

Comment:
Stability Through More Participation? – Local Direct Elections and Their Impact on Communist Rule in Present-Day China"

Lianjiang Li

Given China's huge population and its growing importance in the world, any political reform that may affect its long-term stability and its possible transition to democracy deserves the scrutiny of political scientists. The introduction of direct election in Chinese villages is one of such reforms. As Dr. Schubert points out, Chinese leaders seem to expect that this limited democratic reform will help improve governance and enhance stability in rural China, where over 70 percent of 1.3 billion Chinese reside. In addition, some reform-minded senior leaders also seem to expect that grassroots democracy may provide democratic training to the vast peasant population. In reality, of course, no reform only produces intended consequences. In the last 15 years, direct village elections have led to a wide variety of changes. In accordance, observers have suggested a number of arguments about the impact of this reform. Some analysts in the West, for instance, have argued that grassroots democracy may constitute a growth point of democratic values in the vast rural hinterland of the largest remaining communist country. Until today, however, expectations of and arguments about what village elections may induce have remained largely either policy intentions of the Chinese leadership or scholars' speculations about what may happen. Few empirical studies have been conducted to examine what has happened and what is actually going on. Dr. Schubert's research, jointly undertaken with Prof. Heberer, comes just in time. The topic he has chosen is of immense practical significance, and he is in an excellent position to bring a European perspective into the research on grassroots democracy in China. His insights are particularly refreshing and valuable in that much of the international scholarship on village elections has so far been done by scholars based or trained in the United States.

Both Dr. Schubert and Prof. Heberer have demonstrated beyond any doubt that they are absolutely capable of making outstanding contributions to the steadily growing research on grassroots democracy in China. They are very well prepared to move this research field forward. Their understanding of the current literature on direct elections in China is complete, thorough, and remarkably insightful. Indeed, I wish all authors under review had a chance to see how masterfully Dr. Schubert has summarized their empirical findings and how sharply he has laid out the underlying assumptions of their theoretical arguments in a recent paper discussing the current

state of research on village elections in the PRC.¹ Perhaps not all scholars would agree with Dr. Schubert's provocative synthesis that current studies tend to either assume that direct local elections and political stability are mutually exclusive or assume that more participation and stability are mutually supportive, but everybody will agree that this kind of theoretical synthesis is exactly what is needed to move the current research into a higher level of analysis. The three sets of questions that Dr. Schubert use to set up the background of his research project deserve close attention of all scholars interested in grassroots democracy in China. In fact, almost every single one of the questions on his list makes an excellent topic for a research article, and quite a few of them make appropriate topics for doctoral dissertations.

If Dr. Schubert's and Prof. Heberer's thorough knowledge of the current literature in English, Chinese, and German and their profound understanding of China form a solid base, then his excellent research design promises certain delivery of sound empirical findings and original theoretical analyses. Above all, Dr. Schubert shows in his article that he has flawless understanding of the logic of scientific discovery by proposing two opposing working hypotheses. His keen awareness of the importance of falsifiability in scientific research guarantees that he will enter the field with a fully open mind. He is unlikely to miss anything interesting and important. On the one hand, his erudite knowledge of the existing literature and his deep understanding about China prepare him to see what is important but under-studied. On the other hand, his open-mind will enable him to see what he has not expected.

Equally laudatory is Dr. Schubert's marvelous operationalization of his research hypotheses. It is not easy to come up with theoretically inspiring hypotheses, and it is even harder to properly operationalize them into empirically testable statements. The five sets of questions Dr. Schubert has raised are yet to be translated into more specific interview questions, but they have covered all of the important dimensions of this complicated research project. The first set of questions provides unmistakable signposts in designing appropriate interview questions that will generate reliable and valid assessments of the quality of village elections and of the immediate impact of these elections on various aspects of village governance. The second set of questions moves the analysis to a higher level of abstraction, where Dr. Schubert can explore whether village elections have begun to cultivate a contractual understanding of political power between villagers and elected village leaders. The third set of questions allows Dr. Schubert to explore how village elections may affect institutional changes at the village and township levels, and how such changes in turn may pave the way for institutional reforms at higher levels of government. The fourth set of questions promises fascinating analyses of the role conflicts of elected village leaders that may derive from the uneasy co-existence of direct local elections with the authoritarian regime. Finally, the fifth set of questions focuses on how improved participation in village-level politics may produce popular pressure for extending direct election to the township and county levels. Here Dr. Schubert will be able to assess the validity of the bottom-up democratization argument suggested by some US-based observers.

¹ Gunter Schubert, *Village Elections in the PRC. A Trojan Horse of Democracy*, Project Discussion Paper No. 19/2002, Institute for East Asian Studies, Gerhard-Mercator-University Duisburg, 2002.

Last, but not least, Dr. Schubert and Prof. Heberer have chosen a sound and feasible research methodology. He is wise in relying primarily on semi-structured and open-ended interviews, as there are just too many restrictions on doing surveys in rural China. Moreover, qualitative method allows the researcher to dig deeper into subjects' attitudes and values, and this is exactly what is needed to examine the impact of direct elections on political orientations of villagers, elected village leaders, as well as township government officials. His choice of field-sites (fn. 15) makes sound theoretical sense, and I understand that he has secured reliable and effective collaborators at each field-site.

To conclude, I find Dr. Schubert's and Prof. Heberer's research project exceptionally well-designed and extremely promising. Given his thorough knowledge of the existing literature, his profound understanding of China, and his strong theoretical background, I am confident that both scholars will bring this project to a very successful completion. With some good luck in the field, this project has the potential to produce findings of considerable theoretical significance. I look forward to reading Dr. Schubert's and Prof. Heberer's findings from this carefully designed project.