LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN CHINA
An Assessment of Villagers Committees

By Allen C. Choate

Working Paper #1 • February 1997
The Asia Foundation is a private, nonprofit, nongovernmental organization working to build leadership, improve policies and strengthen institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Building on its 42 years in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with Asian and other partners from the public and private sectors to advance effective governance and effective citizenship; open regional markets and create local opportunities; and promote peace and maintain stability within the region through leadership development, exchanges and dialogue, research, and policy management.

Through its Working Paper Series, The Asia Foundation presents a range of views on the major political, economic and security challenges facing the Asia-Pacific. The views expressed in this working paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of The Asia Foundation.
For the past eight years or so, residents of China’s approximately one million villages have been enfranchised under the experimental Organic Law on Villagers Committees, passed by the National People’s Congress in late 1987. Under the law, villagers directly elect committees to serve three-year terms and administer the village’s affairs. Today, there are roughly 930,000 Villagers Committees, with more than four million committee members and township and county officials in charge of Villagers Committee elections.

This development of local governance in China, and particularly the phenomenon of direct, competitive elections for Villagers Committee seats, increasingly has attracted the attention of the international media, western scholars and the foreign donor community. While the general international public largely still is unaware of this aspect of rural governance in China, during the past two years, articles about Villagers Committee elections have appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Economist*.

International assistance to improve village elections and enhance local administration in China has burgeoned over the past year as well. The UNDP, the European Commission and several bilateral official development assistance programs now for the first time are extending significant financial and technical support for rural local elections and administration. On the American private donor side, the Ford Foundation, the International Republican Institute and The Asia Foundation are all providing different types of assistance and support for village elections and local governance reform and development. In addition, the Carter Center recently announced that it will send a team to China in spring of 1997 to observe and determine ways to further assist village elections.

The reasons for this strong and positive international interest in China’s village elections and the improved administration of local governance are fairly obvious. The Western tendency is to equate democracy with free and fair elections of representative leaders. Many in the West believe they perceive in the village elections of China the “seeds of democracy.” Some outside observers even see in village elections the potential for the bottom-up democratization of China. Other external analysts are simply trying to better understand the meaning of this development in China’s rural governance. Why would the Chinese Communist Party, whose leadership role is formally recognized in China’s constitution, leave itself open to competitive threats? What are its motives? Are the elections legitimate or are they all a sham, with the outcomes determined behind the scenes and well in advance? What are the consequences and results of those elections since they were instituted eight years ago?
Interestingly, many Chinese leaders in public affairs appear to regard village elections and the emergence of Villagers Committees in a much more matter-of-fact manner than Western observers and analysts. The West seems to see more that is new in the phenomenon of village elections than do many Chinese officials. But those officials are beginning to see that this Western fascination with elections and what looks like rural democracy in China is an asset for China’s international image. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, which is responsible, among other things, for basic-level government and village elections in China, has maintained an “open door” policy for outsiders wishing to learn more about and hopefully lend support to this process of rural governance. The results of this candor and accessibility have been positive for China. Whether or not such openness will be sustained in a period of increasing regulatory control remains to be seen.

This paper is written with two purposes in mind. First, it will provide a needed comprehensive overview of the system and process of village and township governance in China. That overview is critical in order to assess where village elections fit in the larger pattern of local rural governance. Regarding those elections in isolation from their contexts can (and sometimes does) lead to serious distortions of perspective. Second, the paper will offer analysis and conclusions on the significance of village elections, village governance and their relationship to definitions of democracy.

**Historical Background: The Emergence of Villagers Committees**

In order to better understand why Villagers Committees have come into being and what they represent, it is necessary to note that the phenomenon of Villagers Committees does not connote a clean break with either Maoist, Republican or even late Imperial China. The concept and practice of village self-sufficiency have antecedents in Maoist and pre-Communist China. Throughout the entire period of Mao’s rule in China, the levels of governance below the county had to take care of themselves. The predecessors of the township and village — the commune and the production brigade, respectively — did not benefit from nor receive any support from the state. They were intended to be self-financing, self-managing and self-developing, meeting their own needs from their own resources. This, in turn, was a continuation of practices and attitudes that stretched back to late Imperial China, where the official apparatus of formal government ended at the county seat. (China administratively is divided into provinces and several municipalities, with the status of provinces; provinces contain prefectures, counties, provincial cities, townships and villages; there also are a number of autonomous regions for various minorities.)
This historical continuity of basic-level self-sufficiency may partially explain why numerous Chinese officials do not appear to regard Villagers Committees as a radical a break from the past as do some Western observers. In that particular view, villages are meant to be left to themselves. By being self-sufficient, villages are not burdens on the treasury of the state nor a source of instability because of their isolated and free-standing character. In other words, a conservative rationale in support of representative Villagers Committees can be found in some Chinese circles.

But the advent of economic reform in 1978, specifically the decollectivization of agriculture and the institution of the agricultural household responsibility system, was undoubtedly the single most important factor leading to changes in village governance and the emergence of Villagers Committees. Decollectivization impacted on village governance in two critical ways. First, with each household now able to retain most of its own earnings under the responsibility system, there no longer was any assured community revenue from agriculture to pay for essential services. Nor was there any interest in providing for those collective services since families now were focused on generating household wealth. Consequently, there was neither the means nor the interest to continue the provision of basic village public goods.

Second, as agricultural decollectivization gathered momentum throughout China, the Commune/Production Brigade/Production Team hierarchy, which had been in place for many years, crumbled and collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of administrative cadres who had been working at the commune and brigade level, and who had received their pay from commune and brigade collective proceeds, now were stranded without a source of income and without any work.

These two results of agricultural decollectivization — the natural collapse of village administration and the unemployment of huge numbers of former commune and brigade cadres who remained in the countryside — influenced the nature of rural politics and shaped the forms of village governance as they are seen today. (There is a historical path dependency).

Officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs say that the first Villagers Committees emerged spontaneously in 1979-80 in places like Anhui province. They came into being to fill the administrative vacuum and provide for basic services and needs which were withering rapidly as community organization fragmented and resources were retained by households. However, it appears that even as early as 1980, there was encouragement from top leadership for devel-
opment of Villagers Committees. In that year Deng Xiaoping, in a speech before the Politburo, said that “facilitating the democratic management of the state, especially at the basic local level” is a new goal to be pursued. “China wants to create a higher and better democracy than in capitalist countries,” he said.

The 1982 constitution of China officially established Villagers Committees as “self-governing organizations of people at the basic level.” This was in keeping with the tradition of self-sufficiency of villages in the past, and also with keeping villages separate from the formal organization of government (note that Villagers Committees are not government units nor agencies; they are self-governing mass organizations). The categorization is very important. It relieves the government of financial responsibilities for Villagers Committees, and does not empower the Villagers Committees with the official authorities of state. On the other hand, as time and events would bear out, this classification of Villagers Committees (cunmin weiyuanhui - not Village Committees, nongcun weiyuanhui) provided the committees with flexibility and room to maneuver that the formal organs of government did not have.

Between 1982 and 1985 the communes and brigades, which had pretty much eroded anyway in the wake of economic reform, were formally abolished and replaced by townships (xiang) and villages (cun), respectively. During this period of administrative reorganization and rapid and extensive rural economic reform, the economic functions of the townships and villages were assigned to newly created economic management committees or industrial development committees. These committees were staffed by the former commune cadres who had been left without jobs earlier. They were joined by many new, young technically qualified cadres who came to the countryside to manage economic functions. In fact, economic reform in China led to an increase in the number of cadres working in the rural areas in the early 1980s.

Thus, even before Villagers Committees came into existence, local economic management committees staffed by full-time cadres, and township governments managed by appointed officials (albeit technically under the leadership of Township People’s Congresses), were in place. Villages and townships owned collective assets, which became known as Township & Village Enterprises or TVEs. TVEs and other collective economic assets today still are managed by these cadre committees and/or township government officials. By the time Villagers Committees actually became operational, the villages’ economic resources already were under the control and management of these other committees.
The most central fact of village politics and power consequently was established over a decade ago. The issue of who controls and manages the village economic resources and the decisions and actions taken concerning the village’s economic development are the central and overwhelming issues in village governance in China. Relationships between the local party branch, Villagers Committee, Economic Management Committee, and township government must be assessed and understood prior to any attempt to empower Villagers Committees with more economic authority. Not to do so is to invite contention and conflict at the local level — the very instability so feared by China’s leadership.

While local cadres are appointed, and local party branch leaders are elected by local party members, Villagers Committee members are elected by the entire village. That more democratic and representative character of the Villagers Committee make it more appealing to Westerners. However, as early as 1980, the People’s Congress Electoral Law was passed, calling for direct competitive elections for township and county People’s Congresses deputies, with choice of candidates, universal suffrage and secret ballots. This procedure remains the case today.

Why, then, is relatively more international attention given to elected Villagers Committees and village elections, but not to election of township and county People’s Congress deputies, which has been ongoing since 1980 — a full eight years prior to the onset of village elections? Part of the answer lies in the relative weakness of township and county People’s Congresses. While technically empowered with oversight and inspection authorities, these local legislatures appear to lack both the capacity and the desire to exercise such authorities. The deputies often lack the skills and education necessary to exercise those authorities (although that may be changing). Since township and county People’s Congresses, unlike Villagers Committees, are components of the formal government, it appears more attention is given by party and government cadres to vetting candidates in the nomination process. Consequently, local legislature deputies tend to be more loyal to the state and function more as state agents than popular representatives — although at any one time they are playing both roles to a greater or lesser degree.

Do Villagers Committees exercise more power within their domains than local People’s Congresses, and is that why they seem more attractive? Or, is it the relatively open and representative nature of the village election process? To provide answers to these and other questions, the following section describes and analyzes the village electoral process and the system of village governance.
Villagers Committees: Elections and Functions

The drafting of the law which authorizes Villagers Committees began in 1982 and continued through 1985, undergoing dozens of revisions. The State Council approved a draft Organic Law on Villagers Committees as an experimental measure in 1986, and in November 1987, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress enacted the Law. At each step of the process, the provisions of the experimental law underwent sustained debate, and the measures themselves were re-drafted until acceptable compromise was achieved. The main issues revolved around the relationship between the village and the township under the terms of the law.

Conservatives wanted the village to fall more under the direction of the township, while reformists sought more village independence, if not authority. The resulting compromise language is sufficiently vague to satisfy both schools, but because of its vagueness, open to differing interpretations. Villagers Committees are not formally under township governments nor under local party branches. But Villagers Committees are expected to follow general party leadership, and cannot reject township requests for “assistance.”

Interestingly, two party elders, Peng Zhen and Bo Yibo, were instrumental in pushing the Organic Law of Villagers Committees through in 1987. In fact, looking at the record of dissent and disagreement, one may speculate that the law would not have been enacted without their sustained leadership and support. The reasons why these two venerable Long Marchers would promote such a measure in part had to do with instrumental considerations of stability and retaining party support. But it is possible that they were motivated by the CCP’s history of peasant backing and its early years in rural China.

Whatever their motives, they saw implementation of the law in June of 1988 with preparations for the first round of Villagers Committee elections in a number of provinces. Villagers Committees are elected for three-year terms. Those provinces which held elections first in 1988-89 now are preparing to enter their fourth round of village elections during the winter of 1997-98. Because some provinces began implementation of the village elections later than others, in any given year there usually are village elections scheduled in at least one or more provinces. During 1997, for example, Fujian and Inner Mongolia will conduct village elections. In 1998, eight other provinces and municipalities will hold elections — Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Zhejiang, Henan, Hainan, Beijing, and Tianjin.

Enough experience now is accumulating to detect patterns and make gener-
al observations about village elections and their place in the larger context of local government.

**The Village Election Sequence**

There are approximately one million villages in China, with an average of about 1,200 - 1,300 people. Depending on the population and geography of a village, a Villagers Committee will have anywhere from three to seven elected members, including a Director and Deputy Director. Some four to six months before village elections are scheduled to be held, an election management committee is constituted by township and county authorities to oversee planning and implementation of the upcoming election. Generally, election management committee members are nominated by the current Villagers Committee and approved by the Villagers Representative Assembly (discussed below), or nominated by the Township People's Congress with the subsequent approval of the Villagers Representative Assembly. However, there are many other variations of election management committees.

Under the terms of the Organic Law on Villagers Committees, no member of the election management committee can be a candidate for the Villagers Committee or an incumbent of the Villagers Committee. Government cadres, members of the military and employees of state-owned enterprises are legally not allowed to serve on Villagers Committees. But they may serve on election management committees, where the potential for influencing the election is considerable given the election management committee’s responsibilities for setting rules and educating voters.

The Organic Law is silent on the issue of party members serving on Villagers Committees, but the Ministry of Civil Affairs estimates that about half of the nation’s Villagers Committees have chairmen who are party members. And of that number, perhaps more than one-third were recruited into the party after their election to the Villagers Committee, not before. The election management committee’s first task is to conduct villager voter registration, which takes about 10 days. All villagers over the age of 18 have the right to vote and to stand for election. The election management committee and Villagers Committee also is responsible for voter education, disseminating election-related documents to village households and conducting meetings for villagers on voting rights and balloting procedures.

The election management committee then initiates a nominations procedure, which is completed about one week before the elections. At this stage of
the election preparation, there is a great deal of variety throughout China. Some provinces allow nominations to be made by a petition of from five to 20 villagers. Other arrangements include: a) nominations by the election management committee; b) recommendations by party branch with approval by the Villagers Representative Assembly; c) “sea” nominations, which is really a set of primary elections; and d) nominations through a sequence of discussions and consensus-building (called “fermentation) from small discussion groups up to the Villagers Representative Assembly.

Clearly, the party and/or the predominant local political power exerts the greatest influence on the election through this range of nominating methods and flexibility. With so many villages and elections, there are documented cases of “rigging” the nominations. There also are many cases of open and fully competitive nominating processes.

The important point to note here is that the entity charged with implementing the nominating process normally has to be active, even aggressive, because in many localities, serving on the Villagers Committee is regarded as a thankless and poorly paid job. In many areas, because of this reason and for socio-cultural reasons, candidates often have to be searched out and “talked into” running for office. Also, the law calls for at least one female to serve on the Villagers Committee, and very often both the election management committee and the local party branch must intervene actively to get a female candidate on the ballot. Thus the nomination process in any given village in China is both influenced by and reflective of the clan populations, economic interests and strength of party leadership. In many ways, the process of nomination is as critical, if not more so, than the elections themselves.

Following nominations, there normally is an opportunity for what Westerners would call a campaign, albeit on a much more modest and briefer level. Since villages are so small and everyone usually already knows one another, there is little need for a candidate to introduce him or herself or engage in door-to-door campaigning, although that does occur in some places. All candidates normally are given opportunities before the balloting, either on election day itself or in earlier village meetings, to make statements concerning what they would do if elected and to answer questions from the villagers.

Villagers Committee candidates’ statements and questions addressed to them by villagers prior to election are concerned almost exclusively with economic issues. “It’s the economy, stupid” is the slogan of virtually every Villagers Committee candidate and the primary concern of the villagers themselves.
Common examples are: pledging the expansion of the local village enterprise to create more jobs through market development; promising to seek out and bring in outside investment; and completing a needed infrastructure project such as a new feeder road (which also generates local jobs).

Balloting on election day usually is characterized by a high voter turnout and an apparent seriousness of purpose displayed by the voters themselves, especially in the interior and poorer provinces. A general election meeting is held at which there is heavy attendance. The rules are explained, the candidates may speak (again or publicly for the first time), registration is confirmed, and voters cast their ballots. Voting is by secret, written ballot, although only a minority of villages have constructed ballot booths. In addition to voting at a fixed location, mobile ballot boxes are deployed to collect votes from those who are either house bound or unable to get to the central location. There is no absentee voting. A resident must return to his or her village to vote. However, there is proxy voting, with one voter able to cast up to three votes for others (with suitable certification). Voters may write in the names of desired candidates who are not listed on the ballot, and frequently do. About one percent of the country’s Villagers Committee Directors were elected through an indigenous write-in campaign. Candidates receiving an absolute majority are declared winners. If no candidate receives an absolute majority, there will be a second round. Elections usually take place in the farm off-season (normally in the winter) to avoid disrupting village work.

With each round of elections, many other features and enhancements are added to the election process. Recall of incumbents is provided for in the law, with one-fifth of eligible voters petitioning for a recall vote and a majority voting for recall. There is growing evidence that villagers are not reluctant to attempt recall procedures. In some “model” localities, sixth-graders, who are knowledgeable enough to help but unlikely to be influenced by others, assist illiterate or elderly voters. County-level “flying squads” of election monitors also have been employed in some locations recently. These observation and evaluation teams are composed of local respected persons such as teachers, doctors and others who do not live in the area they visit. They report their findings directly to higher levels of the Civil Affairs Administration. Finally, in 10 provinces (including Liaoning, Fujian, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Hebei), village voting is under specific legal protection, making it a punishable offense to obstruct or unduly interfere with a voter exercising the right to cast a ballot. It is not specifically protected as a legal right elsewhere because Villagers Committees are a “self-governing people’s organization” rather than a formal organ of government.
The Structure of Village Governance

While the village election process is the most commented on aspect of contemporary village governance, it is only one component of a complex of structures and procedures provided for under the Organic Law on Villagers Committees. Other elements significant in interpreting the village committee development in China include:

**Village Charters, Pledges and Management Regulations**: These documents are not required under the Organic Law on Villagers Committees, but they are encouraged and their adoption has been growing. It is estimated that about 10-15 percent of China’s villages have Village Charters. A new amendment to the Organic Law proposed by the Civil Affairs Ministry to the State Council would make Village Charters obligatory. Where charters or management regulations do exist, they are the result of prolonged discussions in village meetings, often taking more than a year to achieve consensus. Densely written in lengthy and specific detail, these charters have been referred to by some Chinese officials as “village constitutions.” While these charters spell out in great detail the rights of villagers, they are equally specific in detailing the duties and obligations of villagers. In doing so, these charters depart from western liberal practice of only constitutionally defining an individual’s rights, not obligations. However, it must be borne in mind that these charters have been produced over a period of many months in many discussion groups with maximum village participation (not coerced). Where they do exist, charters reflect community values and a collective approach to democratic practices.

Village Pledges can take many forms, either as mutual, between villager and Villager Committee, or by the Villager Committee itself. These pledges are both promises by the committee on what it hopes to achieve in its three-year tenure (e.g., build a new health clinic, extend the bus route, etc.), as well as expressions of villager self-control (e.g., no gambling, volunteer public safety patrols, etc.). Villager obligations and village collectivism also are manifested through the display of “model household” awards, prominently exhibited on the doors of village houses and through the maintenance of dossiers. Many villages keep dossiers on village households which record their performance on measures such as birth control and grain contributions. These are made public periodically so that villagers can “learn from each other.”

To Western eyes, these measures are discomfiting intrusions on individual freedoms and privacy. However, given the open and deliberative process by which these measures have been adopted and implemented in villages, it would
be a mistake to conclude that they are “imposed” on villagers. Instead, they often seem to accurately reflect local culture and values.

**Village Assemblies and Village Representative Assemblies:** The Village Assembly is basically a village “committee of the whole.” Under the Organic Law, it is required to meet at least once a year. The Village Assembly is the ultimate source of authority and oversight in village governance in much the same way that People’s Congresses are supposedly the ultimate authorities at their various levels. Because it is cumbersome to convene and logistically difficult for all villagers to conveniently gather, an alternative “village legislature” has emerged. The Village Representative Assembly, composed of representatives of groups of households in village neighborhoods, has proven exceptionally effective. Village Representative Assemblies are now actively encouraged by the Civil Affairs Ministry, which would like to see the Organic Law amended to make them mandatory nationwide (about half of villages have Village Representative Assemblies).

As the ultimate village authority, the Village Representative Assembly may meet on average three to four times a year. The Village Committee (in effect, the village executive branch) meets an average of once or twice a month. At assembly meetings, the Village Committee reports on village finances and public facilities and services. Its accounting books and financial records are made available to the assembly. The committee’s work plans and proposed expenditures must be reviewed and formally approved by the assembly.

The financial issues proposed and discussed include salaries and methods of compensation for paid village cadres, including the Village Committee Director and sometimes a Deputy Director, depending on the village’s wealth. All paid village cadres receive their compensation from the village finances, not the government, and are answerable to the Village Representative Assembly. On the face of it, this financial dependence should, and often does, produce a responsiveness and sensitivity by cadres to the wishes of the villagers as opposed to higher levels of public administration. As the legally mandated village affairs oversight body, the Village Assembly (or increasingly the Village Representative Assembly) also has the local party branch secretary reporting to it, as well as the economic management committee. If the Villagers Committee wishes to oppose the township or county government concerning a project, it will first take its case to the Village Assembly whose backing is essential.

The increasingly liveliness of the Village Assembly and the Village Representative Assembly is still fairly new and its role evolving. The fact that
these assemblies are more assertive and seemingly capable than local People’s Congresses can be attributed to two factors: First, the expenses of village administration and the costs of village public services are paid for by collective village revenues, not state subsidies. Most of these funds come from earnings of collective township and village enterprises or donations. Thus, the assembly has a much greater and more direct stake in the performance of the village’s economy and administration. Second, the Village Assemblies deal with issues that affect their daily lives while People’s Congresses act more as intermediaries between government and the public. Consequently, the ties and connections between Village Assembly Representatives and their “constituents” are much more intimate than those of local People’s Congress deputies.

Therefore, it can be argued that the emergence of these active Village Representative Assemblies may be even more significant than the elected village committees themselves, in terms of ensuring greater accountability and transparency at the village governance level. The actual work and responsibilities of the Villagers Committee include local dispute settlement, local hygiene and public health (including birth control), grain quota collection, social services and social welfare, public safety and “support and organization of the villagers in cooperative economic undertakings” (production, supply and marketing, credit).

However, on this last critical function, Villagers Committees “must respect decisionmaking power of collective economic organizations.” That is, Villagers Committees are enjoined from interfering with collective village enterprises already controlled by party and township cadres through the local economic management committee. This is a recipe for conflict if the Village Committee is active and strong. Such disputes often are avoided because the economic management committee is usually represented on the Villagers Committee, and also because economic management committee representatives answer to the Village Assembly or Village Representative Assembly.

Assessments and Conclusions

Various proposals by the Ministry of Civil Affairs that are now pending will further strengthen the village governance and autonomy measures by: making the Organic Law permanent rather than experimental; requiring Village Charters and Village Representative Assemblies; improving the registration and voting procedures; and perhaps most significantly, giving the Ministry of Civil Affairs the final interpreter of the law’s intent and meaning.
The existing Organic Law on Villagers Committees mandates their existence and the associated elections. However, the procedural and implementing regulations and laws will be prepared and managed by provincial and sub-provincial units of government. Since the Organic Law is written in broad language, the room for interpretation is quite large. The result, not surprisingly, is a wide variation in the quality and character of village governments throughout China. Among those cited by the Civil Affairs Ministry as having the highest and most democratic standards of village governance are: Liaoning, Jilin, Fujian, Shandong, Hubei, and Sichuan. The Lishu County in Jilin province was named best in the nation by the Ministry. While the Ministry does not cite the least improved village governance systems, outside observers noted that in the provinces of Guangdong and Hainan, the interest and enthusiasm for elections and Village Committees seem to be less than elsewhere.

The quality, integrity and specific procedures for village elections run the full gamut in China. It is very difficult to make generalizations because of the sheer size, numbers and lack of good survey data (although the Civil Affairs Ministry now is gathering such information). The range and variety of application of village elections throughout China demonstrate the decentralized character of administration in China. China may be a unitary state, but the center’s ability to compel and direct provincial and sub-provincial units of government to implement laws and procedures is extremely limited. Instead, there appears to be a constant process of negotiation underway between various levels of administration.

Generally speaking, Villagers Committees have taken greater hold and are treated with more seriousness in the poorer regions rather than in the wealthier areas of China. To Western observers, who see economic development (or the products of economic development, such as higher levels of education and income) as either a precondition for or an expeditor of democratization, this is contradictory. The reason for this is the *instrumentalist* interpretation of democracy by leadership and villagers alike. Villagers Committees, the other components of village governance, and village democracy and autonomy are meant to improve villager economic growth and development. In other words, village democracy is perceived by villagers as the path to economic prosperity; village autonomy is perceived by leadership as a means of ensuring rural stability. This is why central leadership has endorsed these reforms, and why it has initially taken off in part of China.

Another significant feature of village democracy in China is its collective
character. As indicated earlier in the discussion of villager charters and village collective enterprises, there is a strong set of community collective norms and practices at work in instituting village democracy which runs counter to Western notions of democracy, defined solely in liberal, capitalist ways. Where village democracy is exercised in China, the process of deliberation, consultation, mediation, and determining constituent obligations as well as rights, choice of leaders and increased accountability of cadres all are present.

In addition, the financial base for village governance and community services is not constructed on a public finance system. Any taxes which the villages are required to collect are transferred up the ladder of administration. Instead, the revenue base is founded on the village’s collective economic assets, contributing further to the collective character of Chinese village democracy. Since these collective revenues pay for all village services, support the operations of village governance and pay for the village cadres, those cadres have strong incentives to maximize short-term industrial growth and investment.

These features of village governance in China would not seem to support the opinions of those who consider the advent of village democracy as the first step in a bottom-up democratization process. Village democracy is not based on liberal, individual rights-protecting and capitalist economy-enhancing premises. Instead, it is founded on social and economic collective ideas, and is seen as a means to other ends.

With that necessary caution raised, the changes in village governance over the past eight years are cause for optimism and worthy of encouragement for a number of important reasons:

**Gains**

**Choice of representation:** Villagers now have the opportunity to choose from among potential leaders who will represent their views and aims. A recent survey in China shows that the more democratically managed the elections, the more identical and congruent the views of villagers and villagers Committee members on economic and social issues. Villagers can be more assured of having leaders who will articulate their views to higher levels of authority.

**Accountability and transparency:** Since village cadres are paid by the village, the responsiveness of cadres to villagers has increased. The new complex of village governance structures, such as the Villagers Representative Assembly, the Villagers Committee, pledges, and charters, increasingly enmeshes and embeds party and economic cadres in the village itself. The question is not one of the
Villagers Committee having more or less power. Many Villagers Committees members are the key players in the village anyway. What is most important is whether or not those in positions of power in the village are held accountable for their action and performance. The new network of village governance mechanisms, especially the Village Representative Assembly, is greatly improving the odds of accountability and transparency. Cadres who previously fell outside formal accounting and reporting frameworks have not been incorporated into them.

**Enhanced avenues of appeal and advocacy:** Recent field research by scholars has demonstrated repeatedly that villagers, once they are made familiar with and are aware of laws and regulations, will use those laws and regulations as avenues of appeal and complaint to upper authority levels. The 1989 Administrative Litigation Law, which gave citizens the right to sue state officials, and the complex of national, provincial and sub-provincial laws and regulations on village election and Villagers Committees are used extensively by villagers as defense against encroachments or illegal actions by local officials. This is important because township cadres, under the “one-step up” accountability system, are accountable to the county level, not the higher provincial government level, as was the case previously. This has given township cadres more latitude to intrude on village affairs. Villagers, in turn, have become more active in legally defending themselves by using new laws and regulations. Ministry of Civil Affairs officials appear to be particularly responsive to villagers’ appeals, which in turn, has made villagers more forthcoming.

**Needs**

**Lack of revenue and economic resources:** In the poorer regions of China, where economic reform has not yet impacted, and the village’s collective assets are limited, the prospects for economic development are not encouraging. For that very reason, poor villagers see democratic reform in village governance as the way out. But that aspiration will be dashed with related and needed fiscal reforms and changes in the ownership structure of local collective assets. Villages need to be given some ability to raise and/or retain local taxes to support village services and generate economic growth. Similarly, the vaguely defined ownership of village collective assets needs to be made more explicit, through such means as share-holding, in order to generate both political reform and economic development. Local public finance reform will have consequences far beyond simple revenue raising.
Lack of non-economic incentives for village democratization: If it is true that the prospect of economic prosperity is the single greatest motivator for village governance reform, than in those localities which already are prosperous (such as some of the coastal regions), the challenge is to find motivating factors for villagers who are both relatively well-off and busy in the reform economy. In these settings, the tendency is to turn to township and county levels of administration to basically “take over” village services and administration, albeit indirectly. A sense of community in these better-off areas is needed. Inculcating that sense of community by helping to address community needs and problems will not be easy, however.

While not a natural springboard for bottom-up democracy because of the very different functions and relations of the next levels of government, Villagers Committees, village elections and the other new apparatus of village governance has been a gain for China and the Chinese people. It has enhanced prospects for stability, helped contribute to further local economic growth and improved the quality of basic-level democracy. But villagers seem to judge village democracy on the basis of results: is it improving their material life and is it providing them with social safety? To allow Villagers Committees to achieve their hoped-for goals of rural stability, economic development and enhanced state legitimacy, those committees need resources. And those resources can be found through local public finance reform.

Allen C. Choate is the Director of Program Development for The Asia Foundation in China.
Bibliography

Additional Suggested Reading

“China Research Society on Basic Level Governance,” Legal System of Village Committees in China, June 1995

Report on the Villagers Representative Assemblies in China, China Research Society of Basic-Level Governance, 1994

Study on the Election of Villagers Committees in Rural China, China Research Society of Basic-Level Governance, 1993


White, Tyrene, “Reforming the Countryside,” Current History, September 1992