Mass Autonomy], *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1, pp.104-9. On limited changes from production brigades and parallel township and village tasks, see Xie Yuhua, 'Cunmin zizhi...', p.213; also Zhang Houan, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.203-4. On codes of conduct transmitted by townships, see Liu Xiaomin, 'Tanhuan yu bantanhuan...', p.223, and Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, p.385.

⁵¹ Problems arising from excessive overlap and joint meetings are discussed in Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, pp.387-8; Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.196-7. On high overlap and joint meetings, see also Jacobs, 'Political and Economic Organisational Changes', pp.117-18.

⁵² Fujian Civil Affairs Bureau briefing, 16 July 1992; Comments by Wang Zhenyao, 29 July 1992.

Electoral manipulation in authoritarian villages limits participation and accountability insofar as townships often recommend candidates for villagers' committees and Party-dominated election committees often prevent unapproved candidates from reaching the final ballot. A winnowing out of initial nominees commonly takes place behind closed doors and votes are sometimes purchased or cast more than once. The villagers' councils in many authoritarian villages have never been convened, and VRAs are frequently ignored after they are formed or are completely dominated by the villagers' committee director, who typically chairs the VRA.⁵³

And it is not only domineering township officials who spawn and defend authoritarian arrangements. Some village cadres, for their part, also hold their own village's self-government and increased discretion less dear than might be assumed, particularly when it is packaged with more accountability to villagers and less backing from above. Village cadres have always received instructions from higher levels and many prefer to continue taking orders. Their status and authority have declined, since they no longer operate 'under a government sign', and many fondly remember the days when they were essentially township-dispatched. Such cadres might well refuse to offend neighbours and relatives, or to cross village elders, without the protection of state authority (and are delighted when they receive it), and many cannot imagine acting without comprehensive township leadership and support.⁵⁴

More fundamentally, many authoritarian village cadres believe it is easier to satisfy township superiors than villagers. They express concern that 'good cadres' (i.e., they themselves) will lose elections when voters punish those who have 'bravely' extracted funds and carried out family planning, funeral reform, and so on. They fear losing face in the community⁵⁵ and, in wealthier villages, losing power at a time when remaining a cadre can provide unprecedented opportunities for travel, corruption, and legitimate financial gain.

⁵³ On township appointment of villagers' committee members and Ministry statistics (published in 1992) that show most villages have not convened a villagers' council or VRA, see Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', pp.188, 198; also Zhang Houan, 'Cong xingzhenghua...', pp.138-9. Illegal transfers of villagers' committee directors are discussed in Wang Yongwu, 'Shitan cunmin...', p.169. Election committee composition and activities were discussed in each of the eight Fujian villages I visited in July 1992. On inactive VRA, see Zhang Dingwei, 'Cunmin daibiao...', p.238.

⁵⁴ Jiang Zhihua, Li Zhihua and Ma Haijun, 'Xiaochu ganbu...', p.88; Zhang Houan, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', p.203; Zhang Houan, 'Cong xingzhenghua...', p.138.

⁵⁵ Losing face is highlighted in Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo nongcun jiceng zhengquan*, pp.370-1, and villagers threatening to vote out cadres who carry out township tasks is discussed in Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', p.18, and Sun Changlin and Ma Anwu, 'Qianxi shixing cunmin zizhi de qiji' [Analysing the Turning Point in Implementing Villagers' Autonomy], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.2, p.63.

There may also be a second pattern: authoritarian village cadres who seek 'independent kingdoms' but who prudently avoid direct conflict with township leaders. These cadres might enforce unpopular policies to protect their independence from township authorities while sabotaging popular participation to protect themselves from unruly villagers.

Along with township officials, many authoritarian village cadres point to the opportunities that elections provide for lineage resurgence and warn that the Organic Law will wreak havoc in multiple surname villages. They argue, with some evidence, that elections may enhance participation and autonomy only for dominant lineages and that other lineages will be effectively disenfranchised. This, they say, will cause disorder in areas where cadres have struggled to lessen lineage identification and will destroy the unity of cadres in villages where factionalism had previously been under control.⁵⁶

Skeptical cadres at all levels predict dire consequences from full implementation of the Organic Law in authoritarian villages where state policies have always been difficult to enforce and where villagers have recently become more intractable. They cite diminished sanctions and blame the law for the farmers' incorrigibility. They argue that VRAs weaken cadre authority and embolden the villagers, and that misguided belief in education and persuasion place village cadres in a bind on the many policies that oppose mass interests — such as birth control, household registration, grain levies, and fee collections. The Constitution and the Organic Law may forbid the use of coercion, but practically speaking, cadres in authoritarian villages feel they have no choice. Legally they lack authority and informally they lack support; yet they must complete their assignments.⁵⁷ Thus many of the county, township, and village cadres work to frustrate full implementation of the law by arguing that the 'masses aren't ready for self-government' and highlighting one aim of the law — completing state tasks — to derail increased participation, accountability and village autonomy.

It should be noted, finally, that authoritarian leadership, though often not a first choice, is not always the least desirable option for villagers. In some locations, villagers may prefer authoritarian leadership to paralysis, to combat

⁵⁶ Sun Changlin and Ma Anwu, *ibid.*, pp.62-3; Jiang Zhihua, Li Zhihua and Ma Haijun, 'Xiaochu ganbu...', p.86; Li Yushan and Zhang Baoshuan, 'Shixing cunmin zizhi...', p.160; Zhang Shouliang, 'Shixi yingxiang...', pp.165-6.

⁵⁷ Cadre opposition to VRAs is discussed in Zhang Dingwei, 'Cunmin daibiao...', pp.238-9. On lack of authority and support, see Jiang Zhihua, Li Zhihua and Ma Haijun, 'Xiaochu ganbu...', p.88. Wang Zhenyao, a key Ministry of Civil Affairs official, has questioned whether, if villagers' autonomy were realized: 1) unified grain purchase could be maintained, 2) peasant customs would shatter social reforms, and 3) household registration could be maintained. See Wang Zhenyao, 'Zhongguo nongcun shequ de zizhi jichu' [The Base for Autonomy in Chinese Rural Society], in *Practice and Reflection*, vol.1, pp.152-3.

public security problems or simply because effective government, however unaccountable, can be preferable to no government at all.⁵⁸

3. *Run-Away Villages*: Run-away villages are the least discussed but perhaps most threatening outcome to the officialdom. This is because they are governed by populist cadres who defy outside control and who feel entitled to reject state tasks.

Unfortunately, I have only limited data on run-away villages, and must rely primarily on complaints from higher levels to construct a profile. Many of the lower-level officials have always questioned the granting of enhanced autonomy to villagers' committees and have feared that village cadres would use their electoral mandate to strengthen their local standing and build a village following. They charge that cadres in run-away villages interpret autonomy to mean absolute freedom and a right to set up their own 'kingdoms'. These concerns were raised in the initial deliberations of the Organic Law by the National People's Congress, and the county and township leaders responsible for run-away villages nod knowingly and say that their worst fears have come to pass. They argue that where participation and autonomy have proceeded furthest, cadres often ignore upper-level demands, and that townships are becoming 'crabs without legs'. They claim that the Organic Law has encouraged them 'to do what they please' and that administrative chaos looms.⁵⁹ They plead with provinces to slow implementation and to conduct demonstration activities elsewhere, and many advocate circumscribing village cadres' independence by turning villagers' committees into branch structures staffed with appointed leaders. These officials contend that 'moral and capable' cadres are losing contested elections in run-away villages and that populist strongmen or 'good old boys' (*lao hao ren*) who pander to villagers and focus on short-term interests are winning.⁶⁰ At a minimum, many county and township cadres ask that achieving the

⁵⁸ Effective governance may be particularly important in some areas, for example where flood control, forest fire prevention, or irrigation are needed. Or strong, authoritarian leadership may be acceptable in formerly paralyzed villages that have experienced weak economic growth. Further case-study research will be necessary to unravel the relationship of factionalism, lineage relationships, and implementation of the Organic Law.

⁵⁹ On 'crabs without legs' and townships cadres 'who feel they have had their feet cut off', see Zhang Houan, *Cunmin weiyuanhui...*, p.203; Zhang Houan, *'Cong xingzhenghua...'*, p.138; Sun Changlin and Ma Anwu, *'Qianxi shixing cunmin...'*, p.64. On fears of losing control and cadres and villagers seeking 'absolute freedom', see Li Yushan and Zhang Baoshuan, *'Shixing cunmin zizhi...'*, pp.160-1; Yang Xuejun and Sun Xinmin, *'Lishun xiang zhengfu...'*, pp.113-14.

⁶⁰ Jiang Zhihua, Li Zhihua and Ma Haijun, *'Xiaochu ganbu...'*, p.87; Liu Zhenqi, *'Cunmin zhijie minzhu...'*, p.270; Zhang Shouliang, *'Shixi yingxiang...'*, p.164.

townships' legally-assigned demands should be made the primary criterion for assessing up-to-standard villagers' committees.

To a large extent, there are grounds for these fears. Since the cadres and farmers in run-away villages do not seek or receive much government support, they typically feel they owe higher levels little in return. Cadres and villagers in these localities share many interests and, instead of frequently clashing, they commonly work together in the provision of health care, running water, and better roads. In these run-away villages, the cadres who had been in power in the early and mid-1980s frequently suffered electoral defeat when villagers located 'better' candidates more inclined to serve their interests. These are villages where cadres contemplating their state duties have reason to worry when villagers threaten 'if you ever do this heinous thing again (pointing to birth control), we'll vote you out'.⁶¹

The limited evidence available suggests that run-away villages are frequently found where township control is weak, particularly in non-Han villages and villages dominated by a single lineage. In these localities, solidarity is typically quite high and fears by responsive cadres of electoral surprises are low. The farmers in run-away villages also have compelling incentives to become involved with village political institutions insofar as their participation yields net benefits rather than a host of unpleasant responsibilities.

Conclusion

This article has explained how implementation of the Organic Law affects and is affected by the interests of those near the bottom of the system. In the previous section, we have observed how skeptical, aggrieved cadres and reluctant farmers in paralyzed, authoritarian, and run-away villages transform their concerns into evasion and effective opposition. To understand the implementation process in an increasingly fragmented China and to understand the patterns of defiance, non-compliance, and cooperation that central policies elicit, we need to know much more about how interests translate into actions and about the actual weapons used by not-so-weak lower-level actors.

Implementation of the Organic Law has by no means been a complete failure. In up-to-standard demonstration sites — typically prosperous villages with many profitable collective enterprises which have received considerable Ministry attention and which have strong but not overbearing township leaderships and favourable ethnic and lineage profiles — both key objectives of the law appear to have been implemented reasonably well. And partial (though still unsatisfactory) implementation has been effected in authoritarian and run-away villages.

⁶¹ Wang Ke'an, 'Cunmin weiyuanhui...', p.188.

But the up-to-standard villages are still in a distinct minority. The centre, as represented by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, is finding it difficult to popularize village institutions that simultaneously promote state penetration and popular participation. Villagers and local cadres throughout the nation are making their political presence felt and are working to undermine parts of the Organic Law and to divert new institutions. Although the law does not generate a single pattern of concerted, unified localist opposition, aspects of it alienate one or another affected party almost everywhere. In paralyzed, authoritarian, and run-away villages, simultaneous cadre and villager acceptance of *both* key aims of the law — state penetration and popular participation — is proving difficult to secure.

A revised Organic Law is scheduled to appear in the near future. This analysis suggests that improved publicity and cadre training (common Ministry recommendations) will not be sufficient to improve implementation unless the revised law also addresses the interests of cadres and villagers. At this time, comparatively few villagers derive clear benefits from exercising bureaucratically-imposed democratic rights that arrive packaged with increased state penetration and reinvigorated extraction. And comparatively few county, township, or village cadres believe that increased participation will ease completion of unpopular tasks or legitimize controversial allocations. If the centre is to achieve its stated goals, villagers must come to believe that elections, VRAs, charters, and regulations on financial disclosure truly reduce cadre high-handedness and corruption and contribute to villagers' prosperity and control over village revenues and expenditures. At the same time, village cadres must come to believe that their fears of losing elections and losing face are overblown, that members of non-dominant lineages can win elections, and that their state responsibilities will become easier to bear (and worth doing) when they possess the authority and legitimacy that elections, charters, and VRAs confer.⁶² Outside the singularly favourable conditions found in wealthy, up-to-standard demonstration villages with a strong collective sector, this will be a tough sell.

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⁶² Township and county officials are also essential actors whose interests, preferences, and institutional circumstances will continue to affect implementation.