
THE
CARTER CENTER



Report of The Carter Center's Fourth Observation of Chinese Village Elections
4 Jan 2000

Part I. Executive Summary

At the invitation of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), People's Republic of China, The Carter Center sent a delegation to observe villager committee (VC) elections in Hebei Province from January 4 to 13, 2000. The delegation was led by Ambassador Gordon L. Streeb, Associate Executive Director of the Center, and made up of nine Center staff members, election experts and China scholars from various universities in the United States and Denmark. This was the fourth time since 1997 that the Center has observed village elections in China and the first time that an international organization has been invited to observe a primary VC election.

The visit was a success. It further consolidated the relationship between the Center and the MCA and finalized the next stage of cooperative activities. It provided opportunities for the Center to assess and evaluate its work in China and to better define the scope and depth of its work there. It was also an occasion for the Center to investigate how the new November 1998 permanent Organic Law on Villager Committees (hereafter the Organic Law) has impacted the quality of village elections and the fledgling process of village-level democratization in China.

A new three-year cooperative agreement was initialed by Mr. Charles E. Costello, Director, Democracy Program, The Carter Center, and Mr. Zhang Mingliang, Director-General, Department of Basic-level Governance, the MCA. This new agreement outlines future cooperative activities in three main areas, namely, 1) working together to collect village election data in four provinces and standardize electoral procedures; 2) publicizing village elections both in China and the West; and 3) conducting bilateral exchanges to learn from each other's experiences in conducting and organizing elections.

Compared to the elections observed by a Center delegation in Hebei Province in 1997, electoral procedures have been improved, leading to a wider and freer choice for voters. The Hebei Province Measures for Villager Committee Elections (hereafter the Hebei Measures; see Appendix 2 for the full text) has not only incorporated the electoral procedures as outlined in the Organic Law but has also added its own elements. We

saw provincial efforts to make individual nomination mandatory and reduce the number of proxies allowed for each voter. We also observed Qianxi County's efforts to require all villages to conduct elections within a three-day period and introduce regulations to govern campaign speeches. Further innovations included the banning of roving ballot boxes in the four villages that we observed during both the primary and final elections. The results of the elections in the villages visited also suggested that there was genuine competition and real choice in these elections.

Despite these positive steps to improve the quality of elections, we found some deficiencies in the process. For example, there was a lack of basic organization on Election Day that affected an orderly, secret balloting. Not all the distributed ballots were accounted for. There was no clear understanding among election workers who should determine the invalidity of questioned ballots and what were the definitions of a spoiled ballot. There were times when township officials appeared to be trying to influence voters' decisions, although the balloting itself remained secret. The design of the ballots was also problematic, necessitating some voters to consult with each other. Members of the delegation also had a significant meeting with officials from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Legal Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC). NPC officials expressed their willingness to continue to work with the Center, including inviting another Center delegation to observe township and county people's deputy elections when they were in progress. The NPC accepted the Center's suggestion to send a delegation to observe a US presidential primary in early April. There were individual and collective meetings by members of the delegation with Chinese scholars of political science and elections and editors of the *Tribune on Townships and Villages*, a magazine focusing on rural issues with a circulation of close to one million copies. From these productive conversations, we learned more about the impact of village elections on the progress of China's political reform, the various new and sometimes bold experiments in elections at the township level in 1998 and 1999, and the possibilities that these trials would lead to wider participation, greater choice and more competition in the next cycle of direct elections above the village level.

This report was prepared by Dr. Yawei Liu with contributions from Dr. Kellee Tsai of Emory University, Ms. Jamie Horsley, a Carter Center consultant, Dr. Joseph Fewsmith of Boston University, Dr. Jorgen Elklit of Aarhus University, Denmark and Dr. James Robinson of University of West Florida. Mr. Charles Costello and Mr. Tom Crick have edited the report. Pictures were taken by Mr. Michael Furst, Executive Director of the American Chamber of Commerce in China, Mr. Tom Crick and Dr. Yawei Liu.

Part II. New Initiatives with the MCA and Meeting with NPC Officials

VC Elections According to the MCA

Meeting with Vice Minister Li Baoku

On January 5, the delegation met with Mr. Li Baoku, Vice Minister of the MCA. Minister Li expressed the satisfaction of the MCA with the Center's work in China since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in March 1998. He said that the MCA and the Center shared one common goal, to enhance the promotion of democracy in China's countryside. According to Minister Li, further building democracy in the countryside was endorsed by the CCP's 15th National Congress in September 1997. At the 3rd Plenum of the 15th Congress in October 1998, a resolution was adopted to launch a full-scale campaign to consolidate the gains of the economic reform in the past 20 years and deepen the political reform that was begun ten years ago.

Li then recalled the MCA's work since the adoption of the amended Organic Law in November 1998. The MCA convened a conference in Xuchang, Henan in April 1999 to commend 98 model counties in China in self-government. At this conference, officials from the model counties exchanged experiences with each other and discussed recurring problems in their quest for introducing a governance system in which the ordinary villagers were keenly involved in the decision-making process.

The MCA has used considerable resources to publicize the importance of villager self-government and the procedures of direct and competitive elections. Officials at all levels have used public media, including television, radio, newspaper, magazines and other popular formats of communication to disseminate the newly revised Organic Law.

The MCA also has worked hard to supervise the elections of the Villager Committees (VC) and promote local legislation on implementation measures of the Organic Law and electoral regulations. From late 1998 to the end of 1999, 19 provinces had conducted a new round of VC elections and 15 provinces had adopted provincial implementation measures of the Organic Law. Thirteen provinces have also passed new measures for VC elections.

As a result, more and more farmers have become aware of the Organic Law and "the four democracies" (democratic election, decision-making, management and supervision), and the number of complaints against violation of the Organic Law have increased dramatically. On the surface, said Li, things look bad when the farmers knock on one's door, appeal to the media and go everywhere to seek justice, but it is a positive development. The farmers now are equipped with the law and may use it to fight for their own interests.

Li then told delegation members that his colleagues were exploring ways to expand rural democracy beyond villager committees. Foreign friends, including members from The Carter Center, were interested in finding out when direct elections would be held at the township and county level. He said he did not know the answer since no one knows when the Constitution and "The PRC Organization Law for Local People's Congresses and Local Governments at All Levels" would be revised, but it is "inevitable" for the open administration of village affairs to expand to the township level.⁽¹⁾ Open

administration would impose checks and balances on leaders at the local level and create opportunities for the broad masses to monitor township officials. Township officials were supposed to be responsible for the farmers, not the county officials. With obvious pride, Li talked about the Zhuoli experiment (see Part IV) which took place in his home province, Shanxi. It was constitutional and did not violate the Organic Law for Local People's Congresses and Local Governments.

MCA Officials on Cooperation with Western Agencies

Following the meeting with Minister Li, members of the delegation discussed a wide range of issues with officials at the MCA. Both sides reviewed the cooperative activities since the signing of the MOU and discussed operational details of the joint project in the next three years. According to Zhan Chengfu, Chief, Division of Rural Affairs, Department of Basic-level Governance, through working together, both sides came to understand better the ultimate goal of the program and had established a solid foundation to move into the next stage.[\(2\)](#)

Zhan introduced the main cooperative projects with Western agencies and highlighted the differences among these projects. The election project of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), moving into its last leg, was designed to compile training materials for officials at the county, township and village levels. The European Union program, yet to be implemented, was planned to set up training centers in Beijing and 10 provinces. Once established, these centers would engage in training trainers using the UNDP materials. The final goal was to provide a training corps for the MCA so that it could carry out civic education, administrative and fiscal management training and election execution at the local levels. Support from the Asia Foundation, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Ford Foundation had largely been used in conducting research and surveys and facilitating the observation of elections in the West by Chinese officials.

The Carter Center's work focused on setting up an election data gathering operation and disseminating election information through training of officials and publication of election materials. The pilots in 49 counties in three provinces were very popular, according to Zhan, and had convinced the MCA that this project would eventually revolutionize election data gathering and analysis for officials at both the provincial and national levels. It would add a new eye to the MCA in identifying problems in the VC elections and determining where to concentrate the resources on training or procedural standardization.[\(3\)](#)

Problems in VC Elections

Members of the delegation sought to obtain current aggregate statistics on the now more-than-decade long history of village elections. They also were interested in learning what procedural changes had been made, particularly in light of numerous suggestions from members of previous delegations. Mr. Zhan found it easier to

inventory procedural alterations than to provide aggregate data on the conduct of voting throughout China. Zhan said that with the MCA and the Center ready to collect data in four provinces the gap in election census taking would eventually be rectified.

Members of the delegation also discussed some problems faced by the MCA in promoting VC elections and standardizing electoral procedures. Zhan recalled that as early as 1996 when foreign observers came to see China's VC elections, they complained about the chaotic nature of the election and the absence of a setting in which voters could make their choice freely and safely. Although many of these problems had been alleviated by the new electoral measures stipulated by the new Organic Law, there were other problems that would not go away any time soon. First, it was going to take a long time before China could hold elections at uniform dates at the provincial level, let alone the national level. China's rural democracy was indeed a seasonal one that was in accord with the farmers' seasonal tasks. It was impossible to overcome that at the present time.

Among continuing concern has been ballot integrity that embraces more than secret balloting and accurate counting. It includes freedom of voters from coercion or form of inducements that substitute special interests for public interests. Article 15 of the Organic Law excludes threats, bribery, counterfeit ballots or interruption of elections from approved election conduct. The Organic Law entitles villagers to report such acts and enjoins "related government departments" to investigate and handle cases "as required by law." However, there was clearly a lack of a well-defined channel and institutionalized mechanism for farmers to confront violations of the Organic Law. Not only were the electoral procedures often violated by the powers that be in the villages and townships, other articles of the Organic Law were often broken, too.

For the disadvantaged farmers, the only means available to them was either to report the delinquency through the bureaucratic layers, namely the local government, the provincial government, the MCA bureaucracy or even the Central Government in writing or in person, or to mobilize the media to generate public sympathy and anger, forcing the leadership at various levels to take action.⁽⁴⁾ From the MCA perspective, they could initiate investigations and take disciplinary actions against those who had broken the law. They were also relying on the media to generate pressure against those who would defy the instruction from the above. However, this interaction between the farmers at the bottom and the officials at the top was often inefficient and very costly. The best solution was either for the current judicial system to take cases or to establish an electoral court system that would focus on upholding the Organic Law and other laws that stipulate electoral procedures.

A very interesting point made by Zhan caught the attention of the team. According to Zhan, many townships in China are consolidating villages, changing their status to that of urban neighborhood committees within townships. This is illegal because Article 8 of the Organic Law stipulates that villagers are to be consulted and to approve such changes in boundaries and village status. This act has aroused the ire of many affected villagers not only because the law is violated but also because the villagers feel that by becoming residents in urban neighborhood committees they would lose the right to elect

their leaders.

Another issue that had to be dealt with, according to Zhan, was vote buying in elections. Voting buying is not clearly defined in China but its forms “are spreading” and even have become “more common.” Forms include any hint of preferential treatment, not only the exchange of cash for votes. They also embrace campaign promises, such as commitments regarding use of land held in common by the village and pre-election banquets. The range of cash gifts heretofore reported is ten to fifty yuan (\$1.20 to 6) depending on the wealth of candidates and the villages. Zhan felt that having a vote-buying problem was a good sign because it meant elections did take place and there was competition.

In fact, Zhan indicated, a more important issue was how to distinguish legal and illegal campaigning. As neither the Organic Law nor provincial electoral measures provided for candidates to campaign on their own, it was natural for aspiring villagers to be creative in designing ways to win support and popularity. “Can we categorize offering cigarettes or a simple meal as vote buying?” asked Zhan. Probably not, but fraud and bribery did occur. To overcome these problems, the MCA was promoting three things: 1) to make sure secret ballot booths were set up and secret balloting was enforced; 2) to introduce open campaigning, particularly creating venues for candidates to speak out their platforms; and 3) to deepen civic education. VC elections affected the direct interests of the farmers and elected leaders had power to authorize land plots for home building, issue birth permission, lease land and charge fees. If voters realized vital interests were at stake, they might not sacrifice their rights for money or other temporary benefits.

When asked about the clan influence in the villages, Zhan said that in certain parts of the country clans were undoubtedly influencing the nomination of candidates and election results. However, the market economy and the information revolution were bulldozing this vast network of family relations. Economic development triggered an unprecedented redistribution of social and economic resources. The interests of the nuclear family now came first and only after its interests were satisfied would members of the nuclear family consider the interests of the big family group.

Zhan pointed out that the quality of VC elections was quite uneven in the country. This was due to two factors, the trial nature of the first Organic Law and the independence of provincial governments in China. He gave the example of how one coastal province, Fujian, was leading the nation in institutionalizing competitive VC elections while another coastal province, Guangdong, did not even have real VC elections until late 1998. Zhan also said that during the transition period of moving away from the trial law to the amended law, there existed a huge procedural void, leading to many problems. He told us that the MCA would shift away from the emphasis on high voter turn out to focusing on ensuring real choice and competitiveness of the election. He believed that the quality of VC elections would be much improved in the next round. The MCA was aware of all the problems but did not lose its patience. After all, the age of VC elections was just over a decade. He reminded the members of Deng Xiaoping’s favorite remark when he was pushing for economic reform in China boldly but patiently: “Dare to try;

feel free to observe; and do not debate.”

Blueprint of the Joint Project

In the afternoon, the Center staff and the MCA officials reviewed the past cooperative activities and agreed to endorse a three-year cooperative undertaking called “The Project to Standardize Villager Committee Election Procedure” includes the following activities: expanding computerized election data gathering in four provinces, upgrading the data gathering software, conducting data verification and analysis, publishing election posters and procedural literature, creating and maintaining an VC election web site, cosponsoring international conferences on Chinese rural democracy and political reform and having bilateral exchanges.

On January 10, the two groups met again to discuss in greater detail technical aspects of the new agreement. They revised the two forms that had been used to collect data in 49 counties and evaluated the data-gathering software. Officials from the Hunan Department of Civil Affairs, Chinese election scholars, computer experts and statisticians also attended the meeting. On the same day, Mr. Charles E. Costello, Director, Democracy Program, The Carter Center and Mr. Zhang Minigliang, Director-General, Department of Basic-level Governance, initialed the three-year agreement.

□ Meeting with NPC Officials, January 6, 2000

The delegation met with Mr. Zeng Jianhui, chairman, Foreign Affairs Committee, NPC on January 6, 2000 in the People’s Great Hall. Ambassador Streeb and Minister Zeng recalled the Center’s observation of the township people’s congress election in Chongqing in January 1999 and expressed the desire to continue the dialogue and cooperation on township and county elections between the NPC and the Center.

Minister Zeng accepted the Center’s invitation to send an NPC delegation to observe the American presidential primary in spring 2000. He also invited the Center to conduct more observation of the township and county people’s congress elections when they are in session in 2001. Officials from the Legal Affairs Committee and other agencies of the NPC were present at the meeting. Mr. Zhang Chunsheng, Vice Chairman of the Legal Affairs Committee, in charge of revising existing laws and drafting new laws, will lead the NPC delegation.

Part III. Observing Villager Committee Elections in Hebei

□ Observing Primary Election in Beitaipingzhuang Village, Dingxing County,

Baoding, January 7, 2000

On January 7, the delegation observed a primary election in Beitaipingzhuang Village, Gucheng Township, Dingxing County, Baoding Municipality, Hebei Province.⁽⁵⁾ Accompanying us were representatives of the Western media organizations, Susan Lawrence of the Far Eastern Economic Review and Renee Schoof of the Associated Press. Michael Furst, Executive Director, American Chamber of Commerce and Clifford Hart, First Secretary, the American Embassy in Beijing, also joined our group. Wang Jing, correspondent, New China News Agency and Cui Shixin, reporter, the People's Daily, were with us at the request of the MCA.

Background Information

Beitaipingzhuang Village has a population of 2,381 or 518 households, with an annual per capita income of 3,120 yuan (US\$390). As a middle-income village in Hebei, its local economy consists primarily of agricultural production (peach trees, corn, and wheat) and petty trade.

Although Beitaipingzhuang Village has already gone through four rounds of VC elections, this fifth cycle of elections represented the first time that the nomination process had been opened to the entire village in a procedure known as haixuan, or literally, the “sea election.” This form of candidate selection complies with the 1998 revision of the Organic Law and is intended to allow individual villagers—rather than the local Party branch, Village Representative Assembly (VRA), small village groups, etc.—to nominate candidates for the actual VC election. In Beitaipingzhuang Village, the primary was held five days prior to election day (January 12, 2000) as originally planned. Due to weather conditions, the delegation was unable to return to observe the final election. Nonetheless, our initial visit yielded a number of noteworthy observations regarding the political environment in the village and procedural details of the primary process.

On December 17, 1999, a Village Election Committee (VEC) was elected by the thirteen Villager Small Groups (VSG) to coordinate both the primary and the final election.⁽⁶⁾ Seventeen people were nominated through open balloting to serve as members of the VEC. Nine candidates were chosen according to the numbers of votes received. The VEC included three Party members (there are a total of 62 Party members in the Village), one VRA member, two leaders of small village groups, one member of the VC, and three ordinary villagers (as far as we could tell). The Chair of the VEC was Mr. Zhao Jinzhou, who is also the secretary of the local party branch and chair of the VC. We were told that members of the VEC received training from county and municipal election officials.

The VEC then prepared a voter registration list of 1,485 eligible voters based on legal residency. Only three adult villagers were disqualified from voting; they had resided outside the village for too long (more than two years). According to one member of the VEC, the registration list of 1,485 voters was completed and posted on December 22, 1999 and Voter Identification Cards (VIC) were issued to the voters on January 5.⁽⁷⁾

We spoke to three first-time voters, however, who indicated that they did not register and receive their VICs until the day before the primary; they claimed that local administrators had visited them at their homes to do the paperwork and remind them to show up to vote the next day. This suggests that there may have been some last minute mobilization of voters. Apparently, local “civic education” only took the form of public announcements over loudspeakers in the village. It is worth noting that villagers in Beitaipingzhuang Village were compensated for participating in the nomination process by receiving one day of vacation if they are employed by the government, or 15 yuan (US\$1.83) if they are self-employed.

The purpose of the primary was to nominate eight candidates who would then compete for five slots on the VC—specifically, two candidates for the one VC Chair position, two candidates for the one Vice-Chair position, and four candidates for the three VC member slots. Although our observation team was unable to stay until the final nominations were calculated, it was apparent that the incumbent VC Chair, Mr. Zhao Jinzhou, was one of the frontrunners for VC Chair. As mentioned previously, Mr. Zhao, now 36 years old, is also the head of the local Party branch.⁽⁸⁾ In an interview with him, we learned that he earns 300 yuan/month (US\$36) for his public service activities. Apparently, the fact he holds both positions actually saves the village 20 yuan a month because all VC members earn 150 yuan/month and the Party Secretary earns 170 yuan/month.

We also learned that Mr. Zhao was elected to VC Vice Chair in 1989 at the age of 26, and has served as the Chair since 1991. After graduating from high school, he worked as a farmer—growing wheat, corn, and peaches. Over the last several years, he has become active in brokering construction and redecorating materials as a private entrepreneur.⁽⁹⁾ According to a female member of the outgoing VC, during Mr. Zhao’s tenure as VC Chair, the infrastructural conditions of the village have greatly improved. Specifically, the village now has more tap water, electricity, streetlights, and telephones; in addition, roads have been repaved and the village school was renovated in 1997. When we asked Mr. Zhao if he was interested in continuing to serve as VC Chair, he said, “I’m getting a little tired of the job since it is so time-consuming”—and then added with a charismatic smile, “I will serve if it is the desire of the villagers.” We also asked if the local Party branch had encouraged him to continue serving as VC Chair; he denied that the Party had pressured him or anyone else to serve on the VC. Mr. Zhao did point out, however, that the Party and the VC in Beitaipingzhuang are closely integrated. The two organizations share a common budget and major decisions are only undertaken with the approval of both.⁽¹⁰⁾

While the CCP and the VC in Beitaipingzhuang may be tightly connected, it is worth noting that the village also has a seven-member “supervisory group” (jiandu zu) which is elected by the 57-member VRA.⁽¹¹⁾ According to Mr. Zhao, the purpose of the supervisory group was to monitor the activities of both the VC and the Party. This group is a phenomenon that we have not encountered in other provinces, but it may be seen as one of the “four democracies” and sounds like an additional institutional practice that may increase the accountability of both the VC and the CCP to villagers. For example, by the entrance to the main village courtyard, Beitaipingzhuang has a large

blackboard indicating the budget (revenues and expenses) of the village, family planning quotas for the year (names of those eligible to have a child), planned marriages for the year, and electricity use and charges.

Chronological Description of the Primary Process and Results

1. Ballot boxes were publicly shown to be empty, closed, and sealed with a red paper banner.
2. Each of the five electoral districts (organized geographically according to natural village boundaries) was called in turn to go to the voting area in each section of the schoolyard. Outside of each classroom was a table where voters would turn in their VICs (issued after voter registration) to receive a ballot. The card was then stamped to avoid multiple voting and also to prove his or her participation in the election. There was no voter registration master list to check against the VICs.
3. After receiving their ballots, voters entered a classroom and were supposed to vote individually in “secret booths” consisting of a school desk flanked by 1’ x 2’ cardboard separators. Illiterate voters could go to booths at the front of the classroom where teachers from the township—bearing no relationship to the villagers—could write in their choice. Voters were seen consulting with one another all over the place—over the low cardboard partitions, in the middle of the room, etc. (When we made the observation that this did not constitute secret voting, however, election monitors from the county and township encouraged voters to fill out their ballots independently.)
4. After filling out their ballots, voters brought them to the ballot boxes in the main courtyard and placed them into one of three ballot boxes. (One County official noted that the ballot boxes were stationary this time, whereas they were roving during the last election.)
5. When all had voted, the boxes were opened and the ballots were randomly organized into discrete piles and handed out for counting. This process was somewhat unwieldy and not visible to most of the villagers since there was so much crowding around the ballot boxes. A total of 1,206 ballots were cast. 1,203 were valid.
6. After the total number of ballots was recorded, they were split into nine piles and the results of each pile were recorded on black boards around the school courtyard. There were a total of 147 nominees, and several of the boards ran out of space and votes had to be recorded on the adjacent brick walls. The primary produced 147 nominations. (The MCA reported this number was 158.)
7. Eight nominees out of 147 became final candidates from the number of votes they received in the primary, two for chairman, two for vice chairman, and four for the three committee member positions. Zhao Jinzhou (incumbent, party secretary) and Xu Guangquan (deputy party secretary) became candidates for the chair, winning 426 votes and 348 votes, respectively.

Because of an unexpected heavy storm and the closing of the expressways, the delegation was unable to observe the final election in Beitapingzhuang Village. We received the results from officials at the MCA through email. In the final election, 1,258 ballots were cast of which 1,252 were valid.[\(12\)](#) It was a close race with the challenger Xu Guangquan defeating the incumbent Zhao Jinzhou with 632 to 587 votes. Ma Jun

was elected the vice chair with 650 votes. Three candidates were elected members of the VC. They are Zhao Zuohua with 756 votes, Ma Caiyou with 705 votes, and Ran Fuliang with 637 votes. Although the Hebei Measures calls for appropriate female representation on the VC, no women were elected. The woman with the greatest number of votes got just 158 votes.

□ Qianxi County Briefing, January 8, 2000

General Information

Prior to our observing village elections on January 9, officials from the Qianxi County briefed us on the preparation for the new round of VC elections and new methods that were introduced and implemented in the first election after the adoption of the revised Organic Law.

Qianxi is under the jurisdiction of Tangshan Municipality with a population of 350,000, of whom some 240,000 are voters. There are 417 administrative villages. The average per capita annual revenue is 3,330 yuan. The economy is largely agriculturally based, with chestnuts and other fruits and nuts being staples. The county also boasts five large collective enterprises, some state owned and some collectively owned. Qianxi is also a tourist area, being near the Great Wall and various other scenic spots.

According to Mr. Li Xuetian, Director of the County Bureau of Civil Affairs, the county was holding its fifth round of village elections, having held four rounds from 1988-1999. In the past dozen years, the county Party Committee, People's Congress and the government worked together in exploring new ways to expand choice and accountability at the village level in order to maintain economic prosperity and social stability. Mr. Li listed five accomplishments that he and his colleagues believe have been achieved with the initiation of village elections:

1. More and more talented young people, who are knowledgeable, progressive and creative, were elected by voters, bringing new changes in the countryside.
2. The old ganbu or cadre system of appointed positions had been reformed to provide for promotion based on election.
3. The county had moved from the former system of indirect elections with an equal number of candidates and positions to one of direct elections with the number of candidates exceeding the number of positions.
4. Elections procedures had increasingly been more standardized.
5. The content of villager self-government has been expanded to include the "four democracies:" democratic elections, decision-making, management and supervision. The latter includes the holding of two "democracy days" on January 10 and July 10 annually during which citizens can raise issues and evaluate county officials.

However, Mr. Li and his assistants admitted that development has been uneven in

Qianxi and more work needs to be done to spread the idea and practice of competitive elections and secret ballots. Some villagers simply did not want to participate in elections at the beginning. Their “democratic awareness” was not that great, and they didn’t care who was elected. In addition, feudal and clan influences were still strong in the countryside, and factions still existed. As to Party involvement in VCs and village governance, an official from the county Department of Organization said the province as a whole encouraged capable villagers to hold concurrent positions of both the VC chair and Party branch secretary. He estimated that probably in 20% of the villages in Qianxi, the Party Secretary held the post of VC Chair. This practice would save village funds, lessening the burden on the villagers, and concentrate administrative responsibilities on fewer talented villagers, reducing possible bureaucracy.

New Measures Introduced in the Fifth Round of VC Election in Qianxi

The whole process, according to Mr. Li, would last three months, from December 27, 1999, when a county-wide mobilization meeting was first held, to the end of March 2000, when all 417 villages would have finished their elections, completed the power transfer, established new VRAs and adopted new village charters. The entire process would consist of five steps: a) mobilization; b) elections; c) revision of the village charter; d) review of the previous three aspects of work; and d) training of elected officials.

In order to implement the new national Organic Law and the Hebei Measures, Qianxi has introduced a series of measures known as “One Uniformity,” “Four Nos,” “Five Directs,” and “Eight Transparencies.” These measures were designed to improve the quality of elections and to ensure that voters have real choice and that the election is competitive. “One Uniformity” refers to the executive order that all villages in Qianxi should conduct VC elections on three days, January 24, 25 and 26 unless there were special circumstances and that those who failed to adhere to the schedule without appropriate exemption would be held accountable and assessed penalties.[\(13\)](#)

“Four Nos” are: 1) No organization may control the nomination process; 2) No internal namelist is to be compiled in advance; 3) No interference in the nomination process is to be allowed; and 4) No taking over or monopolizing the process.

“Five Directs” prevent any organization from interfering in the electoral process: 1) Direct election of members to the VRA; 2) Direct election of Villager Small Group Leaders; 3) Direct election of Villager Election Committees (VECs); 4) Direct nomination of candidates; and 5) Direct election of VCs.

“Eight Transparencies” were initiated to keep all elements of the electoral process open to the public. They are: 1) Make public the selection of VEC members; 2) Make public the election date; 3) Make public the voter registration list; 4) Make the nomination of preliminary candidates open and public; 5) Make public the final selection of candidates; 6) Make public the time and place of the election; 7) Make public the selection of election workers and officials; and 8) Make public the election results.

In addition to these new measures, Qianxi also introduced a county campaign speech

regulation, stipulating the order in which candidates were to speak at the election meeting (those with the least votes from the primary would speak first), the length of the speeches (5 minutes for those running for the chair and 3 minutes for those running for the vice chair and members) and their contents (no empty promises and personal attacks). We were told by a group of Chinese election scholars that Mr. Li was planning to adopt registration campaigning during the fifth round of elections but authorities denied this attempt. If this measure were adopted, all villagers who intended to run for VC positions could register with the VEC and then campaign to advocate their candidacy. Permitting limited campaigning before the primary would certainly restrict the size of the candidates' pool and shorten the process.

Since late 1999, Qianxi has launched a three-pronged campaign to make sure the new round of elections move forward in a satisfactory manner. First, representatives from the county, townships and villages were selected to join the County Village Election Leadership Group. The Group would use many means such as cable television system, public address system, village administration bulletins, blackboards and wall slogans to publicize the importance of the election and how all voters could make a difference. Approximately 90% of the households had been reached with the basics of election knowledge and procedures. Second, training seminars of election officials from various administrative levels were conducted since July and over 1,500 were trained. Third, specific emphasis was given to mobilize women to become involved in a meaningful manner.

Women's Representation

The provision in the Organic Law and the Hebei Measures requiring that women be "appropriately" represented on VCs was intended to encourage the identification and standing for office of more women. Qianxi officials explained that the cultural background and economic standard of many village women is not high, and they remain subject to certain traditional restraints and tend not to participate much in the political process. However, since women comprise roughly 50% of the voting population, without their participation one cannot have "true democracy." Therefore, officials at the county, township and village level are encouraged to find women to participate in leadership groups and the election committees.

The county government (with a grant from the Ford Foundation) has also provided training and education to raise the political consciousness of village women. About 1,500 women had undergone training since July 1999, from whom 100 were selected to receive further training in October 1999, focusing on election procedure knowledge and political participation. Wang Xiulian, chairman of the Qianxi Women's Association, described these training sessions held for women, including a practical program to familiarize women with the Organic Law and Hebei Measures.

When asked about the high number of votes female candidates received in the nominating processes leading up to the elections we were to witness, one official explained that, in the first place, half the voters were women and would want to have

representation on the VC. Second, most feel it was convenient to have at least one women on the VC to take care of so-called family or woman's matters, like enforcing the one-child policy and caring for the elderly. However, we were told, there was no legal requirement that there must be at least one woman. And there are instances in which there is more than one woman and even all women serving on VCs.

Qianxi's Efforts According to an MCA Official

According to Zhan Chengfu, Qianxi's work was special in several ways. First, Qianxi was leading the nation in setting a uniform period (in this case three days in January) to hold elections in all villages, thus saving costs and minimizing disruption in the countryside, as well as spreading more knowledge about and respect for elections. Setting one national village election day may not be practical in China, given the farmers' different harvesting and work schedules in different parts of the county. One could, however, unify the election days at the county level. The townships and villages would then select which of the days was most suitable. Zhan also believed the adoption of the "Four Nos," "Five Directs," and "Eight Transparencies" and the campaign speech regulation were also an important organizational advance. He commended Qianxi on its voter education efforts, especially with respect to women. Zhan finally commented that it was hard to exaggerate the penetration and significance of direct elections at the village level in China's vast countryside. It was triggering sea-changes in the farmers' perception of their role in the decision-making process and their relationship with the leaders.

Observing VC Elections in Three Villages in Qianxi County, Tangshan, January 9, 2000

San Village

General Information

Saheqiao San Village is a small village of 191 households with a population of 659 people. Of these, 454 are eligible voters.[\(14\)](#) The village is organized into six VSGs. San Village boasts 27 party members, five of whom are female. The village is largely agricultural, with all kinds of fruit orchards. The village claims the average per capita income "living standard" is 3,200 yuan (\$390).

One half of our delegation arrived after the initial voter headcount, on Sunday, January 9, reportedly the coldest day of the winter. The voters were milling around inside a red brick administrative compound housing the VC and Party branch, as well as the family planning center, etc. Copies of the Organic Law were posted at the entrance to the compound and just inside, as was a poster demonstrating proper voting procedure. Also

posted outside the compound wall were various announcements concerning the election, a list of all eligible voters and the results of the nomination process.

This was the fifth round of VC elections since 1988. The VC has only three members, a chair and two other members, since it is a small village and the villagers do not want to bear a heavy burden. In fact, we were told that the VC members did not receive any compensation. Instead, the days they spent on VC work were counted toward their 15 days of mandatory community service, for which they also received a daily stipend of about 5-10 yuan per day.

We learned that there was a strong clan presence in the village. Although there are 30 last names in the village, over 20 households have the surname Zhao (of which over ten of the Zhao households are part of the same extended family). The village also has a 13-member VRA. Each 10 to 15 households have a representative in the VRA. When we asked about the role of the CCP in the village, we were told that the Party was supposed to deal with the bigger decisions (e.g., spending a lot of money on a road) while the VC dealt with day-to-day village business and made smaller budgetary decisions.

We also inquired if there was any difference between the previous VC elections and this new round. The answer was that villagers felt that their choices would really matter this time. We asked for proof, and were told that in the last round of elections, there was not an open nomination process and that this time all roving ballot boxes were banned. A few village leaders also told us that there was greater voter turnout this time because people were more concerned about their economic interests. Specifically, San villagers would like to pay less in fees (including the 50 yuan/month in village-specific ones).

Voting Procedures

The election meeting was presided over by Mr. Zhu Yunshun, chairman of the Saheqiao Township People's Congress, because the chair of the VEC, consisting of five members, became a final candidate and had to resign from the VEC. The VEC itself was elected through VSG votes.

More than 80 names were put forward during the primary election held on December 29, 1999. The final candidates, selected on the basis of who received the most votes, were: Chair: Zhao Limin (incumbent Chair), 114 and Sun Yuequan (Party Secretary, incumbent VC member), 70. Members: Li Cuilan (female incumbent VC member), 206; Zhao Shanlin, 77; and Zhang Huimin, 74.

Zhu went over the voting procedures, emphasizing that each person was to vote for him or herself and not give the ballot to someone else, to put the ballot in the ballot box when finished voting, etc. A sample empty ballot was chalked onto a blackboard, and he went over how to fill in the ballot, putting a circle "o" in the blank space above the name of candidates the voter approved, and an "x" in the space above those he did not want to elect. One space was provided for write-in candidates for the position of chairperson, and two spaces for write-ins for committee members. Zhu asked whether these

procedures met with approval.

After no objections were raised, Zhu then announced that over 50% of the registered voters needed to be present for a valid vote, and he called on each VSG to report the number of voters present from that group. The VSG leaders called out the number of registered voters and the number of those present from each group. Despite some confusion, the numbers added up to 393, much more than 50% of the total of 442 registered voters. The 50% threshold having been met, the national anthem was played, and the ballot boxes were opened so that everyone could see they were empty and then sealed.

The candidates were then called upon to give their campaign speeches, limited to no more than five minutes. Sun Yuequan, the Party Secretary and the candidate for VC Chairperson having received the fewest nominating votes between the two finalists, spoke first. He introduced himself and stated his position. He reviewed the accomplishments of the previous VC and promised to do a better job if elected.

Incumbent VC Chairperson Zhao Limin spoke next. Zhao had four years of middle school education, became a VC committee member in 1994. In the same year, he opened a restaurant. He was elected the Chair in the fourth round of the VC election in 1997. He won 286 out of 311 votes. He joined the Party in 1999.

Zhao spoke with some passion and earnestness, saying he appreciated the nomination for the position of the VC chair, as it showed that people believed in him. He listed his accomplishments as chairperson, noting the power line had been changed and a loan of 70,000 yuan (\$8,536) had been obtained for the village. He had arranged for some village products to be sold, repaired a road and used 500 yuan (\$60) to dig new wells. He also set up a cable television in the village in 1998. Zhao asked for criticism and ideas from the voters, and then went on to describe his blueprint for the next three years. It included introducing cash crops, digging more wells, repairing roads, making sure no one had any problem with getting enough food, refraining from imposing new fees, raising the financial status of the village and improving the welfare and recreation for elderly persons. He assured the listeners that he was not just making empty promises but that he would really do these things.

The third candidate was Zhang Huimin, a Party member and graduate of the University of Law and Politics in Beijing. He became an accountant in 1973 and village enterprise director in 1979, a position he had held until the factory was moved. Zhang then started a shuttle bus service to Beijing after 1986, and earned an award as a model worker in 1987, for which he got to travel to Hong Kong, Macao and Thailand. He was running a private business, which now had four vehicles. Zhang promised to rely on the Party and try his best to serve the villagers well.

Li Cuilan, the only female finalist, was a 43-year-old Party member with a high school education, as well as an incumbent VC member. She became an accountant in 1976 and chaired the women's association since 1983. She received training by the Qianxi County in legal issues relating to women such as the Marriage Law and the Law on the

Protection of Women and Children. She promised to bring greater village fiscal transparency and better financial management. She would also work to lighten people's burdens and take good care of the issues such as birth control, care for the elderly and work on family and children. It was clear in later conversations and by her demeanor that she was fairly confident that she would be re-elected.

The fifth candidate was Zhao Shanlin, a 37-year-old Party member, high school graduate and soldier until 1991. He became a Party member while serving in the army and then came back to the village. If elected, he realized it would be because people trusted him. He wanted to serve the people and not serve for benefits.

After the speeches, the voting began with the candidates and election workers voting first, in front of the gathered villagers. After that, all villagers left the compound and waited out in the street, while election workers seated at a table at the entrance to the compound called out names one-by-one from a voter registration list. If the person called did not come forward, the workers then checked the list of authorized proxies and called out the name of any person registered as authorized to vote by proxy for that absent villager. The proxy list had been prepared two days earlier; 24 persons had registered proxies. One woman interviewed said she held the proxy of her ill husband. Those holding the proxies had been given a proxy certificate, which they showed as they came forward to receive their ballots.

VSGs prepared the voter registration list. Each villager had a white VIC but rarely showed it to the registrar, as everyone knew each other and Villager Small Group leaders and others stood by to confirm the voter identity as his name was checked and a ballot stamped and given to the individual.

There were five rooms in the compound initially designated as voting stations, with one voter to be inside at a time. As was the case in Beitaipingzhuang Village, teachers from the Saheqiao Township and who did not know the villagers of San Village had been recruited to read and write out ballots for those who were illiterate or disabled, as their unfamiliarity with the villagers preserved the secrecy of the vote. They stood outside the stations to offer help, wearing badges identifying them as agent "scribes."

The VEC chairman repeatedly called out instructions on how to fill in the ballot and reminded people to keep their ballot vote secret. Nonetheless, confusion over how to fill in the ballot led to voters requesting assistance from monitors and others, so that at the beginning several people might be gathered around a voter offering instructions and advice. The VEC Chair reminded everyone that the vote must be made in secret and that monitors were to stand outside the voting station rooms. Later, to speed the process up, additional voting places were established, within the rooms and outside on a table upon which cardboard partitions were set up to afford some privacy. One delegation member observed that candidate Zhang Huimin and Sun Yuequan were also monitoring VICs, although they were not officially election monitors. Another noted that partitions were not always erected in the additional polling places to protect secrecy.

As mentioned above, we learned that the VC chair and members did not receive any

special compensation. Instead they could count time spent on VC matters against their mandatory community service obligation (jileigong) of 15 days' service per year and receive 5-10 yuan (\$.60-1.20) per day for their work. We also learned that villagers who came to vote could also count that activity against their jileigong obligation, and get paid 5 yuan (\$.60) for the day, all settled at the end of the year when the jileigong days were added up. Those who did not fulfill their 15 days of service must pay the VC 5 yuan (\$.60) per day missed.

We were told that 450 ballots had been printed up, 384 ballots distributed and 383 ballots returned. The ballot boxes were emptied in view of the re-assembled villagers and divided into two stacks, one counted in the courtyard and one inside one of the rooms. Five checkers reviewed and counted the ballots, finding only four that were totally invalid. Some ballots, however, were partially invalid as to either the election of the Chair or the Committee Members. One of the ballots, for example, was invalidated because the voter had written out the names of the preferred candidates in the write-in space rather than using the "o" and "x" method to indicate approval or disapproval. At the end, it was determined there were 379 valid ballots cast, out of 383 turned in.[\(15\)](#)

The votes were then counted, again in two batches, with the results recorded on blackboards set up inside the room and outside in the courtyard. Some of the villagers watched entertainment provided by township performers beyond the gate or went home to eat lunch before returning. Others milled around and observed the counting process.

Election Results

The result of the election was a surprise to us. Neither the incumbent VC chair nor the challenger received more than 50 percent of the votes cast. Zhao Limin got 181 votes and Sun Yuequan had 146 votes. There were a total of 24 write-in votes with the candidate for VC member Zhao Shanlin receiving 20 votes. Although Zhao Limin received more than 50% of the votes cast for the Chair (351), he was not deemed to have reached the 50% threshold required by the Organic Law as well as by the Hebei Measures because he fell short of 50% of the total ballots cast (383) or total valid ballots cast (379). A run-off has to be conducted according to the Hebei Measures within 10 days to determine among the two who will be the chair. The VEC Chair, Mr. Zhu, clearly hoped to hold the run-off the next day. In the run-off election, Hebei Measures stipulate the winning candidate only need garner 1/3 of the ballots cast.

However, as the Hebei Measures allow votes for higher positions to be added to lower positions, both Zhao Limin and Sun Yuequan became VC members with the former receiving 62 votes (181+62=243) and the latter 91 votes (146+91=237) for the VC member position.[\(16\)](#) Another winner for the VC member was the Village Women's Association Li Cuilan with 285 votes. Thus, the election resulted in the valid election of a new VC composed of Zhao Limin, Sun Yuequan and Li Cuilan. The township government announced the official results and issued certificates certifying their election to the VC.

The MCA recently informed us through email that a run-off election was conducted in San Village. 303 (out of 455) voters cast ballots at the run-off. Zhao Limin was elected chair with 159 votes. Li Cuilan and Sun Yuequan became VC members with 208 and 133 votes respectively.[\(17\)](#)

□ Daguan Village

General Information

On January 9, the other half of our delegation went to Daguan Village in Qianxi County. This is the largest village in the county, consisting of 521 households with a population 1,803 people. In 1999 the village suffered extreme drought, reducing income from agriculture. Most village income, however, derives from quarrying, transportation, and construction activities. Per capita income in 1999 was 2,750 yuan (\$335).

This was the fifth round of VC elections in the village but the first one since the adoption of the revised Organic Law. Guan Henglin, the village Party secretary and VEC chair, told us that in the previous four rounds of elections the Party always controlled the nomination process and the voters did not have real choice. This time, no organization could nominate or eliminate any candidates. It was all up to the individual voters to decide. Guan also told us that each voter who came to vote would receive 7 yuan (\$.88) as compensation from the VC.

We also learned that the VEC consisted of 7 members who were selected by voters from 9 VSGs. Each group could nominate up to seven members and the top seven vote getters became members of the VEC. Officials from the township trained them on election procedures. The VEC prepared the voter registration list and made it public on December 15, 1999. There were a few villagers who were not registered because they lost their legal residence in the village. There was no complaint against the list.

The primary election took place on December 29, 1999. 854 voters cast ballots for nomination, which lasted six hours. A total of 310 villagers were nominated for various positions. The final candidates were chosen in the order of the number of votes they received from the primary. The following is a list of the candidates and the positions they were holding at the election time with the number of votes they received from the primary in parenthesis. It is in the order in which they were listed on the ballot:

1. Official candidates for the chair: Guan Lize, incumbent, member of the Party Branch (272), and Li Shaoshun, incumbent, vice chair, member of the Party Branch (156).
- 2) Official candidates for the vice chair: Li Shaoshun, Guan Lize, Gou Jingshi, Deputy Party Secretary (176), and Guan Zhenbao (116)

3) Official candidates for VC members: Li Guifen, chairman of the Women's Association (449), Guan Zhenbao, Gou Jinshi, Li Shaoshun, Guan Zhenkui (178), Liu Wanxi (131), Guan Lize and Guan Zhenguo, businessman (99).[\(18\)](#)

Voting Procedure

When our delegation arrived, the voters were seated in the sub-freezing weather in the courtyard where the VC office, Party Branch office and a village meeting room are housed. The meeting was called to order by the head of the VEC, Guan Henglin, who was also the Party secretary. Unlike in Beitapingzhuang Village, the Party secretary was not running for election as the VC chair. Everyone stood for the playing of the national anthem, and then the voters were counted. There were a total of 1,294 registered voters in Dagan Village but only 988 (of which 29 were proxies) voters were present at the election meeting, arrayed in nine sections, the sections being based on VSGs. Villagers then raised hands to approve the confirmation of election assistants selected from the voters, 16 monitors, 6 ballot announcers and 6 counters.

Candidates for various positions then gave short election speeches of about three to five minutes depending on what position they were running for. In accordance with the regulations that prevented candidates from making false promises or attacks on other candidates, these speeches were mostly a recitation of the candidates' backgrounds and qualifications for the position. Nevertheless, there were some interesting moments. The most interesting was when Guan Zhenguo, an entrepreneur whose several businesses took in a gross income of 300,000 yuan (\$36,585) in 1999, spoke. He promised that if elected, he would help pave the village road and allow the villagers to use some of his machinery for free. Although he was only one of the final candidates for the VC member position, he declared his candidacy for the VC chair and asked the voters to write him in.

After the candidates spoke, the head of the VEC asked whether there were any questions for the candidates. One young villager (whose badge identified him as an election monitor) got up and asked Guan how much money his businesses had made last year and why, if he was so wealthy, he wanted to run for the VC. Guan responded that he did not feel fulfilled by being wealthy. He wanted to help the rest of the villagers become better off. Another old villager (from the same section as the entrepreneur) went to the podium to support the entrepreneur's candidacy.

Immediately before the voting began, a township official repeated the voting procedures, emphasizing how the ballots should be marked. He then explained why it served the villagers' interests better if they elected Party branch members into the VC and why it was important to elect a woman member to the VC. It would simplify the management of village affairs, save village funds and make it easier to take care of issues related to women in the village.

monitors who stamped the registration cards and handed the voters a ballot. The voters then proceeded to one of four simple voting booths (cardboard thumbtacked to the top of wood tables) in front of each separate group. Although there was some effort to make this procedure orderly (compared to the process we saw in Beitaipingzhuang), there was still much crowding around, looking over the top of voting booths to see who was being voted for, husbands filling out ballots for wives, etc. After voting, the ballots were deposited in ballot boxes that had previously been shown to the audience as empty and then sealed.

The ballots themselves consisted of two candidates for village chair, four for deputy village chair (both candidates for chair were automatically candidates for vice chair), and eight for village committee (the two candidates for village chair and two separate candidates for vice chair being automatically added to the slate for VC member).⁽¹⁹⁾ The ballots were pre-printed, but blank spaces were left for voters to write in names of other candidates. Voters had to put a circle in the space under the name of their preferred candidate and an “x” under the names of those they did not want to vote for. This procedure took quite a while, perhaps as much as two hours.

After the voting, as in Beitaipingzhuang, the ballot boxes were publicly unsealed and the ballots taken out and arranged into piles. Unused ballots were clipped to invalidate them. The ballots were counted group by group, with the results being written on chalkboards arranged around the courtyard. As this was a lengthy process, entertainment in the form of arias from local opera kept most villagers from leaving.

Election Results

The count was finally over in about three hours. Election monitors reported the final result to the VEC chair. 1,021 ballots were distributed and 1013 collected from the ballot boxes. No roving boxes were dispatched to collect votes from those voters who were unable to come. There was no separate count of proxies.⁽²⁰⁾

Name/Position	Chair	Vice Chair	Member	Result
Li Shaoshun	336	141	73	550 as VC member, elected
Guan Lize	428	101	55	584 as VC member, elected
Gou Jingshi	61	193	222	476 as VC member, lost
Li Guifen	0	2	726	728 as VC member, elected
Guan Zhenguo	90	6	299	395 as VC member, lost

Guan Zhenbao	2	221	357	570 as Vc member, elected
Guan Zhenkui	2	0	146	148 as VC member, lost
Liu Wanxi	42	7	307	356 as VC member, lost

Li Guifen and Guan Zhenbao won handily as VC members. By using the adding-down methods, both Li Shaoshun and Guan Lize also won as members with 550 and 584 votes respectively. No chair or vice chair candidates won enough votes to be elected under the 50 % rule. As required by the Hebei Measures, the village will have to conduct a run-off to determine a chair, a vice chair and add a member to VC.

As of the time this report is written, we have not heard from the MCA about the final result. It is likely that voters will choose a chair from Guan Lize and Li Shaoshun, a vice chair from Li Shaoshun and Gou Jingshi (or Guan Zhenbao who received the most votes for the vice chair) and make Gou Jingshi and Guan Zhenbao) candidates for the last VC vacancy. (We finally received incomplete information of the results of the run-off. According to the MCA, which received a fax from the Qianxi Bureau of Civil Affairs, a run-off election was held to determine who would be the chair and vice chair and elect an additional member to the VC. 913 voters cast ballots (out of 1,293). Guan Lize was elected chair with 628 votes and Li Shaoshun became vice chair with 550 votes. Gou Jingshi was elected member of the VC with 642 votes. He got 166 more votes than he had received previously. It would be interesting to find out what had changed so many villagers' mind in such a short time.)

□ Dongyuan Village

While Dagan Village was tabulating the ballots, Yawei Liu went to Dongyuan Village with MCA's Zhan Chengfu and CASS's Shi Weimin to observe briefly the election.⁽²¹⁾ Dongyuan is a very small village with seventy-one households. Out of the population of 286 there were 194 registered voters. The average per capita income in the village in 1999 was 3,500 yuan (\$426). We dropped in when election assistants were adding up the votes and engaged in heated discussion deciding what type of ballots were considered spoiled.

Outside the VC courtyard, all election related posters were neatly glued to the wall, including Voter Registration List, Members of the VEC, Posters announcing Primary Election Day, Election Day and the final candidates for the VC. Since it is a small

village, voters were only electing three VC members, one chair and two members. From what we saw on the blackboards on which the votes were added, the choice was clear and the incumbents were going to win in a landslide. In fact, many voters told us that they liked Wang Lizhong, the incumbent chair who was also the Party secretary. His challenger, Wang Lixue, an incumbent member and village accountant, had received enough votes to be the member of the VC. Liu Guizhen, chairman of the Village Women's Association, was also getting an overwhelming vote. We were unsure how the election was conducted since four of the five final candidates for the VC were also VEC members. As they all had to resign as required by the regulation, it would be difficult for the VEC to operate.

□ Problems and Recommendations

The delegation's stay in China was brief and the observation of the elections was limited due to severe weather. From what we observed in Beitaipingzhuang Village, Dagan Village, San Village and Dongyuan Village and from our conversations with officials at all levels, we feel that elections were generally conducted within the confines of the 1998 Organic Law and relevant provincial and lower level implementation measures and administrative instructions. We have no doubts that the outcome of the village elections in Dagan, San and Dongyuan Villages adequately reflects the preferences of voters. We also have no doubts that the large presence of outside officials and foreign visitors did not impact the voting.

We saw many positive signs that we have not seen elsewhere. We are pleased by the fact that no roving ballot boxes were used in any of the four villages. In both San Village and Beitaipingzhuang Village, the arrangement for outsiders to serve as the agents for reading and writing out ballots for those who were illiterate or disabled was a commendable safeguard of vote secrecy. San Village's process of having villagers assemble outside the courtyard where voting took place and of calling out names from the voter registration list and marking them off, as well as checking the list of registered proxies, was orderly, and well handled. Although everyone knows each other there, it would still be good training for voters to be asked for their voter registration IDs at the time they pick up their ballot.

The problems we have identified from this observation may not be universal and should not be construed as discounting the sincere intention of the MCA and Hebei Province to improve the quality of direct elections at the village level. In fact, we should see these problems in the context of scope of these elections and the daunting difficulties experienced by the Chinese officials at all levels to standardize electoral procedures and ensure real choice and accountability in China's 834,000 villages.[\(22\)](#) We are fully aware of the fact that the revised Organic Law was only enacted in November 1998 and that only 19 provinces have so far conducted VC elections under these rules (together with provincial implementation rules, of which 15 have been passed so far). We also

understand the enormous cost that is involved in conducting VC elections in China's vast countryside. As the Organic Law does not specify which level of the governments will pay for administering the elections, the funds, as we have been told repeatedly in the past two years, come from other budgets of the governments at all levels.

It is important for us to stress that the following suggestions and recommendations should be understood as ideas which might be easier to implement at this point in time and which will diminish problems in relation to the conduct of elections at a later point in time, in villages and at higher levels. It also may be premature for us to suggest different procedures, some of which could be carried out through the use of clearer instructions and better training and information, while others might require changes in the legal framework. We feel, however, that it is necessary to indicate clearly where we see problems in the current system and how these problems could be alleviated. We will address the issues first in general and then in five specific areas, namely, VEC, training of election officials as well as voters, voter registration, nomination, and polling.

GENERAL

The 1998 Organic Law represents a step forward compared to the 1987 Trial Law. The law is the overall legal framework within which the VC elections are conducted. The law is supplemented by the provincial election implementation measures which have been prepared, passed, and issued at a higher speed than what was the case under the 1987 Trial Law. The Hebei Measures have thus been in place since 24 September 1999. (For full translation of this Regulation, see Appendix.)

The national law and the provincial regulations are supplemented and complemented by various sets of lower level administrative instructions, especially at the county level, which in more detail regulate the conduct of VC elections. These administrative instructions are therefore of considerable importance, as they are also part of the legal framework within which VC elections are conducted and they should also be easily available to interested parties.

Although we are not yet aware of any discrepancies between the provincial regulations and the Organic Law, we are wondering when discrepancies do occur or if provincial regulations deviate from the Organic Law, which organ of the state will interpret the Organic Law or force the provincial government involved to revise its regulations. We are interested in finding out when violation of either the Organic Law or a provincial electoral measure does take place, which organ of the state will be responsible for investigating the violation and punishing the violator. We are also curious as to the procedure of amending the current Organic Law. As all thirty Chinese provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly administered by the Central Government adopt their electoral measures, will the Standing Committee of the NPC look into the matter and revise the Organic Law by incorporating good elements into the Organic Law? Can the MCA take the initiative and make a recommendation to the Standing Committee of the NPC?

For example, the formulations in the national law as well as in the Hebei Measures (and probably other provincial measures as well) about the representation of women and national minority groups are less precise than advisable in this kind of legislation. It appears to us that the actual interpretation is in accordance with either the Organic Law, or the provincial measures (as it is possible to get away with having only one woman (or minority representative) – or even none – on the VC). It should be specified that the requirement about “a proper proportion of women” should not – at least not in VCs with more than four members – be interpreted as if one token woman is enough.

We have also noticed that there is a lack of definition of the size requirements for VCs, i.e. three members for villages up to 500 inhabitants, four for villages with 500-999 inhabitants, etc. Both the Organic Law and the Hebei Measures are vague about this. It is also unclear where it is stated how decisions about whether or not a vice chair should be elected are to be taken. We think that VC size requirements – and the rules about whether or not to have a vice chair - should be published more prominently.

Our Recommendation: The MCA should carefully monitor, as it has done in the past, the provincial measures and work with the NPC to seek any appropriate amendments to the Organic Law or implementing regulations which should be easier to amend when all or most provincial level governments have adopted new regulations. Seeking to establish an election court, as has been discussed by many Chinese election officials and scholars, may not be practical at this point; but getting the nation’s highest court to make a ruling on a case of violating the Organic Law will certainly make it clear that local courts at all levels should handle suits filed by complaining and disgruntled farmers.

VEC

VECs had been elected and were operative during the conduct of the three primaries/elections we observed. The Hebei Measures state that VECs should be elected either by the VRA or by the VSG, but not how the choice between these two methods, the number of VEC members, or other issues are to be decided.

In Beitapingzhuang village 17 persons had been nominated from the VSGs for membership in the VEC and there was a non-secret election of the final nine members. These included the incumbent village head (who was also the party secretary) as well as two other party members, a VRA representative, two VSG representatives, etc. In Dagan Village, members of the VEC were selected the same way from 17 nominees. The Party Secretary was also the VEC chair. In San Village, the incumbent VC chair headed the VEC. This does not violate current provisions, but it might be better to exclude both incumbents – and the party secretary – from membership in the VEC, as cases of conflicting interests might arise during the conduct of the tasks of the VEC (the fact that any nominated VC candidate will have to step down from the VEC is only a partial solution to this problem).

When VEC members step down (as happened in the three villages we were able to

observe on election day), it appeared that remaining members were not sufficiently well prepared for running the elections, as assistance and guidance had to be provided from others, e.g. township representatives present. This is in full accordance with the legal framework, but it points to a need for better training and better instruction of ordinary VEC members, as the present system of VEC election often leads to the situation where the leading member(s) will have to step down from the VEC during the conduct of the election.

Our recommendation: Incumbent VC members and the local party secretary should not be eligible to be members of the VEC, as it might put some voters under undue influence during the electoral process. To avoid massive resignation of VEC members at the time of the election, it is advisable to select alternate VEC members at the very beginning. All VEC members and alternates should be trained so that they can all run the VC election if need be. This will also more generally improve their administrative skills.

TRAINING

In addition to training VEC members, training of poll workers such as callers, monitors and counters could be improved. The elections observed were all conducted in a somewhat chaotic way when it came to issuance of ballot papers to voters and the filling out of ballot papers, where the secrecy of the vote was violated in several instances. The nomination election in Beitapingzhuang Village on 7 January 2000 was conducted in a rather relaxed and somewhat careless way. VICs were checked before nomination forms were handed out, but the voter registration lists were not used to perform any form of control. Ballot booths were available for all voters, but many voters ignored the booths and the poll workers did not insist on their use.

Training should also include decision rules as to invalidity of ballot papers and clear instructions about referring such questions to the VEC. Training should also include the use of formal ballot paper account forms/tally sheets (see below), the use of which could also improve the general confidence in VC elections (and improve the quality of the data transmitted to MCA).

Training of ordinary voters (voter education/civic education) does take place, but probably mainly through the use of posters and some instruction during voter registration and the delivery of voter IDs. However, it was clear to us that the instructive general poster about the conduct of polling was put up to no particular avail. We also noticed that voter education took place during the village election meeting itself, which is good, as the voters present – at least in principle – will be interested in the issue. However, it was also our impression – from observation and from interviews with villagers – that some voters were not fully aware of the purpose of the exercise and that others were not fully aware of how to fill out the ballot paper, the rules about secrecy and use of the secret ballot booth.

Our recommendation: Better training of all poll workers on the basis of an instructive

election conduct manual which authoritatively covers all relevant issues. Training of poll workers (and VEC members) should always include the conduct of mock elections, where various problems could be taken up in a systematic and instructive way. We believe that voters will be more aware of the procedures as more civic education is conducted and they gradually realize that their votes make a difference in both the nomination and election.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Voter registration had been conducted in all three villages, registration lists had been posted 20 days prior to the election, and it had been possible to file complaints. However, no complaints were received in any of the three villages. We were told by the VEC in Dagan Village that there were two villagers who were not registered due to a mistake and they were added to the list once it was reported.

The Hebei Measures stipulate (Article 8) that the VEC can disenfranchise voters who have been away for more than two years and who don't want to vote by proxy. Beitaipingzhuang Village has apparently violated this provision as they have decided to exclude voters who had been away for only one year, but as no complaints were received this appears to have been less an issue than one would expect – at least among the registered voters.[\(23\)](#)

According to the Hebei Measures (Article 19) voter credentials are only checked through the presentation of the voter ID. This means that the voter registration lists should not be used to check voter eligibility before handing out nomination forms during the primary elections in Beitaipingzhuang Village and before handing out ballot papers in the villages. Registration lists were, however, used during the electoral process, but in somewhat different ways: In San Village they were used meticulously, while in Dagan Village they were used in different ways (if at all) in the different Small Groups.

Our recommendation: It should be stated clearly in the administrative instructions that nomination forms and ballot papers can only be handed out to voters subsequent to a check of their appearance in the registration list, marking against their names in the registration list, and marking of the voter ID. This procedure would also allow a more precise check of the number of ballot papers in circulation.

NOMINATION

The 1998 Organic Law stipulates that only registered voters can nominate candidates. The Hebei Measures state in Article 12 that nomination is to be conducted either in a village primary where more than 50 percent of the voters participate or in an elections conducted within each of the VSGs. Nominations in the three villages we observed were all conducted in village level primary elections. The nomination process does not close the race for candidacies in the election, as “write-ins” are still possible. The ballot papers we have seen have had room for this – and have even allowed for writing the full

number of three new names as candidates for membership, which is a liberal interpretation of the rules.

The main problem encountered was the easy – and commendable - access to nomination of candidates for election (even without obtaining the consent of the person involved and self-nomination has resulted in massive numbers of nominees). Open nomination is one of the more substantial changes between the trial law and the permanent law, but the fact that no formal campaign is allowed before the primary election – and it is unclear how much informal campaigning actually goes on – makes the new nomination method highly inefficient and perhaps excessively open, a counter intuitive conclusion.

Officials we met used the number of nominees in the primary to buttress the argument that there were no restrictions in the nomination process and all voters were searching for qualified candidates. We agree with this observation but in villages with about 1,200 voters it is not uncommon to see 200 to 300 voters nominated (most for ordinary membership posts). Many of these nominees had very little or no support. There is no predefined process that can guide the voters during the nomination process. If there were venues such as public declaration of the intention to run for office or some room for public campaigning, there would be guidance to the voters in their choice. This would significantly narrow down the number of candidates and make it easier for those with a genuine chance of being elected to enter the final round.

The system in Hebei of transferring nominations for higher positions to lower positions for candidates, who did not make the cut for, say, chair of the VC (Article 12), is an innovation, but it might confuse some voters. We saw election officials at pains explaining to the voters how to avoid spoiling ballots. We also saw many voters talking with each other, finding out how to mark the ballots.

The combination of strict nomination rules (in principle aiming at a kind of run-off) and the possibility of suggesting new names in the final round can make it difficult to obtain the required 50 per cent of the votes cast in the formal election, especially if the nomination race has not led to concentration on a small number of serious candidates. In both the villages observed in Qianxi County, no head was elected and a run-off had to be organized.

Our recommendation: Nomination rules should be reconsidered, both in relation to access to campaigning and to the combination of the actual nomination rules and write-in rules in connection with the formal election. It should also be made clear that voters can only nominate the same person for one position – just as he or she can only vote once for the same person (Hebei Measures, Article 22).

The rule about transference of “unused” nominations for a higher position to a lower position might be misused as they are not accompanied – as mentioned above – by a rule saying that any one voter can only nominate a person for one position (i.e., there appears to be no nomination rule parallel to Article 22).

The requirement about multiple candidates in the national law (Article 14) as well as in

the provincial measures (Article 14) is in most provinces interpreted as if a surplus of one candidate for each kind of position is enough. But if a village wants to have more (many) candidates, it is unclear to us whether it is possible to take this kind of decision in a legally binding way.

CAMPAIGNING

We have already talked about how the lack of campaigning has affected the outcome of the primary. Officials at different levels told us that individual campaigning before and after the nomination was prohibited, although we do not see why campaigning should be totally banned. We understand some of the concerns of the Chinese election officials. They are concerned about illegal networking, undue influence by the family clans and other social and religious forces in the country, the impact of wealth of candidates, and attempts to bribe voters through dishing out gifts, organizing banquets or distributing cash. Some of these appear to us as normal campaign practices. However, we do think an opportunity should be given to the voters to learn more about the candidates and to understand their platforms better. In Dagan Village, voters were only allowed to ask the candidates two questions. In San Village, no questions were asked. We don't believe that voters did not have questions. They were not encouraged to ask questions.

Our Recommendation: Time should be set aside for voters to question the candidates at election time. In the long run, candidates should be allowed to campaign before the nomination takes place and between the determination of the final candidates and the election under the supervision of the VEC. Campaigning will make it easier for voters to make better and wiser choices. Allowing campaigning will also provide a good opportunity to offer civic education to the voters.

POLLING

In the three villages observed on January 9, 2000 the general picture was that the entire legal framework – the law, the provincial implementation rules, and the county administrative instructions – was adhered to.

The voters had come early so that the process could start as soon as the guests/observers had arrived. Instructions were given, campaign speeches were held (strictly following the county rules), and some last-minute voter education was conducted (on how the voters were expected to perform their role). The township representative, however, became afraid of having too many spoiled ballots so he interfered in Dagan and gave a very specific instruction on how to fill out the ballot paper.

The problem was that the two candidates for VC chair also appeared on the ballot paper as candidates for vice chair (together with the two candidates ordinarily nominated for that position) and all four candidates for vice-chair were also listed as candidates for ordinary membership – together with the four persons ordinarily nominated for those posts. The ballot paper in Dagan village thus had 2 + 4 + 8 candidates nominated in

the three categories, respectively, instead of the 2 + 2 + 4, which one would have expected. The popularity of the two main contenders could lead some of the voters to vote for them for more than one position, which would (partly) ruin the ballot. It still happened in some cases, but probably on a much smaller scale than would have happened without this last minute official warning.

The elections in both villages were organized according to the villagers' small groups, but it was interesting – and positive – to observe that registration lists were used to some degree to check whether voters could be given a ballot (i.e., that they had not already been given one) or that there was a case of voting for somebody else (proxy voting), on the basis of the special documentation for that purpose (i.e., the proxy certificate). The use of the registration lists, however, was not systematic in Daguán, and the handing out of ballot papers was quite chaotic. In some of the Villagers Small Groups voters were able to collect ballot papers on behalf of other voters (friends, marital partners), so the control of this particular procedural element left a lot to be desired.

A considerable number of secret voting booths had been set up, but voters were not encouraged sufficiently to use them in a disciplined way. The booths were also positioned in such a way that they were not protected from people walking directly behind them so that it was not difficult to look over the voters' shoulders to see what they were doing. A number of voters did not make use of the secret ballot booths – filling out their ballots against a wall or using the table set up for observers and guests – and a number of voters happily shared information on how they had filled in the ballot paper with others. We also saw a number of cases where husband and wife voted together – in some cases obviously because one of them was illiterate. The conclusion is that secret voting was not sufficiently vigorously implemented in Daguán and San Village, even though maybe 75 per cent of the voters actually used the facilities for secret voting.

When voting was completed, counting took place according to the rules. It was well prepared; for example in Daguán blackboards had been provided and were available for counting in public. There appeared to be a little uncertainty in at least one of the counting groups about who should make decisions in case of spoilt ballots (the correct answer is the VEC), which probably was a result of insufficient training.

The process for counting ballots was a bit disorderly, as villagers crowded around to witness the opening of the ballot boxes and the counting process.

Our recommendations: Although we are aware of the rationale of giving popular and talented villagers more than one opportunity to get elected into the VC, it is advisable to phase out this unfair system gradually. If this practice is not eliminated, it will create more difficulties once the election is elevated beyond the VC level.

A system of getting voters to line up before they are admitted to the table where their credentials are checked and the ballot paper issued should be implemented (as on the MCA poster distributed widely). Secret voting should also be implemented rigorously (which would also make it easier to ensure that voters do not walk away with ballot

papers, something that happens in all villages).

An open space of several meters should be maintained between the counting stations and the voters who are interested in finding out the election outcome.

Part IV. Training in Baoding, December 18-21, 1999

The Carter Center sponsored a training of election officials in Baoding Municipality, Hebei Province from December 9 to 12, 1999. Baoding, 140 Kilometers south of Beijing, is one of twelve municipalities in Hebei Province. As of the end of 1996, Baoding had a population of 10.27 million of which 8.87 million is rural, the fifth largest in the nation. There are 3 county-level districts, 4 county-level cities and 18 counties under Baoding's jurisdiction. It has 492 townships and 6,251 villagers' committees.

A total number of 145 officials were trained. 130 were responsible election officials from county and township governments in Baoding. 15 were officials from the Baoding Municipal Government and Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs. Seminars were conducted on the Organic Law, the Hebei Provincial Implementation Measures of the Organic Law, and the Hebei Measures.

Mr. Zhang Mingliang, Director-General of the Department of Basic-level Governance, MCA, gave the keynote speech. Leading officials from Baoding attended the opening session. Professor Yu Weiliang, of Beijing Civil Affairs Training College and one of the most famous trainers of village election procedures in China, lectured at the training and organized a mock election.

Part V. Township Elections in China in 1998-1999

Professor Shi Weimin, a researcher at CASS, gave us an important briefing on several experiments that took place in various regions in China in electing the township magistrate, chairman of the presidium of Township People's Congresses (TPC) and township Party secretary from 1998 to 1999. Shi is a prominent researcher on China's electoral system. His most recent book is entitled *Direct Election: Its System and Procedure: A Study of Elections of Deputies to County Level People's Congresses*. Two other books, one on the direct election of leading township officials and one on election data gathering and analysis, are forthcoming. Since Professor Shi and his colleagues are conducting an investigation of the evolution and impact of village elections in Qianxi County, he accompanied us to Qianxi and offered the following

findings to us while we were there.

Direct Election v. Indirect Election

There are three kinds of direct elections in China: direct election of VC members, direct election of deputies to the TPC and direct election of deputies to the county people's congress (CPC). Leading officials at the township and the county levels (including township and county magistrates, deputy magistrates, chairmen of the TPC (presidium) and the CPC (standing committee) and vice chairmen of the TPC and the CPC are elected indirectly by deputies to the TPC and CPC.[\(24\)](#) Direct elections in China are conducted according to the "The Electoral Law of the PRC for the National People's Congress and Local People's Congresses at All Levels". Indirect elections of leading officials at the local governments and people's congresses are held according to "The PRC Organization Law for Local People's Congresses and Local Governments at All Levels". Ordinary voters have no access to the nomination and election of leading officials at the township, county and higher levels.[\(25\)](#)

Nomination of Candidates and Election in Indirect Elections [\(26\)](#)

There are two methods of nomination of candidates at the township and county level, namely nomination by people's congress presidium and nomination by 10 or more "deputies freely associating." Nomination by the presidium is in fact a Party dominated nomination. Candidates nominated by deputies freely associating usually have very little chance of winning. At the level of the township and county, there is normally only one candidate for the magistrate and chair of the presidium since it is permitted by the election law.[\(27\)](#) Multiple candidates are usually fielded only in the election of vice magistrates and vice chairs of the presidium.

There are various ways for the Election Leadership Commission at the township level to discourage candidates nominated by the deputies freely associated from running for offices. The presidium can persuade the deputies to withdraw the nomination or convince the nominee to drop out. In 1999, during Shandong Province's township elections, TPC presidium nominated 2,270 candidates for the chair and 2,294 for the magistrate. Only two candidates for the chair of the presidium lost the election and three for the magistrate did not win. Deputies only managed to nominate 6 candidates for the magistrate and three were elected. For deputy magistrates, there were 9,235 positions in Shandong. Deputies managed to nominate 2,452 candidates but only 38 were elected. There are a few cases of non-endorsed candidates who were elected ("jumping out of the ballot box"), but then they got transferred to another township and therefore lost legitimacy.[\(28\)](#) Candidates do not necessarily come from the local area in which they are running: rather, they are often government functionaries assigned there.

These practices have triggered discontent among deputies because they have no real input into the election and among the broad masses who have elected the deputies to represent their interests and fight for their causes. [It also led to a high turnover rate of

leading township officials since most of them got elected not because they were popular but because they were trusted by the Party and the government.] Popular resentment and a high turnover rate have inhibited the implementation of state policies at the township level in many places. As a result, there is serious political instability at the township level. Because this is the lowest level of the official government with a connection to the farmers, higher officials are inclined to see that elected officials are popular, more effective, and held accountable.

In this context, in the new round of election of leading township officials from 1998 and 1999, reform efforts were made in various areas to expand the choice and to get as many voters involved as possible. Although officials and scholars in China do not have a complete picture of these experiments, they can be summarized into five categories.

1. Nomination by deputies freely associated

Officials in Mianyang Municipality, Sichuan picked one township from each of the eleven counties and county-level districts under its jurisdiction to try this experiment for electing magistrates and deputy magistrates. Professor Shi and his colleagues investigated this new method in Jiepai Township, An County, Mianyang.

The experiment was designed to limit the control of the nomination by the Party through eliminating the so-called presidium nomination altogether. In the pilot townships, only TPC deputies could nominate candidates for both the magistrate and deputy magistrates. Another significant initiative was associated with this experiment. At the election time, each pilot township used secret ballot booths with public counting of the votes. Usually it is the other way around--public voting, secret counting. In Jiepai Township, there were two candidates for the magistrate. One candidate won all of the votes and the other received zero votes.[\(29\)](#) Comparing with other efforts, this is by far the easiest reform option.

2. The use of the two-ballot system

This experiment, tried in Zhuoli Township, Linyi County, Shanxi Province, was keenly observed by officials from the NPC and the MCA and reported by the Chinese media. The so-called two-ballot system was invented by officials in neighboring Hequ County. In Hequ, villagers questioned the legitimacy of the village Party Branch members. If the voters could elect all VC members, Party Branch members should also go through the same public scrutiny, too, they proposed. As a result, before Party members elect Party Branch members, all candidates should go through a public opinion poll. If the candidates fail to get more than 50 percent of endorsement from ordinary voters, they automatically lose their candidacy.

In April 1999, during the election of TPC deputies in Zhuoli, the three single candidates for the magistrate, the TPC presidium chair and the Party Committee secretary underwent a public opinion polling with ratings of “very satisfactory,” “satisfactory,”

“unsatisfactory.” Only those who received satisfactory or higher ratings of at least 60% were eligible to become candidates. This was done through balloting, but secret balloting was not enforced. There were reports that manipulation of voters and outright cheating took place. The organizers of the polling also lowered the threshold for a winning candidacy to 50%.

The result of the polling was overwhelmingly in favor of the anointed candidates who were all incumbents: the Party secretary received 90.67%, Chair 88.8%, Magistrate 89.5%. Despite the lack of competition and the fact that no alternative candidates were fielded, it may be seen as a step forward in subjecting candidates that were determined internally in a very small circle of electors to public opinion polling. It introduced an element of suspense and participation to the voters, but it failed substantively to alter the status quo in selecting leading township officials.

3. Gongxuan--Public Election

Public election is an inaccurate term to describe this kind of selection of leading township officials, but it has become very popular among officials and voters. This method was used mainly in Sichuan, particularly in Suining Municipality, where the Buyun election also took place, and in Nanbu County. This public election method was used both to elect township administrators and Party secretaries. In Baima Township, to the surprise of the organizers and the broad masses, a non-Party member was elected as the magistrate.

The first stage of the public election is registration (self-nomination). All those who meet the age (under 45), education (high school minimum) and political (no criminal record, patriotic, support Party's policies, etc.) requirements could apply to become preliminary candidates. The second stage is known as a cultural written test. The written exam tests candidates' general knowledge (scientific farming, geographical, historical and current affairs), grasp of political theory, and ability to respond to policy issues. For example, applicants were asked to identify Clinton and Yeltsin, locate South Africa, and write essays to explain the thesis “Why Is Rural Stability the Foundation of National Stability in China?” and “How Do You Handle Letters of Complaint from Farmers on Disaster Relief?” The tests were all designed and graded in a different township to avoid cheating.

Those who pass the written test face an interview attended by 200 to 400 township officials and village leaders. Each candidate addresses these selectors and answers their questions. Then, the interviewers cast ballots to determine the final candidates. The candidates are then forwarded to either the TPC or township Party congress for the deputies to vote for.

The significance of this process is multiple. It allows all those who are interested in running to nominate themselves. It puts all the potential candidates theoretically on a level field of competition. It reduces the level of manipulation and influence by the Party and other organizations to control the nomination and determination of final candidates.

But there are inherent problems. The selection of selectors is not open to the public. The Party Committee and the government in the township or even the county pick them. They are all subject to various kinds of influence from their selectors. Test grading can be a little subjective.

According to Professor Shi, these three experiments are certainly encouraging signs of the quest for new ways to solve the perennial problem of choice and restriction on nomination, but they have all failed to bring ordinary voters directly into the process. The experiments have opened up the process but not wide enough to generate real legitimacy and popular input. Therefore, they should not be taken as models to be promoted for nationwide implementation.

4. Minxuan—People’s Nomination: The Dapeng Experiment

Dapeng is a town in Longgang District, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province. On April 30, 1999, Li Weiwen, a 48-year old government official, was unanimously elected by forty-five deputies of the Dapeng TPC and became the first township magistrate elected through what is labeled as a “people’s nomination” (minxuan). The April 30 election, in fact, was a confirmation of the result of an open primary that involved all eligible voters in Dapeng.

To a certain extent, the Dapeng experiment was like the liberal Buyun election repeated with a conservative twist. Dapeng has a population of 6,900 with about 5,300 eligible voters. In January 1999, election organizers in Dapeng announced that all eligible voters could nominate candidates for the position of township magistrate through a secret ballot in seventeen polling stations in the township. The whole nomination process lasted four days, from January 22 to 25. 5,048 voters participated in the nomination with 5,039 valid nomination vote (nomination of two candidates would invalidate the form) forms collected. Seventy-six candidates were nominated with Li Weiwen receiving 3,323 votes. The second runner-up was an incumbent township deputy magistrate with 355 votes. There were four other candidates who received more than 100 votes.

According to the nomination procedure, those with more than 100 votes would enter an election to determine the final candidates after an eligibility check. The Election Leadership Committee (ELC) dropped one candidate from the pool because he was over 50 years old. The primary was held in a local theater with 1,068 electors, made up of local officials and VSGs representatives. After hearing campaign speeches delivered by the five candidates in the order of votes each had received in the primary, the electors voted to pick the final candidate. Each elector was allowed to pick one person. Li Weiwen received 813 ballots in this round. The ELC then submitted Li as the final and only candidate for the position of magistrate to the TPC.

Some officials and scholars refer to the Dapeng experiment as “the three ballot system,” namely, the first ballot of nomination by all registered voters, the second ballot of electors choosing the final candidate and the third ballot of TPC deputies confirming the

choice of the voters and the electors. Some officials defined this three-ballot system as an upside down triangle because fewer and fewer numbers of people ended up electing the township magistrate. However, this experiment did not deviate from the Constitution and the Election Law, and if conducted well, can introduce real competition and choice into the system. In fact, there was intense interest in the Dapeng election. The procedures were designed by NPC officials and political scientists from Beijing. National media outlets also sent people to observe the election in an attempt to launch a media campaign to call for more Dapeng experiments in China. When a local newspaper ran a story on Dapeng with a banner headline claiming the Party was withdrawing itself from the nomination of candidates, a decision was quickly made not to publicize the election.[\(30\)](#)

5. Zhixuan—the Direct Election in Buyun[\(31\)](#)

The Buyun Election was bold and daring. It was likely a spontaneous reaction to massive support for the public election in Suining described above. It could well be the direction of China's electoral reform. Despite its publicity in the West and some Chinese scholars' claim that Buyun is to China's political reform what Xiaogang Village was to China's economic reform [\(32\)](#), at a recent conference in Beijing attended by officials from fifteen provincial people's congresses, only officials from three provinces, including Sichuan, had heard of the Buyun election. What can we expect after Buyun?

There is no expectation that in the next cycle of TPC and CPC elections, scheduled for 2001 and 2002, there will be a rush to conduct elections the Buyun way. China's electoral reform probably will be evolutionary, and it is unlikely that the Constitution and the election laws will be revised any time soon. Any reform attempt will have to be incremental and within the constraints of the Constitution in order to proceed without interference. For example, the reduction of the role of the presidium in nomination may be gradually implemented. In fact, three provincial-level people's congress deputy election regulations (Beijing, Guangdong and Tianjin) have already stipulated that the presidium can only nominate 15 percent of the candidates. The Dapeng method can also be promoted in the next round of elections. There is much room for improvement in TPC and CPC elections in terms of setting up election districts, improving nomination methods, introducing primaries and enforcing secret ballot. All these measures can be incorporated into the provincial implementation measures.

The NPC and Provincial People's Congresses can also improve the quality of elections through better election data gathering. If the NPC decides to collect data on how many elections are conducted in secret ballot booths and the percentage of nomination of candidates that are made by presidiums at the TPC and CPC level, then a message will be sent out to the local election organizers. Better data will also make it easier for officials and scholars to analyze electoral situations in the countryside and offer measures to correct problems.

With VC elections going full steam under the supervision of the MCA and support of the NPC, elections at the TPC and CPC levels may also be affected in a positive way.

After all, it is the same group of voters that are going to the polling station. As an MCA official told us, VC elections are a democracy seminar for China's 600 million voters in the countryside in terms of democratic electoral practices. When they fully grasp the substantive significance of the procedure, they will want to use it to choose other leaders as well. It is no wonder a rural journal editor made a prophetic comment that this will be the second time in recent Chinese history that the countryside encircles the urban centers.