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The China Journal, No. 46. (Jul., 2001), pp. 45-67.

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THE POST-ELECTION ADMINISTRATION OF CHINESE VILLAGES

Björn Alpermann*

The spread of village elections in China since the implementation of the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees in 1987 suggests to many observers that democracy has taken hold at the grassroots. In examining these elections, foreign researchers have largely focused on voting procedures or on questions such as whether the level of economic development affects the likelihood that a village will hold genuine elections.¹

* The fieldwork on which this paper is based was supported by the Carl Duisberg Foundation's ASA Program. Interviews were conducted jointly with Astrid Lipinsky. I also wish to thank Maria Edin, Thomas Scharping, Anita Chan, Jonathan Unger, Sarah Leeming and two anonymous reviewers for their encouragement and helpful suggestions.

¹ Field studies have arrived at conflicting answers to this latter question. Kevin J. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (July 1994), pp. 33–59, the most systematic of these studies, identified four factors that increase the likelihood that a village will effectively implement the Organic Law: a history of good leadership in the village, economic prosperity, the existence of a strong collective economy, and if the Ministry for Civil Affairs pays attention to the village. The crucial role of middle-level officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs in implementing the Organic Law has been further stressed by Tianjian Shi, "Village Committee Elections in China. Institutional Tactics for Democracy", *World Politics*, Vol. 51 (April 1999), pp. 385–412. In contrast, O'Brien's proposition regarding the relationship to economic prosperity has been challenged. Allen Choate, "Local Governance in China. An Assessment of Villagers' Committees", *Working Paper*, No. 1 (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 1997), p. 15, claims that local government and villagers in poorer regions treat village self-administration more seriously than those in better-off ones. David Zweig, *Freeing China's Farmers. Rural Restructuring in the Reform Era* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 26; and Amy Epstein, "Village Elections in China: Experimenting with Democracy", in Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States (ed.), *China's Economic Future. Challenges to U.S. Policy* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 418, suggest that self-administration is most successful in areas of average wealth. Finally, Jean C. Oi, "Economic Development, Stability and Democratic Village Self-Governance", in Maurice Brousseau,

Considerably less attention has been devoted to the workings of village institutions after the elections. This article looks at how self-administration works in practice, and shows that in some major policy areas the directly elected village committees, which are made up of a village head and a few other village officials, are treated like line-organs of the Chinese government and have to carry out orders from above.

An element that Western scholars have also largely neglected is the role and functions of village-level branches of the Communist Party. Most Western analysts either ignore the presence of Party branches or treat them as a major impediment to the development of self-administration.² In contrast, Chinese authors and the Communist Party view them as an integral part of village political life. Ignoring the role of the Party branches in village self-administration gives a distorted impression that the political set-up at the grassroots has radically changed, which neglects the reality that old institutions often remain in place in transitions from Leninism.³ In fact village-level Party branches and village committees have to be seen (and are seen by Chinese) as *one* leadership group (*lingdao banzi*) with an internal division of responsibilities.⁴

Suzanne Pepper and Tsang Shui-kui (eds), *China Review 1996* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1996), p. 139–40; and Jude Howell, “Prospects for Village Self-Governance in China”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1998), p. 106–7, conclude that there is no direct positive link between the economic prosperity of a village and the likelihood of it successfully adopting village self-administration. The link may even be negative or non-existent. Tianjian Shi, “Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 8, No. 22 (1999), pp. 425–42, derives a curvilinear relationship between the prosperity of counties and the adoption of semi-competitive elections in their villages, thus endorsing Zweig and Epstein’s proposition. However, Shi’s conclusion can be challenged on the grounds that he uses the GDP of counties, not villages, as the measure of economic development. Jean C. Oi and Scott Rozelle, “Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 162 (June 2000), pp. 513–39, show that it is the economic context of a village that matters most. However, the results of another large survey should caution us that local peculiarities may influence political participation as much as socio-economic variables; see M. Kent Jennings, “Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (June 1997), pp. 368–70.

² Notable exceptions are Lianjiang Li, “The Two-Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Village Party Secretaries to a Popular Vote”, *The China Journal*, No. 42 (July 1999), pp. 103–18; and Xiaotao Wang, “The Politics of Village Elections: The Case of North Village”, *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (November/December 1999), pp. 167–85.

³ Edwin A. Winckler, “Explaining Leninist Transitions”, in Edwin A. Winckler (ed.), *Transitions from Communism in China: Institutional and Comparative Analyses* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), p. 291.

⁴ A high level of integration between the two bodies has also been found in other studies. See Wang Yalin, “Nongcun jiceng quanli jiegou ji qi yunxing jizhi” (Rural Basic-Level Authority Structures and their Functioning Mechanisms), *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences in China, hereafter *ZGSHKX*), 1998, No. 5, p. 41; Xiaotao Wang, “Politics of Village Elections”, p. 171; Ellen R. Judd, *Gender and Power in Rural North China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 271; and Thomas Heberer and Wolfgang

This article adopts a principal-agent perspective which, as Edwin A. Winckler has argued, is particularly appropriate for describing transitions from Leninism, highlighting both the “necessity for further delegation and the difficulties of maintaining control”.⁵ The village cadres—be they elected or appointed—serve as agents both of the state and of their electorate.⁶ Birth planning is an obvious example of when village committees serve the state, whereas the picture is mixed when the fostering of village economic growth is concerned. A study of villages in Hebei province is used to illustrate the myriad of checks and controls employed by the state to ensure that the villages toe the line on key issues. Far from having relinquished control of village affairs, the Chinese Party-state has been using self-administration as another way to control rural politics. The intriguing aspect of this new control device is that the state delegates to ordinary villagers some of its monitoring and control powers over its local agents.⁷ These intentions can be seen in the national statutes and prescriptions for village self-administration.

Village Self-Administration: On Whose Behalf?

The path to self-administration in the villages has been arduous. Village committees were first mentioned in article 111 of the 1982 constitution.⁸ The definition given in the constitution seems straightforward enough: village committees are described as “mass organizations of self-management at the grassroots level”.⁹ Just exactly what this means, though, has been a bone of contention between a more liberal camp and a more statist camp. This ongoing

Taubmann, *Chinas ländliche Gesellschaft im Umbruch* (China's Rural Society in Transition) (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), p. 288.

⁵ Winckler, “Explaining Leninist Transitions”, p. 260.

⁶ This dual role of village cadres in the pre-reform era has been described by Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁷ See also Harrison White, “Agency as Control”, in John W. Pratt and Richard J. Zeckhauser (eds), *Principals and Agents: The Structure of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1985), pp. 187–212, who argues that control is the main reason for delegation.

⁸ Tang Jinsu and Dong Chengmei, “Cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa (shixing) guanche shishi qingkuang diaocha baogao” (Report on the Implementation Situation of the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees [Trial Implementation]), *Zhongguo faxue* (Chinese Legal Science), 1992, No. 2, pp. 6–12; Bai Gang, “Zhongguo cunmin zizhi fazhi jianshe pingyi” (Assessment of the Legal Construction of Villagers' Self-Administration in China), *ZGSHKX*, 1998, No. 3, pp. 88–104; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Accommodating ‘Democracy’ in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 162 (June 2000), p. 465–78; and Liu Yawei, “Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China: Better Local Governance or more Consolidation of State Power?”, *China Perspectives*, No. 31 (September–October 2000), pp. 27–30.

⁹ Translated in Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 377.

debate was a major reason why in 1987 the decision was made only to implement the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees on a trial basis.¹⁰ Only in 1998 was the final law passed by the National People's Congress.¹¹

In both 1987 and 1998, discussion in Beijing focused on the relationship of a village committee to the township government above it and to the village branch of the Party. In both years, the more liberal view that villages should be "guided" but not "led" by the townships carried the day. The difference is more than semantics, since a "leadership relationship" (*lingdao guanxi*) would have given townships the right to issue binding orders to the committees.¹² In a "guidance relationship" (*zhidao guanxi*) the township authorities are supposed to work through persuasion and assistance.¹³ In both cases the village committee is obliged by law to help the township government accomplish its tasks at the grassroots. Although this delineation of authority was always bound to give rise to tensions, the "guidance relationship" was again incorporated into the final version of the Organic Law in 1998.

The 1987 Organic Law did not mention the village Party branches, but a host of official documents acknowledged their role as the "leadership core" in village organizations and explicitly stipulated a leadership relationship with the village committees.¹⁴ This role was confirmed by a clause in the 1998 Organic Law,

¹⁰ "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa (shixing)" (PRC Organic Law on Villagers' Committees [Trial Implementation]), *Quanguo Renmin Dahui Changwu Weiyuanhui Gongbao* (Bulletin of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, henceforth *CWWGB*), 1987, No. 6, pp. 5–8. A rare glance at the debate surrounding its enactment can be gained from reviewing the various reports—to be found in the same volume—on changes of this bill in the last stages of the legislative process. It is also depicted by Tyrene White, "Reforming the Countryside", *Current History*, Vol. 91, No. 566 (September 1992), pp. 273–7; and O'Brien and Li, "Accommodating 'Democracy'", p. 473–5.

¹¹ "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa" (PRC Organic Law on Villagers' Committees), *CWWGB*, 1998, No. 5, pp. 507–11. Again the law is supplemented by reports on discussions and alterations in the same volume.

¹² Lieberthal, *Governing China*, p. 169–70.

¹³ Wu Jie, Liu Hui and Tang Jinsu, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa (shixing) wenda* (Questions and answers to the PRC Organic Law on Villagers' Committee [Trial Implementation]) (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Gong'an Daxue Chubanshe, 1987), pp. 9–10. An even looser form of linkage would have been "work-contact relations" (*gongzuo lianxi guanxi*), which for instance exist between people's congresses at different levels. However, Kevin J. O'Brien and Laura M. Luehrmann, "Institutionalizing Chinese Legislatures: Trade-offs between Autonomy and Capacity", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (February 1998), pp. 91–108, found a desire by delegates of local congresses to establish "leadership relations" to enhance their institutional capacity, whereas organizational autonomy was honoured more by delegates at provincial and national levels.

¹⁴ Wu Jie et al., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo*, p. 8; *Zhongguo gongchandang zhangcheng* (Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party) (Guiyang: Guizhou Renmin Chubanshe, 1992) article 32, p. 65–6; "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang nongcun jiceng zuzhi jianshe de tongzhi" (Circular of the CCP Centre Concerning the Strengthening of the

article 3, which provided a strong reminder that self-administration should not be taken to mean a relinquishing of the Party's claim to leadership in the villages. The duty of Party branches to guarantee the functioning of self-administrative organs was also emphasized.¹⁵ The clause echoed the Party constitution, which states:

village Party branches lead the work of their areas: to support administrative, economic, and mass self-management organizations; and to ensure that such organizations fully exercise their functions and powers.¹⁶

The village committees are not part of the state bureaucracy and are in principle autonomous in self-administration affairs, albeit subject to supervision by the township government. At the same time they provide a necessary avenue for the township to deal with villagers, a function described by Chinese as that of a "bridge".¹⁷ Without the active support of village cadres, the township officials would not be able to accomplish their tasks. The township government sometimes even delegates tasks concerning "official affairs" to the village committee, which is supposed to act as an arm of the township government in these matters.¹⁸

Construction of Rural Basic-Level Organizations), in Hebei sheng funu lianhehui zuzhibu (Organization Department of the Women's Federation of Hebei Province) (ed.), *Jiceng funu ganbu peixun jiaocai* (Study Materials for Women Cadres) (1996), p. 134; China News Analysis, "Farmers and Villagers", No. 1549, (15 December 1995), p. 7.

¹⁵ Quanguo renda changweihui fazhi gongzuo weiyuanhui guojiafa xingfa shi (Office for State and Administrative Law, Legal Affairs Committee, Standing Committee of the National People's Congress) et al. (eds), *Cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa xuexi duben* (Study Book on the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees) (Beijing: Zhongguo Minzhu Fazhi Chubanshe, 1998), p. 12–13 (hereafter Quanguo renda, *Cunweihui duben*). Opponents of this new clause fought for this guarantee to be added to provide a counterweight to the phrase stipulating a leadership relationship. See Wang Weicheng, "Guanyu cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa (xiuding caoan xiugaigao) he xiugai shouyangfa de jue ding (caoan) xiugai yijian de baogao" (Report on Suggestions for Altering the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees [Revised Draft, Revised Version] and the revised Adoption Law [Draft]), *CWWGB*, 1998, No. 5, p. 520; Summary of World Broadcast, Daily Report, part 3/G (Asia-Pacific/China), 30.10.1998, p. 8.

¹⁶ Translation in Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China*, p. 396. See also the Party reader *Xuexi Dangzhang Wenda* (Questions and Answers to the Study of the Party Constitution) (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, 1997), p. 145–6. Given the fact that this clause contained nothing new, Liu Yawei's judgement that its introduction into the law constituted "the party's most detrimental act toward the villager committee elections" hardly seems justified; see Liu, "Consequences of Villager Committee Elections", p. 29.

¹⁷ Wu Jie et al., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo*, pp. 6–11. In this they resemble other self-regulating organs in China; see Jonathan Unger, "'Bridges', Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New Associations", *The China Quarterly*, No. 147 (September 1996), pp. 795–819.

¹⁸ See Quanguo renda, *Cunweihui duben*, p. 16.

What is the distinction between “self-administration affairs” and “official affairs”? The Organic Law lists the functions of the village committee, the most important of which are the arbitration of civil disputes, the development and management of the local economy, and the provision of public goods and services. An official book on the Organic Law defines self-administration even more broadly as “all those public affairs of the village that are not by law or legal regulation defined as affairs within the township government’s administration”.¹⁹ The administrative tasks in which the township government will need the help of the village committees all pertain to official affairs.²⁰

Very similar divisions of responsibility can be found in Western democracies with long traditions of self-government.²¹ What makes Chinese local government unique is the attempt to introduce self-administration while there is, at least theoretically, a unitary state structure under the leadership of a Communist Party.²²

Village self-government has been debated in Chinese journals and newspapers since the 1980s. Daniel Kelliher noted that the arguments by Chinese authors are often set in the context of a looming crisis of state authority in the countryside.²³ This crisis is usually described as a “paralysis” of basic-level political organizations.²⁴ Most proponents of self-administration present it as a means to re-establish the state’s authority, arguing that village committee elections provide the best personnel for carrying out their duties and encourage

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 15 (abridged translation by the author).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 16. See also Xu Anbiao, *Nongmin ruhe xingshi minzhu quanli*. “*Cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa*” *shiyong wenda* (How the Farmers Exercise their Democratic Rights. Practical Questions and Answers to the “Organic Law of the Villagers’ Committees”) (Beijing: Falu Chubanshe, 1999), p. 23–4.

²¹ See Hans Georg Wehling, “Kommunalpolitik” (Community Politics), in Peter Nohlen, *Wörterbuch Staat und Politik* (Dictionary of State and Politics) (Bonn: Bundesinstitut für Politische Bildung, 1998), pp. 319–26.

²² However, useful comparisons can be made with the case of Taiwan; see Bruce J. Dickson, *Democratization in China and Taiwan: The Adaptability of Leninist Parties* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

²³ See his “The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government”, *The China Journal*, No. 37 (January 1997), pp. 63–86. Another account of the Chinese argument is Liu, “Consequences of Villager Committee Elections”, pp. 21–4. For a justification of an instrumental approach to democratic practice, see Shih Chih-yu, *Collective Democracy. Political and Legal Reform in China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), pp. xii–xv.

²⁴ See Zheng Quan, “Quanguo cunji zuzhi de zhuangkuang de diaocha” (Nationwide Survey on the Situation of Village-Level Organizations), *Zhongguo minzheng* (Chinese Civil Administration, hereafter *ZGMZ*), pp. 16–18; Chen Shiyun, “Cunmin weiyuanhui jianshe qingkuang de diaocha yu duice” (Survey of the Situation of Villagers’ Committee Construction and Related Measures), *ZGMZ*, 1990, No. 2, pp. 9–11. According to these studies, between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of villages were experiencing “paralysis or semi-paralysis” of their organizations.

feelings of mutual obligation between the electorate and the elected. Thus, the implementation of state tasks such as the collection of grain and taxes and the enforcement of birth planning would be smoothed over.²⁵ On the other hand, opponents of self-administration argue that elections do not provide an effective way of controlling the villages and instead might entrench clan power in the villages.²⁶

Proponents and opponents alike attribute the authority crisis in the villages to the personal shortcomings of village cadres. The debate over self-administration concerns the right means to address this problem—through village self-government or through Party rectification.²⁷ But in laying major blame at the local cadres' door, both sides tend to personalize the problem,²⁸ instead of

²⁵ Wang Zhenyao, Yang Jihong and Niu Dongming, "Cunmin canyu: qianghua cun zuzhi de yitiao youxiao tujing" (Villagers' Participation: An Effective Way of Strengthening Village Organizations), *ZGMZ*, 1989, No. 1, pp. 13–14; Cao Guoying, "Lun cunmin zizhi zhidu dui nongcun dang zuzhi jianshe de cujin zuoyong" (On the Supporting Function of Village Self-Administration vis-à-vis the Construction of Rural Party Organizations), *ZGMZ*, 1997, No. 6, pp. 7–9.

²⁶ See Kelliher, "Chinese Debate", pp. 78–81; Yu Hong, He Yuchang, Zhou Liangtuo and Chen Cuiling, *Dangdai nongcun wu da shehui wenti* (Five Big Social Problems of Contemporary Rural Areas) (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), pp. 112–17. Notable exceptions from this mainstream argument include Wang Yalin, "Nongcun jiceng quanli jiegou ji qi yunxing jizhi" (Rural Basic-Level Authority Structures and their Functioning Mechanisms), *ZGSHKX*, 1998, No. 5, pp. 37–51; Xie Zhikui, "Gongshe hou tizhi xia de xiangcun zhengzhi: Bianqian yu chongjian" (Post-Commune Rural Politics: Changes and Restructuring), *Fuyin baokan ziliao (Shehuixue)* (Reprinted Press Materials, Sociology, hereafter *FYBKZL*), 1999, No. 3, pp. 112–23; Cao Yongxin, "Zhongguo xiangcun zhixu he cunzheng fazhan fangmian cunzai de ji ge wenti fenxi" (Analysis of Some Problems in the Rural Order and the Development of Village Politics), *FYBKZL*, 1999, No. 2, pp. 11–15.

²⁷ See Ignatius Wibowo, "Rural Party Rectification in China in the 1990s: Rectification or Reification?", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 7, No. 19 (1998), pp. 493–506; and Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Campaign Nostalgia in the Chinese Countryside", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 375–93, for differing assessments of villagers' views of such campaigns.

²⁸ Xiang Jiquan, "Lun nongcun de fazhan yu wending" (On Rural Development and Stability), *Nongcun jingji yu shehui* (Rural Economy and Society, hereafter *NCJJYSH*), 1993, No. 2, pp. 41–6; Ma Shuke, "Xin shiqi dang de nongcun gongzuo lilun zhinan" (Theoretical Guide to Rural Party Work in the New Era), *Hebei xuekan* (Hebei Science Journal, hereafter *HBXK*), 1995, No. 2, pp. 3–6; Long Zhixia, "Kaizhan nongcun dangyuan shiyong jishu peixun de shijian yu sikao" (Practice of and Reflections on Practical Technical Training for Rural Party Members), *Nongcun jingji yu guanli* (Rural Economy and Administration, hereafter *NCJJYGL*), 1997, No. 3, pp. 49–51; Zhao Shiju, "Fazhan zhuangda cunji jiti jingji shili, tigao nongcun zuzhi jianshe zhengti shuiping" (Develop a Strong Collective Economy at the Village Level, Enhance the Overall Level of Rural Organization Building), *Xuexi yanjiu cankao* (Study Research Reference, hereafter *XXYJCK*), 1997, No. 4, pp. 23–6; Shu Huiguo, "Jinyibu jiaqiang nongcun jiceng zuzhi jianshe" (Advance in the Strengthening of Rural Basic-Level Organization Building), *XXYJCK*, 1997, No. 2, pp. 19–22.

connecting the cadres' difficulties to a lack of economic growth due to a village's location.²⁹ It is notable that village self-administration is not seen as a way to enhance political participation, but rather is defined as a means to resurrect state authority and foster economic development.³¹ Therefore the success of village self-government in achieving these twin goals is ultimately be the yardstick by which the government will judge the election program's success or failure.

The Village Leadership: Empirical Evidence

The conclusions in this paper are based on information gathered during fieldwork in Hebei province not long after a round of village committee elections. In the summer and fall of 1997, I participated in a feasibility study on organic cotton growing in Ningjin county and Wu'an city, in southern Hebei. Together with a colleague I undertook a socio-economic study of several villages with the aim of identifying one or more as possible demonstration sites for cotton farming. Eleven villages were part of the study, of which six were examined more extensively: four in Ningjin county and two in the vicinity of Wu'an. The political structure of the villages was part of the review. More than 80 interviews were conducted with villagers and with village, township and county cadres. Because the tiresome work of cotton growing has traditionally been assigned to women, many of the cadres were women.³²

When discussing their own village's government, interviewees always spoke of the village leadership group (*lingdao banzi*) as a collective body under the overall leadership of the village Party secretary, comprising the Party branch and the village committee. The interviews revealed a clear division of labour in the

²⁹ Regional disparities explain much of the variation in rural economic development. See Scott Rozelle, "Stagnation without Equity: Patterns of Growth and Inequality in China's Rural Economy", *The China Journal*, No. 35 (January 1996), pp. 63–92.

³⁰ Xiang Jiquan, "Lun nongcun de fazhan yu wending" (On Rural Development and Stability), *Nongcun jingji yu shehui* (Rural Economy and Society, hereafter *NCJJYSH*), 1993, No. 2, pp. 41–6; Ma Shuke, "Xin shiqi dang de nongcun gongzuo lilun zhinan" (Theoretical Guide to Rural Party Work in the New Era), *Hebei xuekan* (Hebei Science Journal, hereafter *HBXK*), 1995, No. 2, pp. 3–6; Long Zhixia, "Kaizhan nongcun dangyuan shiyong jishu peixun de shijian yu sikao" (Practice of and Reflections on Practical Technical Training for Rural Party Members), *Nongcun jingji yu guanli* (Rural Economy and Administration, hereafter *NCJJYGL*), 1997, No. 3, pp. 49–51; Zhao Shiju, "Fazhan zhuangda cunji jiti jingji shili, tigao nongcun zuzhi jianshe zhengti shuiping" (Develop a Strong Collective Economy at the Village Level, Enhance the Overall Level of Rural Organization Building), *Xuexi yanjiu cankao* (Study Research Reference, hereafter *XXYJCK*), 1997, No. 4, pp. 23–6; Shu Huiguo, "Jinyibu jiaqiang nongcun jiceng zuzhi jianshe" (Advance in the Strengthening of Rural Basic-Level Organization Building), *XXYJCK*, 1997, No. 2, pp. 19–22.

³¹ See Liu Xitang, "Cunmin zizhi yu woguo nongcun minzhu de dutexing" (Villagers' Autonomy and the Distinctiveness of Democracy in China), *Zhongguo nongcun jingji* (Chinese Rural Economy, hereafter *ZGNCJJ*), pp. 57–61.

³² See Judd, *Gender and Power*, pp. 41–2.

management of village affairs, with the Party secretary usually in charge of industrial development and the village committee chair responsible for agriculture. Service as a cadre on the village committee is often seen as a step to joining the more prestigious and powerful Party branch. On average 35 per cent of cadres in the 11 villages held positions on both committees at the time of the interviews.

The ways in which positions in the village leadership were filled offer clues as to whether village cadres feel more responsive to the authorities above them or to their village constituencies. Party members in the village vote to fill positions on the Party branch committee, including the post of village Party secretary, but the outcomes are predetermined by careful preparation and deliberations on the part of the township Party committee.³³ The picture is more complicated for the elections to the village committee. These elections are supposed to be open to all adult villagers, but not all villages applied the election standards prescribed by the provincial government—one village had not used secret ballots, while another left the voting up to village representative assemblies instead of individual voters.³⁴ Only one village applied the “sea selection” (*haixuan*) method of open nominations of candidates by the whole electorate. But even in that village, the final list of candidates had to be approved by the township Party committee.

In all but one village, the 1997 round of elections was semi-competitive, with at least one more candidate than positions to be filled. Yet the township authorities are able to influence or even reverse the decisions made by villages. In the one village applying the *haixuan* method, a second round of elections was held to decide the committee members, but the township Party committee subsequently decided who among the elected members would become the chair—that is, the village head. In other villages, too, the division of labour between the village committee and the Party branch was supervised by the township Party committee. One township even went so far as to let villagers vote only for ordinary village committee members, selecting the chair from among the seven members of the village Party branch committee.

More frequent still were subsequent insertions (*buchong*) of additional members or adjustments (*tiaozheng*) of village leadership groups. In the 10 years previous to my fieldwork, additional members were added to village committees in four out of six villages, in one case adding three positions to a four-person committee. In the same period, adjustments were carried out once in three of the

³³ Some localities in Hebei province have experimented with the “two ballot system” of electing village Party secretaries, entailing the balloting of all villagers. See International Republican Institute (ed.), *Elections at the Grassroots: An Assessment of Local Elections in Guangxi, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, and Yunnan Provinces, Peoples' Republic of China, July 2000* (Washington: International Republican Institute, 2000), pp. 24–5.

³⁴ See “Hebei sheng cunmin weiyuanhui xuanju zanxing banfa” (Provisional Measures of Hebei Province for the Elections of Village Committees), *Hebei zhengbao* (Hebei Government Bulletin, hereafter *HBZB*), 1997, No. 1, pp. 21–3. New regulations have been issued since the revision of the Organic Law.

six villages, and three times in a fourth. Such adjustments concerned at least two positions, usually in both the village committee and Party branch committee, and included at a minimum one of the top four posts—the village Party secretary, deputy secretary, village committee chair (i.e., village head) and deputy chair. In fact, seven out of fourteen interviewees who had ever held one of the top four posts had been promoted into it by such interventions by township authorities. The ability of the township to adjust members of the village leadership gives the township a crucial edge over village residents in structuring the incentives of village cadres and severely compromises the meaning of elections.

Case Study 1: Birth Planning

Birth planning clearly falls within the category of official affairs, where village cadres are expected to act on behalf of the state. It is one of the policy areas in which the Chinese state wields its power most directly and at times unscrupulously. Yet this is not a straightforward chain of command emanating from the centre and extending right down to individual citizens, but rather a chain of principal–agent relations, in each of which problems of compliance and control arise.³⁵ Each principal has to provide incentives to ensure compliance from agents and needs to monitor the agents' behaviour. The way that the township government and higher-level administrations fulfil their birth-planning tasks in the villages and the role played by self-administration institutions are best analysed within this framework. The following pages will unravel level by level the net of surveillance woven by the state's agents.

There has been a strengthening and widening of the birth-planning bureaucracy in recent years. The lowest level comprises the “small groups” organized for women of child-bearing age (*yuling funu xiaozu*). These women's groups were introduced in Ningjin and Wu'an in the early 1990s, and are supposed to base their membership on the former production teams, now largely stripped of their economic functions. In fact, the size of the groups varies considerably, with each group head being in charge of between 30 and 194 women,³⁶ while two small villages had not established a group. The large numbers in most of the groups make it difficult for heads to pay the prescribed visits to each and every woman in their group each month to monitor contraception.

The official qualifications for group head were not strictly applied by the village cadres: of the 12 small-group heads whom I interviewed, only half fulfilled the criteria of having graduated from junior high school, while the same

³⁵ See Edwin A. Winckler, “Re-enforcing State Birth Planning”, in Edwin A. Winckler (ed.), *Transitions from Communism in China*, p. 183; and for a comprehensive analysis of the topic, see Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China 1949–2000: Population Policy and Demographic Development* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001).

³⁶ Two of the villages employed two heads per women's group to reduce the ratio between group members and heads.

number should have been disqualified from the post for having violated birth-planning regulations themselves. Rather than follow the official criteria, village cadres often selected women who ran the lowest future risk of a violation; that is, sterilized women.³⁷

Two functions make the group heads an indispensable workforce for the state's birth-planning program. First, they mobilize the women in their group to submit to quarterly check-ups at the township birth-planning station; and second, they persuade women who have given birth to a second child to undergo sterilization.³⁸ In two such women's groups in two villages, more than 50 per cent of women of child-bearing age had been sterilized, and in two other villages for which I have information the share was more than 30 per cent. In contrast to Zhang Weiguo's conclusion, based on field research in 1993 in a village close to Wu'an,³⁹ my research suggests that this sterilization policy has played a large role in the further institutionalization of birth planning.

In the 1980s, in most villages the entire responsibility for birth planning rested with the village's women's head (*funü zhuren*), a post of the Women's Federation.⁴⁰ The 1990s witnessed the introduction of the new post of birth-planning assistant (*jisheng zhuli*) at the village level. Three of the villages in my sample only nominally established the post, by adding it in name to that of the cadre who occupied the post of women's head. In the other eight villages, the birth-planning assistant was invariably male and—except for one—higher ranking in office than the women's head. This was the case even though in seven villages the women's head was a village committee member and at least four were also Party members.⁴¹

The two village-level posts together fulfil birth-planning tasks such as selecting and monitoring the small-group heads, aggregating the data they

³⁷ Most likely this is a unique solution for the "moral hazard" problem faced by employers; see Terry M. Moe, "The New Economics of Organization", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (November 1984), p. 755.

³⁸ The process of how the formerly strict rule of "one child per couple" was transformed to a de facto two-children policy in rural China has been described by Susan Greenhalgh, "The Peasantization of the One-Child Policy in Shaanxi", in Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 219–50.

³⁹ Zhang Weiguo, "Implementation of State Family Planning Programmes in a Northern Chinese Village", *The China Quarterly*, No. 157 (March 1998), pp. 202–30. The question of institutionalization versus mobilization is also discussed by Tyrene White, "Postrevolutionary Mobilization in China: The One-Child Policy Reconsidered", *World Politics*, Vol. 43 (October 1990), pp. 53–76; and Edwin A. Winckler, "Re-Enforcing Birth Planning".

⁴⁰ Tyrene White, "Postrevolutionary Mobilization", pp. 65–6.

⁴¹ The official criteria were applied more strictly in the selection of village women's heads than with small-group heads. Only one out of the six women's heads in my sample had not graduated from junior middle school and just two had violated birth-planning regulations.

provide and submitting quarterly reports to the township administration. As the checks and meagre material incentives far from guarantee the reliability of the small-group heads, the village-level personnel have a considerable workload. The women's heads unanimously declared that they too conducted "thought work" (*sixiang gongzuo*); that is, they persuaded reluctant women to be sterilized.⁴²

What kind of leverage does the township administration in turn apply to ensure compliance by the village cadres? The most powerful tool is the ability to alter the structure and composition of the village leadership. In four of the six more closely studied villages, such adjustments (*tiaozheng*) took place in the 1990s, and seven out of fourteen interviewees who had ever been in one of the top posts of Party secretary, vice-secretary, village committee chair or vice-chair were put there by the township.⁴³ The threat of demotion is a strong deterrent for the village cadres, involving both loss of prestige and an important source of income. The women's heads in the sample, for example, on average were paid more than 80 per cent of the village per capita income for their work.⁴⁴ The townships can also veto the bonuses that village cadres normally disburse to themselves at the end of the year. Although village leaders do not have to make written pledges to meet birth-planning targets, as is usually the case at the township level,⁴⁵ the village leaders who were interviewed all indicated they would be penalized in some way if the village failed to fulfil the targets, be it materially or through public criticism. When the birth-planning assistant and women's head submit their quarterly reports, the township government calls small-group heads to study sessions to check their knowledge of birth-planning regulations. Insufficient accomplishments will be followed by severe criticism of the two leaders and at times demotion.

These measures, however, ultimately depend on the reports by agents one or two levels below the township, and are therefore subject to the information

⁴² Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, in "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (January 1999), p. 175, argue that in implementing the family-planning directives, cadres shirk persuasion since it is time-consuming and uncertain. In the case of persuasion to undergo sterilization this hardly applies, since this surgery is the best guarantee the cadres can have against any future violations of birth control regulations.

⁴³ Of course, some of these interventions constitute a violation of the Organic Law and relevant Party regulations providing for an election to those posts. Nevertheless they continue on a large scale. See Liu, "Consequences of Villager Committee Elections", pp. 30–1.

⁴⁴ Since village cadres do "not leave production" (*wu tuochan*), this remuneration comes on top of their income from agriculture and other economic pursuits. See also Sylvia Chan, "Research Notes on Villager's Committee Election: Chinese-Style Democracy", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 7, No. 19 (1998), pp. 514–15.

⁴⁵ See Maria Edin, "Market Forces and Communist Power: Local Political Institutions and Economic Development in China", Ph.D dissertation (Uppsala University, Sweden, 2000), pp. 120–41; and Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Selective Policy Implementation", pp. 171–4.

asymmetry that pertains to every principal-agent relationship.⁴⁶ Given the severity of the policy, the incentive to hand in false reports is high.⁴⁷ The township has attempted to overcome this problem by expanding its monitoring activity and extending its control directly into the villages.

Each township cadre, in addition to his or her regular duties, has responsibility for one of the township's villages—the “guarantee the village cadre” (*baocun ganbu*) scheme.⁴⁸ Birth planning is emphasized in two ways within this system. Several such township-level cadres monitor each village—one will be exclusively in charge of birth-planning work, while the others will implement miscellaneous tasks assigned by the township leaders. Every township official, even the Party secretary, has a village to “guarantee” unless the official is professionally engaged in birth planning, and can be reprimanded if the village fails to fulfil birth-planning targets. The cadre workforce deployed by the township in this policy area is much larger than organizational figures suggest. The guarantee system has proved an effective instrument to expand monitoring activities and to enhance compliance.

A further step is taken to extend the reach of state control right down to the individual. Every woman of child-bearing age has to attend quarterly check-ups at the township birth-planning station. Although the medico-technical standards are debatable,⁴⁹ stations are equipped to immediately employ “remedial measures” once an unauthorized pregnancy is detected. In theory these check-ups should solve the township administration's monitoring and control problems, and

⁴⁶ The agent is either spatially or professionally closer to the subject matter, while the principal monitors the outcome only and not the agent's actions. The classic work on information asymmetry is George A. Akerlof, “The Market for ‘Lemons’: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (August 1970), pp. 488–500.

⁴⁷ See Tyrene White, “Implementing the ‘One-Child-Per-Couple’ Population Program in Rural China: National Goals and Local Politics”, in David Lampton (ed.), *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 306; and Giovanna M. Merli, “Underreporting of Births and Infant Deaths in Rural China: Evidence from Field Research in One County of Northern China”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 155 (September 1998), p. 641.

⁴⁸ This guarantee system dates back to the commune era, see John P. Burns, *Political Participation in Rural China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 48; and Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 275.

⁴⁹ Whereas in Ningjin county the birth-planning station had a fixed location, in Wu'an it was mobile and check-ups took place in the office of the village leadership. A non-random sample study estimated that approximately 10 per cent of all women suffered permanent harm through birth control surgery. See Zhongguo Jihua Shengyu Zhixing Xiaoguo Yanjiu Ketizu (Research Group for the Effects of Birth Planning Implementation in China), “Jiceng nongcun jihua shengyu zhixing qingkuang de diaocha yu fenxi” (Investigation and Analysis of Effectiveness of Birth Planning Implementation at Rural Basic-Level), *Renkou yanjiu* (Population Research, hereafter *RKYJ*), 1996, No. 20, p. 30.

therefore it is not surprising that the mobilization of women for the check-ups is seen as an important task by small-group heads, village birth-planning workers and township “guarantee cadres” alike. Yet the low medico-technical standards and the fact that the local agents from within the village are depended on to organize attendance at the check-ups has meant that some unauthorized pregnancies go undetected.⁵⁰

In earlier years the birth-planning program was implemented through sporadic campaigns, in their harsher form carried out by cadres from outside the village.⁵¹ In recent years the program has been less dependent on campaign-style implementation. Instead, in some places what is labelled “birth-planning self-administration” has now been introduced. A rigorous system of collective control strongly reminiscent of the Qing dynasty’s *baojia* system,⁵² it has correctly been criticized as replacing the principle that villagers have “democratic control” over cadres with the principle that villagers should control each other.⁵³

An example of such collective control is “making village affairs public knowledge” (*cunwu gongkai*), whereby the names of those couples entitled to childbirth as well as the number and kinds of birth-control surgery undertaken are featured on large chalkboards in the village. This information should, in the view of higher-level government organs, enable the villagers to control the village administration and ensure compliance by all villagers. Obviously, this is an attempt by the state administration to cash in on what Sulamith and Jack Potter labelled “negative egalitarianism” among rural Chinese—in this case, a desire among those who were hurt by the birth-planning policy to prevent others from having more children than themselves.⁵⁴ Although in Chinese publications this

⁵⁰ Migration is another reason why the program of quarterly check-ups is not entirely effective; see Kate Xiao Zhou, *How the Farmers Changed China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 189–95.

⁵¹ Campaigns by local cadres are less effective since they are more likely to side with violators of birth-planning regulations in their community. This type of campaign is meticulously described by Zhang Weiguo, “Implementation of Family Planning”, pp. 210–17. Rare glances at the organization of campaigns by outsiders are provided by Wang Qian and Wang Haidong, “Guojia jishengwei dui Hebei, Hubei liang sheng jiceng jihua shengyu tongji zhiliang diaocha de baogao” (Survey of Quality of Basic-Level Family Planning Statistics of Hebei and Hubei Provinces by the National Family Planning Commission), *RKYJ*, 1995, No. 5, p. 28; and by the manual *Hebei sheng renkou diaocha dui* (Population Survey Group of Hebei Province) (ed.), *Hebei sheng renkou diaocha peixun jiaocai* (Training Materials for the Population Survey of Hebei Province) (internal publication, July 1996).

⁵² Li Mingwen, “Jihua shengyu cunmin zizhi de shijian yu sikao” (Villagers’ Self-Management of Family Planning: Practices and Considerations), *RKYJ*, 1997, No. 5, pp. 69–71.

⁵³ Lu Shenliang, “Guanyu jihua shengyu cunmin zizhi de falu sikao” (Legal Considerations Concerning Village Self-Administration of Birth Planning), *Renkou yu jingji* (Population and Economics), 1999, No. 2, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M Potter, *China’s Peasants*, p. 338. These authors coined the phrase “negative egalitarianism” to describe the fact that the peasants in their fieldwork site

technique is praised as a creation of the masses, the uniform implementation of the idea emanated from the state.⁵⁵

More than this, in Wu'an a control group was established in each village to regularly check up on the village cadres' conduct, especially in birth-planning work. These groups were hand-picked by the township officials and consisted largely of older villagers who had formerly held an official post and thus could be expected to be trustworthy.

While the institutionalization of these various elements of self-administration in an "official affair" such as birth planning is unexpected, it is in line with the state's perception of self-administration. It should not be mistaken as a step to liberalize the state birth-planning program. Instead, the state is using self-administration as a way of monitoring and controlling its local agents and villagers.

Case Study 2: Local Economic Development

The management and development of the village economy is a central task of self-administration and in principle should be carried out by the village committee according to the wishes of the community. In other words, the villagers should themselves be able to act as the principals in this sphere. But as the state pursues economic policy priorities of its own, it has to rely on the local cadres for implementation, and conflicts are bound to arise.

One of the central government's economic policies has been to lengthen land-use contracts to 30 years, aiming to increase tenure security and investment in the land.⁵⁶ To avoid disincentives for birth planning, a family's landholdings should not be increased as the family grows larger, nor diminished as a household's numbers decline.⁵⁷ If strictly applied this policy leads to inequality between families in per capita landholdings. Most rural Chinese hold egalitarian attitudes and believe land should be periodically redistributed to address the changing needs of families. A large survey in 1997 reported that 62 per cent of respondents judged 30-year land contracts to be too long, with an even higher

who could not attain wealth themselves did not want anybody else to do so. Since no-one directly benefits from a neighbour's compliance with birth-planning regulations, it is hard to see what other incentives could be at work here.

⁵⁵ Bai Gang, "Zhongguo cunmin zizhi", p. 97-8; and Xu Anbiao, *Nongmin ruhe xingshi minzhu quanli*, pp. 92-5.

⁵⁶ Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 206.

⁵⁷ "Hebei sheng shenhua nongcun gaige yaodian" (Essentials for the Deepening of Rural Reform in Hebei), *HBZB*, 1995, No. 1, p. 39.

percentage in districts where there were few income-earning opportunities outside agriculture.⁵⁸

Faced with contradictory demands from superiors and villagers, the leaderships of the villages that I studied quietly favoured their village constituencies. In Ningjin, where higher-level attention to land tenure was scant, only one village strictly implemented the state policy prohibiting reallocation of extra land to households that had grown in size. In the other four Ningjin villages, land readjustments were more frequent in those villages with fewer opportunities for off-farm employment and income. In contrast, the Wu'an city government prohibited readjustments after 1990 and ordered a consolidation of landholdings in the area of its jurisdiction. Nevertheless some village leaders managed to accommodate the needs of villagers by parcelling out the land in very small fields to ensure an equitable distribution. Moreover, five of the eleven villages in the wider sample retained a portion of their land to be rented out by public bidding for only a few years at a time.⁵⁹ This was described to us as a way to ameliorate the situation of families with insufficient land, rather than a decision to concentrate landholdings for intensive farming.⁶⁰

In contrast, in the distribution of crop procurement quotas, village leaders are treated like extensions of the state administration and are handed down fixed quotas. According to the village leaders, the village's quota is then distributed to individual households by the village accountant in accordance with the size and quality of landholdings. Yet the household interviews undertaken in four villages revealed a more confusing picture. Only one village distributed grain quotas evenly according to landholdings, while two villages levied them on a per capita basis, thus advantaging smaller families. The other three villages treated households in the same village very differently.⁶¹ Such differential treatment was usually a response to farmers' specialization in either agriculture or off-farm

⁵⁸ James Kai-sing Kung and Shouying Liu, "Farmers' Preferences Regarding Ownership and Land Tenure in Post-Mao China: Unexpected Evidence from Eight Counties", *The China Journal*, No. 38 (July 1997), pp. 54–5.

⁵⁹ The size of this so-called mobile land (*jidong di*) varied considerably between 0.5 per cent of total agricultural land in one village and 45 per cent in another. The latter case must be seen as an exception since this land was a former collective walnut plantation just recently converted to fields. If we exclude this village, the average stands at 4.5 per cent.

⁶⁰ The only exception was one village whose acreage amounted to only 1.26 mu per capita, the least among villages studied and considerably below the 2.17 mu per capita of Hebei province as a whole. In view of that, most households in this village had an off-farm income source, such as a small transport firm, from which they derived most of their cash income. Farming was only used to obtain staple foods, except for a small fraction of households specializing in growing vegetables for the nearby urban market.

⁶¹ The grain quota for the interviewed households varied: between 50 and 175 kilos/mu or 12.5–58 kilos/person in the first village; 38–86 kilos/mu or 87–186 kilos/person in the second village; and 7.5–70 kilos/mu or 30–263 kilos/person in the third village. Note that because of the non-random selection of interviewees, these are not necessarily the extremes.

employment, but the possibility that some villagers received preferential treatment from village leaders cannot be ruled out.⁶²

Two state policies received particular attention during the time of my fieldwork: (1) reversing the reduction in acreage sown to cotton; and (2) achieving at least modest economic well-being (*xiaokang*) in the villages. To meet these goals, the state had institutionalized its agency relationships with the village leadership, despite the fact that local economic development is supposed to lie within the purview of self-administration.

The farmers in these districts are obliged to fulfil state targets for the acreage sown to cotton and sell not just part of their grain but also all of their cotton harvest to state-assigned stations at state-set prices.⁶³ Southern Hebei became one of China's main cotton growing regions during the 1980s and early 1990s.⁶⁴ In these years cotton growing was quite profitable and several of my interviewees earned enough to buy a small tractor. However, the expansion of cotton production without crop rotation exhausted the soils, and the overuse of pesticides aggravated pest problems, leading to drastic crop losses in subsequent years. While the area sown to cotton in Hebei province expanded by 59 per cent between 1986 and 1992, low productivity meant that cotton production rose by only 24 per cent. By 1997, after disastrous harvests, the area of sown cotton had dropped to 20 per cent below the 1986 level and production was half of what it had been in 1986.⁶⁵ The State Council issued an order to Hebei and Henan

⁶² Sarah Cook, "Work, Wealth and Power in Agriculture: Do Political Connections Affect the Return to Household Labor?", in Andrew G. Walder (ed.), *Zouping in Transition: The Process of Reform in Rural North China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). pp. 105–36.

⁶³ In general, every township has a grain station belonging to the local grain bureau (*liangshi bumen*), while cotton trade is monopolized by the state-owned Cotton and Fibre Companies (*mianma gongsi*) and Supply and Marketing Cooperatives (*gongxiao hezuoshe*) that are basically controlled by the state. See Terry Sicular, "Establishing Markets: The Process of Commercialization in Agriculture", in Walder, *Zouping in Transition*, pp. 118–21, 128–32; Marc Blecher and Vivienne Shue, *Tethered Deer. Government and Economy in a Chinese County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 130–2; and Fang Shijie and Zhou Xiaodong, "Hezuoshe de tizhi chuangxin" (New Creation of the Cooperative System), *Zhongguo gongxiao hezuo jingji* (China Supply and Marketing Cooperative Review), 1997, Nos 2–3, pp. 42–5.

⁶⁴ Marc Blecher and Wang Shaoguang, "The Political Economy of Cropping in Maoist and Dengist China: Hebei Province and Shulu County, 1949–90", *The China Quarterly*, No. 137 (March 1994), pp. 61–98. Shulu county, since renamed Xinji city, is adjacent to Ningjin county.

⁶⁵ Calculations by the author based on the following sources: Guojia Tongjiju (State Statistical Bureau) (ed.), *Zhongguo nongcun tongji nianjian* (China Rural Statistical Yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, consecutive years 1988–96); Guojia Tongjiju (ed.), *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* (China Statistical Yearbook) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1998); and Hebei Sheng Renmin Zhengfu (People's Government of Hebei Province) (ed.), *Hebei jingji nianjian* (Hebei Economic Yearbook, hereafter *HBJNJ*) (Beijing: Zhongguo Tongji Chubanshe, 1995 and 1996).

provinces in 1996 to counter the trend of “drastic losses in the area sown to cotton”.⁶⁶

A number of important differences exist between grain and cotton quotas. First, rural households are more inclined to grow grain because they need it for subsistence and can sell above-quota surpluses at the market price, whereas cotton has to be sold entirely to state agents at relatively low prices. Cotton is harder to weed and pick, is more expensive to grow because it requires pesticides, fertilizers and plastic sheeting, and is more prone to pests and plant diseases. Most importantly, most of the village cadres in this area have a direct stake in the collection of grain quotas but not in cotton quotas. The official levies that each villager contributes to the village’s coffers (*cun tiliu*) are deducted from the price that the grain stations pay on delivery of the quota grain.⁶⁷ This practice is commonplace in rural China despite its prohibition in 1990—a prohibition that has been repeated in each document of the Party and central state on the problem of the “peasants’ burden”.⁶⁸

Whereas the state’s and the farmers’ interests are contrary regarding cotton, the state could suppose that villagers share its desire to increase rural incomes.⁶⁹ At the time of my fieldwork, much official emphasis was being given to the plan to raise households to the *xiaokang* standard by 1998 in Wu’an and 2000 in Ningjin.⁷⁰ Village cadres are set per capita income targets, with failure entailing

⁶⁶ Guowuyuan (State Council), “Guanyu qieshi zuohao 1996 niandu mianhua gongzuo de tongzhi” (Circular on Conscientiously Conducting Cotton Work in 1996), *HBZB*, 1996, No. 11, pp. 9–10.

⁶⁷ This was the case in seven of the eleven villages under review.

⁶⁸ State Council, “Guanyu qieshi jianqing nongmin fudan de tongzhi” (Circular on Conscientiously Lightening the Peasants’ Burden), *Guowuyuan gongbao* (Bulletin of the State Council), 1990, No. 2, p. 48; and Andrew Wedemann, “Stealing from the Farmers: Institutional Corruption and the 1992 IOU Crisis”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 152 (December 1997), pp. 803–31. In other places, however, the same measure is taken regarding cotton quotas; see Xu Yong, “Baihe yu Baishi liang cun chuli nongmin fudan wenti de fangshi ji houguo bijiao” (Comparison of Solutions to the Problem of Peasants’ Burden in the Two Villages of Beihe and Baishi and the Results), *ZGNCJJ*, 1997, No. 5, pp. 34–8. Good overviews on this policy area are provided by Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform*, pp. 188–97; Xiaobo Lu, “The Politics of Peasant Burden in Reform China”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 113–38; and Thomas B. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu, “Taxation without Representation: Peasants, the Central and the Local States in Reform China”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 163 (September 2000), pp. 742–63.

⁶⁹ See “Hebei sheng nongcun xiaokang jianshe guihua gangyao (1994–2000)” (Plan for the Construction of Rural Well-being in Hebei Province [1994–2000]), *HBJJNJ*, 1995, p. 248–9, for a list of indicators including school space and electrification among many others. Nevertheless, average per capita income was treated as the single most important indicator.

⁷⁰ This policy targets all of rural China. Cai Yongshun, “Between State and Peasant: Local Cadres and Statistical Reporting in Rural China”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 163, pp. 791–4. The *xiaokang* standard varies according to local conditions. In 1997 the standard was an average per capita income of 2,700 yuan in Ningjin and 3,500 yuan in Wu’an.

severe criticism and demotion, especially for the village Party secretary.⁷¹ In this way, a matter of self-administration in economic development is turned into an official affair, and again the agents have to be monitored.

How are farmers induced to grow cotton on a large scale under these circumstances? And how are income levels simultaneously to be enhanced? The measures taken by the state and its agents stretch on a continuum between administrative orders and services rendered to farmers. On one end of the continuum, the “guarantee cadre” system is used by the townships to monitor planting activities. This was at first described to us as “thought work”, but probing revealed that township officials might join village cadres at planting time to “mobilize” farmers to fulfil their targets for sown cotton acreage. Mobilization techniques include loudspeaker announcements in the villages and talks with individual farmers.⁷² Township-level cadres extended monitoring and control directly to the grassroots, rather than just monitoring the outcome, which could conveniently be done at the collection stations.

The Women’s Federation provided another avenue for mobilizing women to grow cotton. At county and township levels alike, Women’s Federation cadres organized activities such as planting contests between women. This mobilization was again contingent on the assistance of the village women’s head and was only successful when sufficiently monitored. The prizes, usually in the form of fertilizer or pesticides, did not provide sufficient incentives to assure participation in the contests.⁷³

State agents also undertake agricultural extension services, with the aim of fulfilling cotton targets and simultaneously raising incomes. This is an area of considerable ambiguity since, as a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences notes, “technical innovation and technology extension have long been an important means used by the government to *promote* and *control* the development of agriculture and rural economy”.⁷⁴ Extension work at township and village levels includes the promotion of particular planting techniques, the use of plastic sheeting, or experiments with pest-resistant cotton. Seminars were held for women by township extension officers, in cooperation with the Women’s Federation and the women’s heads.

⁷¹ This necessitates the Party secretary’s direct involvement in economic management, further blurring the distinction between the activities of the village committee and Party branch.

⁷² Ildiko Bellér-Hann, “The Peasant Condition in Xinjiang”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (October 1997), p. 97–8, for similar observations in Xinjiang.

⁷³ This was confirmed by a number of interviewees. Ironically, the first prize in one Wu’an contest, a washing machine, was won by a woman already in possession of one. One year later, at the time of our visit, she had not even unpacked it. See Ellen Judd, *Gender and Power*, pp. 153–63, for a more extensive treatment of Women’s Federation activities regarding “socialist commodity production”.

⁷⁴ Wang Sangui, “The Diffusion of Agricultural Technology in Poor Areas of South-West China: The Role of Farmer’s Organizations and Village Governments”, *China Information*, Vol. 10, Nos 3/4 (Winter 1995/Spring 1996), p. 149 (emphasis added).

Each village, with the exception of the poorest in the study, had established an agricultural technician's post. These technicians receive training and advice at the township's agricultural extension station and pass their knowledge on to villagers, informing them about new plant varieties or the right dates for planting, fertilizing or spraying pesticides.⁷⁵ It is here that the distinction between information services and administrative orders is the most blurred.

A member of the village leadership was usually chosen to be the village technician.⁷⁶ This appointment serves the dual purpose of attaching administrative authority to the technical advice and of giving members of the village elite preferential access to technology and hence to other opportunities to earn income.⁷⁷ This is a deliberate move by higher authorities to make a cadre's post more attractive.⁷⁸

In short, even though quota assignments and agricultural extension services supposedly fall within the realm of the self-administration of economic activities, village cadres are ordered to mobilize cotton farmers for planting and take part in training in order to realize a state-set agenda. Yet, as in every principal-agent relationship, problems of information asymmetry and compliance arise, and the townships usually do not have enough personnel to monitor these spheres in the same way as in birth planning. Thus, it is easy for the village cadres to use information asymmetry to their advantage and to make superficial or false reports.⁷⁹ As long as township cadres are not involved, village leaders rarely

⁷⁵ See also Alan Channer, Robert Moss, Dismas Mwaseba, Nino Ozara, Muhammed A. Raza, Julieta Roa and Zhong Bingfang, *Farmers in Industry: An Analysis of the Agricultural Systems in Eastern Wu'an, China* (Wageningen: International Centre for Development Oriented Research in Agriculture, 1993), pp. 73–6.

⁷⁶ For further studies on the connection between agricultural extension services and village leadership, see Wang Sangui, "Diffusion of Technology", pp. 149–52; Jorgen Delman, *Agricultural Extension in Renshou County, China: A Case-Study of Bureaucratic Intervention for Agricultural Innovation and Change* (Copenhagen: Rambol and Hanemann Bulletin, No. 28, July 1991), p. 249; and Scott Rozelle, "Decision-Making in China's Rural Economy: The Linkages between Village Leaders and Farm Households", *The China Quarterly*, No. 137 (March 1994), p. 118.

⁷⁷ Almost every township held technical seminars, sometimes on exotic sidelines like growing ginkgo trees or raising snails, in which the township administration provided labour to outside companies.

⁷⁸ "Tigao nongcun jiceng dangzuzhi zhandouli de yi ge zhongyao jucuo (An Important Measure to Enhance the Fighting Power of Basic-Level Party Organizations), *XXYJCK*, 1997, No. 4, pp. 19–22; Liu Xueguo, "Nongcun dangyuan jiating jingji zhuangkuang diaocha" (Survey of Economic Conditions of Rural Party Members' Families), *NCJJYSH*, 1994, No. 2, p. 41; Ren Baogui, "Guanyu Changping xian nongcun dangyuan duiwu jianshe de diaocha" (Survey of Party Membership Development in Changping County), *NCJJYGL*, 1996, No. 3, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Leaders in one village frankly declared that at the end of the year they would report exaggerated income figures because there was no way to achieve the required *xiaokang*

bother to check on cotton planting. In fact, during the interviews, the village leaders in Ningjin county indicated that a relaxation in policy could be discerned and that cotton acreage quotas were no longer being treated as seriously.⁸⁰

On the other hand, all of the village cadres interviewed saw it as their foremost responsibility to the villagers to foster economic growth, as their legitimacy rested in large part on it. Thus, village leaderships were pursuing a host of autonomous development activities. For instance, two of the villages had for some years contracted to produce seeds for large seed companies, because this provided higher returns per unit of land. Two villages converted collective plantations into farmland for special crops such as pepper that would generate greater income. Another village invested in irrigation. Yet another helped livestock producers to access land, water and electricity. On the whole, however, rural people were more likely to increase their incomes through commercial and industrial employment than through agriculture. Every village contained some industry and three specialized in related services such as transport. Two of the villages were gradually expanding their collective industrial production, simultaneously enlarging the private transportation sector.

Village-sponsored economic development efforts were evident in every village in my sample, indicating that leaders felt they had some obligation to improve the lives of their constituents.⁸¹ But is this enough to make the village leaders agents of the villagers in the area of economic management? Villagers still lack effective means to shape the incentives of village cadres and thus cannot function as their principals. And as noted above, the township intervenes to change the composition of the village leadership.⁸² Village cadres are therefore more likely to attempt to satisfy their superiors than their electorate.⁸³ Moreover, the direct participation of villagers in decision-making remains low because village representative assemblies are convened only infrequently.

Although reported as the invention of villagers, village representative assemblies were uniformly introduced in Hebei province on the state's initiative

standard in that time. This kind of statistical distortion is pervasive in rural China; see Cai Yongshun, "Between State and Peasant".

⁸⁰ From 1998 the State Council no longer aimed at expanding the sown area in northern China, but instead sought to raise output per unit of land. State Council, "Guanyu shenhua mianhua liutong tizhi gaige de jue ding" (Decision Concerning the Reform of the Cotton Circulation System), *GWYGB*, 1998, No. 32, p. 1223.

⁸¹ The notable exception to this trend was a village where the introduction of self-administration has had the least effects. The village leadership there had remained largely unchanged since decollectivization, and only an affirmative vote by a show of hands was conducted.

⁸² Gu Hangyu and Ye Yaopei, "Muqian yingxiang cunmin zizhi zhiliang de jige yinsu fenxi" (Analysis of Some Factors Currently Affecting the Quality of Villagers' Self-Administration), *Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences), 2000, No. 1, p. 66.

⁸³ See also Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu, "Taxation without Representation", pp. 760-3; and Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Selective Policy Implementation", pp. 171-4.

in 1990.⁸⁴ The cadres are obliged to submit public reports once or twice a year, and consent from the village representative assembly is supposed to be necessary on investment decisions. Yet in none of the villages studied did the assemblies overrule the cadres' proposals.⁸⁵ If properly put into practice, these new self-administration institutions would presumably enhance the transparency of village government, but at the moment they are largely ceremonial and not signs of the villagers' increased decision-making powers.

Conclusion

Village self-administration is in line with Chinese government conceptions rather than Western ideas of democracy. Not only do village Party branches play a central role, but village committees are obliged to conduct any official affairs that are of concern to superior levels in a legally prescribed way. This is especially the case with birth planning, which is closely monitored by township administrations to maximize compliance. Initiatives for self-administration, such as "making village affairs public knowledge" and control groups, are pushed more in the interests of the state than of the populace.

For activities that are legally defined as within the authority of village organs, the township administration is only supposed to supervise the legality of the village organ's actions. Yet, as has been seen regarding economic management, the state violates this principle by institutionalizing new command relationships with the village leadership while retaining old ones. The state's aims for cotton procurement and the *xiaokang* standard become intertwined with the village's management of economic affairs. Since village cadres are still dependent on and accountable to administrative superiors, principal-agent relations between the state and village cadres prevail over those between villagers and village organs even for activities that are supposed to lie within the sphere of self-administration. Again, self-administration is a supplement, not a substitute for state control.

But does this really enhance the state's capacity at the grassroots? Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li have argued that a pattern of selective policy implementation exists in rural China in which grassroots cadres choose to enforce policies that have quantifiable "hard" targets, such as birth planning, even if they

⁸⁴ Bai Gang, "Zhongguo cunmin zizhi", p. 96-8; and Yang Aimin, "Cunmin zizhi yu nongcun zhengzhi gaige", *HBXK*, 1995, No. 5, p. 40.

⁸⁵ This is a common theme in heavily propagandistic articles that describe how the villagers' decision led to better results. See Li Jianzheng, "Dangzhibu de hao zhushou, laobaixing de tiexinren" (A Party Branch's Good Assistant, An Intimate of the People), *Difang Renda Jianshe* (Construction of Local People's Congresses), 1997, No. 6, p. 35; and Wang Zhenyao et al., "Cunmin canyu", pp. 13-14. A relatively early English-language account of an energetic village representative assembly in Hebei is Susan V. Lawrence, "Democracy Chinese Style", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (July 1994), pp. 61-8. Although her case was obviously the exception rather than the norm, this report proved to be very influential in the Western literature on villagers' self-administration.

are resented by villagers. On the other hand, cadres neglect more popular policies that are difficult for higher-level authorities to assess—for example, “soft” targets such as the implementation of the Organic Law. The explanation for this pattern is the incentive structure entrenched in the system of cadre management.⁸⁶ The evidence marshalled in my two case studies sheds new light on this relationship. What matters in the eyes of village cadres is not so much whether the targets are easily quantifiable, since statistical figures can be manipulated,⁸⁷ but rather the risk involved in not enforcing the policies faithfully. This risk depends largely on the attention paid to particular policies by higher-level administrations. With birth planning, the pressure is strong; but in other policy areas the state cannot muster the same level of personnel to maintain pressure on local agents.

The delegation of power to ordinary villagers in some policy areas has been hampered by the continued existence of principal–agent relations that ensure that hard, state-set targets drive out the soft ones set by villagers. This holds an important lesson for the development of “village democracy”.⁸⁸ Democratic elections, when and where these are a reality in rural China, are of great significance in their own right. But only when villagers are able to take control over areas of self-administration will village democracy pass the litmus test. This will only happen when the state detaches itself from the system of hierarchical policy implementation that still prevails.

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May 2001

⁸⁶ See Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Selective Policy Implementation”; and, on cadre management more generally, Yan Huai, “Organizational Hierarchy and the Cadre Management System”, in Carol Lee Hamrin and Suisheng Zhao (eds), *Decision-Making in Deng’s China. Perspectives from Insiders* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 39–50.

⁸⁷ See, for instance, Cai Yongshun, “Between State and Peasant”; and Giovanna M. Merli, “Underreporting of Births”.

⁸⁸ Susan V. Lawrence, “Village Democracy”, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 January 2000, pp. 16–17.