

Stability through more participation? — Local direct elections and their impact on Communist rule in present-day China*

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The article brings into focus an ongoing research project on village elections in the PRC. Introduced in the late 1980s, they have undergone almost fifteen years of implementation. However, China scholars have started only in recent years to concentrate on village elections more systematically and to analyse their impact on Communist rule in the countryside. The empirical findings so far present a very contradictory picture, suggesting both more and less stability through the direct ballot. Also, much research has been done on electoral quality and participation patterns, while qualitative studies dealing with changes in the peasants' political awareness and behaviour lag somewhat behind. The project introduced here examines the peasant's political culture in six villages situated in three provinces, trying to narrow the mentioned gap within contemporary research on local democracy in the PRC.

Direct elections at the village level have been introduced to the political system of the PRC fifteen years ago.¹ Almost ignored by China scholars at first, they have slowly become the focus of much empirical research in recent years. The reason for this growing academic (and political) interest in both the West and China is understandable. With more and more villages casting ballots to elect their governments, the quality of the electoral process gradually improving and first signs of genuine political mobilisation among the peasants being noticed, more and more people now have a second look at these elections. Additional interest has been stimulated by recent

* This article aims at bringing into perspective an ongoing research project titled "Village and Urban Neighborhood Elections in the PRC — Driving Force for Democracy or Institutional Arrangement to Consolidate One-party Rule?", jointly initiated by Prof. Thomas Heberer (Duisburg University) and this author and supported by the German Science Association (DFG) and the Ministry of Economic Cooperation of the German Federal Government. I will focus on the first part of village committee (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) elections and leave out the second one of urban neighborhood committee (*jumin weiyuanhui*) elections. The latter still lag far behind the degree of procedural implementation and political mobilisation that village elections have achieved to the day. Therefore, their impact on the urban population's political thinking and behaviour must be estimated much less significant. However, neighborhood committee elections have become more important in some cities recently and might slowly evolve into the urban counterpart of village elections. Here, our research must be considered pioneering work, as the issue of urban direct elections is clearly (and understandably) underresearched so far.

¹ The Organic Law of Village Committees was promulgated in 1987 on a trial basis first. Since its revision in 1989, direct elections for VCs are obligatory in the whole country.

experiments with direct voting at the township level in different provinces.² Although the number of scholars doing regular fieldwork is still quite small, the issue of local direct elections has become a steady reference point in almost all studies reporting on the latest developments in contemporary Chinese politics. These tend to suggest a real potential of village elections to emancipate the people from Communist authoritarianism. As a matter of fact, most China scholars in the West think that (long-term) stability in the PRC can only be achieved by the gradual introduction of democratic institutions and the ultimate abolition of the Communist Party's power monopoly.³ From this (liberal-democratic) perspective, competitive elections and Communist one party-rule cannot go together. Either are such elections flawed by the party's manipulating influence, leading to more instability in the long run by voter frustration and declining party-legitimacy. Or they will evolve into a dynamic bottom-up force that systematically pushes the party into the defensive and finally destroys its power monopoly — which would also mean instability. To put this view in different terms: *Elections and stability in Socialist China are mutually exclusive.*

The party leadership, for its part, is rejecting any consideration that local direct elections are the first step into a pluralist, multi-party democratic system as known in the West. Village self-government has been introduced in the late 1980s in order to enhance the (democratic) legitimacy of local cadres, to promote their recruitment and professionalisation through more competition and post-election accountability, to speed up economic development, to fight more efficiently against corruption, and, consequently, to bring more stability to the countryside (Elklit 1997; Kelliher 1997; Li/O'Brien 1999; O'Brien/Li 2000). In short, local direct elections have a very instrumental value for the Communist Party: They are seen as a means to generate more stability through political legitimacy-building and (economic and social) development within the parameters of accepted one-party rule. In that sense, *elections and stability are mutually supportive.*

At this point, a couple of important questions arise that form the background of our research project:

- How successful has the Communist Party actually been so far in achieving stability (as the party defines it) by initiating more political participation through local direct elections? Will the party indeed be able to secure *long-term* stability by the introduction of (*limited* or *semi-competitive*) elections at the lower administrative levels? Or does it soon have to extend them to the higher levels in order to keep up stability — which would imply the danger of gradually bringing an end to one-party rule in China? How does the party leadership think about this

² International attention was aroused by the direct election of the head of Buyun township (Shizhong district of Suining City, Sichuan province) in December 1998. Although it was not the first of its kind, the Buyun ballot can be regarded as the most democratic election of a township head in the PRC so far. For details see Li (1999), Li/Shou (2000), He/Lang (2001), Cheng (2001).

³ Quite representative for this analytical premise is a collection of articles written by renowned Western and Chinese scholars in a January 1998 special edition of the *Journal of Democracy* titled "Will China Democratize?". I have briefly dealt with the epistemological problematic behind this way of reasoning in Schubert (1998). However, the 'democratic potential' of village elections is treated with much more cautiousness by those scholars who do regular field work and have a closer look at the empirical data (see below).

point? And how does the debate on local direct elections affect the ongoing discussion on political system reform within the party?

- How have village elections influenced the people's political thinking and behaviour and what does this mean for social and political stability in the countryside? How much legitimacy do the people attribute to the party because of their guaranteed right to engage in local self-government by the means of direct voting? On the contrary, how much is this legitimacy challenged because of more direct political participation, relating local elections to instability?
- Does the introduction of local direct elections inhere any path dependency that may put on firm ground the Communist leadership's concept of *stability through participation under one-party rule*? More precisely: How much reason is there to claim that *long-term* stability in China can be achieved by limited electoral competition — a hypothesis alluding to a specific *historical tradition* of rural self-government and autonomy that makes a clear distinction between the national and local sphere; a specific *cultural tradition* of remonstrance, i.e. a preference for correcting the state's behaviour by "enlightened criticism from below" (instead of promoting a Hobbesian or Rousseauian social contract that institutionalizes a much more horizontal relationship between the state and the people); and a specific *political tradition* of respecting the Communist Party as a revolutionary force that liberated China from imperial humiliation and destructive warlordism, thereby giving it much credit as the nation-state's embodiment? And if the hypothesis of path-dependency can be verified, do we face in China an alternative model of political participation *and* legitimacy (as the precondition of stability) that is deviating from the Western liberal one in more than only transitory terms? To put it in even more provocative terms: May stability in China be generated by a *sustainable* model of limited democracy under the roof of one party-rule (Schubert 2002a)?

Village elections in the PRC — a brief account of the state of research

The above-mentioned questions cannot be answered, yet. As a matter of fact, the empirical data collected so far provides a rather blurred picture of the impact of village elections on rural stability. However, accounting more than a decade of direct voting and 'competitive politics' in the countryside, the following provisional findings might be reported and accentuated by some attached hypotheses:

- The procedural quality of village elections has ameliorated considerably since the late 1980s and has contributed much to growing political mobilisation and participation of the rural population (Manion 1996; Jennings 1997; Shi 1999). The better elections are implemented, it seems, the more people are interested in them.
- Election-driven political mobilisation has considerably changed the peasants' relationship to their village committees. The VC members need the villagers' support for being (re-)elected and therefore cannot (as in former times) rely exclusively on the support of the township government or the village or township party branches. At the same time, the elected village head disposes of new political legitimacy that he can use either to implement the political directives coming from

above or to oppose the township government. His position has therefore become very complex, although according to the revised Organic Law from 1998 he is explicitly subordinated to the guidance of the Party, i.e. the village or township party secretary (Lawrence 1994; Hu 1998; He/Lang 2000; Liu 2000). In sum, peasants seem to be truly empowered by elections, with local power relations gradually changing in favour of elected cadres.

- The village party secretary is put into the defensive by direct village elections, because he is confronted now with a stronger village committee. For that reason, the Party is increasingly forced to bind its appointment of party secretaries — at least indirectly — to the villagers' democratic vote (Li 1999). The more elections take root in a village, the more the party loses its power to control the village committee and the more it must give new democratic legitimacy to its village party branch.
- The politicization of the peasants is not only demonstrated — at least in some areas — by an increasing willingness to participate in local politics and to contact the elected village committee to defend the peasants' interests against the higher levels of government. It also becomes manifest by the cultivation/habitualisation of the strategic arsenal of "rightful resistance", i.e. the playing of official laws and regulations against the cadre bureaucracy (O'Brien 1996; Li/O'Brien 1996). Therefore, local direct elections seem to generate an awareness of the people to have rights *against* the party-state. The longer such elections are practised, the more they are contributing to the rise of the Chinese citizen — a person linked to the state by a contract that ensures him/her political autonomy.
- Also less clear, there is much reason to believe that political mobilisation in the villages has contributed to growing pressure in some parts of China to introduce direct elections at the township level (Li 2001).⁴ This may give some ground to the hypothesis that genuine local direct elections are the start of an unavoidable democratization "from the bottom-up".

Needless to say, that the above-listed observations are not representative for all parts of China where direct elections have been institutionalized. There is a huge number of reports and field studies pointing at the irrelevance of elections for local power distribution or the predominating influence of the cadre bureaucracy on the nomination process and the election results (Alpermann 2001). However, these shortcomings seem to be gradually eradicated as much by the number of elections held as by better implementation (and drafting) of election guidelines. Indeed, the success of local direct elections appears to be closely linked to electoral experience and practice.

As far as stability is concerned, the party's aim to reconsolidate its rule over the countryside has been achieved fairly well in some areas, whereas results are more mixed or even negative in others. In those more stable places, direct elections have obviously brought new political legitimacy to the village committees, making it easier

⁴ As mentioned above, experiments with direct township elections have been undertaken since 1998, although they are considered to be formally illegal since the issuance of Central Committee Document No. 12 in July 2001, stipulating that direct elections of township heads violate the PRC constitution and the Organic Law of Local People's Congresses and Local Governments.

for them to implement party guidelines and government policies passed down from above. This has doubtlessly strengthened Communist rule.⁵ On the contrary, stability has not been achieved in those areas, where the institutionalization of direct elections has only just started and where they are still seriously manipulated by local cadres. So once again, much empirical evidence speaks for a causal link between the number of direct elections, the quality of the electoral process and the degree of stability.

From a different perspective, local politics has become more complex by direct elections, because their impact has changed the power relations between the different political actors in the villages on the one hand and between the village and the township/county governments on the other. Generally spoken, election-based village self-government leads to a horizontalisation of local power that tends to bring more instability to the countryside at first sight. On the one hand, there is pressure coming from the villages to broaden the scope of direct elections up to the townships and counties, provoking resistance at these levels. On the other hand, more and more township cadres opt for direct elections themselves. As they are 'sandwiched' between democratically-elected village committees opposing the township's demands and the county governments urging them to carry through official policies, this seems to them the only solution to survive in local politics.⁶ In that sense, village elections might have triggered a 'structural' dynamic opening up of the political system from the bottom — a dynamic that does not only reach out to the townships but soon, for the very same reasons, to the county level, too. The Party leadership does clearly see this possible outcome and fears its consequences for stability. Consequently, the issue of direct township elections has been shelved for the time being, although local experiments seem to go on in many provinces.⁷

Another point to be mentioned here is the Communist Party's growing challenge to give new legitimacy to its party secretaries in the villages and townships. Although the revised Organic Law for Village Committees from 1998 stipulates that the party is leading (*lingdao*) the villages, the introduction of direct elections for the position of village head makes the party secretary's political standing precarious. In order to avoid a 'democratic showdown' between village head and party secretary in case that a

⁵ For that reason, some scholars state a compatibility of interests between central party leaders and the peasants concerning the institutionalization of village elections. As Jude Howell (1998) put it, top Chinese leaders "have a clear interest in ensuring that grievances and dissatisfaction among rural inhabitants are expressed in containable rather than uncontrollable ways".

⁶ Once again, this is not a common phenomenon to be observed all over China, but mainly in those places where village elections have been fairly institutionalized and competition over local resources is fierce. A common phenomenon, however, is the township governments constant efforts to keep their political supremacy over the villages, trying anything to avoid that village elections produce a real challenge to their leadership. However good or bad they may succeed in that, the 'legitimacy pressure' of village elections is always felt.

⁷ Provincial and even county arbitrariness concerning the promotion of direct township elections is widespread and well-known in China. Since it was Jiang Zemin who is said to have personally intervened to rule out official legalisation of the township ballot any time soon, many concerned scholars and public officials in the PRC believe that the tide will turn within the party leadership after Hu Jintao has taken over the state presidency in 2003 (Personal communication in Beijing, March 2002).

personal union of these two posts cannot be sponsored,⁸ the party is forced to modify its nomination system and to integrate new methods of public choice. These have been introduced in some areas: Either are voters asked to make a 'recommendation vote' that the party respects when it nominates the party secretary. Or it nominates a candidate who has already won the people's support by becoming directly elected VC head before.⁹ These institutional innovations are currently 'hot issues' of the intra-party debate on political system reform in the PRC. They can be regarded as necessary reform supplements to the introduction of competitive village elections in order to stabilize the party's legitimacy in the countryside. However, if one day the popular vote cannot be successfully 'caught' by these means anymore, things will quickly turn out to be extremely difficult for the party leadership in rural China. At this point, it is an open question if the village party branch will survive the further institutionalization of village elections — and what it would mean for rural stability if it was gradually sidelined by the impact of these elections.¹⁰ Things would become even more politically sensitive, if the same question arose at the township or even county level one day.

Research program

Building on the contradictory observations made so far, we intend to contribute to the current research on local direct elections in the PRC by more closely investigating the people's political attitudes on (and shaped by) these elections. We are interested in their political values and try to evaluate the potential of these to generate legitimacy and stability for the party. Our approach therefore deviates to some degree from the current mainstream of Western and Chinese research on local direct elections, since the latter's influence on the political culture of the rural population has not been the focus of most of the empirical research (Schubert 2000b). Two hypotheses have been formulated, the first taking seriously the "party's approach" and the second one representing the "Western (i.e. liberal-democratic) approach" to local direct elections and stability in the PRC:

1. The Communist Party is successful in gaining more and enduring 'systemic stability' through limited political participation in the villages and cities, because this institutional arrangement helps to create more economic development and prosperity as it produces more political legitimacy for the party at both the local and national levels. The people reward the party with this legitimacy, because they *accept* the connection of conditioned (if only fair) participation and one-party rule for specific historical, cultural, and political reasons. Therefore, there is no contradiction between stability, political legitimacy, and communist

⁸ Actually, in many (if not most) of China's villages, the posts of party secretary and village head are still held by one person. However, this tradition slowly disappears, as village elections become more established in rural political life.

⁹ See also "Village Democracy", in: *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 27th, 2000, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ As Thomas Heberer has pointed out in various discussions on the subject, the party might skip the village party branch some day just for financial reasons, since the current system of competing village authorities is simply too expensive. Certainly enough, this would be a qualitative jump in political system reform in the PRC that is — as far as I can see — not openly debated, yet.

supremacy, as laid out in the framework of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics".

2. The Communist Party fails in generating more stability by limited political participation through direct elections, because even if this institutional arrangement leads to more economic development and political transparency, it cannot enhance the legitimacy of communist one-party rule. As the people (and their elected representatives) get more politicized by the electoral process and its aftermath, criticism against the party's cautious approach of power-sharing will rise. Growing pressure from below forces the party to extend direct elections to the upper levels, thereby opening up the political system and ultimately giving way to full-scale democracy.

These two hypotheses form the background of a set of more general research questions which are then "downsized" to semi-standardized questionnaires to be used in the field.¹¹ On the general level, we are interested in the interviewees'¹² subjective views and estimations of the following aspects of local direct elections:

- How competitive have elections been so far? How much have they affected the people's readiness to take part in direct voting and local politics thereafter? How much growth in personal influence on local politics caused by these elections do the people perceive? How much relevance have elections in their life?
- How do people think of their elected VC members, especially the village head? Have elections made them think in terms of a new 'political contract' that binds them to their elected leaders — and the leaders to them? How have elections changed the relationship between the people and the non-elected cadre bureaucracy (i.e. the party branch personnel)?
- How big do people estimate the influence of old and new 'non-system elites' (i.e. clan organizations, religious groups, new entrepreneurs etc.) on direct elections and local politics? Do these elites play a positive or a negative role for the institutionalization of direct elections and election-based rural self-government?¹³
- How do the local cadres deal with the double bind of 'democratic accountability' towards the electorate and their obligation to 'obey the party line'? How do they see the implementation of (semi-)competitive elections with respect to their responsibilities and their political authority vis-a-vis the peasants?
- How do village elections affect the upper governments and party branches (especially at the township and county levels)? How much pressure 'from below' do cadres feel to extend direct elections to their respective levels? And what do they think about it?

¹¹ We will also work with a set of standardized questions to secure the possibility of some statistical correlation analysis. However, this is not the main interest of our research.

¹² Interviewees will be 'civilians' and cadres in selected villages and urban neighborhoods (see below) and cadres at the level of township (district), county (city), and province. Also, representatives of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Minzhengbu) on all levels of government will be questioned.

¹³ These 'non-system elites' have received much attention by Chinese scholars lately, while they are still widely neglected by Western social scientists focussing on village elections and rural politics. A good example for a theoretical explanation — based on sound empirical data — of the role of 'non-system elites' in village elections is Tong (2002).

By this survey framework, we hope not only to gain exemplary insights into the local population's political thinking and the extent of its politicization, but also into the party's state of mind, especially at the lower administrative levels. This should help us to determine more exactly the degree of stability — or the intensity of present political conflict — in rural China.¹⁴ We conceive of this undertaking that primarily relies on qualitative research methods (open and semi-standardized interviews) as a fruitful and necessary completion of those approaches making use of more quantitative methodology to explain electoral competitiveness, voter behaviour and voters' political attitudes and values.¹⁵ Problems of electoral implementation so hotly debated by Western and Chinese experts in the context of officially sponsored programmes to promote village elections in the PRC are surely discussed by our project, too. However, we are much less interested in those technical problems (e.g. Pastor 2000) as we are in the effort to learn more about how local politics is thought of in China and by Chinese.

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¹⁴ Additionally, we will collect data by a systematic look at the Chinese research on local direct elections, as far as it comes close to our research and methodology.

¹⁵ Well aware of our limited resources both in terms of personnel and funding and of the impossibility to make any claims for the whole of China, we still have tried to select our cases on a somewhat representative basis in terms of both electoral implementation and economic development (in this order) nation-wide. With respect to village elections, we broadly distinguish between a "model region" (good electoral implementation and strong economic development: Guangdong province), an "average region" (lower degree of electoral implementation and economic development: Shandong province) and a "under-average region" (low degree of electoral implementation and economic development: Jiangxi province). In each province two villages situated in one township will be investigated. This distinction is problematic, of course, since the degrees of electoral implementation and economic development do not only vary from province to province, but also within each of the provinces. However, representativeness is not the main issue here. We are contributing to a collective effort in the field of social science research on China to come to terms with the political reality in roughly 900,000 villages (!) — and the simple fact that not even 500 of them have been systematically researched, yet.

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