

Research Note

The Politics of Village Elections: The Case of North Village*

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The 1982 PRC Constitution and the 1987 Village Committee Organic Law (revised in 1998) gave peasants a legal right to elect their village leaders, but different regions vary widely in their implementation of these laws.¹ What causes these differences? Some scholars have tried to connect village elections to the level of economic development.² Others emphasize the role of officials in local governments,³ or the pressure from ordinary villagers.⁴ My field work⁵ in China's countryside suggests that, in some

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¹For a recent overview, see Sylvia Chan, "Village Self-Government and Civil Society," in *China Review 1998*, ed. Joseph Y.S. Cheng (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), 235-58.

²See Tianjian Shi, "Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 22 (1999): 425-42; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994): 33-60.

³For an example, see Yong Xu, "Local Governments' Initiatives in the Process of Democratization," *Zhanlue yu guanli* (Strategy and Management), no. 22 (1997): 68-74.

⁴Lianjiang Li, "The Two-Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Village Party Secretaries to a Popular Vote," *The China Journal*, no. 42 (July 1999): 103-18.

⁵Through a friend's help, I lived with his cousin's family in North Village for fifteen weeks, where I conducted informal and semi-structured interviews, participant observations (in-

areas of China, village elections are the results of a compromise between the township government and angry villagers under certain special circumstances. While other studies are mainly focused on village committee elections, whose relevance to village power structure is still arguable,⁶ this paper will report on a different type of village election,⁷ which subjects the whole village leadership including the village party secretaries to a popular vote. The author will discuss the problems faced by the local governments, why an election seemed to provide a solution, and how the outcomes of an election were decided.

North Village

North Village is one of the fourteen villages in Wulin Township, Honghu County, Hubei Province. Since there are too many villages in a township for the township government to directly supervise, the township governments divided their territories into several areas, setting up an office (*banshichu*) in each. Four such *banshichus* were created in Wulin Township; North Village, along with other three villages, was placed under the leadership of Dongfeng *banshichu*.

One of the main concerns in this area is the danger of floods. The Yangtze River and its two tributaries, the Dongjing and Neijing rivers, and the Hong Lake have always been a threat to the county. Since the communists took power, flood prevention has been one of the top priorities of local governments in the area. Countless money has been invested and laborers recruited for flood prevention projects, but the situation seems not to have changed much.

Although located in Jiangnan Plain, a "land of fish and rice" as is

cluding joining the local cadres when they collected money and grains house by house), and observing the whole process of three elections respectively for selecting village cadres, township people's congress representatives, and team leaders.

⁶This is because in most villages it is the party secretary rather than the Village Committee elected that has the ultimate authority.

⁷This type of village election has attracted little attention until recently. See note 4 above.

often claimed, the village is still relatively poor.⁸ Having pork or small fish is something of a luxury, usually eaten once in a fortnight for most villagers. Less than one-tenth of the families have a color television, most of whom are recently married young couples. Playing cards and mahjong is the main form of entertainment for many villagers during the long and cold slack seasons.

There is not a single village enterprise, nor is the village in a position to provide such agricultural goods as seeds, agricultural chemicals, or fertilizer for the villagers. Every year the village cadres have to struggle to collect the taxes and fees from households, and in most cases they end up borrowing on the local black market at usurious rates to fulfill the government tasks and to pay village expenses. By the end of 1996, North Village's debt was already more than 200,000 *yuan* and the interest rate was as high as 30-40 percent per year. The village cadres enjoy little authority or respect. Just a few days before I entered the village, the village head Wang Shuliang was beaten up by an angry villager when he and other village cadres tried to take away the villager's grain as collateral for the taxes and fees he was supposed to pay. Later I was told that in the past two years the village party secretary Li Guoshan was beaten up three times under similar circumstances.

The villagers are generally discontented with and distrust the village cadres, and in some cases are even hostile. One villager went so far as to say "if there is another Cultural Revolution, the village cadres will be beaten to death." During my stay in North Village, I was invited to some ten feasts (for marriages, funerals, or birthdays) and on no occasion was a current village cadre invited. One of our neighbors visited the village head at dinner time and was asked to have dinner there. He was too shy to decline (at least this was his explanation). The second day everyone knew about the dinner and people began to say he was a "traitor," with some

⁸According to the exaggerated statistics from the township government, in 1995 the income per capital in North Village was 1,600 *yuan*, slightly higher than the national average (1,500 *yuan*). See Institute of Rural Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *1995-nian Zhongguo nongcun fazhan niandu baogao jianxi 1996-nian fazhan qushi* (Annual report on China's rural development in 1995 and trends toward 1996) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1996), 292.

guessing that his motive was to be a group leader. In the following few days he had to explain the matter to everyone he met and he did not attend the meeting for electing group leaders to redress himself.

The state's birth control policy is only a matter of a fine in North Village. Families with three or four children are common. From 1989 to 1995, sixty-two couples gave birth to their third or fourth child and fines were imposed ranging from 1,500 to 6,000 *yuan* for each "birth out of schedule" (*chao sheng*). In 1992, the women's commissioner, who is supposed to enforce the birth control policy, violated the policy herself. She suddenly disappeared from the village. A year later she came back with a newborn baby, her third child. The township government had to appoint a young unmarried woman to take her position.

Phenomena that are classified as "superstitious activities" (*fengjian mixin*) are part of the villagers' everyday life. Genealogical record-keeping was renewed in the early 1990s by those with the main surnames. Three statues of Buddha (*pusa*) are enshrined separately by the Wang lineage, the Li lineage, and all the other surnames. It is not uncommon for villagers to turn to a sorcerer or sorceress to cure a disease or to regain lost property. When a family member dies, usually the family will send for a shaman or Daoist priest (if the family is rich) to officiate at a ceremony before, or as part of, the funeral.

Not having an office, the village cadres usually meet in the party secretary or village head's home. When the villagers or villager representatives meet, the gathering will be held in the open air or in a classroom at the village school. There is no place for the village's files such as documents and accounts. Such records are kept by the individuals in charge.⁹

The formal organization in North Village is quite simple: the party organization and the village committee are not separated, and there is no village economic organization. Actually few villagers have ever heard of the term "village committee." Both local cadres and villagers still use the term "village head" (*cunzhang*) instead of "village director" (*zhuren*) as pre-

⁹For example, when I needed a document or data from earlier years, I had to find the person who had been village head or accountant at that time.

scribed in the Village Committee Organic Law. Officially, village cadres as a whole are referred to as "the village leadership." This consists of the village party secretary and the deputy party secretary (who are in charge of the "party's construction and spiritual civilization"), the village head (who is in charge of agricultural production), two deputy village heads in charge of finance and irrigation works respectively, the village accountant, the women's commissioner whose main duty is birth control, the militia head, and the village security commissioner.

Each year during the slack season before the Chinese traditional Spring Festival, the township government and *banshichu* hold a meeting of villager representatives to summarize the previous year's work and announce the name list of the new "village leadership" for the coming year.¹⁰ The meeting may be held jointly by the three or four villages under the same *banshichu* or separately in each village. This largely depends on whether the township government expects many complaints. If the township government foresees trouble in a village, there will be a separate meeting for this village so as to limit the "negative consequences" to that one village. Moreover, with fewer villager representatives, it will be easier for township officers to do "persuasion work" (*zuo gongzuo*) with each individual. Each year after the autumn harvest, the township government will assess the situation in each village and make corresponding decisions on the tone of the meeting (to praise or criticize the performance of the village leadership), how to deal with the likely criticisms from villagers, and whether some personnel adjustments are needed or an election is warranted. In most cases the meetings have proceeded smoothly following the tone called by the township government, without the need to resort to an

¹⁰It was said the practice started from the commune period. In the "Regulations on the Work of the Rural People's Commune" (Revised Draft) (also known as "Sixty Articles on Agriculture"), it was provided that brigade leaders should be elected annually by representatives of the commune members. See Agricultural Economics Department's Archive Office, *Nongcun zhengce wenjian xuanbian* (Selected documents on rural policies) (Beijing: Beijing College of Economics, 1977), 136-63. Similar practices were studied by John P. Burns, "Election of Team Cadres in Rural China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 74 (June 1978): 273-96, and Zhang Letian, *Gaobie lixiang: Renmin gongshe zhidu yuanjiu* (Farewell to idealism: A study of the people's commune system) (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 1998), 265-77.

election. However, under certain circumstances, the villager representatives may raise sufficient objections so that the township government feels obligated to compromise. This happened in North Village in 1993 and 1996, when the villager representatives successfully rejected the incumbent village cadres who were supported by the township government and elected a new village leadership.

Village Election in 1993

In 1993, neither the township government nor the village party secretary, Wang Chuanzhi, expected this type of rejection by the villagers. Among the fourteen village party secretaries in this township, Wang Chuanzhi seemed by far the most capable. Smart, eloquent, and having very good connections with the township leaders, Wang seemed to have every reason to stay in. Even three years later, when I entered the village for field work, villagers were still talking admiringly about how Wang could find ways to deal with "nail households" (*dingzi hu*, i.e., those who refuse to pay taxes and fees); how he supported the compiling of the genealogy of the Wang lineage, a huge project that records twelve collateral lines originating from twelve alleged ancestors, each with dozens of volumes; how his eloquence helped the township win a boundary dispute with a neighboring township and this earned him the trust and full support of the township party secretary. All these achievements could not, however, save him from losing power. In fact, his capability even became one of the reasons why villagers rejected him. As a villager explained to me later: "The more capable the village cadres are, the more easily they will play tricks on us and the more our losses will be."

The trigger of the rebellion was the widely believed involvement of village cadres in corruption. In 1991 the Honghu County People's Congress passed a resolution requiring every village to build new classrooms for "our children." In an effort to respond to the call from the county government, the village, under the leadership of Wang Chuanzhi, spent 160,000 *yuan* to build a new village school. The three-story building project was contracted to Wang Shuyan, the former village party secretary.

Without any connections nor experience in the construction industry, Wang Shuyan had to subcontract the project to someone else in the village, who eventually subcontracted the project to a local construction team. To subcontract a project three times inevitably caused a widely-held suspicion of cadre corruption.¹¹ To make things worse, in July of 1993, ten months after the inauguration of the project, several crevices were found in the walls of the new building. The county's construction bureaucracy classified the building as "dangerous housing" and ordered it be vacated. When the annual meeting was held at the end of 1993, the school children had to hold their classes in the open air for almost the entire winter—until the village spent another 40,000 *yuan* to consolidate the building after a new village leadership was elected.

Wang Chuanzhi surely knew what the villagers thought about him, but he was still confident that his position was unshakable. Each year there would be a meeting, he knew, and the villager representatives would be allowed to make complaints but that would be all. The township government would keep everything in control.

Previously, the township leaders did appoint or dismiss village party secretaries at these meetings no matter whether the villagers liked them or not. Anger and complaints among the villagers were listened to but generally ignored. For township officers, if a village party secretary could manage to complete the tasks from above, they were happy to keep him in his position. As a *banshichu* officer explained, "We had a meeting each year to let the villager representatives complain so they could feel better. The power of deciding who will be the village party secretary of course should reside in our hands. What does the term 'leader' mean? It means to lead the masses rather than to be led by the masses. In addition, even if they do not feel good, what can they do?"¹²

When the villagers are not happy with the village cadres, their resistance in most cases is not organized and thus does not bother the township

¹¹In fact, in this village almost every villager I talked with believes that village cadres are corrupt. Put in their words, "No one is clean. The only problem is whether you would have a chance to catch them."

¹²Interview with the deputy party secretary of Dongfeng *banshichu*, December 1996.

government officials much. If a village cannot complete "the state tasks"¹³ because too many people refuse to pay the fees, as is often the case in North Village,¹⁴ the township government will send local police and judicial personnel¹⁵ to force the village cadres to collect the fees house by house. If a family still fails to pay the fees, they will take away the family's grain (*cuogu*, which literally means "scooping up grain") or other valuable items like furniture and farming tools as collateral. Usually an individual villager will hesitate to fight back given the presence of local police and judicial people. One of the villagers admitted to me after his grain was taken away by the local cadres: "If it were only the village cadres who came to my house to scoop up my grain, I would have fought them back without hesitation. But I was really a little scared to see so many township officials there." As a result, most villagers will have to pay the taxes and fees to get back their collateral, lest the village cadres sell these to raise the money. In short, this kind of resistance cannot form any significant threat against the township government officials, and is far from enough to force them to make any compromise with regard to choosing the village leadership.

But in 1993 the situation was different. In that year the county government decided to widen a highway during the winter slack season and each township that the highway crossed through was required to organize peasants to complete the project within a given time. It was this circumstance that made the villagers' resistance or threat of resistance more effective. As a villager put it, "If we do not pay the fees, they can come to our

¹³One of the most frequently seen forms of resistance by the North villagers is to refuse to pay taxes and fees, which is not a direct concern of the township government. The fees and taxes include two parts: money that is supposed to be provided to the state and the township government (which is referred to as "the state tasks"), and the money collected for paying the salary of village cadres and other costs. Villages are required to pay higher-level taxes and fees first with whatever they collected from the villagers, so individual refusals to pay taxes and fees only concern the village cadres rather than the township government.

¹⁴According to my observations, only a small proportion of villagers are too poor to pay taxes and fees. Most people refuse to pay them because they want to show their discontent with and anger against the village cadres. Here the question is not whether the villagers can afford to pay the fees but whether they think it is fair for them to pay that much.

¹⁵These include policemen from local police branches (*paichusuo*), and people working in local public security organs, procuratorial organs, people's courts, and the township government's judicial office.

houses to scoop up our grain. But if we simply do not go to the construction site, what can they do with us? Can they come to press gang us?" The township government had to seek the villagers' cooperation, since if the project under the township government's jurisdiction lags behind or cannot be completed on time, the township government officials will be in trouble. This time, they had to care about what the villagers thought.

In 1993, the usually one-day meeting lasted for three days. The township government officials tried hard but still failed to convince the villager representatives that Wang Chuanzhi was the right person to continue to lead the village. On the second day some villager representatives became so angry that they pushed down the dining tables when they were treated to a meal by the township government in an effort to relax the tension. The representatives threatened to mobilize the villagers to boycott the highway project if the township government insisted on retaining Wang Chuanzhi as the party secretary. The township government at last compromised and announced an election to be held on the third day of the meeting. Wang Chuanzhi was dismissed¹⁶ and his deputy, Li Guoshan, was elected as the village's new party secretary. Ironically, Li was elected not because of his capability but rather his lack of ability. The villagers do not believe village cadres can do or will do much good for the villagers, so they preferred a less capable party secretary who is not sophisticated enough to play tricks on the villagers or who can be easily supervised.

In the following two years, no elections were held. The township government announced the name list of the village leadership each year either without encountering much opposition or without paying much attention to the opposition. There were still conflicts between the villagers and the village cadres, and Li was even attacked three times by angry villagers when he tried to take away their grain. There were conflicts among village cadres, too. The village head resigned and two village accountants

¹⁶The township party secretary did not abandon Wang Chuanzhi. He was appointed as one of the five contractors (*chengbaoren*), all retired cadres at the township or village level, who lease the township's brick plant. Being in this position gives him an urban residence permit (*hukou*) and a decent profit. When I entered the village in late 1996, he was one of the main creditors of the village and several village cadres.

were dismissed. Under Li's leadership, the village soon went into more than 200,000 *yuan* of debt, mostly from local black market loans at interest rates of more than 30 percent per year.¹⁷ But these problems did not suffice as adequate conditions to hold another election. As long as the village under Li could finish the tasks set by the township government, it was happy to keep him in his position. The villagers, on their side, felt, "We do not care who is the party secretary or village head as long as they do not cause us to suffer losses."¹⁸

The Election in 1996

It was not until the end of 1996 that another election was held in North Village, after a heavy flood changed the scenario of local politics. The flood was so severe that local governments felt the need to reinforce the dikes along the Yangtze River. The eroded dikes and dams need consolidation to prepare for the next year's flood. For local officials, it is also safer politically to show that they have made efforts to prepare for future floods. If they fail to do so and the following year something goes wrong with one of the dikes or dams (nobody can guarantee this will not happen), the local officials will be in big trouble. In this area, to know how to deal with flood prevention projects (*dong shuili*) is a big advantage in trying to retain local power. Some informants even went so far as to claim that if a party secretary or mayor cannot do a good job, he or she does not *dong shuili*.

Naturally, during the period when a flood prevention project is under construction, the project will be the focus of governments from the provincial to township levels. All of the major leaders will stress the importance

¹⁷Why not borrow money from a bank? The bank officials I interviewed said it was because there was not enough money, and the village cadres said the banks did not want to lend money to poor villages because they were afraid that these poor villages would not be able to return the money. According to my own observations, part of the black market loans came from the banks: local bank staff members and those with connections to bank staff borrow money from the banks and lend the money at higher rates on the black market.

¹⁸It seemed that the debt did not bother the villagers much. When the villagers talked about the village's debt, they referred to it as "the village cadres' debt."

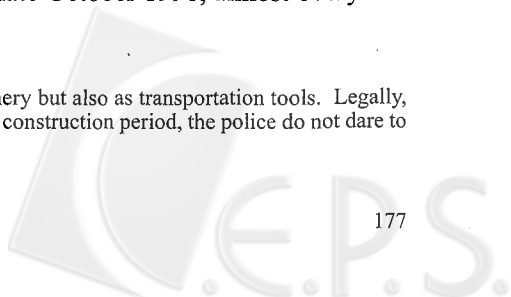
of the project. Some of them will make high-profile inspection trips to the construction site. All government departments, agencies, and work units are required to provide full support to the project, and dozens of correspondents will be sent by the local media to report on the event.

The peasants are required by the local governments to work for the flood prevention projects as part of their so-called voluntary labor (*yiwugong*) contribution to the state. They are not paid for the work and even have to bring their own food to the site, but according to my observations, although some will complain, the event generally is accompanied by a festival atmosphere among the villagers. Usually ignored, the peasants will for once find themselves treated with some respect. Before the project starts, the villagers are courted and sometimes begged by village cadres to arrive at the site on time. While at the site, many party leaders and government officials, whom they would otherwise only see on television, pay visits to the site to express their appreciation, sometimes accompanied by treats (*jiacan*). During this period even the traffic police do not dare to bother them.¹⁹

During this period, too, the township officials are especially vulnerable in that any small trouble might become known to the higher-level leaders or be reported by the media. Peasants from each township will be working on a certain segment of the dikes. Obviously there is intense competition among different townships with regard to the speed and quality of the project. It is a time for township officials to impress their superiors with their "achievements." If the peasant laborers do not arrive at the project site on time as required, or if they let their project lag behind, or if they lodge complaints against the township government when a higher-level leader inspects the site, it will be disastrous for the township officials. Moreover, while at the site, the villagers will be working and living together, providing opportunities for collective action. The township government, therefore, will try to appease the villagers at these sensitive moments.

When I arrived at the village in late October 1996, almost every vil-

¹⁹Tractors are used not only as farming machinery but also as transportation tools. Legally, they are not allowed on highways, but during construction period, the police do not dare to stop them.



lager whom I interviewed complained to me how their crops were inundated the previous summer because of party secretary Li Guoshan's incapability. All the dikes and dams had held, but the threat to the crops was that the water could not be drained away in time. Li's mistake, according to the villagers, was that he was slow to decide to hire pumps to pump the water away and so lost the chance to save the crops. Although at a higher elevation than neighboring villages, North Village became one of the few villages in this township to suffer harvest losses, since village cadres in other villages had acted quickly enough to reduce the damage.

In early November of that year, the villagers began to gather in small groups, talking about the necessity of removing Li and the possible candidates to replace him. Three types of people seemed more active. The first group consisted of villagers with relatively high prestige, which may derive from their education, special experience, age, or connections. These people are the so-called "opinion leaders." Another group was former village cadres. Some hoped to regain their posts or seek revenge. The third group was comprised of young people. They are too cynical to believe in any candidates and they participated not to choose a good village leadership but, rather, to make trouble for the village cadres and would-be cadres.

Li Guoshan certainly realized the anger and dissatisfaction among the villagers. He tried to explain the dilemma he faced at that time to almost everyone—to the villagers, to township officials, and to me: "It was a hard decision. No one could predict whether or not there would be heavy rain coming. If I had hired pumps to pump away the water and it began to rain again, pumping would be no use and I would have been blamed for wasting the money." The village was in debt and hiring pumps is expensive. If he decided to rent pumps, the village had to borrow from the black market at interest rates as high as 80 percent per month. Not knowing what to do, Li chose the simpler path—to avoid a decision. Claiming that the safety of the dikes was more important, he disappeared from the village and stayed for a few days at the dikes. As a result, when the villagers were in a panic to find ways to salvage their crops, they could not find the village's party secretary and had to helplessly watch their crops rot in the water. When Li at last showed up in the village again, it was too late.

The township government did not intend to remove Li, for he is far

from the worst among the fourteen party secretaries under the jurisdiction of the township government. In addition, the township government itself was in the process of reorganization. A new township party secretary had just been sent by the county and all officials in the township government were anxiously awaiting the expected "adjustment" of the township leadership. The readjustment of leadership at the village level was naturally postponed until the Spring Festival, after the township leadership would be stabilized. However, the county government's agenda was different. In early December of 1996, the county government issued a document requiring all township governments to be prepared to send peasant laborers to consolidate the dikes along the Yangtze River.

The township government had to change its schedule. To avoid any trouble that might affect the flood prevention project, the "problem of village leadership" needed to be solved in advance. The township government rushed to hold meetings to discuss how to adjust the leadership at the village level. All the fourteen leaderships were classified into two groups: those that needed a "change in personnel" (*huan ren*) and those only needing a "change in their thinking" (*huan sixiang*). North Village was deemed to belong to the latter category, which meant the township government did not plan to remove the village cadres and all they need to do was to make self-criticism. The township government authorized *banshichu* to decide whether a particular village needed an election. North Village was the only village that would have an election out of four villages under the same *banshichu* because the leaders of the *banshichu* were clearly aware of the complaints among the villagers in North Village.

The meeting was held on December 5, 1996, without any advance notice. Most villagers had no idea of the meeting until that morning, when the group leaders (*cunmin xiaozuzhang*) were suddenly told to send two villager representatives from each group to attend the meeting, which was to be presided over by Director Zen of the *banshichu*.

The villager representatives were appointed by the group leaders. But this did not mean the group leaders had the power to decide who can or cannot go to the meeting. Usually the appointed representatives are relatively eloquent and capable. Those not selected as a representative are still free to attend the meeting. This was the case that year.

When the meeting began that morning, there were forty-one villagers, including twenty-four representatives (two from each villager small group), eight village cadres, and nine other villagers, seated in one of the classrooms of the village school. Fifty-five villagers voted the next morning to elect the village leadership.²⁰

The meeting began with Li Guoshan summarizing the past year's work. He first apologized for the losses because of his incapability and explained the difficulties he faced in making a decision at the time. He then concluded with a self-assessment: "I am a person who has virtue but does not have capability [*you de wu cai*]." He declared that he cares for the villagers and is loyal to his superiors, and hoped the villagers would give him another chance. Then Zen, representing the *banshichu*, gave a speech. After listing the main advantages and shortcomings of the village leadership, Zen announced that, according to the township government's instructions and arrangements, this year North Village would select its leadership through a secret ballot. He guaranteed that there will be no administrative intervention nor fraud, and asked the villagers to "be responsible," not to involve themselves in factional activities, personal attacks, or to abuse the opportunity to retaliate against a personal enemy (*gongbao sichou*).

The villagers focused on complaints regarding the village cadres. Apart from complaining about Li Guoshan's lack of ability, the villagers also poured out their anger against the village cadres' alleged corruption. Just as Wang Chuanzhi had subcontracted the project of building the village school to his predecessor, former party secretary Wang Shuyan, Li had subcontracted a dam project to Wang Chuanzhi, his own predecessor. As the villagers complained, "New secretaries take care of old secretaries, and these party members favor those party members." The villagers described the changing of village cadres as "just change to another hand to scratch where it itches (*huanshou zhuayang*). Whomever you choose, it is always a party member. They take turns to run our village just like the twenty-

²⁰This practice obviously left some room for cadre and candidate manipulation. For example, the nephew of secretary Li was sitting next to me, even though he was not a village resident at that time. He was studying in the county capital and his father worked as a flood prevention expert in the *banshichu*, but they both came to support Li's reelection.

eight stars that take care of the sky in turn." The villagers said they simply do not trust any of the party members in this village and they demanded a chance to elect a non-party member. "There is no good party member in our village suitable for this position [party secretary]. If you do not let us choose a non-party member, you on the township party committee will have to send a party member here to take the position."

At first Zen claimed that it was impossible for a non-party member to be the party secretary, but he eventually gave up when he found the villagers were intransigent. Obviously Zen had read or heard of reports about some other villages where non-party members were elected. He said the solution would be to let the non-party member join the party after he is elected, which was the case in those other villages, but of course this would need the approval of the township leaders.

In the afternoon the *banshichu* officials separately talked with each of the villagers who attended the meeting to seek more detailed opinions. It was said that Li Xinguo, Li Guoshan's deputy, was found to be responsible for most of the corruption charges, although the evidence was still not clear. One of Li Xinguo's big mistakes was that his new house, a three-story building, had been completed just a few days earlier: "We suffered flooding and many of us even do not have enough food. Why could he afford to build a new house like that?" For the *banshichu* officials, whether Li Xinguo was responsible or not was not important.²¹ They were happy, however, to find someone to lessen the villagers' anger.

That night the *banshichu* officials were quite busy. First, they had to choose a candidate for the party secretary position. He must be a non-party member and must be known to the *banshichu* officials as well, for they did not want to take the risk of allowing someone to run the village who was completely unpredictable. Their choice was Min Xinlu, the deputy village head in charge of water irrigation. Min was not a party member and was

²¹I was told, "If we expect the village cadres to complete the state tasks, we have to let them get some benefit from it. Otherwise, who is so foolish as to be a village cadre?" So the best way is to turn a blind eye to such corruption as long as they do not go so far as to cause any scandal. In this case, the *banshichu* leaders did not intend to investigate these alleged corruption cases and did not care who was really responsible.

known to them all. Min's experience in water irrigation was obviously an advantage after the villagers had suffered so much from the flood. Second, the *banshichu* officials needed to call the township party secretary to report on the situation in North Village—that the villagers asked for a non-party member as the party secretary—and to gain approval to choose Min as the candidate for the position. After that, they had to notify Min of their decision so he could prepare the necessary speech the next morning after his election. They also consulted with Min as to the candidate list for the election. At the same time, one official from the *banshichu* talked with Li Xinguo who would be excluded from the candidate list, asking him to "adopt a correct attitude" toward the masses' criticism and the decision by the higher authorities.²²

Li Guoshan did not know what had been going on until the next morning. Zen sent for him thirty minutes before the election started. Zen told Li Guoshan that he would be included in the village leadership, but not as the number one person. Li Guoshan was given a chance to acquit himself before the villagers began to vote. He claimed that all the "concrete matters" had been dealt with by Li Xinguo and he himself was not involved in any corrupt activities. His fault was that he trusted Li Xinguo and failed to keep a tight rein on him. Then Zen, representing the township government, guaranteed the alleged cases would be investigated in due time. To save face for Li Guoshan, Zen thanked Li for his work and said Li had voluntarily asked for a younger person to take his position a long time ago. "It was me who insisted that he stay in this position until we could find the right successor. Now, based on the proposal of most villagers and after serious consideration of the township government, we recommend a candidate list [the *banshichu* had made seventy copies of the list that morning, before the meeting started] with Min Xinlu as the candidate for party secretary." Li Guoshan, along with all other incumbent village cadres except Li Xinguo, was on the list because the new leadership needs his "rich experience."

²²In the following few weeks, Li Xinguo's wife complained to almost everyone she met that her husband was innocent and was the victim of a "plot."

At this stage, the outcome of the election had already been determined. There was no surprise and could not be any surprise (all the work done by the *banshichu* officials was to make sure of this) for the following voting process. After counting the votes, Zen announced the birth of the new village leadership, which consisted of all the incumbent village cadres,²³ less Li Xinguo. Zen announced that the new team would be led provisionally by Min Xinlu who was going to be accepted into the party that evening by the village party branch. His formal appointment as the acting²⁴ party secretary of the village would be made soon by the township government.

The last two proceedings of the meeting was for Min Xinlu to make an inaugural speech in which he promised to achieve four "material benefits," including improving the water irrigation system for the villagers, and for Zen to give instructions, in which he urged the new leadership to take measures to finish the task of collecting taxes and fees as soon as possible, and to make sure the assignment of the flood prevention project be completed in time and in good order.

Conclusion

In North Village, the village election was the result of a compromise made by the local government under pressure from the villagers. This compromise was possible only under certain special circumstances.

It seemed that the villagers are usually indifferent to whomever the township government puts into the village leadership as long as the cadres do not cost them extra suffering apart from the taxes and fees (which are decided by the higher authorities and have to be paid anyway, no matter who is in power). When the village cadres do cause losses for the villagers—like the school building project in 1993 and the flood disaster in 1996—

²³The new leadership had eight members, one less than the old team.

²⁴According to the party's chart, there is a one-year provisional period for new party members. As provisional party member, Li Xinguo is not eligible to vote or stand for election within the party and thus cannot be the formal party secretary.

the anger and complaints of the villagers may eventually evolve into enthusiasm for political participation in order to get rid of corrupt or incapable village cadres. The villagers would take almost any chance to complain when they run into someone from the township government or *banshichu*. As a result, the township government and *banshichu* were well aware of resentment among the villagers. More importantly, the government saw as reasonable villager resentment and thus demands for removing these village cadres.

To convince the higher authorities that villager demands are reasonable is much more important in Chinese politics than many Western scholars might imagine. Whenever encountering a spontaneous collective action (a petition, demonstration, or rejection of a candidate nominated by the party committee, etc.), the first reaction of the government and party organizations is to determine the nature of the action (*dingxing*). If they believe the action is malicious, resolute measures will be taken to suppress it. Only if they decide the demands are reasonable will there be room for compromise.²⁵

However, a well-grounded demand does not necessarily guarantee a compromise. To force the township government or *banshichu* to retreat, the villagers need to have some bargaining chips in hand. Daniel Kelliher correctly pointed out that China's reforms have provided more freedom and choices for the peasants, but ironically this diversity has reduced the power of the peasants as a whole to influence policies, because their individual behavior no longer converges into a collective force.²⁶ However, under certain circumstances, as the North Village case demonstrates, when the villagers were needed to collectively work for a high-profile project and the township officials' own careers are at stake, villagers can put great pressure

²⁵One famous example was the CCP's dealing with student demonstrations in 1989. The "nature" of the movement was determined by Deng Xiaoping as "a riot against the party and socialism" which excluded any possibility of a compromise. It was not surprising that both the student leaders and Zhao Ziyang and his assistants sought to redefine the nature of the movement in the first place.

²⁶See Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979-1989* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), chap. 9.

on the township government and *banshichu* and at least partially achieve their goal.

The whole election process was still under the control of the township government and *banshichu*, which took control over almost every step, including deciding on the necessity for an election, the organization of the meeting, the nomination of the candidates, the ratification of the election outcome, and the positions of those elected. There was no open competition. There was no mechanism for the villagers to decide on someone they really liked or trusted. The villagers did vote on their own will, but their choices were limited. This kind of election is participation through rejection. The villagers meet not to choose someone but to reject someone. In 1993 they rejected a capable party secretary from the Wang lineage, and in 1996 they rejected an incapable party secretary from the Li lineage.²⁷ The latter time they also rejected all the incumbent party members.

²⁷Wang and Li are the two major surnames in North Village, with each accounting for one-third of the total households. The remaining one-third consists of a dozen surnames, with Min as the biggest.