

## ***Report from the Field***

# **Chinese Democratization in Perspective: Electoral and Selectorates at the Township Level\***

Melanie Manion

Progress in democratization is widely judged by how well elections function as instruments allowing ordinary citizens to choose political leaders to represent their preferences. In January 1999, I travelled to villages and towns in Chongqing as a member of a Carter Center delegation invited by the National People's Congress (NPC) to observe the electoral processes that produce delegates to people's congresses, chairmen and deputy chairmen of these congresses, and government leaders at the township level. The Carter Center is an American non-government organization associated with Emory University, with an executive board chaired by former President Carter. As part of its mission to enhance freedom and democracy, the Center has observed and reported on Chinese village elections in delegation visits that began in 1996. Ours was the first delegation to observe people's congress elections, however.<sup>1</sup> Only weeks before we visited Chongqing, voters a hundred miles away, in Sichuan's Buyun township, elected a head of township government in an unprecedented exercise of authority vested constitutionally and legally in their people's congress delegates. Juxtaposing the experience of the Buyun elections with the normal processes by which township leaders emerge offers a useful perspective from which to consider electoral mechanisms of representation in China today. My main conclusion is that these mechanisms are designed to align voter preferences with the preferences of Communist Party committees. Ordinary voters and people's congress delegates have choices among candidates in elections at the township level, but these choices are normally constrained by Communist Party committee pre-selection of candidates designated for positions of leadership. The role of voters and congress delegates as electoralates is not trivialized by this role of the Party organization as selectorate, however. Rather, the system is configured so that local Party

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1. Indeed, according to our NPC hosts, ours was the first international observation of elections of congress delegates and government leaders. Our delegation was headed by Charles Costello of the Carter Center. Other members were Thomas Crick, Merle Goldman, Yawei Liu, Robert Pastor, Pia Pannula and Elizabeth Perry. We were accompanied to Chongqing by three journalists (Jaime FlorCruz, Matthew Forney and Mary Kay Magstad) invited by the Carter Center to join the delegation. Information about the Carter Center and its China Village Elections Project is available at <http://www.cartercenter.org> and <http://www.cartercenter.org/china.html>. The Carter Center summary of the delegation visit discussed here can be located at <http://www.cartercenter.org/CHINA/dox/reports/199.html>.

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committees want to select candidates who will win, ideally with a margin of victory big enough to legitimate the Party choice. Losing (or barely winning) signifies an organizational failure. The alignment of voter and Party committee preferences in these elections reflects a perspective on representation quite different from an orthodox Leninist view of the appropriate relationship between Party and society, but also fundamentally different from pluralist visions of elections as instruments of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

The past two decades have seen a growing scholarly interest in people's congresses at both national and local levels in China. This has much to do with revitalization of the NPC in the early 1980s, when veteran leaders "retired" to the institution and began to strengthen their role in order to maintain influence and advance policy initiatives.<sup>3</sup> As for people's congresses at lower levels, new interest has been sparked by the introduction of candidate choice, direct election of delegates at the county level, devolution of significant economic powers, signs of assertiveness by congress delegates, and restiveness of voters demanding accountability of delegates and governments.<sup>4</sup> We know that elections of people's congress delegates (by voters) and congress chairmen, deputy chairmen, and government leaders (by delegates) are seriously constrained. This report tries to set out the nature and extent of constraints at the township level.

As the lowest level of state organization, township government is the basic link between citizens and the formal state hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> It works with

2. On the Leninist view of the appropriate relationship between the party and society, see Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Alfred G. Meyer, *Leninism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). For a discussion of the Leninist view in the context of Chinese village elections, see Melanie Manion, "The electoral connection in the Chinese countryside," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (1996), pp. 736–748. For a normative and empirical account of pluralist visions, see G. Bingham Powell, Jr., *Elections as Instruments of Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

3. The best account of the transformation is in Murray Scot Tanner, *The Politics of Lawmaking in Post-Mao China: Institutions, Processes and Democratic Prospects* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

4. On the elections, see Brantly Womack, "The 1980 county-level elections in China: experiment in democratic modernization," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1982), pp. 261–277; Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Robert E. Bedeski, "China's 1979 Election Law and its implementation," *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1986), pp. 153–165; Barrett L. McCormick, *Political Reform in Post-Mao China: Democracy and Bureaucracy in a Leninist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); J. Bruce Jacobs, "Elections in China," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 25 (1991), pp. 171–199; and Tianjian Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). On the role of people's congresses, see Kevin J. O'Brien, "Agent and remonstrators: role accumulation by Chinese people's congress delegates," *The China Quarterly*, No. 138 (1994), pp. 359–380, and "Chinese people's congresses and legislative embeddedness: understanding early organizational development," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1994), pp. 80–107; Kevin J. O'Brien and Laura M. Luehrmann, "Institutionalizing Chinese legislatures: trade-offs between autonomy and capacity," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1998), pp. 91–108; and Roderick MacFarquhar, "Provincial people's congresses" (reports from the field), *The China Quarterly*, No. 155 (1998), pp. 656–667.

5. Formally, rural villages and urban neighbourhoods are not part of the state hierarchy. Their executive committees are considered as "autonomous mass organizations of self-government," with leaders who are not state cadres.

grassroots organizations to ensure compliance with policies issued at higher levels, it possesses state resources to allocate directly to lower levels, and it makes authoritative decisions to extract resources to support education, public health and economic expansion, for example. From the perspective of electoral representation, the township level is especially interesting. Township leaders are state cadres, which distinguishes them from village leaders, for example. As such, township leaders are managed by the Communist Party through its *nomenklatura* system of cadre management, which allocates to designated Party committees the authority to make key personnel decisions involving state cadres of any importance, including leaders who gain office through elections.<sup>6</sup> The *nomenklatura* system gives the Party a formal legitimate role in selecting leaders who are formally elected. The co-ordination of these processes of selection and election is an interesting and important puzzle. Unravelling this puzzle is particularly useful at the township level. Post-Mao electoral reform extended the rights of voters in direct elections of people's congress delegates: prior to the reform, voters only elected delegates at the township level; afterwards, voters elected delegates at the county level too.<sup>7</sup> At this time, then, it makes sense to consider the co-ordination of these processes only for elections at the township and county levels. Yet voters in the fairly large districts drawn for elections to county people's congresses are often unfamiliar with candidates, especially as electoral campaigns are officially proscribed. As voting districts drawn for township elections tend to be relatively small (coinciding with villages, for example), voters typically know candidates well. This allows them easily to express preferences with votes in elections to township people's congresses, but not in elections only one level higher.

The most recent round of township-level elections in China began in mid-1998. By the end of the year, 24 provinces had already completed elections at this level. In Chongqing municipality, which acquired its provincial-level status in 1997, the election of people's congress delegates began in October 1998. The entire electoral process at the township level (election of more than 75,000 delegates and 8,000 congress and government leaders) was scheduled to be completed in all 830 townships and 648 towns by the end of February 1999. By law, the first meeting of delegates elected to a local people's congress is convened within two months of their election. To observe, within a week, election of delegates to the township people's congress and election of leaders by township people's congress delegates required that our delegation visit localities at

6. On the post-Mao *nomenklatura* system, see Melanie Manion, "The cadre management system, post-Mao: the appointment, promotion, transfer and removal of Party and state leaders," *The China Quarterly*, No. 102 (1985), pp. 203–233; John P. Burns, *The Chinese Communist Party's Nomenklatura System* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), and "Strengthening central CCP control of leadership selection: the 1990 *nomenklatura* (research note)," *The China Quarterly*, No. 138 (1994) pp. 458–491.

7. Above the county level, delegates are elected by the people's congress at the subordinate level.

different stages in the electoral processes. We first observed grassroots elections of delegates in voting districts of Changyuan town in Rongchang county. We then travelled to Dazu county to observe the first session of the 14th people's congress of Baoding town, at which delegates elected leaders of their people's congress and government. At our request, we were given access to original electoral records for each voting district in Baoding, which allows reconstruction of grassroots elections of delegates there. We were also provided with the package of documents received by each congress delegate.

Of course a few districts and a single town are not a representative sample of elections that take place in some 45,000 Chinese towns and townships. The account below is based on observations, interviews, documents and reports from our delegation visit. Broader conclusions are formed by placing field observations in the context of existing knowledge about the Chinese cadre management system.

### *Election of Delegates*

Rongchang county held elections of delegates to township people's congresses on 10 January 1999. Our delegation was originally scheduled to observe elections in the voting district constituted by Zhujiqiao village, one of 33 villages in Rongchang's Changyuan town. At our request, a second village was added and our delegation divided into two observation groups. We also stopped to talk to villagers in two other villages. My own observations were in Banqiao village, which had been notified about our visit only a day earlier. The elections were managed by the town election committee, which is a normal practice.

Banqiao has a population of 2,130 and an electorate of 1,575. The village constitutes a voting district that elects three delegates to the Changyuan people's congress. Voters elected their three delegates from a ballot listing four candidates. According to town and village leaders interviewed, the four had emerged from a list of eight initial candidates nominated in meetings of Banqiao's 13 village small groups. The village representative assembly had voted by secret ballot, reducing the number to the four candidates on the ballot. On election day, voters assembled at the village school and sat with their groups. A town official explained voting procedures, and the four candidates gave short speeches. By the standards elaborated in Chinese electoral law, the elections we observed were procedurally flawed. For example, ballots were distributed in an unorganized fashion by group leaders, many voters received more than one ballot (in one case, six or seven) to vote by proxy for others without producing a written permission, voting cards were not checked before distribution of ballots (but they were stamped after the election, and voters received five *yuan* each) and ballots were collected by small group leaders rather than being dropped in the ballot box by voters. Perhaps the most fundamental procedural flaw, in the eyes of some delegation members, was the absence of secret voting: ballots were filled out in a very public way; indeed, sometimes one voter filled out ballots for several

others because of a shortage of pens.<sup>8</sup> Procedures were explained, speeches made, ballots cast, votes counted and results announced within about two hours. The candidate receiving the most votes (1,304) was the village committee head, and the two other candidates elected were members of the village committee (with 1,123 and 1,091 votes). The losing candidate was the school principal (with 642 votes).

Banqiao villagers did not appear constrained by our presence, nor did they seem to understand the concern of some delegation members about flawed procedures. We talked with voters during the voting process and while votes were being counted. Two conclusions from observations and discussions with villagers are particularly relevant. First, voters seemed to have little understanding of the role of their people's congress delegates. This undoubtedly accounts for the observed general disinterest in the election of delegates. By contrast (and not surprisingly, given its greater prominence in their daily lives), they seemed to have a fairly good understanding of the role of the village committee. This was quite easy to ascertain in Banqiao as voters in Rongchang county elect their village committee and people's congress delegates at the same meeting, allowing us to observe and discuss both elections. Secondly, despite this relative ignorance or apathy about their people's congress, Banqiao villagers apparently did use the ballot to express preferences over delegates. While I mingled with villagers, a note scrawled on a cigarette package was thrust anonymously into my hand. It complained of unreasonable fees recently assigned to each family in the village to pay for construction of a new school.<sup>9</sup> The losing candidate, who received less than half the votes of the most popular candidate, lost for an obvious reason: as he himself admitted later in an interview, villagers blamed him, as school principal, for the arbitrary fees.<sup>10</sup>

Our delegation travelled next to Baoding town in Dazu county. Baoding has a population of 12,730 with an average per capita yearly income of about 1,500 *yuan*. Delegates to the 14th people's congress of Baoding town were elected on 20 December 1998. From an initial pool of 94 nominees, the number was reduced to 69 candidates for a total of 48 delegate positions. In 15 of Baoding's 21 voting districts, voters elected two delegates from three candidates on the ballot; in the remaining six districts, voters elected three delegates from four candidates. Voting was reportedly by secret ballot and took place in mass meetings similar in form to those we had observed in Changyuan.<sup>11</sup>

8. Not surprisingly, members of the delegation who observed the election in Zhujiqiao village found it rather better organized and less flawed in some procedures, but with the same notable absence of the secret ballot.

9. A note with a different complaint was passed to another member of our delegation: it described unreasonably low prices for pigs bought from villagers by a monopsonist in league with the town authorities.

10. Interview with Lei Mingheng, 10 January 1999.

11. Village committee and people's congress elections do not take place on the same day in Dazu, however. On the elections, see "Dazu xian Baoding zhen di shisan jie renmin daibiao dahui daibiao zige shencha weiyuanhui guanyu Dazu xian Baoding zhen di shisi jie renmin daibiao dahui daibiao zige de shencha baogao" ("Report on examination of qualifications of delegates to the Dazu county Baoding town 14th people's congress by the Dazu county

Figure 1 shows election results in Baoding by voting district, distinguishing winners who were town officials, incumbents, or both (shaded bars) from winners who did not hold these sorts of positions (white bars). Of the 48 elected delegates, we have fairly complete background information on about 44.<sup>12</sup> Based on these data, we know that incumbent delegates had a less than even chance (39 per cent) of appearing on the ballot again; of 17 incumbents who became candidates, however, all were elected to office. Nine elected delegates (of whom, four incumbents) were town officials of some sort, and 24 elected delegates (of whom, 12 incumbents) were village leaders of some sort.<sup>13</sup> In short, 33 of 44 elected delegates (75 per cent) held a town office or position of village leadership at the time of the election. On average, incumbents won a higher percentage of the vote than winning candidates generally (87 per cent, compared to 83 per cent): unpopular incumbents presumably did not make it onto the final ballot.<sup>14</sup> Town officials did even better on average (89 per cent), and all town officials who appeared on the ballot were elected. Most elections were not close: on average, a vote share of 46 per cent distinguishes the least popular elected delegate in the district from the losing candidate.<sup>15</sup> Among the 48 elected delegates, 29 were Communist Party members (60 per cent). Twelve elected delegates were women (25 per cent).

Among Baoding town officials, the highest vote share received was 97 per cent, won by 39-year-old Yi Zeliang in district 12. Yi won a significantly higher vote share than Qin Xiaolin, incumbent head of town government, elected in district 3 with 89 per cent. Yi also won a higher vote share than Lei Tianhua, incumbent chairman of the town people's congress and secretary of the town Communist Party committee, elected in district 17 with 93 per cent of the vote. Moreover, at the Baoding people's congress meeting that we observed in January, delegates overwhelmingly elected Yi as deputy chairman of the congress. In Baoding, this is a full-time office (because Lei Tianhua, re-elected at the people's

*footnote continued*

Baoding town 13th people's congress committee for the examination of delegate qualifications"), passed at the 13th Session of the Dazu County Baoding Town 13th People's Congress Presidium and reported to the Preparatory Committee for the Dazu County Baoding Town 14th People's Congress First Session, 5 January 1999. The report states that 96 candidates were initially nominated. Based on our examination of original election records by voting district, in addition to 94 candidates initially nominated, there were four write-in candidates. Of the four, only one (in district 5) received more than ten votes, and he received 110 votes.

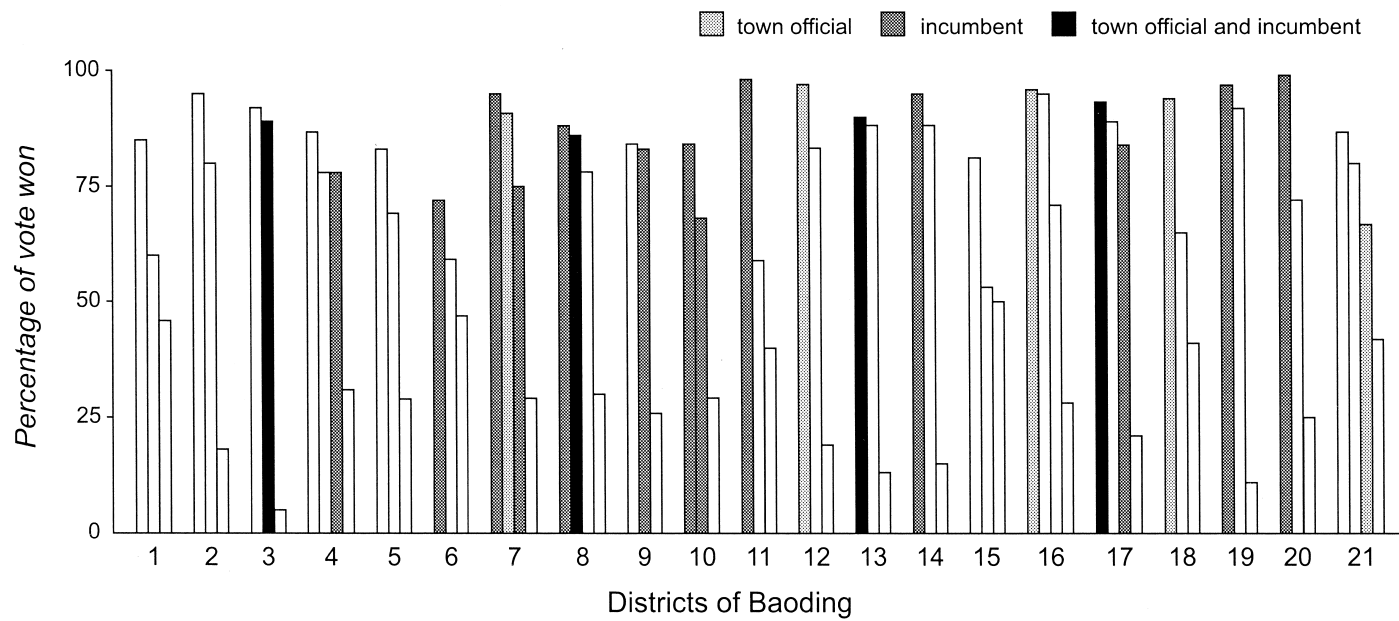
12. To the best of my recollection, lack of information about candidates in districts 1 and 2 is due to our failure to record it rather than the unavailability of these data.

13. This includes positions of leadership at the administrative village level (village Communist Party branch secretaries and deputy secretaries, village committee directors and deputy directors, village women's association heads) and at the natural village level (village small group heads). One incumbent delegate I have not included in this category is a village accountant, an office that can also be considered village leadership.

14. In at least two districts (5 and 6), incumbents nominated initially did not become candidates.

15. In districts 1 and 6, however, winning and losing candidates are separated by 14 and 12% of the vote respectively; in district 15, a mere 3% of the vote separates an elected delegate from the losing candidate.

Figure 1: Results of district elections of delegates to Baoding town 14th people's congress



congress as its chairman, holds two positions of leadership concurrently). As Yi had been in Baoding less than six months at the time of the election,<sup>16</sup> his electoral successes in December and January require some explanation.

An official interpretation of Article 29 of the Electoral Law gives normal responsibility for candidate nomination to the Communist Party committee at the same level as the people's congress for which delegates are elected.<sup>17</sup> The Baoding Communist Party committee, then, recommends some candidates directly. This authority to nominate candidates allows the town Party committee to ensure, for example, that an "appropriate" number of women are nominated as candidates and that a critical mass of Communist Party members are among the delegates to the town people's congress.<sup>18</sup>

The town Communist Party committee also transmits the preferences of the Party committee at the county level. As people's congress delegates are not state cadres, they are not on the Dazu county party committee's *nomenklatura*, but the county Party committee is interested and involved directly in the nomination of some delegates. These include candidates it has pre-selected for the positions of chairman and deputy chairman of the Baoding people's congress, for example. Their election is required for these positions. In addition, it would undoubtedly be embarrassing if a leader such as the incumbent town government head were not also an elected delegate.<sup>19</sup>

About six months before the 1998 election, the Dazu county Party committee had conducted a comprehensive evaluation of Baoding leaders. One result of this evaluation was a decision to recommend the incumbent people's congress chairman and town government head as "official candidates" for their current offices (see below).<sup>20</sup> A second result was a decision to replace Li Yonghua, deputy chairman of the people's congress. At 54, Li was older than the norm for leaders at this level and was also apparently in poor health. The county Party committee transferred Yi Zeliang from Gulong township, where he was serving as deputy chairman of the people's congress. After his transfer to Baoding,

16. Interview with Yi Zeliang, 12 January 1999.

17. "Political parties" and "mass organizations" at the township level "have the authority" to nominate candidates for delegates to the township people's congress, while parties and organizations within voting districts "also may" nominate candidates. Qiao Xiaoyang and Zhang Chunsheng (eds.), *Xuanju fa he difang zuzhi fa shiyi yu jieda (An Explanation of the Electoral Law and the Organic Law of Local People's Congresses and Local People's Governments)*, revised edition (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 1997), p. 47.

18. The Party committee may also be concerned about a rough distribution of communist delegates among districts, so that each discussion group at the people's congress has a sufficient number of Party members to nominate candidates (see below). On the other hand, Changyuan election officials told us that the town did its best to ensure nomination of a certain percentage of non-Party members (as well as women) as candidates.

19. The head and deputy heads of town government need not (by law) be people's congress delegates, but at this lowest level of government, which is supposed to maintain the most direct contact with ordinary citizens, it is presumably unusual for a government to include no elected congress delegates.

20. Discussion with Jin Lie, Deputy Chairman, Chongqing People's Congress Standing Committee, 13 January 1999.



Yi did much of the work previously carried out by Li. Formally, he was simply a town official. Effectively, he was already acting as Li's replacement.<sup>21</sup> In the months before the election, Yi visited eight of Baoding's nine villages, becoming well acquainted with village circumstances and village leaders.

How much do preferences of higher levels constrain candidate choice and electoral outcomes at the grassroots, in the voting district? First, as elected delegates represent the collective interests of the voting district to the town, leaders (and, to the extent that they care, ordinary voters) at the grassroots most prefer delegates who can act effectively as spokespersons for local interests. This accounts for the large proportion of village leaders among elected delegates. Delegates do more than represent local interests at annual people's congress meetings, however: they can enhance local circumstances by influencing resource allocation decisions made by the town Communist Party committee and town government.<sup>22</sup> This means that the election of a delegate who is already a town official or who wins a position of leadership at the town level is potentially an asset, not a liability, for the voting district. In Baoding, for example, relevant resource allocation issues include extension of roads to connect three villages without links to the town, improvement of radio transmission to villages poorly served, and selection of a site for a new school. Secondly, the grassroots Communist Party branch probably shares the higher-level Party committee interest in representation by Party members: typically, Communists are active participants in village politics and hold positions of village leadership anyway; they can be expected to represent voting district interests (at least, as defined by the Party branch) reasonably well. Moreover, there are only so many plausible candidates, and undoubtedly many are also (for the same reasons) Party members or probationary Party members. In sum, it is not surprising that well over half of Baoding's delegates are Party members, and (based on information about 44 delegates) three-quarters are officials or leaders at either the town or village level. In fact, of the 19 districts for which we have information on delegate occupation, each is represented by a town official or village leader (or both). No district is represented only by ordinary villagers.<sup>23</sup>

21. Discussion with Chen Zhong, Division Head, Chongqing People's Congress Standing Committee, Working Committee on Liaison with Delegates, Liaison Division, 12 January 1999. Chen explained to me that the fact that Yi was transferred indicates the county had decided that he should enter the leadership group of Baoding town. Yi told me he had been "acting" deputy chairman (because of Li's poor health), but this can only have been in an unofficial capacity as chairmen and deputy chairmen of local people's congress are required by law to be elected delegates. Interview with Yi Zeliang, 12 January 1999. Li Yonghua was elected as a delegate to the 14th Baoding people's congress, winning 86% of the vote in district 8.

22. In Baoding, we were told: "All major decisions are made by the Party committee; the government implements decisions." Interview with Lei Tianhua, Secretary, Baoding Communist Party Committee, 11 January 1999.

23. On the other hand, county and town Party committees may also be concerned that the "bridge" between town and villages enables town leaders to learn about villager opinions. No district has more than one town official.

*Election of Town Leaders*

Since the cadre management reform of 1984, the Chinese *nomenklatura* system gives to the county Communist Party committee the authority to make personnel decisions involving all leaders at the township level, including elected leaders. Put another way, the county Party committee acts as the selectorate for these offices. An important basis for Party committee decisions as selectorate is regular evaluation of incumbents, and recent efforts to improve the Party system of cadre management include strengthening evaluation mechanisms. A February 1995 document on cadre management emphasizes “democratic evaluation” as part of regular performance evaluations conducted by the Party committee through its organization department. By this is meant comprehensive evaluation of workstyle, competence, effort and achievements. The regular evaluation is supposed to solicit views widely through interviews, public opinion polls, on-site inspections, special investigations and meetings with the leader under evaluation. Evaluations are supposed to occur before the inauguration of a new people’s congress and government as well as at mid-term.<sup>24</sup> The Dazu county Party committee conducted this sort of evaluation of Baoding’s leaders about six months before the December 1998 election.<sup>25</sup>

The most obvious result of evaluations by the county Party committee is reflected in transfers of key leaders of the township people’s congress and government (or not). Transfers may be simultaneous and lateral: in Baoding, Qin Xiaolin gained office as town government head a year before the 1998 election, through a transfer ordered by the Dazu county Party committee in which the incumbent was transferred to another locality. The presidium of the Baoding 13th people’s congress, acting for the people’s congress, ratified the change, but as Qin had not been elected by the full congress, his official position was “acting” town government head. Transfers of this sort, especially at lower levels of government, have been quite routine in recent years. A different sort of transfer reflects a county Party committee decision to replace a key township leader. The transfer of Yi Zeliang to Baoding is an example of this. For Yi, the transfer was lateral: indeed, he had held leading offices in four different townships before his transfer to Baoding. For incumbent people’s congress deputy chairman Li Yonghua, however, Yi’s transfer signified a decision on his retirement from office. By contrast, 40-year-old incumbent people’s congress chairman (and Party committee secretary) Lei

24. “Provisional Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Party and Government Leading Cadres,” 9 February 1995, Xinhua (Beijing), 16 May 1995, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report: China* (hereafter FBIS), 16 May 1995. See articles 9–11 and 21. The regulations deal only with leading cadres at and above the county level, but they instruct provinces to issue parallel regulations for cadre management at lower levels. I have made the conversions to leaders at the township level.

25. According to Jin Lie, the evaluation was very thorough. It is not clear to me, however, whether Jin based his description on Chongqing regulations about what these sorts of evaluations ought to be or on specific knowledge about evaluation of Baoding’s leaders. Discussion with Jin Lie, 13 January 1999.

Tianhua was not transferred out of Baoding, nor was another leader designated as “acting” chairman.

In addition to reflecting evaluation results in transfers, the county Party committee explicitly recommends candidates for elected positions of town leadership. It communicates these recommendations to various sorts of middlemen – agents – in a number of ways.<sup>26</sup> It presents its recommendations to leaders of the outgoing people’s congress (for Baoding, to the presidium of the 13th people’s congress) and to Party members elected as delegates to the new congress. In Baoding, Party member delegates were probably briefed at the Communist Party congress held in late December 1998.<sup>27</sup> People’s congress delegates made up roughly half of the 60 Party congress delegates. According to article 32 of the February 1995 document on cadre management, Party members who are delegates to the people’s congress should “take the initiative to act on the Party committee’s intention.” Not least of all, since 1979, recommendations of the county Party committee become the “official candidates” proposed by the presidium at the congress session in which delegates elect their congress and government leaders. There is no subterfuge to this: delegates know the official candidates reflect the preference of the county Party committee.

On 10 January 1999, the 48 newly elected delegates to Baoding’s 14th people’s congress assembled for a preparatory meeting (which our delegation did not observe). Delegates, organized by voting district, divided into three discussion groups of roughly equal size. Each group was joined by four non-voting delegates (permitted to participate in discussion) and two town government officials (permitted neither to vote nor participate in discussion).<sup>28</sup> The official agenda indicates that each group elected a chairman and deputy chairman at this meeting and discussed the plenary session agenda and composition of the congress presidium. Delegates then assembled to vote on the agenda and elect the 14th people’s congress presidium.<sup>29</sup> These votes ratified, without change, the 5 January 1999

26. These are described in “Provisional Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Party and Government Leading Cadres,” articles 32 and 33.

27. I did not ascertain whether the Party congress was held before or after the people’s congress election on 20 December. I am guessing here that it was held between the election and the first session of the 14th people’s congress; certainly, this would be a convenient time to brief Party member delegates on their role as agents in elections of congress and government leaders.

28. Our delegation divided up to allow us to observe the three discussion groups on 11 and 12 January. I observed group two, comprising 17 delegates, from voting districts 8 to 15.

29. Prior to the 1986 revision of the Organic Law of Local People’s Congresses and Local People’s Governments, township governments were responsible for convening meetings of the people’s congress. Since 1986, by law, the township people’s congress elects a presidium at its preparatory meeting, to preside over the first session and convene the next meeting. Article 15 of the law describes the presidium as a provisional committee, with responsibilities that do not extend beyond congress meetings. People’s congresses at and above the county level establish standing committees, which act for the full congress between sessions. At the township level, the law does not provide for establishment of standing committees. Article 2 of the law states that people’s congresses at the township level do not need standing committees because there are fewer delegates (therefore, congress meetings are more easily convened) and fewer responsibilities (therefore, a chairman and deputy chairman can manage congress matters on their own). An official interpretation of this article explains that congresses at this most basic level of state ought not to have too many layers, which obstruct

proposals of the 13th people's congress presidium, which were communicated to delegates in the package of congress documents. The newly elected presidium then met to nominate its official candidates for the offices of people's congress chairman and town government head: incumbents Lei Tianhua and Qin Xiaolin, respectively. Table 1 summarizes the actions (some as yet to be discussed) of the selectorate, agents and electorates in the election of Lei Tianhua, Yi Zeliang and Qin Xiaolin.

In addition to the official candidates nominated by the presidium, ten or more congress delegates may jointly nominate a candidate for a leading office. An explanation of procedures for candidate nomination at local people's congresses, currently article 21 of the Organic Law of Local People's Congresses and Local People's Governments, describes with fascinating clarity the official ideal of the relationship between selectorate (Party committee), agent (congress presidium) and electorate (congress delegates). The discussion summarizes article 21 as follows: "In practice, candidates nominated by the presidium are all candidates recommended by the Party organization; in reality, then, nomination by the presidium and nomination by the Party organization are consistent."<sup>30</sup> It then addresses apparent doubts *not* about the basis of selectorate or agent authority, but about the legitimacy of candidate nomination by congress delegates:

Some comrades think that as the candidates nominated by the presidium are candidates whom the Party organization has nominated after extensive vetting at higher and lower levels, it seems unreasonable to give the same legal status to candidates nominated on the spot by a group of delegates. This view seems reasonable, but is inappropriate. Party management of cadres is an important principle of our country's cadre management: whether it refers to comrades involved in Party organizational work or comrades involved in people's congress work, all must uphold this principle. The law stipulates the presidium may nominate candidates, and the point of this is to guarantee the principle of Party management of cadres is realized. But Party management of cadres cannot substitute for state management of cadres, and evaluation and selection of cadres by the Party organization cannot substitute for elections by the people's congress. Practice has shown that the vast majority of cadres evaluated and selected by the Party organization are good and can win the approval of delegates, but it is difficult to avoid occasional instances of selection that are not sufficiently well-founded. *The stipulation that delegates can nominate candidates is aimed at providing incentives for the Party organization to be more conscientious in exercising its responsibilities of evaluating and recommending cadres, in making every effort to bringing about a well-founded recommendation of cadres. At the same time, it is also a remedy for occasional defects, when the Party organization makes an insufficiently well-founded recommendation.*<sup>31</sup>

*footnote continued*

closeness to the people. Despite this, since 1986, many townships (including Baoding town) have established a people's congress presidium that acts for the full congress between sessions – a standing committee in all but name. See Qiao and Zhang, *An Explanation of the Electoral Law and the Organic Law*, pp. 85, 102. The people's congress chairman and deputy chairman elected at the congress become ex officio members of the presidium, but both Lei Tianhua and Yi Zeliang were among the delegates originally proposed (and approved) as members of the presidium in Baoding.

30. *Ibid.* p. 110.

31. *Ibid.* p. 111 (emphasis added).

**Table 1: Election of Lei Tianhua and Yi Zeliang as Baoding Town 14th People's Congress Chairman and Deputy Chairman and Qin Xiaolin as Baoding Town Government Head**

<i>Selectorate</i>	Dazu county Communist Party committee
<i>Agents</i>	Baoding town Communist Party committee, Baoding town 13th people's congress presidium, Baoding town 14th people's congress presidium, Baoding town election committee, Communist Party member delegates to Baoding town 14th people's congress
<i>Electorates</i>	Voters in Baoding town voting districts 17, 3 and 12, delegates to Baoding town 14th people's congress
<i>Time line</i>	<i>Actions of selectorate, agents and electorates</i>
Late 1997	Dazu county Communist Party committee transfers Qin to Baoding to replace incumbent town government head. Replacement is ratified by Baoding 13th people's congress presidium, acting for people's congress. Qin becomes "acting" town government head.
Mid-1998	Dazu Party committee evaluates Baoding leading group. Result is recommendation of incumbents Lei and Qin as official candidates for offices of people's congress chairman and town government head respectively, and transfer of Yi to Baoding to replace incumbent people's congress deputy chairman. Yi becomes "acting" deputy chairman.
December 1998	Lei, Qin and Yi are nominated as formal candidates in election of Baoding 14th people's congress delegates in voting districts 17, 3, and 12 respectively. Nominations probably are initiated by Baoding Communist Party committee through Baoding election committee.
20 December 1998	Voters elect Lei, Qin, and Yi as people's congress delegates, with 93%, 89% and 97% of the district vote respectively.
December 1998	At Baoding Party congress, Party congress delegates, 29 elected as people's congress delegates, are briefed about Dazu Party committee choices for town leadership offices.
5 January 1999	Baoding 13th people's congress presidium proposes seven candidates to form Baoding 14th people's congress presidium. Lei and Yi are candidates.
10 January 1999	Baoding 14th people's congress delegates approve proposed composition of presidium. Presidium nominates official candidates for people's congress chairman and town government head. Lei and Qin are official candidates.

Table 1—*continued*

<i>Time line</i>	<i>Actions of selectorate, agents and electorates</i>
11 January 1999	Congress delegates discuss work reports and district problems. Communist Party members and presidium members play active role in discussion, e.g. noting that leaders must be experienced and know local conditions, and that Yi has visited eight of nine villages. Delegates nominate candidates for positions of leadership: Party member delegates nominate Yi as congress deputy chairman, group chair announces presidium nomination of Lei and Qin as congress chairman and town government head. After meeting, presidium verifies candidates have been nominated by ten or more delegates.
12 January 1999	Congress delegates vote in primary election to reduce the number of candidates for deputy town government head. Incumbents and official candidates Lei and Qin are unopposed. Yi is one of two candidates for office of congress deputy chairman; his opponent is a 29-year-old clerk in town government. Presidium verifies primary election results and determines formal candidates on ballot. Delegates vote. Lei wins 47 of 48 votes, Qin wins 48 of 48 delegate votes, and Yi wins 44 of 47 votes.

Seen in this light, the vote of congress delegates is the exercise of a veto (or not) over leaders pre-selected by the Party committee one level up. Moreover, as the quoted selection makes clear, delegate dissent from the choice of the Party committee means the selectorate has made a serious mistake. It is by no means in the interest of the Party committee, acting as selectorate, to recommend as an official candidate a leader who will lose the congress election. In this sense, the election provides an incentive for a thorough evaluation of prospective candidates before the congress. Done well, the evaluation can assure the selectorate of its preferred outcome; done poorly, the rejection of an official candidate by congress delegates is a grave matter which draws the attention of higher levels to the failure of the selectorate (as well as the candidate, of course). It makes good sense, then, for the selectorate to conduct its evaluations and transfers well before a new session of the congress: new leaders need time as office holders to win the approval of electorates (voters and delegates).

Veto power of delegates notwithstanding, the process is structured so that election of the selectorate's preferred candidates is the norm. The role of the presidium and Communist Party member delegates ensures this. For the Dazu and Baoding Party committees, control over the nomination process was facilitated by an even distribution of Party member delegates among the three discussion groups. To deviate from election of the selectorate's preferred candidates requires a considerable effort of collective action on the part of delegates, and failure to overturn the selectorate's

preferences is not costless either. Local people's congress delegates do not meet often (once per year) or for very long (a few days), and the congress agenda is highly structured. Given these constraints, it is not easy to overcome the obstacles to collective action. How often are official candidates rejected? I asked Jin Lie, Deputy Chairman of the Chongqing People's Congress Standing Committee, about any instances he knew of where an official candidate had been rejected. He could recall just one instance, ten years ago: delegates at the first session of a people's congress had passed around a slip of paper outside the official meetings and discussion sessions, obtaining enough signatures to propose an alternative candidate, who won the election.<sup>32</sup>

On the afternoon of 11 January 1999, officially the first plenary session of Baoding's 14th people's congress, delegates met in their groups to discuss reports and district problems and to nominate candidates for offices of congress and government leadership. I observed group two, which appeared relatively unconstrained by our presence in the discussion of reports and problems.<sup>33</sup> When the group chair called for nominations, a presidium member, one of the oldest delegates in the room, summarized the qualities required of a good leader. Yi spoke up, clarifying that delegates should not consider him an alternative to official candidate Qin Xiaolin: "In recent days, some people said they would nominate me as town government head. I ask you not to do this." Minutes later, Yi nominated official candidates Lei Tianhua and Qin Xiaolin. The older presidium member seconded the nomination and immediately nominated Yi as congress deputy chairman, reiterating a point made several times by other delegates (including Yi himself) during the discussion: that Yi had visited eight of Baoding's nine villages. Other nominations followed, for congress deputy chair and government deputy heads. Delegates then signed papers to nominate the candidates in writing, and the nominations were passed around to collect supporting signatures. The next day, delegates assembled again in their groups and continued discussion of local problems. Mid-morning, the group chairman announced the candidates supported by ten or more delegates that had emerged from the three groups: official candidate Lei Tianhua (unopposed) for congress chairman, official candidate Qin Xiaolin (unopposed)

32. Discussion with Jin Lie, 13 January 1999. Left unstated is whether opposition to the official candidate had anything to do with the mass protests and their suppression in 1989.

33. In group two, delegates voiced strong complaints about many aspects of town government performance: collection from villages of water conservancy fees without apparent government effort to solve serious problems, lack of a road connection linking three villages to the town, failure to exploit the tourism associated with the famous Dazu stone carvings, penalties assigned to villages for not meeting tax obligations imposed by the town, extra fees charged for schooling, unreasonably low prices paid for crops, lack of a programme to educate villagers about laws relevant to village issues, and fines assigned to women who fail to have their IUD checked on the single day scheduled for this each month. Town congress and government leaders responded, often defensively, to questions and criticism. Yi Zeliang noticeably outperformed the other participants in group two: he spoke more than other delegates, displayed broad knowledge of local conditions, cited specific laws and provincial regulations, and used examples of policy initiatives drawn from his experience in other localities. He also regularly exhorted his fellow delegates to voice more criticisms. Discussions in other groups also appeared lively and unconstrained.

**Table 2: Results of Elections to Positions of Leadership in Baoding Town 14th People's Congress and Government**

<i>Position</i>	<i>Candidate</i>	<i>Votes</i>	
		<i>Primary</i>	<i>Final</i>
Chairman of people's congress	Lei Tianhua†	na	47
Deputy chairman	Yi Zeliang	na	44
	Zhou Tailun	na	3
Government magistrate	Qin Xiaolin†	na	48
Deputy magistrates	Ding Gangjian	47	39
	Tang Quan	46	46
	Yuan Xihong	46	40
	Zhang Tuming†	43	39
	Wang Wenke	30	20
	Mu Dengfang	14	na
	Others‡	14	8

*Notes:*

†Incumbent

‡Includes abstentions and votes for candidates not on the ballot

In the primary election held to reduce the number of candidates for deputy magistrate, the ballot listed six candidates; the 48 delegates voted for five or fewer candidates. In the final election, the ballot listed five candidates for the position of deputy magistrate; the 48 delegates voted for four or fewer candidates. Mu Dengfang was eliminated as a candidate in the primary election. Zhou Tailun and Wang Wenke lost to the other candidates in the final election.

for town government head, Yi Zeliang and Zhou Tailun as candidates for congress deputy chairman, and six candidates for four town government deputy head positions.<sup>34</sup> Delegates then voted by secret ballot in a primary election for five of the six candidates for government deputy head. After votes in the group were tallied and recorded, the ballot box was taken from the room by the scrutineer. Discussion of local problems continued until the scrutineer returned to announce the results of the primary election in the three groups (see Table 2).

In the afternoon, the delegates assembled in plenary session. Qin Xiaolin and the five candidates for positions of town government deputy head gave short speeches and answered questions from delegates. Four ballots were handed to each delegate, a separate ballot for each elected office. Delegates were instructed to vote for or against candidates on the ballot, write in the name of candidates (who must be delegates) not on the ballot, or abstain. A half-dozen delegates chose to exercise their right to vote more privately in the rooms where group discussions had been held. Others marked their ballots in the meeting hall. After all delegates had cast their ballots in the ballot box, votes were tallied on a blackboard at the front of the meeting hall. The final results, easy victories for the official candidates and Yi Zeliang, were announced within half an hour

34. Article 22 of the Organic Law of Local People's Congresses and Local People's Governments permits a non-competitive election for the offices of township people's congress chairman and government head, but not for deputy offices of the congress or government.



(see Table 2). After a brief speech by the newly elected government head, delegates voted by a show of hands to pass the reports presented the previous day. The first session of Baoding's 14th people's congress adjourned.

### *Chinese Democratization in Perspective*

What do the processes described above reflect about officially acceptable electoral mechanisms of representation in contemporary China? A succinct version of the official ideal was summarized for me by Deputy Chairman Jin Lie of the Chongqing Municipal People's Congress Standing Committee.<sup>35</sup> Our conversation focused on the relationship between Communist Party management of cadres and election of township leaders by congress delegates, but the principle illustrated is also consistent with the election of delegates by ordinary voters at the grassroots:

Jin: If the county Party committee left it up to the township to choose its top leaders, the township might choose leaders that represent only the narrow interests of the township. The county can ensure that larger interests are taken into account. This is beneficial to the work.

Manion: I agree, this may make work go more smoothly. But a different conception of democracy includes the idea that ordinary people have authority to "choose wrongly," that is, to choose a leader who may not be the "best" leader but who is the most popular.

Jin: That is a fundamental difference in conception: we don't think people should be permitted to choose wrongly.

Manion: So it appears the organizational decision is the crux of it, the main component of the process. The election is only secondary in importance.

Jin: No. In the end, leaders have to be elected. They have to win a majority of votes. If they don't win a majority of votes, they can't take up office.

On the one hand, then, people's congress and government leaders are state cadres, and the Communist Party manages cadres. The Leninist foundation of the system is seen in Communist Party committee *nomenklatura* authority over elected leaders. As Deputy Chairman Jin suggests, however, this by no means necessarily implies that the Party selectorate can ignore ordinary voters and congress delegates: the system is designed to align preferences of selectorates and electorates. Through the cadre evaluations and transfers that are part of the routine exercise of *nomenklatura* authority, Party committees attempt to pre-select candidates who will also win, through election, legitimacy as leaders. Losing (even barely winning) is a failure for the candidate, obviously – but also for the particular Party committee selectorate, revealed by election outcomes to be ignorant of popular opinions. Even the authoritarian post-Mao reformulation of the "mass line" must take seriously this sort of specific miscalculation: problems of local leadership may be a harbinger of future

35. Discussion with Jin Lie, 13 January 1999.

unrest. More generally, if the pre-selected candidate loses, the normal mechanisms have failed to co-ordinate selection and election. More regular failure of these mechanisms is dangerous for the Party: it means it has failed in its effort to achieve representation without relinquishing organizational power.

In this context, it is useful to conclude by considering the recent election by ordinary voters of the Buyun township government head, which has been hailed as a major advance in China's democratization.<sup>36</sup> Buyun township is under the central city district (a county-level district) of Sichuan's Suining municipality. The decision to experiment with direct election of the Buyun government head was apparently made locally, by the district Party committee, which has *nomenklatura* authority over leaders at the township level in its district.<sup>37</sup> In this experiment, candidates were required to have the endorsement of 30 voters in order to register. Fifteen initial candidates from diverse backgrounds emerged from this process. Some were part of the township Party and government leading group, others were neither Party members nor leaders at any level.

The selection of two final candidates from the initial 15 was made by township officials, village leaders and representatives from Buyun's ten villages – a special committee of 162 people in all. To the surprise of district and township officials, candidates associated with the township Party and government lost to a school teacher (non-Party member) and a village committee head. According to the procedures established by the district authorities, however, final candidates could also emerge by another means: nomination by the township Party committee or government. By this procedure, Buyun Party committee deputy secretary Tan Xiaoqiu became a third final candidate, in effect an "official candidate," nominated by the township Party committee.

In the campaign that followed, Tan, not a native of the township, reportedly visited all ten villages with a motorcycle entourage supplied by township authorities. The other two candidates were constrained by lack of resources, although village leader Cai Yunhui undoubtedly benefited from the fact that more than half of Buyun residents share the family name Cai. The vote on 31 December 1998 resulted in a very close victory for Tan, who won just over 50 per cent of votes cast. A difference of 12 votes would have required a run-off election with Cai. At the first

36. On the Buyun elections, see especially the article by Tang Jianguang "Feature on Sichuan township election," *Nanfang zhouno* (Guangzhou), 15 January 1999, internet version at <http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/zm/1990/15/amat.htm>. See also the series of three articles by Li Fan in Hong Kong's *Ming bao*: "China directly elects township chief for the first time," 11 February 1999, p. E6, "Expectations: taking Buyun out of Buyun," 12 February 1999, p. E4, and "Leave mark in history: first township holding direct election," 13 February 1999, p. E4, all in FBIS, 16 February 1999. Other interesting articles include Zha Qingjiu, "Democracy shall not transcend the law," *Fazhi ribao* (Beijing), 19 January 1999, p. 1, in FBIS, 3 February 1999, and "China's first direct election of a township chief," *Fazhi ribao* (Beijing), 23 January 1999, p. 2, in FBIS, 4 March 1999. American newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*) also reported on the Buyun elections.

37. It seems improbable that the decision was taken without consultation and approval at higher levels, but that is another matter.

meeting of the Buyun township 14th people's congress, delegates passed a resolution recognizing the election result, in effect forfeiting their legal authority to elect the town government head.

A Suining central district Party committee member described the Buyun experiment as "the most extensive public opinion poll." Versions of the selectorate (the township Party committee) and official candidate (Tan) were not absent from this experiment, however. As discussed above, the principle of a pre-selected candidate operates best when the selectorate has done well its evaluation of leaders and recommends a candidate whose competence the electorate also endorses clearly in the election. The Buyun experiment was a bold electoral experiment by the Suining central district Party committee. It certainly failed to co-ordinate Party committee and electorate preferences well: Tan won only barely (and despite evident unpopularity).<sup>38</sup> Judged by the official standards of representation in contemporary China, the Buyun election was nearly a complete failure and by no means a great success. The close electoral results, as much as the procedure of direct popular election of a government executive, depart from the official vision of well-functioning mechanisms of electoral representation in contemporary China. The slippage in control, part purposeful and part unexpected for the local authorities, brings these elections a step closer to a normative vision of electoral representation familiar in liberal democracies.

38. A Chinese scholar who monitored the election explained Tan's victory as follows: "Some voters at first had reservations about Tan since he had a record of spending too much public money on drinking and dining. But they finally chose him because he had the connections to get subsidies for the township and promised to raise income." See Vivien Pik-Kwan Chan, "Town poll awaits Beijing ruling," *South China Morning Post*, 27 January 1999.