



## **How Democratic are Village Elections in China?**

*Summary of a public presentation at the National Endowment for Democracy by*

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Tuesday, June 10, 2003

*On June 10, 2003, Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow Baogang He gave a public presentation at the National Endowment for Democracy entitled “How Democratic are Village Elections in China?” The following is a summary of his remarks, written by Victorien Wu, Reagan-Fascell Democracy Intern at the International Forum for Democratic Studies.*

Village elections were first introduced in China in 1978 and were subsequently conducted on a trial basis from 1988 onwards. In 1998, the Chinese National People’s Congress formally passed and promulgated the New Organic Law of the Village Committee, which mandated that all villages hold competitive elections for their village committee and that all candidates be nominated by villagers. Involving approximately 3.2 million village leaders in more than 734,000 villages, these elections represent a key development in the Chinese political system. A crucial question, therefore, is how democratic are these elections? And what implications do they have for democratization in China as a whole? In his talk, Dr. He sought to address these questions by presenting the findings of his research in China’s Zhejiang province, where he examined five dimensions of village elections: village citizenship, developments in electoral procedures, electoral competition, women and elections, and changes in the village power structure.

The issue of village citizenship has become increasingly important as peasants who have moved out of villages in previous years—particularly “married-out” women and migrant workers—are demanding the right to vote in their native villages. Unwilling to become embroiled in disputes between these individuals and the village committees that are in charge of defining village citizenship, township authorities have begun to delegate the responsibility of defining village citizenship to village representative assemblies (VRAs). This has helped to invigorate VRAs, transforming them from dormant institutions that would meet only once a year to active assemblies that regularly meet, debate, and vote on questions of village citizenship and other relevant issues.

Between 1994 and 1996, breakthroughs in electoral procedure occurred in Jilin and Fujian provinces, where systems of open nomination of candidates, known as *haixuan*, were adopted. Villages in Zhejiang province subsequently adopted this system in 1998 and 1999. In He’s three surveys, 28–47 percent of respondents said that candidates in their villages had been nominated directly by villagers. More importantly, 50 percent of township leaders surveyed said that they supported this system of direct nomination. This may not be surprising when considered in light of He’s findings in Zhejiang province, which suggest an apparent shift in people’s conception of a good election. In the early 1990s, an election was considered good if there was no violent confrontation, disturbance, or kinship fighting. More recently, however, individuals have demonstrated a keen interest in seeing that there is meaningful competition and that elections follow a set of sound procedures.

Electoral competitiveness has also improved. He's surveys show that there has been a shift from one-candidate elections in 1994 to multi-candidate elections in 1998–99. Out of 111 village chiefs surveyed in 1998, only 32.5 percent said that they had participated in one-candidate elections, with the other 67.5 percent confirming that they had competed against several other candidates in their elections. Moreover, the rate at which incumbent village chiefs have been reelected has also declined. For example, in Chengzhou municipality, only 35.6 percent retained their position.

Women, however, do not seem to have improved their status as a result of these elections. Women's issues have been absent from campaigns in Zhejiang province, and the number of women elected to village committees has been low and decreasing. Even if a woman is elected to a village committee, she is often relegated to a secondary position, usually dealing with family planning policies. Only one out of 111 village chiefs in He's survey was female.

Finally, village elections have resulted in positive changes in the village power structure. Prior to the implementation of elections, the village branch of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was the most important decision-maker, followed by the village committee (headed by the village chief) and the village representative assembly. The rise of elections for the village chief, however, has allowed that individual to gain greater legitimacy. In He's 1998 survey, 15 percent of village chiefs felt that they had more power than the party secretary because of their mandate as elected officials, even though the law stipulates that the party constitutes the "core leadership" of the village. More interestingly, additional fieldwork since 1998 has revealed several positive developments. For one, there is now a tacit acknowledgement of the growing power of village chiefs vis-à-vis that of the party secretary. Some elected village officials have also gained control of the use of the official village seals. Thus, the party branch is no longer the most important decision-maker in the village. A new power structure is emerging, in which the VRA is at the top, with the village chief and village party secretary as co-equals.

Does this mean, then, that village elections are undermining the CCP's authoritarian rule? The answer is probably no. Indeed, the elections may even be consolidating Communist rule, as CCP leaders may claim some legitimacy through these elections. At the same time, however, village elections are also paving the way for a democratic transition. The electoral processes currently under way are not only familiarizing the public with democratic procedures, but are also strengthening representative institutions.

Interestingly, elections have been extended beyond the village-committee level. From 1999 to 2001, five experimental direct elections were conducted for township heads in Sichuan, Shanxi, Shenzhen, and Henan provinces, and although the CCP has since formally stopped the process, such elections continue to take place in provinces such as Yunnan and Hainan. In addition, elections for urban residential committees have taken place in Qingdao, Shanghai, and Beijing. Most importantly, in response to the challenge posed by the enhanced legitimacy of the elected village chief, some villages have introduced direct elections for the party secretary.

All these developments suggest that the Chinese Communist Party is undergoing a significant transformation. While the CCP remains highly authoritarian at the national level—as evidenced by its crackdown on the China Democratic Party and the Falungong—it appears willing to share power at the local level. Taken as a whole, these developments show that the CCP is fundamentally divided: while there remains a national party that still refuses to share power, there also exists a village party that is receptive to representative institutions and democratic procedures. Thus, He concluded, a local-to-national model of democratization is perhaps the most appropriate framework for understanding China's transition.