

**DISCOURSES ON POLITICAL REFORM AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN EAST
AND SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE LIGHT OF NEW PROCESSES OF REGIONAL
COMMUNITY BUILDING**

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**Village Elections in the PRC
A Trojan Horse of Democracy?**

by

Gunter Schubert

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**Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften (Institute for East Asian Studies/East Asian Politics)
Gerhard-Mercator-University Duisburg
D-47048 Duisburg, Germany**

Tel.: +49'203 379-3728

Fax: +49'203 379-3728

E-mail: heberer@uni-duisburg.de

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Preface to the Paper Series

The present discussion paper series of the Institute of East Asian Studies accompanies a research project entitled *Political Discourses on Reform and Democratisation in Light of New Processes of Regional Community-Building*. The project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and supervised by Thomas Heberer.

The central topic of interest is, as the title of the project suggests, the influence exerted on the political reform process by political discourse. The papers published in this series address the public political discussion at the national as well as the transnational, regional level. Accordingly, the papers display a variety of discourses that have emerged in different countries and centre round different political issues. Contributions from authors of the region are particularly welcome, because they reflect an authentic view of the political discussion within the local public. By integrating and encouraging the local voices, the project team intends to compile a collection of papers that document some important debates and states of the research process.

The current political discourses in East Asia are primarily analysed in case studies of two authoritarian states (China, Vietnam), a multi-ethnic, formally democratic state with strong authoritarian features (Malaysia), and a democratic state with significant parochial structures and patterns of behaviour (Japan). In addition to these case studies, contributions from and on other countries of the region are included to provide a broad scope of comparable discourses.

While Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer are the editors of the paper series, a project team of eight members conducts field work in East Asia and brings forth regular proceedings. Research reports other than discussion papers shall be published in refereed journals and magazines. Detailed proceedings leading to the final results of the research project will be published as a book. The project team is composed of research fellows associated with the Chair for East Asian Politics at the Gerhard Mercator University of Duisburg. The team members are: Karin Adelsberger (area: Japan); Claudia Derichs, Ph.D. (Malaysia, Japan); Lun Du, Ph.D. (China); Prof. Thomas Heberer, Ph.D. (China, Vietnam); Bong-Ki Kim, Ph.D. (South Korea); Patrick Raszelenberg (Vietnam); Nora Sausmikat (China); and Anja Senz (China).

Paper No. 1 of the series provides a detailed idea of the theoretical and methodological setting of the project. Each discussion paper of the present series can be downloaded from the university server, using the following URL: <http://www.uni-duisburg.de/Institute/OAWISS/Publikationen/index.html>. Suggestions and comments on the papers are welcome at any time.

Duisburg, June 2000

Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer

Titel/Title:

Village Elections in the PRC - A Trojan Horse of Democracy?

Autor/Author:

Gunter Schubert

PD Dr. Gunter Schubert is Senior Research Fellow for International and East Asian Politics at the *Protestant Institute for Interdisciplinary Research (FEST)* in Heidelberg. He also teaches International and Comparative Politics at the Institute of Political Science, University of Heidelberg.

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Politische Reform- und Demokratisierungsdiskurse im Lichte neuer Prozesse regionaler Gemeinschaftsbildung

Discourses on Political Reform and Democratization in East and Southeast Asia in the Light of New Processes of Regional Community-Building

Zusammenfassung/Abstract:

Since the controversial passing of the Organic Law of Villager's Committees in 1987, direct elections for the head and members of China's village committees have seen continuous institutionalization. Consequently, research on village elections and their effects in terms of political mobilization and "democratic assertiveness" in the countryside has gained momentum in the last ten years. This paper summarizes the main results of recent research on village elections in the PRC as presented in selected Western and Chinese publications. It focuses on the theoretical concepts and methodical approaches applied and on the hypotheses which have been derived from the case studies so far. The purpose of the paper is to mark the main issues future research has to put on the agenda, when the overall "democratic potential" of local direct elections in China is investigated.

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Village Elections in the PRC - A Trojan Horse of Democracy?

Gunter Schubert

I. Introduction

Since the controversial passing of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees in 1987, direct elections for the head and members of China's village committees (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) have seen continuous institutionalization.¹ In fact, it is the Chinese villages that have experienced a degree of democratization during the previous decade that comes closest to Western liberal standards of democratic practice and accountability. More recently, direct elections have been introduced at the township level in some areas and for urban neighborhood committees in China's big cities. Consequently, research on village elections and local democracy in the PRC have gained momentum among Western and Chinese scholars in recent years. Surprisingly, it is still a very small group of experts who have made this issue their special focus and who are engaged in active field work. Although the results of this work may be highly significant for tackling the question of future political reform and democratization in China, Western scholars (and those Chinese academics, who live and publish in the West) usually remain skeptical about the impact of village elections in this regard: "Democratization from below" as an alternative to elite-sponsored liberalization "from above" is barely imaginable for most experts in the field. Village elections are said to be controlled by the Communist Party, technically flawed by township and city governments and psychologically restricted to their rural settings by the parochial orientations of the peasants. To put it in different words: Although many books and articles in the West speak of growing tensions between the center and the periphery with an accelerating drive for autonomy by the latter, of mounting social unrest in the countryside and peasant activism, village elections are not considered as really important for political liberalization in China.

¹ For the "history" of this law and the preceding debate within the Communist leadership see Elklit, Jorgen, The Chinese Village Committee Electoral System, in: *China Information*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1997, 1-13; Kelliher, Daniel, The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government, in: *The China Journal*, No. 37, January, 1997, 63-86; Liu, Drew, A Harbinger of Democracy: Grassroot Elections in Rural China, in: *China Strategic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3, May-June, 1997, 50-75; O'Brien, Kevin J./Li, Lianjiang, Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party-State: Introducing Village Elections in China, in: *The China Quarterly*, No. 162, June, 2000, 465-489.

Only gradually, growing numbers of field studies and broad comparative survey data change this picture. Also, Western non-governmental organizations (e.g. the US-based *Carter Center*) and governments sending election observers to China, developing and supporting programs for the education of electoral staff and - last not least - financing academic research, contribute significantly to a rising international awareness of political change in rural China. So will village elections lead to nation-wide democratization in the PRC? Are they the forerunner of a complete restructuring of China's political system breaking the power monopoly of the Communist Party? Although the Party itself has sponsored local self-government and competitive elections in the countryside, will village elections finally turn out to be a Trojan horse of democracy within the realm of Chinese socialism?

Taking these questions into account, this paper summarizes the main results of contemporary research on village elections in the PRC (both Western and Chinese) as presented in selected Western and Chinese publications. It focuses on the theoretical and methodical approaches applied and on the hypotheses which have been derived from the case studies so far. The purpose of this paper is to mark the main issues future research has to put on the agenda, when the overall "democratic potential" of local direct elections in China is investigated.²

II. Western Perspectives on Village Elections in China

A systematic look at the Western literature on local self-government and village elections makes visible four guiding research approaches:

² This said, another aim of the following sections is to put into context a project on 'Local democracy in the PRC between state-led legitimacy-building and bottom-up democratization' initiated by this author and Prof. Thomas Heberer, Duisburg University. This project will not only focus on village elections, but also investigate the effects of direct voting in urban neighborhood committees (*juweihui*). It should be stressed here that we don't conceive of our endeavor as something "new" or as an evident desideratum of the research already undertaken. It is much more compatible to existing studies and projects, while placing special emphasis on *qualitative changes* in the political consciousness (political culture) of the rural and urban population in China caused by direct political participation. The same program was formulated by Silvia Chan in 1998, although empirical results have not been presented, yet, as to the knowledge of this author: "I am undertaking on how the introduction of village self-government and direct elections at village level has affected the political life, political culture, and the public sphere(s) in the rural areas." See Chan, Sylvia, Research Notes on Villager's Committee Elections: Chinese Style Democracy, in: *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 7, No. 19, November 1998, 507-521, here 507. Of course, aspects of qualitative change concerning political culture in the countryside have already been addressed in recent research on village elections by different scholars (see below). However, this was much more done "at the sidelines" of projects with a different analytical focus, whereas political culture will be at the center of our project.

1. *Modernist approach*: These studies concentrate on the relationship between electoral implementation and material welfare in the villages. They are inspired by the "classical" thesis of modernization theory that there is a direct correlation between democratization and economic development, making the first a consequence of the latter.

2. *Institutionalist approach*: These studies focus on the relationship between electoral implementation and the generation of political legitimacy and stability in rural China. This approach is based on the observation that participation enhances the will to become actively engaged in politics so that the system of local self-government - even if only partially democratic (in the Western sense) - is strengthened. It follows the assumption that the political system is slowly changing towards democratization: If political legitimacy is more and more bound to the act of direct voting, the resulting 'structural constraints' on the behavior of elected cadres finally lead to demands of electoral reforms on the higher administrative levels, pushing democracy upwards.

3. *Elite approach*: Some studies have looked at the *actors* of the electoral implementation process. They focus on the strategies of these actors to adjust the tempo and extent of this process. It is assumed that high and mid-level cadres are the most crucial agents of change by their promotion of rural democracy.

4. *Political culture approach*: These studies discuss the relationship between electoral implementation and the rise of peasant civil (democratic) consciousness. This approach is directly influenced by the assumption that democratic practice creates the democrat, even if there hasn't been any tradition of genuine political participation so far. The democrat is thought of as an individual who not only realizes his parochial interests, but who fights for the good of the community and therefore "delocalizes" his political orientations.

This heuristic differentiation, which will be explained more in detail in the following sections of the paper, makes clear one point: Western Research dealing with local elections in the PRC is mostly optimistic about village elections going beyond the given institutional frame laid out by the Communist Party, eventually bringing about political democratization "from below". "Rightful Resistance"³ plays an essential part here, increasingly making the cadres⁴ prisoners

³ O'Brien, Kevin, Rightful Resistance, in: *World Politics*, No. 49, October 1996, 31-55.

⁴ By "cadre" I mean the appointed village party secretaries, the elected members of the Village Committees and the corresponding functionaries on the township and county levels.

of the Party's norms and laws. Also important is the attraction of the democratic principle that wins over nomenclatura politics; as are changes within the political culture of the voters, who gradually develop a civic consciousness that forces back the ideological and political power monopoly of the Party. In this perspective, local self-government - if handled efficiently - generates political stability while slowly climbing up the higher administrative levels and, at the same time, evitating any revolutionary iconoclasm. Consequently, the rural population is regarded as the most important agent of the demise of Chinese authoritarianism.⁵

1. The *modernist approach*: Electoral implementation and economic development

Studies on local self-government and village democracy following the modernist approach provide us with contradicting results. In an often quoted article of 1994, Kevin O'Brien connected the implementation success of the 'Organic law' directly to the material wealth in the villages or the townships/counties. Things were going smoothly where local cadres did not have to fear sanctions of the electorate for their management and control of the collective economy. It was them who had led the village to prosperity and who used the material resources to comfort the village population, as by investments in the local infrastructure and in social security systems or by paying obligatory levies to the township government without charging the peasants. Consequently, they not only substantially enhanced the possibility of their (re-) election; they became also interested in "clean" elections themselves, because these helped them to gain "cheap" political legitimacy. Under the given circumstances, the villagers' dependence on the cadres rose, since the cadres were seen as the guarantors of economic welfare in the villages the people couldn't do without. At the same time, the peasants' motivation to take part in public affairs grew, too, so that the above-mentioned new dependence on the cadres did not result in a disinterest in local elections or even depoliticisation.⁶

In poor villages with strained relations between cadres and peasants, however, implementation of the Organic Law was flawed. Sometimes both cadres and peasants worked together in

⁵ Some authors state that political change in the PRC can't be successful without the support of the peasants. See Heberer, Thomas/Jakobi, Sabine, Villagers as the Starting Point for Democratization (in Germ.), in: *Welt-trends*, No. 20, Autumn, 1998, 45-68.

⁶ "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" (O'Brien, Kevin J., Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages, in: *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32, July, 1994, 33-59, here 48).

an exit-alliance against the township government to save the village from the state's grip.⁷ In this case, rule-based elections were impossible. O'Brien's article seemed to verify the general modernist assumption that democratization (here measured as procedural quality of the electoral process) directly depends on the level of economic development: Material resources in the villages are used by the cadres for redistribution, so that the delegitimizing use of force to execute state policies is unnecessary and elections can be easily won. Consequently, there is no reason for the local cadre bureaucracy to hamper the implementation of the Organic Law.

Objection to O'Brien came from two sides: *Susan V. Lawrence* concluded after field work in a village in Hebei province that it was not economic welfare nor the introduction of direct elections for Village Committees which were responsible for a positive turnaround in the village's administration. The village she studied was notoriously mismanaged, when a new Village Representative Assembly (*cunmin daibiao huiyi*)⁸ was elected in 1990 and took over control of the Village Committee. The VRA soon became the driving force for a new workstyle in the village, ending its administrative paralysis. In the end, so Lawrence, it was not economic development, but institutional efficiency that spurred political change.⁹

Other authors have questioned the "prosperity thesis" by the empirically grounded counter-thesis that there is a negative correlation between the level of economic development on the one hand and the degree of electoral implementation on the other. *Jean C. Oi* found that "high levels of economic development do not necessarily bring enthusiasm for implementing democratic reforms."¹⁰ In rich villages, the powerful party secretaries have become even more powerful entrepreneurs who control the villages' financial resources. Whereas the introduc-

⁷ These were the *Run-Away-Villages* in O'Brien's 1994 typology that - along with the *Authoritarian Villages* and the *Paralyzed Villages* - had a history of deficient implementation of the Organic Law and differed negatively from the prosperous *Up-to-Standard Demonstration Villages*.

⁸ Lawrence was one of the first to place emphasis on the role of Village Representative Assemblies as a control mechanism for Village Committees. The number of delegates to VRAs and the mode of their election vary regionally, since the VRA is not part of the Organic Law. For a more detailed discussion of VRAs see Wang, Zhenyao, *Village Committees: The Basis for China's Democratization*, in: Vermeer, Eduard B./Pieke, Frank N./Chong, Woei Lien (eds.), *Cooperative and Collective in China's Rural Development*, Armonk/N.Y. 1998, 239-255, here 252ff; Oi, Jean C./Rozell, Scott, *Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages*, in: *China Quarterly*, No. 162, June, 2000, 513-539, here 515ff.

⁹ A similar way of reasoning was pursued by Allan Choate, who in contrast to O'Brien put forward the assumption that democratically elected Village Committees were promoted more seriously in economically backward regions: First, in those areas villagers had a high interest in using self-government for economic development; second, the state was particularly under pressure to reconsolidate its power in poor villages by introducing direct elections. See Choate, Allen C., *Local Governance in China: An Assessment of Villagers Committees*, Working Paper No. 1, The Asia Foundation, San Francisco 1997.

¹⁰ Oi, Jean C., *Economic Development, Stability and Democratic Village Self-governance*, in: Brosseau, Maurice/Pepper, Suzanne/Tsang, Shu-ki (eds.), *China Review 1996*, Hongkong 1996, 125-144, here 137.

tion of direct elections makes the village head accountable to the village population, the party secretary usually is not touched by such an arrangement. His privileged access to the local collective economy enables him to substantially limit the Village Committee's authority. Making sense of this empirical finding, Oi went so far as to state an "inverse relationship between level of economic development and progress in the implementation of democratic village rule."¹¹

Shi Tianjian for his part confirmed Amy B. Epstein's assumption that there is no linear, but a curvilinear (convex) relationship between economic development and electoral implementation in China's villages:¹² Starting on a low level, economic development leads to a higher probability of semicompetitive elections. Growing prosperity, on the contrary, translates into a declining probability after a certain point is reached. In fact, villages in middle-developed areas are the most likely to have free and fair elections.¹³ In contrast to poor villages, rural income here is above the subsistence level. The peasants have to deliver money to the state and find themselves in a position of relative deprivation against the economically more advanced villages nearby.¹⁴ As a consequence, they are very critical of the local cadres who have not contributed enough to the material well-being of the village. At the same time, the cadres face great pressure: Because they lack financial resources - the village's collective industry is not developed enough - they can't win over the peasants nor "persuade" their superiors to manipulate elections and hold them in power. This weak position results in the township and county governments' determination to implement the Organic Law, because they hope that this will generate new political legitimacy to help carrying through their policies in

¹¹ Oi, op.cit, 141.

¹² Epstein, Amy B., Village Elections in China: Experimenting with Democracy, in: U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee (ed.), *China's Economic Future*, Washington D.C. 1996. In the same direction goes Zweig, David, *Freeing China's Farmers. Rural Restructuring in the Reform Era*, Armonk/N.Y., 1997, 26.

¹³ "...economic wealth increases the likelihood that a village will hold semicompetitive elections for people to choose their leaders, but its impact diminishes as economic wealth increases. This finding confirms Epstein's argument that the middle-developed counties in rural China are most likely to hold semi-competitive elections for peasants to choose their leaders. (...) The relationship between the speed of economic development and village elections appears to be a convex curve, that is, a higher rate of economic development reduces the likelihood that Chinese villages will hold semicompetitive elections in an accelerated manner, that is, the higher the rate of economic development in a county, the less likely that elections in the villages located in that county will be semicompetitive." See Shi, Tianjian, Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China, in: *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 8, No. 22, 1999, 425-442, here 436f. By 'semicompetitive' Shi means elections that do not allow for the competition of parties, but only for individual candidates.

¹⁴ To the contrary, in poor villages the peasants are totally absorbed by survival or migrate to the rich coastal provinces. They are simply not interested in political participation in their home villages. The problem of relative deprivation therefore is not as important as in more developed villages - even less so, as the Chinese state does not raise taxes or other levies from villages classified "poor".

the villages - and that democratic elections will push modernization and development, bringing personal benefits to township and county politicians in the long run.¹⁵

This analysis turns the "prosperity thesis" upside down and negates its "philosophical" optimism: Economic development does not necessarily lead to democratization, but can even oppose it. However, if growing material well-being reduces the probability of semicompetitive elections, what future does democratization "from below" in China have then? At this point, Shi Tianjian predicted qualitative changes within any society's political culture undergoing economic growth. Growth raises the educational quality of the rural population and, subsequently, induces new claims for participation. Apart from this, the generational change at the upper administrative levels will make it ever more difficult for village cadres to convince their superiors to freeze the Organic Law.¹⁶ So even if there is a relation between economic development and the consolidation of undemocratic power, this power will finally be overcome by the long-term effects that development and prosperity have on the political awareness of the villagers.

A modification of the modernist paradigm in terms of political economy was proposed by *Jean C. Oi* und *Scott Rozelle*.¹⁷ In a broad empirical study on the competitiveness of village elections, the authors focused on the "locus of power" in the villages. Power was seen as dependent on the degree of village industrialization and on the nature of the peasants' ties to the economy outside the village. Oi/Rozelle came to the following results¹⁸:

- Where peasant income is predominantly attached to the cultivation of the land, the degree of political participation and electoral competitiveness is high because of the special importance of land issues in local politics (e.g. land distribution, irrigation and environmental protection).

¹⁵ In rich villages the motivation to implement true semi-competitive elections is reduced again: The village heads use the financial resources for 'buying' their superiors who manipulate the elections. At the same time, the economic success of village cadres make township government and party branches want to keep them. And the villagers are ready to renounce to clean elections, as long as clever village heads pay their duties and taxes to the state and even redistribute profits of the local collective economy by paying yearly bonuses to the villagers (Shi, *Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China*, op.cit., 437ff.).

¹⁶ Shi, *Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China*, op.cit., 441.

¹⁷ Oi, Jean C./Rozelle, Scott, *Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages*, op.cit., 513-539.

¹⁸ Oi/Rozelle, *Elections and Power*, op.cit., 531ff.

- In industrialized villages the degree of participation and electoral competitiveness is low, supposedly because village cadres are more interested in a perpetuation of their privileged position and therefore work against the Organic Law; and because the rural population is comparatively well-off and doesn't see any particular reason to demand more direct participation in local politics.¹⁹
- However, the degree of competitiveness rises in those villages that extract surplus revenues out of the collective economy. According to the authors, this was an effect of exactly the same reasons that Shi Tianjian put forth to explain the implementation successes of the Organic Law in middle-developed areas: Economically successful cadres don't fear elections, but consider them as useful fortifiers of their legitimization. They can influence the outcome of elections by material favors without compromising their formal procedures. And they are more likely to transfer the responsibility for local policies to the Village Committees as long as they keep control over the local economy.
- In villages with a high percentage of migrants participation and electoral competitiveness are declining for obvious reasons. In other words: The higher the degree of integration of the village economy into the external economy, the lower the degree of local political participation.
- The more private entrepreneurs in a village, the higher the competitiveness of local elections. According to Oi/Rozelle this might be due to the fact that entrepreneurs - especially those without party membership - see in village elections a means to defend their interests against the cadre bureaucracy that is often skeptical, if not openly antagonistic towards the private economy.

Oi/Rozelle confirmed Epstein's thesis of a curvilinear relationship between income and participation: The probability of competitive elections rises with growing income ever more slowly and begins to fall at a certain point.²⁰ This provokes again the question, if one has to be pessimistic about the future of political democratization in China. At this point, Oi/Rozelle, like Shi Tianjian, suggest a qualitative jump of peasant political consciousness as an indirect effect of rising amounts of personal income. According to this logic, more wealth creates a

¹⁹ This interpretation corresponds to what has been claimed in the cited studies of Epstein (1996) and Shi (1999).

²⁰ "As incomes rise, villages experience a rising likelihood of contested elections. The level of rise increases at a decreasing rate, however. In the richest villages in our sample, those in the 90th percentile, the incidence of contested elections begins to fall. In contrast, however, the frequency of villagers' assembly meetings does not fall with higher incomes" (Oi/Rozelle, *Elections and Power*, op.cit., 537).

new demand for "true political voice"; and an ongoing democratic practice enhances the village cadres' trust into the electoral process, making them become more and more dedicated to it.²¹ It becomes clear here that all authors taking the road of the modernist approach, although they qualify its basic assumptions quite substantially, finally stick to the belief in a causal relationship between economic development and democratization.

2. The institutionalist approach: Electoral implementation and political legitimacy

Melanie Manion stated in 1996 a positive correlation between the quality of village elections and what she called 'congruence' - the common political ground of village cadres and their electorates: The more advanced the implementation process, the more trustful the relation between the village head and the peasants; the bigger the interest of the village population in the elections, the smaller the political distance between them and the village head.²² This result, according to Manion, was not leading to revolution, because the village head was still bound to the guidelines coming from his 'township selectorate' which could in no way be ignored. However, the new identity of interests between the villagers and village heads obviously was a consequence of an 'electoral connection' between the two of them based on 'choice'. It showed that political stability and efficient administrative work in the villages was dependent on clean elections and the official acceptance of their results.²³

In much the same direction go empirical results of a nation-wide project to study the implementation deficits and successes of the Organic Law that was inaugurated in March 1998 as part of a cooperation agreement between the US-based *Carter Center* and the *Chinese Ministry for Civil Affairs*.²⁴ Its results showed that in spite of various technical problems and missing official willingness in many places to implement the Organic Law properly, elections ap-

²¹ Oi/Rozelle, *Elections and Power*, op.cit., 539.

²² Manion, Melanie F., *The Electoral Connection in the Chinese Countryside*, in: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4, 1996, 736-748, here 741ff. The studies' results were based on an evaluation of a survey in 56 villages in Anhui, Hunan, Hebei and Tianjin municipality.

²³ "To demonstrate that winners are in fact closer to villagers than losers, the argument that congruence comes about because voters with more choice can choose candidates closer to them remains untested here. But the theoretical logic is well established, and the analyses demonstrate that congruence is in significant part the result of an electoral connection that involves voter choice per se: the more choice, the more congruence. (...) As expected, village leaders are responsive to their selectorates above them at the township level, but they are also responsive to the villagers who elect them. Congruence between village leaders and villagers is in significant part the result of an electoral connection that involves voter choice" (Manion, *The Electoral Connection*, op.cit., 745).

²⁴ For some details see Pastor, Robert A./Tan, Qingshan, *The Meaning of China's Village Elections*, in: *China Quarterly*, No. 162, June 2000, 490-512, here 508ff.

parently helped to channel local protests away from dangerous resentment. Therefore, they not only contribute to the recruitment of more qualified political personnel, but also to social stability in rural China. Local democracy therefore functions as an important security valve to contain rural discontent that can otherwise quickly radicalize in case of an economic downturn, putting party rule in jeopardy. Village elections generate legitimacy that is working against those dangers.

3. The *elite approach*: The leading role of public officials

Another analytical focus was chosen by *Shi Tianjian* when he concentrated on the history of the implementation process of the Organic Law since 1987. He emphasized the leading role of dedicated public officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, who were the driving forces in the process.²⁵ At the beginning, they were just interested in the execution of elections and the subsequent recognition of their results. Only after this was fairly secured, they started to pass down new regulations in order to erase the widespread manipulations of the elections by local and township cadres. As calculated in advance, this was done with the energetic support of some parts of the local bureaucracy and the peasants who had become quite enthusiastic about direct political participation once they had realized the possible impact of meaningful elections on their lives.²⁶ Here was an alliance between Civil Ministry officials, local cadres and the villagers against those representatives of the township and county governments and influential village party secretaries who fought against the Organic Law for political or just selfish reasons. The implementation success of village elections in China so far is, according to the author, a result of intelligent political maneuvering by responsible public officials applying a step-by-step approach: The first step of just forcing upon the mere execution of elections according to the Organic Law, even if severely flawed, was bestowing general legitimacy to the system. This made the second more difficult step, improved implementation and law enforcement, much easier. As a conclusionary remark, Shi Tianjian underlined in his article's

²⁵ Shi, Tianjian, Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy, in: *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 3, April, 1999, 385-412.

²⁶ "As anticipated by reformers, institutional dynamism brought about two other changes by that time. One is that some local bureaucrats changed their attitude toward elections. Many county officials realized that elections increased the governability of local government and some of them began to support reform. The other is that peasants now joined in the struggle: realizing that elections had a bearing on their welfare, many began to nominate their own candidates to challenge local bureaucrats. Some of them even lodged complaints with higher authorities about election fraud" (Shi, Village Committee Elections in China, op.cit., 403).

final passage that in the process of bringing democracy to China's villages, "democratically committed midlevel officials may accelerate the wheels of history."²⁷

4. The political *culture approach*: Electoral implementation and civic consciousness

Rule-based resistance and the rise of a democratic consciousness among villagers have gained growing attention in recent studies on local elections in the PRC. Central to this approach is the hypothesis, that institutionalized political participation gradually makes the Chinese *citizen* who sees political participation not only as a local privilege but as an objective right reaching up to the national level. This is the research focus of both Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang who have published extensively on village elections in China throughout the last decade. In an often quoted article published in 1996, they looked at different manifestations of political resistance in rural China, distinguishing between 'compliant villagers' (*shunmin*), 'recalcitrants' (*dingzhihu*) and 'policy-based resisters' (*diaomin*).²⁸ The last group was of particular interest to the authors: 'Policy-based resisters' interfere in local politics by appealing to valid laws and regulations, party guidelines and slogans (that can even go back to the Cultural Revolution) in order to defend their interests against village and township cadres. They stay within the given order of legitimacy, but play its rules and norms differently, i.e. against the local cadres. They conceive of their relationship to the party and the state more and more in contractual terms of reciprocity that make them obey just in case the other side sticks to its part of the contract, too.²⁹

For Li/O'Brien this behavior reflected the growing aspiration of the villagers to transform what were just contested claims into rights that would not only be used against local cadres

²⁷ Shi, Village Committee Elections in China, op.cit., 411. Actually, the author here was taking sides with leading Ministry of Civil Affairs officials, who have come up with similar evaluations of the system of direct village elections in recent years (see below).

²⁸ Li, Lianjiang/O'Brien, Kevin, Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China, in: *Modern China*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January 1996, 28-61. See also O'Brien, Kevin/Li Lianjiang., The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China, in: *China Quarterly*, No. 143, September, 1995, 756-783.

²⁹ "Since the introduction of the household responsibility system, more and more villagers appear to conceive of their relationship with the state in contractual terms. (...) Policy-based resisters seem to view taxes, fees, and other demands in terms of exchanges that imply mutual obligations. They see their relationship with cadres partly in terms of enforceable contracts and fulfill their responsibilities so long as rural cadres treat them as equals and deliver on promises made by officials at higher levels" (Li/O'Brien, Villagers and Popular Resistance, op.cit., 40,42).

but in the end could turn against the whole system.³⁰ Quite important for this assumption was the authors' observation that the different forms of local resistance were not limited to individual actions, but very often accompanied by collective action (street demonstrations, beleaguering of township governments, submission of petitions etc.) that saw participation of dozens, sometimes even hundreds of peasants. This made resistance become the expression of a collectively-shared conviction to have rights and to be legitimized to sue for these rights.

For the time being, however, 'policy-based resisters' still act within a *zone of (policy) implementation*, and not in a *zone of immunity* that would give their claims an objective basis and lift them out of the range of political arbitrariness. They therefore know that they cannot really appeal to "rights" which are still subordinated to the state's (the party's) premises and can be "cashed in" whenever the state wants. In fact, 'policy-based resisters' are "occupying an intermediate position between subjects and citizens".³¹ However, at the end the authors suggest that the "early stirrings of rights consciousness in the Chinese countryside" are harbingers of an evolving civil society that might soon fundamentally change the power constellations in rural China.³²

Whereas Li/O'Brien at this point concentrated on political resistance which could be aroused by the flawed implementation of village elections and political misbehavior by local cadres, other authors looked more at the relationship between political participation (not only as taking part in elections, but even more so as active engagement in politics before and after elections) and democratic consciousness. M. Kent Jennings published a study on the significance of three different modes of participation in rural China: 'cooperative (collective) behavior, 'voice' and 'contacting'.³³ About a third of the villagers surveyed had engaged in one of these modes at least once. This was, according to Jennings, a percentage pretty close to figures drawn from comparable studies in Western societies.³⁴ Additionally, it was striking that the peasants acted according to an individual calculation of the costs and benefits each form of participation implied. This put into question the assumption that the rural population in

³⁰ "It is in these sorts of actions that local proactive resistance takes on its widest import, for it is here that we may see the beginning of efforts to transform still-contested claims into enforceable rights - rights that may eventually be claimed throughout the political system" (Li/O'Brien, *Villagers and Popular Resistance*, op.cit.,46).

³¹ Li/O'Brien, *Villagers and Popular Resistance*, op.cit., 54.

³² Li/O'Brien, *Villagers and Popular Resistance*, op.cit., 52ff und 57, Fn7.

³³ Jennings, M. Kent, *Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside*, in: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2, June, 1997, 361-372. The study is based on a survey carried out in 60 villages in Anhui, Hunan, Hebei and Tianjin

³⁴ Jennings, *Political Participation*, op.cit., 365.

closed-up systems is inclined to parochialism and hampers collective action. On the contrary, the peasants apparently have a precise comprehension of collective goods and the necessity to defend them against corrupt cadres.³⁵ One could identify modes of participation in rural China that resembled those in Western countries strikingly and allowed the conclusion that one-party rule would be gradually forced back by the consequences of economic development, social stratification and the habitualisation of political participation.³⁶

Another study by Shi Tianjian that was based on a representative survey comprising both directly elected village and urban neighborhood committees (*juweihui*), focused on the implementation of semicompetitive elections and the voting population's motivation to participate in these elections.³⁷ The author here came to the following conclusions:

- The possibility to choose between different candidates strengthens the willingness to participate significantly.
- In semicompetitive elections bad politicians get punished; in noncompetitive elections people prefer not to vote.
- In semicompetitive elections the conviction to contribute to the development of a veritable democracy translates into even stronger participation.
- Education, party membership and age positively affect the willingness to vote in semicompetitive elections, as does the desire to punish corrupt politicians.

More statistical correlation proved that it was not primarily the belief in a positive response of the government to voters' preferences that motivated the individual voter to take part in elections ('external efficacy'); it was much more the individual belief that one could effectively influence local politics that promoted voting ('internal efficacy'). Besides this, the quality of elections had a direct impact on the willingness to vote corrupt and power-hungry cadres out

³⁵ "Contacting, voicing, and even cooperative actions more often than not had the ring of behavior taken by an individual or small group to generate selective benefits. (...) Nevertheless, distinct signs of activities in pursuit of collective goods also emerged" (Jenning, *Political Participation*, op.cit., 370).

³⁶ However, the author remained careful on these predictions in his final conclusions. See Jennings, *Political Participation*, op.cit., 370f.

³⁷ Shi, Tianjian, *Voting and Nonvoting in China: Voting Behavior in Plebiscitary and Limited-Choice Elections*, in: *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4, November, 1999, 1115-1139. The notion 'semicompetitive (limited-choice) elections' here means again that choice is limited to alternative candidates and does not extend to political parties.

of office.³⁸ Evidently, voters had quickly realized the significance of even limited competitive elections under authoritarian conditions. And this, so the author in the concluding passages of this article, would probably contribute to political change in the PRC in the long run.³⁹

In their more recent studies, *Li Lianjiang* and *Kevin O'Brien* have continued to investigate the relationship between resistance and participation (and the rise of a rights consciousness) in rural China. In a conference paper submitted in mid-2000, Li Lianjiang investigated the state of village-cadre relations, on both the village level and between the village and township levels.⁴⁰ He drew conclusions from a survey conducted in 25 provinces that aimed at determining the degree to which villagers approached their elected village heads to make them oppose unfair township policies; and at finding out about the villagers' opinion on their elections' competitiveness and democratic quality. Moreover, the author concentrated on the following questions: Have free and fair elections made it more probable that villagers force their elected representatives to defend village interests against the township government? How do village elections change the response behavior of village cadres to their electorate's demands? What consequences will possible alliances between villagers and village cadres have for the perspectives of political reform in China?

It became clear that there is a positive relationship between the assessment of elections as democratic and individual willingness to contact elected village cadres for political protest. Subsequently, the author checked the results of the voters' subjective views with an analysis of the electoral process by "objective" criteria, stating a significant correlation between 'contacting' and the election's procedural quality for 7 out of 9 indicators. Put in different words: The more rule-based and "cleaner" the voting-process, the greater the willingness to contact elected cadres. The same was true for the voters' assessment of cadre performance (an additional indicator): The more positive achievements were attributed to them, the more they were contacted. No significant correlation, however, could be found for the additional indicator

³⁸ "Taken together, these findings indicate that people vote in semicompetitive elections not because they believe the government is responsive, not because they are identified with the regime, and not because they have affective attachments to political authority. Instead, they vote to pursue the limited interests those elections can bring them, that is, to punish those who abuse power" (Shi, *Voting and Nonvoting in China*, op.cit., 1135).

³⁹ "People in authoritarian societies, then, may learn democratic principles while a repressive regime is still in power, and the experiences gained during the authoritarian stage may be critical for a transition of the political system in the future" (Shi, *Voting and Non-voting in China*, op.cit., 1136)

⁴⁰ Li, Lianjiang, *Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China*, Paper presented at the 'Third Conference on China's Economic Reform and Social Development'; June 16-17, 2000, Beijing (unpublished).

‘number of collective enterprises’ - an indication that financial redistribution as an important means of co-optation lost its preeminence in the villages’ everyday politics and stepped back behind the significance of procedural electoral quality and the performance of the local Village Committee.

The evaluation of different interviews made by the author showed that elected village heads - now equipped with democratic legitimacy - have developed a salient ”conflict culture”:

Whenever they feel to be under unbearable pressure ”from above”, they play their position as elected representatives of village interests against their duty to carry out higher government (party) guidelines and laws. Consequently, township cadres are often enough in rough waters themselves that they usually try to overcome with the help of the village party secretaries. However, their interventions very often provoke even bigger resistance of the Village Committees and the villagers. Some township cadres have therefore switched to the demand of direct elections for township governments, as firstly undertaken in the famous case of Buyun township in Sichuan province in late 1998 and in some more townships nation-wide since then.⁴¹ But this can only mean that new pressure will be felt soon at this level, too, which will have to be passed once again one level up.⁴²

The important insight of Li Lianjiangs empirical observations was that the mutual relationship between the (subjective or objective) quality of village elections on the one hand and the increasing willingness for political participation on the other has changed the political culture of China’s peasants considerably. This leads to the question, if we already face the formation of a new strategic group here that might soon leave the *zone of implementation* in order to demand the establishment of a legally protected *zone of political autonomy*.

To this point turns a recent paper of Kevin O’Brien’ called “Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship⁴³: Can Chinese villagers today be called citizens, i.e. persons with a consciousness to possess rights and at the same time being equipped with a factual right to political participation? According to O’Brien’s brief analysis, such a citizen does still not exist nationally nor

⁴¹ More township elections have been introduced on an experimental basis since then, e.g. in Guangdong and Shanxi province (see e.g. *South China Morning Post*, July 7, 2000). This policy is supported by the Central Leadership, even if there is no hint of a coherent government approach to the issue, yet.

⁴² ”Unless Beijing scraps village elections, it is unclear how the Center can reduce village-township tension without introducing democratic township elections, thus allowing the township to ‘pass the buck’ up yet one more level” (Li, Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China, op.cit.).

⁴³ O’Brien, Kevin, Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship, Paper prepared for the ‘Conference on The Impact of Village Elections in China’, March 16-18 2001, Chinese University of Hongkong (unpublished).

locally (concerning the right to directly elect the National People's Congress and the subordinated people's congresses), although there are experiments in direct democracy since the 1980s with respect to county, city and township people's congresses.⁴⁴ These might contribute to a rising civic consciousness above the village level. But how to qualify contemporary village democracy in terms of the citizen ideal?

After he evaluated the institutional deficits and strengths of the present electoral system in China's villages and elaborated on the peasant "culture of resistance" once more, O'Brien comes to the conclusion that the Chinese villager is not a citizen, yet. He does not possess real rights that would - at least partially - limit the power of the party-state.⁴⁵ His political engagement does not go so far to ask for fundamental civic rights (for instance, the right of free association or the right of free expression of one's opinions). He does not put into question the authority of undemocratically appointed politicians on the higher levels of government. Still, he does accuse manipulated or flawed elections with a "vocabulary of rights".⁴⁶ O'Brien sees the contemporary villager in an intermediate position between subject and citizen, "demanding citizenship rights he had never enjoyed, while making it appear he had just been deprived of them."⁴⁷

5. "Silent revolution" or stabilization under one-party rule?

The most important insights of recent Western research on local self-government and village democracy in the PRC can be summarized as following:

⁴⁴ For recent developments on the township level see Manion, Melanie, Chinese Democratization in Perspective: Electorates and Selectorates at the Township Level, in: *The China Quarterly*, No. 163, September, 2000, 764-782.

⁴⁵ "Chinese villagers have certain rights, but theirs is partial, local citizenship. Rural dwellers have few opportunities to participate outside the village and their inclusion in the wider polity is not well-established. While villagers have a foothold in grassroots politics, and some resources, their ability to rein in state sovereignty is slight. The inclusion that rural people have been offered is piecemeal and incomplete" (O'Brien, Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship, op.cit.).

⁴⁶ "Chinese villagers are increasingly identifying, interpreting and challenging improper elections using the vocabulary of rights" (O'Brien, Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship, op.cit., 25).

⁴⁷ O'Brien, Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship, op.cit., 31. At the end, the author leaves it open, if the observable dynamism in China's countryside will bring about the Chinese citizen, or if this needs additional institutional reforms in the PRC. The redefinition of the Communist Party's role in the political system as a necessary precondition for political change in China is stressed by O'Brien, Kevin/Li Lianjiang, Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party-State: Introducing Village Elections in China, in: *The China Quarterly*, No. 162, June, 2000, 465-489, here 488.

- The procedural quality of village elections has ameliorated considerably since the late 1980s and has contributed much to intensifying political participation of the rural population.
- The politicization of the rural population changed its relationship to the Village Committees, especially the village heads. The latter need the villager's support for being (re-)elected and therefore can't (as in former times) exclusively rely on the support of the township government (or the village or township party branches).
- At the same time, the village head disposes of new political legitimacy gained from the election that he can use either for implementing the political directives from above or to oppose the township and county governments. His position has therefore become very complex, although according to the revised Organic Law from 1998 he is explicitly subordinated to the guidance of the Party, i.e. the village or township party secretary.
- However, the village party secretary is also put in the defensive by direct village elections, because he has to deal now with a stronger Village Committee. For that reason, the Party is increasingly forced to bind its appointment of party secretaries - at least indirectly - to the villagers' democratic vote.⁴⁸
- The politicization of the peasants is not only demonstrated by an increasing willingness to participate in local politics. It also becomes manifest in the cultivation/habitualisation of the strategic arsenal of "Rightful Resistance" vis-a-vis the cadre bureaucracy and intensifying 'contacting', i.e. the systematic consultation of the Village Committee to defend the peasant's interests.
- This has resulted in the gradual formation of a civic (citizen)-like consciousness in the countryside that steps out of the frame of village parochialism and might one day lead to the demand for true democratic rights and for democratic accountability of China's political leaders. This would not necessarily contradict to political stabilization in the countryside which the Party is striving for; however, it would very probably contradict to one-party rule in China.

As far as the Western debate's provisional verdict on direct village elections in the PRC is concerned, the Party's aim to reconsolidate its rule over the countryside has been achieved

⁴⁸ For recent developments concerning the issue of direct voting of the Party secretary in the villages see Li, Lianjiang, The Two-ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Village Party Secretaries to a Popular Vote, in: *China Journal*, No. 42, July 1999, 103-118; "Village Democracy" in: *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 27, 2000, 16-17.

fairly well in some areas at least.⁴⁹ In those places, local elections have brought new political legitimacy to the Village Committees and made it easier for them to implement party guidelines and government policies passed down from the township level. This has doubtlessly strengthened Communist rule. However, local politics has become more complicated, because the power relations between the different political actors in the villages on the one hand and between the village (as a political community) and the township/county government on the other have changed. Generally spoken, village self-government has led to a horizontalization of local power, while at the same time sharpening the peasants' political awareness. There is obvious pressure coming from the villages to broaden the scope of direct elections towards the township and county levels which gives some substance to the hypothesis of an inevitable "bottom-up"-democratization in the PRC. Still, the big majority of China scholars in the West is very cautious on this issue, claiming to need much more empirical evidence for being able to prove a "spiralling-up" effect of the implementation of the Organic Law.

III. Chinese Perspectives on Village Elections

Whereas Western research on village democracy in the PRC is led by well-known theoretical and methodological approaches in order to identify the driving forces and to foresee the future political impact of direct elections⁵⁰, the Chinese debate on the issue is more complex. As a matter of fact, it is following two main trajectories, one more ideological and – just as in the West - one more empirical.

On the *ideological* stage, government leaders, public officials and academics are discussing the general political significance and instrumental value of village elections for reconsolidating the Party's control over the countryside, promoting rural development and building "Socialism with Chinese characteristics". Although they often base their views on empirical stud-

⁴⁹ This has led some scholars to state a compatibility of interests between central party leaders and the peasants concerning the institutionalization of village elections. As Judy Howell put it, top Chinese leaders "have a clear interest in ensuring that grievances and dissatisfaction among rural inhabitants are expressed in containable rather than uncontrollable ways" (Howell, Jude, Prospects for Village Self-governance in China, in: *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1998, 87-111.)

⁵⁰ The "democratic prophecy" within much Western research on village elections has been criticized by Björn Alpermann. He is pleading for a more endogenous perspective on local politics in China and advises to take seriously the specific Chinese understanding of self-government and rural democracy as just practical means to achieve stability and development and not as the forerunners of a bottom-up democratisation along the liberal model of the West. See Alpermann, Björn, *The State in the Village. Village Self-government in China in the 90s* (in German), unpublished MA-Thesis, University of Cologne, 1998.

ies, here the authors refer to them in more abstract (sometimes apologetic) terms. This is the discourse, in which village elections are most closely attached to strategies of discursive legitimization to support different factions or opinion groups within the party leadership.

On the *empirical* (or problem-oriented) stage, Chinese scholars and administrative experts discuss the state of village elections by cross-checking and evaluating the results of (their own and others') field studies. The central focus here is the analysis of implementation problems of the Organic Law. However, these studies are not only focusing on technical flaws of different election procedures, but also taking issue with the influence of rural interest groups (e.g. clans and religious groups), local cadre corruption, peasant collective behavior and resistance, conflicts between elected village heads and the local party secretaries, and the interference of township governments and party branches in village politics to secure their power vis-a-vis the peasants. On a more general level, the debate focuses on the necessity and range of next-step reforms to overcome the observed problems in the field. The outcome of this research is very often channeled into the ideological debate, mostly supporting the proponents of local self-government against their inter-party adversaries or academic critics. But this does not mean that all "empiricists" are interested in ideological skirmishes. Many of them just want to provide their employers (county or provincial governments in the first place) and the broader public with factual information on the electoral process in the villages and its social, political and economic implications. They seriously understand their work as contributing to the Party's endeavor of promoting economic development and social stability in the countryside. In some cases, they would describe themselves as political consultants straight away. Others stick more to an "ethics of objectivity", present their findings disinterestedly and, sometimes, cautiously reflect on the necessity of much more profound democratic remolding of China's political system to achieve long-term stability and prosperity.

1. The ideological debate

According to Liu Yawei's useful typology, the Chinese perspective on village elections should be divided heuristically into three discourses, juxtaposing the views of the party leadership, mid-level public officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) and scholars.⁵¹ The arguments brought forward by these groups - may be completed by the camp of local government

⁵¹ Liu, Yawei, Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China. Better Local Governance or More Consolidation of State Power?, in: *Chinese Perspectives*, No. 31, September-October, 2000, 19-35, here 21.

and party officials⁵² - illustrate very well the general parameters determining the ideological debate on village elections since its early days in the 1980s.⁵³

For *Chinese leaders* like Peng Zhen, who was the decisive figure in the successful fight for promulgating the Organic Law and for defending it against numerous party opponents, direct elections in the countryside were an important means to erase the remnants of China's feudal past, make peasants learn how to manage their own affairs and, by trusting them to do just that, to enhance the Party's efficiency and legitimacy at the grassroots.⁵⁴ From the start, there was fierce resistance against this way of thinking by local cadres and officials, who were afraid of losing their political control over the villages. They pointed at the impossibility of enforcing unpopular policies (especially birth control measures and tax collection), the rise of (corrupt) lineage rule, the lacking qualities of the peasants to practice democracy⁵⁵ and the political marginalisation of the village party secretary, if direct and competitive elections were institutionalized.⁵⁶ These reservations were echoed at the party top. It was hardly imaginable for many leaders that direct democracy - however limited - could solidify the Party's control over the countryside. Even Zhao Ziyang, who was quite attracted by the idea of democratic reforms of the political system, was opting for village administrative offices staffed with ap-

⁵² See Kelliher, *The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government*, op.cit., 78-84.

⁵³ According to the Electoral Law of the PRC, all delegates for local People's Congresses - i.e. on the rural and urban township/town level (*xiangzhen*) and on the county (*xian*), city (*shi*) and urban district (*qu*) levels - are directly elected, too. Due to various specifications concerning the selectorate, however, these are not 'one-man, one-vote' ballots. The 1987 'Organic law for Village Committees in the People's Republic of China' (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhi fa*) was first put into function on a trial basis (*shixing*) in 1988 and revised in 1998. For details on China's People's Congresses elections see Jakobs, J. Bruce, *Elections in China*, in: *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 25, January, 1991, 171-199.

⁵⁴ Liu, *Consequence of Villager Committee Elections in China*, op.cit., 21. Fascinated with experiences made in Yishan and Luocheng county of Guanxi province, where Village Committees were established as early as 1980 and 1981, Peng instructed both the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) to send investigators to Guanxi to study these new institutions. Simultaneously, he encouraged other provinces to set up VCs in their villages. For this and interesting details on Peng Zhen's biographic motives to promote direct village elections see O'Brien/Li, *Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China*, op.cit., 465-469.

⁵⁵ In Hebei, a reporter working for Xinhua was bluntly told by a township official: "Presently, villagers don't know how to govern themselves. They don't even know what it means to govern themselves. And we won't let them govern themselves" (quoted in: O'Brien/Li, *Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party State*, op.cit., 479).

⁵⁶ In one survey of 1994, the main objection of the local cadre bureaucracy was expressed as follows: "There is a direct contradiction between village self-government and Party leadership. If village self-government is put into practice, then it will cripple Party leadership. If Party leadership is tightened, then it is impossible to realize genuine self-government by villagers. The two are mutually exclusive" (quoted in: Kelliher, *The Chinese Debate over Village Self-government*, op.cit. 82.

pointed personnel instead of directly elected VCs - a solution that was at least practised in Guangxi and Hainan until 1997.⁵⁷

Strong opposition came up when the final draft of the Organic Law was discussed in the NPC in 1987. The arguments made against direct village elections once again centered on the immaturity of China's peasants to practice democracy responsibly, the danger of protracted conflicts between elected village officials and party secretaries that would further paralyze village administration and, consequently, the declining capacity of the township governments to carry through state and party policies in the villages. Other NPC deputies were more positive on the peasant's political skills and agreed to Peng Zhen's opinion that genuine village democracy would help the Party winning over the peasants to follow its guidelines. Peng Zhen himself was insisting in his speeches during the NPC session that only the introduction of village elections could make an end to the rampant corruption of local cadres and therefore stop the process of deteriorating relations between the peasants and the local party branches. Still, the final decision on the Organic Law was suspended until November 1987 when it was finally promulgated on a trial basis by the NPC Standing Committee.⁵⁸

Ten years later, opposition within the party leadership against competitive village elections had almost completely vanished. During the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party in September 1997, Jiang Zemin stressed that "the most expansive practice of socialist democracy lies in increasing basic-level democracy and guaranteeing the people's right to engage in direct democracy, manage their own affairs according to the rule of the law, and pursue happiness."⁵⁹ Following this line of thought, the NPC Standing Committee passed a revised Organic Law in November 1998 in order to unify electoral procedures and enhance the overall quality of the electoral process. From now on, direct and competitive elections for Village Committees were compulsory in every Chinese province. One year later, the NPC praised the new Law as an important step to institutionalize the 'four democracies' (democratic election, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision). Repeating Jiang Zemin, NPC Standing Committee vice-chairman Ma Xianzhang stated

⁵⁷ Liu, A Harbinger of Democracy: Grassroots Elections in Rural China, op.cit., 52. However, Zhao was thinking of *administrative* villages (former production brigades comprising a couple of natural villages) here, while he was perfectly in favor of elected VCs in the *natural* villages (O'Brien/Li, Accommodation 'Democracy', op.cit., 471).

⁵⁸ O'Brien/Li, Accommodating 'Democracy', 473-475. For details of the debates during the 1987 NPC session see Bai, Yihua, *Zhongguo jiceng zhengquande gaige yu tansuo (Reform und Erforschung der lokalen Regierungsgewalt in China)*, Beijing 1995.

⁵⁹ Quoted: in Liu, Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China, op.cit., 21.

in February 2000 that direct village elections will contribute to further political reform and enable the people to pursue happiness and prosperity.⁶⁰ There was no more ideological bickering, but apparently a confident belief in the positive value of village democracy for the Party's local standing - although it must be left open if this change of mind was just reflecting a matter-of-fact recognition of the impossibility to turn back the wheel of history, or if it expressed the conviction that village elections had really helped the Party to regain political legitimacy at the grassroots.⁶¹ Surely, there is much evidence for the latter, even if the general picture is still quite mixed (see below). Today, village elections are regarded as well-established and important not only because of their remarkable institutionalization since 1987, but also because they have been successfully integrated into the concept of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', forming one of the central pillars of 'Socialist Democracy'.

Most important for the promotion and implementation of direct village elections have been energetic *top and mid-level public officials*, especially those working for the Ministry of Civil Affairs in Beijing and its branches in the provinces. They drafted the Organic Law and worked systematically for the establishment of guidelines and procedural regulations concerning its countrywide application. Most of them are pragmatists who are, as it seems, mainly concerned with rural stability and development and much less with the overall democratization of China's political system. Only very few of them have touched upon this issue at all. For example, Bai Yihua, a high-level MCA official, has stressed that village elections would be essential for building a democratic political system in the countryside and promoting the rule of law in China. A new generation of peasants would become strong agents of these values. By direct village democracy, the state would gain new legitimacy to maintain social stability, enforce family planning, and collect fees. Local elections would help to generate a new cohesiveness for rural China and, last not least, be conducive to economic development and more wealth for the peasants.⁶²

⁶⁰ Liu, Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China, op.cit., 21-22.

⁶¹ It has to be noted here that the 1998 revised law says in article 3 that the party branch is the village's 'leadership core' (*lingdao hexin*). Opponents of too far-reaching democratic practices in China's countryside might have felt assured of the Party's political predominance by this clause.

⁶² Bai, Yihua, Lun zhongguo nongcun cunmin zizhi (China's Rural Self-Government), in: *Zhengzhixue yanjiu*, January, 1997, 14-19; see also Bai, Yihua, *Zhongguo jiceng zhengquande gaige yu tansuo (Reform and Exploration of China's Base-Level Governance)*, Beijing 1995.

In much the same - at first sight even apologetically - way of reasoning, Zhan Chengfu, another Beijing-based MCA official, was striking a positive balance of the time that passed since the revised Organic Law of 1998 was promulgated. According to this author, the overall quality of village self-government has risen clearly, as the implementation process has been deepened and the legal framework become more internalized by the different political actors. At the same time, the quality of elected cadres has seen a take-off. The percentage of party membership has risen, while the average age of the cadres has fallen. They have developed a more positive profile as wealth creators and a higher educational background. Furthermore, village democracy has improved peasant-cadre relations and contributed to the rule of law and social stability in the countryside. All in all, direct elections have helped decisively to consolidate the Party's rural construction efforts and to build up 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

However, Zhan Chengfu also stated some pertinacious problems with the Organic Law: There were still serious implementation deficits, as in many villages local authorities disregarded the policy of genuine self-government. Many cadres at the township and county/town levels were still very reserved towards the idea of direct elections, insisting on the leading role of the village party branch in all local affairs. Consequently, in many villages, the relations between the local VC head and the party secretary were strained as both insisted on the ultimate supremacy to lead the village. Most important, violations of the Organic Law can still not be persecuted legally, since they are neither specified in the Organic Law itself nor in any other Chinese law. The author finally stated that much more research and experimentalism is required to fill some blank spaces in the Organic Law, especially with respect to lacking stipulations to determine the formal qualifications of candidates, to fight corruption, to recall elected cadres, to ensure quotas for women candidates, to clearly define the competences of village assemblies and village representative assemblies etc.⁶³

In fact, this is a very typical piece to illustrate an MCA official's perspective on village elections. These cadres are very positive on the Organic Law and apparently believe in the possibility of the concurrent improvement of rural development, genuine village democracy and effective party control over the local political process. However, given the fundamental conflict between "genuine" democracy and party control as it empirically manifests by the con-

⁶³ Zhan, Chengfu, Xin 'cunweihui zuzhifa' guanche shishi yi zhounian huimou (Looking Back at One Year Implementation Reality of the New Organic Law of Village Self-Government), in: *Jingmen zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Jingmen Vocational Technical College)*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2000, 5-10.

tending authorities of the village head and the village party secretary, MCA officials are usually unable to present a convincing solution here. In a very representative passage of his article, Zhan Chengfu confirms the paralyzing effect of this conflict in many villages. But all he can say is that elected village cadres should help the party branch to fulfill its leadership role, whereas the party branch has to acknowledge the legal position of the VC members. Both of them should serve the people and show mutual respect for their respective legitimacy, consult with the village (representative) assembly and never pretend that a minority can have the last word in local political matters.⁶⁴ From this perspective, village democracy depends on a political consensus that can only be achieved by the categorical orientation of all political actors at the collective good.

It is interesting at this point to look at the position of Wang Zhenyao, one of the most prominent MCA officials and promoter of direct village democracy who is also very known in the West because of numerous articles written in English. In a more recent contribution, Wang puts China's experiment with local direct elections in the context of China's democratic future. He first recalls the history of the Organic Law and its gradual implementation, underlining the positive effects this has had on the peasants political education, their tactical skills and their democratic consciousness. Even if the electoral process is still flawed today, the simple act of direct and competitive voting has changed the countryside completely, reducing peasant-cadre conflicts to a considerable degree and bringing back stability. Village democracy is a success because it is responsive to the peasant's concrete interests and at the same time provides legal arrangements to guarantee cadre accountability and procedural order. At the end, Wang Zhenyao pleaded for a change of China's political culture by learning from the experiences with village democracy. Political reform in present-day China is still very much influenced by the tradition of elites "taking care", i.e. dominating the people. In terms of political reform in present-day China, this tradition places special emphasis on the fight against corruption, but neglects integrity - a preference order that Wang Zhenyao thinks of as fallacious to spur democratization in China.⁶⁵

This is perhaps the most far-reaching criticism an MCA official can make of what is generally perceived as mainstream thinking within the upper party echelon. Taking it constructively, as is surely the author's intention, it means: Do not think of democracy (as institutionalized gov-

⁶⁴ Zhan, Chengfu, *op.cit.*, 10.

⁶⁵ Wang, Zhenyao, *Zhongguode cunmin zizhi yu minzhuhua fazhan daolu* (China's Village Self-Government and the Development Path of Democratization), in: *Zhanlüe yu guanli*, No. 2, 2000, 99-105.

ernment accountability and acknowledged legitimacy) from above, but from below - as the gradual empowerment of the people by rule-based governance and pragmatic problem-solving, not by "teaching" them how to practice democracy.

Turning to the discussion among *Chinese scholars*, the general attitude towards village elections is very positive. Takings sides with the instrumental approach of the MCA bureaucracy, many scholars praise them as an effective mechanism to achieve better village self-government, to educate the peasants to pursue their own good interests and to take over political responsibility for the good of their community, to help them to overcome old (i.e. backward) traditions and to push back manipulative local power-holders (especially clan organizations), to change power relations in a way that brings more legitimacy to both local office-holders and party rule, and to make the peasants state-loving citizens and democratic actors who will build a modern civil society in China and actively promote social stability. Negative aspects of village elections - e.g. the manipulation of the Organic Law by local officials, the rise of a new gentry of local entrepreneurs and their families, the renaissance of "feudal remnants" as clan organizations and clientelism - are not left out of the picture. However, they are discussed as temporary problems that will disappear in time or can be overcome by structural adjustments and reforms. In fact, the ideological debate in recent years among scholars has very much focused on the instrumental value of village elections for rural development and the strengthening of local party rule, sometimes assuming apologetic, if not propagandistic character.⁶⁶

Some scholars, however, are more critical of village elections. They outright question their value for stability, economic development and party legitimacy in the countryside. By drawing different conclusions from a very complex empirical setting, they challenge the proponents of village elections with quite the same arguments that have been brought forward by

⁶⁶ For a good overview of Chinese sources see Kelliher, *The Chinese Debate Over Village Self-Government*, op.cit.; more recent contributions to this mainstream current of the ideological debate are (among many others) e.g. Xin, Qiusui, *Cunmin zizhi yu woguo zhengzhi tizhi gaige* (Village Self-Government and China's Political System Reform), in: *Fujian Luntan*, July, 1997, 52-55; Jiang, Wanbang, *Lun nongcun jiceng minzhu zhengzhi jianshe* (The Construction of Village-Level Political Democracy), in: *Xueshujie*, No. 1, 1999, 77-80; Xu, Yong, *Liyi yu tizhi: minzhu xuanju beihoude bianshu fenxi* (Interest and System: An Analysis of the Variable behind Democratic Elections), in: *Huazhong shifan daxue xuebao* (*Journal of Central China University*), March, 1999, 1-9; Wu, Yi, *Zhidu yinru yu jingying zhudao: minzhu xuanju guize zai cunluo changyude yanyi* (System Introduction and Elite Guidance: The Evolution of the Principle of Democratic Elections in the Village Place), in: *Huazhong shifan daxue xuebao*, March, 1999, 10-17; Yang, Qunhong, *Zongzu shili dui nongcun jiceng zhengquan jianshede weihai ji fangfan cuoshi* (The Danger of Clan Power for the Construction of a Rural Base-Level Authority and Precautionary Measures), in: *Nandu xueyun* (*Academic forum of Nandu*), Vol. 20, No. 2, March, 2000, 67-68.

the opponents of the Organic Law at the party top in the 1980s and 1990s. As these authors see it, direct village elections have aggravated local tensions between elected village officials and party secretaries, by which political decision-making and implementation in the countryside has been hampered; the township governments must channel too much energy and money into efforts to overcome the political paralysis in many villages; village elections lead to the formation of new local power groups, if not a new gentry class of corrupt politicians, thereby quickly eroding party legitimacy; the guiding role of the Party in the villages is undermined by narrow-minded peasants who are unable to think of the common good and who use local elections to finally get rid of the Party. On a more theoretical level, these academics often insist on the existence of some important preconditions in the countryside before direct village elections should be implemented, most of all sufficient degrees of economic development, political institutionalization and peasant education. Besides this, direct voting in the villages does not necessarily set free spill-over effects up to the national level so that they could be regarded as the pacemakers of a gradual process of nation-wide democratization; there is no convincing empirical evidence to believe in such an automatism.

For example, Dang Guoyin, a rural specialist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, plainly rejects the 'democratization hypothesis'. In a programmatic article titled "Is 'rural self-government' the starting point of political democracy?", he reasoned by a brief account of modern Western and recent Chinese history that rural self-government can never lead to democracy if some important material, political and cultural factors are absent in the wider society. Quoting from Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Dang Guoyin especially pointed at the importance of the relationship between mobilization and political institutionalization for achieving peaceful democratic change. If the political system lacks proper institutionalization (on which Dang didn't qualify too much), extended participation leads to social disorder. Therefore, in a traditional and sub-institutionalized society like rural China, free elections would not end up in a stable democracy, because its fundamental principles - fair competition and campaigning and the free flow of information - would be compromised by the local gentry, i.e. rich and influential power-holders who can manipulate the electoral process to their own advantage. The institutional setting for peaceful democratization can only be delivered by the central state. As a matter of fact, village democracy can't be separated from national democracy, but is only one of its components. For Dang Guoyin it was no surprise that village elections were implemented much better in the prosperous coastal provinces than in the poor hinterland, were they were flawed and dominated by local interest

groups. As one of the key points of modernization theory, political institutionalization depends on economic development and social stratification, so that for Dang Guoyin competitive elections should only be executed in those villages and townships being well-off. Here, as the author pointed out in his final recommendations, direct voting should also be applied to determine the party leaders.⁶⁷

This is a very modernist way of thinking, of course. The author was worried about the negative impact local elites would have on rural stability, if they could play poor and ignorant peasants against the Party. Only party-led economic development in the villages could produce more educated and skilled peasants who would use their voting rights responsibly and be able to withstand corrupt local leaders. From that angle, direct village elections were premature in many parts of China, as it was a big mistake to believe (in the West) that democracy can quickly grow from the bottom up in modernizing societies.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Dang, Guoyin, 'Cunmin zizhi' shi minzhu zhengzhide qidian ma (Is 'Village Self-Government' the Starting-Point of Political Democracy?), in: *Zhanlüe yu guanli*, No. 1, 1999, 88-96. In the same direction argues Shen, Yansheng, *Cunzhengde xingshuai yu chongjian* (The Rise and Fall of Village Government and its Reconstruction), in: *Zhanlüe yu guanli*, No. 6, 1998, 1-34. For some more critical accounts of village elections see Yu, Hong et al., *Dangdai nongcun wu da shehui wenti* (*Five Big Problems of Contemporary Villages*), Nanchang 1995; Miao, Helin, *Nongcun jingshen wenming jianshe zhong zai yindao he jiaoyu nonmin* (The Focus of the Construction of a Spiritual Civilization in the Villages is on Guidance and Education of the Peasants), in: *Xuexi yanjiu cankao*, No. 6, 1997, 44-46.

⁶⁸ See also Dang, Guoyin, *Xiangcun zhengzhi fazhan tiaozhan chuantong lingdao yishi* (The Political Development in the Villages is Challenging the Traditional Awareness of Leadership), in: *Zhongguo shehui lingdao*, April, 2000, 14-17. As some authors pointed out in this context, to achieve the main goal of rural development, reconstruction of the Party's base-level administrative work and consolidation of the local party branches were more important for the time being than the deepening of electoral reforms; see e.g. Zhang, Zhiliang, *Qian fada diqu nongcun dangzuzhi jianshede diaocha yu sikao* (Investigation and Reflections on the Construction of the Party Organization in the Villages of Underdeveloped Regions), No. 1, 2000, 12-16. In a fine piece of pseudo-theoretical reasoning, Tang Xinglin and Ma Jun negated the possibility of a bottom-up democratization in China going beyond the village level for systemic reasons. Such a move would have to be part of a comprehensive adaptation process initiated by the center to enhance the system's overall stabilization and performance capabilities. The center takes each reform step on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis. In the Chinese case, the outcome of such an analysis would be negative with respect to further democratization, since this would reduce the center's (the Party's) control and therefore seriously compromise the system's above-mentioned capabilities. Only if the system's deficits (i.e. too much power at the center) have been overcome by a collective effort of the Party, the government and the people, will China achieve more political democratization. However, as the authors conclude, this process can only be gradual. The message of their article was clear and also made explicit in the authors' final passage: In authoritarian China, democratization is not imaginable as a process of bottom-up political emancipation from the Party as it is conceptualized in the West, but can only be initiated from above. See Tang, Xinglin/Ma Jun, *Zhongguo nongcun zhengzhi minzhu fazhande qianjing ji kunnan: zhidu jiaodude fenxi* (Perspectives and Problems of the Development of Political Democracy in China's Villages: A System-Based Analysis), in: *Zhengzhixue yanjiu*, No. 1, 1999, 48-56. Making use of the same arguments and vocabulary is Teng, Shihua, *Cunmin zizhi yu zhongguo minzhu zhengzhi fazhan* (Village Self-Government and China's Political Development), in: *Jingmen zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao*, Vol. 15, No. 1, January, 2000, 5-10. This author speaks of a constitutional crisis that would be triggered by the introduction of direct elections on the township or county levels, since such elections are not written into the Chinese constitution.

2. The empirical debate

As in the West, empirical research on village elections has taken steam in the PRC in recent years, too. However, there are some striking differences when it comes to a comparison with Western studies on the subject. Generally speaking, Chinese scholars do not work with "big" theoretical models that guide their research. Also, they do not elaborate much on their methodology (as do their compatriots working in the West and Hongkong, though) when diving into the field. Their approach is utmost pragmatist and output-oriented. They tend to focus on problems of electoral implementation or interest conflicts between different political actors by presenting a huge amount of details of the local situation and by relating many anecdotes of corrupt cadres, courageous peasants and political quarrelling between village and township governments. Usually, they finish their articles with practical recommendations for administrative measures to overcome the existing difficulties. They also may be arguing quite uncompromisingly for more political reforms in the countryside (as e.g. the introduction of direct elections for township governments). But they rarely bring their empirical results to a theoretical level and prefer to remain on the descriptive side. Also, they mostly abstain from connecting their empirical findings to more general remarks on the limits of party rule at the national level or the future of democracy in China (although some scholars can be very outspoken on these issues). Of course, as one can argue, this would be rather unwise to do given the authoritarian setting in which these scholars work. Still, one has to take seriously here the possibility of a very different concept of social science research in China.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ At the end of a recent Hongkong conference on rural self-government and village elections in the PRC, this difference became a very controversial discussion point between the Chinese participants and the few Western scholars who attended. The Chinese point of view (it we accept such a formula as a heuristic concept) has recently been defended against the so-called Western understanding of 'serious' social science research in an article by Deng Hongyan. Unlike Western scholars, so the author, who start with theory, Chinese scholars start with practice (*shijian*). Concerning village elections, they would look at the empirical facts this experiment produces and then try to discover the underlying law (*guilü*) of Chinese political practice therein. To make use of this law consciously would help to bring about smooth system reform in China. The Chinese approach focuses on the empirical experiences of the Chinese nation (*zhongguo minzu*) and helps to create a true theoretical system of Chinese political science (!). Moreover, the author warned against too easily drawing theoretical conclusions from empirical facts. For instance, this is very often done with respect to the political awareness of the peasants. They are too quickly disqualified for direct democracy or made responsible for major implementation problems of the Organic Law just because they live in backward economic and social (cultural) conditions. According to the author, extensive field work must be done before any kind of theory should be established. See Deng, Hongyan, Zhuoyan yu shenhua dui shiji wentide lilun sikao (Founding and Deepening the Theoretical Reflections on Practical Questions), in: *Jingmen zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Jingmen Vocational Technical College)*, Vol. 15, No. 1, January, 2000, 14-16. It is very interesting to note here the author's claim that such an inductive approach is typically Chinese in contrast to the (so-called) Western approach in social science research. Even if he understands his juxtaposition only heuristically, it remains to be seen what special kind of theoretical conclusions can really come out of the 'Chinese approach'. For the time

Scanning recent articles and papers presented in international conferences on village elections⁷⁰, most studies – as has already been said - deal with the *implementation quality of the electoral process*, analyzing its institutional deficiencies and the behavioral shortcomings of both voters and cadres. For example, Li Xiaoping and Lu Fuying found in their investigation of elections in one village in Zhejiang province held in early 1999 that many important stipulations of the Organic Law (concerning e.g. the setup of an electoral committee, voters' registration, the assurance of free and secret elections, the principle of 'one man, one vote' and the prohibition of any direct interference of the township government) were not properly implemented. According to the authors, most responsible for these flaws were legal gaps in the Organic Law, weak assistance from the township government, and lacking "democratic qualities" of the peasants who were just interested in their private gains and even ready to sell their votes. Consequently, they advised to strengthen the legal basis of village elections and to intensify programs on peasant education to make them understand better the significance and procedures of direct democracy. Also, government guidance should be optimized by more training of the township and village cadres to fully apply the Organic Law. Last not least, the authors stressed the necessity to teach the peasants how to become 'political men' (*zhengzhiren*), providing them with an awareness of subjectivism, fair competition, equality and a liberal spirit.⁷¹

In another empirical study of late 1998 surveying 19 villages in Zhejiang province, He Baogang was concentrating on the significance of four *factors influencing voters' choice in village elections*: the overall evaluation of the voting process by the peasants based on their past experiences; the expectations towards elected village officials; general economic conditions in the village; and the origin of the financial resources to carry out village elections. The author found that an absolute majority of voters extremely appreciated village elections, since they served their very interests. Also, only some 20 per cent of the respondents thought that clan organizations were of any importance in those elections. Moreover, villagers had a very clear understanding that their elected officials should work effectively for the village's economic development, be morally "clean" and politically apt to get swing votes. With respect to

being, I would like to stick to my observation that most articles on village elections and rural self-government are rather 'sub-theoretical' and much more concerned with practical advice for practical problems.

⁷⁰ An excellent overview of current Chinese empirical research on village elections and rural self-government give two volumes containing papers presented at the conference 'Zhongguo dalu cunji zuzhi jianshe (The Construction of China's Village Organisations)', held at the Chinese *University of Hongkong*, March 16-18, 2001.

⁷¹ Li, Xiaoping/Lu Fuying, *Cunweihui minzhu xuanju zhongde wuxu wenti fenxi (Analysis of Problems of Disorder in the Democratic Elections of the Village Committees)*, in: *Jingmen zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao*, Vol. 15, No. 2, March, 2000, 11-16.

the economy, He Baogang stated a rather complex relationship between the level of material development and elections: In poor villages it was difficult to find any candidates for taking over political responsibility, since there was no resource base to make use of for economic and political gains. In rich villages with a flourishing collective economy, however, elections were more established because incumbent village heads strove for democratic legitimacy to give them even more political space for allocating funds. In villages with a big private sector, the peasants were too busy with earning money to be seriously interested in elections. On the contrary, in those villages about to gain township status, elections had become a "hot issue", because peasants wanted a democratic government corresponding to the degree of marketization there village had achieved. Finally, the author stated that the more developed the village, the less influential was the clan factor in village elections. Interestingly, looking at the mounting problem of vote buying in the villages, the author proposed a system of government funding of elections as common in Western political systems. All in all, the author's perspective on village elections was very modernist. Still, he stuck to the above-mentioned descriptive level, combining prudent correlative analysis with practical advice.⁷²

Studies dealing with the *relationship between the elected village committees and their respective township governments* and between the village head and the village party secretary have been another important research focus for Chinese scholars in recent years. As above, the results found here resemble very much to what has been presented in Western publications on the subject. In general, the party branch and the township government still can control the villages fairly well - but the pressure on them to gain democratic legitimacy and to agree on their own direct election is rising. Reporting research in some villages of Fujian Province in mid-1997, Hu Rong stated that the village party branch is still more influential in village politics than the local VCs. The latter's power depends on their control over the collective economy and the possibility to use its resources for the villagers' benefit. Still, the party secretary

⁷² He, Baogang, Xiangcun xuanju shizheng yanjiude sigewenti jiqifenxi (Four Problems Concerning Empirical Research on Rural Elections and Their Analysis), in: *Zhejiang Social Sciences*, No. 1, January, 2000, 104-107. In another article based on the same survey in Zhejiang, He Baogang and Lang Youxing focus (among other issues) on the social profile of elected cadres in the villages. It becomes clear that there is a rising percentage of economic elites (managers, private entrepreneurs and successful shopkeepers) taking over power in the villages. They not only marginalize the old party guard, but also more and more challenge the township governments. If these 'new rich' (*xinfu*) and economic 'can-doers' (*jingji nengren*) become the pillars of rural self-government, then democracy will take strong roots in the countryside. However, so the author, this causes new problems of fair distribution and economic justice. See He, Baogang/Lang Youxing, Cunmin xuanju dui xiangcun quanli de yingxiang (The Influence of Village Elections on Rural Power), in: *Xianggang shehui kexue xuebao* (*Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*), No. 16, Spring, 2000, 99-124.

presides the village election committee that decides on the candidates qualifications to run for office. Although the party secretary in the investigated villages is elected democratically by all party members, the candidates running for this post are preselected by the township party branch. Also, the township government can exert some influence on the selection of candidates for VC seats by co-checking their formal qualifications. So there is much indirect intervention of the higher administrative levels in the village ballot, yet. However, as Hu Rong confirms in the same article, the mutual dependency of the township governments and the village committees can't be denied: Without the support of the other side, no effective governance on both levels is possible. Interestingly, after having insisted on a rather limited autonomy of the VCs in Fujian, the author finishes by defining the village committee as taking a middle position between what he calls primary (*chuji*) and secondary (*ciji*) social units (*shehui danwei*). This should indicate that today's VCs are more than parochial administrations and less than autonomous bodies, with just some political powers transcending the village boundaries. But they apparently move in the direction of autonomy.⁷³

Of course, these are just a few examples of the extensive empirical work on village elections and rural self-government that has been done and is under way in present-day China. However, the research questions and results presented here are quite representative for the overall empirical output of these studies. As mentioned above, many Chinese scholars have addressed these findings in more general contributions to present at least some theoretical conclusions and/or to propose new initiatives to push on the reform process in the villages. However, even here there is less theory than limited correlation analysis combined with practical advice.⁷⁴

⁷³ Hu, Rong, *Cunmin weiyuanhui de zizhi ji qi yu xiangzhen zhengfude guanxi* (The Autonomy of the Village Committees and Their Relations with the Township Governments), in: *Ershiyi jiji*, No. 50, December, 1998, 133-140. The dominating role of the Party in the process of village elections is also emphasized by Lang Youxing: First of all, there is no multi-party system in China; secondly the village party secretary is actively taking part in the electoral process by presiding the village electoral committee; and thirdly, elections make the cadres understand better the demands of the villagers, helping them to create a more confidential relationship with the peasants. See Lang, Youxing, *Xiangcun xuanju yanjiu santi* (Three Questions Concerning the Research on Rural Elections), in: *Zhejiang shehui kexue*, No. 1, January, 2000, 108-113, here 113. However, in the above-cited article co-written with He Baogang, the author states the declining power of the village party branch against the village committee. See He/Lang, *Cunmin xuanju dui xiangcun quanli de yingxiang*, op.cit., 106.

⁷⁴ A very good example is Xiao, Lihui, *Yingxiang cunmin toupiaode yinsude fenxi* (Analysis of Factors Influencing the Vote of the Peasants), in: *Shantou daxue xuebao* (*Shantou University Journal*), Vol. 15, No. 3, 1999, 27-34. Without referring to a special field study but generalizing from the field, the author enumerates organizational mobilization, cost-benefit calculations, efficiency orientation, idealistic thinking, education and sex, village income sources and the institutionalization of the electoral system as the decisive factors influencing the peasants' vote. In his conclusions, he just states that such an analysis can't be fully compared to Western research on voting behaviour, since there is no party system in China and the village officials are not on the government's payroll. Finally, he relativates his findings, saying that what he has found can only explain the determining factors of voter behaviour, but says nothing about the 'depth' of voting, i.e. the identification with or internalisation of participation as a political value.

One of the most frequent recommendations made by these authors is to extend direct elections to the township level. The structural conflict between the village and township governments caused by their contending political legitimacy is seen as the crucial factor hampering rural development. It is more important than the low "democratic quality" of the peasants, the influence of clan organizations or the negative impact of corrupt local cadres. The interventions of the township governments in village affairs have obstructed the positive achievements of direct elections and local self-government. So these actions have to stop, which means – next to letting the townships have more independent financial resources - to introduce direct elections at that level, too.⁷⁵

Other authors have pleaded for a new drive of legal reforms to specify the competences of the different institutions taking charge of village democracy, defining precisely the relationship between the villagers and their village committees, between the village committees and the township governments and between the party branches and the VCs.⁷⁶ Quite often, however, Chinese academics restrict themselves to very general remarks on the necessary conditions of better village self-government (e.g. strengthen party guidance, deepen electoral implementation, promote more political participation of the peasants) and frequently repeat the central stipulations of the revised Organic Law or relevant party guidelines for rural development.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ See e.g. Yang, Xuege, Xiangzhen he cun: dangdai zhongguo noncun minzhu jianshe zhongde boyi (Township and Village: The Tactical Game in the Democratic Construction of Contemporary China's Countryside), in: *Tianjin shehui kexue*, No. 4, 1999, 69-74; Wu, Licai, Minzhuhua yu zhongguo xiangcun shehui zhuanxing (Democratization and Social Change in Rural China), in: *Tianjin shehui kexue*, No. 4, 1999, 75-79. He, Xuefeng, Dangxian cunmin zizhi yanjiu zhong xuyao chengqingde ruogan wenti (Some Questions to be Made Clear in Contemporary Research on Village Self-Government), in: *Zhongguo noncun guan*, No. 2, 2000, 64-71.

⁷⁶ See eg. Kuai, Maoya/Lian Wei, Dui 'cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa' zhong san dui guanxi de tanxi (Study of Three Relationships within the Organic Law) in: *Xuzhou shifan daxue xuebao (Journal of Xuzhou Normal University)*, Vol. 25, No. 4, December, 1999, 131-133. For some "neutral" reflections on the future role of the Village Committees and the conditions of their further institutionalization see Yang, Chenghu, Cunmin weiyuanhui yu zhongguo nongcun shequ zhengzhi fazhan (The Village Committees and the Political Development of the Peasant Communities), in: *Shehui kexue yanjiu*, No. 5, 1997, 27-32.

⁷⁷ Yang, Yongzhi, Xiangcun xuanju: Yige zhide guanzhude huati (Rural Elections: A Topic Worth of Attention), in: *Lingdao kexue*, No. 3, 1999, 21-23; Xu, Xihua et al., Cunmin zizhi guifanhua wenti tanxi (Study of Problems Concerning the Standardization of Village Self-Government), in: *Xuehai*, No. 2, 2000, 110-112; Gu, Hangu/ Ye Yaopei, Muqian yingxiang cunmin zizhi zhiliangde jige yinsu tanxi (Study on Some Actual Factors Influencing Village Self-Government), in: *Shehui kexue*, No. 1, 2000, 64-67. He Xuefeng, a well-known scholar in the field, has elaborated on interesting institutional innovations for more efficient local self-government. In one article, he proposes the introduction of a Village Legislative Assembly (*cunmin yihuishi*) as a new consultative body in rural politics. It should comprise both elected and nominated delegates representing all relevant interests in the village and function as a new arbitrator between the state (i.e. the township governments) and the countryside. It would be an assembly not only composed of directly elected villagers, but also of delegates representing 'functional constituencies' or just influential interest groups, may be including even party branch personnel (this is not said explicitly). See He, Xuefeng, Guojia yu nongcun shehui hudongde lujing xuanze (Path Options for the Mutual Stimulation of State and Countryside), in: *Zhejiang shehui kexue*, No. 4, July, 1999, 96-100. In another piece, He invented a Village Political Assembly (*cunzheng weiyuanhui*) uniting the village party secretary and all elected members of the village committee. This body would be presided by a director whose nomination needs the support of the township government. It would be the highest

Many of these articles have concentrated on attempts to clear up the relationship between the party secretary and the village head, perhaps the most critical issue of direct village democracy. It is thrilling to follow the efforts of these authors to make compatible the power of guidance attributed to the Party with the democratic accountability and legitimacy of the Village Committees. Most of them try to establish a mutual dependency of the party secretary and the village head for promoting stability, development and better implementation of the Organic Law. Both have a basic responsibility to achieve common goals, nobody can claim to know about the "truth" or to be in a position of rightfully taking the ultimate decision on village policies.⁷⁸ One has to note here the earlier-mentioned fact that the Party has accepted semi-democratic elections of its village secretaries in some parts of the country (on an experimental basis) already.⁷⁹ It is therefore widely accepted that guidance is only possible if the party secretary has at least some democratic legitimization; only then can he expect to be able to assume the function of tutor or arbitrator in rural politics as imagined by those who believe in a "dual track" of political decision-making in the villages.

IV. Some Tentative Conclusions

Besides the fact of some obvious differences between Western and Chinese research on village elections in terms of theory, methodology and epistemological interest, the empirical findings on both sides are quite comparable. Chinese scholars report as much as their Western colleagues on a rising political awareness of the peasants and their sophistication to make use

body of political decision-making in the village. The Village Political Assembly would be able to bridge the differences between the elected VC and the village party secretary on the one hand and between the village and township governments on the other. See He, Xuefeng, Cunzheng weiyuanhui: cunji zuzhi zhidu chuanguoxinde yizhong guoduxing gouxiang (The Village Political Assembly: A Transitional Concept for Reforming the Village Organisation System), in: *Xinan shifan daxue xuebao*, No. 6, 1998, 1-6

⁷⁸However, these argumentative efforts are not convincing since there is always a last decision to be taken by somebody. The point is that the best way out of this theoretical and practical dilemma for most authors is some sort of consensual democracy in which both the village head and the party secretary try to reach common ground by mutually respecting their legal positions and political obligations. However, scholars more inclined to the principle of guidance than to an equal standing of the two sides stress the tutelage that the Party must execute in the process of constructing rural democracy. Then, of course, it is the village party branch that dominates the political decision-making. See e.g. Song, Lamei, Lun cundang zhibu zai cunmin zizhi zhongde zuoyong (The Role of the Village Party Branch in Village Self-Government), in: *Jiangnan luntan (Jiangnan Tribune)*, No. 1, 2000, 82-85. For the official definition of the party's task of guidance see *Cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa xuexi duben (The Study Guide on the Organic Law of the Village Committee)*, Beijing 1998.

⁷⁹The 'two-ballot system' (*liangpiao zhi*) as practiced in some parts of Shanxi strikes two different elections to choose the party secretary - one in which only party members can participate and another one for all villagers. However, the villagers' vote is not binding. In another system that has been applied in different parts of the country in recent years, the election of the party secretary is always held after the election of the Village Committee. The successful candidate for VC head is then nominated to run for the job of party secretary.

of existing laws and regulations to secure fair elections. They document the growing tensions between the VCs and the township governments and the tenacious conflicts between the village heads and the party secretaries on who has ultimate power in the villages. They also reflect on future developments and necessary reform steps to adjust the 'dual system' of electoral and party authority in rural China, mostly suggesting (not predicting, as Western studies like to do) direct elections on the township level and more democratic methods to choose the village party secretary.⁸⁰ However, research on local elections in China faces a very complex picture and much more field work is needed to make sense of what is happening in the countryside and to where rural self-government goes.

So it remains to be seen if China's experiment with direct elections on the village and - although just on an experimental basis so far - the township level has already implanted a true Trojan horse of democracy into the Communist Party's authoritarian regime. There is strong evidence for the politicization of China's peasants who openly challenge the cadre bureaucracy, because they feel to be democratically legitimated to fight for their interests and to disregard unjust official policies. Simultaneously, the procedural quality of village elections has risen considerably during the last decade, making ever more peasants take elections seriously and become actively engaged in them. The Party seems to be ready for an extension of direct elections to the township level and also for a democratic ballot for their most important control instrument in the villages - the party secretary. Also, there is an ongoing discussion among public officials and party leaders about the possibility of direct elections up to the county level. Needless to say that it wouldn't be logical thinking to claim that the structural constraints that have led to the introduction of experimental elections on the township level would just stop there instead of proceeding to the level of county and municipality.

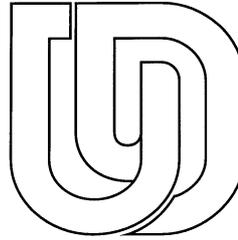
This leads to a fundamental question: Can there be a sub-national border-line of direct participation once the ballot box is on its way? Many officials in China seem to think this way. Still, China's leadership has set in motion a risky project of attaining regime legitimacy by allowing the majority of the country's population to practice "real" democracy at the village level. Moreover, the government is seriously promoting the Organic Law and works hard to rise the implementation quality of village elections. It will be intriguing to observe the development

⁸⁰ However, Chinese scholars seem to be more cautious than their Western counterparts to condemn the influence of clan organizations and powerful families on village elections and local political decision-making. These groups, as problematic as they usually are for fair elections, can at least play a positive role during the early institutionalization of the voting process in terms of voter mobilization and organization.

of the concurrent existence of democracy and authoritarianism in China in the coming years. Will it bring sustainable regime stability (as hoped by the Party) or just be a transitional step to more democratization of the PRC's political system? The least to say, local elections bring democratic training and idealism to China's people and therefore will most probably contribute to the foundation for a stable Chinese democracy in the future. The institutionalization of local direct democracy in Taiwan under authoritarian *Guomindang* rule since the early 1950s and its supporting effects for smooth political democratization in the mid-1980s might serve as a near-by historic example.



Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften
Institute for East Asian Studies



**Gerhard
Mercator
Universität
Duisburg**

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