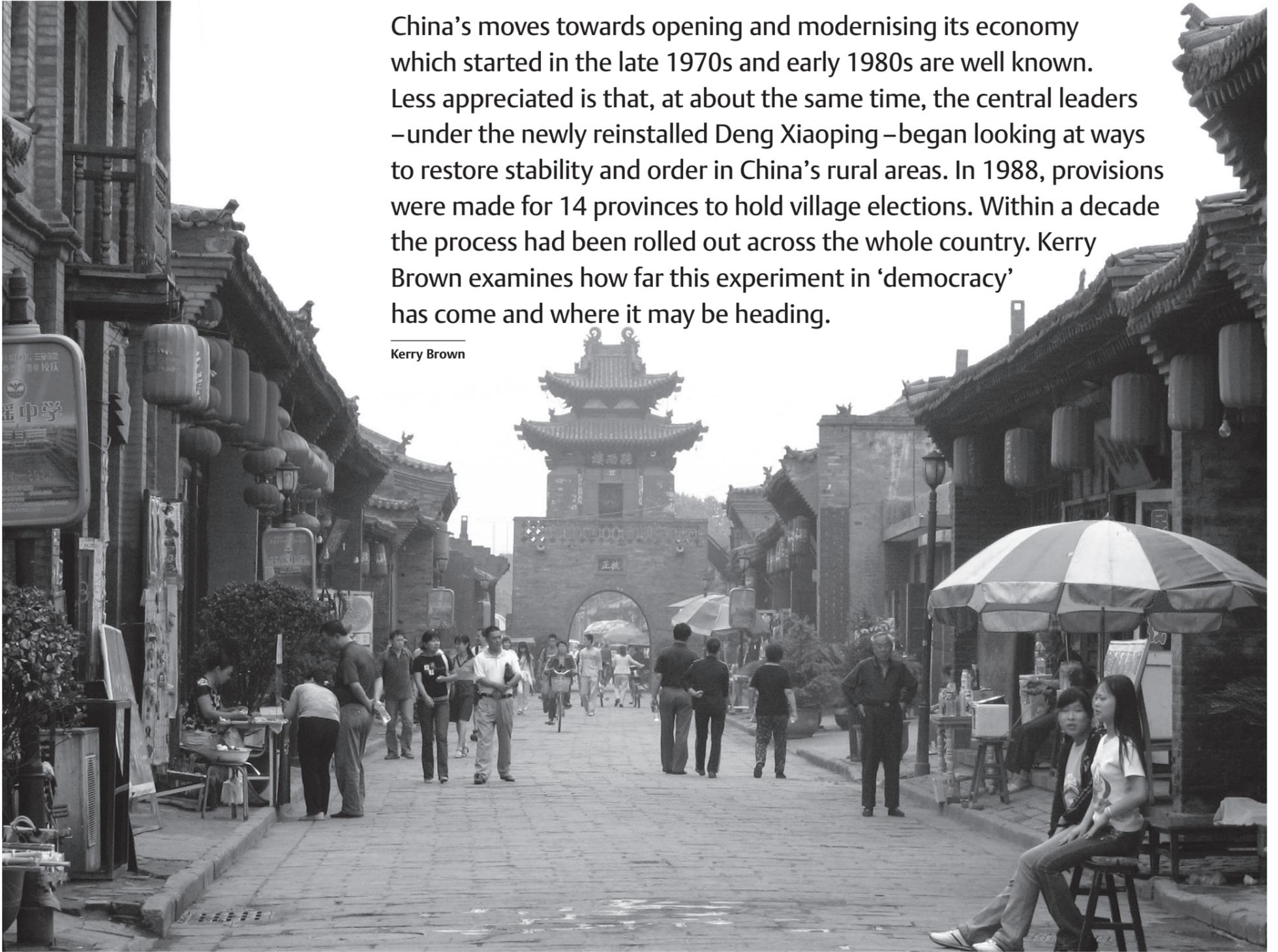


The future of village elections in China



China's moves towards opening and modernising its economy which started in the late 1970s and early 1980s are well known. Less appreciated is that, at about the same time, the central leaders –under the newly reinstated Deng Xiaoping –began looking at ways to restore stability and order in China's rural areas. In 1988, provisions were made for 14 provinces to hold village elections. Within a decade the process had been rolled out across the whole country. Kerry Brown examines how far this experiment in 'democracy' has come and where it may be heading.

Kerry Brown

THE YEARS OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION from 1966 onwards had seen much of the administrative and social infrastructure in rural China depleted. China's education system had been interrupted. In some areas of the countryside, there had been a worrying descent into anarchy, with cliques, local strongmen and illegal groups literally running whole areas as their own special constituencies. In the early 1980s, the first moves were made to redress this situation with elections held to install Village Committee leaders in Gansu, in the north west of China, and Guanxi, two of China's least developed provinces.

These areas had very specific problems, caused by them both having a large proportion of ethnic minority dominated areas. They had challenges of governance that the use of basic elections could be used to address, allowing locally-respected people to have their leadership legitimised by processes accepted by the local and national government.

Much like the creation of the household enterprise system, and of town and village enterprises which were occurring at about the same time, there was a dynamic mixture of local improvisation and flexible central government policy in the evolution of what, finally, became the first Organic Village Election Law in 1988. This allowed for elections with more candidates standing than places to be filled, non-Communist Party members as candidates and secret ballots. Fourteen provinces were first included in this process, rolling out to the whole country when the revised, second Organic Village Law was passed in 1998.

Village elections have been described as a massive experiment in democratisation, and a process of education for over 700 million Chinese. In the last 20 years, over 3.2 million people have been elected via these elections, 20% of them non-party members, in over 650,000 Chinese villages. In view of the sheer size of this process, it is surprising that only now academics in Beijing are starting to systematically assess what these elections have achieved for the governance of rural China.

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Scholars at Beijing University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences have put together exhaustive amounts of data from the elections held in the last decade, drawing conclusions and setting, perhaps, the basis for a possible expansion of this experiment to higher levels of government.

Although in the 1982 Chinese Constitution (the latest), three formal levels of government are set out, in practice there are five, from Central, through provincial, prefectural, county, down to township. Village government stands as an informal level of administration with no strictly legal basis. But it is via village level officials that over half China's population still engage with authority and relate to the state. The ability of these officials to govern is critical.

Mixed results

Since the 1990s, village elections have had very mixed results. In some areas, they have achieved better, more efficient levels of administration, more accountable systems of resource allocation, and the removal, because of poor performance, of officials by electorates that are dissatisfied with them. But the analysis of data so far is very unclear on whether, for instance, villages in poor areas or middle income areas, or in the more developed, wealthier coastal areas produce the best results. According to one academic interviewed in Beijing in August 2009, it seemed to be that the poorest and wealthiest areas held the best elections, with proper competition, and the election of officials to lead the Village Committee who were much more accountable to local public opinion. Middle income areas were much more contentious, with provinces in the centre of China like Hunan, Henan and Hubei failing, in some areas, to hold elections for a number of years (they are meant to be held every three years) because of the levels of disorder and violence that they provoke. Other analysis however seems to imply that middle areas have held the most effective elections, with poor areas suffering from low elector turn out and chronic levels of proxy voting, and wealthy areas being dominated by elites who can buy elections.

The most that can be said is that the situation across China is very complicated. In some areas, there is the reappearance of factionalism or tribalism, with family groups dominating villages and succeeding continuously in getting their favoured candidates in. In other regions with large proportions of ethnic minorities, there is the sensitive issue of the local and central government's fear of the introduction of policies locally that might favour one ethnic group over another. There are poor levels of voter turnout amongst women in many areas, with the abuse of proxy voting to the extent that in one case, one person voted on behalf of over 60 other electors. In other areas, businessmen who have recently emerged have spotted that being head of the Village Committee gives power to disburse land which belongs to migrant labourers who have left an area and do not return after a five year gap. Village Committees also have planning powers over construction projects which, of course, have a strong commercial edge. The dominance of these business elites in some areas has led to cases of vote buying.

On a field trip to a village about two hours from Beijing, in Hebei province, I was able to see some of these issues crystallised. Interviewing one retired farmer, it was clear that he felt that the current village committee head was corrupt and incompetent. He claimed that in the next village, there were proper elections, with real debate on the day when the votes were cast, with each candidate able to stand up and say why they were the best choice. These meetings got very lively, and often led to well attended and very open debates. But in his village, the elections had been a formality, with little real competition. The former CPC branch Party Secretary had been voted in, and had managed to make himself even wealthier since his election by allowing the building of a large hotel in the area, despite the fact that it was on a greenfield site and therefore disallowed under recent central regulations to try to prevent yet more precious agricultural land being put over to residential or industrial use. In such a small community, he said, it was impossible to conceal from others who you had voted for, and there was intense pressure put on you, by friends and relatives of the main candidate, to vote for specific candidates.

This example raises the vexed question of the relationship of the village committees to the Communist Party machinery. The Village Election Law and the associated legislation and regulations around it does place most of the administrative powers in village government with the committee. As in other areas of Chinese political life, the role of the party is still very significant, and there is no strict rule about who in the end has the final say – Party Branch leader or Committee Leader. Some provinces like Shandong have tried to solve this by only allowing Party Secretaries to stand in elections, so that in effect the final successful candidate will be both village committee head and Communist Party local branch head. Shandong's solution, while pragmatic, creates dissatisfaction because it places all the power in the hands of the Party. That was not the original idea.

One interpretation of the Party's willingness to tolerate elections in the early years, in any case, was the ways in which this served as a good method of talent-spotting good officials and then recruiting those who were not Party members into the Party. This has happened in a lot of cases across China. Many candidates successful in village elections, which are salaried positions, are then able to move up to the next level of government, in townships, where they are able to enter the formal civil service system with the benefits that brings with it.

Overall, village elections in China over the last 20 years, however mixed the results, have probably delivered well conducted, and successful elections in about 50% of the areas in which they have been held. But now there is the question of where they can be taken, and what meaning they may have for the larger question of elections in higher areas of government in China.

Next steps?

According to one activist based in Beijing, who supports those who have stood in village elections and then been disallowed their victory because of corruption or malpractice, the events held in 2008 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the passing of the original Village Election Law in Beijing were described by some who attended them as being 'more like going to the funeral of the process, rather than a celebration of its success.' While the government of Jiang Zemin till 2002 did tentatively play with expanding elections up to township levels, and looked at some experiments made in this direction in Jiangsu province in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the whole process was put on hold. Under the very cautious leadership of the current leader Hu Jintao, there have been no further moves.

One interpretation of this is to see that the kind of issues village elections were meant to deal with – better standards of governance at the village level, the delivery of social justice, accountability by officials, transparency in decision making, etc – while they are still regarded as being very important, have now been shifted to within the Party. As one analyst said, the 'Village Committees', at the start of the village election process, were there to do the state's dirty work – collect taxes, implement the one-child policy, and deal with social stability issues. For the first two of these, at least, things have improved. The current government has removed many of the taxes which were laid upon farmers, and the one-child policy has now had a generation in which to be socially accepted, and in some areas is being relaxed. There was never any intention that village elections were meant to deliver a blueprint or an experimental basis for something that could then be migrated from administrative government to within the Communist Party itself.

The focus of the Hu-Wen government, therefore, has been in the area of delivering the sorts of things that village elections were meant to achieve – accountability, fiscal responsibility, efficiency – but within the Communist Party by what Hu Jintao famously called in his speech at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007 'intra-Party democracy.' In essence, the Party must sort its own house out, rather than look purely to society around it to improve that. In berating Communist Party cadres for needing to be more 'morally upright and have greater integrity' Hu is therefore supporting the clear focus on making the Party more accountable to itself.

In this context, village elections have hit a ceiling, and there are, as yet, no signs that they will be extended beyond the current stage. This has been recognised by some of the main foreign organisers who offered practical support for elections in the early phases, through advice on monitors, practical implementation, and the drafting to the two election laws. The Carter Center, for instance, and the Ford Foundation have been two of the most deeply involved, but beyond very specific technical areas (in one case publication of books assessing the last two decades of elections) their main energies in China are now concentrated elsewhere.

There has also been a shift towards working on the extension of civil society, and the legal sector, in the last five years. When the first elections were held in the 1980s, civil society could barely be said to exist in China after the highly politicised years

of the Maoist area, and the legal infrastructure was effectively being built from scratch. These two areas are now flourishing and delivering many of the things, in terms of public participation in decision making, feedback on government services, and holding authority accountable, that, at least in rural areas, were once the province of elections and village committees.

There is one newer area of activity, which is the creation of enhanced resident's committees in urban areas. In some cities, like Shanghai, studies by Fudan University have shown that these have had surprising results in some areas, helping residents to lobby municipal governments about local environmental issues. The enfranchisement in some form of urban dwellers was an important priority for the Jiang Zemin administration, which saw a period of intense urbanisation in the 1990s, accompanied by the laying off of up to 60 million employees from state-owned enterprises during the Zhu Rongji industrial reforms of 'letting the small go, and strengthening the large.' The appearance of a new swath of people on the labour market meant that, firstly, people became much more mobile, moving from their native provinces to where jobs existed, and secondly that cities like Shanghai and Beijing saw sudden increases in their population. Over this period, the internal passport 'hu kou' (household registration) system was relaxed to the point that, in the early 2000s, there was even discussion of scrapping it altogether. The final element was the liberalisation of the housing market, with people able to be much freer in getting loans (usually on 15 year terms) to then buy apartments and property to live in in the places where they found work.

Resident committees were built on the basis of the old household committees of the past, which had existed from the 1950s onwards in China. But they lack the air of intrusive surveillance that the old committees had, and instead have become a way to create at least some social cohesion in very newly created and liquid urban communities where people feel very little sense of belonging anywhere, and a high proportion of people are from outside. As with village elections, resident committees involve the voting in of members, and the holding of a form of elections and hustings. In that sense, they continue the educational function of the village ones.

Whatever the individual achievements of some committees in cities, however, there is widespread cynicism about their significance and function. One official I interviewed in Beijing about them dismissed them as 'something for the retired and the unemployed.' He said that very few people working were involved in the committees or bothered standing for them. Another in Shanghai said that they were 'things that the vast majority of people in cities were barely aware of.' At the very least, however, they supply some institutional infrastructure in cities for voting for local representatives, and that may, in the future, when the enfranchisement of city dwellers becomes more of a priority, be useful for the government.

Stagnation

The relative stagnation of the village elections at the moment is symptomatic of a lack of political will right at the top of the Communist Party of China itself about how to carry forward meaningful political reform. While there is a strong awareness of the need to continue improving the levels of government service, and to satisfy the increasing numbers of Chinese who may now be classified as middle class, both in the countryside and in the cities, the challenge remains how to do this without ceding major territory from the Party itself, and allowing for some of the relaxations which, in the eyes of the current Chinese leadership elite, led to the disintegration of the Communist system in the Soviet Union. The Colour Revolutions which occurred in former Soviet Union areas over the last two decades are looked at negatively in China, and have been studied intensively in order to avoid what are seen as some of the mistakes made by Communist Parties in these areas.

This lies behind the CPC's extreme caution. There are no signs at the moment that this will change. Critics within China, even amongst the academic community, who align themselves with the new leftism (*xin zoupai*) have even claimed recently that elections, far from addressing the problems of governance and stability in the countryside, have made things worse, leading to anarchy in some areas, and battles between different groups in local societies. One academic complained that in fact contemporary China suffers from 'too much democracy', because in many areas where elections are held there is a lack of consensus, with everyone standing up for their own limited interest, and no sense of a wider society. These may well sound like excuses in order to avoid carrying reforms further, but at some level, they are symptomatic of the lack of consensus within the decision making elite about what the next steps might be for political reform in China, and how village elections might offer some kind of basis for this. One thing is clear. Leaving things as they are at present is not an option. On that, at least, everyone in China agrees.

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