

Conference on Village Self-Governance in China: An Evaluation of Its Progress

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The PRC government's attempts to introduce self-governance and democratic elections in China's some one million villages have received considerable international attention as they have often been equated with harbingers for democratisation from below. Yet given the vastness and the huge socio-economic differences within rural China the real consequences of more than twelve years of experiments at the grass-roots level are barely understood. The Conference on Village Self-Governance, the second organised by Emerson Niou, director of the Center for Chinese Electoral Studies, provided a welcomed opportunity for scholars and practitioners from China, the United States, Japan and Germany to assess the progress of rural political reforms. Furthermore, the conference — run in Chinese — aimed at bridging the gap between scholars writing for western/English-reading audiences and those local scholars who, due to language barriers as well as lack of access, mostly or exclusively publish in Chinese.

The two-day sessions started with detailed accounts of two surveys, one dealing with election modes (Emerson Niou), the other one focussing on decision-making authority in China's villages (Jean Oi, Stanford University). The crucial question of who has the final say (*shei shuo le suan*) in public matters of a village was also central to a number of other papers delivered by Liu Yawei (Carter Center), Hishida Masaharu (University of Shizuoka), Xu Fuqun (*Tribune of Villages and Townships*), Zhao Shukai (Center for Research and Development, State Council) and Zhou Lang (*People's Daily*). The majority of discussions concerned the role played by the village branch of the Chinese Communist Party and its secretary. While participants generally agreed that a full implementation of the Organic Law of Villagers Committees (revised in 1998) would strengthen these elected self-governance bodies in relation to party organisations, the fieldwork presented at the conference showed that implementation is far from universal and at times produces counter-intuitive outcomes.

Papers on the second day introduced a wider context to the topic by using historical comparison (Amy Gadsen, University of Pennsylvania, and Lu Mingjun, *People's Daily*) and by linking it to related topics in political science such as the questions of citizenship (Kevin O'Brien, UC Berkeley) and popular resistance (Li Lianjiang, Baptist University, Hongkong). The final session was concerned with legal aspects of village self-administration, including legislation (Tong Baogui, National People's Congress) and policy implementation (Björn Alpermann, University of Cologne). A concluding discussion pointed to the urgent need for further detailed fieldwork and surveys on a variety of subjects. This needs to be done before more definite conclusions can be drawn regarding the evolving changes of authority relationships at the grassroots level and the social, political and economic factors involved. A conference volume in Chinese will be published in 2001.

Björn Alpermann