

## **Research Report**

# **The Politics of Introducing Direct Township Elections in China\***

Lianjiang Li

**ABSTRACT** Based on archival sources and interviews, this article relates the untold story behind several township elections. It shows that these experiments were largely the result of a discursive opening on expanding grassroots democracy, and efforts by local leaders to promote their careers by taking the lead in initiating electoral reforms. It suggests that over two decades of post-Mao reform may have encouraged a belief among some local officials that history is on the reformers' side. It also suggests that the current cadre management system may enable mid-level leaders to introduce political reforms at a lower level without seeking prior approval from their superiors. The article argues that succession politics may re-open the door for further electoral reform and that the international community can offer protection to local initiatives by pressing the Chinese government to improve its human rights record.

As the struggle over village elections continues, direct election of township heads has become a new point of contention.<sup>1</sup> Opponents of this reform include President Jiang Zemin, who told the Anhui delegation at the 2001 National People's Congress (NPC) session that "villagers' self-government must not be extended to higher levels."<sup>2</sup> Echoing Jiang's remark, the Central Committee issued Document No. 12 in July 2001, which ruled that direct election of township heads "does not accord with the constitution and the Organic Law of Local People's Congresses and Local Governments."<sup>3</sup> A number of intellectuals have also either cautioned that holding direct township elections without additional legal change would jeopardize efforts to build the rule of law, or that direct

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1. For a discussion of the struggle over village elections after 1998, see Yawei Liu, "Consequences of villager committee elections in China," *China Perspectives*, No. 31 (September 2000), pp. 19–35.

2. Interviews with a researcher from Anhui and a political scientist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Beijing, August-September 2001.

3. "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu zhuanfa 'zhonggong quanguo renda changweihui dangzu guanyu quanguo xiangji renmin daibiao dahui huanjie xuanju gongzuo youguan wenti de yijian' de tongzhi" ("The Central Party Committee's notice on transmitting 'Suggestions of the Party Group of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in regard to a number of questions concerning the re-election of township level people's congresses'").

election of township heads was impractical because townships were too large a community for “direct democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

Though they are no match in terms of influence, advocates of township elections are nevertheless vocal. Du Runsheng, former director of the Policy Research Institute of the Central Party Committee, has argued forcefully that the only way to maintain stability in the countryside is to “implement villagers’ self-government first, then move on to direct elections of township leaders, followed by democratic restructuring of county government.” He has criticized central leaders for lacking the moral courage to do the right thing, and warned that the “problem of peasants” has become “extremely urgent.”<sup>5</sup> Joining Du are a group of liberal scholars and reform-minded local officials, most notably Li Fan, a US-trained political scientist who runs a non-governmental research institute in Beijing; Zhang Jinming, the key architect of the well-known Buyun township election; and Li Changping, a former township Party secretary from Hubei.<sup>6</sup> They have argued that direct township elections were in accord with the spirit of the constitution and the Party’s policy of expanding grassroots democracy – a policy that ironically was announced by Jiang Zemin himself at the 15th Party Congress in 1997. They have also quoted Premier Zhu Rongji, who said during a news conference in March 2000 that he would like to see direct elections extended to higher levels as soon as possible.<sup>7</sup>

What exactly is at issue between supporters and opponents of direct township elections? What factors may affect the prospects for introducing this reform? Based on interviews and archival sources, this article highlights the untold story behind a few well-reported township elections. It starts with a discussion of early attempts to introduce direct township elections in Guangdong and Sichuan provinces. Here my research confirms Manion’s suggestion that it seemed improbable that the decision to hold the Buyun election was taken without consultation and approval of higher levels.<sup>8</sup> The article then examines the debate over the constitutionality of the Buyun election and the news blackout imposed on the election. It concludes with an analysis of how succession politics, the cadre management system and the international environment may affect the prospects for introducing direct township elections.

4. See Zha Qingjiu, “Minzhu bu neng chaoyue falü” (“Democracy must not overstep the law”), *Fazhi ribao (Legal Daily)* (19 January 1999), p. 1; Lang Youxing, “Zhixuan ke xing hu?” (“Is direct election practical?”), *Dongfang (Orient)*, Nos. 4–5 (April–May 1999), p. 83.

5. Du Runsheng, “Foreword” to Li Changping’s *Wo xiang zongli shuo shihua (I Told the Premier the Truth)* (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 2002), pp. 2–3.

6. See Li Fan, “Buyun xiang shi Zhongguo zhengzhi tizhi gaige de ‘Xiaogang cun’ ma?” (“Is Buyun township the ‘Xiaogang village’ for China’s political reforms?”), *Zhongguo shehui baokan (Journal of Chinese Society)*, No. 2 (February 1999), pp. 14–17; Zhang Weiyun (pseudonym), “Buyun zhixuan zhongshi de tixian le xianfa jingshen” (“The Buyun direct election loyally embodies the spirit of the constitution”), mimeo; Li Changping, *I Told the Premier the Truth*, p. 302.

7. For Zhu’s remark, see *Renmin ribao (People’s Daily)*, 16 March 2000, p. 1.

8. See Melanie Manion, “Chinese democratisation in perspective: electorates and selectorates at the township level,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 163 (September 2000), p. 781, n. 37.

*Township Government and Its Reform*

After the dissolution of the commune system in 1982, township (*xiang*) and town (*zhen*) government was re-established as the lowest level in the governmental hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> In 1999, there were 44,741 townships and towns in China; 19,184 of these were towns.<sup>10</sup> (Towns are generally more urbanized and industrialized than townships, but for simplicity, I use “township” to refer to both town and township, except when I translate names of places.) On average, each township has around 20,000 residents and 20 villages. Townships are governed by the township Party committee, the township people’s government and the township people’s congress.

Leaders of these three centres of power are chosen in different ways. The township Party secretary is appointed by the county Party committee. But according to the constitution (Article 101) and the Organic Law of Local People’s Congresses and Local People’s Governments (1979, revised 1982, 1986 and 1995), the head and deputy heads of the township government are elected by township people’s congress deputies, who in turn are directly elected by township residents. The chairperson of the township people’s congress is also formally elected by township deputies.<sup>11</sup> In reality, most township heads are selected by the county Party committee, and the congress election is little more than a formality.<sup>12</sup>

Discussions of reforming township government started almost immediately after townships were re-established. As “street-level bureaucrats,” township officials must carry out a wide range of tasks assigned by their superordinates at the county, most of which, unfortunately, are hugely unpopular. For instance, they must collect taxes and fees, implement birth control and enforce funeral reforms.<sup>13</sup> As might be expected, townships in many places have become the most hated level of government. Peasants often blame township officials for increasing peasant burdens and using excessive coercion. Even the official news media has sometimes criticized township officials for mistreating peasants.<sup>14</sup>

9. On the reconstruction of township government, see Vivienne Shue, “The fate of the communes,” *Modern China*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (July 1984), pp. 259–283.

10. National Statistics Bureau, *Zhongguo tongji nianjian (China Statistical Yearbook)* (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 2000), p. 369.

11. For an account of the revisions of the Organic Law, see Shi Weimin, *Gongxuan yu zhixuan (Open Selection and Direct Election)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000), pp. 283–297.

12. On elections of township people’s congresses and elections of township heads, see Manion, “Chinese democratisation in perspective,” pp. 764–782.

13. See Ma Rong, Liu Shiding and Qiu Zeqi (eds.), *Zhongguo xiangzhen zuzhi diaocha (Investigations of Organizations of Towns and Townships in China)* (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2000).

14. For analyses of conflicts between peasants and township officials, see Thomas P. Bernstein, and Xiaobo Lü, “Taxation without representation: peasants, the central and the local states in reform China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 163 (September 2000), pp. 742–763; Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “The politics of lodging complaints in Chinese villages,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (September 1995), pp. 756–783; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Villagers and popular resistance in contemporary China,” *Modern China*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 1996), pp. 28–61.

In the mid-1980s, officials at the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) drew up plans to strengthen township governments. They argued that more often than not township officials were “ordered” by their superiors to do what peasants abhorred. Moreover, since township officials lacked the power and resources to provide services to peasants, they, along with village cadres, were often ridiculed as “three-want-cadres” – cadres who wanted peasants’ money, grain and aborted children. In order to enable the township government to garner popular trust, MoCA officials concluded that the county government must devolve some of its powers to the township. Under the auspices of the MoCA, a number of experiments were conducted in Shandong and Hebei, all of which failed because the county government simply refused to devolve any of its power.<sup>15</sup>

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the problem of many township officials ruling like “local emperors” (*tu huangdi*) worsened to an extent that senior Party leaders like Peng Zhen began to worry that peasants might soon attack rural cadres “with their shoulder poles.”<sup>16</sup> Many Chinese policy analysts came to believe that the township government had become the weakest link in the structure of power. They worried that, without democratic reforms, township officials would sooner or later “drive peasants into rebellion.” It was against this backdrop that a few senior leaders and policy researchers in Beijing began to consider introducing direct election of township heads. Just as village elections might stop village cadres from becoming local emperors, they concluded, direct township elections might do the same for township heads. In 1990, Peng Zhen instructed the MoCA, which had drafted the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees (1987, revised 1998), to draw up a law that would commence direct township elections. As late as 1994, MoCA officials had hoped that the law would be enacted by 1996.<sup>17</sup> Owing to the halt to political reforms immediately after the 1989 crackdown, however, the promised legislation never appeared.

### *The First Experiment with Direct Township Elections*

The lid on township reform remained airtight until 1997, when Jiang Zemin pledged at the 15th Party Congress to “extend the scope of democracy at the grassroots level.” Specifically, Jiang said that the “grassroots organs of power and self-governing mass organizations in both urban and rural areas should establish a sound system of democratic

15. See Li Xueju, Wang Zhenyao, and Tang Jinsu (eds.), *Zhongguo xiangzhen zhengquan de xianzhuang yu gaige* (*The Current Situation of Township Government and Its Reforms*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1994).

16. See Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O’Brien, “The struggle over village elections,” in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (eds.), *The Paradox of China’s Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 131–32.

17. Interviews with Wang Zhenyao and Bai Yihua, Beijing, July 1994.

elections.”<sup>18</sup> Though he failed to clarify what he meant by “sound system of democratic elections,” Jiang’s praise of villagers’ self-government as a “great invention” of Chinese peasants opened the door for others to equate democratic election with direct election.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps because Jiang’s pledge was vague, the response from most local Party leaders was lukewarm. There were, however, exceptions. On 6 November 1997, only weeks after Jiang delivered his speech, the Party committee and the government of Shenzhen city jointly filed a report with the Guangdong Party committee and the provincial government, requesting approval for introducing direct township elections. The report argued that Shenzhen, as the first Special Economic Zone, should take the lead not only in economic reform but also in political reform. It proposed an experiment with direct election of township heads and deputy heads in two townships in 1998 and then direct elections throughout the city in 1999. This move, the report noted, would contribute to effective implementation of the 15th Party Congress’s policy of deepening grassroots democracy.

The Guangdong Party committee transmitted Shenzhen’s report to the provincial people’s congress, the provincial organization department, the bureau of civil affairs and the bureau of special economic zones. Feedback was generally positive. The only disagreement was on whether the provincial authorities should seek approval from Beijing. In the end, the more cautious view prevailed. On 24 February 1998, at the instruction of the provincial Party committee, Guangdong’s people’s congress filed a report with the NPC, requesting approval of Shenzhen’s proposal.

Then an ominously long period of time passed. The Guangdong report was circulated to all deputy chairmen of the NPC, most of whom were reportedly supportive. When it reached the desk of Li Peng, chairman of the NPC, however, Li passed it to Jiang Zemin, who commented that township elections should be conducted according to the law. When the report was returned to Li Peng, Li agreed with Jiang, though he added that alternative procedures could be explored to select candidates. On 18 August 1998, almost six months after receiving the Guangdong report, the General Office of the NPC issued a two-part response. First, township elections in Shenzhen were to be conducted according to the current law. Second, to implement the 15th Party Congress’s decision to “press ahead with the reform of the political structure” and to “extend the scope of democracy at the grassroots level,” new measures could be adopted to solicit popular opinion during candidate selections. After failing to obtain

18. Jiang Zemin, “Hold high the great banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory for an all-round advancement of the cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics to the 21st century,” 12 September 1997.

19. On village electoral systems, see Jorgen Elklit, “The Chinese village committee electoral system,” *China Information*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 1–13; Robert A. Pastor and Qingshan Tan, “The meaning of China’s village elections,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 162 (June 2000), pp. 490–512.

Beijing's approval, Guangdong aborted its attempt to introduce direct township elections.<sup>20</sup>

While Guangdong was waiting to hear from Beijing, reformers in Sichuan adopted the time-tested strategy of doing without asking. Instead of seeking approval from Beijing, provincial leaders decided to encourage lower levels to experiment on their own. First, without receiving any written communication from the provincial Party committee, the provincial organization department began informally to encourage Party secretaries of various prefectures to experiment with direct township elections. The response was not enthusiastic. When approached directly by the organization department, leaders of one prefecture declined the request, primarily because of fear of failure. The exact reasons could have been many, ranging from concern that the Party's candidate would lose the election to possible unrest caused by excessive competition.

In the end, however, the provincial organization department successfully talked Meishan prefecture's leadership into taking on the task. The argument was that Meishan had been a demonstration area for villagers' self-government for a number of years, so that township officials and villagers should be better prepared for direct township election. Meishan's leaders, in turn, instructed Qingshen county to carry out the experiment. In total secrecy, preparation work for direct township elections was started in the middle of 1998. Nancheng, a township with approximately 19,000 villagers residing in 14 villages, was chosen to be the experimentation site.

The election was completed in one month. On 5 November 1998, the people's congress of Nancheng township passed a set of electoral regulations prepared by the county. Nomination of candidates immediately followed. Though every eligible voter could put forward a nomination, only ten individuals were proposed for the post of township head, two of whom refused to stand; 27 individuals were nominated for the three deputy head positions, but five took themselves out of the running. Screening of nominees was conducted first by the Nancheng township Party committee, then by the county organization department. On 19 November, each of the three preliminary candidates for township head and the eight preliminary candidates for deputy head delivered a short speech at a meeting held in Nancheng's primary school. There was no debate. Village cadres and villager representatives were only asked to tell their fellow villagers about the nominees and the speeches they gave. The primary election was held on 28 November, and voting took place through roving ballot boxes. Results of the primary were announced the next day. Two official candidates were chosen for township head and four candidates were chosen for the posts of deputy head. On 5 December 1998, voters in Nancheng cast their ballots at 18 polling stations. No public campaigning was allowed throughout the process.

Largely because it was arranged by the provincial organization depart-

20. Interview with an official at the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress, Guangzhou, September 2001. Also see Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, pp. 411–12.

ment, the Nancheng election was essentially a carefully conducted political show. The organizers did everything to prevent any possible surprise from taking place. Nevertheless, this election was significant, if for no other reason than that it was the first direct town election since 1949. Moreover, it was designed to be part of an overall restructuring of political power at the township. Immediately after the election, the township people's congress convened to record (*bei an*) the results. At the same meeting, it was decided that the township people's congress had the authority to remove popularly elected township heads and deputy heads by mustering a two-thirds majority in favour of impeachment. It was also decided that should any such recalls occur, the people's congress would elect replacements. Finally, on 25 December 1998 Party members in Nancheng directly elected the secretary, deputy secretaries and members of the township Party committee.<sup>21</sup>

### *The First Reported Direct Election of Township Head*

The Nancheng township election was the first of its kind, but it was kept secret until early 2001. What made direct township elections a hot issue was another election, also held in Sichuan. About the same time as the Nancheng election was unfolding a remarkably similar reform was hatched in Shizhong district of Suining city. On 4 November 1998, one day before the Nancheng election process began, the Shizhong Party committee decided, entirely on its own, to experiment with direct election of township heads.

The decision to hold direct township elections was bold, but it did not come from nowhere. In the first half of 1998, Shizhong's leaders suffered two major setbacks. First, their effort to develop the local economy was floundering. A factory they had built with funds raised from government employees went bankrupt soon after it opened, resulting in huge discontent and encouraging rumours about their capability and honesty. Then in May 1998 the Party secretary and government head of Baoshi town, who enjoyed the "deep trust" of Shizhong's leaders, were both dismissed for embezzling public funds. This incident once again cast doubts on the political aptitude and integrity of the Shizhong leadership.<sup>22</sup>

Eager to make up their losses on the economic front and dispel doubts about their capability and honesty, Shizhong's leaders decided to seek a breakthrough in political reform. Shortly after the dismissal of the two Baoshi town leaders, they decided to adopt "open selection" (*gongxuan*) of town head candidates. Also known as "open recommendation and selection" (*gongtui gongxuan*), this practice had been advocated by the

21. See Li Fan, "Zhongguo xiangzhen xuanju gaige de dadan changshi" ("A courageous experiment with township electoral reforms"), *Beijing yu fenxi* (*Background and Analysis*), No. 30 (29 April 2001). Personal communications with Li Fan. Also see Baogang He and Youxing Lang, "China's first direct election of the township head: a case study of Buyun," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (May 2001), pp. 4–5.

22. See Hu Shubao, "Buyun zhixuan diaocha baogao" ("An investigation report on the direct election of Buyun"), *Beijing yu fenxi*, No. 25 (20 January 2001), p. 2.

Sichuan organization department as a reform of the cadre recruitment system. It combines open nomination of candidates, screening by the Party's organization department, and written and oral examinations. Compared to the secretive and exclusive *nomenklatura* system, this new practice opens up eligibility and allows for some popular participation by including a few citizen representatives in the selectorate. Perhaps because it poses no real challenge to the Party's monopoly of cadre management, open selection has won the support of the central organization department and has been adopted throughout the country, though primarily in recruiting deputy chiefs of functional government agencies.<sup>23</sup>

By promoting open selection of township head candidates, Shizhong's leaders expanded a limited reform significantly. They also liberalized prevailing procedures a bit. First, by screening nominees almost entirely through a civil service examination, they substantially reduced the role of the organization department. In Baoshi, only two of 69 applicants were disqualified by the district organization department. Secondly, they improved the representativeness of the selectorate by including all town people's deputies, village Party secretaries, village committee directors and villager small group leaders as selectors. As a result of this reform, about 50 per cent of selectors were not on the government payroll. Finally, unlike in most open selections, where selectors grade the performance of applicants but scores are not publicized, the open selection of official candidates of town head in Baoshi was done by anonymous balloting. Votes were counted on-site and results announced immediately.<sup>24</sup>

The open selection of town head candidates in Baoshi was an instant success. The provincial organization department spoke highly of the reform. The Sichuan provincial television station and a number of provincial newspapers reported the event and praised it as the first ever in the province. At a provincial meeting on organizational work in the countryside held in September 1998, the Shizhong Party secretary was invited to talk about Baoshi's open selection to the participants.<sup>25</sup>

Encouraged by a positive response from provincial authorities, Shizhong's leaders pressed ahead to expand the scope of open selection further. From September to early November 1998, they conducted two open selections of township Party secretaries. They also organized the open selection of town head candidates in Hengshan, where a middle-

23. See Wang Bin, " 'Gongxuan' lingdao ganbu re zhong de leng sikao" ("Cold reflections amidst the fever of open recommendation and selection of leading cadres"), *Neibu canyue* (*Internal Reference*), No. 24 (22 June 2001), pp. 17–22.

24. See Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, pp. 384–410; Li Fan, Shou Huisheng, Peng Zongchao and Xiao Lihui, *Chuangxin yu fazhan* (*Innovations and Development*) (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2000), pp. 79–90, 231–38; Ma Licheng, "Nongcun gaige de xin tansuo" ("New explorations in rural reforms"), *Beijing guancha* (*Beijing Observation*), No. 1 (January 1999), pp. 16–18.

25. See Zhonggong Suining shi Shizhong qu zuzhibu, "Gongxuan jiceng lingdao ganbu, tansuo xin de yong ren jizhi" ("Hold open selection of grassroots-level leaders and explore new mechanism of cadre recruitment"), November 1998, pp. 10–11.

school teacher who was not even a Party member won, thanks to the liberalized selection procedure.<sup>26</sup>

The decision to begin direct township elections was made right after the Hengshan election. Later on, Shizhong's leadership offered two justifications for their decision. First, they argued that the recent third plenum of the 15th Party Congress would "bring forth a new high tide of developing grassroots democracy," which would inevitably lead to the introduction of direct township elections.<sup>27</sup> This argument has some basis in fact. Shizhong's leaders did receive thinly veiled encouragement from provincial leaders early on. On 21–22 November 1998, county Party secretaries throughout Sichuan were called to the provincial capital to study the resolution enacted at the third plenum. At the meeting, a deputy provincial Party secretary remarked that direct township elections should be experimented with in places where conditions were ripe. She noted, however, that such an experiment was still absent in Sichuan.<sup>28</sup> By then, the Nancheng township election was already under way, so it is unlikely that this deputy secretary (who was directly in charge of the organization department) was unaware of it. It seems that she was prodding county leaders to launch their own experiments. The Shizhong Party secretary wasted no time in turning this speech into her "imperial sword" – a symbol of authorization.

The second justification is even more interesting. Shizhong's leaders argued that it was villagers who demanded direct election of township heads. The story they liked to tell is that after the open selection in Hengshan town, a villager who was also a town people's congress deputy commented that although open selection was an improvement, it was not ideal because candidates were in effect selected by the county. He said it would be good if villagers could directly elect township heads, in the same way they elected villagers' committees. Shizhong's leaders claimed that this remark made them realize that only direct township elections could satisfy the democratic demands of villagers.<sup>29</sup> Of course, few would believe that a single comment by an individual villager could have prompted them to initiate a rather risky reform; what is interesting is that satisfying popular demand for more democracy seems to have become part of the rhetoric of change employed by reformers.

Shizhong's leaders not only spoke as if their decision was based on popular demand for direct township elections, they also acted as if meeting this demand took priority over obeying their superiors. Rightly concerned that their request would probably be turned down, Shizhong's leaders decided against seeking approval from the Suining city Party

26. Ma Shengkang *et al.*, "Shixing lingdao ganbu gongxuan tansuo xin de yong ren jizhi" ("Hold open selection of leading cadres and explore new mechanism of cadre recruitment"), November 1998.

27. Li Fan *et al.*, *Innovations and Development*, p. 120.

28. Interview with Li Fan, Beijing, September 2001.

29. Li Fan *et al.*, *Innovations and Development*, p. 118. Interviews with Zhang Jinming, the Shizhong Party secretary, and Chen Yangrong, head of the Shizhong Propaganda Department, Kunming, February 2001.

committee. In light of what happened in Guangdong, this was a wise choice. Indeed, when risks and pay-offs are both very high, it is good politics for enterprising lower levels not to seek approval for unorthodox ventures. Their uninformed superiors do not have to take much responsibility if things go wrong, yet they can always claim credit if the experiments turn out to be successful. Shizhong's leaders and their superiors at the city and provincial levels played this game well. According to one observer, it did not take long for Suining Party leaders as well as the provincial organization department to learn about the Shizhong's undertaking, yet they all chose to watch and see what would transpire.<sup>30</sup>

Shizhong's leaders also made a wise tactical decision to put forward a claim that the demand for direct township elections came from below. After they had finished working up the election procedures, they chose Buyun township as the experimentation site. But instead of simply having Buyun officials conduct the election, as they did when enforcing open selections in other townships, Shizhong's leaders instructed Buyun township to initiate it. On 27 November 1998, the presidium of the Buyun township people's congress filed a report with the township Party committee, proposing to hold a direct election of the township head "to better implement the spirit of the 15th Party congress of expanding grassroots democracy." The Buyun Party committee immediately filed the same application with the Shizhong district Party committee, which granted approval on the same day. In a matter of days, a top-down reform had been turned into a bottom-up initiative.<sup>31</sup>

This manoeuvre not only served to create a façade of popular demand for township elections, it also served two other purposes. First, it spread responsibility around. By having the Buyun township leaders make the proposal, Shizhong's leaders shielded themselves. This arrangement also benefited Buyun's leaders who, by taking the initiative, could claim credit if the experiment proved successful. Moreover, since they had the Shizhong Party committee's approval, Buyun's leaders were immunized against the charge of neglecting Party discipline. At worst, their crime would be one of incorrectly understanding the "spirit of the 15th Party Congress," which is a very minor offence. It is perhaps no coincidence that in Nancheng it was also the township people's congress that "enacted" all the electoral regulations.

Secondly, this move allowed Shizhong's leaders to minimize their own risks without unduly jeopardizing their experiment. By turning the election into a bottom-up initiative, they reduced but did not eliminate risks to their careers. The Shizhong Party secretary, in this sense, took a chance but a calculated one. A week before election day, she decided to report the election to the Suining Party secretary. When asked what she would do if the city Party secretary demanded that she scrap the election, she said she would accept the order but not immediately pass it along to

30. Interview with Li Fan, Beijing, September 2001.

31. See Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, pp. 428–431; Li Fan *et al.*, *Innovations and Development*, pp. 131–32.

Buyun township, so that the balloting would proceed as planned. Though by no means risk-free, her strategy probably would have worked. After all, it is not a terrific offence to be just a little sluggish in transmitting an order to a lower level. Moreover, thanks to an arrangement known as “one-level-down management” (*xia guan yi ji*), the city Party committee could not directly issue orders to the Buyun township Party committee. It has been observed that this institutional arrangement has contributed to making lower level officials hyper-responsive to their immediate superiors in meeting “hard targets” but insensitive to “soft” ones; now it is shown that it can also create a buffer for an intermediary level to introduce political reforms at a lower level without seeking prior approval from its immediate superiors.<sup>32</sup>

Fortunately, the Shizhong Party secretary did not have to engage in any duplicity. Although the city Party secretary castigated her for lack of discipline, he grudgingly gave a green light to the election. As mentioned above, he was aware of the Buyun election, so his anger must be due to the last-minute report that implicated him in this potentially risky experiment. It is not entirely clear why he did not try to halt the election. Perhaps he had heard of the provincial organization department’s experiment in Nancheng, or maybe he reported his plans to the provincial organization department and obtained their approval. It is also likely that he felt protected by the late notification, since he could defend his decision by arguing that it would damage the Party’s reputation if he called off the scheduled election after so much mobilization and campaigning.

The Suining Party secretary’s approval, however, had two strings attached. First, Shizhong’s leaders planned to adopt a plurality principle in the final balloting, meaning that they would recognize whomever won the most votes as the new township head. The city Party secretary insisted that the current Electoral Law be obeyed, that is to say, the winning candidate had to receive more than 50 per cent of the valid votes and over 50 per cent of eligible voters had to turn out and vote. In addition, the city Party secretary ordered that balloting must be kept out of the sight of any outsiders, particularly “those from Beijing,” perhaps wishing to pre-empt unwanted publicity or even to dispel possible speculation that the experiment was controlled by someone in Beijing. Both of these injunctions were executed religiously. When Buyun’s villagers elected the township head on 30 December 1998, no journalists or outside observers were on the scene.<sup>33</sup>

Although the Buyun election was not the first direct township election, it was arguably the first real township election. It was freer, fairer and

32. On “one-level-down management,” see Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Selective policy implementation in rural China,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (January 1999), pp. 167–186; Melanie Manion, “The cadre management system, post-Mao: the appointment, promotion, transfer, and removal of party and state leaders,” *The China Quarterly* (June 1985), pp. 203–233.

33. Interviews with Li Fan and two political scientists at the CASS, Beijing, September 2001.

more competitive in almost all aspects than the earlier Nancheng election. The nomination of candidates was more competitive in Buyun, as individuals who met a set of broadly defined qualifications had only to gather 30 signatures of eligible voters to register their candidacy. This arrangement also eliminated the all-too-common phenomenon of nominees declining a nomination. If institutionalized, it will also help cultivate a healthier election culture by requiring aspirants to political power to make their ambitions public and actively seek popular endorsement.

The primary election in Nancheng township was freer than Buyun's only in that all eligible voters could participate. But this provision was poorly implemented. The township and county authorities had disqualified over two-thirds of the nominees before the primary was held. In addition, the primary was conducted solely through roving ballot boxes. This practice is so susceptible to manipulation that it has been banned in village elections in some provinces. In contrast, the primary election in Buyun was more restrictive, as it was done by a selectorate called "the joint meeting of electoral districts" (*xuanqu lianxi huiyi*), which included township officials, village cadres and villager representatives. But because nominees were allowed to speak freely about their ambitions and plans, and because the primary employed an anonymous vote, it was, in the end, fairer and more competitive. The results also suggested that it was free of interference and fraud, as all nominees who were incumbent township officials, including a deputy Party secretary, lost in the primary.<sup>34</sup>

The most significant difference between elections in Nancheng and Buyun, however, lies in campaigning. Unlike in village elections, where voters usually know or at least know of the candidates, unrestricted campaigning is absolutely necessary to have free and fair township elections. In Nancheng, candidates had only one chance to speak to a small fraction of voters. In contrast, Shizhong's leaders designed and enforced a set of campaign rules that are not so different from those practised in industrialized democracies. Public debate was held in each of the ten villages and the township seat. Additional debates were held in the town seat on two country fair days. Furthermore, candidates not only had the opportunity to debate one another, they were also allowed to have their own "think tanks" and "campaign teams," who helped design campaign tactics and mobilize votes.<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, the final balloting of the Nancheng election was fraught with problems associated with proxy voting, roving ballot boxes and the lack of secret balloting booths. In Buyun, Shizhong's leaders required that all

34. Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, p. 442.

35. See Li Fan *et al.*, *Innovations and Development*, pp. 135–142; Tang Jianguang, "Zhixuan xiangzhang" ("The direct election of a township head"), *Nanfang zhoumo* (*Southern Weekend*), 15 January 1999, p. 2; Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, pp. 445–48; He and Lang, "China's first direct election," pp. 7–11.

voters fill out their ballots in secret balloting booths. No roving ballot boxes were used, and proxy voting was not allowed.<sup>36</sup>

The Buyun election, of course, was by no means flawless. In addition to the restrictive primary election, Shizhong's leaders admitted that it was a mistake not to allow candidates to dispatch their own monitors to polling stations. At one polling station, disputes occurred when illiterate villagers found out that a township-appointed ballot-writer gave their votes to the candidate recommended by the township Party committee, even when he was told to do otherwise. Fortunately, the Shizhong Party secretary was on the spot to correct this malpractice.<sup>37</sup> But the damage, to some extent, had already been done. Two years after the election, the two losing candidates and their supporters remained unhappy about suspected irregularities.<sup>38</sup>

### *Repercussions of the Buyun Election*

The efforts by Shizhong's leaders to keep the Buyun election secret were not successful, owing to an unanticipated rivalry between local reporters. Before the Suining city Party secretary ordered the expulsion of outsiders, *Chengdu shangbao* (*Chengdu Commercial News*) had sent a journalist to Buyun, who adhered to the news blackout. But late arrivals from *Huaxi dushi bao* (*Western China Cosmopolitan*) ignored the ban and published a report on 3 January 1999. The frustrated first-comer decided to follow suit, but in a bigger way. He wrote a long report and sent it to *Nanfang zhoumo* (*Southern Weekend*), a weekly news journal with a national reputation for publishing controversial articles. When informed of the report, the Shizhong leadership tried but failed to stop its publication. On 15 January 1999, the story was published.

Reaction was swift and strong. Three days later, the *Legal Daily*, the newspaper of the Ministry of Justice, published a commentary by Zha Qingjiu. While praising Buyun villagers for their high democratic consciousness, Zha argued that the election had a "fatal flaw" in that it "directly violates" the constitution and current laws. He warned that "if the pursuit for democracy ignores or even violates the constitution and law, the result will be that both democracy and the rule of law are damaged, inflicting serious havoc on our country and the people."<sup>39</sup>

This commentary turned out to be quite controversial. In the following days, the editorial office of the *Legal Daily* received many calls of protest from readers. Quite a few callers pointed out that as a newspaper the *Legal Daily* had no authority to determine the constitutionality of the Buyun election. By deeming the election unconstitutional, they argued, the newspaper itself was "over-stepping the law."<sup>40</sup>

36. Interview with a political scientist at the CASS, Beijing, September 2001. Also see Li Fan *et al.*, *Innovations and Development*, p. 144.

37. *Ibid.* pp. 150–51.

38. Hu Shubao, "An investigation report," p. 3.

39. Zha Qingjiu, "Democracy must not overstep the law," p. 1.

40. Interviews with two political scientists at the CASS, Beijing, September 2001.

These objections encouraged editors who disagreed with the commentary to speak up. Just three days after the critical remarks appeared, a much shorter note appeared in a section entitled “Comments on Current Affairs.” The second commentary offers a one-sentence recap of the *Southern Weekend*’s report, then continued: “History has remembered Xiaogang village, where two decades ago the Household Responsibility System was originated. In the same vein, history will remember Buyun township for pushing forward direct township elections.”<sup>41</sup> This commentary was mistaken by some observers for remarks by a central leader. In fact it seems to have been published without the endorsement of the chief editor of the *Legal Daily*, who later vowed to punish those who were responsible for “publicizing unconstitutional events.”<sup>42</sup>

As might be expected, the strongest reaction to the *Legal Daily* criticism came from Shizhong’s leaders. In an unpublished rebuttal, they argued that although the Buyun election was not in accord with current laws, it was “entirely loyal to the spirit of the constitution.” Since it was a basic principle of the constitution that all power (not some power) belongs to the people (Article 2), they argued, any law or constitutional article that is incompatible with this principle must be revised. They further argued that without breakthroughs there could be no reform. Without violating earlier versions of the constitution, for instance, there would have been no economic reforms, because the Household Responsibility System was unconstitutional when it emerged.

Shizhong’s leaders not only put political reform above the effort to build the rule of law, they also considered popular demands to be the basis for political reforms: “As time goes by and the society develops, the people’s material and cultural lives continue to get richer, their enthusiasm for broader participation in political life steadily grows. We have every reason to believe that the universal demand of the masses is the inevitable trend of social development.”<sup>43</sup>

Later on, Shizhong’s leadership further developed their defence of the Buyun election. At a meeting held in Kunming in 2001, the Shizhong Party secretary argued that there was a lot of commonality between economic and political reforms. Just as economic plans must be replaced by the market, market mechanism should be introduced into cadre management. The Party should manage cadres, but management mainly means having the organization department train qualified cadres. It does not mean imposing cadres on the people. Cadres should be subjected to popular vote, just as industrial products have to be sold on the market. Without a free market, the economy would not develop well. Similarly,

41. “Shishi quandian” (“Comments on current affairs”), *Fazhi ribao*, 23 January 1999, p. 2.

42. See Chen Yingge, “Buneng xuanchuan weixian shijian” (“Unconstitutional events must not be publicized”), *Neibu tongxin* (*Internal Communications*), No. 5 (1999), p. 11.

43. See Zhang Weiyun, “The Buyun direct election”; Tang Jianguang, “The direct election,” p. 2; Li Lu, “Buyun de gushi fabiao yihou” (“After the publication of the Buyun story”), *Huasheng yuebao* (*China’s Voices Monthly*), No. 3 (March 1999), p. 20; He and Lang, “China’s first direct election,” pp. 14–15.

without free competition in cadre management, the Party would never win the battle against corruption, favouritism and nepotism.<sup>44</sup>

Other advocates of direct township elections have offered four additional arguments in defence of the Buyun election. First, holding direct elections helps maintain stability. The countryside, in their words, is “like a pressure cooker.” As the fire of peasants’ anger over excessive burdens and corruption continues to burn, it may explode unless safety valves such as direct township election are put in place. Secondly, direct election will make township heads work harder to develop the local economy and be more responsive to popular demands. Thirdly, direct elections will help resolve the problem of corruption, thereby strengthening Party leadership over the countryside. Lastly, it is only right that Chinese peasants be treated as citizens, and electing government leaders is an essential citizenship right.<sup>45</sup>

If critics and supporters of the Buyun election had the opportunity to debate each other openly, there would have been a fuller range of opinions about township elections, just as there were with village elections.<sup>46</sup> Advocates of direct township election in fact welcomed the *Legal Daily*’s critical commentary. They knew that a heated debate over the Buyun election would not only have spread the news to a wider audience, it would also have provided a platform for advocates to make their case for the desirability and feasibility of direct township elections.<sup>47</sup> But opponents knew this game, too. Barely a week after the *Southern Weekend*’s report appeared, Jiang Zemin warned at a national meeting on propaganda that the news media “must not stir-fry erroneous things hot.”<sup>48</sup> Soon afterwards, the Central Propaganda Department issued an urgent notice that forbade the media from publishing anything about the Buyun election.<sup>49</sup>

The news blackout was quite effective, but not completely successful. Most notably, CCTV ignored the ban and broadcast a 15-minute programme on the Buyun election. The programme covered the whole election process and praised the election as a new step forward in building grassroots democracy. It is notable that the programme ended with an interview with a researcher at the NPC’s Legal Work Com-

44. Interview with Zhang Jinming, Kunming, February 2001.

45. See Du Runsheng, “Foreword,” pp. 1–3; Li Fan, “Is Buyun township,” pp. 16–17; Hu Shubao, “An investigation report,” p. 8; Tian Xin, “Zhixuan xiangzhang hao” (“Direct election of township head is good”), *Dongfang*, Nos. 4–5 (April–May, 1999), pp. 80–82; Deng Tianzong, “Cong cunmin zizhi che kai qu” (“Starting from villagers’ self-government”), *Minzhu (Democracy)*, No. 4 (April 1999), p. 41; Li Changping, *I Told the Premier the Truth*, esp. pp. 308–316. On citizenship, see Kevin J. O’Brien, “Villagers, elections, and citizenship in contemporary China,” *Modern China*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (October 2001), pp. 407–435.

46. See Daniel Kelliher, “The Chinese debate over village self-government,” *China Journal*, No. 37 (July 1997), pp. 63–86.

47. Interviews with Li Fan and two political scientists at the CASS, Beijing, August–September 2001.

48. Liu Zhenying, Zhang Sutang, He Jiazheng, “Quanguo xuanchuan buzhang huiyi zai jing zhaokai” (“National meeting of heads of propaganda departments held in Beijing”), *Renmin ribao*, 22 January 1999, p. 1.

49. Interviews with a reporter of the Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, August 2001.

mission, who argued that the Buyun election “accords with the spirit of current laws” and that “it is a good reference point for further perfecting our laws in the future.”<sup>50</sup>

A number of influential magazines also ignored the ban. Editors dissimulated when queried. The editor of one journal claimed to have obtained approval from the MoCA. The editor of another journal approved the publication of a report on the election, arguing that since Buyun had caused a huge sensation overseas the journal must express its opinions, otherwise the Western media might tell the story in whatever way it liked.<sup>51</sup>

### *Other Township Electoral Reforms*

The news leakage about the Buyun election left the Sichuan provincial leadership with no choice but to report the election to Beijing. Sichuan’s people’s congress filed a report to the NPC, asking for advice on how to handle the election results. The NPC responded that since the winning candidate was the one nominated by the Buyun Party committee, the election results might stand, but Buyun’s township people’s congress should conduct another election so that the election results would be legal. But Shizhong’s leaders never bothered to have the Buyun township people’s congress cast a vote.<sup>52</sup>

The *Legal Daily*’s criticism of the Buyun election might have discouraged officials in other provinces from experimenting with direct township elections, but attempts to reform township governance did not stop. At least three different experiments were conducted in the aftermath of the Buyun election. In Dapeng town of Longgang district in Shenzhen, a “two-ballot system” was adopted in April 1999. Under this system, which was adapted from a practice of letting ordinary villagers cast a recommendation vote when electing village Party secretaries,<sup>53</sup> all eligible voters in the town could nominate preliminary candidates by casting a “recommendation vote” (*tuijian piao*). The five preliminary candidates who received the most votes entered the second round of the election. They delivered campaign speeches to a selectorate that consisted of about one-fifth of eligible voters. Then the selectors cast a “vote of public assessment” (*minyì ceping piao*). The preliminary candidate who received the most votes was then recommended by the town Party committee to the presidium of the town people’s congress as the only candidate for town head. Finally, congress deputies cast a ballot (*xuanju piao*) to elect the town head.<sup>54</sup>

50. I thank Li Fan for a copy of the CCTV programme.

51. Interview with a journal editor, Beijing, September 2001. Western reports on the Buyun election can be found on Lexis-Nexis.

52. Interview with a political scientist at the CASS, Beijing, September 2001.

53. See Lianjiang Li, “The two-ballot system in Shanxi: subjecting village Party secretaries to a popular vote,” *China Journal*, No. 42 (July 1999), pp. 103–118.

54. See Joseph Y.S. Cheng, “Direct elections of town and township heads in China,” *China Information*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2001), pp. 104–137; Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, pp. 411–427;

A similar experiment was conducted in April 1999 in Zhuoli town, Linyi county, Shanxi province. Also known as the “two-ballot system,” the measure adopted in Zhuoli allowed all eligible voters to cast a vote of confidence (*xinren piao*) on the town’s incumbent government head, Party secretary and people’s congress chairman. It was announced to the public before the voting that the incumbents would not be allowed to run for re-election if they failed to receive 50 per cent of the confidence votes.<sup>55</sup>

Yet another version of the “two-ballot system” was adopted in Henan province in 2000. In two townships of Xincui county, all eligible voters were allowed to nominate candidates for township heads. The county Party committee then selected preliminary candidates from the nominees. After campaign speeches were delivered, villager representatives elected official candidates by casting a vote of recommendation. Finally, people’s congress deputies in these two townships elected the township head.<sup>56</sup>

All of these later township elections adhered to existing law, but the county leaders who conducted them were often outspoken in their support for direct township elections. The Party secretary of Linyi county, for instance, stated that “it is an inevitable trend that township heads will be elected directly by voters.” The experiment with the two-ballot system, in his words, was mainly a way to explore how to introduce direct township elections.<sup>57</sup>

### Conclusions

All experiments with direct election of township heads occurred in response to Jiang Zemin’s pledge to expand grassroots democracy. The irony is that Jiang did not seem to mean what he said. A beneficiary of post-Tiananmen palace politics and secret manoeuvring himself, Jiang’s reservations with free elections is hardly a surprise. During a recent interview, he claimed that “should China follow the parliamentary democracy of the Western world, the only result will be that 1.2 billion Chinese people will not have enough food to eat. The result will be great chaos.”<sup>58</sup> In fact, even Jiang’s initial praise of village elections in 1998

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*footnote continued*

Li Fan *et al.*, *Innovations and Development*, pp. 91–96; Huang Weiping (ed.), *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan de zuixin tupo* (*A New Breakthrough in the Development of China’s Grassroots Democracy*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2000).

55. See Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, pp. 350–383; Shi Weiqin, “Muji Linyi de xiangjian minyi diaocha” (“Witnessing a rural public opinion poll in Linyi”), *Zhongguo shehui daokan* (*Journal of Chinese Society*), No. 5 (May 1999), pp. 13–16; Xiao Qun, “Xuan ‘xiangguan’ baixing xian toupiao” (“Commoners vote first when electing township leaders”), *Xiangzhen luntan* (*Township Forum*), No. 5 (May 1999), pp. 4–6; Li Fan *et al.*, *Innovations and Development*, pp. 71–79.

56. Wang Xin, “Shou pi ‘minxuan xiangguan’ zai Henan chansheng” (“The first batch of ‘popularly elected township heads’ are elected in Henan”), *Xinhua ribao* (*The New China Daily*), 2 April 2000, p. C4.

57. Quoted in Shi Weimin, *Open Selection*, p. 361.

58. Erik Eckholm, “Chinese president is optimistic about relations with the US,” *The New York Times*, 10 August 2001, p. A1.

can be questioned. Reportedly, he himself was ultimately responsible for inserting the controversial Article 3 into the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees (1998), which affirms the village Party branch as the leadership core (*lingdao hexin*) in the village.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Jiang in 2001 sounds more conservative than some of the "eight immortals" who dominated elite politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He rejects Peng Zhen's vision that "after villagers have learned how to govern a village, they can govern a township; and after they have learned how to govern a township, they can govern a county."<sup>60</sup> He also ignores Deng Xiaoping's own half-hearted promise that China could eventually hold national elections.<sup>61</sup> Jiang's distrust of popular elections is perhaps best exemplified by his understanding of "sea elections" (*haixuan*), a widely used practice in village elections that allows every eligible voter to put forward a nomination. At a meeting with local officials in Guangdong, he opined that the true meaning of "sea elections" was that peasants would directly elect village cadres today, township leaders tomorrow, and county leaders the day after tomorrow. Very soon, in his words, they would directly elect national leaders. If things go like this, he asked, where would the Party's leadership be?<sup>62</sup>

An even more formidable obstacle to introducing direct township election than Jiang's personal feelings is the Party's institutional interest in monopolizing cadre recruitment. The Party leadership must understand that they can no longer count on ideologically motivated loyalty from local officials. To maintain one-Party rule, the Party leadership may have to maintain the current cadre management system, even though (or because) it is fraught with favouritism and nepotism. In particular, many officials in organization departments have little incentive to give up the opportunity to take bribes from aspirants to political office or seekers of promotion.

Despite the heavy odds against them, however, advocates of township election have a few reasons to be optimistic. It is true that Central Document No. 12 effectively put experiments with township elections to a halt in July 2001, but succession politics may re-open the door for further political reform. Some observers in Beijing believe that both Hu Jintao, the heir apparent to Jiang Zemin, and Zeng Qinghong, Jiang's protégé and Hu's potential rival, may seek to consolidate their power by initiating political reforms of one kind or another.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to the succession, four other factors may also facilitate the introduction of direct township election. First, inter-bureaucratic rivalry may induce some officials to support direct election because it will

59. Interview with an official at the MoCA and a political scientist at the CASS who took part in revising the Organic Law as an adviser to the MoCA.

60. See Li and O'Brien, "The struggle over village elections," pp. 131–32.

61. Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan (Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping)*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 220.

62. Interview with an official at the MoCA, Beijing, August 2001.

63. Interviews with a political scientist at the CASS, a researcher at the Development Research Centre of the State Council, and a professor at the Central Party School, Beijing, September 2001.

weaken the domination of the organization department. Officials of people's congresses, for instance, are generally rather supportive of the reform. Many of them detest the corruption of the organization department. An official at the Guangdong provincial people's congress said that the only reason why officials of the organization department opposed direct election was that they did not want to stop receiving bribes from office-seekers. To back up this accusation, he said he would hang himself if any head of any level of organization department was found to have taken no bribes. He admitted that the organization department had clear advantages in its rivalry with the people's congress, but was quick to add that incumbent Party secretaries and government heads have some interest in strengthening people's congresses by making elections freer and fairer, not least because many know that they will eventually end up as chairmen of people's congresses themselves.<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, it is notable that local leaders who responded to Jiang's call for expanding grassroots democracy seem to agree that only direct election can persuade villagers that the Party is sincere about democracy. The fact that these local reformers invariably view village elections as a model for township elections suggests that the implementation of villagers' self-government over the last decade may have persuaded them that free and fair elections are essential to real democracy. Younger and better-educated local officials, in particular, may also see more opportunities for themselves in popular elections than in the secretive *nomenklatura* system.

Thirdly, enterprising local Party leaders may work to introduce direct township elections for the sake of their own careers. Party secretaries are not simply bureaucrats, they are also politicians who have the authority to make important political decisions. As enterprising bureaucrats, many yearn for promotion. But the path to promotion through economic success is narrow and crowded, particularly in remote locales where the infrastructure is poor, or developed coastal areas where market reforms have left little for Party leaders to do in developing the local economy. This may lead them to explore alternative paths to promotion by pioneering political reforms such as direct township election. Two decades of economic reform, in which path-breakers were awarded and conservatives penalized, may have persuaded some local Party leaders that history is on the reformers' side. For them, being first in experimenting with political reforms may become irresistibly attractive, particularly when there is a plausible discursive opening such as Jiang's 1997 pledge to exploit. This dynamic was clearly at work in the experiments with township elections. Local election organizers all liked to describe their own reform as "historic" or "of historical significance," and all reforms were invariably labelled as "the number one in the country."

Lastly, as the international community keeps pressing the Chinese government to improve its human rights record, Chinese leaders may hesitate to abandon existing reforms such as village elections or openly

64. Interview, Guangzhou, September 2001.

to punish local leaders who initiate township electoral reforms. Moreover, international non-governmental organizations may play a role in assisting reforms of township electoral systems similar to the one they played in the implementation of village elections.<sup>65</sup>

65. See Tianjian Shi, "Village committee elections in China: institutionalist tactics for democracy," *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (April 1999), pp. 385–412; Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating 'democracy' in a one-party state: introducing village elections in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 162 (June 2000), pp. 465–66; Paul Grove, "The roles of foreign non-governmental organisations in the development and promotion of village elections in China," *American Asian Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall 2000), pp. 111–126; Becky Shelley, "Political globalisation and the politics of international non-governmental organisations: the case of village democracy in China," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (July 2000), pp. 225–238.