

# *Village and Township Elections in China*

## Elements of Democratic Governance

*Jonathan Tomm*

### **Introduction**

Village and township elections in China have been the focus of much excitement among Western scholars. To many, such elections hold out the promise of genuine democracy taking hold in China, starting at the village level and (as both Western and Chinese democrats hope) one day moving up even to the national level. Others are more skeptical, suggesting that such elections only entrench the leadership of the Communist Party. This essay will argue that elections in China are a movement toward greater democracy in local governance. The methodology used will be a survey of the Western literature on village and township elections in China, and engagement with the arguments put forward by scholars in this area.

There has been an interesting debate around the meaning of village elections ever since their introduction in 1988. Kelliher, Pastor and Tan, O'Brien and Li, and Manion have all presented analyses of village elections, including observations of actual electoral practice, and more

---

*Jonathan Tomm brings a broad and eclectic academic background to his study of politics, including undergraduate studies in philosophy and theology. After receiving his BA from the University of Victoria in 2003, Jonathan traveled to Lesotho, Southern Africa, to work for a small NGO. There he worked on various 'democracy building' projects aimed at strengthening civil society, primarily through educating high school students about democratic governance and citizenship. He now looks forward to beginning his MA in political science in September 2006. His research interests centre on theories of democracy, and in particular, on democratic deliberation under conditions of cultural pluralism.*

importantly, reflection on the relationship of such elections to Communist Party leadership.<sup>1</sup> Recent elections of township heads and township party secretaries have caused further debate. Fan Li and Lianjiang Li examine the politics of introducing township elections, again with a view toward prospects for further democratization in China.<sup>2</sup> Saich and Yang describe other innovations in township cadre selection, which, unlike direct election, are still considered “legal” by the Party centre.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Fewsmith describes changes toward more openness to independent nominations and campaigning in party congress elections.<sup>4</sup> Most of the sources above provide nuanced commentary on the relationship of elections in China to the possible emergence of democracy. This essay will evaluate some of the arguments made, and put forward a defense of the view that elections in China do, in fact, constitute a movement toward greater democracy. In particular, I will emphasize that increased consciousness of democratic rights among peasants and efforts to improve the representativeness of township cadre selection constitute important signs of democratic changes both outside and inside the Communist Party.

### **Recent openings in elections and representation**

Village elections have evolved out of a long process of informal, local, and initially unofficial experimentation, beginning in 1980. Following a long and heated intra-party debate, village elections were legally instituted as national policy in the 1988 Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees.<sup>5</sup> By 1993, all provinces were implementing the three-year village election cycle. Kelliher describes how from 1989 to 1996, the merits of village elections were bitterly contested in public debate in China, with local officials (county level and below) most vociferously opposed.<sup>6</sup> However, it appears that since then, and particularly with the promulgation of a revised Villager Committees Organization Law in 1998, village elections have come to be widely accepted as legitimate.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, interest in rural elections revived again with reports of the extension of direct elections to the level of township. In particular, an election in Buyun township in Sichuan province in 1998 became the first direct election of a township head. This is a significant development, in part because the township government, unlike the village committees, is part of the state structure, and comes under the Party’s *nomenklatura* list.<sup>8</sup> Thus, elections to this post more directly challenge the Party’s monopoly on cadre placement. For a while, there was some question as to how the centre would react, but after some ambivalence, it was made clear that direct elections of township heads would

not be allowed. In July 2001, the Central Committee declared the direct election of township heads unconstitutional.<sup>9</sup>

However, other townships and counties have continued to experiment with innovations that have made the cadre selection process more open and accountable, within the confines of the current law. Conventionally, township heads are elected by the township people's congress, who is in turn elected by the villagers. In practice, though, the township head is chosen by the Party committee at the county or municipality level, and given to the township congress for ratification. Even so, it is in the interest of the county authorities to choose a candidate who will be popular.<sup>10</sup> Saich and Yang describe a number of innovations to this procedure that have attempted to broaden participation in the selection process, without resorting to a direct election.<sup>11</sup> In one notable method called "open recommendation and selection," candidates for township head complete public written and oral exams. They are then voted on by a representative group of citizens larger than the township people's congress (though still not the populace as a whole). This open process of evaluation—and especially the "oral exams," which resemble campaign speeches—significantly increases citizen participation in cadre selection, compared with the secrecy of the usual selection process. Furthermore, this method has even been extended in some cases to selection of the township Party secretary, which represents a further opening of the Party's internal cadre promotion system.<sup>12</sup>

A final set of changes taking place involves the selection of deputies to the people's congresses. The law requires direct elections of people's congresses up to the township and district level, but these elections have remained firmly in the control of the Party though the Party's monopoly of the nomination process. However, in recent years there has been an increase in independent or self-nominated candidates that have succeeded in being placed on the ballots.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, this has happened not only in rural areas, but also in the influential cities of Shenzhen and Beijing in 2003.

### **Voices of caution**

To many observers, all of these electoral practices—the established system of village elections, the tentative movements toward direct election of township heads, various attempts to make the cadre placement process more representative, and the opening of party congress elections to independent candidates—suggest a movement toward democracy in China. However, there is good reason to be wary of leaping to

such a conclusion too quickly. Many commentators both inside and outside China express serious reservations about whether the electoral processes in question offer anything that should be called democracy.

Broadly speaking, the arguments of election skeptics may be considered under three main headings. First, there are serious implementation problems that undermine the effectiveness of elections. Second, elections may not be meaningful because those elected have little real authority. Finally, many argue that village and township elections actually build the legitimacy of the Party, and so entrench the Party's monopoly on political leadership.

#### *Problems with implementation*

There are numerous problems in the actual implementation of elections that seriously impugn their effectiveness. First, many village elections simply do not happen at all, or are rigged or otherwise subverted by Party or government interference. As Kelliher notes, the principal resistance to village elections has come from local government officials.<sup>14</sup> Despite the fact that elections have been national policy for over a decade now, many officials still resist. In the fragmented Chinese state, the ability of local officials to creatively resist policies from the centre is a long-standing phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

Second, village elections are plagued with numerous "irregularities" that undermine the fairness and competitiveness of the elections. Snap elections, disqualification of unapproved candidates, public voting, and intimidation have been used by Party officials to control elections.<sup>16</sup> Party control over the nomination process is also a common and effective method of Party interference.<sup>17</sup>

Third, "open recommendation and selection" (ORS) and the various other legal innovations in township cadre selection still fall far short of democratic standards. Even though the Party authorities relinquish some control over the final selection of the candidate, the Party still controls the process as a whole, and can design the eligibility criteria, exams, and voting procedures to achieve favourable results.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, even when officials are elected fairly, the results can still be annulled by higher-up officials. Saich and Yang describe how the first candidate placed by the ORS process in Baoshi township was simply moved to a different township after only one year in office.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Elected officials have little authority*

Another problem with viewing elections in China as signs of democra-

cy is that the officials elected have little real power. Even if an election for a village head is free and fair, if the village head does not have power to make important decisions, the election may not be very meaningful.<sup>20</sup> Although village and township leaders do have some authority over smaller matters of local finance and projects, the primary functions of these officials is to carry out orders handed down from the centre. Above all, village and township leaders have to implement the three non-negotiable demands the state places on peasants: levying taxes and fees, procuring grain, and enforcing birth control.<sup>21</sup> Even considering decisions made at the township level, elected leaders are still subordinate in practice to the township Party secretary. Given this, it would perhaps be more appropriate to consider village and township leaders *bureaucrats* rather than politicians since they primarily administer policy from above, rather than represent the interests of the electorate.<sup>22</sup>

*Elections reinforce the legitimacy of Party leadership*

Perhaps the strongest reason to be wary of seeing elections as signs of democracy is that elections seem to enforce the legitimacy of Party leadership. Indeed, Kelliher and others have pointed out that increasing the acceptance of Party authority among peasants and farmers is probably the Party's primary reason for allowing elections to happen. Kelliher notes that in the Chinese debate over village self-government, the main defense put forward for elections was that they increase the authority of Party cadres.<sup>23</sup> Instituting some semblance of self-government at the local level helps to implicate villagers in the actions of the state by giving them a sense of responsibility for their leaders. Party proponents of village elections argue that elections actually increase peasants' willingness to give in to state demands.<sup>24</sup>

Elections can also buoy up the legitimacy of the Party by helping to recruit better Party cadres. The Party is aware that exploitation by corrupt and predatory local cadres is a major source of unrest in rural areas. It is in the Party's interest (though it may not be in the interest of local cadres) to recruit cadres that are both talented and honest. The Party centre realizes that a strict *nomenklatura* system is prone to corruption and nepotism. Thus, elections and other innovations in the cadre selection process are contributing to the ultimate strengthening of the Party through better recruitment.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the implementation of elections has often come in direct response to corruption scandals: this was the case in the well-known 1998 Buyun township election,<sup>26</sup> and in the first use of "open recommendation and selection" in 1998 in

Baoshi township.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, elections are very good for Party public relations, both within China and especially internationally. Within China, ongoing peasant resistance and protest damages Party legitimacy. By reducing rural unrest, elections help the Party maintain the impression that it is doing what is best for the masses. Internationally, village elections have brought much interest, acclaim, and funding from Western governments and non-governmental organizations. The Chinese government uses elections to turn back Western criticism that it is undemocratic. The Ministry of Civil Affairs states this logic baldly: "Their [i.e. Western] reports and commentaries [about elections] help the international community to understand the reality of democracy and human rights in China. Objectively, they serve the function of aiding our propaganda."<sup>28</sup>

### **Elements of genuine democratic change**

The arguments above suggest that we should be cautious in taking the recent growth of elections in China as a sign of democratization. Nevertheless, a strong case can be made that these elections are, in fact, a meaningful movement toward democracy. A broader understanding of how elements of democratic change can appear in a wide variety of forms, both inside and outside the Party, paints a different picture of the meaning of village and township elections in China.

#### *A democratic continuum*

One important answer to the arguments above is to point out that democracy should not be considered an all-or-nothing principle. Pastor and Tan enumerate an extensive list of elements that make for a free and fair election, including an open nomination process, secret ballots, sufficient campaigning, etc.<sup>29</sup> However, as they note, not even consolidated liberal democracies would meet all these criteria perfectly. As they argue: "Just because the village elections are not fully free or fair, and some do not transfer complete authority, one should not conclude that they are unfree, unfair and meaningless. Elections should not be evaluated categorically but rather viewed as lying on a democratic continuum."<sup>30</sup>

This concept of a democratic continuum is a useful one. Most political systems will contain some elements of democracy, that is "rule by the people," mixed with elements of other types of rule, perhaps by the rich or by a powerful clique or individual. Even a firmly established

democracy like Canada will exhibit some elements of disproportionate power in the hands of the political elite. Similarly, in China, where the political elite are overwhelmingly powerful, elections still place at least some power in the hands of common people.

If we are trying to ascertain whether the elections that have developed in China over the last 20 years constitute a movement toward democracy, we should not only compare these elections with an ideal of democracy, but also with the *status quo* in China. On this view, even though the elections are flawed in many ways, they do represent improvement: elected village and township leaders are more accountable to average citizens than under the stricter authoritarian traditions in recent Chinese history. Thus, the arguments above that focus on flaws in the electoral process, or on the fact that elected village and township officials are still subordinate to higher-ups in the Party and government, miss the point that the introduction and gradual improvement of village elections in China still represents a movement toward greater control of local government officials by the people.

*A broader view of democracy: democratic culture and representation*

In addition to recognising a continuum from more democratic to less democratic regimes, in order to properly evaluate Chinese elections in recent years, we have to take a wider view of what counts as democracy. In the Western literature, there is a tendency to equate democracy with elections, in what Pastor and Tan call “electoralism.”<sup>31</sup> It is clearly true that elections are an essential part of democracy: one cannot imagine a genuine democracy without them. Nonetheless, elections are not the whole of democracy. In particular, if we look at two other aspects of democracy – democratic culture and representation – we will see a more promising picture.

One important aspect of democracy is what we might call a democratic culture, in which citizens have both a sense of entitlement to capable and honest leaders, and the practice of holding leaders accountable. In this regard, after ten years of village elections (in at least some areas), the growth of such a democratic consciousness among peasants is occurring. This is manifest in the reactions of peasants when officials attempt to “cheat” in elections. Peasants have proven able and willing to take elections seriously, using the Organic Law to demand that proper procedures be followed. In conflicts with local authorities, voters have been successful in gaining the support of the Ministry of Civil Affairs to have rigged elections investigated and even overturned.<sup>32</sup> Lianjiang Li notes a sentiment among reformers in local government that “only direct elections can persuade villagers that

the Party is sincere about democracy.”<sup>33</sup> According to some officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, “farmers’ active participation” and “mass creativity” have been the biggest factors in the spread of village elections.<sup>34</sup> The evidence shows that after over ten years of village elections many peasants have come to know what fair elections are and demand them.

Furthermore, this demand for fair elections at the village level seems to contain some upward momentum. While the Party in Beijing has tried to draw a line between village and township elections, this line is not as clear to all citizens. Indeed, the fear that the practice of village elections will create a demand for elections at higher levels is a major factor in the Party’s resistance to township elections. According to an official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Jiang Zemin has remarked: “Peasants would elect village cadres today, township leaders tomorrow, and county leaders the day after tomorrow. Very soon they would directly elect national leaders. If things go like this where would the Party’s leadership be?”<sup>35</sup> When, or indeed, whether this prediction will come true cannot be said with any certainty. But what is clear is that a change has taken place in the consciousness of at some peasants toward a greater sense of their own entitlement to good and honest leaders. Although this consciousness in itself does not constitute democracy, it is a step toward the kind of political culture necessary in any working democracy.

A second important element of democracy is representation: the principle that leaders ought to represent, or work on behalf of, their constituents. There are a number of aspects of representation. One is that leaders not only work in the interests of citizens, but also respect how citizens themselves conceive their interests. This precludes specious claims to “represent the masses” while simultaneously coercing them. A second aspect of representation is that leaders should have a relatively high degree of acceptance by citizens. A leader that claims to represent citizens, who do not in fact accept that person as leader, cannot be said to truly represent the citizens.

Importantly, through many of the recent elections and innovations in cadre selection, representation is improving in China. Manion argues that representation is a key norm in township cadre selection, even where the selection process is not what we would count as democratic. In the conventional *nomenklatura* system, the township Party committee (or in practice, the Party secretary on the next level up) pre-selects candidates for township positions. Delegates to the township peoples’ congress then vote to approve or disapprove the candidates. If the candidate loses (or wins by only a narrow margin), this reflects badly on the Party committee, who are shown to be out of touch with



public opinion.<sup>36</sup> Thus, even the conventional system includes a concern for public acceptance of leaders.

Concern with public consent over the selection of leaders is also a main factor driving the reforms in cadre selection that Saich and Yang describe, such as "open recommendation and selection."<sup>37</sup> Although this process falls short of direct elections in terms of democratic legitimacy, it still increases representation. Importantly, ORS allows the preferences of village-level cadres to override the preferences of district-level officials. This, in turn fixes the "incentive structure" for township leaders: rather than needing to impress only their superiors, township leaders need to gain the support of Party members at their own level and below. To do this, they will need to pay more attention to local interests and demands. Even though non-Party members are still largely excluded from the process, the shifting of power closer to the local level is a step toward better representation, and so a closer approximation of democracy.

#### *Democracy and Party leadership*

One reason that these elements of democratization sometimes go unrecognized is that there is a Western bias against intra-Party democracy. As outlined earlier, the argument is sometimes made that because elections increase the legitimacy of the Communist Party, and thus entrench Party leadership, they should not be taken as signs of growing democracy. This argument tends to restrict our understanding of democracy to competitive elections in a multi-party state. While it is true that a multi-party system is necessary for advanced forms of democracy, an over-emphasis on multi-party competition can obscure genuine democratic changes that are happening at a local level *within* the Communist Party.

The growth of democratic consciousness among peasants and innovations in "open selection" of local government cadres are two such changes that are happening largely within the Party. When demanding fair elections, peasants and other proponents of local self-government use the legal apparatus set up by the Party. Similarly, efforts to broaden participation in cadre selection have been undertaken for various reasons by Party officials. Nonetheless, as I have argued, to the extent that these changes are part of a general movement toward greater assertiveness of the majority vis-à-vis the elite, they should be understood as increasing elements of democracy.

Therefore, to point out that elections increase the legitimacy of the Party is to miss the point. In looking for traces of democracy, what

is essential are the more basic aspects of relationships between society and state. If the Party gains legitimacy because local Party officials have become less authoritarian, and increasingly seek the consent and support of citizens in fair elections, then democracy has been served. Whether further elections at higher levels would continue to entrench the authority of the Party is another question. Quite likely the Party is right that the extension of elections would some day challenge their political dominance. However, just because elections have not necessarily threatened Party authority yet, does not mean that they are not seeds of democracy, or that they will not one day provoke more profound changes in the Chinese political system.

### Conclusion

The emergence of elections and other innovations in the selection of rural cadres in China have caused many to wonder about the implications of these changes for democracy in China. There are good reasons to be skeptical of the claim that these elections will bring sweeping democratic reform in the near future. The scope of the elections is still very limited, and implementation is deeply flawed. However, despite the fact that these elections fall far short of the Western ideal of a multi-party democracy, they still represent a genuine movement toward more democratic governance, even within the operations of the Communist Party itself.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government." *The China Journal* 37 (1997): 63-86; Robert A. Pastor and Qingshan Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections." *The China Quarterly* Number 162 (June 2000): 490-512; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China." *The China Quarterly* Number 162 (June 2000): 465-489; Melanie Manion, "Chinese Democratization in Perspective: Electorates and Selectorates at the Township Level." *The China Quarterly* Number 163 (September 2000): 764-82.

<sup>2</sup> Fan Li, "Is Buyun Township the 'Xiaogang Village' [Turning Point] of the Reform of China's Political System?" *Chinese Education and Society* 35:4 (2002): 57-63; Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Introducing Direct Township Elections in China." *The China Quarterly* Number 171 (September 2002): 704-23.

<sup>3</sup> Saich, Tony and Xuedong Yang. 2003. "Innovation in China's Local Governance: 'Open Recommendation and Selection'." *Pacific Affairs* 76:2 (2003): 185-208.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, "Pressures for Expanding Local-Level Democracy." *China*

*Leadership Monitor* 12 (2004) 1-10.

<sup>5</sup> Kelliher, 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> Kelliher, 65.

<sup>7</sup> Saich and Yang, 186.

<sup>8</sup> Manion, 766.

<sup>9</sup> Lianjiang Li, 721.

<sup>10</sup> Manion, 780-81.

<sup>11</sup> Saich and Yang, 190.

<sup>12</sup> Saich and Yang, 204.

<sup>13</sup> Fewsmith, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Kelliher, 65.

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien and Li, 487.

<sup>16</sup> O'Brien and Li, 479, 487.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien and Li, 485; Pastor and Tan, 507.

<sup>18</sup> Saich and Yang, 203.

<sup>19</sup> Saich and Yang, 203.

<sup>20</sup> Pastor and Tan, 506.

<sup>21</sup> Lianjiang Li, 707; Kelliher, 71.

<sup>22</sup> An example of the bureaucratic nature of these posts is the written and oral exams used in the "open selection and recommendation" process described by Saich and Yang, 199.

<sup>23</sup> Kelliher, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Kelliher, 74.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin O'Brien "Neither Contained Nor Transgressive: Boundary-Spanning Contention in China." Chapter 5 in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen, Eds. *State and Society in 21<sup>st</sup> Century China: Crisis, Contention, Legitimation*. (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 116. O'Brien compares this to a 1-800 number on trucks, by which the trucking company uses the public to keep its own employees driving safely.

<sup>26</sup> Lianjiang Li, 710.

<sup>27</sup> Saich and Yang, 196.

<sup>28</sup> Kelliher, 77.

<sup>29</sup> Pastor and Tan, 493-99.

<sup>30</sup> Pastor and Tan, 506.

<sup>31</sup> Pastor and Tan, 505.

<sup>32</sup> O'Brien and Li, 482.

<sup>33</sup> Lianjiang Li, 722.

<sup>34</sup> O'Brien and Li, 483.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Lianjiang Li, 721.

<sup>36</sup> Manion, 780.

<sup>37</sup> Saich and Yang, 189.

