

Village Elections in China – Democracy or Façade?

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DO ELECTIONS OF SELF-GOVERNING Village Committees in China's signify a major step towards democracy? How, if at all, do these elections affect power relations among various groups, class strata, and nascent or even actual classes in the Chinese countryside? Inside and outside of the villages, who makes decisions about how the village will evolve or develop?

These are important issues to consider in evaluating China's democratic prospects. Some sixty percent of China's population lives in its rural villages, and the villages are the only level at which direct elections are regularly held. What happens at this level could well influence the degree to which elections and/or democracy develop at higher levels throughout China.

Elections of Village Committees and Village Leaders in China's approximately 950,000 villages began in 1989 as part of a wider village self-government movement. The Village Committee and Village Leader are entrusted with managing the public affairs of the village. This includes managing any collective enterprises including land (the use of which is most frequently subcontracted out to villagers), building and repairing roads, maintaining public security, administering family planning issues, and helping the village to develop economically, socially, and environmentally. As self-governing institutions, they receive little direct support from the state. As a result, in poor villages they have few resources while in richer villages they have considerably more. Election to the Village Committee, and even more so as Village Leader, can increase one's linkage to — and status with — higher level government and commercial leaders, and, particularly in wealthy villages, provide access to the village's resources. This helps to account for both the continuing anger against corrupt cadres who steal from the villages and the more recent increase in vote-buying as candidates vie to control these positions.

Much energy has been focused on analyzing the degree to which these elections are fair and competitive, i.e., are there multiple candidates for each office, how many people vote, is voting secret, is ballot counting fair and transparent, etc.? While this is certainly important, the key issues regarding democracy are much deeper than this.

Village elections in China provide some key insights into contemporary China, such as the meaningfulness of elections, the increasing role of entrepreneurs in elections and in the continually dominant Party, and the continuing male domination of the process.

How meaningful are elections? Many village elections are pro-forma. In some cases, there is no real competition and the results are known by all in advance. In others, the elections are "managed."

For example, in Guanmen Village, the long-term Party Secretary decided it was his obligation to "manage" the election to get a "desirable" outcome. This is in line with the position stated by many analysts and officials in documents about village elections concerning "the low quality of the voters."

This "management" involved removing the incumbent Village Leader, a private entrepreneur who had angered many villagers with his autocratic and perhaps corrupt methods. To accomplish this, the Party Secretary ran in and won both the primary and final election for Village Leader by a large majority, while "arranging" for the prior Village Leader, who had good business connections and was a member of the largest family lineage in the village, to be elected Deputy Village Leader. This

meant "persuading" the two top vote getters in the primary election for Deputy Village Leader to drop out (largely by arranging other positions for them). However, this "management" seemed to provoke a protest vote, as the Party Secretary received considerably fewer votes, in the final election than in the primary while his competitor and the competitor for Deputy Village Leader each increased their votes many fold from the primary.

But some elections are competitive.

Almost everyone in Pingshanan Village shares the same lineage. In 2005, after the incumbent village Party Secretary was alleged to have manipulated the primary election, the Township Party Secretary (the next level above the village) intervened to force a new primary. In that second primary, the incumbent village Party Secretary withdrew from the race for Village Leader after coming in behind his cousin, a wealthy Party member and team leader who had offered to serve as Village Leader without pay and was eventually elected with no meaningful challenger.

In Damoling, the competition occurred in the final election with two relatively wealthy entrepreneurs competing for Village Leader. One, Mr. Li, lived in the village and was a member of the Village Committee. The other, while still officially registered as a village resident, worked outside the village.

The election was run in a most scrupulous fashion. The candidates each gave a brief speech, with Mr. Li making more specific promises to advance the economic development of the village. The speeches were recorded to allow subsequent evaluation of the winner's performance. Each voter's name was checked against the list of eligible voters. Proxy votes were limited, and the ballots were publicly counted (twice) with township cadres assuring the objectivity of the process and with Public Security officials available in case of any disturbances. Mr. Li won the election with about two thirds of the vote.

But a competitive election in one cycle does not mean that there will be a competitive or even functioning election the next cycle.

In Pingshanan, the entrepreneur who had been elected Village Leader in 2005 had subsequently become Party Secretary (in line with the Party policy of having the same person hold both positions where possible). Having helped to accomplish a number of key goals for the village, some of which was facilitated by donations of his own funds, he was re-elected as Village Leader in 2008 without any competition.

The change in Damoling was even more extreme. After the 2005 election, it was beset with contradictions. Mr. Li was accused of trying to manipulate village finances. Although under his leadership the Village Committee offices were renovated and its courtyard paved and one road was built (largely with higher level government financing), his other promises were not — including resolving the water problem, creating a commercial vegetable growing venture, and building another road. As a result, the Deputy Village Leader decided to challenge Mr. Li in the 2008 election and received some 90 percent of the votes. But since the Deputy Village Leader was also the brother-in-law of the new Party Secretary, who himself had problems working with Mr. Li, Mr. Li's neighbors and clan members saw this as potential manipulation and boycotted the election. Consequently the election was declared void (although there is nothing in the national village election law about this). As a result, incumbents remain in power until the issue is resolved, meaning that the village is politically paralyzed.

In short, there are many cases of well organized and scrupulously well run elections. Some meet all these criteria but are still neither competitive nor meaningful. Some, although fewer, are truly

competitive. But competitive elections are far from institutionalized in China's villages.

The Role of Entrepreneurs, the Newly Wealthy, and the Party

THE ROLE OF THE NEWLY WEALTHY in village government is increasing. This is clear anecdotally, statistically, and as a logical outcome of Party policy.

For example, the Village Leader elected in 2002 in Pingshanan was a truck driver. However, unable to sustain himself on the salary of a Village Leader, which was often paid months late, he quit the position and left to seek work in a nearby city. In Damoling, the Village Leader/Party Secretary in 2002, who had been seen as a fair man but was not an entrepreneur, was on a downward path since having lost a bid for Deputy Village Leader in 2005. By 2008 he was no longer on the Village Committee and had fallen from Party Secretary to a member of the Party Village Committee. In contrast, the new Party Secretary in Damoling is a wealthy entrepreneur and the Village Leader/Party Secretary whom I interviewed in a nearby village runs a factory with 500 employees.

Overall, in the five villages I visited in Henan in 2005, 80 percent of the Village Leaders and a significant portion of the Village Committee members were entrepreneurs or newly wealthy. This is in line with Party policies to increase the number of entrepreneurs, the newly wealthy, and those with economic skills (*nengren* or "able people" in Chinese) in village leadership. The Party in many provinces suggests that candidates for village leadership positions in the Party and the Village Committee should have "two strengths," that is, the ability to do well at both Party work and business" and/or "the ability to lead the village to prosperity." As a result, the number of people in village leadership with these qualifications has reached as high as 50 percent or even 90 percent (among the province reporting such data).

This reflects what Gramsci called a hegemonic view that the wealthy are skilled, virtuous, and deserving of the leadership of society, a view that is shared by the dominant group, which profits from it, and a dominated group, which does not. Within this context, even those Village Leaders who use their own resources to help villages, as did several Village Leaders I met, reinforce this hegemony as it becomes apparent that the village will progress only by reliance on the generosity of the newly rich.

But the election of newcomers or entrepreneurs does not threaten Party leadership. In fact, in line with Party's presentation of China as a classless and "harmonious" society, in 2002 it began to officially admit capitalists into the Party. In coordination with that, the Party has been advocating recruiting entrepreneurs and non-Party members who are elected as Village Leaders into the Party. Consequently, after the most recent round of elections, 66 percent of Village Committee members and 78 percent of Village Leaders were Party members.

A Male-Dominated Process

THE CONTINUING MALE DOMINATION of the power structure in rural China should not be a surprise. Multiple factors contribute to it: traditional attitudes in the countryside, the historical male dominance within the Party, and male dominance in the business world. Although there are counter trends, both in the cities and — as market forces draw young men and women out of the villages and undermine the traditional male-dominated family structure — at the village level. All the Village Leaders I met in Henan were male. Nationally only some 2-3 percent of Village Leaders are women and only some 18 percent of Village Committee members are women. Since Village Committees frequently only have three to five members, this means that many Committees lack any women despite a provision in the Organic Law on Village Committees that each Committee have an

"appropriate number" of women.

Where women are on Village Committees — and in some provinces there are affirmative action policies to make sure that there is at least one woman on the Committee — they are most frequently in the "woman's slot" which is responsible for family planning and cultural issues. This does not always translate into significant authority or respect. In one amazing example, I was invited to a village Party Secretary's house for lunch. After the meal, we found out that since his wife was away for the day, he had asked the female member of the Village Committee to come to cook the dinner (but not join the discussion).

Conclusions and Implications for Democracy in China

THE MOST OBVIOUS CONCLUSIONS to be drawn are that the local election process continues to be largely under the control of the male-dominated Party with an increasing role for entrepreneurs and the newly wealthy. At present, village elections are likely to reinforce the power of the rural new rich who are creating networks throughout the political and economic structure as their relatives take positions in the government and Party township, county and municipal structures.

While these elections do create what the Chinese have called "sprouts" of (some form of) democracy in local social structures, they are very contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, they do strengthen notions of voting and citizens' rights. But competitive elections seem more the exception than the rule and, where they do exist, they are far from institutionalized. On the other, they also allow the Party-state to legitimate itself by maintaining Party leadership through a popular rather than top-down process.

To the extent that elections have created some of the procedural elements of democracy, it is still unclear whether these can provide a basis for meaningful democracy in light of several factors.

First are China's authoritarian and neoliberal tendencies. These were clearly manifest in late March 2009 when the reformist Governor of the People's Bank of China, Zhou Xiaochuan, argued that China's ability to rapidly develop policies to address the international economic downturn, including the U.S. \$586 billion stimulus package, "demonstrat(ed) its superior system advantage when it comes to making vital policy decisions," and called on other government bodies to increase the power of government financial leaders to allow them to "act boldly and expeditiously without having to go through a lengthy or even painful approval process."

Second, the increasing strength of capitalists and the newly wealthy within society and within the Party will be a key factor. They will play a key role in the continuing transformation of the Party, its role and its policies. Will they play a role in advocating for democracy, as suggested by many Western theories, or will they be content to create or support non-democratic structures that meet their needs as suggested in Chile, Brazil, Honduras, and perhaps the United States and China as well?

Where, then, does this all lead? Before drawing any general conclusions, one must also consider issues which are frequently ignored and go beyond the procedural elements of democracy, namely, increasing polarization within a context of generally rising incomes, the absence of nationwide non-Party organizations, China's increasing integration into the global economy, and the related departure of youth from rural areas and, most basically, the nature of meaningful democracy.

In this context, the older, more politically-based elite and the newer, more economically-based elite, both of whom are increasingly linked, economically and culturally, to political and economic

elites around the world, are engaged in a complex struggle to dominate and/or co-opt each other. This suggests a situation of continuing struggle and contradictions influencing, among other things, village self-government, and potentially leading to further integration of the elites at the expense of ordinary villagers, none of which bodes well for a bottom-up form of democracy with significant input into major decisions from the majority.

However, many Chinese analysts still argue that village elections are acting as a school for democracy as villagers develop at least a limited sense of rights and higher level officials come to see the legitimizing benefits of electing local officials. As long as these growing rights come within a paradigm of continuing elite leadership with an increasingly entrepreneurial element, accepted by both the Party and increasing numbers of villagers, it is likely that competitive village elections will increase and perhaps elections will even move up to the township and higher levels, although China's notion of a more "efficient" authoritarian system may undermine upper level support for such an upward trend. However, even if elections move up to higher levels, if this occurs within a context of an increasingly polarized society with an increasingly powerless, unorganized, and depoliticized majority, the degree to which meaningful democratization, as opposed to voting per se, or voting to choose among candidates of competing elites, must be questioned..

Are there any prospects for greater meaningful democratic input for the poor and unorganized, the original base of the Chinese Revolution, or should the fact that their standard of living has generally increased significantly since the beginning of the reforms under Deng Xiaoping be adequate?

Achieving a bottom up form of democracy would have to come from a movement from the bottom, although links to higher-ups in the Party would facilitate such a development. At present there are few indicators that this is likely. However, there are democratic innovations, including spontaneous self-governing organizations at the lowest levels in the countryside in Nanjing and public input into township level budgeting in Wenling City in Jiangsu Province. But these processes are not institutionalized. Each has and still requires individual sponsors in the township Party and state structure.

There are pro-democracy elements among the dissident intellectuals. Some lawyers defend political dissidents and injured workers. While this contributes to the notion of individual rights vis-à-vis the state, these actions are largely limited, by some combination of choice and fear of repression, to individual-based cases within the court system. Perhaps more significant are those who signed Charter 08, which included demands, among other things, for election of public officials at all levels, freedom to form independent groups, and freedom of assembly and expression, along with protection of private property. Although signed by some middle-level officials and rural leaders, it is unclear how great a base in China's countryside such groups or demands have, although the linkages can perhaps be developed. Moreover it is unclear how much the Charter actually supports bottom-up democracy at the economic and political levels.

But without even such limited developments, as in many other societies, voting (even more so in local elections only) and voting to choose from within the elites, is unlikely to provide a true opening for input from the majority in a society in which they are marginalized at the structural level.

Footnotes