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Giving Meaning to Elections in Chinese Minority Areas

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Democratization of minority villages in China is not conceptually distinguishable from that of Han villages probably because democratization is conceived of as a universal type of progress regardless of the country or ethnic origin of the areas under study. This paper reports on a number of interviews with local minority scholars and cadres at the township and village levels in three minority areas in China and one in Taiwan. The paper will draw a comparison among those ethnic groups. Both China and Taiwan possess a "human relational culture" while the latter is institutionally more democratic in politics and more liberal in economics than the former. The similarities among the four minority areas are significant. First of all, electoral competition is not of value in any of these ethnic villages. Integration and unity are the major concerns. Competing on the human relational front is more typical than intra-system campaigning. The anxiety over loss of social control is a built-in element, rather than a constraint, of democracy. The family and kinship organizations are by far the most influential factors in election-related discourse. Even though people no longer blindly follow the family position on an issue, the repeated reference to "unity" or "consensus" implies a worldview where the meaning of life begins in the family, the tribe, and the kinship level instead of the individual. Electoral politics has not yet changed the fundamental thinking on the priority of the collective over the individual.

KEYWORDS: **election; China; Taiwan; village; ethnic minority; political culture**

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Interpreting Elections

Although democracy and elections are not interchangeable concepts, many political observers expediently refer to the holding of elections as indicators of democratization. At least, many consider elections to be a necessary condition for democracy.[1] This is especially true if marketization occurs simultaneously. Marketization and elections are similar in their common emphasis on individualized motivation behind each political and economic behavior; this individualism is what strengthens democracy. While the conditionality of elections as related to democratization may be reasonable, elections can also be a useful instrument in sustaining social forces irrelevant, if not hostile, to democratization. If one overlooks the various meanings of elections that do not lead to the rise of the democratic culture familiar to political scientists, one would not appreciate the possibility that there might be different kinds of democracy. Such a possibility would include democracies that do not seriously treat individual rights in politics or market.

To observe democratization today nonetheless focuses on elections in terms of their procedural fairness and the acceptance of their results. Procedures are matters of institutional technicality while acceptance is a matter of political culture. The former receive more attention both because technical matters can be improved relatively easily over time and because frequent application of fair electoral procedures is believed to be conducive to the breeding of democratic culture. The interest of political scientists in observing elections implies that elections can create, if not just reflect, both the knowledge for and the will of individual citizens/voters to participate in politics for the purpose of protecting their personal interests.

The same line of reasoning may explain the rising interests among political scientists in the installation of electoral mechanisms in most Chi-

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[1]Minxin Pei, "Creeping Democratization in China," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 4 (October 1995): 76; Larry Diamond, "Beyond Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism," in *The New Democracies*, ed. Brad Roberts (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 227-49.

nese villages. Outside observers cannot but wonder if the nascent practices of ballot casting may bring about a more democratic China.[2] I have argued against this type of observation elsewhere based on my findings that peasants take part in voting for reasons irrelevant to either individualism or liberalism. On the contrary, my past interviewees were concerned with maintaining some sort of identification with kinship, religion, as well as faction. People care more about expressing trust toward a leader who should know their interests better than about imposing their own concept of interest upon candidates. Despite the rhetoric on checking power of democracy that has been promoted in the official media, the quest for benevolent leadership, instead of political checks, is clear in these elections.[3] In the interviewed areas, nevertheless, the ability to improve economic welfare of the village as a whole is often what attests to the existence of benevolent leadership.

If one argues that this quest for benevolent leadership is destined to die out eventually along the development of the market economy, one carries the burden of proof that, first, collective ownership system in villages will dwindle and, second, that collective identity will concomitantly perish. If any of these two processes fail, the holding of elections may simply represent a new form of collectivism rather than liberal democracy. Whether or not democracy is part of this new form thus becomes a matter of semantics. Past experiences in Taiwan seem to suggest that existing "human relational culture" constrains the range of political change that can be caused by the holding of elections.[4]

"Human relational culture" refers to an affective tendency as well as cognitive necessity to always interpret one's own action and role in accordance with one's relationship with a larger social network; there is the little

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[2]International Republican Institute, "People's Republic of China" (N.p.: International Republican Institute, n.d.) (mimeo).

[3]Chih-yu Shih, "Public Citizens, Private Voters," in *PRC Tomorrow*, ed. Chong-Pin Lin (Kaohsiung: National Sun Yat-sen University, 1996), 145-68.

[4]On the authoritarian culture and democratization in Taiwan, see Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu, "Electoral Competition and Political Democratization in Taiwan" (Paper presented at the Conference on Democratization in Taiwan, Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, Taipei, January 8-10, 1989).

self as oneself and the great self as societies at various different levels. The expression of one's own interest is legitimate only if it involves some self-less positioning which from time to time requires theatrical sacrifice of the interests that presumably prompt one's action in the first place. The human relational culture survives through child rearing, school education, and socialization. A growing person learns to relate his or her role in any given event from the situational context, which may be defined, for instance, by family, work unit, community, state, nation, or race. The acquiring of one's own material interest should be a by-product rather than a direct goal. Consequently, for people higher in the sociopolitical ladder, private and public interests are often difficult to distinguish. "Elections" as a judge of leader character, not voter interests, would be useful to the consolidation of a collective spirit since the ruled have the right to determine whether or not leaders have confused the "public" with the "private" good.

Compared with typical villages in Han areas, minority villages should better demonstrate this collective tendency. In theory, elections in these areas individualize minority members to leave behind their sense of duty to the ethnic groups of which they are members and create a stronger sense of loyalty to the Chinese state. Although democratization is not the same as Sinification, democratization that carries civilizing discourses cannot avoid triggering Sinification. If ethnic identity is important to people, their responses to the introduction of electoral procedures to their villages should be even more hybrid than in Han villages. In other words, human relational culture in minority areas should be richer. This is why one can expect that the meaning of elections for other than individualistic purposes be more readily apparent in minority areas.

Little research has been done in this area. Democratization of minority villages is not conceptually distinguishable from that of Han villages probably because democratization is conceived of as a universal type of progress regardless of the country or ethnic origin of the areas under study. In this paper, I will report on a number of interviews with local minority scholars and cadres at the township and village levels. The venues of this study include three minority areas in China and one in Taiwan. The paper will draw a comparison among the ethnic groups in these areas. Both China and Taiwan possess a "human relational culture" while the latter is

institutionally more democratic in politics and more liberal in economics than the former.

I conducted the interviews in China in 1996 and 1997 with the Bai people in Dali, Yunnan; the Naxi people in Lijiang, Yunnan; and the Tujia people in Yongshun, Hunan. In Taiwan, the research was with the Zou people in Shanmei Village, Ali Mountain Township, Chiayi County.[5] The interviewees do not necessarily accurately represent the ethnic group of which they are members, but their views are useful because they teach us how elections can have different meanings. The purpose of this exercise is not to pin down a law-like relation between elections and democracy. Rather, the hope is to see how elections changed the strategies of the interviewees in their identity politics.

A Zou Village in the Ali Mountain Township

The Zou people live in the Ali Mountain Township of Chiayi County, Taiwan.[6] For the purpose of this paper, interviews were mainly with the Zou people in Shanmei Village of the Ali Mountain Township. Unlike in China where elections in ethnic areas are a politically sensitive issue usually not to be discussed with outside researchers, elections are a common-sense activity for the Zou people. Shanmei villagers are basically concerned with two types of elections: elections for village director and township director, and elections for the board members of the Shanmei Association of Community Development.

Interviews reveal a number of factors relatively important in determining vote choice of the villagers. They are the position of the elderly in the family or the kinship group, the position of Han dwellers living in the nearby plain, and the position of the ruling Kuomintang's (KMT's) local

[5]For the personal background of interviewees, see appendix.

[6]For a more detailed account of the background of this study, see Tang Hong-chong, "The Legends of Shanmei" (Chiayi: 1999) (mimeo). Tang was the acting township director of the Ali Mountain Township for three years between 1996 and 1998 and is currently a staff member of the Chiayi County Government.

office. The sense of unity among villagers at the time of elections affects how well all these factors can mutually adapt. To achieve unity, villagers stress the role of mutual consultation. The presumption seems to be that all Shanmei villagers should have only one position. The discussion is typically about unity or lack of unity, not about the freedom of choice by individual villagers.

In the last decade, the village's community development was centered around tourism and environmentalism. The issue of Zou identity was first sensitized by the upsurge of identity politics in Taiwan since the mid-1980s. Shanmei villagers have been able to settle down on their Zou identity not without some struggle. In the end, fortunately, villagers successfully adopted Shanmei's environmental resource, Gufish, as Shanmei's symbol. The protection of Gufish against Han raids and the growth of the business for Han tourists together serve the village quest for a meaningful identity.[7]

Villagers have established the Shanmei Association of Community Development to manage tourism and environmental protection. Election for the board members has always been a big issue in the village. There was once the worry that election results might challenge the existing "social ethic," meaning balance among kinship groups. It turns out that every election reflects the balance well. The interviewees stress the contrast with the elections for village and township directors, whereby such a balance has never been attained. The contrast suggests not just that villagers are more independent voters in the elections for village and township directors, but that, for the villagers, the Association is far and above more important than the village or township office. One Zou interviewee, Mr. Wen Ying-chieh, cannot be more satisfied with "the balance." He comments:

> The distribution of seats reflects our longstanding tribal ethic. This is not a negotiated result but is rather spontaneous. In the case of Shanmei, the An family and the Chuang family are the largest two, . . . You will find that An and Chuang took most seats in the last election. Other families have their shares,

[7]Gufish is the most significant and unique river resource in Shanmei. Early Zou dwellers harvested fish eggs from streams deep in the mountains and brought them back for raising in the valleys. About Shanmei's history, see Chih-yu Shih, "Ethnic Economy of Citizenship in China," in *The View of Citizenship in Modern China*, ed. Merle Goldman and Elizabeth Perry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

> too. The only family left out was the Tu family—yet the Tu family and the Yang family are related and the Yang family won a seat. In brief, the Association incorporates different positions, be they political, familial, or religious. . . . In contrast, the composition of village cadres does not incorporate different positions. I think this organized balance was formed under the previous system of the Commission of Tourist Development. . . . In that previous system, every family had seats. This is why the subsequent Association is able to do away with the village officials.

The position of village director cannot be shared—there is only one. This explains why villagers generally do not feel close to the directorship position as they do to the Association. One former chief commissioner of the Tourist Development—who later became general secretary of the Shanmei Association of Community Development and is now the village director—never treats the Association as subordinate to his governmental office. On the contrary, he accepts his secondary role and uses the patriarchal metaphor that "the man handles the outside world and the woman handles the domestic world" to describe the relationship between the board and the village office:

> When the election for the Association's board took place, Ying-feng won. Ying-feng has strong leadership. He has been very active and able to raise a lot of funds. The village director loses his focus in comparison; he did not know what to do in the beginning. He wanted to contribute but the Association had no place for him. His relationships with villagers were not as close as Ying-feng's. . . . Later, he may have realized his vulnerability and said that "Ying-feng took care of the outside world while I took care of the domestic world." . . . Whether or not there will be harmony between the board and the village depends on the attitude of these two.

In these remarks, we see that elections should produce leaders who are not there to promote specific interests. They must demonstrate that they have no personal interests to serve. Wen is a brother of Ying-feng and it is natural that he stresses the harmony and balance among families, especially when the largest family, Chuang, seems to be a little cynical about the clan's underdeveloped leadership in the village office. Wen told us that the Chuangs have the most seats in the Association so every development is ethical (*lunli*). One should note that the notion of "to be ethical" is a statement of being selfless. Moreover, for his brother to lead the Association and the village legitimately, Wen needs to stress the fact that the Tu family was not left out in actuality. Wen points to the neighboring village for the

possible consequence of not maintaining this ethical balance—"the imposition of Western religion on aboriginal people"[8] will take place in Shanmei.

How Shanmei villagers emphasize unity and harmony in the age of elections is interesting to hear. Before every election, Shanmei cadres work hard on "integrating" (*zhenghe*) different ideas. Cadres and villagers come together and everybody desiring so is able to express their opinion. As Yang Ching-hsi observes:

> We aboriginal people are minorities in the first place and if we spread our votes thin, the result would be very negative. We always work hard on integration, but we do not say you must vote for so and so. We respect everyone's own choice. I mean, cadres will tell their ideas and analyze pros and cons for the villagers to know. Most of the time, after listening to our promotion, villagers can understand better and cooperate. This is true for elections of township director as well as for the head of Chiayi County.

Shanmei is special among all Zou villages in the sense that villagers are allowed time to raise questions to cadres or candidates after listening to the speeches. Mr. Kao Cheng-sheng, the current village director, finds this kind of participation a unique feature in Shanmei unity.

Other Zou villages cherish unity, too. Even though when younger generations have their own ideas and indeed decide not to cooperate with the elderly in the village, villagers still believe that the village as a whole should have a consensus on its position in the public. A consensus in the public eye is an affective need because the image of unity is essential to the sense of belonging, a feeling which is dying out in the age of development. One cadre in Tapang Village comments:

> We belong to the Wang family, for example. There are many divisions in our kinship network and we always have a strong sense of belonging. We used to have the elderly family head come out to enlist votes. This is a relatively out-of-date mode of mobilization today because the younger generation has better education and has a stronger self-consciousness. We now depend on human relational networks. . . . For the sake of harmony, we continue to rely on mutual consultation; hopefully we can always choose a candidate acceptable to everybody. . . . Remember, Tapang is an underdeveloped village; if anyone remains selfish, Tapang's development would be even slower.

[8]By "imposition," I think Wen meant different churches split the villagers into confrontational groups.

Tapang villagers feel that Shanmei villagers have a strong sense of unity—perhaps too strong—for even Shanmei cadres acknowledge that before every election for township director, they will call for an elderly meeting and send the decision of the meeting to the local KMT office. In fact, it is not just the Zou people that demonstrate unity, the Han people living in plain areas are also unified among themselves during elections. For example, the Han enclaves of Ali Third Village and Fengshan Village always vote together. One Shanmei cadre reveals his feeling of being threatened and questions "how the two villages which are apart from each other in such a long distance can coordinate between them so well?" This apparent cooperation breeds the conspiracy theory that the Han people want to split the aboriginal people. Some Zou cadres are even in awe of the unity demonstrated by the Han in the plain villages:

> In the past, whenever the government arranged social activities, the Han in the plains never showed up. It is different now—the Han are everywhere. For example, they are the key in determining the results of township director elections. . . . The unity among them is impressive. Anything the Han promise during election time will be fulfilled. . . . My husband asked for their support in the last elections; they apologized, saying that another Zou candidate from a different village requested their support earlier. They said [to my husband], "We are old friends. If you had said it earlier, there would have been no problem." Then they said, "Well, I will give you six votes." He meant it, for after the election there were exactly six votes for my husband coming out of his booth. . . . I really admired them for this.

One Shanmei cadre is worried that the unity in his village perceived by the Tapang observers is breaking down. He thinks that the old social ethics are gone forever due to the Japanese colonial rule and the subsequent KMT reign. He feels that the election for village director is no longer a choice made by the elderly. I find it difficult to substantiate his analysis. To compare the power of the elderly and the political regime is to compare apples with oranges. The elderly want to make sure that the holding of elections becomes an occasion to readdress the issue of unity while the KMT uses the same event to gain legitimacy. In any case, the notion of unity continues to be a reference point when villagers judge events. One anxious cadre comments that:

> The elderly from each Kuba [i.e., the rule of the elder] will stand out to resolve the competition. But the Kuba system broke down long ago during Japanese

> rule. The KMT was even more destructive. There is no core in the village today. The core gave in to the township office. In the past, the KMT appointed the township director. Indeed we have elections now, but most of the time the KMT designates you to vote for so and so and the villagers all vote for so and so. The KMT's will dominates the township director's. As a result, the sense of community of our tribe is close to total destruction. Unless the KMT decides to leave it to open competition, there is no way the elderly can still coordinate.

Recent elections are more competitive as people realize that they can take advantage of elections by articulating their needs for the superior KMT division to hear. Facing competition, the KMT often makes the first move to inform the villagers of the party's choice as one township cadre who prefers to remain anonymous comments:

> In the past, when township cadres urged people to become a candidate, nobody wanted to. . . . The people's concept has gradually changed. The people now understand that they can take advantage of elections to promote and procure their community interests or needs. . . . This is different from passive waiting which is what we did before. . . . That is why there are many people jumping forward to run in elections for township director in recent years. When the KMT's township cadres try to coordinate, I feel the KMT still has more influence. The KMT will pick up one of the willing candidates from our tribe and tell us to support him.

The local KMT office also actively intervenes in the election for the chair of the township assembly. In the past, the KMT preferred a Han chair to balance a Zou director. The KMT is more open to elections today and the Han in the plains use a lot of tricks. One of the more popular tricks is to get all the assemblymen out for sightseeing a few days before elections so that the Zou people are unable to meet with and lobby them. If the election is totally open to competition, the majority of Zou assemblymen would definitely elect a Zou, as happened the first time the KMT opened up the election. In that year, the assembly under the Zou chairmanship moved quickly to change the name of the township from the Wu Feng Township to the Ali Mountain Township.

Wu Feng is a folk hero constructed by Japanese rulers a long time ago. It is said that Wu, a Han widely respected by the Zou people, offered his life for human sacrifice as the Zou people pleaded for rain. Wu did this because, according to the story, he failed to persuade the Zou people to give up their barbarian rituals and he hoped to use his life to change the Zou people's convention. It is said that the Zou people were so sorry after dis-

covering his death that they gave up their barbaric customs. There is no doubt that the story was a construction reflecting the superiority complex of Japanese rulers.[9] The KMT took over the story after Japan left, writing it into primary school textbooks. The Zou people have for generations felt degraded by the story, and a move to change the name of the township was a triumph. However, the change of name irritated those Han dwellers in the plains who used to ask for blessings in the local temple of Wu Feng. Partially as a result, the Han in the plains have felt it necessary to compete more effectively in the subsequent elections.

The Zou people are not used to the change of electoral style. The Han candidates have begun to buy votes. Some have developed good human relational networking skills among the Zou villagers. All have learned to use negative campaigning which discloses a high level of behind-door exchanges that is detrimental to social harmony. With Han leaders reassuming power in the assembly, the township office and the township assembly boycott each other. The KMT has lost control in recent years. One Zou assemblyman recalls what he once witnessed:

> Here in front of us are all kinds of accusation from both sides. Staff and supporters on each side almost burst into fist fighting. The conflict in the past did not reach the level of fist fighting. During the meeting, they continue the boycotting, delaying, and fault-finding. The township office then imparts its plan to do such and such if the township assembly dares to do this or that.

Neither the Zou nor the Han in the Ali Mountain Township are ready for electoral politics that is based on individual differences on issues. Differences are considered as challenges to harmony to all the people involved. Competition and differences necessarily push the game into one of mutual negation.

Elections used to mean little to the Zou people. Once elections become part of political life, one needs the coordinating elderly as an institu-

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[9]Wu Feng was pursued and killed in 1769 for being suspected of poisoning the Zou people, kidnapping Zou girls, and cheating Zou traders. It was the Japanese colonial government that rewrote the Wu Feng incident into its modern version, which was conveniently adopted by the KMT government upon taking over Taiwan in 1945. The rationale of the rewriting was to mobilize and civilize the Zou people through the construction of an inferior Zou identity. See Hsu Chi-yi, "Exploring Ancient Sites in Chiayi," *Jiayi wenxian* (Chiayi Literature) 28 (1998): 23.

tion and a community development body like the Association in Shanmei to avoid the vicious competition as seen in township politics. The KMT intervention and the solidarity of the Han voters in the plains contribute to the Zou sense of unity. On the whole, values that Zou cadres care about (such as balance, ethics, unity, and community development) are more concerns relating to the tribe or the village than individual interests. One needs to wait a few more decades to judge if the sense of community will diminish, as feared by the above-mentioned Zou cadre. More likely, however, is that the election-related thinking will continue to spring from a collective perspective. From my interviews, the best judgment can only be that the Zou people's understanding of elections springs from and strengthens (albeit in a rather peculiar way) rather than weakens the Zou people's sense of belonging.

Democratic Autonomy in Some Mainland Ethnic Areas

The Chinese Communist Party promotes democracy at the village level. Ethnic cadres in villages respond accordingly. However, the installation of electoral mechanisms at the village level does not necessarily promise real politico-cultural changes. Not only is this because local ethnic cadres elected through village democracy may not appreciate the meaning of democracy as understood by political scientists, but also because the rationale behind the village democratic system in China is not familiar to us. From the perspective of the Ministry of Civil Affairs who is planning the new democratizing project, democracy is useful because it relieves the party from the duty of executing policies such as birth control, food extraction, and fee levying. Elected village cadres are held responsible by the township government on the one hand and at the same time must cope with villager democratic participation during election time.

Institutionally speaking, village cadres are left alone to deal with peasants after the introduction of the electoral system. The cadres should not expect the same level of political support as before from the township government when encountering resistance in villages. If the cadres cannot handle the responsibility, the party will look for someone else to take over

in the next elections. The party, although still actively involved in the daily operation of many villages, prefers to remain behind the scenes. Except for a few sporadic cases, village cadres are in no position to challenge the township government. Nonetheless, the electoral system seems effective in compelling most elected village directors and their village councils to find ways acceptable to villagers in fulfilling policy requirements. Despite rising responsibilities, village directors generally appear willing to continue their work. Monetary incentives explain part of this willingness. In Dashi Township of Beining County, Liaoning, for example, the Manchurian directors in villages would lose their salaries if the township investigation team decides that their performance fails the standards set in the beginning of the year.

The party leaders at the top of the provincial or central government are invariably Han or coopted by the Han and their policies are naturally not ethnic-based. Any ethnic-based policies, including birth control exemptions, are made by Han officials. Ethnic cadres at the village level are responsible for all Han-made policies. Electoral systems successfully camouflage the non-ethnic nature of government policies by holding ethnic cadres directly responsible for their implementation.

The above discussion reveals a generally overlooked assumption of village democracy—that the villagers care more about fair implementation than the substance of a policy. If the villagers care about the substance, they would use the democratic process to articulate their own interests and compel candidates for village director to promote these interests. Indeed villagers usually care more about the candidates for director as a person than the concrete policies, if any, that the candidate advocates. Since the government's focus is on resolving problems of policy implementation and thus believes what is needed is only finding the right director, the government must similarly assume that it knows villager interests better than the villagers themselves and that the villagers agree with this. The widespread assumption that the villagers only use elections for choosing the right person, not to promote their specific interests, is incompatible with the political science assumption that in democracy each person knows and promotes their own interests.

The Chinese assumption about elections at the village level thus ex-

plains why ethnic villages are required to have ethnic directors. This requirement, although not universal, is to a large extent the practice. Obviously ethnic directors are better off in implementing policies in ethnic villages. Once directors are local minorities and elected by ethnic villagers, the Han-dominated government would not face any ethnic-based challenge to its policies.

There could be a risk, though, if one day policies are so unacceptable that ethnic cadres in an autonomous area, be it a district or a prefecture, decide to mobilize their villagers to resist the policies. The government thus wants to assure the loyalty of these ethnic cadres. Most of the time, ethnic villages are supervised by an ethnic township, which is under an ethnic county or prefecture. A situation where a village director is popularly elected can put the village director and the township director against each other. Strong county leadership can often resolve the situation, rendering village elections a formality. In any case, regardless of the level (village or township) of real power, ethnic cadres at that level are always concerned with the issue of implementation rather than substance.

The process of nomination of candidates for village director ensures both the participation of villagers and the control by the township. According to Mr. Peng, a Tujia general manager of Yongshun Tobacco and previous township director who had many experiences with elections at the village level:

> We have elections. Villages are the most democratic places in China. We go through a prolonged and repeated process of consultation. The township level would gather all the information, evaluate it, and nominate a list for the villagers to vote. We do not have the problem of vote buying. To be a village director in Yongshun is very tiring. They want to serve the people. The township director here must be a minority. The Han are a minority here in actuality and should thus receive special protection.

What is interesting about this comment is that nominees must go through a consultation process among villagers, but the final candidates are determined at the township level. In this particular case, the village is economically underdeveloped and relies heavily on township subsidies. Other than some feeble allowance provided by the township, there is little benefit to be gained by becoming a director. The township gains the power to interfere in village elections to the extent that consultation is little more than

promotion of the official candidates. However, the township government strives to avoid weak directors who will not help very much in executing government policies.

The above explains why the township wants to find a director capable of developing the village economy. The ability to boost the local economy is the most important source of power. Mr. He Pinzheng, a Naxi scholar in Lijiang of Yunnan, comments that when villagers vote, "primarily they look at the economic management despite other obvious problems the candidates may have. The good old man can no longer win votes. A good old man listens to the superior, having no skills of his own." Even in villages where ethnic religions continue to thrive, candidates during elections must promise to develop the economy, according to Professor Gao Li at Yunnan University.

The thinking here is quite different from the modernization theory familiar to political scientists of the outside world. According to modernization theory, economic growth will bring about the rise of a plural, civil society. Citizens participate in the policymaking process with the purpose of protecting their interests against governmental intervention. Government power should be limited by law and supervised by the elected legislature. The Chinese assumption, however, is that villagers will have more trust in cadres that bring in growth and willingly cooperate with them on policies. Economic growth helps to integrate a community in the process of breaking down due to the weakness of collective business in the village.[10] Integration is achieved through the rise of a trustworthy and revered leader in these Chinese ethnic villages whereas it is achieved through the consolidation of personal rights in individualist societies.

In reality, however, most ethnic villages have yet to achieve a level of economic growth that is strong enough to support the village leadership. The extant social organizations continue to dominate. Electoral mechanisms usually strengthen rather than weaken the existing organizations.

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[10]Government intervention as well as economic growth may create various seemingly incompatible results that would not allow any generalized conclusion. See the discussion in Mette Halskov Hansen, *Lessons in Being Chinese: Minority Education and Ethnic Identity in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

According to Professor Gao:

> Anyone who relies on kinship and patriarchal structures can manipulate elections in places with a closed geography, a sense of communal unity, and weak government control. When the village director is old and should be replaced, for whom does one vote? Everybody knows. The process of holding elections is required nevertheless. The process legitimizes the succession. The successor still comes from the same family.

The superior government officials face a dilemma between stepping in and letting go. On the one hand, villagers apparently support the family, not the policy, a fact that would weaken the government's leverage in the village if the policy should ever contradict the ruling family's interests (the interests as determined by the assumed benevolent leadership in the family rather than by the individual family members themselves). On the other hand, as long as the village director keeps in mind the work of policy implementation, the township government which is not influential in the village anyway should not complain. In fact, village cadres, with the support of social networks, often abuse their power or government policy. This problem may be more serious at the township level than at the village level in some areas.

Together with various old conventions, elections may reproduce local dictatorship. This happens even in the relatively advanced ethnic areas such as the Bai localities. Professor Li Donghong of Yunnan University comments:

> Election is purely a matter of formality. Most people do not care too much. People winning elections are those who do not work. Those elected are the ones villagers fear, not those who do the real work. They can be very oppressive. During elections villagers only know those who come to mind most quickly. These are perhaps leaders of production teams, villagers who are economically better-off, those whom villagers fear most, and the more eloquent. The result often defeats the purpose of having elections in the first place.

The superior government has a tendency to intervene whenever spotting local dictatorships, especially if the government is conscious of the potential stake of aborting democratization. Professor Gao argues that:

> The township government goes down to investigate and intervene. . . . The key is how to handle the forces of family and kinship. If village councils and these forces combine, the consequence could be beyond imagination. If these forces do not combine, it is still possible for the government to influence the village

> councils. Nonetheless, the stability of the central political regime could encounter problems. This is the situation where each village has a different minority and there is another new minority community every two to three kilometers. All issues in villages are resolved through private means.

"Private means" exist both inside and between ethnic villages. Under these circumstances, few would develop loyalty to an abstract state. In Yunnan, the priority function of elections is thus to produce village cadres who will willingly cooperate with the township government. In fact, the township government may disapprove the election results.

It happens that those directors winning the elections may be willing to cooperate but are unable to mobilize the support of the villagers. Over time, experienced villagers adapt and thus vote only for those whom they know the township government can accept. He Pinzheng recalls what happened in his Naxi village:

> In the past, the party appointed village directors and village council members. All production team divisions had their own team leaders, succumbing to the control of the party secretary. Since the end of the 1980s, elections have become a built-in mechanism for choosing directors. The masses would vote first but the party would judge the results afterwards. If unsatisfied with the outcome, the party would call for another election. . . . When casting votes, the masses sometimes take into account the possibility of getting the superior approval.

In Yongshun, which is a county-level government of the Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in western Hunan, government intervention is more sophisticated. Director Tian Tingqi, a Tujia cadre of Lingxi township, was appointed by the county government to Lingxi a year before election. In Yongshun, the township director is elected by the township people's congress, but the nomination is made by the masses or mass organizations. This setup is to assure that the township government has some popular support. A year of work acquainted Mr. Tian with his constituency and this contributed to his acceptance by the local people a year later. Yongshun's Bureau of Civil Affairs is similarly sophisticated in managing village elections. According to Mr. Wang, the bureau chief of Tujia origin, on average, one-third of village directors failed in their last reelection attempts: "Those who cannot even run public welfare or take care of public interest cannot get reelected."

In these ethnic villages the township government appears to play a

critical role in arranging the right candidates for village cadre positions. The right candidates are those who, once elected, can effectively implement government policies, mobilize support for reform, and collect feedback information concerning public opinion toward the government. The function of elections, as envisioned by the party, is ultimately to keep harmony in the village, within the government, and—most importantly—within the party leadership so as to smoothen the policy implementation process.

Noteworthy is that ethnic and Han villages are not necessarily different in terms of the function of elections envisioned by the party. Ethnic villages are relatively poor economically, remote geographically, and unique religiously. The sensitive nature of electoral politics in ethnic villages clearly does not result from these characteristics, but rather has to do with the fear that the impression of a Han-ethnic split may ruin the political unity of the whole country. As a result, the intervention by the party often brings some policy privileges or exemptions. In addition, demands regarding a faster pace of reform of the electoral procedures are similarly lacking in ethnic villages. This is especially true in Yunnan and to a lesser extent in Hunan. The government and the party are cautious enough to make sure that intervention is conducted by the superior cadres who often belong to the same ethnic group, with the exception of ethnically mixed Xishuangbanna where a Han superior can appear as an arbitrator.

The meaning of elections for ethnic villagers this author met in sporadic trip stops to Yunnan and Hunan is yet to be determined. What seems obvious is that elections serve functions other than protecting individual interests. There is also little expression that elections have a base in liberal individualism. Furthermore, the notion of democratic control is alien to the ethnic villages while it is not necessarily so to the Han villages. Yet, indeed, all minority cadres stress that there is no difference between ethnic and Han villages in terms of village reform—for example, in the cases of Mr. Wang, Mr. Peng, and Mr. Tian.

Wanting to be no different from the Han seems relevant in understanding the relatively slow pace of political reform in ethnic villages. Not only do the ethnic superiors at the township and county levels ignore the sheer formality of elections in many villages under their jurisdiction to

avoid embarrassment, but ethnic cadres in villages visited by the author also never seemed interested in resisting the party or the government regardless of the latter's policies. The government's problem with these ethnic villages is not resistance, but one of difficulty in implementing policies, many of which often mean little to such villages. Birth control is one such policy. From this perspective, electoral mechanisms are themselves forms of intervention.

Conclusions

Democratization occurred in the Ali Mountain Township and in various sites across Yunnan and Yongshun roughly at the same time in the early 1980s.[11] Its most conspicuous feature is that ethnic villagers now elect their cadres. The fact that ethnic villagers vote individually does not mean that they will think individualistically when they evaluate candidates. Political regimes at the superior levels in all these areas typically require elected administrators to be of the minority ethnicity. Coordination and mutual consultation are necessary parts of electoral politics and put all villagers under pressure to adapt and to accept their belonging to a larger community. For Chinese ethnic areas, coordination takes place more in the nomination process; for Shanmei Village, it also occurs in the distribution of ballots.

There are differences among the Zou people in the Ali Mountain Township, the Bai and Naxi peoples in Yunnan, and the Tujia people in Yongshun. First, policy implementation is a less prominent concern in the Ali Mountain Township than on the mainland. Second, ethnic villagers in the Yunnan sites are not mixed with Han dwellers as are the Zou and Tujia peoples. The Tujia people feel no intrusion because the level of development of the Tujia and Han peoples is roughly the same while the Zou people fare much worse than the Han in the plain. This explains the expression of a stronger sense of unity in Zou villages. Finally, the KMT's control in

[11]The Shanmei Association of Community Development was established in 1982. This was the time point when election became a relevant factor in Shanmei's life.

the Ali Mountain Township is weaker than is the control of the Communist Party in China; the former, moreover, is not politically sensitive to ethnic issues. However, for the remoter mountain villages in Yunnan, the Communist Party's reach can be even weaker than the KMT's hold is over Shanmei Village.

The similarities among these cases are significant. First, electoral competition is not a value in any of these ethnic villages. Rather, integration and unity are the major concerns. Competing on the human relational front is more typical than intra-system campaigning. The anxiety over loss of social control is a built-in element—rather than a constraint—of democracy. The family and kinship organizations are by far the most influential factors in election-related discourse. Even though people no longer blindly follow the family position on an issue, the repeated reference by the interviewees to "unity" or "consensus" implies a worldview where the meaning of life begins in the family, the tribe, and the kinship level, instead of the individual. Electoral politics has not yet changed the fundamental thinking on the priority of the collective over the individual.

The practice of electoral politics and the results of elections do not solely depend on this collectivistic worldview, though. The extent of the party's intervention, the degree of mix of the ethnic and Han peoples, and the differences in the levels of development between the ethnic and Han peoples, together with the continuing importance of mutual consultation among the elderly as well as between local cadres and the party, are all elements determining the results of elections. Due to the combination of these factors, no ethnic village in the interviewed areas is similar to, nor comparable with, the rise of individualism in cases popular in the political science literature.[12]

The sense of unity is manifested in different forms depending on the local situation and the history of the ethnic identity in question. In other words, one should not expect that electoral mechanisms unilaterally transform ethnic villages. The responses from the ethnic villages are active and

[12]Recent ethnic studies confirm that each ethnic area has its own feature not characterized by general descriptions. See, for example, Gerald A. Postiglione, ed., *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling, and Development* (London: Flamer, 1999).

creative, if not always straightforward or conscious. Elections actually strengthen and further sensitize the Zou as opposed to the Han identity. Elections can legitimize the existing ruling structures, for example, as in some Bai villages in Yunnan. Some Naxi villagers cleverly elect those the township can accept in exchange for minimum support of their preference for economic leadership. Feeling a relatively low need for ethnic solidarity, the Tujia superior maintains county-level stability by engineering the change of a good proportion of village directors. The burden of fixing the Tujia identity shifts to the Han regime, which responds by handing out policy privileges and exemptions. None of these responses are related to, or less important than, the emergence, if any, of individual-regarding thinking. Perhaps, in those more democratic Han villages, these similar important responses are overlooked to the extent we may have misinterpreted the meaning of democratization in Han villages as well.

Appendix: Interviewees Relevant to This Paper

(1) Shanmei Village, Ali Mountain Township, Chiayi County, Taiwan

Name*	Gender	Position	Year of Birth
Wen Li-chen	F	Secretary of SACD Community Chorus	1967
Chuang Yueh-mei	F	Accountant of SACD	1951
Wen Ying-chieh	M	Head of SACD Cultural Education	1962
Wen Ying-feng	M	Head of SACD board	1960
Yang Ching-hsi	M	SACD board member	1950
Kao Cheng-sheng	M	SACD board member	1943
An Sheng-chi	M	SACD standing supervisory member	1954
An Ping-yao	M	SACD supervisory member	1953

SACD: Shanmei Association of Community Development.
*Some of the names remain anonymous in the text.

(2) Chinese Ethnic Interviewees

Name	Ethnicity	Position
Mr. Peng	Tujia	General Manager of Yongshun Tobacco
He Pinzheng	Naxi	Scholar, Yunnan Social Science Academy, Lijiang Division
Mr. He	Naxi	Scholar, Yunnan Social Science Academy, Lijiang Division
Gao Li	Han	Professor, Political Scientist, Yunnan University
Li Donghong	Bai	Professor, Anthropologist, Yunnan University
Tian Tingqi	Tujia	Township Director, Lingxi, Yongshun
Mr. Wang	Tujia	Director of Yongshun County Bureau of Civil Affairs