# Village Elections, Grassroots Governance and State Power Restructuring: An Empirical Study in Southern Periurban China

## Abstract

China's rapid urbanization has revitalized grassroots governance, under which millions of villagers become increasingly keen to participate in grassroots elections and to influence decision-making on their village affairs. To maintain its political legitimacy over a fast transforming society, the authoritarian party-state has sought to progressively promote open, competitive grassroots elections as a response to the increasing demand of villagers for social equities and political rights. Based on in-depth field research in some urbanizing villages in southern China, this article provides an empirical analysis of how the local state has adopted different interventionist strategies in elections to support villagers' active participation while sustaining its direct leadership over the daily village governance. The relevant findings explain why the recent development of open and transparent grassroots elections are working towards reinforcing the ruling capacity of the socialist state, rather than enhancing self-governance and grassroots democracy in urbanizing China, despite the fact that villagers have been given more opportunities to strive for their economic and social rights through formal political means.

## 1. Introduction

China's rapid urbanization has profoundly altered the landscape of local governance, calling for a refocused inquiry into its impact on the restructuring of power relationships between the socialist state and villagers in grassroots elections. In 1987, the promulgation of the *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees* formally established the rights of villagers to elect their own leaders (cadres, or *cun ganbu*) and participate in making decisions on village affairs.[1] Some studies suggest grassroots elections have formally empowered villagers to vote out those incompetent cadres who did not serve their interests.[2] However, more studies tend to argue that village elections remained state-manipulated, because of two main reasons. First, the socialist state had 'no intention of relinquishing control' of the rural society, despite a process of political decentralization that allowed peasants to defend themselves against abuses by local cadres of unscrupulous "gangster capitalism" through elections. [3] Second, local officials did not want village elections either, because they were worried that elected cadres might take side with the voters to defy implementation of and compliance with unwelcome state policies[4]. It is argued that village elections were fundamentally flawed processes driven by rapacious and deceitful local officials who sought to maximize personal gain and sustain their positional power.[5] Consequently, the "feigned compliance" of local officials in promoting village elections [6]and the ongoing attempts of the local state to manipulate election processes have constrained the effective participation of villagers who were striving for democracy.[7]

The existing literature about grassroots elections in China seems to have overlooked how an authoritarian state has sought to transform itself at the time when rapid urbanization has heightened the awareness of villagers about social equities, economic interests and political rights. In the past four decades, more than 500 million rural peasants have become urban residents in China. Accompanying this massive wave of urbanization were incessant land disputes and social conflicts in many localities. To safeguard their landed interests, villagers engaged in collective action and resistance against frenetic land grabbing orchestrated by

[1] Baum and Shevchenko 1999; Lin 2011
[2] O'Brien 1994; Li 2003; Wines 2012
[3] Walker 2006
[4] Hu 2005
[5] Zhong and Chen 2002
[6] Kelliher 1997
[7] Lawrence 1994; Shi 1999; Howell 2007

corrupt, self-serving local officials.[8] Moreover, villagers increasingly exercised their voting rights in formal elections to support village leaders who were prepared to repel top-down national policies that threatened to compromise their benefits and welfare.[9] As Huaiyin Li suggests, "for the younger generation of villagers growing up in the reform period, the traditional gap between the city and countryside was no longer unbridgeable; they strived to change their status from the stigmatized *peasants* to *citizens* who would be on equal footing with the rest of the nation and whose individual rights and choices would not be compromised."[10]

In the face of this trend of villager "empowerment," the socialist state cannot rely simply on coercive measures to maintain effective social control. Rather, as an emerging body of literature on local governance suggests, the socialist state and its local agents have adopted a flexible approach in managing social conflicts with the aim of enhancing its political legitimacy. For example, to placate "land-losing" villagers and to deal with their economic and social demands, a district government in Guangzhou actively implemented a series of conciliatory measures comprising not only progressive social welfare provision and shareholding reforms, but also subtle intervention into the village electoral politics.[11] In Beijing and Shenzhen, the district governments absorbed dissents through "protest bargaining, legal-bureaucratic absorption and patron-clientelism," giving rise to a market-like exchange of compliance for benefits between the state and the community.[12] In defusing resistance, some municipal governments became acquiescent to implement unorthodox institutional experiments, such as the promotion of land-based shareholding cooperatives in Nanhai and land bill system in Chongqing.[13] Similar arguments can also be found about the adoption of informal institutions and rural collective system by the socialist state as a pragmatic mechanism of social housing and welfare services for villagers.[14] Successful businessmen and entrepreneurial village leaders were recruited by the socialist state as local party secretaries to act as role models of marketization with the aim of legitimizing party leadership over grassroots governance.[15]

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[8] So 2007; Sargeson 2013; Hillman 2010; Smith, 2013
[9] Landry et al. 2010; Li 2011; Su et al., 2011
[10] Li 2009,
[11] Wong 2015a
[12] Lee and Zhang 2017, 1475
[13] Yep 2015; Yep and Forrest 2016
[14] Ho 2014 and 2017
[15] Yan 2012

These reproductions of state governing capacity point to the need for a re-focused inquiry into the restructuring of state-villager relationship in the context of grassroots elections. A fundamental question here is about whether a transforming socialist state, which has become receptive to open, competitive grassroots elections, would engender and enrich the development of self-governance and grassroots democracy in urbanizing China. To address this question, we will provide an empirical study of how the lowest level of the socialist state (the township government or the district government and its Street Offices) has managed to reshape its power in local governance at the time when villagers have become active in grassroots elections.

## 2. A Two-pronged Approach of State Intervention in Elections

This study examines the lived experiences of Y district in southern China. With a total population of approximately 370,000, Y district was traditionally a rural area in which villagers relied on growing rice and vegetable to make a living. Since the 1990s, rapid urbanization has led many villages in Y district to experience a significant growth in the value of their collective land and assets, giving rise to the widespread conflicts between villagers and village cadres in the management and distribution of collective incomes.[16] To address these problems and conflicts, the local state issued in 2003 a policy document entitled "*Implementing Elections for Party Branch/Committee and Residents' Committee in New Urban Neighbourhoods*" to guide the operation of grassroots elections.

Our field research focuses on 10 villages, which were already reorganized administratively into "urban neighbourhoods (*shequ*)" between 2003 and 2005. Within these transitional neighbourhoods that we call "urbanizing villages", village traditions and norms continue to affect daily governance, even though villagers have been forced to undergo a rapid process of rural-to-urban transformation. Villagers had their *hukou* converted from "agricultural" to "non-agricultural" status. Their Villagers' Committees were accordingly renamed as Residents' Committees (RCs). In these transitional neighbourhoods, urban institutions and practices were gradually adopted. But, informal institutions and traditions indigenous to the rural communities, such as villagers' sense of collective identity, their shared norms about kinship relations and their perception about authority and legitimacy, continued to influence daily interactions among villagers. This is vividly reflected in our interviews, where local residents adamantly described

[16] In 2005, the municipal government reorganized the local authority of Y district form a township government into a district government.

themselves as "villagers (*cunmin* 村民)", even though they have become urban residents in an official sense. Moreover, villagers continue to collectively own some land for commercial uses.

[Figure 1 here]

The transitional nature of these neighbourhoods is also reflected in the election arrangement, which still follows the common organizational structure in the Pearl River Delta called "Two Committees, One Association (*liangwei yishe*)" (see Figure 1). The two Committees in question refer to the Party Branch/Committee and the Villagers' Committee (now RC) respectively. The Party Branch/Committee has the highest level of governing authority. RC takes up local administrative affairs including public security, mediation and birth control. One Association refers to the Association of Shareholding Cooperatives (ASC) which was formerly known as the Brigade in the Maoist era.[17] Under the ASC is a cluster of Shareholding Cooperatives (SCs) which used to be the Maoist Production Teams.[18] Under the Maoist system, the management of collective assets was governed by three levels of authority, namely Commune, Brigade and Production Team. In the 1980s, the Commune in Y District was reorganized into a township government. Brigades and Production Teams continued to manage villagers' collective assets. Under the shareholding reforms in the 1990s, Brigade and Production Team were renamed as ASC and SC respectively. The two levels of organization are also what villagers now call village collectives (*cunjiti* 村集体).[19] Under the specific structure of "Two Committees, One Association", three types of elections—the election of the Party Branch/Committee, the election of the RC, and the election of the SC—were held once every three years to determine the administrative leadership and personnel in charge of these organizations.

Between 2008 and 2018, we conducted intensive field research to explore the operations of these different types of elections and the interaction between villagers and elected cadres in our case study district. Through both personal and professional connections with the local authority, we were permitted to appear on site to have a direct observation on the behaviour of key local actors during elections. Moreover, we had the opportunity to conduct more than 150 structured interviews with the local officials, cadres and villagers, so that we could collect and evaluate the impact of elections on a range of important local incidents. Through these field studies, we have

[17] Interview with cadres, June 2008.
[18] Wong 2015
[19] Interviews with cadres and villagers, January 2018.

found that the local state adopted two distinct strategies in managing party and non-party elections respectively. On the one hand, it exercised tight supervision and close control on the entire process of party elections. In contrast, it encouraged open, competitive non-party elections (including RC elections and SC elections) and purposely sought to distance itself away from the election process. The remaining part of this paper explores the reasons behind this two-pronged approach and its effects on village governance.

## 3. Villagers' Participation in Grassroots Elections and Local Conflicts

In Y district, the enthusiasm of villagers in elections began to increase since the early 2000s. In the last four rounds of grassroots elections (in 2005, 2008, 2011 and 2014) for the SC and RC, all villages under this study achieved a voter turnout of more than 85 percent. Two main factors contributed to this. First, active participation of villagers was related to the payment of "*Wugongfei* (误工费)", which provided monetary remuneration to villagers for voting in all grassroots elections. Historically, it had been a common practice that each villager received 50 yuan after casting his or her vote.[20] In the recent two rounds of elections, the payment was increased to be 150 yuan. Second and more importantly, villagers were increasingly eager to vote in elections when the village wealth began to expand tremendously as a result of the requisitions of collective land by the local state for industrial development. Like many of their counterparts in rural China, most villages in Y district started to implement elections in the early 1990s.[21] At that time, villagers still received their principal earnings by farming and selling fruits to nearby cities.[22] As the performance of elected cadres only had a marginal impact on their personal income, villagers gave a lukewarm response to voting. [23]

Since the late 1990s, however, massive scale land requisitions by the local state have completely altered villagers' attitudes towards elections. This is because land requisitions increased the reliance of villagers on collective income, elevating them to an unprecedented level of enthusiasm for participating in the management of collective assets. After land requisitions, villagers received two categories of compensation. First, it was cash compensation. As all arable land was collectively owned, cash compensation was not handed over directly to individual villagers. Affected farming households received cash compensation only for the

[20] Interviews with villagers and cadres, December 2012 and June 2016.
[21] Interviews with cadres, June 2008 and November 2013.
[22] Interviews with villagers, November and December 2012.
[23] Interviews with villagers, July 2012.

agricultural products they had grown on the requisitioned land. The remaining and larger portion of the compensation money was centrally held in custody by the village collectives.[24] The second category of compensation referred to the "reserved commercial land (*ziliujingjiyongdi*)". Villagers received about 10 percent of the requisitioned land that was "returned" by the government as part of the overall compensation. This "reserved commercial land (*ziliujingjiyongdi*)" remains collectively owned and is centrally managed by the village collectives. It cannot be sold in the open market but may be legally leased to outside investors for non-farming uses. The resulting rental incomes are then used to support the livelihood of the villagers after they lost their agricultural land to urbanization. In a village which had lost all arable land to urbanization by 2002, the village collective now held nearly 100 million yuan of compensation fees.[25] In another village which had leased 1,100 mu of "reserved commercial land" to investors for factory and office uses, the village collectives could generate a total rental income of more than 3.3 million yuan each year.[26] The uses of these collective incomes were usually divided into two portions. One was used to fund the provision of village infrastructures and social welfare services. Another was used for payment of dividends to individual villagers.

Village cadres were in charge of deciding the uses and payment of these incomes. When their lifelong assets were in the form of cash (land compensation fees and rental income) and this huge sum of money was in the hands of cadres, villagers found that their economic well-being was no longer under their sole control. Many villagers started to worry that they might lose all of what they had owned if corrupt cadres, for example, were to run away with their money.[27] Given these considerations, they chose to actively participate in elections, in an attempt to hold cadres accountable for the management of collective assets. Some scholars suggest that competitive elections were more likely to occur in poorer villages because the villagers in wealthier villages tended to be less politically enthusiastic.[28] In Y district, however, strong voter participation in grassroots elections is directly related to the growing economic wealth of the villages.

Competition for the decision-making positions of village collectives through elections ignited the influence of kinship and lineage networks in the daily governance of villages. As an agrarian society, the Chinese villages have long had lineage networks playing an important role in many

[24] Interviews with cadres, July 2012.
[25] Interviews with cadres, November 2012 and July 2014.
[26] Ibid
[27] Interviews with villagers, June 2008 and December 2012.
[28] Oi and Rozelle 2000

aspects of village life generation after generation.[29] The origin of the villages in Y District can be traced back to the Song dynasty (960 -1297), during which the Zhong family moved to build a village in the area. Gradually, more families with different surnames, such as Liu, Kong, Huang, He, Luo and so forth, arrived to build their settlements, the so-called "natural villages." Taking one village under this study as an example, it contained nine natural villages, in which three big families including Zhong, Liu and Lai and some minority families with surnames of Chan and Xiao have lived together here for centuries. During the Maoist era, these natural villages were divided into 13 Production Teams under the supervision of a Brigade. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the enduring efforts of the Communist Party to transform the countryside substantially undermined these traditional networks.[30] Such effects served to weaken but not dismantle the influence of social organization in villages.[31] After the implementation of Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s, the Chinese government shifted its policy focus to the development of cities. Consequently, the retreat of the state from villages allowed a revival of informal village norms, culture and customs, which in turn influence daily governance practices.[32]

Since the early 1990s, traditional clan-based power blocs in Y district have been invigorated for two main reasons. First, implementation of the "reserved commercial land," coupled with an urban-biased development strategy, consistently undermined the presence of the state in rural areas. Throughout the 1990s, the local state devoted all its energy to strategic industrial development, leaving villagers to rely on their own village collectives for both social welfare provision and personal income. This provided an opportunity for the resurrection of clans in taking up village administration and growing their villages into wealthy and autonomous entities.[33] Second, the promotion of self-governance and democratic elections enabled powerful village families and clans to expand their influence on local decision-making through village elections and management of the Villagers' Committees. At election time, not surprisingly, the voting behaviour of villagers was influenced by the informal institutions, such as kinship ties, family power relationships, and so forth. It is generally true that villager would first pay attention to the candidate's credibility, leadership and administrative ability, particularly his/her integrity and past performance in the management of collective assets. This, however, did not mean that blood ties and family lines played a small role when villagers came to decide for

[29] Lin 1935; Fei 1992
[30] Siu 1989
[31] Feuchtwang 1998
[32] He and Xue 2014
[33] Wong 2015

whom they would vote. In general, many villagers still favoured a candidate descendant from their own lineage to represent them in the management of the community.[34]

A village cadre indicated that he had devoted all his energy to win the election because his defeat would shame not only himself but also the entire lineage.[35] A candidate would not only appeal to voters on the basis of his personal attributes or administrative calibre but also on the basis of blood ties and family connections, capitalizing on the voters' preference of placing one's own clansman in a leadership position within the community. Such lineage-based loyalty was not without problems, however, especially for those elected on this basis. In order to secure the support from their clan members, cadres were expected to consistently act in favour of their own clans in local administrative matters. One cadre indicated that he felt extremely frustrated, as his relatives treated him as an enemy after he had become involved in demolishing their "illegal houses".[36] To demonstrate his impartiality, he chose to start enforcement actions against the buildings owned by his sister and other close relatives. However, most members in his clan condemned him and refused to maintain contact with his family afterwards. Losing support from his clan, he was worried that he would be voted out in the next round of elections. The power to manage collective assets and village affairs was particularly likely to fall into the hands of large families and powerful clans that were politically unified. In Y district, members of the main clans such as Zhong and Liu have occupied the key posts in Villagers' Committee for more than 10 years. Cadres tended to exercise their power in alignment with the interests of their kinsmen, at the expense of the villagers from other smaller clans. From the perspective of local officials, village elections could lead to a 'tyranny of the majority', which became a source of social instability in villages.[37]

## 4. State Intervention in Grassroots Elections

*Villagers versus Cadres: Potential Crisis of Grassroots Governance*

Previous studies have focused on land disputes between the state and the villages in shaping the complexity of local governance restructuring.[38] In the case of Y district, however, the potential conflicts between the *indigenous* cadres and the villagers were decisive in grassroots

[34] Interviews with villagers, December 2012, July 2013 and June 2016.
[35] Interview with cadre, December 2014.
[36] Ibid
[37] Ibid
[38] Hillman 2010; Hsing 2010; Smith 2013.

governance. Implementation of the "reserved commercial land" policy as part of the compensation to villagers under the process of state-led urbanization contributed to a rapid growth of property assets of the village collectives during the 1990s. [39] After land requisitions, cadres were made responsible for managing all collective assets including the land compensation fees and the rental income derived from "reserved commercial land". Revival of clan-based power blocs and the ambiguity of collective ownership created many grey areas for cadres to manipulate in managing these village assets and wealth to the detriment of non-clan villagers. The situation became worse when the appreciation of collective property asset values generated greater incentive for cadres and party members to engage in cheating, fraud and illegal undertakings.

During the early 2000s, when more and more arable land was requisitioned, many internal conflicts in relation to the management of collective assets and the distribution of incomes were brought to the surface, leading to direct clashes between cadres and villagers. From our field research, we heard stories about cadres receiving kickbacks from contractors involved in village construction projects.[40] Even worse, some village cadres had used the collective funds for their personal enjoyments, and even gambled away with all the land compensation fees in one incident. Seeing that their wealth vanished overnight, some villagers vented their anger at the village collective and burned down the office of the Villagers' Committee. To settle the disputes, the local state had to quickly inject money back into the account of the village collective, in addition to penalizing the cadres who misappropriated the village assets.[41] On top of hostilities against cadres, the villagers also submitted mounting complaints to the local government offices through open protests or submission of petition letters.

In all these incidents of grassroots struggles, the villagers were not opposing the state or the government officials. According to the villagers who participated in petitions and protests, they only wished to reprimand cadres who consistently acted unfairly in distributing collective incomes in favour of their own clan members.[42] A case in point is that some villagers demanded the local officials from the Street Office to attend their meetings as adjudicators, to hear their reports of the malpractice of cadres and experience their simmering grievances. Because compensation fees and property assets held by the village collectives constituted the essential

[39] Wong 2015
[40] Interviews with villagers, October 2013.
[41] Interviews with local officials and cadres, October 2013 and April 2017.
[42] Interview with villagers, June 2008 and July 2012.

sources of village welfare funding, namely the villagers' medical services and pension schemes, the local state quickly recognized that any breakdown in this funding model caused by corrupt cadres would escalate into widespread social instability in the villages and inevitably endanger the political legitimacy of the socialist party. Filling the management positions through grassroots election of cadres by villagers was not sufficient to ensure good village governance.

To enhance the quality of village administration, the local state in Y district once experimented with appointing outsiders to govern these urbanizing villages. In the early 2000s, the local state launched an Undergraduate Trainee Program (*peiyang daxuesheng cungan jihua*, 培养大学生村官计划), under which it openly recruited young degree holders and then assigned them to work in the RCs.[43] The primary purpose of this program was to nurture young talents as new leaders and encourage them to participate in grassroots elections so as to neutralize the political influence of traditional village power networks. However, this program failed to achieve its objective, because only one of them was eventually successful to become an elected member of the RC.[44] Having learnt from the failure of this program, the local state quickly recognized that indigenous leaders were indispensable players in village administration.[45] It therefore became a political necessity of the local state to re-build the trust and confidence of villagers in indigenous leaders. To achieve this political mission, it was also crucial for the local state to identify capable and respectable cadres from the villages. In practice, the local state adopted two distinct but interrelated governing strategies in managing party and non-party elections respectively. Put simply, it firmly exercised control on the elections of Party Branch/ Committees, but deliberately gave a free hand to other non-party grassroots elections, such as Villagers' Committees (now RCs), Villagers' Groups (now Residents' Groups) and SCs.

*Authoritarian Party Elections*[46]

In each round of grassroots elections, the elections of the Party Branch/Committee were conducted before the elections of the RC and the SC. Election of Party Branch/Committee in these urbanizing villages was a process of what village cadres described as "two nominations and one election (*liangtui yisuan* 两推一选)." "Two nominations" meant that candidates were nominated in two ways: internal nomination by party members (*dangnei tuijian* 党内推选) and

[43] Interviews with local officials, May 2015.
[44] Ibid
[45] Interviews with local official, October 2013.
[46] Initial findings appeared in Wong 2013.

external nomination by villagers' representatives (*qunzhong tuijian* 群众推选). The number of candidates was typically greater than the number of elected positions by 20 percent. The Party Branch first convened a meeting of all party members in the neighbourhood/villages to nominate candidates. The nomination was valid so long as it was supported by two-thirds of all the party members. Simultaneously, candidates were also nominated by a committee composed of non-party members from villagers' representatives, heads of Residents' Groups, and former members of the RC.

The list of nominees had to be approved by the Party Branch at the Street Office level. One primary consideration of the Street Office was to make sure that the candidate was faithful to the implementation of all state policies and duties. It usually eliminated those candidates who were known to have participated in open oppositions against the state or violated specific national policies such as birth control regulations. Party Groups organized regular classes for its members to study the policy directives and required them to submit annual self-appraisal reports to the Party Committee. This allowed the party organization at the Street Office level to have continuous assessments on its members at the village level.[47] The Street Office also welcomed candidates with some popularity among villagers. In this process, it screened out those candidates who had records of illegal undertakings in the management of collective assets and/or had open disputes with other clans in the village. After finalizing the list of candidates, the Party Branch called a general meeting to elect the secretary and the members of the Party Branch/Committee. This was what they call "one election" after "two nominations." During the election meeting, voters' choices were anonymous. The relevant policy document required that the attendance at the election meeting had to be over 80 percent of the party members who had registered their memberships with the neighbourhood. However, it did not specify the rules for determining the winning candidates, even though candidates with the highest number of votes were mostly declared elected. This left some room for the party officials at the Street Office level to have a final say, when the results of the elections were submitted for endorsement.

Under these procedures, the party organization at the Street Office level was empowered to influence not only the nomination of candidates. It also had a lot of discretion over determining which nominees actually appeared on the winning list. There were obvious reasons why the local state concentrated its attention on the elections of the Party Branch/Committee. As shown in Figure 1, the Party Branch/Committee was the highest level of authority in village

[47] Interviews with cadres, July 2017.

administration. As the head of local authority at the grassroots level, the Secretary of the Party Branch/Committee also took up the directorship of the ASC. Therefore, in addition to handling community affairs, this person was also in charge of managing all collective assets held under the ambit of SCs.

Given this power structure and arrangement, leadership of political and economic management of the villages were put under the direct guidance of the Party Branch/Committee. Furthermore, the Party Branch/Committee actively recruited new, capable villagers from the neighbourhoods to become party members, and nurtured them to become village leaders. A firm control on the membership elections to the Party Branch/Committee cemented the political interests of the socialist state, and ensured that its influences over local administration and the management of collective assets could be ring-fenced. In contrast to all these deliberate attempts of directing the party elections and expanding the party organization at the neighbourhood level, however, the local state was found to adopt a different approach to deal with elections of the RC and the SC.

*Open and Competitive Non-party Elections* [48]

In the elections of the RC and the SC, the local state no longer manipulated the nomination of candidates. Although the Party Secretary usually served as one of the members in the Electoral Affairs Commission, he/she could not determine and dictate the list of nominations directly, because the avenues for candidate nominations were rather open and the opinions of other villagers' representatives in the Commission could not be ignored. In fact, all eligible villagers could nominate and vote for their own candidates. In the final election days, they could write directly on the ballot papers the names of additional candidates whom they supported, if they disagree with the candidates already nominated on the list.

In 2005, villagers in Y district began to elect directors and committee members of RC to fill positions in the areas of accounting, public security, birth control, conflict mediation, and conscriptions. Reorganization of Villagers' Committees into RCs did not bring any fundamental changes to the procedures of these elections, but allowed the villagers more flexibility in choosing their method of election. According to the *Organic Law on the Organization of RC,* elections were allowed either through direct balloting by all villagers (now residents) or voting by villagers' representatives (i.e., indirect election). In the case of direct election, the quorum

[48] Initial findings appeared in Wong 2013.

was set at 50 percent and a candidate had to secure a majority vote in order to win the seat. In the case of election by villagers' representatives, the quorum was set at a higher level: at least two-thirds of the representatives were required to attend the election and the winning candidate had to win more than half of the votes.

The decision to select the method of election was the responsibility of the Electoral Affairs Commission, which comprised the party secretary, the existing committee members and the elected villagers' representatives. If the Electoral Affairs Commission decided to continue with the method of direct election, members of the RC would be elected by all registered villagers aged 18 or above. If the Electoral Affairs Commission opted for indirect election, committee members would not be elected directly by all qualified villagers who had the right to vote. Instead, they were elected indirectly by the voters' representatives who had won the elections at the Residents' Group level. In recent years, while many villages in Y district still continued with direct elections, some had switched to indirect elections by residents' representatives. Village cadres and villagers suggested two considerations which had influenced their choice of the electoral method.

First, indirect elections involved less complex procedures and thus incurred a lower cost in administration. As a major part of the expenditures for elections were funded by the village collectives, villagers generally tended to support a method which could help lower the costs.[49] Second, the election method also affected the decision-making process in day-to-day community management. This is because the same election rules would be used in determining the collection of fees, the allocation of collective income, the construction of roads or other public projects, and the provision of welfare programs in the villages.[50] Therefore, indirect elections generally met with acceptance from more villagers than direct elections, because the latter was considered too cumbersome and time-consuming in the decision-making process.

However, indirect elections had a major shortcoming. It made it easier for some powerful clans to dominate the political scene. Under indirect election, villagers' representatives were first elected to the Residents' Group, in which every 20 or 30 households selected one villager to represent them. These elected representatives then went for the election of the RC on behalf of their voters. The total number of households in each village usually ranged from 400 to 800. If indirect election was adopted, only about 20-50 representatives would be selected for the final

[49] Interviews with cadres, October 2013 and January 2016.
[50] Interviews with villagers, October 2013 and January 2016

election of the RC. In this case, some candidates could easily lobby the villagers' representatives and influence their decisions in the process of election. But in the case of direct election, it was considerably more difficult for candidates to influence the outcomes, as they could not possibly sway hundreds of villagers who were entitled to vote. Given the pros and cons of these methods, villages in which cadres and villagers had established a high degree of mutual trust tended to adopt indirect election.[51] In contrast, those villages where tensions between cadres and villagers have long existed continued to adopt direct election for selecting members of the RC.[52] For instance, we came across a village which had initially had indirect election. However, when it came to light that cadres had been abusing the collective income for private uses, the villagers not only burned down the cadre offices, but also reverted back to a system of one-man-one-vote direct election.[53]

Both direct and indirect elections were subject to the standardized government procedures. They generally involved five major steps. The first was to form an Electoral Affairs Commission. Afterwards, the Electoral Affairs Commission proceeded with the registration of qualified voters. A list of registered voters had to be made available for villagers' inspection for at least 20 days before the formal election. The third was the nomination of candidates by villagers to stand for elections. Under a multi-candidate electoral system, two candidates were usually nominated to compete for the position of director or deputy director. For the election of committee members, usually two or three candidates competed for each position. The fourth step involved the selection of three to seven poll watchers from the villagers' representatives to act as the observers of the election responsible for monitoring the entire voting process and scrutinizing ballot-counting operations. The final step was the process of voting by all qualified voters. All ballots had to be counted and the results of the elections were declared on the same day.

Similarly, elections in SCs were held once every three years. They came after the elections of Party Branch/Committees and RCs. SCs were the officially recognized self-governing bodies that were responsible for the management and distribution of collective assets. The elections of SCs adopted the principle of "one man, one vote." During the 1990s, the number of shares held by each villager in Y district varied from time to time, because the shareholding rights of all eligible individuals were re-allocated every three years to accommodate for the changes in age

[51] Interviews with local officials, May 2015.
[52] Ibid
[53] Interview with villagers, October 2013.

and the size of village population.[54] Each shareholder still held an equal vote despite holding different amount of shares. In 2003, the local state introduced a new policy called "ossification of share right (*guhuaguquan*)," under which each villager was allocated an equal number of 200 shares and reallocation would no longer be permitted. The principle of "one man, one vote" continued to prevail.[55]

In each round of elections, villagers selected candidates to fill three posts including, Director (*shezhang*), Deputy Director (*fushezhang*) and Accounting Manager (*chuna*) in their respective SC. These elected cadres of the SC were entrusted with two important tasks. First, it was the daily management of villagers' collectively owned assets. Another task was to represent their fellow villagers in the Board of Directors and the Board of Supervisors of the ASC to make decisions on the allocation of collective assets for the development of village facilities and social services. The number of Directors (the elected leaders from the different SC) varied from three to nine, depending on the size of the village population. Further, a Board of Supervisors, comprising three to four elected leaders from the villagers' representatives, was formed to oversee the performance of the Directors and monitor the financial conditions of the SC.[56] Compared with the elections of Villagers' Committee, more freedom and flexibility were given to the elections of SC. Villagers could directly jot down on the ballot papers the names of three candidates for the aforesaid posts. After the election, performance of these "write-ins" were closely monitored and supervised by their fellow villagers, who could vote them out in the next election if they did not act in the interests of shareholders. The role of the local state in non-party elections was to ensure that the election results were not manipulated and the electoral procedures strictly followed the official guides. During the elections of the RC and SC, as some local government officials from the Street Office suggested, villagers were encouraged to wait at the polling place to hear the announcement of election results. Cadres were thus extremely vigilant about every step of the election in order to survive the scrutiny of villager voters and the supervision of local government officials.

## 5. Grassroots Governance Capacity Building and State Penetration

A direct consequence of this two-pronged approach of state intervention into elections was the rebuilding of the political legitimacy of RCs and SCs, which had been undermined by the

[54] Interviews with villagers, June 2008 and Oct 2012.
[55] Ibid
[56] Interviews with local officials and cadres, July 2015.

persistent confrontations between *indigenous* leaders and villagers in village management. In the election of the Party Committee, the Street Office wanted the elected Party Secretary and the committee members to be not only loyal to the party-state but also popular among villagers. The nomination process in party elections removed candidates who were known to be corrupt or incapable of balancing the interests of their own clan families and others. To enhance their accountability, elected Party Secretary and Committee members were required to participate in the open elections of RC and SCs. Most of them could win in these two elections. Consequently, in most of the villages under this study, the Party Secretary also took up the position of RC Director. The Party Committee Members also served as the Director or Deputy Director in SCs. Through these open and competitive non-party elections, the legitimacy of the elected leaders was effectively enhanced, notwithstanding that they were the "hand-picked" nominees in party elections.

From the perspective of villagers, the elected cadres now had greater representativeness. Some villagers suggested that elections were more "democratic" as they were versed with the nomination and electoral procedures.[57] Formal and rigorously designed electoral procedures are essential to increase villagers' confidence in elections and their trust in the elected leaders.[58] The same was also true in the villages under this study. Some villagers suggested they were more willing to accept the election results even through the candidates they supported could not win in the final election. Moreover, villagers considered that many of the elected cadres were more "dedicated" than before in fighting for their interests to improve the welfare facilities of villagers. We were told an example that the elected members of an existing RC had just renovated a building for a neighbourhood clinic so that villagers had better and convenient medical services.[59]

Some scholars describe the elected cadres as "Janus-faced intermediaries who represented the party/state policies to the peasants and the peasants to the party/state." [60] Our field research shows that the cadres have become more wilful implementation agents of state policy for two main reasons. First, the Party Committee at the Street Office could eliminate corrupt, incompetent Party Secretary by removing him or her from the party organization. Second, cadres still had to rely on the support of the local state to reinforce what Dingxin Zhao calls

[57] Interview with villagers, July 2012 and July 2014.
[58] Mansion 2006; Su et al. 2011
[59] Interview with villagers, July 2012
[60] Potter and Potter 1990

"performance legitimacy" in the daily governance after elections.[61] For the villagers, democracy was a high-sounding principle, and it had to be backed up by material results. Whether something is democratic or not does not solely depend on the fairness of the electoral process and procedure.[62] It is also judged by the outcomes of community management. Villagers were most concerned about their social welfare provisions and dividend payments. Yet, to generate stable collective incomes for improving village welfare and dividend, the elected cadres could not oppose but to obey the local state which held decisive power over land use planning and development of village property assets.

The local state could adjust its policy in village land development matters, and in so doing, affect the performance of cadres in the eyes of villagers. For instance, upon the request of some cadres in a village, the local government agreed to sign up a long lease of renting their premises on "reserved commercial land", guaranteeing villagers to receive an annual collective income of nearly 40 million yuan.[63] After securing this contract, cadres could showcase to their electorates that they were carrying out their promise of fighting for the interests of their fellow villagers. The blessing of the local state was highly instrumental behind the success of elected cadres. On the contrary, if the local state did not give a favourable support to some proposals raised by the elected cadres, they could 'lose face' in front of the villagers, who might give their votes to other candidates capable of securing a better deal in land leasing to the government.[64]

In exchange for material concessions from the local state, the cadres had to adhere to its supervision and instruction, by implementing policies and fulfilling duties in a range of areas, including but not limited to, building control, social security, conscriptions, and village redevelopment. Since 2009, the municipal government has progressively promoted village redevelopment. One of the key tasks that the local state handed down to the cadres was to combat and soften the resistance of some villagers who disagreed with redevelopment. To appease villagers, the local state used its discretionary power to relax some redevelopment restrictions, so that cadres could have more rooms for negotiation with the villagers about their request for higher compensation.[65] In the process, the cadres turned the controversy about village redevelopment into a manageable task by focusing on practical issues that they could discuss with the local state for their fellow villagers. These issues might include not only the

[61] Zhao 2001
[62] Interview with local officials, July 2012.
[63] Interviews with local officials and cadres, December 2016 and July 2017.
[64] Interviews with cadres, March and April 2017
[65] Interviews with local officials and cadres, June and July 2017.

amount of compensation, but also the location of a new subway exit to improve village accessibility and produce windfall to villagers' own properties.[66] When the local state could induce compliance and loyalty from the elected cadres through its flexible responses or otherwise detrimental reactions to the village development proposals, not surprisingly, cadres were more inclined to stand behind the state, even though the cadres repeatedly emphasized their role as an intermediary between the state and villagers.[67]

## 6. Conclusions

Undoubtedly, open and competitive elections of village cadres have provided a formal political means for villagers to strive for their social and economic rights. Like their counterparts in Y district, a growing number of villagers in periurban China have become wealthy and they are increasingly eager to defend their entitlements to the expanding collective income generated by urbanization. Some scholars describe these villagers as the "new middle class."[68] In the West, the rising bourgeoisie constituted a major driving force towards democracy, when the middle class strived for a stronger influence on public affairs after gaining control over the capitalist production. Our study, however, indicates that villagers' active participation in grassroots elections is still a far cry from being a driver for bottom-up political changes in China. Villagers wanted elections to regulate their cadres rather than the socialist state per se. With their primary concern about safeguarding the growth and distribution of their village wealth, villagers used elections as a tool to protect their rights to collective asset management and distribution, rather than engaging them as a political means to alter the prevailing political norms, value and structure.

Against this background, the local state also adopted a pragmatic approach of intervention into village administration. This approach is dominated by a utilitarian concern about how to eradicate social instability through a better supervision of village affairs and a prudent management of collective assets. The local state realized that it was virtually impossible to effectively monitor the day-to-day operations of a huge number of village organizations from the top-down. There is a practical need to strengthen grassroots administrative capacity and leave some room for self-management by villagers. To this end, effective political control of the state were not achieved by direct appointment of local government officials to take up

[66] Interviews with cadres, March and July 2017.
[67] Interviews with cadres, December 2012 and July 2017.
[68] Brook, 1997

grassroots administration, nor giving villagers a free hand to select their leaders through elections. The lived experience of Y district shows that, the local state used a two-pronged approach, first to firmly tighten its control over party elections to determine the candidature of village leadership; and second, it progressively promoted competitive elections of non-party positions in village collectives. Behind this strategy, the local state also nurtured competent indigenous candidates to occupy key positions in villagers' economic and administrative organizations by supporting them to build up popularity and rapport through open, competitive elections. It also stepped up its timely intervention into potential confrontations between villagers and elected cadres, before they escalated into widespread instability at the grassroots level.

This two-pronged interventionist approach in grassroots elections, which supported both authoritarian state domination and democratic bottom-up participation, has led to what John Friedmann describes as a path of transformation "between two poles of ever-present danger: the lapse into anarchy and the reimposition of a totalitarian rule leading to stasis." [69] Alongside this transformation, there were encouraging outcomes of self-governance, in which grassroots elections succeeded to ward off political instabilities caused by corrupt and incompetent village cadres. However, it is difficult to see how the active participation of villagers in elections will eventually evolve into a critical mass of autonomous forces able to challenge the socialist state authority. As shown by the case of Y District, villagers still had to rely heavily on the local state to restrain the misconduct of cadres, adjudicate over inter-clan conflicts, supply talented party-cadres to take up leadership positions, and provide economic opportunities for growing the collective incomes. Grassroots elections provide formal channels for villagers to voice their grievances. However, it is still the local state which could effectively put cadres under control, and hold the reins on influencing not only the candidature of elections but also the achievement of elected cadres for the village collectives. Consequently, the current electoral arrangement has consolidated a subtle form of political intrusion of the socialist party-state into village affairs, which have in turn impeded the development of self-governance by villagers.

[69] Friedmann 2005, 117

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