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Village Democracy and Its Limits

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Summary

This article examines democratic elections and governance in rural China – a mixed bag of results. On the one hand, village elections have become a normal feature of grass-roots political life. Rural people expect to be able to elect their leaders and to replace them in the next round of elections, or in between, if they turn out to be corrupt or abusive. This constitutes a truly significant step forward in China's quest for a more accountable political system. On the other hand, however, there is a good deal of evidence that this outcome applies only to a subset of villages. In other places, power holders, such as the townships and the village party branches, hold sway to a greater or lesser extent. In terms of governance, the goal of financial transparency, a matter of great concern to ordinary villagers, is often not fully attained. Most importantly, village democracy functions within an authoritarian environment which greatly limits its impact.

In recent years, China has not made much progress toward democratization. If anything, the country's new leaders, installed three years ago, seem determined to maintain tight authoritarian rule while they seek to tackle the country's enormous social problems. In their view, democracy understood as competitive elections is something for which the country is not ready and will not be ready for another generation or two. For those who hope for eventual democratization, China's competitive village elections represent the major positive indicator that even if full-scale democracy is not in prospect in the foreseeable future, small steps in that direction can be taken. This makes an assessment of village democracy a significant task. But at the same time, given the deep reluctance of China's rulers to take even the most obvious next steps, e.g., to expand direct, competitive elections to the next higher administrative level, namely that of the towns and townships, it behooves the analyst to refrain from treating village democracy in teleological terms, i.e. to view it as a harbinger of future democratizing changes. After all, many years have elapsed since the passage of the trial Law on the Organization of Village Committees in November 1987 – the final version was adopted in 1998 – and except for experimental direct township elections, no significant further expansion of rural democracy has taken place.

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Given their authoritarian inclinations, why did China's leaders embrace the idea of democratic election at the village level in the first place? Their hope was that this step would reduce tensions between cadres and peasants, tensions that had become more and more serious in the wake of the decollectivization of agriculture in the early 1980s. One source of these tensions was that once land reverted to control by families, extracting funds from households became much more difficult, provoking widespread conflict. Thus, key members of the central leadership, and especially the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which has responsibility for basic-level governance, wanted to give villagers more power vis-à-vis their leaders in the hope that this would make the latter more accountable and hence reduce conflict and promote stability. But at the same time, they also needed village leaders to be responsible for implementing policies and programs handed down from above, even if these ran counter to villager preference. Hence, they severely circumscribed the authority of the village committees.

This essay focuses not on the promise of village democracy but on the realities, that is, on how elections and democratic governance actually function. This is a formidable task. There are about 740,000 village committees distributed across China's enormously complex and varied rural landscape. Rural society is characterized by severe inequality with respect to incomes. Rich, industrialized villages in the coastal provinces and around major cities in the interior contrast sharply to "empty-shell" villages in areas where there are few developmental opportunities.

Assessment of the state of the countryside is also complicated by the fact that rural China is changing rapidly. For instance, as part of the Western Development Program, massive road construction and other investments have begun significantly to alter rural life in the hinterland. Rural protest, formerly about financial burdens, but now increasingly about pollution and land confiscation, has become a major factor in rural political life. Even the basic political institutions in the countryside are in a state of flux. The fate of the townships, the lowest level of state power, is a matter of heated debate among Chinese academics. Should they be maintained, and if so, in what form? Or should they be abolished altogether, thereby eliminating the administrative link between counties and villages? One reason for this debate is that the recent abolition of fees and most taxes, including the land tax, has greatly jeopardized the resource base of townships as well as village governments. Given the complexity and fluidity of the rural situation, generalizations are at best an uncertain enterprise and findings have to be taken with a grain of salt.

This caveat notwithstanding, this article argues that even when village elections work well, the power of elected village committees is limited because they necessarily function within an authoritarian political environment that is not structured to respond to the demands of constituents. Solutions to problems of the greatest concern that face rural China are largely beyond the capacity of village committees to solve. For instance, the onerous tax-and-fee burdens that caused much social protest in the

1990s and into the 21st century have now been alleviated by the elimination of fees and major taxes, but this was not due to efforts made by elected village committees.[1] Rather this beneficial change was made by the new leaders in Beijing, probably because they were worried about increasing rural unrest. Similarly, democratic governance isn't helping farmers much in defending their rights against widespread requisitioning (*zhengdi*) of collectively-owned land for development, for which farmers are often fobbed off with a pittance even as local governments profit handsomely. Indeed, as will be noted in the last section of the paper, bottom-up pressure for new organizations that might better defend peasants' interests, such as peasant associations, indicates a felt need to bypass elected village committees. This is not to say that elections and democratic governance are not important, but that they need to be put into perspective.

Elections

Broadly speaking, what do villagers want from democratic elections? First, they want leaders whom they trust, whom they perceive as fair, and especially, who are capable and can lead them to prosperity. Villagers prefer leaders who have entrepreneurial skills and who have connections outside the village that could secure benefits, such as investments. Most importantly, villagers want leaders who are not corrupt. Electing a wealthy person to office provides some assurance that he won't feel the need to siphon off funds for himself. (At the same time, there appears to be a certain degree of tolerance regarding cadres who take more than their share as long as it isn't seen as excessive and provided that the village benefits.) On the negative side, they want to be able to take advantage of the recall provision of the Law on the Village Committees to oust village tyrants, that is, highly corrupt, abusive, and violent bosses. And, villagers want leaders who can defend their interests against the demands of higher authorities, especially those of the townships and towns.

Fair, open, and competitive elections are a prerequisite for meeting these expectations to a greater or lesser degree. The openness of the nominations process is a critical ingredient in the electoral process. The Law stipulates that neither the township Party committee nor the village Party branch, nor any other organization, may interfere in the nomination process. Anyone is supposed to be able to run for office provided he/she obtains the requisite number of signatures. The Law also requires secret ballots and the public counting of votes. It is worth adding that strong international interest in the elections has led the European Union, the US-based Carter Center, the Republican Institute, and other organizations to run training programs for local officials on electoral procedures in cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA).

[1] For background, see Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

To what extent do elections in fact exemplify the official criteria? To begin with, elections have been held in the vast majority of villages (82% according to a survey conducted in 2002).[2] Many villages have by now gone through three, four or even more electoral rounds for the three-year terms of village committees (VCs). Undoubtedly, the process has become institutionalized in most villages. Competitive elections have become an important part of village life, arousing much interest and excitement. I witnessed the process in two villages in Shuangliao city, Jilin province, in June 2004, and was impressed by the intensity with which crowds of villagers watched the counting of the ballots. Given the normally rather dull lives of peasants, the horse-race aspect of competitive elections is an attention-getting innovation. In one of these villages, a poster read: "Take advantage of your sacred right to vote." People are becoming accustomed to the idea that they have a voice and can choose their leaders, and that they have the right to remove bad or corrupt cadres.[3]

Surveys also indicate that over the years, local officials have increasingly complied with the formal rules. The proportion of elections with more than one candidate for the VC chair rose significantly. Professor Tianjian Shi's nationwide sample surveys of villager opinions found that in 1993, 53% of the villagers polled reported that in their villages, more than one candidate ran for office, whereas in 2002, the percentage had risen to 70.[4] Another researcher, John Kennedy, found, however, that these improvements were often due to intense pressure from above. When the central and provincial authorities make elections and village democracy a priority, local officials tend to respond because adherence to official standards on the conduct of elections will be monitored and will be reflected in their job evaluations. Local officials, in other words, have not made a commitment to democratic procedures. Kennedy compared two rounds of elections in 18 villages in three Shaanxi counties held in 2000 and 2004. In 2000, revenue collection and birth control took priority over village democracy, resulting in lower degrees of compliance with the election rules. But four years later, financial-burden reduction and the quality of village elections took higher priority, which was reflected in improvements in the quality of the elections, albeit variable ones.[5]

At the same time, there is much evidence that suggests that township Party and government agencies as well as village Party branches are continuing to constrain the choices that ordinary residents can make. Tianjian Shi's 2002 survey found that when respondents were asked to compare compliance in their villages with official

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[2] Tianjian Shi, "Semi-Competitive Election: Evidence from Surveys," presentation made at the US State Department in 2005.

[3] Li Lianjiang, "The Empowering Effect of Village Elections in China," *Asian Survey*, vol. 43, no. 4, July-August 2003, pp. 648-62.

[4] Shi, "Semi-Competitive Election...," op. cit.

[5] John J. Kennedy, "The Implementation of Village Elections and Tax-for-fee Reform in Rural Northwestern China," unpublished paper given at the Conference on Grassroots Political Power in China, Harvard University, October 29-31, 2004.

standards, nearly a quarter reported that in their villages, the members of the "election leadership groups," which strongly influence nominations, were chosen by the Party branch, the township, or by the incumbent VC. 28.9% reported that nominations were decided by the Party branch, the township, through "negotiations among different groups," and by the election leadership group, rather than by the "masses." 29% of the respondents voted for the incumbent, 9.1% for the candidate supported by the Party branch, and 5% for the candidate supported by the township. Overall, more than two thirds of Shi's respondents reported flaws in the electoral process. Other researchers agree that in a substantial proportion of villages, the electoral process is by no means as free as is desirable, and that there are plenty of opportunities for local elites to manipulate the process.[6]

It could be argued that while the procedures are flawed, they nonetheless indicate that democratic elections have made great progress in rural China. This is true but neglects the structure of political power in rural China. Violations of the election rules occur because township Party committees and governments have a vital interest in the outcome of village elections. Townships are the lowest level of state power – the village committee is legally a mass organization responsible for implementation of numerous tasks handed down from above, such as development plans, tax collection, promotion of education, family planning, etc. Its performance in meeting targets is evaluated by its superiors, with points being awarded for the completion of assignments. Most of its assignments can only be accomplished with the cooperation of village leaders. The township cadres are therefore strongly motivated to ensure that they have reliable "legs" to stand on in their villages. It is not surprising that they seek to intervene and manipulate the elections, or, between elections, seek the dismissal of recalcitrant village chairmen.

For their part, village leaders come under pressure from their constituents to defend village interests against township demands. The author saw an example of this in Jilin mentioned earlier. Before the actual casting of ballots, each of the four candidates, one of whom was the incumbent, briefly presented their plans and qualifications. When the incumbent started to speak, he was interrupted by a member of the audience who jumped up on the speakers' platform, telling the incumbent that he wouldn't vote for him again if he didn't succeed in persuading the township authorities not to stop monopolizing the sale of farmers' produce, thereby reducing their incomes. This was a demand that the village chairman defend the "legitimate rights and interests" of the peasants. In this particular case, these interests were being violated by the township leaders, who had substituted local policies (*tu zhengce*) for national rules. This incident supports a finding by Li Lianjiang that when villagers felt that an election had been properly conducted, they were more likely to ask their leaders to intercede with the townships when a local policy violated national regula-

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6 Shi, "Semi-Competitive Election...," op. cit. For more election data, see Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, forthcoming, pp. 74-77.

tions.[7] Ordinary people in rural China – and also in the cities – place much greater trust in their national leaders, whom they perceive as supporting them, rather than in local officials, whom they perceive as corrupt and abusive. As a popular verse suggests: "At the Center the sky is blue; in the provinces clouds are gathering; in the counties there is flooding; in the townships people are drowning and running for their lives."[8]

Governance

The preceding section suggests that one outcome of fair elections is that the VCs are subject to popular pressure to defend village interests against higher-level officials. How this is played out in practice, i.e., what the patterns of bargaining are between village leaders and township officials, is a topic about which little is known. Citing interviews, Linda Jakobsen suggests that "... elected village leaders ... are less apt to accept demands for extra levies or taxes from bullying township officials." They "have a greater degree of independence vis-à-vis township officials and have no need to 'bow and scrape'" before them. [9] In contrast, a Chinese analyst writing in 2003 concluded that since the state put the village committee system in place, the VCs were essentially tools of the townships and couldn't speak for the peasants.[10]

Probably one way in which village chairmen can pressure the township is by conjuring up the specter of instability unless certain township demands, e.g., for funds, are reduced or dropped. Maintenance of stability is a core task of local officials. Their performance evaluations suffer when villagers stage demonstrations, engage in rioting, or when they repeatedly petition higher levels, from county to Beijing, under the state's "letters and visits" system to demand local compliance with national rules, or when they succeed in contacting journalists to expose official abuses. It is thus in the interest of local officials to suppress information about discontent and prevent it from reaching higher levels, just as it is in their interest to prevent villagers from learning about national regulations. Much depends on informal factors, especially the personal relations between village leaders and their township counterparts. But whatever the influence that village leaders have with the townships, their relations have not translated into systemic capacities. As Li Lianjiang notes, free village

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[7] Li, "Empowering Effect...," op. cit; see also Li's "Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China," *China Information*, vol. XV, no. 2, 2002, pp. 1-19.

[8] Yang Hao, "Nongmin de huhan" (Cries of the Peasants), *Dangdai*, no. 6, 1999, pp. 63-90.

[9] Linda Jakobsen, "Local Governance: Village and Township Direct Elections," in Jude Howell, ed., *Governance in China*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, p. 106.

[10] See Yu Jianrong, 2003. "Nongmin you zuzhi kangzheng jiqi zhengzhi fengxian"– Hunan sheng H xian diaocha" (Peasants' Organized Resistance and Its Political Risks – Investigation of Hunan's H county), *Zhanlue yu Guanli*, no. 3, pp. 1-16. Yu investigated 20 townships in H county over a three-year period, heading a study team from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

elections don't open institutional channels through which villagers can affect policy formulation."[11]

Village committees and the village assembly to which they report are empowered to take charge of village-level affairs, such as the allocation of village funds, e.g., income from collective property, fund-raising for projects such as schools or road repair, compensation for cadres, the distribution of taxes and fees among households, administration of family planning quotas, etc. All these matters are of great concern to residents. In his national survey in 2002, Tianjian Shi questioned villagers whose interests were served by elected officials. 29% of respondents referred to the interests of the village, 22% to the interests of their clan; 9.1% to the interests of higher-level authorities, and 5% to the interests of the small villager group to which they belonged.

For ordinary villagers, transparency of financial transactions (*cunwu gongkai*) is a major concern. Many are deeply suspicious about the uses to which village funds are put, fearing that money is spent on "wining and dining" or is diverted to corrupt use. The capacity to monitor finances is a major component of democratic village government. One study, for example, found that elections enabled villagers to monitor whether cadres overestimated household incomes in order to increase their tax load.[12] But transparency continues to be a problem. A contributor to the 2005 annual "Blue Book on Chinese Society" notes that "in some localities" accounts are not made public in a timely manner but *post facto*, thereby depriving villagers of an opportunity for input. Moreover, when accounts are posted, they are incomplete and vague. Some VCs fail to report on highly sensitive financial issues, such as on earnings from contracts and especially from sales of land to developers. This author concludes that the "right to know (*zhiqingquan*) is not put into practice," eliciting villager dissatisfaction, which in turn leads to petitioning of higher authorities.[13] In some provinces, e.g., Fujian, experiments with "supervisory committees" have been launched to tackle this problem.

The issue of transparency suggests that the ability of constituents to limit the discretion of VC cadres is often severely circumscribed. Moreover, in rich villages, power may be in the hands of an interlocking elite that has close ties with the townships and that controls and manages the business enterprises of the village. My visit to a rich suburban village in Beijing in June 2004 conveyed the impression that an elite consisting of the VC chairman, the Party secretary, and the head of the economic commission were running things. In such cases, paternalistic rule may well result in ordinary villagers benefiting from the wealth that is being generated. Villages are

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11 Li, "Empowering Effect...," op. cit.

12 John Kennedy, "The implementation of village elections...," op. cit.

13 Li Ping, "2004 Nian Zhongguo Nongmin," (The Chinese Peasant in 2004), *2005 nian: Zhongguo Shehui Xingshi fensi yu yuci* (Analysis and Forecasts of the State of Chinese Society) (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2005), p. 323.

under the control of political bosses – a phenomenon not unheard of in democratic America – who essentially disenfranchise ordinary residents. Their power may be exercised in a paternalistic and benevolent manner, but also in brutal and repressive ways. In the latter cases, resort to violence, including the use of hired thugs by local officials, is not rare.

By the same token, however, there are also VC leaders who defend village interests by tolerating, sponsoring, or even leading demonstrations or collective petitioning. In 1999, the principle of open nominations was a matter of high-level priority, resulting in the election of many leaders of collective protests. In October 1999, two elected village cadres in Henan reportedly led an anti-tax demonstration at their township Party-government compound.[14] In Shandong, VC cadres organized a large number of protests against townships, prompting the provincial Party organization department to warn in an internal circular that elections had caused "widespread chaos." In late 1999, four elected protest leaders in Shandong were reportedly arrested.[15] If VC leaders turn into organizers of protests, China's rulers might well reconsider their commitment to village democracy.

Party Branches and Village Committees

There is an inherent conflict between these two institutions. The head of the village enjoys greater legitimacy because he is popularly elected, whereas the Party secretary is essentially appointed from above.[16] Traditionally, the Party secretary was the *yibashou*, the first-in-command of village affairs. The elections pose a challenge to his authority. He has a strong incentive to try to control both the elections and the VC's activities. The Law does specify that the Party branch and its secretary should play the leading role but it is vague on what this actually entails. When respondents to Shi's 2002 survey were asked about who makes important decisions, 25% stated the Party; 23% the VC; and 20% thought decisions were made jointly.[17]

Concrete jurisdictional conflicts have arisen, e.g., over who controls collective assets. In 2001, 57 village chairmen from Shandong signed a letter to the central government saying that they were resigning because Party secretaries had prevented them from carrying out their duties by failing to relinquish the village seal or by denying them access to records. One was "brutally beaten up" by the Party secretary's associates for complaining to county authorities.[18] The township leaders often prefer to work through the Party secretary, because under the rules of Party disci-

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14 *Stratfor Report*, www.stratfor.com, November 2, 1999.

15 Information provided by Li Lianjiang. See Bernstein and Lu, *Taxation*, p. 151

16 For an analysis of this issue, see Guo Zhenglin with T. Bernstein, "The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: the relations between village committees and the Party branches," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 13, no. 39, May 2004, pp. 257-75.

17 Shi, "Semi-Competitive Elections..."

18 Jakobsen, "Local Governance," p. 107.

pline, the relations between the township Party committees and the Party branch are those of a superior to a subordinate. In contrast, the relations between the township government and the VCs are those of "guidance" (*zhidao*), not leadership (*lingdao*), meaning that the township cadres cannot simply issue orders to the chairman.

One approach to the problem of "two suns in the sky" sanctioned by the Central Committee's Organization Department and practiced in some provinces aims at merging the posts of Party secretary and VC chair. During a VC election, the Party secretary runs for VC office. If he doesn't win, he is replaced by someone in whom villagers have greater confidence as demonstrated in a kind of open primary election, and who will eventually win. Conversely, a VC chair who is not already a Party member will be recruited into the CCP and eventually promoted to the secretarial post. This arrangement saves the village money, but at the same time is likely to impair the autonomy of the VC chairman. The Party secretary, after all, is an agent of the Party, and as VC chief, should conflicts of interest arise, he would have to balance pressure from the constituents with pressure from above.

As rural conflicts over such issues as polluting industries become more acute, new possibilities have arisen of cooperation between the Party branches and village committees on matters of urgent common interest. Such cases have occurred in villages along tributaries of the Yangtze River, where the mining industry had caused severe damage to crops and the health of villagers. Unable to secure any help from county or provincial authorities, villagers, with the implicit and even explicit support of both Party and VC cadres, demonstrated and sought forcibly to close down offending mines. In one location, 30 village leaders combined into an unauthorized association to press their claims.[19] This instance of horizontal collective action involving both "suns" may be the harbinger of an emerging pattern of cadre-led conflict with local authorities.

Resources

As the rural scholar Xu Yong points out, "democracy without funds is an empty shell."[20] Except for villages whose VCs receive a share of the profits of collectively owned non-agricultural enterprises, funding of village operations has recently become an even more acute problem than in the past, because of the abolition of local fees and of major state taxes. These reforms, eminently helpful to China's farmers, have left a major hole in local budgets that threatens the most basic administrative functions. Before the tax and fee reforms, both the village and the townships were partially funded out of peasant levies that were to pay for essential public goods. The portion that accrued to the village, "the collective retention" (*jiti tiliu*), paid for

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19 *Washington Post Foreign Service*, September 12, 2005.

20 See Xu Yong, "Xiangcun zhili jigou gaige de zouxiang" (The Course of Reforming Rural Governing Organs), *Zhanlue yu Guanli*, no. 4, 2003, pp. 90- 97.

collective investments, welfare expenses and compensation for cadres. But, depending on the village's resource base, there often were no funds to pay for developmental projects, and these had to be forcibly extracted from the peasants in the form of an array of illegal fees and exactions. The end of these income streams plunged both townships and villagers in poorer areas into severe financial straits compounded by high rates of past indebtedness.

Several years ago, the central government began allocating new funds to offset losses resulting from tax and fee reform and especially to fund rural education, which had been a major source of financial burdens. This represents a major initiative. It is recognition, as a Chinese scholar put it, that "In the past, the state took much from the countryside; now, it should give more and take less" (*zijin qu duo yu xiao; duo yu xiao qu*), a reference to the long era of pro-urban-industrial exploitation of the agricultural sector that began with the First Five-Year Plan in 1953.[21] Villages are now supposed to receive subsidies with which to compensate cadres and maintain basic services. Village representative assemblies are also authorized to raise funds from villagers for the provision of essential public goods. It is not as yet clear how this new system will work out, e.g., whether centrally allocated funds will actually reach villages.

Clans

Finally, mention must be made of the role in elections and governance of lineage groups or clans, which since the reform era have revived and are once again sources of power and authority. As noted above, 20% of Tianjian Shi's respondents thought that their village leaders acted in the interest of their clans. Lily Tsai, a scholar at MIT who interviewed villagers in four provinces, has put forth a provocative thesis, namely that VCs work well when they have the backing of clans, because peasants trust such natural social organizations. In villages in which one clan was dominant, she found, the VC did much better in the provision of public goods – schools, roads, irrigation facilities – than did VCs in villages without clans or villages in which different clans were competing with one another. This finding, she notes, is valid when controlling for differences in incomes, since richer villages are more likely to supply greater quantities of public goods. The logic in this is that some version of beneficial governance can take root more easily when it resonates with local values, traditions, and social structures.[22]

This constructive view of the role of clans contrasts sharply with the official view, which sees them as feudal relics, as illegitimate, and as dangerous to the new institu-

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21 Ma Hong et al., eds. (2003), *2003-ban Zhongguo Fazhan Yanjiu* (China Development Studies, 2003 edition), Beijing: Zhongguo Fazhan Chubanshe, p. 533

22 Lily Tsai, "The Struggle for Rural Public Goods Provision: Informal Institutions and Accountability in Rural China," paper presented at the Conference on Grassroots Political Reform in China, October 29-31, 2004.

tions. One Chinese scholar complained that some elections are ostensibly democratic but are in fact usurped by clans. Together with other "evil forces," clans have seized power in many a village. Yu cites an instance in which the Li clan established control over rival clans and used its control over the VC illegally to acquire weapons, ostensibly in self-defense, but actually in order to engage in clan feuds (*xiedou*). In one case, a clan openly declared that it aimed to dominate. It used a clan gathering to nominate the village chairman.[23] This suggests that while villages dominated by one clan may do better in serving the inhabitants, clan control of VCs is not necessarily democratic. After all, clans and lineages are organized hierarchically and controlled by elders who may or may not subscribe to democratic principles.

Land Requisitioning and Village Committees

As high-speed development engulfs China, the demand for rural land on which to build industrial enterprises and urban-style housing has mushroomed. Rapid development is now taking place not just in the eastern regions, but has reached the rural interior as well, especially areas surrounding major cities. As of July 2004, "there were 6,866 development zones in the country with a planned land use of 38,600 square kilometers."[24] Demand for land far exceeds supply. Developers are able to pay enormous sums by village standards for land (including arable land). Because all three levels of rural government (VC, township, and county) are desperate for new sources of revenue, the prospect of selling – or rather, leasing – land to developers is extremely attractive to them.

Powerful forces of local governments and developers are thus arrayed against farmers who have little or no bargaining power. The democratically elected VCs ought, in principle, to defend the interests of farmers in the requisitioning process. Some VCs no doubt do the best they can for farmers, but frequently, the temptation to collude with township and county officials and developers overwhelms them, removing one potential barrier to the victimization of China's farmers. As *China Daily* put it, village committees, the *de facto* owners of the land, may "force" farmers to agree to transfer their contractual land rights on highly unfavorable terms.[25]

A widely publicized case illustrates the issue. In Sanchawan village, Yulin city, Shaanxi province, officials seized 1,670 acres of peasant land as part of a development zone. They paid farmers 480 Yuan per mu, which they then sold to developers for about fifty times this amount. The head of the Village Committee initially opposed the sale but then switched to the development side, reportedly after landing a

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[23] Yu Jianrong, "Nongcun heie shili he jiceng zhengquan tuihua – Xiangnan diaocha (Black and Evil Forces and the Retreat of Basic-level Political Power – an investigation in Southern Hunan), *Zhanlue yu Guanli*, no. 5, 2003, pp. 1-14.

[24] www.caijing.com.cn/english/2004/041101new_policy.htm, accessed November 8, 2004.

[25] *China Daily*, November 24, 2003.

job as a construction boss in the development zone. Peasants were extremely angry. Their normal livelihood was being jeopardized and they had been fobbed off with a tiny fraction of the market value of their land. A two-year struggle began in late 2002. Peasants resisted the taking over of their land by staging prolonged blockades, sit-ins, and organizing groups to petition the Ministry of Land Resources in Beijing. All these efforts were fruitless and were accompanied by clashes with the police. An official told women demonstrators: "So you dirt-poor trash think you can oppose the city government? You don't have a chance in hell." A veteran Maoist named Liu Zhandou, meaning "Liu the fighter," led farmers to petition in Beijing but the group's petition was sent back to the very officials against whom the grievance had been brought, a not uncommon practice. Farmers thereupon refused to plant crops on their remaining plots, a provocation since officials are held responsible if grain isn't grown. Farmers occupied the village government office. They were then given 985 yuan for each mu of land, which they saw as a bribe and they still refused to leave. On October 4, 2004, police staged a massive, violent crackdown. The ringleaders were savagely beaten and sentenced to 3 to 15 years' imprisonment.[26]

This case illustrates the viciousness of the conflict between peasants and officials over land sales, which have now become the most serious source of protest and resistance since the ebbing of protest over financial burdens.[27] Since farmers don't own the land, they are legally entitled only to payment for the value of their crops for up to 30 years. But as of 2004, farmers were owed almost ten billion yuan for land compensation and relocation fees.[28] The Ministry of Land Resources reported that in 2003, over 140,000 offenses related to land management had been uncovered – a 12% increase. Estimates of the number of farmers who have lost their land range from 40 to 70 million. While a proportion of them find non-agricultural employment, a huge landless proletariat is being created.[29] The central Party-government leaders are taking steps to protect farmers from rampant exploitation, but there is a lag in the establishment of an effective regulatory regime and of enforcement of existing and new rules. Above all, what is needed is the intervention of impartial third parties that can subject competing claims to compulsory arbitration.

As rural grievances stemming from official abuses intensified in the last decade or so, villagers sought new ways to defend themselves. When tax-and fee abuses were the major cause of anger and resistance, individuals in provinces such as Hunan became active on peasants' behalf, becoming known as "peasant heroes," "burden-reduction representatives," "collective-petitioning representatives" (*jiti shangfang daibiao*), or "spokespersons for peasant interests" (*nongmin liyi yanren*). These

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26 This case was reported at length in the *New York Times*, December 8, 2004 and January 22, 2005.

27 Interview with a senior Chinese scholar, New York, May 2005.

28 www.chinaembassy.org.in/eng/zgbd/t118478.htm, accessed January 5, 2005.

29 www.china.org, March 16, 2004, reported by www.chinaelections.org/en, March 17, 2004.

activists sometimes formed burden-reduction groups or committees. As the internal edition of a Chinese journal observed,

> In recent years, in some villages where cadre-mass relations are tense, "peasant leaders" have appeared. Under their leadership, organization, and slogans, peasants engage in collective petitioning, accuse cadres, even surround and attack basic-level Party and government organs. What are they, heroes or troublemakers? Where does their "magic power" come from?[30]

Such "heroes" taught peasants about central policies and how to couch their claims in terms acceptable to the Party-state by using the state's rhetoric and by proclaiming their readiness to cooperate with officials to secure peasants' "legitimate rights and interests," promising that this in turn would reduce the incentive to petition higher levels for redress. In some instances, township or even countywide networks of burden-reduction leaders appeared, which skirted the state's prohibition on the formation of unauthorized organizations.[31] The appearance of such informal groupings prompted Yu Jianrong, a prominent researcher, to call for the revival of peasant associations as institutions capable of actually helping peasants. "What's most important," he wrote, "is that peasant associations can fill the political-administrative vacuum which clearly exists in 'not a few' areas of our country. What this vacuum signifies is that there isn't any organization that can "realistically and wholly represent peasant interests," referring to local people's congresses and to VCs. Yu's proposal provoked intense discussion among specialists on rural society and politics.[32]

Conclusions

Village elections have become institutionalized in much of the countryside, and in one subset of villages, elected village committees have made governance more acceptable as far as the management of narrowly defined intra-village issues is concerned. In this way democracy is making a contribution to turning Chinese peasants from subjects into citizens. In another subset, however, village democracy does not mean much even within its defined sphere of competence, because VCs do not represent their constituents. Most importantly, elected village committees are not able to make a significant dent in resolving the core grievances of China's villagers such as those over land seizures or pollution. If VCs are to be more effective, they need to be given much greater scope and independence, thereby enabling them to bring to bear collective, organized, and countervailing power. They need to have the right to organize horizontally, so that the VCs of an administrative unit, say a township or even a county, could act in concert. As of early 2006, the Chinese regime is not prepared to empower them in a genuinely meaningful way.

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30 *Banyuetan* (internal edition), no. 2, 2000, pp. 1-22.

31 Yu Jianrong, "Nongmin you zuzhi kangzheng".

32 Yu Jianrong, "Wo weishema zhuzhang chongjian nongmin xiehui?" (Why Do I Advocate Re-establishment of Peasant Associations?), May 5, 2005, in www.blogchina.com/new/display/73086.html.