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The Rise of the Peasant Citizen? – Political
Contention and Participation in Contemporary Rural
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Presenter

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Village Elections, Democracy, and the Rise of the Peasant Citizen in Contemporary China

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Summary

After more than a decade of intensive research in China and the West on Chinese village elections, judgement on the consequences of this institutional innovation remains ambivalent and controversial. One of the most intriguing questions is if these elections will bring about the peasant citizen who – apart from enjoying democratic rights – actively claims and defends those rights against the state. By summarizing main results of the scholarly debate on village elections and drawing on recent field research, this paper addresses the state and specific contents of political awareness among China’s peasants. In the final part, it discusses the relationship between village elections and regime legitimacy. It is suggested that village elections can strengthen one-party rule, as they produce a more horizontal peasant-cadre relationship based on self-perceived democratic empowerment and trust on the part of the peasants.

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I. Introduction

What to make out of village elections in the PRC? After more than a decade in which the direct ballot in the countryside has now been researched with growing intensity in both China and the West,¹ judgement on the consequences of this institutional innovation introduced to China's political system in the late 1980s remains ambivalent and controversial. Many different aspects of village elections have come under scrutiny since then. The underlying motive of many scholars dealing with this subject is obviously connected to the intriguing imagination of a bottom-up democratization in China. While issues concerning the technical implementation of the 1987 Organic Law on Villager Committees, political participation, the influence of clans, the redistribution of power in the villages caused by elections, and – more generally – the effects of a changing political economy on elections have shaped most of the research agenda in the past, thorough investigation has recently been undertaken into (rising levels of) political contention and collective action. Obviously, there is now keen interest among scholars to find out more about the changing political awareness² of peasants and rural cadres.

It remains an open question if this recent trend reflects factual developments “on the ground” as peasants, taken as a whole, might have become increasingly self-confident by elections and feel genuinely empowered to engage in active politics to pursue their interests or ensure their rights; or if it is more inspired by an experimental probing of scholars into the rise of the Chinese peasant citizen just to see how far one can get with this concept. Such an experiment is certainly legitimate. It allows to measure the effects of direct village elections over the last ten years of their institutionalization in most parts of China against the *idealtyp* (Max Weber) of the modern citizen for the sake of better qualifying the scope and limits of political awareness in China's countryside – and perhaps even to make new hypotheses on the potential for democratic system change generated by village elections. Surely enough, behind such probing stands the concept of the autonomous individual who is a rational decision-maker focused

¹ Kevin O'Brien's “Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages”, in: *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32, July 1994, pp. 33-59 may be regarded as the “runner-up” for scholarly attention to this subject in the West. In this article, he provided a typology of village committees generated from an investigation of the relationship between political participation and policy implementation that is still relevant for comparative research on village elections.

² I define ‘political awareness’ quite generally as goal-oriented political participation and behaviour directed to the public sphere of the village and beyond in order to pursue individual or collective interests. It may be linked to some form of ‘proto-citizenship’ in the sense that peasants are politically aware by referring to existing laws and regulations claimed against the state. Manifest political participation is an important signifier of political awareness and indicates its content and intensity.

on a self interest-based agenda. From this perspective, elections enable peasants to live up to their nature and, thus, guarantee stability (and prosperity) within society at large. Consequently, village elections cannot but contribute to the gradual rise of democracy as it has been conceptualized in the West.

Chinese scholars within the PRC are more divided on this approach, albeit for different reasons. Most of them have welcomed village elections as an effective means to enhance the quality of village self-government. They have, for instance, argued that elections educate and empower peasants to become more engaged in village politics for the good of their community, change power arrangements within the village by “containing” bad or corrupt cadres, strengthen the legitimacy of the local authorities, and make peasants both state-loving citizens and agents of a gradually rising democratic civil society.³ Others have been more critical. For instance, they questioned the ideological commitment to an abstract, but ahistorical and, thus, useless concept of democracy that stood behind the drive for village elections.⁴ In more practical terms, they were pointing at the aggravating tensions between peasants and village committees (as between village committees and local party/government authorities), the reinvigoration or strengthening of clan structures and the formation of new corrupt power groups within the villages, the overall loss of party control over the countryside caused by election-triggered turmoil in many parts of China, and not at least to the financial burden for township governments to get election-paralysed villages back on track.⁵ Radical voices

³ For a good overview of Chinese empirical research and the debate on village elections among China scholars see e.g. Xiao Tangbiao et al. (eds.), *Duwei shijiao zhong de cunmin zhixuan (Village Elections in Multi-Perspective)*, Beijing (Zhongguo shehui kexue) 2001; Li Lianjiang et al. (eds.), *Cunweihui xuanju guancha (Observing Village Elections)*, Tianjin (Tianjin renmin) 2001; Xu Yong, *Cunmin zizhi jincheng zhongde xiangcun guanxi (Township-Village Relations in the Process of Villager Self-Government)*, Wuhan (Huazhong shifan daxue) 2003; Xu Yong, *Xiangcun zhili yu Zhongguo zhengzhi (Rural Governance and Chinese Politics)*, Beijing (Zhongguo shehui), 2003.

⁴ These voices often downturn village elections as premature or outright counterproductive in the context of rural governance reform. There is an intensive debate on the latter going on among Chinese scholars for quite some years. While some experts would advocate an extension of direct elections to the township and even county levels, others opt for the cancellation of those elections and the instalment of professional local officials indirectly controlled by higher governments. For more recent contributions to this debate see Dang Guoyin, ‘Cunmin zizhi’ shi minzhu zhengzhi de qidian ma (Is Village Self-government the Starting Point for Democratic Politics)?, in: *Zhanlue yu guanli*, No. 1, 1999, pp. 88-96; Yu Jianrong, Xiangzhen zizhi: Genju he lujing (Township Self-government: Foundations and Means), in: *Zhanlue yu guanli*, No. 6, 2002, pp. 117-120; Shen Yansheng, Zhongguo xiangzhi de huigu yu zhanwang (Looking Back and Ahead to China’s Rural Governance), in: *Zhanlue yu guanli*, No. 1, 2003, pp. 52-66.

⁵ This doesn’t mean that these scholars in all cases oppose the institution of direct village elections. Very often, they recommend judicial reforms and better implementation controls by the authorities to make village elections work. I have briefly discussed the Chinese debate on

like Beijing University's Pan Wei flatly reject direct village elections, as they are accused of doing more harm than good in rural China.⁶

Behind this background, it is the objective of this paper to assess the debate on Chinese village elections with respect to the current state of peasant political awareness and its (possible) consequences. The ensuing set of questions is guiding my synopsis:

1. In what way have elections influenced and shaped political participation, i.e. participation *in* elections (as voter or office-seeker) and active engagement in village politics *between* elections?
2. How have elections changed the political behaviour of peasants? To what extent do they feel truly empowered, and how do they define this empowerment?
3. Do elections bring about the peasant citizen, i.e. a self-confident and rational interest-seeker who claims democratic *rights* against the local cadre bureaucracy (as the representatives of the party-state) and who may soon traverse the limits of what has been called 'rule-based resistance'?
4. Are village elections thus conducive to the rise of competitive democracy in China or do they help to (re-)consolidate one-party rule?

The existing literature on village elections is heuristically differentiated along two sub-topics highlighting political awareness: the relationship between elections and participation (II) and between elections and citizenship (III). My brief overview of past and current research – concentrating on some “paradigmatic” studies mostly published in the West – is complimented by some preliminary observations drawn from field research undertaken in six villages situated in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone and the provinces of Jiangxi and Jilin throughout 2002-2004.⁷ This project directly aims at exploring the content and changing nature of peasant and cadre political awareness under the influence of village elections. It further looks into how political awareness affects the

village elections in Gunter Schubert, *Village Elections in the PRC. A Trojan Horse of Democracy?*, Project Discussion Paper No. 19/2002, University of Duisburg-Essen.

⁶ Pan Wei contends that the direct ballot destroys the communal basis and social coherence in the villages, i.e. the very preconditions of rural China's stability and economic development. He also denies that the numerical reduction of cadres will help to ease the financial burden of the peasants and lead to more efficient local administration. See e.g. Pan Wei, “Zhiyi 'xiangzhen xingzheng tizhi gaige'” (Doubting at 'Village and Township Administrative Political Reform'), in: *Kaifang shidai*, Nr. 2, 2004, pp.16-24.

⁷ This is part of a broader – DFG-funded - project on village and urban neighbourhood elections jointly undertaken by this author and Prof. Thomas Heberer, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany (see appendix).

relationship between peasants and local cadres at the village and township level, and what this means for the Communist leadership's efforts to generate system stability and new regime legitimacy in rural China (IV).⁸

II. Elections and political participation

The relationship between village elections and political participation has been most frequently researched by linking participation to different systemic/structural or actor-centered factors figuring as independent variables.⁹ Very prominent among these factors is the quality of electoral implementation. For example, *Melanie Manion* found a positive correlation between the quality of village elections in terms of genuine choice for peasants and what she called 'congruence' between leaders and their electorates:

If democratization is an important source of congruence, the leaders in villages that are farther along in implementing the law on village committees will be closer to the village constituents in their positions on the state's role in the economy than leaders in villages that lag behind in implementation, other things equal.¹⁰

Thus, implementation does determine the degree of political consent in a village between those elected to lead on the one hand and their voters on the other: the more genuine choice, the more congruence. Certainly enough, village leaders would still listen to their township selectorates, but they obviously could no longer ignore the peasants' interests channeled into the election process. In terms of political participation, however, Manion's data stated a negative

⁸Roughly the same program was formulated by Silvia Chan in 1998: "I am undertaking on how the introduction of village self-government and direct elections at village level has affected the political life, political culture, and the public sphere(s) in the rural areas". See Chan, Sylvia, Research Notes on Villager's Committee Elections: Chinese Style Democracy, in: *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 7, No. 19, November 1998, pp. 507-521 (507).

⁹ Most studies focus on rather technical or descriptive aspects of participation like voter turnout and electoral competitiveness, cadre performance, clan influence and mobilisation, cadre-peasant interaction, distribution of village revenues, etc. – explanatory variables that are applied "externally" to the phenomenon under investigation. These studies also rely mainly on quantitative methodology using standardized data sets instead of qualitative methods of data gathering and evaluation to explain political participation. Hardly do we come across attempts to explore peasant political awareness by taking a more endogenous perspective, i.e. giving peasants space to explain their views on elections and local politics themselves without pre-structuring their answers too much. Clearly, this is not only a problem of methodology, but also of theory and epistemology, as most scholars lean on modernist (systemic, structural or institutionalist) approaches to explain political participation and awareness.

¹⁰ Melanie F. Manion, The Electoral Connection in the Chinese Countryside, in: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4, 1996, pp. 736-748 (741). The study's results were based on survey data collected in 56 villages in Anhui, Hunan, Hebei and Tianjin in 1990. In particular, the author was interested in "congruence of positions on a basic question of political economy: the importance of state management relative to private initiative in economic development" (736).

correlation between village elections and congruence. Voter turnout and attendance at village meetings – the two indicators of political participation used here – were associated with *greater* political distance between leaders and villagers. This was linked by the author to the factor of authoritarian mobilization,¹¹ i.e. successful summoning of the peasants to take part in an officially-sponsored activity pushed by politically ambitious local elites. Consequently, political participation cannot explain congruence in a village unless those who vote have a real choice.

In another study focusing on implementation, *Shi Tianjian* related semicompetitive and noncompetitive elections¹² - his main indicators informing political participation - to the people's voting behaviour in both rural areas and cities.¹³ Guided by the hypothesis that, "it is competition per se that changes people's voting behaviour in local unit elections"¹⁴ the author found (among others) that

- it is (true) choice and the desire to punish bad cadres that makes people vote
- in semicompetitive elections bad politicians get punished by motivated voters while in noncompetitive elections people prefer not to vote
- voters with stronger democratic orientations vote more often in semicompetitive elections than in noncompetitive elections

Thus, it is again the extent of institutionalized competition combined with rational calculations on the part of the voters which determine the intensity of political participation. More statistical correlations proved that it was not primarily the belief in a responsive government that made people vote nor any identification with the current regime. People participated in semicompetitive elections "to pursue the limited interests those elections can bring them, that is, to punish those who abuse power".¹⁵ Choice, even if limited, drives participation, and this results in better local governance.

¹¹ Manion, p. 744.

¹² The notion 'semicompetitive (limited-choice) elections' used by the author means that choice is limited to alternative candidates, not political parties. The study distinguishes between noncompetitive and semicompetitive elections for 'local unit leaders' (village committee members and, presumably, urban neighbourhood committee members) and semicompetitive elections for local people's congresses at the township and county levels.

¹³ Shi Tianjian, Voting and Nonvoting in China: Voting Behaviour in Plebiscitary and Limited-Choice Elections, in: *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4, November 1999, 1115-1139. The data set was computed from interviews conducted in 1990/91 in village and urban neighbourhood households representatively chosen from the 1986 PRC National Population Data Book by a four stage sampling method.

¹⁴ Shi Tianjian, Voting and Nonvoting in China, p. 1121.

¹⁵ Shi Tianjian, Voting and Nonvoting in China, p. 1135.

Whereas in Shi Tianjian's study it was the quality of electoral implementation (i.e. competitiveness) which favoured or discouraged rationalist behaviour (voting) by the villagers and, therefore, was of primary importance for understanding political participation, other authors stressed the significance of a rising rationalist behaviour among peasants. For instance, *M. Kent Jennings* discovered three different modes of "autonomous" participation – here as peasant activities between elections - in rural China: cooperative action, voicing opinions to cadres, and contacting representatives.¹⁶ About a third of the villagers surveyed had engaged in at least one of these modes. This observation was, according to Jennings, a percentage pretty close to figures drawn from comparative studies in Western societies¹⁷ and seemed to challenge the common viewpoint that the rural population in closed-up systems clings to parochialism and is not receptive of collective action. It was also striking that the peasants acted only after an individual calculation of the costs and benefits each participation mode implied. And although Jennings's respondents aimed at safeguarding their individual interests in the first place, they obviously had an understanding of collective goods, too:

Contacting, voicing, and even cooperative actions more often than not had the ring of behaviour taken by an individual or small group to generate selective benefits. (...) Nevertheless, distinct signs of activities in pursuit of collective goods also emerged. A visible minority of the sample specifically acknowledged engaging in collective action as such by reporting that they had banded together with others to address a common problem. Perhaps more significantly, individuals engaged in the other two participation modes – voicing opinion and contacting delegates – placed substantial emphasis on addressing such communal topics as infrastructure needs, certain agriculture policies, and economic enterprise concerns. Even if the participants attacked these problems as solo actors, the goods involved were often collective in nature.¹⁸

Villagers emerged as strategic actors who took into good consideration their specific opportunity structure and particular resources when pursuing a goal. Interestingly, as the author noted, the modes of participation identified in rural China resembled those found in Western countries to an astonishing degree.

¹⁶Jennings, M. Kent, Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside, in: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2, June 1997, 361-372. The article is based on a survey of 1.270 interviews carried out in 15 villages of four counties in Anhui, Hunan, Hebei and Tianjin back in 1990.

¹⁷Jennings, Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside, p. 365.

¹⁸Jennings, Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside, p. 370.

However, he remained cautious to conclude that this pointed at a gradual retreat of one-party-rule in favour of more political reform and freedom.¹⁹

Yang Zhong and Jie Chen attempted to complement the studies of Shi Tianjian and Jennings by further investigating the factors that make peasants participate or not in village elections.²⁰ They found that peasants with high degrees of 'internal efficacy' – meaning “to have feelings that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process”²¹ – abstained from or were less inclined to vote. Contrary to Shi Tianjian's finding that 'internal efficacy' makes peasants vote in semi-competitive elections because elections – as deficient as they may be – allow them to punish bad cadres, in the Zhong/Chen study the very same deficiencies led to a different outcome. Dissatisfaction with the system combined with stronger democratic orientations resulted in non-voting, as “people who support a more complete democracy in the village self-government are less likely to vote in Jiangsu's VC elections”.²² These villagers would also deny that elections are effective in punishing corrupt local officials. At the same time, the authors found that “those who are more attentive to public affairs and more satisfied with their lives are more likely to vote in the elections”.²³ Unfortunately, no statement was made if those peasants who are dissatisfied with the electoral system and have stronger democratic orientations, but are still satisfied with their overall living conditions - if such a psychological state is not a logical contradiction - cast a vote or not -. However, they made a point that lower levels of 'internal efficacy' and democratic orientation in combination with some interest for state and local public affairs, lower education levels and relative life satisfaction make people more likely to vote.²⁴

Approaching the relationship between elections and participation from a slightly different angle (though still adhering to the general assumption that peasants act rationally and interest-oriented), a substantial number of scholars have focused on the rural political economy to explain what factors condition political

¹⁹ For Chinese scholars subscribing to a similar approach of explaining political participation in rural China see Hu Rong, *Lixing xuanju yu zhidu shishi. Zhongguo nongcun cunmin weiyuanhui xuanju de ge an yanjiu (Rational Elections and System Implementation. A Case Study in Chin's Villager Committee Elections)*, Shanghai 2001 (Shanghai Yuandong).

²⁰ Yang Zhong/Jie Chen, To Vote or not to Vote. An Analysis of Peasants' Participation in Chinese Village Elections, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 6, pp. 686-712. The authors draw on results of a standardized opinion survey conducted in twelve counties in Jiangsu province by interviewing 1,270 villagers during summer 2000.

²¹ Quoted in: Zhong/Chen, To Vote or not to Vote, p. 699.

²² Zhong/Chen, To Vote or not to Vote, p. 706.

²³ Zhong/Chen, To Vote or not to Vote, p. 707.

²⁴ Zhong/Chen, To Vote or not to Vote, p. 708.

participation in village elections. In this literature, participation is treated as a dependent variable of economic development and structure, revenue distribution and cadre efficiency within a village. In an often quoted article published in 1994, *Kevin O'Brien* connected the success of direct elections to the material wealth in a village or surrounding township/county. Things were going smoothly for local cadres in rich villages where the local collective economy was managed well. They could rely on a reputation among peasants to have led the village to prosperity and used the financial resources gained from the village enterprises to benefit the local population: through new investments in infrastructure and social security or by paying obligatory levies to the township government without charging the villagers. Consequently, they would actively promote the implementation of the 'Organic Law of Villager Committees' since "cadres who have brought prosperity to their villages have fewer fears of electoral defeat and greater incentive to retain their positions".²⁵ Without discussing it too much, O'Brien suggested that in these "up-to-standard" villages popular participation in elections increases (or is high) as a result of cadre efforts and public content with the overall economic and political situation in the village:

In short, in wealthy villages and villages with large collective economies, cadres and villagers both have compelling motives to accept (at least not frustrate) the institutional arrangements embodied in the Organic Law. Cadres have a large public sector to administer and to profit from (as well as reduced concern with electoral removal and humiliation) and peasants have an interest in ensuring that public funds (...) are not misused or squandered.²⁶

At the same time, in remote areas where villages were poor or without meaningful collective enterprises, cadre spirit low and peasant-cadre relations tense, "people scoff at the incentives offered for participation, and may even demand to be paid to attend a meeting or appear only if a video is shown".²⁷ Political non-participation in these locations – brought into a typology of "paralyzed", "authoritarian" and "run-away" villages due to the different relative importance of each of the above-mentioned problems – would only be overcome by a change of mind of the villagers who

must come to believe that elections, VRAs, charters, and regulations on financial disclosure truly reduce cadre high-handedness and corruption

²⁵ Kevin O'Brien, *Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages*, p. 47.

²⁶ Kevin O'Brien, *Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages*, p. 48. The author was drawing his conclusions from observations in eight demonstration villages in Fujian.

²⁷ Kevin O'Brien, *Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages*, p. 52.

and contribute to villager's prosperity and control over village revenues and expenditures. (...) Outside the singularly favourable conditions found in wealthy up-to-standard demonstration villages with a strong collective sector, this will be a tough sell.²⁸

Other authors have questioned the „prosperity hypothesis“ to explain (rising, declining or stagnant) peasant participation in village elections by the counter-thesis that there is an inverse relationship between the level of economic development and meaningful political participation. In spite of touching upon participation only implicitly by discussing the relationship between economic development and electoral implementation, *Jean C. Oi* found that it was the industrially most advanced villages where political reforms were difficult to carry through. Powerful party secretaries control the local collective economy and sideline the village committees in every important decision to invest or distribute money. Whereas the introduction of direct elections makes the village head accountable to the village population, the party secretary is not in any way confined by such an arrangement.²⁹ As a matter of fact, Oi's study complements O'Briens above-mentioned typology by varying on the “authoritarian village”: Prosperity can go hand in hand with obstructed or protracted electoral implementation, as party secretaries undermine the authority of elected village committees. As a consequence, they may (and intentionally do) discourage peasants to “invest” in participation, as elections turn out to be meaningless in terms of redistributing political power in the village; however, peasants might also be content with the way things are, as they profit – at least to some degree - from the village's economic gains.

Shi Tianjian found as well that there was no linear relationship between economic development and the likelihood of having semicompetitive elections in China's villages which would – at least indirectly – bespeak the intensity of political participation. As a matter of fact, this relationship appeared as a concave curve, meaning that “economic wealth increases the likelihood that a village will hold semi-competitive elections for people to choose their leaders,

²⁸ Kevin O'Brien, *Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages*, p.59. For a more recent study on the positive relationship between economic development and political participation/electoral contestation see He Baogang/Lang Youxing, *Xunzhao minzhu yu quanwei de pingheng – Zhejiang sheng cunmin xuanju jingyan yanjiu (Searching an Equilibrium between Democracy and Authority – A Study on the Experiences of Village Elections in Zhejiang Province)*, Wuhan (Huazhong shifan daxue) 2002.

²⁹ Oi, Jean C., Economic Development, Stability and Democratic Village Self-governance, in: Brosseau, Maurice/Pepper, Suzanne/Tsang, Shu-ki (Hg.), *China Review 1996*, Hongkong 1996, 125-144.

but its impact diminishes as economic wealth increases”.³⁰ Thus, villages in middle-developed areas seemed to be the most likely to have free and decently fair elections. The relationship of the *speed* of economic development and participation, however, turned out to be a convex curve in the author’s analysis, elucidating “that a higher rate of economic development reduces the likelihood that Chinese villages will hold semi-competitive elections in an accelerated manner, that is, the higher the rate of economic development in a county, the less likely that elections in the villages located in that county will be semicompetitive”.³¹

Why are middle-developed villages more receptive of semicompetitive elections than villages in other areas? Rural income in villages with medium degrees of industrialization is above the subsistence level. Peasants in these villages have to deliver cash to support the village administration (and to finance the township government) and quickly find themselves in a position of ‘relative deprivation’ vis-a-vis the economically more advanced villages nearby. Consequently, they are very critical of the local cadres who failed to secure and ameliorate the material well-being of the village. At the same time, the cadres face greater pressure since they lack the financial resources to “appease” the peasants and to protect their power from the danger of the direct ballot. Moreover, they cannot co-opt their superiors and successfully resist political change. This weak position results in the county’s determination to implement the Organic Law and promote semicompetitive elections. In rich villages, however, the motivation to implement semicompetitive elections is low, as village heads and party secretaries can use the financial resources for “pacifying” demanding peasants and ambitious superiors. At the same time, the economic success of village cadres make those superiors at the township and county levels want to keep them and, thus, ready to compromise the implementation of the Organic Law.³² To put Shi Tianjian’s findings differently: There is an equilibrium of economic development and electoral noncompetitiveness in richer villages and in poor villages, and a positive correlation between these two factors somewhere in the space between

³⁰ Shi, Tianjian, Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China, in: *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 8, No. 22, 1999, pp. 425-442 (437). In this study, the author’s data came from a survey conducted from September 1993 to June 1994 by interviewing 3,287 respondents from 551 villages and urban neighborhoods chosen by a four stage PPS sampling procedure.

³¹ Shi Tianjian, Economic Development and Village Elections, p. 437.

³² To the contrary, in poor villages the peasants are totally absorbed with survival or migrate to the rich coastal provinces. They are simply not interested in political participation in their home villages. The problem of relative deprivation, therefore, is not as important as in more developed villages - even less so, as the Chinese state does not tax poor villages.

which must be explained by varying opportunities for strategic actors to distribute surplus revenue.

Another study on the impact of the local political economy on village elections and participation was presented by *Jean C. Oi* und *Scott Rozelle* some years later when they focused on the power center in the villages.³³ Power, as the authors contended, is as much dependent on village industrialization as on the peasants' ties to the economy outside the village. Power also determines the degree of political participation, measured in terms of personal engagement in village assemblies' activities and contestation of elections. The authors came to the following results:

- Where peasant income is predominantly attached to the cultivation of the land, the degree of political participation and electoral competitiveness is high because of the special importance of land issues in local politics (e.g. land distribution, irrigation and environmental protection).
- In (well-off) villages with a collectively run enterprise the competitiveness of elections is lower, because village cadres are more interested in a perpetuation of their political power and, therefore, work self-confidently against the implementation of the Organic Law.
- However, the degree of competitiveness rises in those villages that enjoy surplus revenues extracted from the collective economy, as economically successful cadres do not fear elections but consider them as useful amplifiers of their political legitimacy. Also, peasants can more easily be bought off by reducing fees and levies, and by offering them jobs in the village-owned enterprises so that no cadre must fear electoral defeat.
- In villages with a high percentage of migrants, political participation is declining as migrants are mostly absent and lose interest in direct elections taking place in their respective villages. Therefore, the higher the degree of a village's integration into the external economy, the lower the degree of local political participation.
- Finally, the more self-employed people live in a village, the higher the contestation of local elections. Private entrepreneurs - especially those without party membership – apparently used village elections as a means to defend their interests against the cadre bureaucracy.

³³Oi, Jean C./Rozelle, Scott, Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages, in: *China Quarterly*, No. 162, June 2000, pp. 513-539. The study is mainly based on survey data collected in 1996 in 32 villages of eight counties in each of seven provinces: Zhejiang, Sichuan, Hubei, Shaanxi, Shandong, Hebei, Liaoning.

Most importantly, Oi/Rozelle confirmed Amy Epstein's³⁴ and Shi Tianjian's earlier studies reporting a curvilinear relationship between village income and political participation: The probability of competitive elections rises with growing income, but at a decreasing rate. At one point, electoral contestation then starts to fall while village incomes were still growing.³⁵ Once again, this suggested a negative relationship between the development of rural income and political participation, making the authors step back from any optimistic prognosis of future democratization in China. However, they suggested that local leaders might be encouraged to promote political participation in the long run, as they find elections not to be to the detriment of their interests.³⁶

The discouragement and/or irrelevance of political participation in well-off villages and their political-economic explanation has been further highlighted in a more recent study by *Richard Levy*.³⁷ His empirical research in Guangdong province – producing results pretty much in accordance with our own field work in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone – has pointed at a rising trend of corporatized political and economic control in China's richer and urbanized villages. Although there is an influential discourse on village elections going on in the province extending down to the local level, it does not translate into democratic supervision of the party branches and influential village cadres. On the contrary, powerful networks of local elites – including established party officials, clan leaders and new entrepreneurs – hijack the electoral process and detach the elected village committees from the centers of political power. This works by successful “engineering” of election regulations and technicalities, and by concentrating the management of the village economy (asset companies and village development corporations administering abundant productive or rental income) in the hands of the village party branch. As a matter of fact, Guangdong leaders were very suspicious of village elections, fearing that this reform would complicate local politics and slow down economic growth. At the same time, villagers were – and still are - content with enjoying their fair share of the village revenues, live off their rents, and did not demand more

³⁴ Amy Epstein, Village Elections in China: experimenting with democracy, in: Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States (ed.), *China's Economic Future*, Armonk/N.Y. (M.E. Sharpe) 1997.

³⁵ Oi/Rozelle, *Elections and Power*, p. 537.

³⁶ Oi/Rozelle, *Elections and Power*, p. 539.

³⁷ Richard Levy, The Village Self-Government Movement: Elections, Democracy, the Party, and Anticorruption – Developments in Guangdong, in: *China Information*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, 2003, pp. 28-65. The study is based on more than sixty formal and informal interviews with party officials at higher levels, local cadres, and researchers of village elections in Guangdong conducted in October 2001 and March 2002.

supervision over the local 'cadre connection'. This can go so far that, as Levy pointed out,

Villagers in numerous wealthy villages in Guangdong tend to denigrate villager self-government as something appropriate for poor villages while favoring management by the elite (*jingjing guanli*) or, as it is referred to by other Chinese analysts, elite democracy or elected autocracy, for themselves.³⁸

In other well-off places like Shenzhen, villagers may insist and truly believe that their elections are meaningful, but they would still be isolated from the power centers in the village because of the party's dominance over the nomination of candidates and, consequently, the lack of a meaningful choice. Grassroots democracy (or villager self-government) is only "played on stage" but not practiced as a means of curbing corruption and instilling new transparency in the local decision-making process. For Levy and others (including this author), it is not discernible at this stage if the detachment of village elections from local cadre power can be overcome in the nearer future, as the "corporization" of the villages continues and the village communities in well-off places like southern Guangdong become decomposed by ongoing urbanization and class stratification - particularly between villagers and the huge mass of migrant workers.

Clearly, political participation has been mainly measured by both Western and Chinese scholars in terms of electoral contestation and/or the existence of semicompetitive elections while being explained by systemic (or structural) features of the local political economy on the one hand and growing rationalist behaviour on the part of the peasants on the other. These approaches have recently been questioned by Qinghua University's Tong Zhihui who claims that they are insufficient to grasp what political participation is essentially about in rural China.³⁹ Most importantly for this author, the understanding of peasant participation in village elections and politics is misled by the notions of individual autonomy and expedient rationality (as of competitive democracy). These concepts ignore the embeddedness of all peasants in a complex structure of village relations and values which he terms *shehui guanlian* or 'social

³⁸ Richard Levy, *The Villager Self-Government Movement*, p. 45.

³⁹ Tong Zhihui, *Xuanju shijian yu cunzhuang zhengzhi (Election Events and Village Politics)*, Beijing (Zhongguo shehui kexue) 2004. Tong belongs to a cohort of renowned younger Chinese scholars who have done extensive comparative field work in recent years on village elections and are rather critical of Western research on the subject.

interconnectedness'. Political participation aims at upholding *shehui guanlian* and must be analysed (and valued) along its internal (normative and functional) logic. Peasants participate autonomously in the sense that they subject their ballot intentionally to the requirements of maintaining *shehui guanlian* within the village. 'Social interconnectedness', for its part, is generated by the personal relations between peasants and village elites operating on the basis of traditional clan structures. These have been "modernized" in terms of outward appearance, as clans (*jiazu*) or cliques (*paixing*) have now turned into "system elites" (*tizhi jingying*) maintaining close relations with their clientele, i.e. the electorate.⁴⁰ However, they have kept their functional and normative value and legitimacy in village life. Hence, political participation and political awareness in rural China can only be understood by properly factoring in the political culture of contemporary village organization. Both are shaped by empowered peasants who would use (and understand) their right to vote as a means to make sure that elected leaders maintain the entire network of personal relations and the sense of collective identity which are critical for the well-being of the village. Consequently, political participation in China must be understood differently from (Western) mainstream explanations concentrating on individual interest-seeking or rationalist behaviour; it is socially contextualized, the object of a strongly-bounded rationality at best.⁴¹

III. Elections, political contention and citizenship

A few scholars, most prominently *Li Lianjiang* and *Kevin O'Brien*, have discussed the relationship between political participation (as collective action) and the possible rise of the peasant citizen. Their studies highlighted "rule-based resistance" by peasants, a growing institutionalization of political contention, and an informal alliance between the center and the villages to

⁴⁰ The author differentiates between "collective social interconnectedness" (*jiti shehui guanlian*) and "group social interconnectedness" (*qunti shehui guanlian*), with the first type focusing primarily on economic relations between village elites and peasants, and the second type emphasizing relations based on charismatic aspects of political leadership.

⁴¹ As a researcher, Tong Zhihui is mainly interested in how political participation influences a village's *shehui guanlian* and, vice versa, how it is conditioned by the latter. This leaves open the question if he does support village elections or not. Only in the final section of his book, the author states briefly that village democracy (as democratic policies, democratic administration and democratic control) *should* contribute to the consolidation and strengthening of "social interconnectedness". Obviously, Tong does take elections as a given fact and advises policy-makers and scholars to look more at their consequences for village coherence – spelled out as *shehui guanlian* - when assessing their value and expediency (see p. 292). However, it is obviously more important to the author to rehabilitate the role of clans and traditional networks in village elections and politics so negatively judged by most scholars in the field.

discipline local cadres, most notably at the township and county levels.⁴² The concept of rule-based (or “rightful”) resistance has gained particular attention in recent years among both Western and Chinese scholars. Central to this approach is the question, if institutionalized political participation through village elections gradually makes the Chinese *citizen* who begins to conceive of the direct ballot as a fundamental right to be claimed uncompromisingly against the state. In O’Brien’s definition “rightful resistance”

is a form of popular contention that (1) operates near the boundary of an authoritarian channel, (2) employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb political or economic power, and (3) hinges on locating and exploiting divisions among the powerful. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovated use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy ‘disloyal’ political and economic elites; it is a kind of partially sanctioned resistance that uses influential advocates and recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to some professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure. (...) Rightful resistance is thus a product of state building and of opportunities created by the spread of participatory ideologies and patterns of rule rooted in notions of equality, rights, and rule of law. It derives as much from the ‘great tradition’ of the powerful as from the ‘little tradition’ of the powerless, and is a sign of growing rights consciousness and a more contractual approach to political life.⁴³

As O’Brien observed, quasi-contractual thinking and “rights talk” is becoming ever more widespread in China’s countryside as villagers resist illegal cadre policies or rigged village elections. They appeal to elites, often at higher levels, to respect central policies (the Law) and acknowledge their claims as just. At the same time, these villagers are completely aware that they will only be successful if their resistance can exploit elite differences and fractions. They don’t believe in the power of the Law *per se*, but in the legitimacy that it bestows on political action. Rightful resistance, therefore, makes use of a language that can hardly be ignored by those in power, if they want to sustain a layer of democratic legitimacy on their authoritarian rule. If successful, rightful resistance can evolve into stronger contractual thinking and finally bring about a strict stance among peasants that rights cannot be subjected to political

⁴² See e.g. Kevin O’Brien/Li Lianjiang, The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China, in: *China Quarterly*, No. 143, September 1995, pp. 756-783; Kevin O’Brien, Rightful Resistance, in: *World Politics*, Vol. 49, October 1996, pp. 31-55; Li Lianjiang/Kevin O’Brien, Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China, in: *Modern China*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January 1996, pp. 28-61; Li Lianjiang, Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China, in: *China Information*, Vol. XV, No. 2, 2001, pp. 1-19; Li Lianjiang, Political Trust in Rural China, in: *Modern China*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2004, pp. 228-258; Kevin O’Brien/Li Lianjiang, Popular Contention and Its Impact in Rural China, in: *Comparative Political Studies* (forthcoming). For Chinese studies discussion peasant (proto-)citizenship see e.g.

⁴³ Kevin O’Brien, Rightful Resistance, pp. 33, 34.

opportunity and that all power is reined in by the Law. If that happens, however, the peasant citizen has emerged on scene.

Behind this conceptual background, Li/O'Brien produced an often-cited typology by distinguishing between 'compliant villagers' (*shunmin*), 'recalcitrants' (*dingzhihu*) and 'policy-based resisters' (*diaomin*) in contemporary rural China.⁴⁴ The third group consists of those peasants who proactively engage in local politics by appealing to valid laws and regulations, party guidelines and official slogans in order to defend their interests against village and township cadres. These peasants stay within the existing boundaries of legitimate political action but play its rules and norms strategically against the local cadres, invoking a contractual relationship that allows them to obey just in case the other side honors the contract, too:

Policy-based resisters seem to view taxes, fees, and other demands in terms of exchanges that imply mutual obligations. They see their relationship with cadres partly in terms of enforceable contracts and fulfill their responsibilities so long as rural cadres treat them as equals and deliver on promises made by officials at higher levels.⁴⁵

For Li/O'Brien this behaviour gives evidence of a growing aspiration among villagers to transform contested claims into rights that would not only be claimed against local cadres but, in the long run, against the whole system. Quite important for this assumption is the observation that rightful resistance is not limited to individual behaviour, but ever more frequently accompanied by collective action (street demonstrations, beleaguering of township governments, submission of petitions etc.) of dozens if not hundreds of peasants. For the time being, though, 'policy-based resisters' still act opportunistically in what might be called a 'zone of implementation' rather than legitimately in a defined 'zone of immunity',⁴⁶ which would put their claims on unassailable moral *and* legal grounds. They do not appeal to objective rights enjoyed by a genuine citizen and recognized by a constitutional state. Thus, 'policy-based resisters' are „occupying an intermediate position between subjects and citizens“.⁴⁷ However, as Li/O'Brien conclude, their political commitment may point at „early stirrings of rights consciousness in the Chinese countryside“ which “may eventually help make rights real.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Li/O'Brien, Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China.

⁴⁵ Li/O'Brien, Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Li/O'Brien, Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China, p. 54.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Li/O'Brien, Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China, p. 55.

In a more recent study, *Li Lianjiang* investigated the relationship between resistance and participation empirically by drawing on a survey conducted in 25 provinces, showing that free and fair elections enhance political participation, here defined as the “villagers’ desire to appeal to village cadres when they find that the township has made decisions that contravene central policies”.⁴⁹ It became clear that there is a direct relationship between the assessment by peasants of elections being democratic and their willingness to demand political action from elected village cadres. The author then confronted the voters’ subjective views with an analysis of the electoral process by „objective“ criteria, stating a significant correlation between ‘contacting’ and the procedural quality of elections: The more rule-based and „cleaner“ elections are, the greater the willingness to contact elected cadres. The same was true for the voters’ assessment of cadre performance, an additional indicator for appealing: The more positive achievements were attributed to them, the more they were contacted. Contacting, for its part, was accompanied by certain expectations which peasants took to their cadres, “most notably, that elected cadres should represent and defend their constituents”.⁵⁰ Consequently, township officials are now often in rough waters when village leaders oppose them on behalf of their electorate. As some of them attempt to circumvent this resistance with the help of local party secretaries, even fiercer confrontation between villages and townships may be the result. Therefore, township officials in various parts of China have demanded direct elections at this level, too, “thus allowing the township to ‘pass the buck’ up yet one level”⁵¹ and get out of their “sandwich position” between villages and counties. The important insight of Li Lianjiangs empirical observations was the increasing willingness of peasants to participate in terms of systematically appealing to cadres and make them resist to unliked policies coming from above. This leads directly to the question, if peasants might soon leave the above-mentioned *zone of implementation* to call for a legally protected *zone of immunity* based on “objective” citizenship rights and rights awareness.

The possibility of *political* (as distinguished from *social* and *civil*) - citizenship in contemporary China came to be discussed systematically by Kevin O’Brien who was particularly interested in qualifying the demonstrative use of a language of rights – certainly another variant of political participation - used by peasants in denouncing improper elections. Political citizenship, according to the author,

⁴⁹ Li Lianjiang, *Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Li Lianjiang, *Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China*, p. 14.

⁵¹ Li Lianjiang, *Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China*, p. 19.

is associated with the right to participate in the exercise of power. It guarantees a person a place in the polity. In modern times, the sine qua non of political citizenship has become the right to elect state leaders – in the executive, in national parliaments, and in local councils.⁵²

More precisely, O'Brien asked to what extent Chinese peasants considered the possibility to vote in village elections as their right in terms of political (and civil) citizenship. Objectively spoken, citizenship does not exist nationally as most elections in the PRC – including those direct elections for people's congresses at the township and county levels - are not free, fair and equal. Moreover, his careful analysis of the state of village elections does present a very mixed picture concerning the realization of "local citizenship" of Chinese peasants. In the sense of factual rights enjoyed by villagers, O'Brien confirmed that they cannot be called citizens. However, seen from the bottom as a result of pressure and a process of "painstaking extraction of concessions"⁵³ from the authorities, peasant citizenship may indeed be observed in rural China:

In this regard, political citizenship involves adjustments in psychological orientation: in particular, it involves changes in one's awareness of politics, sense of efficacy, and feelings toward government. It implies a willingness to question authority and suggests that people view their relationship with the state as reciprocal. It entails a readiness to enter into conflicts with the powerful and a certain assertiveness in articulating one's interests.⁵⁴

Resistance to rigged elections and cadre misbehaviour have manifested a language of rights on the part of peasants which, according to O'Brien "invokes a contractual logic borrowed from their economic life to demand that protections they have been guaranteed are respected".⁵⁵ Sound elections are considered an entitlement promised by the state that peasants insist on, which makes them act "like citizens before they are citizens".⁵⁶ Both the right to vote and active resistance has shifted them into an intermediate position between subject and citizens: They wouldn't yet claim to have inalienable rights against the state, but insist that the state must honor its promises and obligations vis-à-vis the peasants by respecting their law-based claims. If this strategy works, concludes O'Brien, it may bring about "a more complete citizenship"⁵⁷ in the countryside, most probably indicating the rise of the peasant citizen who would leave the

⁵² Kevin O'Brien, *Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China*, p. 411.

⁵³ Kevin O'Brien, *Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China*, p. 423.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Kevin O'Brien, *Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China*, p. 425.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Kevin O'Brien, *Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China*, p. 426.

locality both psychologically and geographically to strive with others for his/her constitutional right to unconditioned political participation.

This probability is further substantiated from a different angle in a forthcoming study by O'Brien and Li which primarily turns to the effects of political contention in rural China on local policy implementation and peasant awareness, but also puts light on the development of peasant collective action leading "villagers to reconsider their relationship to authority, while posing new questions, encouraging innovative tactics, and spurring thoughts about political change".⁵⁸ *Collective action*, therefore, drives forward not only a dynamic institutionalization of (ever more) activism, but also entails the formation of a *collective identity* among peasants who share a feeling of dignity in their common efforts to resist improper or illegal cadre behaviour. O'Brien/Li report on "activist carriers" and "complainant villages" (*shangfang cun*), open calls for "peasant associations" (*nonghui*) and drafts for corresponding legal regulation initiated by villagers, public donations for activists, and the emergence of a "culture of protest" with activists being recognized as "public figures who derive their power from acting in the name of the Center and their moral authority from taking personal risks for the benefit of other villagers". Once again, peasants appear as "proto-citizens" – people who act like citizens before they actually have acquired that status. For Hunan province at least, O'Brien/Li state that activists have begun to ground their claims on constitutional principles, such as popular sovereignty and the rule of law, and therefore are ready to leave the "zone of policy implementation" to step over to the "zone of immunity". Thus, the peasant citizen is clearly in the making.

IV. Elections and regime legitimacy

Are village elections – by way of strengthening peasant political awareness and creating a more horizontal peasant-cadre relationship (at least in some parts of China) conducive to the demise of Chinese authoritarianism and the rise of competitive democracy "from the bottom up"? Or are they, on the contrary, helping the party's efforts to fight corruption and professionalize village politics, promote economic development and, thus, reconsolidate one-party rule in the countryside? Even if these questions cannot be answered for the whole country, most empirical studies are rather sceptical on the first, while the answer to the

⁵⁸ O'Brien/Li, *Popular Contention and its Impact in Rural China* (forthcoming). This study draws on interviews with officials and rural protesters in the provinces of Hebei, Henan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Shandong, and on a series of in-depth interviews conducted in Henyang county, Hunan province, during January to March 2003.

second seems to be less clear. Whereas Li Lianjiang and Kevin O'Brien's work suggests that village elections have some potential to generate a rights consciousness among peasants that may lead to institutionalized collective action and even the formation of the peasant citizen challenging the party-state, the overall impact of the direct ballot in rural China on the Communist party's political supremacy – according to most scholars in both China and the West – has still been rather limited.⁵⁹ This doesn't necessarily mean, however, that no significant change has taken place concerning peasant-cadre relations.

Our own field research does not confirm a meaningful potential of village elections for triggering off a “bottom up”-democratization in China whereas, they seem to be much more significant for stabilising and legitimizing one-party rule in the countryside. In affluent Shenzhen Special Economic Zone's Longgang district, we found what Richard Levy has termed the “hollowing out” of elections in “corporate village China”. In Jiangxi's northern Fenyi county, elections so far have been of only rudimentary importance for poor peasants who may share a feeling of political empowerment by casting votes, but do not see how this can and why this should challenge the political authority of the party secretary and the township government. In Jilin's model Lishu county, we met peasants with a strong political awareness who would claim that direct elections have made the party secretary and the village committee more responsive to local concerns and also more performance-oriented over the years. However, these peasants seemed to be content with the state of affairs in their villages which exposed a good working relationship between the party secretary and the village committee behind a background of healthy economic development. Political awareness, as measured by our qualitative approach,⁶⁰ was weakest in Jiangxi, relatively weak in Shenzhen and relatively strong up to very strong in Jilin, while in all three localities village elections were well entrenched and institutionalized – even if only two rounds of genuine *haixuan*-elections had been carried out in Shenzhen and Jiangxi at the time of our field work there.

In all three research sites we found that even if peasants felt genuinely empowered by the direct ballot they would hardly see a reason to contact their village head or party secretary after the elections nor would they put the party secretary's authority – a non-elected official – into question (他是書記!). At the

⁵⁹ See also Björn Alpermann, The Post-Election Administration of Chinese Villages, in: *China Journal*, No. 46, July 2001, pp. 45-67; Sylvia Chan, Villagers' Representative Assemblies: Towards Democracy or Centralism?, in: *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Sept. 2003, pp. 179-199.

⁶⁰ See appendix .

same time, they were hardly impressed by the idea of direct elections for township head and never came up with such a proposal on their own initiative. Even if the control of the party secretary over the whole electoral process in the village was evident, peasants would not complain about this fact too much – except for a small minority of cynic villagers who called elections a show and just turned away from it. The paradox to be found here is that even if elections are fulfilling what one may expect from them, i.e. to nurture a feeling among peasants that the direct ballot makes a fundamental difference in their life, political awareness in the villages is delinked from the centers of political decision-making in the locality. This is not only true for rich villages in which peasants have actually turned into urbanites and bought off by economically successful cadres. It is also true for those areas in which economic development is more moderate and electoral institutionalization sound; and, although less of a surprise, in those parts of rural China where peasants are poor, peasant-cadre relations not too strained and elections carried out according to the stipulations of the Organic Law.

The following sets of preliminary hypotheses could be drawn from our survey data which must, however, still stand the test of intensive data evaluation:

- Village elections are widely de-coupled from the centers of local political power, even where participation is taken seriously by the peasants and considered efficacious in terms of controlling local cadres and promoting rural development. Political participation is not understood in terms of challenging village committees and party branches after elections. As most party secretaries, village heads and township authorities now accept the Organic Law and do not openly work against it in most places, they are accredited a fundamental legitimacy to lead the villages that is not even eroded by contentious issues coming up once in a while.
- Hence, the introduction of village elections help those local officials and governments who take them seriously and accept the challenge of delivering to the people both material benefits and political accountability. They enjoy a *bonus of trust* from the majority of peasants who feels genuinely empowered, and they are able to renew their political legitimacy by only minor changes of the local power structure, i.e. the cooptation of newly-elected village officials into an established network of local leaders.

- Elections, therefore, do strengthen one-party rule in the countryside as long as the peasants feel respected as citizens and associate village elections with economic progress. However, even if progress has not happened on a big scale and living conditions remain tough for most villagers, peasants may not challenge party authority as long as they feel empowered by elections and respected by – to their understanding - honest and law-abiding cadres.

It is certainly true that even if village elections are soundly implemented, the electoral process can still be manipulated by influential clans or charismatic party secretaries. There can still be corruption and also suppression of political dissent. However, such practices are now restricted by a new power balance between peasants and cadres which resembles a tacit contract forcing cadres to be recognized as agents of grassroots democracy and economic development. If cadres fail in the latter, they may still maintain their legitimacy by delivering the former. If they are delivering both, their power is widely uncontested. Only if they fail in both, cadre authority quickly erodes and leads to what others have described as “runaway” or “complainant” villages. Such an outcome is good news for the Communist Party. It may be able to preside over a process of horizontalising relationships between peasants and rural cadres without being confronted – at least for some time to come - with the well-established teleology that such horizontalisation is the beginning of the end of one-party rule. The least that one can say is that villager self-government and the strengthening of peasant political awareness does provide a window of opportunity for the party to gain new legitimacy which could and must be used to solve the many problems that it faces in rural China.

V. Conclusions

Coming back to the questions posed in the introduction of this paper, it may be said that past and current research tends to confirm a positive correlation between the quality (and number) of village elections and a strengthening of the peasants’ political awareness, manifested by growing participation in local politics (including contacting and collective action) and a feeling of political empowerment (internal efficacy). At least for some parts in China, we have empirical knowledge of peasants becoming routinized ‘rightful resisters’ at the edge of evolving into *de facto*-citizens, although it remains doubtful that this describes a larger trend in the countryside. Certainly, village elections have complicated rural politics. Where they have been implemented fairly well over the time, they have horizontalised the relationship between peasants and local

cadres considerably, although this does not necessarily imply a significant loss of party control over the villages. For how many “run-away” and “complainant” villages may be found today, there are at least as many examples for villages with the party fully in command, and (maybe) enjoying even more legitimacy than before village elections became properly institutionalized in rural China. The reasons for this difference have been most often explained by drawing on specific systemic and structural factors of a village’s political economy and on agency and individual rationality. However, no coherent picture has come to fore, yet, the relative significance of each factor seems to vary quite strongly from location to location.

What does this mean for the party’s objective of promoting village self-government as a means to push economic development, to enhance the cost efficiency of local administration and, not at least, to consolidate its legitimacy? For the time being, there is no convincing empirical evidence that shows that village elections lead to more dynamic economic development but many hints at positive changes in leader recruitment and professionalism, and a more equal peasant-cadre relationship. Concerning the nexus between village elections and regime legitimacy, the picture is certainly mixed. In many places, elections are still manipulated and peasants suppressed by village and township authorities, especially in remote and poor areas. Wherever political contention arises and is answered by collective action and open resistance by villagers, the party’s legitimacy is seriously undermined. In other places, peasants consider village elections to be of secondary importance to material gains from the local economy distributed by cadres who have earned a reputation of being *nengren*. In yet other villages, direct elections have resulted in an astonishing potential by local cadres and governments to adapt to the more complex political setting that elections have brought to the villages. These cadres – both elected and party-nominated – play to the rules and, thus, enjoy much legitimacy transferred to them by peasants who feel empowered without the desire to engage in village politics too much.

The most interesting findings of our research, as it seems, suggest that the rising political awareness of peasants driven by increasingly institutionalized elections may produce more tolerance of the exercise of power in the villages in the sense that elected village committee members and party secretaries are granted a bonus of trust as long as they honour – by their words and deeds – the peasants’ empowerment and their (moral) obligation to raise the living-standards of the local community. This does not de-couple village elections

from political power in the village as described by Richard Levy. Peasant are not bought off and local cadres may be enjoying the peasants' good will even in case of only minor progress in the economic realm. What we might be facing in these "trust villages" is a new moral contract between the peasants and the cadres which helps the party's claim to guide the villages. If the cadres respect this contract by taking peasants seriously as citizens, things can go very smooth for them – even under more difficult economic conditions.

The (changing) content of peasant political awareness and its relationship to political power in the village, township and county must be further investigated. Such research should not only be stimulated by the hypothesis that village elections – by engendering collective action and rule-based resistance – push the formation of the uncompromising peasant citizen and the gradual demise of authoritarian rule. They might also renew and strengthen peasant-cadre relations without challenging the party's political supremacy and, at least for some time to come, give more leeway for legitimate one-party rule in the countryside.

Appendix

1. Notes on fieldwork

Fieldwork was undertaken in *Zhangshubu* and *Shuijing* villages of Buji township in Longgang District of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone during November/December 2002; in *Xiagong* and *Louxia* villages of Dongcun township, Fenyi county, Xinyu City Prefecture in Jiangxi province during July/August 2003; and in Balimiao and Huojiadian villages of Lishu township, Lishu County, Siping City Prefecture in Jilin province during August 2004. The research sites were chosen by three general selection criteria:

1. Level of economic development: rich – moderate – poor development
2. Institutionalization of elections measured by the number of *haixuan*-elections
3. No former visits by Chinese or Western researchers
3. Personal access to local cadres

We gathered qualitative data on the basis of three different sets of semi-structured questionnaires for villagers, village cadres and higher cadres. In each village of the Jiangxi and Jilin case studies, at least 30 villagers – among them up to six elected village cadres – were interviewed, complemented by at least 12 interviews with higher cadres at the township, county and prefectural level in each of the two locations.¹ Only in Shenzhen we had to reduce the sample to 50 respondents (four of them higher cadres) for organisational reasons. Thus, the entire sample counts some 190 respondents.

Each interview took between 40 minutes and two hours, during which our respondents – according to the sample category they belonged to – were guided to recount and opine on a wide range of issues concerning their participation in village elections. For instance, *peasants* were asked on their knowledge of elections held in the village, their views on the fairness and competitiveness of elections, the role of the local party branch and of clan organizations during and after elections, their personal interest and engagement in village politics, the impact of village elections on their personal lives and the well-being of their village, their knowledge of and opinions on township involvement in village politics, and their views concerning further political reform, especially direct voting for the party-secretary and the township head. In addition to this, elected village cadres were more specifically questioned on their (changing) relationship to villagers, the local party branch, and township authorities. Higher cadres were particularly questioned on their assessment of village elections, the impact of elections for local stability and party legitimacy, and further political reform in terms of time and scope. Each questionnaire, besides collecting extensive bio-data of the respondents, contained 37 questions for villagers, 23 questions for village cadres, and 16 questions for higher cadres.

Data evaluation will be mainly undertaken by conventional qualitative-hermeneutical (discourse) analysis to detect the patterns and specific contexts of political awareness for villagers and village cadres (see appendix II). This analysis will be complemented by a standardization of the responses by simple coding to put up an index of (democratic) political awareness for villagers and village cadres in each of the three locations (see appendix III).

¹ These were mostly township heads and party secretaries and their deputies; and county and prefectural officials working for the Ministry of Civil Administration or in any other function that gave them authority to supervise village elections.

2. Data Assessment I : Variables for qualifying political awareness of villagers (peasants and village cadres)

Explanation of methodology: The variables enumerated below serve as tools to structure the respondents' answers. The subjective dimension of political awareness refers to the respondents' individual perception of elections and village politics in general. The overarching variables (*efficacy* and *empowerment*) are scaled down to additional sub-variables for analysing the empirical data. This permits to draw a general picture of democratic political awareness in the villages under investigation. The method applied here is qualitative-hermeneutical. It requires careful reading and understanding of the respondents' answers and, subsequently, the identification of dominant trends of thinking and attitude.

a) subjective dimension of peasant/village cadre political awareness

- sense of internal/external efficacy: elections do matter
 - approval - disapproval of the electoral process
 - will to participate in elections
 - inclination to contact elected officials
 - inclination to individual or collective action (including *shangfang*)

 - cadres can be influenced or changed successfully
 - better cadres can be installed
 - corruption is reduced
 - village policies change to the better
 - economic and social life conditions ameliorate

- feeling of empowerment
 - vis-à-vis the village committee
 - vis-à-vis the party secretary
 - vis-à-vis the township government
 - awareness of enjoying rights

b) objective dimension of peasant/village cadre political awareness

- sound factual knowledge of elections/the electoral process
- intensity of political participation in the village by voter turnout
- intensity of contacting and of individual/collective action after elections

- cadre turnover and recruitment of "*nengren*"
- economic structure and development of the village
- corruption in the village
- clan influence
- change of relations between village director and party secretary (how?)

- quality of relations between elected village committee and the party secretary
- quality of relations between village and township authorities

- evaluation of elections by township, county and prefectural cadres is positive/negative?

1. How much overlapping of the subjective and objective dimensions of political awareness can be found?

2. What is the relationship between village elections, rural stability and regime legitimacy?

2. Data Assessment II: Standardization variables for setting up an index of (democratic) political awareness of peasants

Explanation of methodology: In order to standardize the qualitative data to some reasonable extent for the sake of comparison, the survey questions are regrouped under different analytical variables (V1-V4, Residual) along a thematic structure. The answers of each respondent to the different questions are “condensed” into 3-4 standardized answers which are given values between 3 and 0 indicating both a question’s relevance for and a respondent’s degree of democratic political awareness. Adding up the points from 0 to the highest score attainable allows for the establishment of an Index of (Democratic) Political Awareness (IDPA) which can be scaled according to different scores, indicating strong awareness, medium awareness, weak awareness, no awareness. Besides comparing the total score results between the different villages, the scores for different variables can also be compared.

A. Villagers (Total: 37 questions)

V1: Factual knowledge of elections held in the village

- How many direct elections have taken place in your village so far?

Does know precisely	___	2
Does know approximately	___	1
Does not know	___	0

- Are elections very popular in your village?

Makes a clear statement indicating support for elections	___	3
Makes a clear statement indicating indifference towards elections	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn’t know	___	0

- Do your family members, neighbours and friends also vote?

Does know	___	1
Does not know	___	0

- Do you remember when elections started to be popular in your village?

Makes a clear statement	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn’t know	___	0

- How are candidates for elections nominated in your village?

Does know precisely	___	2
Does know approximately	___	1

Does not know _____ 0

- Do you know or have you ever heard of the Organic Law for Village Committees?

Does know precisely _____ 2

Does know approximately _____ 1

Does not know _____ 0

V2: Knowledge of the political decision-making process in the village

- According to your understanding, what role does the party branch play in an election?
Can you explain what the party branch is precisely doing?

Makes a clear statement that matches reality _____ 2

Makes a clear statement that comes close to reality _____ 1

Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do you think that elections have changed the relationship between the party branch and the village committee to any extent?

Makes a clear statement indicating full understanding of the relationship _____ 2

Makes a clear statement indicating some understanding of the relationship _____ 1

Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do clans (jiazhu) play an important role in village elections and village politics? What are they exactly doing to influence the village committee?

Makes a clear statement indicating full understanding of the issue _____ 2

Makes a clear statement indicating some understanding of the issue _____ 1

Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- What do you think are the most important duties of the village director/the village committee?

Makes a clear statement that matches reality _____ 2

Makes a clear statement that comes close to reality _____ 1

Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Generally spoken, how has the township government reacted to the elections in your village?

Makes a clear statement indicating understanding of the issue _____ 1

Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do you observe any change concerning village-township relations since direct elections take place; are there any major problems that have come up since then?

Makes a clear statement indicating understanding of the issue _____ 1
 Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- How do you see the present state of relations between the village committee and your township government?

Makes a clear statement indicating full understanding of the issue _____ 2
 Makes a clear statement indicating some understanding of the issue _____ 1
 Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

V3: Appreciation of and support for elections (internal/external efficacy): Elections do matter

- How often did you vote in a village election?

Does remember precisely _____ 1
 Does not know _____ 0

- Did you vote in the last election?

Did participate _____ 1
 Did not participate because of disinterest _____ 0

- Why did you vote? Why didn't you vote?

Makes a clear statement indicating support for elections _____ 3
 Makes a clear statement critical of or against elections _____ 1
 Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Are you going to vote in the next election, too?

Is going to vote _____ 1
 Is not going to vote because of disinterest or does not know _____ 0

- Why are you going to vote? Why not?

Makes a clear statement indicating support for elections _____ 2
 Makes a clear statement critical of or against elections _____ 1
 Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do you think that your vote is important?

Makes a clear affirmative statement _____ 3
Makes a clear negative statement _____ 1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do you think that elections in your village are fair? Do you think that you have a real choice between candidates in elections?

Makes a clear affirmative statement _____ 3
Makes a clear negative statement _____ 1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do you think that election procedures in your village are honest and executed according to the law? If you think that they are not honest and not executed according to the law, why is this so?

Makes a clear statement (positive or negative) _____ 1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Why do you think are elections so popular in your village? (Why do you think elections are not popular in your village?)

Makes a clear statement indicating support for elections _____ 3
Makes a clear statement critical of or against elections _____ 1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Are you satisfied with the nomination procedure of candidates in elections? If you are not satisfied, why is this so?

Makes a clear statement indicating support of elections _____ 3
Does make a clear statement critical of or against elections _____ 1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Generally spoken, do you think that elections have made the village committee listen more to the wishes of the villagers?

Makes a clear statement indicating support of elections _____ 3
Does make a clear statement critical of or against elections _____ 1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do you think that an elected village director serves the people better than a leader nominated by the township government?

Makes a clear statement in favour of elections _____ 3
Makes a clear statement in favour of nomination _____ 1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know _____ 0

- Do you think that elections have brought any advantages to your village (for instance more economic development and social welfare, better roads, new schools etc.)?

Makes a clear affirmative statement	___	3
Makes a clear negative statement	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

- Generally spoken, what do you think have been the most important consequences of direct elections for your village? What changes have you observed in your village since elections have been implemented?

Makes a clear statement indicating support for elections	___	3
Makes a clear statement critical of or against elections	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

- Do you think that elections have given you more influence on important decisions made in the village (e.g. concerning the fixation of grain quotas, the construction of roads and schools, development projects as irrigation systems, the founding of new collective enterprises etc.)?

Makes a clear affirmative statement	___	3
Makes a clear negative statement	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

- Do you feel any change in the behaviour of the village director to pre-election times?

Makes a clear statement indicating support for elections	___	2
Does make a clear indicating indifference towards elections	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

V4: Political participation after/in between of elections (contacting, resistance, etc.)

- Have you become more interested in village politics since direct elections have been implemented in your village? For instance, do you go to the meetings of the Village (Representative) Assembly or do you contact the village director/village committee for personal matters?

Makes a clear affirmative statement	___	3
Makes a clear negative statement	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

- Did you ever participate in some form of political protest? Did you ever initiate such a protest yourself?

Did participate/initiate	___	2
Did not participate/initiate	___	1
Does not know	___	0

V5: Support for extension of direct elections

- Do you think that the party branch should participate more or less actively in the organization of a village election?

Should participate less	___	3
Should participate more	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

- Do you think that if the village director is elected by the villagers, the party secretary should also be elected by them? Or do you think that this is not important?

Makes a clear affirmative statement	___	3
Makes a clear negative statement	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

- Do you see any changes, maybe even some problems that have come up before and in the aftermath of elections?

Makes a clear statement indicating support of elections	___	3
Makes a clear statement critical of or against elections	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

- We have learned that there is a broad discussion going on in China that direct elections should be expanded to the township level. What do you think about this?

Makes a clear affirmative statement	___	3
Makes a clear negative statement	___	1
Does not make a clear statement or doesn't know	___	0

Residual:

- How has the village director reacted to (your participation) in political protests in your village?
- Do you think that it is more or less efficient if the posts of party secretary and village director are assumed by one person (yi jian tao)? Or do you think that they should be held by two different persons?