Popular Electoral Support for Party Members in Chinese Village Elections: An Alternative Interpretation of Elections Results

by

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Abstract

Since the introduction of elections into Chinese villages two decades ago, many have viewed these elections skeptically. These skeptics point to the disproportionately high percentage of Village Party Branch members elected to Village Committees as a sign that the Party is manipulating the elections to reassert their power at the village level. They conclude that the contours of rural political power have changed little since the commune era. I argue, alternatively, that the reason so many Party members are elected to VCs is that many peasants see it in their interest to vote for them. I use two sets of arguments to support this view. The first addresses whether the elections offer peasants meaningful choices among candidates. I argue that if we use an expanded concept of how constituents approach elections, we must conclude that peasants do have meaningful choices. The second addresses the question of how peasants respond to material uncertainty. I use the moral economy/rational peasant debate to show that when faced with material uncertainty, peasants respond by being conservative in their choices. I conclude that reform-era agricultural and economic policies have left many peasants in China’s central grain belt feeling financially vulnerable. Faced with such uncertainties, they have adopted a “safety first” principle of minimizing risk while maximizing opportunities within the existing political and economic arrangements. Furthermore, the post-Mao economic reforms have necessitated a change in the criteria for Party membership, particularly at the village level. Because the Party now prioritizes economic development, it also prizes those Party members or potential members who possess the skills that further that goal. Voting for Party members can therefore not be considered a vote for the status quo.
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**Introduction**

*Overview of the Intellectual Questions about Chinese Village Elections*

After the end of the Mao Zedong era (1949-76), China’s rural commune system began falling into disrepair and was eventually abolished and replaced with new forms of local political and administrative organization. Whereas under the commune system village leaders were, in practice, appointed by higher-level officials, the new arrangement includes a system of villagers directly electing their own leaders to serve on Village Committees (VCs). These committees serve two functions: first, they are local agents of the state, responsible for ensuring that villagers comply with top-down policies such as grain procurement, tax collection, and birth control; and second, they are administrators of many day-to-day village affairs, such as developing the local economy, maintaining physical infrastructure, managing collectively-owned assets, resolving disputes between villagers, and providing basic educational and health care services. Not only do VCs’ responsibilities straddle several areas of village social, political, and economic life, but they also serve different constituencies which may or may not have conflicting interests.¹

In theory, this system of village elections differs from the commune era in two respects. First, under the commune system, all village leaders were either Communist Party (hereafter ‘Party’) members or at least hand-selected by the Party. Now any adult member of a village can now nominate or be nominated for VC candidacy. Second, during the commune era, the Party put in place far fewer checks on its own power, significantly blurring the Party-state distinction, particularly at the local levels. Under

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the new system, the VC constitutes a locus of authority that is technically discrete from
the village Party branch. But many observers challenge the notion that the new
arrangements constitute a significant departure from the commune system by pointing
to the statistical evidence that shows a high incidence of village Party branch (VPB)
members holding concurrent positions on the VC and the VPB. For example, although
only 5 per cent of the rural population holds Party membership,² the percentage of Party
members on VCs ranges from 50% to as high as 83%.³ This disproportionately high
percentage of Party members elected to VCs raises questions about whether the Party
(usually working in cahoots with the township government) is using the VC elections as
a vehicle for reasserting its control at the village level. These skeptics often operate
from a baseline assumption that given how poorly Chinese peasants have fared under
the Party’s tenure, those peasants will reject the Party’s leadership at the polls as soon
as they are given the opportunity. The high number of Party members elected to VCs
must therefore be a barometer of how poorly the elections system is meeting standards
of openness and fairness, rather than a barometer of peasants’ political preferences.

I offer an alternative explanation: Party members perform well in VC elections
because peasants see it in their best interest to vote for them. To accurately interpret the
data on the Party’s strong showing in VC elections, we must resist imputing our own
feelings about the Party’s policies and performance into our analysis of elections
results. We must also stop viewing the peasants themselves as only passive or

secondary actors in the elections process, and instead see them as deliberate actors who take strategic actions in very “concrete circumstances.” I argue that there are two such circumstances that shape Chinese peasants’ voting behaviors: insecurity about being able to maintain one’s current level of income, and changing criteria for Party membership, which has led to shifting perceptions of village-level Party members. First, despite the income gains accrued to peasants early in China’s economic reform period (from 1978 to approximately 1984), many peasants’ household incomes have become vulnerable to a combination of state economic and agricultural policies. This is especially true for those peasants whose incomes are derived primarily from agricultural production (as opposed to those who are engaged at least part-time in off-farm production activities). Faced with sometimes acute economic insecurity, peasants’ first and overriding priority is to hedge against further risk. This behavior of erecting a protective barrier over, for example, ones current income, is called the “safety first” principle. The safety-first principle dictates that peasants act cautiously and conservatively in a whole range of choices they make. Even if it means forgoing a potentially lucrative gamble, peasants will avoid changing their local political and economic arrangements so long as the outcome of those changes is uncertain.

Second, the very nature of what it means to be a Party member at the village level, and therefore what it means to vote for one, has changed as a result of the fundamental shift in the Chinese Party-state’s priorities in the post-Mao era. Under Mao, Party membership was infused with ideological meaning and entailed a mandate of ideologically transforming ‘the masses’ in order to build a better socialist society.

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Since the Deng Xiaoping government launched the economic reform program, Party members have assumed a great deal of responsibility for economic growth and development. This is especially true at the village level, where cadres are required to wear many hats in their positions. In fact, the Party has used VC elections as a tool for identifying and recruiting those village members who have the desired skill set for furthering economic growth at the local level.

China’s rural residents still comprise approximately 75% of China’s 1.3 billion people. Even the slightest transfer of decision-making authority from the Party-state to the peasants is significant for the sheer number of people impacted by such a shift. And as many scholars have pointed out, village government oversees many matters of critical importance to peasants, namely the local physical and institutional infrastructure that determines how far above the poverty level they will be able to rise. This study aims to contribute to our understanding of how peasants will use their votes to further their interests. Furthermore, telescoping our focus to the peasants’ relationship with village Party leaders might force us to break out of our static paradigm of the Chinese Party-state and society locked in a dichotomous and zero-sum struggle. If our research leads us to conclude that there are substantial reasons for Chinese peasants to freely designate this decision-making authority to the village’s Party members, we might find that we need to revise our understandings of how ordinary Chinese people view the Party’s leadership, at least at the grassroots level. According to several sources cited in

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5 As David S. Goodman points out, the use of the term ‘cadre’ in Chinese politics is highly imprecise. Technically, a cadre is a “government or party official whose income is paid by the state,” although he points out that the term is often used as a general reference to leaders or leadership. “Used in general parlance,” he says, “the term ‘cadre’ conveys a meaning of political prestige and status, and particularly of association with the [Communist Party].” Although this point is not insignificant, because the sources consulted and cited in this study often employ ‘cadre’ to refer to village government leaders in a general sense, my usage will be consistent with those surveys. See David S. Goodman, “The Localism of Local Leadership Cadres in Reform Shanxi,” Journal of Contemporary China 9 (July 2000), pp. 159-84.
this study, the criteria for being a Party member in rural areas have changed quite dramatically, suggesting that the meaning of Party membership at the grassroots level is very much in flux.

**Scope of Research**

The geographic scope of this study is limited to the predominantly agriculture-based villages of China’s central ‘grain belt,’ also referred to as “middle income agricultural China.” The grain belt starts in Manchuria in the north and stretches down through the provinces of Hebei, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Anhui, Jiangxi and over into Sichuan Province. It also includes some areas of the Eastern coastal provinces that are remote from major metropolitan areas. Grain belt peasants cultivate many of China’s staple crops, although some also engage in cultivating tobacco, cotton, and other commercial crops. Although by no means a homogenous group, grain belt villages tend to be characterized by the following: they are inward-orientation in terms of their access to and dependence on economic resources and markets; they receive a low level of financial assistance from the state; they receive little outside investment, translating into few opportunities for non-agricultural income; and they are subject to high development targets imposed from above. In terms of major socio-economic variables, they are quite distinct from both the more industrialized and prosperous rural areas in China’s coastal provinces, and the poorer and agriculturally less developed areas of far Western and Southwestern China (Xinjiang, Tibet, Gansu and Qinghai, Yunnan).

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The present study is concerned with determining whether or not we should interpret the election of Party members to VCs as an outcome pre-determined independent of the peasants’ political preferences. The focus on grain belt villages will provide us with the greatest number of cases of a functioning village elections system. Jean Oi and Scott Rozelle hypothesize that:

“[L]ocal politics will be more active (that is, greater participation in local assemblies and contested elections) when the economic and social context of the village is such that villagers have an incentive to participate and leaders do not have an incentive to limit such activities. We propose two important sets of characteristics that define this context. First, as the economic ties of villagers become stronger with the world outside the village, interest in politics should be expected to diminish. In contrast, politics in more inward-oriented villages should be more active. Secondly, the more the economy is agriculture-dependent and reliant on its own resources, the higher will be the interest of farmers in local politics and the greater the likelihood that elected villagers’ committees will have power.”

Table 1. Varying degrees of interest in village politics, according to agricultural/industrial dependence and inward/outward economic orientation, (Oi and Rozelle, 2000)

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<tr>
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<th>Inward-orientation</th>
<th>Outward-orientation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Agricultural Dependence</strong></td>
<td>High degree of interest in village politics.</td>
<td>Medium degree of interest village politics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Industrial Dependence</strong></td>
<td>Medium degree of interest village politics.</td>
<td>Low degree of interest in village politics.</td>
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The time period considered in this study covers the entire post-Mao, reform period (1978 to present). Although scholars did not begin collecting hard data on Chinese village elections until after these elections were given legal sanction by the Chinese constitution (1987), the two conditions that shape voter preferences (economic insecurity and the changing nature of Party membership), were set in motion at the start

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of the reforms. The earliest published data on village elections used in this study were collected in 1990, and the most recent data were collected near the end of the 1990s. Because of the frequency of VC elections (elections are held every three years), the earliest studies in particular will not reflect the qualitative changes made in the elections process since then. Furthermore, the most recent studies will generally not reflect the implementation of several 1998 constitutional provisions related to open nomination procedures, secret balloting, and having more candidates than contested positions.\(^\text{10}\)

**Outline of the Paper**

I will begin with a sketch of the formal political power structure at the village level, followed by a brief overview of the Organic Law of Village Committees. I will then review two sets of studies that contribute to our understanding of Chinese village elections at both a substantive level and at a more abstract and theoretical level. I will use the first set of studies to address the question of whether we can consider village elections 'meaningful' in terms of both their process and outcome. I believe that the studies which argue for an expanded paradigm of meaningful elections establish quite clearly that China's village elections, and therefore their results, are significant indicators of meaningful peasant political participation. I will use the second set of studies, drawn from the rational peasant vs. moral economy debate in the peasant studies literature as an intellectual tool for understanding which socio-economic factors guide peasants' political behavior. The moral economy argument provides theoretical support for my contention that under conditions of economic insecurity, peasants avoid gambling on change for the sake of protecting what little they currently have. Finally, I

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will explain in finer detail the two causes of the high rate of Chinese peasants electing Party members to VCs: first, the combination of economic and agricultural policies that have raised peasants' uncertainties with respect to their incomes; and second, the changing criteria of Party membership at the grassroots level.

**Methodology**

Although the primary disciplinary framework of this study is political science, the closed and inward-oriented nature of grain belt villages means that we must treat each village as a "total environment" of social, cultural, political, and economic factors.\(^{11}\) This study, like other studies of agrarian societies, is therefore an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor which will draw primarily from political science and anthropology.\(^{12}\) I consult and cite several political science sources in which the authors observed first-hand both the process of electing VC members and the post-election VPB involvement with VCs. Although some studies on Chinese village elections are based on anecdotal information, the studies that anchor my argument have based their findings on data drawn from quite representative samples of the grain belt population. In some cases, data taken from grain belt villages is aggregated with non-grain belt villages, but I have tried to be careful about scrutinizing these sources for consistencies and inconsistencies.

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Research into Chinese village elections is still limited by the fact that to date, no independent scholar has conducted a survey of all grain belt villages.\(^{13}\) The sheer demographic and physical enormity of this area makes such a study almost a logistical impossibility for non-governmental researchers. Furthermore, there is tremendous variability in rural China in terms of the villagers’ level of income, their access to the non-agricultural income opportunities, their natural resources, and the quality of their local leadership, among other things, making it difficult to generalize about village elections from one village to another, even within the grain belt itself. Given these empirical limitations, I construct my argument as a conceptual one: rather than presenting hard data that proves that peasants \textit{willingly} and \textit{freely} vote for Party members, I offer a two-pronged explanation as to why, given their current political economy circumstances, they would consider voting for a Party member to be in their best interest.

**Notes on Usage of Terms**

For the sake of analytical consistency, I must clarify my usage of two terms. First, in the literature surveyed for and cited in this study, ‘villager’ and ‘peasant’ and ‘farmer’ are often used interchangeably, with no significant differentiation in their meanings. Because the object of my analysis is villagers whose incomes are concentrated in agricultural production, I will refer to those actors as ‘peasants,’ and will reserve the use of the term ‘villager’ for more general use, and for implying a more inclusive meaning in which residential criteria (living in a village) are more important than occupational

\(^{13}\) The only comprehensive statistics on grain belt villages are compiled by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA), the Chinese government’s bureaucratic arm responsible for implementing Chinese village elections. Because the MoCA has a vested interest in furthering the village elections cause, and because there may be some irregularities in their reporting procedures, such statistics can not be entirely relied upon for accuracy.
criteria. While acknowledging that in some usages the term ‘peasant’ (nongmin) denotes a derogatory bias, I adhere to Christiansen’s and Zhang’s argument that:

"It is not the word itself but the conceptualisation of the peasant category that is biased; seeking to hide the bias by using a different word [such as ‘farmer’] does nothing to change its real existence. The category ‘nongmin’ has created a social reality of administrative divisions and political discrimination in China, which means that we must use the terms ‘nongmin’ or ‘peasant’ in order to capture and understand this reality."14

Second, although ‘Party’ and ‘state’ and/or ‘government’ are separate entities, in practice they are often difficult to distinguish, particularly in the Chinese context. In the reality of village power politics, the Party often exerts influence through its involvement in (some would say dominance over) state institutions. Furthermore, the interests of the Party and the state often converge, making it difficult to disentangle one from the other, especially from the perspective of those beneath the formal hierarchy such as Chinese peasants. In such cases, I will simply use the term ‘Party-state.’

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14 Christiansen and Zhang, “Introduction: The Village Revisited,” in Christiansen and Zhang, eds., fn 1, pp. 20.
Background: The Political Power Structure at the Village Level

A typical Chinese village consists of somewhere between 200 and 400 households and an average population between 1,000 and 3,000 people. On paper, each village is governed by three “nodes” of formal political power: the VPB, including one Party secretary and two or three vice-secretaries; the VC, including a VC chair, vice-chair, and between one and five additional members elected from among the villagers themselves; and the Village Representative Assembly (VRA), an auxiliary body to the VC made up of one representative for every 10 to 12 households, or between 30 and 70 members, depending upon the size of the village.

Village governments are not formally part of the Party’s nomenklatura system of cadre management through which the Party delegates to itself the authority to “make key personnel decisions involving state cadres of any importance.” (The township level is the lowest level included in the nomenklatura system.) The VC’s exclusion from the nomenklatura ostensibly confers upon Chinese villages a degree of autonomy not enjoyed at other levels of government. Although the VPB is part of the nomenklatura system, the VPB and VC are technically distinct entities that form a dual authority structure with a clear division of responsibilities: the VPB is responsible for managing macro-level policy, including industrial development, and the VC responsible for micro-level administrative duties, including local agricultural matters. Who governs these two areas and how is of critical import to the villagers themselves, since

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18 Lawrence, pp. 63.
another distinguishing fact of villages is that unlike other levels of government, each village is largely self-reliant with respect to the “provision of benefits and services for its villagers.”

The scope of VC responsibilities and the procedures for choosing VC members are spelled out in the Organic Law of Village Committees in the Chinese Constitution (1987, revised 1998). Article 2 states that VCs are to form “a mass organization of self-government at the basic level, through which villagers manage their own affairs, educate themselves and service their own needs.” Although the precise range of responsibilities varies from village to village, provincial governments now require all VCs to

“draw up village development plans and annual production plans; coordinate and provide services to the private economy; manage village-owned land and other collective assets; administer on behalf of the state family planning, conscription, tax collection and state procurement plans; provide (primary) education, public health, old age care and poverty relief to the community; undertake construction and maintenance of public works, mediate civil disputes and assist the state public security authority to maintain law and order.”

Before holding VC elections, each village must form an election committee (also called an ‘election leading group’) to supervise all procedural matters related to the election. In some villages, the election committee is chosen democratically by the villagers themselves, although in other cases it is the incumbent VC members who form

20 Although village elections were first mentioned in the 1982 Constitution, the language describing their legal status and operational provisions was vague. It was not until 1987 that the National People’s Congress passed the Organic Law of Village Committees, setting in motion the broad implementation of village elections. In 1998, the Organic Law was revised to give greater procedural clarity and institutional certainty to the village elections system and to the purview of VC responsibilities.
21 Chan, pp. 237-38.
22 Ibid., pp. 238. According to Chan, “Even though the number of tasks each province requires the VC to perform may vary from over a dozen to about six or seven, they are in fact very similar.”
the election committee, a situation that is clearly less than ideal for those candidates hoping to challenge the incumbents. But, says Sylvia Chan, "regardless of how an election committee is constituted, it is usually headed by the head of the village party branch." Many villages have adopted the 'sea elections' nomination procedure by which any eligible village member can nominate another village member for VC candidacy. Often times the elections committee puts a ceiling on the total number of candidates that can run for VC positions, although the process of determining who will make the final list of candidates varies considerably across villages.

The Organic Law also provides for the establishment of VRAs, to which the VC is supposed to be answerable. The stated purpose of the VRA is to oversee the VC's finances and economic activities and other decisions. In some villages, the VRA is quite an active institution, with members meeting approximately once a month and operating with clearly defined responsibilities and a good deal of authority with respect to the VC. But in other cases, VRAs meet far less frequently and are merely rubber-stamping bodies for VC activities.

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23 Ibid., pp. 240-41.
24 Originally, the Organic Law stipulated that VCs would be answerable to Village Assemblies (VAs), which were to comprise all village members over the age of 18, or one adult representative from each household. But recognizing that calling a quorum of two-thirds of VA members was logistically nearly impossible given the distances many would have to travel to attend, VRAs were established in response to those difficulties. By 1996, approximately half of China's villages had established VRAs. See Chan, pp. 243, and Jude Howell, "Prospects for Village Self-Governance in China," The Journal of Peasant Studies 25, no. 3 (April 1998), pp. 94.
25 Lawrence, pp. 64.
26 Howell, pp. 101.
Theoretical support for my argument that the high number of Party members on VCs is, at least in significant part, a fair indication of villagers’ political preferences, requires a two-part approach. First, we must establish that the VC elections, once they reach a reasonable standard of openness and fairness, offer villagers a meaningful choice from among the selection of candidates. Second, we must establish that villagers have concrete reasons to choose Party members to govern and represent them on VCs.

The first debate over the substance of Chinese village elections, addresses the question of whether this new village institution constitutes a significant departure from the Mao-era rural political power structure. Some take a highly skeptical view, citing evidence of incumbent cadres taking advantage of the elections system’s imperfections to consolidate their power at the expense of villagers. Others argue that despite those imperfections, the elections still offer voters a choice of candidates, and therefore the power to shape elected cadres’ behaviors in ways that serve the villagers’ interests.

Do China’s Village Elections Offer Voters Meaningful Choices?

If we conclude that the elections offer villagers meaningful choices, how can we expect them to use their voting opportunity? The second and more abstract set of debates addresses how we are to understand peasants’ orientation toward risk under certain socio-economic circumstances. The rational peasant approach argues that as rational problem solvers, peasants are constantly seeking ways to augment their own material positions. This ‘rational’ orientation makes them positively predisposed to risk, so long as they have reason to believe there could be a significant payoff. The moral economy approach argues, conversely, that peasants’ limited personal material and financial
resources make gambling with what little they have not at all 'rational.' Rather, peasants are risk-averse actors whose material vulnerabilities urge caution and conservatism in their behaviors.27 Below I briefly consider both sides of each debate. Do village elections empower peasants in the governing of affairs that matter to them most? If so, how can we expect peasants to use that newly acquired power to further their own interests?

Jonathan Unger argues that although Deng’s rural reforms transformed the Chinese countryside economically, the “contours” of China’s rural political system have in fact changed little in the post-Mao era.28 If anything, he says, the central Party-state’s direct oversight over village-level cadres has receded, allowing incumbent leaders to establish “new bases of power, often to the detriment of villagers.”29 Under these circumstances, the VPB secretary has emerged as the most powerful person in the village, effectively trumping the VC’s power and rendering the exercise of village elections irrelevant.30 Even if elections are conducted somewhat democratically, the power of the elections’ winners is neutralized by the VPB’s overriding authority. Unger concludes that the post-Mao rural political system is little more than “old wine in new bottles.”31

Bjorn Alpermann echoes this view, adding that the VPB, often working in tandem with the township government, interferes unduly with both the elections process

27 The rational peasant-moral economy debate is fundamentally over whether rational self-interest or village morals of reciprocity and mutual assistance govern peasant choices, and how those orientations determine peasants’ receptiveness to collective action. For the purposes of this study, I will narrow my focus to what each side of the debate says about peasants’ orientation toward risk.
28 Unger, pp. 1.
29 Ibid., pp. 197.
30 Ibid., pp. 221.
31 Ibid., pp. 197.
and the post-election composition of village self-government bodies.\textsuperscript{32} Alpermann is mostly concerned with two ways in which the VPB interferes in the VC's post-election composition. First, it determines who among the winners will serve as VC chair. It is not at all uncommon for the VPB to choose a victorious Party member (often the VPB chair or vice-chair himself) to be VC chair, a practice so common, some say, that it almost goes unquestioned.\textsuperscript{33} Second, the VPB inserts additional members into VCs and VC subcommittees in order to tip the balance in favor of the Party.\textsuperscript{34} In effect, the VPB and VC form not a dual authority structure, but a single authority structure "with an internal division of responsibilities."\textsuperscript{35} Alpermann points out that rather than being a matter of secrecy, the VPB's intended role in village government is expressed quite clearly.

"The 1987 Organic Law did not mention the village Party branches, but a host of official documents acknowledged their role as the 'leadership core' in village organizations and explicitly stipulated a leadership relationship with the village committees. The role was confirmed by a clause in the 1998 Organic Law, article 3, which provided a strong reminder that self-administration should not be taken to mean a relinquishing of the Party's claim to leadership in the villages."\textsuperscript{36}

According to his line of argument, the most troubling reality is that because it is the VPB's and township government's decisions that ultimately count in who participates

\textsuperscript{32} Sylvia Chan and others have pointed out that the township government has a strong interest in who gets elected to VCs because it (the township government) is accountable for how effectively the village leaders implement and enforce top-down policies. See Chan, pp. 241.


\textsuperscript{34} Alpermann, pp. 53.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., pp. 46.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., pp. 46-47.
in village government, VC members remain the agents of those two bodies, rather than of the voters.\(^{37}\)

But if the entire process is by design little more than a façade, why devote the resources and political capital to making the village elections system better? Do elections merely serve propaganda purposes, or are there other interests at work? The answer, says Daniel Kelliher, is rooted in the logic of the China’s reform-era political economy. For more than 30 years, village cadres were appointed based on their political and ideological credentials rather than on their professional merits. At the time the Deng government launched its rural economic reforms, village leadership as a whole was deficient in the types of skills required to make the reforms successful. Kelliher says,

“The [Chinese Party-state’s] argument for elections is purely practical: if you want to get younger, educated, technically able people into office, then let villagers make the selection from their own ranks. They are bound to choose more intelligently than the bureaucratic hacks who have appointed village cadres up to now. Why? Because, proponents argue, villagers will vote almost exclusively on the basis of economic interests. For their own selfish good, they will choose smart, energetic, entrepreneurial people who can make the community richer – just the sort of dynamic leaders the state wants.”\(^{38}\)

In other words, the elections for village leaders were an important new quality control device for the central leadership.

Yet the elections will only serve a quality control purpose if the system is truly open to identifying the best local talent. Many find optimism in Kelliher’s point that popular selection of village leaders is in both the villagers’ and the central Party-state’s interests. Entrenched village cadres’ using the system to their own advantage is therefore in conflict with the center’s desire for the elections to be a mechanism for

\(^{37}\) Ibid., pp. 65.

\(^{38}\) Kelliher, pp. 69.
identifying a village’s most effective rulers. To that end, the Chinese government has improved the legislation related to village self-government, as reflected in the 1998 constitutional provisions to the Organic Law. Although many concede that the elections system is still very much a work in progress, there is no shortage of examples of Chinese villages conducting elections in accordance with the Organic Law’s stipulations. 39

Robert Pastor and Qingshan Tan caution against assessing elections categorically as either legitimate or not legitimate, saying that “just because the village elections are not fully free or fair, and some do not transfer complete authority, one should not conclude that they are unfree, unfair and meaningless.” 40 These criteria should be amended to reflect the way in which people, in practice, approach elections. Many who exercise their right to vote do so not to vote for someone or something, but to vote against someone or something. Instead of viewing an election as a “right to choose,” it may be more apt to say that an election is a “right to replace [incumbent] leaders at regular intervals.” This “replacement factor,” say Pastor and Tan, “acts as the glue that keeps the leaders accountable. If they do something wrong or do not measure up to their constituents’ expectations, they will lose the next election. An election should not be judged on whether the people do replace their leaders, however; only by whether they can” (emphasis in original). 41 If a candidate, including a Party member, is

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39 Some scholars have argued that the gradual approach has been by design. Tianjian Shi calls this a deliberate “Fabian” or “foot in the door” approach that the MoCA and other interested parties have taken as a way to avoid direct opposition. See Tianjian Shi, “Village Committee Elections: Institutionalist Tactics for Democracy,” World Politics 51 (April 1999), pp. 385-412.


41 Pastor and Tan, pp. 506.
able to win an election through his or her personal aptitude and qualifications, then the process can be said to be working.\textsuperscript{42}

Melanie Manion found that when village elections were at least semi-competitive, the successful candidates’ positions were noticeably more congruent with the villagers’ positions than was the case in non-competitive elections. The reason, according to Manion, is simple: “Competition pushes candidates toward the constituency center to capture votes.” \textsuperscript{43} And once elected, those VC members must remain quite consistent with the positions by which they were elected, since they will be subject to reelection in just three short years. Those VC members who satisfy the wishes of their superiors at the VPB and township at the expense of the wishes of their village constituents cannot expect to be reelected. Furthermore, Manion points out that since from the Party’s perspective, one of the main reasons for holding elections is to improve its image among rural residents, “the system is configured so that local Party committees want to select candidates who will win, ideally with a margin of victory big enough to legitimate the Party choice.” \textsuperscript{44}

\textit{How Do Peasants Respond to Risk?}

All of the analyses reviewed above generally neglect the role of the villagers themselves.\textsuperscript{45} Does this suggest villager passivity or mere compliance in the elections process? To the contrary, the ‘rational peasant’ and ‘moral economy’ arguments each

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., pp. 509.
\textsuperscript{43} Melanie Manion, “The Electoral Connection in the Chinese Countryside,” \textit{American Political Science Review} 90, no. 4 (December 1996), pp. 741.
\textsuperscript{44} Manion (2000), pp. 764-65.
\textsuperscript{45} In previous writings, Kellihner has generally attributed greater power and proactivity to peasants, and has been quite optimistic about their ability to steer their own course. (See Kellihner, \textit{Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1978-89}, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.) In fact, in “The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government,” he ends on an optimistic note, pointing out that in the past, democracy has often emerged “by accident.” Overall, his article is therefore somewhat more balanced.
describe peasant actors as having very clear notions of their own interests and deliberate
strategies for furthering those interests. Samuel Popkin argues that peasants are first and
foremost rational problem-solvers whose behaviors are driven by their interest in
maximizing their own utility. In pursuit of this goal, they are guided by an “investment
logic,”46 which applies to both market and non-market activities.47 This investment
logic encourages them to respond positively and proactively to new opportunities, even
if it means incurring some risk.48 In societies that are experiencing modernizing change
and upward mobility, peasants are especially willing to take such a risk because they
start to see their futures and personal prospects as manipulable, rather than determined
by other more powerful actors and forces.49

James C. Scott refutes the notion that peasants are willing to incur risk for the
sake of a payoff, emphasizing that many peasants’ material circumstances do not permit
them to engage in such risky behaviors.50 Many peasants, including China’s grain belt
peasants, practice “subsistence production,” in which there is very little surplus and thus
very little available for reinvestment. This makes it difficult for these peasants to
enlarge their scale of operations.51 If they suffer an unexpected production loss due to
weather conditions, falling market prices for their goods, rising cost of inputs, or other

46 Samuel L. Popkin, The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam, Berkeley:
47 Ibid., pp. 4.
48 Ibid., pp. 33.
49 Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East, New York: The Free
50 Scott refers to peasants’ material circumstances as being on or near the “subsistence margin.” I
distinguish here between subsistence existence and subsistence production. With the former, subsistence
refers to a living level that is a minimum for survival.” With the latter, subsistence refers to “a low degree
of commercialization or monetization.” In the case of China, it would be inaccurate to talk about grain belt
peasants being vulnerable to subsistence existence, but more so to talk of them as being vulnerable to
subsistence production. See Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., ed., Subsistence Agriculture and Economic
51 Eric R. Wolf, in Rogers, pp. 21.
factors, they risk falling into the more perilous ‘subsistence existence.’ In which their very physical survival is in jeopardy.52 Faced with such vulnerabilities, these peasants typically follow a “safety first” principle toward risk.53 This is not to say that peasants never take risks, but that they erect a “defensive perimeter” around their behaviors and choices because the potentially catastrophic (and possibly life-threatening) consequences of miscalculation.54 What earlier peasant studies scholars assumed was a lack of innovativeness is actually risk-aversion that is rational in their subsistence-level lives.55 Because of the microcosmic nature of many villages, political, social, and economic forces are all highly interconnected. Therefore what at first glance looks like a political choice very quickly becomes a social and economic choice as well.

52 This is not to suggest that a significant number of Chinese peasants risk starvation, but rather that socio-economic uncertainties means that they can no longer take it for granted as before.
54 Scott, pp. 24-25.
55 Everett M. Rogers produced a list of ten characteristics that form a “subculture of peasantry.” These characteristics are: mutual distrust in interpersonal relations; perceived limited good; dependence on and hostility toward government authority; familism; lack of innovativeness; fatalism; limited aspiration; lack of deferred gratification; limited view of the world; and low empathy. See Rogers, Modernization among Peasants: The Impact of Communication, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969, pp. 25.
Interpreting the Party’s Strong Showing in Village Elections

To many, it seems anathema that peasants would willingly vote for Party members to handle matters that are of such critical consequence to them. At the macro level, Chinese peasants have fared quite poorly under the Party’s leadership. Most notably, the Party-state’s grave mishandling of the rapid communization effort of the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) resulted in a humanitarian disaster that ultimately claimed the lives of 20 to 30 million rural Chinese.\(^{56}\) And more recently, the combined impact of the Party-state’s rural economic reforms have left many grain belt peasants economically disadvantaged compared to other Chinese, both urban and rural. At the more local level, the Mao-era’s legacy of the ideology-based appointments left in place many corrupt and ineffective local cadres whose decisions with respect to their village office has often had as much, if not more to do with enriching themselves and their cohorts than with the social and economic well-being of the village. Given these two realities, why would peasants see it in their best interest to vote for Party members?

The explanation lies in a combination of two factors. First, although peasants operate in a broader context of economic growth, a combination of agricultural and economic factors has made those households whose income is concentrated in agricultural production particularly vulnerable. Briefly, these factors are: fluctuating prices for agricultural goods; rising prices for agricultural inputs; a burdensome and often unpredictable tax system; and a loan system that is biased against those with the

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\(^{56}\) In a few scattered cases, peasants also suffered from the violent political repression of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Although long believed to be mostly an urban phenomenon, scholars have recently revisited reports of political violence and repression conducted against peasants during this period. See Jonathan Unger, “Cultural Revolution Conflict in the Villages,” *The China Quarterly* 153 (March 1998), pp. 82-106; and Andrew G. Walder and Yang Su, “The Cultural Revolution in the Countryside: Scope, Timing and Human Impact,” *The China Quarterly* 173 (March 2003), pp. 74-99.
few material assets. Now that peasants deal with the state on these matters directly through their own households rather than through commune-era production teams, their impact is more visible and felt more directly. In this type of situation, peasants' sense of insecurity and uncertainty generally makes them more conservative in their choices. This is consistent with a "minimax" strategy of minimizing risks and uncertainties, then trying to maximize opportunities and benefits within the existing political contours. Predictability is at a premium, and knowing what the system is, they can work the system to their minimum disadvantage.  

Second, the very nature of Party membership has changed, particularly at the village level. What was once a membership that was highly infused with ideological meaning has shifted to one that values entrepreneurship and administrative and economic management skills. This reflects the broader and more fundamental shift in top-down policy from socialist transformation to balanced economic growth. The focus on economic growth demands that the state’s local agents possess certain professional abilities. Whereas adherence to Party dogma was once highly prized, proven ability to bring about sustained growth and manage social discontent is now highly prized. Taken to its logical conclusion, if what it means to be a Party member has changed, then so has what it means to vote for one. If a villager votes for a new Party member, or even an older Party member who has exhibited these skills, his vote is not tantamount to voting for the status quo, but rather a vote for progress and change. While

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this is certainly not true across the board, the change in the Party’s post-Mao economic priorities makes this increasingly so.

A Mixed Picture of Economic Growth

To understand how it is possible for peasants to feel vulnerable in a context of generally rising incomes, we must consider how the rural reforms have changed the economic arrangements under which peasant households operate. At the start of the Mao era, the collectivization of land and agricultural inputs such as farm equipment and draft animals eliminated differences in personal ownership of assets, leaving only differences in labor power as a factor economically distinguishing one peasant from another. But even this difference was leveled by the Dazhai work-point system which awarded work points based largely on fairly abstract ideological criteria rather than on a worker’s actual performance.\(^{59}\) Despite different abilities and work ethics, there was a “narrow range of differentiation in work-point payments” allotted to workers.\(^{60}\) This imposed equality changed little in the decade leading up to the reforms. In return, peasants were guaranteed a minimum level of subsistence, unsatisfactory as it may have seemed. This is not to say that inequality was nonexistent under the commune system; many enterprising (some might say opportunistic) peasants augmented their meager living standards by entering into clientelistic relationships with local elites,\(^{61}\) and by engaging in hidden agricultural production activities in China’s black or “grey” market.\(^{62}\) But

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\(^{62}\) Oi (1985), pp. 306; Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger define the “grey” economy as comprising those activities which were only semi-legal, though tolerated by the authorities because the goods and services the grey market provided were necessary for the broader economy’s smooth functioning. See Chan and
these individualistic gains were kept to a relative minimum by the highly restrictive ideological environment of the Mao Zedong government which demonized ostentatious displays of wealth.

The communes also held a virtual monopoly over the village’s (then brigade) most basic resources such as food, capital, social and educational services, and other scarce commodity goods. In theory, the commune was simply the sum of its parts: the ‘people,’ or commune members themselves. But in reality the commune authorities, appointed by higher-ups in the Party-state, controlled virtually all production decisions and had exclusive access to the provision of these basic goods and services. The Party-state’s top-down organization and control over rural residents and their productive activities facilitated the heavy extraction from the peasants and made it less visible than it is now. Furthermore, the government stabilized prices for agricultural products and inputs, thereby stabilizing rural incomes as well, albeit at very low levels.

After Mao’s death in 1976, the communes disintegrated and were formally abolished soon thereafter. Communes became townships and production brigades (sometimes called simply ‘brigades’) became administrative villages. The government replaced the commune system with the Household Responsibility System (HRS) whereby agricultural land was distributed administratively to individual households, usually based on the number of people in that household. Although the households were not given ownership over the land, per se, they were given longer-term leases (between 15 and 30 years) for its use. The economic logic behind the HRS was to encourage

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Unger, “Grey and Black: The Hidden Economy of Rural China,” *Pacific Affairs* 55, no. 3 (Fall 1982), pp. 452.

Shi, 2000, pp. 10.

peasant households to invest greater time, resources and energy into their land to increase overall agricultural production. Hy Van Luong and Unger say this post-commune land distribution was tantamount to "an egalitarian land reform, leaving in its wake communities of small independent farmers," also called 'smallholders'.

Significantly, many non-land agricultural resources, such as machinery and irrigation infrastructure, remained the collective property of the village, and the provision of their use fell under the purview of the village government.

Under the HRS, the state reserved the right to procure a certain quota of household's production and allowed households to keep any above-quota product to either sell at local markets or to keep for their own consumption. The state also permitted households "to engage in a wider variety of private sideline activities which could account for an unrestricted share of their incomes." Broadly speaking, the economic impact of the abandonment of the commune system for the adoption of the HRS has been threefold. First, the majority of peasants have enjoyed an overall increase in their household incomes. Second, the wider variety of permissible economic activities has led to an increase in the village's economic complexity. Third, the devolution of responsibility for collective assets has given villagers themselves more direct control over these resources.

But the impact of the reforms on grain belt village households has not been all positive. Because of the small size of the plots of land allocated according to the HRS,

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66 Putterman, pp. 299.
67 Putterman, pp. 299.
and because of their limited financial means and capacity to organize themselves into a viable interest groups, rural households quickly reached the limit of their economic possibilities. After an early surge in peasant incomes of approximately 10 per cent annually during the first years of the rural reforms, peasant incomes tapered off quite dramatically. Although rural per capita incomes are difficult to determine because of the wide variability across grain belt areas and by the upward statistical distortion by each level of government, one study of two grain belt areas estimates that since 1985, per capita income grew at about 2 per cent per year, and in some areas, actually declined 2 per cent per year. Several factors account for this mixed picture. These factors are: fluctuating prices for grain and other agricultural products; steadily rising prices of agricultural inputs; a “sub-optimal” system of credit for middle-income peasant households; and an arbitrary and often abusive system of taxation and levying fees. Compounding the problem is that many peasants’ efforts to expand their earning potential by engaging in non-agricultural work (which tends to be more lucrative and less vulnerable to price fluctuations), are stymied by the fact that such opportunities are still relatively scarce in most non-coastal rural areas.

First, although the central government raised grain prices several times since 1979, the initial price was already artificially low. The central government remains committed to keeping the grain supply stable and grain prices low as a type of subsidy.

70 Jean C. Oi, “Two Decades of Rural Reform in China: An Overview and Assessment,” The China Quarterly 159 (September 1999), pp. 617; Luong and Unger, pp. 68.
71 For a closer look at how and why local levels of government exaggerate rural per capital incomes, see Yongshun Cai, “Between State and Peasant: Local Cadres and Statistical Reporting in Rural China,” The China Quarterly 163 (September 2000), pp. 783-805.
to urban areas, a policy which is consistent with the Mao era. And the early rises in the procurement price of grain encouraged peasants to produce large amounts, causing a glut of grain production which forced the price down and even prevented some peasants from being able to sell their harvests.\textsuperscript{73} Second, the cost of agricultural inputs has risen steadily throughout the reform era.\textsuperscript{74} Even when peasants can afford fertilizers and farm chemicals, these inputs often do not yield the maximum productive benefits because the local water supply system, which is critical to the use of fertilizers, is under-funded and underdeveloped.\textsuperscript{75}

Third, peasants have limited access to credit which could help them expand their productive capacities. Rural credit markets for are generally underdeveloped, limiting the total financial resources available to rural residents to “sub-optimal levels.”\textsuperscript{76} Institutional constraints on peasants’ access to credit include a “wager on the strong bias,” meaning that the government favors ‘specialized’ (read: prosperous) households simply because they are already generating a high income and therefore more likely to be able to re-pay their loans.\textsuperscript{77} Credit is considered a scarce resource, and villages, more than any other level of government, are forced to be self-reliant in funding economic

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{73} Jean C. Oi, “Two Decades of Rural Reform in China: An Overview and Assessment,” The China Quarterly 159 (September 1999), pp. 619.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., pp. 619.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{75} Rozelle (1994), pp. 111; Oi (1999), pp. 619.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{77} Luong and Unger, pp. 85; Jean C. Oi, “Peasant Households between Plan and Market,” Modern China 12, no. 2 (1986), pp. 240-41.}
Oi’s research suggests that on the whole, smaller-scale village projects receive a disproportionately small share of state credit allocated by the township government.\(^78\)

Fourth, and perhaps the most serious, is the economic burden in the form of rural taxes and levies. One study suggests that the tax rate for well-off rural households is approximately half that of poorer households. Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lu found even more dramatic disparities in rates of taxation; a 1996 study revealed that peasants whose annual income was 400-500 yuan had a tax burden of 16.7%, whereas the burden for those whose annual income was between 4,500-5000 yuan was only 2.8%.\(^79\) One reason this tax system is regressive in practice, say Luong and Unger, is that “taxes are largely on land, which each family in a village, rich or poor, possesses in relatively proportionate measure, while non-agricultural sources of income are lightly taxed, if at all.”\(^80\) Although the central government put an official cap on taxation of rural households at 5 per cent, local governments often exceed this amount by slapping additional fees and levies on peasants for a variety of goods and services. From the peasants’ perspective, the most conspicuous and resented practice is imposing the “three unrulies” (sanluan), for things such as issuing licenses or registrations of births and marriages, and other generally minor services or infractions.\(^81\)

Many local governments defend their imposition of these fees by pointing out that village governments usually have only two major sources of revenue for village projects: profits from the village’s collective enterprises and taxes and levies on


\(^80\) Luong and Unger, pp. 86.

\(^81\) Bernstein and Lu, pp. 743.
households. In grain belt villages, the only substantial taxable resource is agricultural production. As a result, peasant households seek non-farm income opportunities to spread their financial risk to various sources of income, but access to off-farm wage employment is highly uneven among households, with those opportunities going to those with the best family and other personal network connections.

The aggregate affect of these pricing, credit, and taxation factors has been a "disequalizing" of rural incomes, which is now officially permitted under the reform-era policy of 'letting some get rich first.' In a 19-province survey of income inequality in rural China, Khan and Riskin found that for Chinese peasants as a whole, the bulk of total income came from farm production, with wages comprising the second largest source of income. For wealthier households, wages and other forms of non-farm employment formed a greater (and increasing) percentage of their income. For poorer households, their main source of income continued to be farming. Although most peasants are not poorer in absolute terms, they feel poorer in relative terms. In other words, they measure their material well-being against that of others. Even more troubling for Party-state officials is that peasants can now compare their own standards of living to those of urban residents, something which was all but forbidden under the

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82 Sylvia Chan, pp. 239.
83 Luong and Unger, pp. 79.
85 Ibid., pp. 226-27. Khan and Riskin create a much more complex and detailed composite of rural income (pp. 224-25), but roughly consider the following to be the most critical components of rural income: net income from farming; income from wages, pensions and other forms of compensation for labor; and net income from income from property (rental of land and/or houses). Yunxiang Yan, based on surveys of his peasant research subjects, came up with another way of conceptualizing a household's economic position. He includes: "1) primary tools of production; 2) farm machinery and/or draft animals; 3) milk cows or other important capital for family sidelines; 4) private enterprises; 5) housing; 6) savings in cash and/or grain; and 7) consumer durables." See Yan, "The Impact of Rural Reform on Economic and Social Stratification in a Chinese Village," The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs 27 (January 1992), pp. 9.
86 Khan and Riskin, pp. 240.
hukou, or system of residential registration, of the commune era that made rural-urban and rural-rural movement extremely difficult. The hukou restrictions have been relaxed substantially, allowing more and more peasants first or second-hand accounts of the far greater prosperity of China’s cities.

But the question remains as to how these negative impacts on grain belt households translates into their support for Party members in VC elections. Scott has argued that economic uncertainty and feelings of material vulnerability compel peasants to adopt the “safety-first” principle with respect to any decision which may change the terms of their local political economy. This is not tantamount to enthusiastic approval for the current arrangements, but rather recognition that unknown alternatives may be worse. Indeed, if peasants are aware that others, even other rural residents, have fared much better under the reforms, they are also well aware that still others have fared more poorly. These poorer peasants serve as a constant reminder that things can get worse for them and they therefore need to make decisions that protect them from further loss.

This is not to say that peasants will not support non-Party candidates; on average of 20 to 30 percent of elected VC members are not Party members. But extensive campaigning is not permitted by the Organic Law, with the exception of a brief speech by each candidate on the day of the elections, so if a VC candidate can get elected without the institutional support that Party membership brings, he must therefore have an independent base of villager support. That base of support may simply derive from his proven leadership and/or administrative capabilities in some previous informal leadership capacity. But it is equally likely that his base of support derives from his lineage, or family ties. The benefit of being part of a network of lineage ties is that it
gives one exclusive access to opportunities or resources, such as personal loans, moral support during crises, or other forms of assistance that may otherwise be difficult to obtain. Peasants who are outside of that network would not see it in their interest to vote for a village member who may end up being more preferential than Party members in terms of distributing resources and opportunities. Party members themselves may be part of such lineage networks, but their official positions give other villagers the right to scrutinize their wielding of political and economic power through participation in the VRA. And the central Party’s interest in improving its image among rural constituents means that higher levels of the Party-state will probably not tolerate more local-levels’ efforts to resist such popular oversight. According to Tyrene White:

"in some rural villages, the party, whatever its limitations, may be the only force that can restrain the power of a strong local clan or village faction that has come to dominate village life at the expense of the weak and vulnerable. From abroad, the party is easily perceived as the only political bully on the block. But other bullies have emerged in recent years as the power of local party branches has declined. For example, complaints are already being heard about attempts by clans to dominate local elections by engaging in intimidation and vote buying. In villages where this is the case, a strong and uncorrupted party presence would be a welcome improvement, especially if it could eliminate clan violence and break up criminal gangs."

In essence, voting for Party members is consistent with a “minimax” strategy of maximizing control over their immediate environment while incurring only a minimum

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of risk. Having a majority of Party members running the village government may not be the ideal situation for peasants, but as Pastor and Tan suggest, in reality elections do not often offer voters ideal choices. Instead, voters typically choose candidates (or in some systems, a political Party) they feel will be least inimical to their interests. White reinforces the notion that peasants’ preferences in choosing VCs is not a matter of ideology, but of pragmatism. She says that ultimately what villagers want in a leader is the same as what most other people want: “someone who is honest, competent, capable of improving the local economy, and efficient and thrifty with tax money.” Depending on the circumstances within any given village, voters may calculate that a candidate with Party membership will be an asset in dealing with pressures from township and county officials and in attracting industries to the village, thereby bringing greater possibilities for non-farm work.

The Changing Nature of What It Means to Be a Party Member at the Village Level

Finally, we must rid ourselves of the tendency to assume that selecting from a list of VC candidates, most of whom are Party members, is tantamount to choosing from among a list of like-minded individuals. The meaning of Party membership has shifted qualitatively and the valued criteria for membership have broadened as a result of the economic reform effort. This is especially true at the village level, where cadres need to be generalists who oversee a wide variety of social, economic, and political concerns. Furthermore, Party membership has long been a status that opens important doors for otherwise politically weak and institutionally powerless (relatively speaking) rural actors. Now that rural Party membership officially values traits such as economic entrepreneurship, such villagers may seek to join the Party as a way to augment their

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professional possibilities. In addition, the Party now tries to recruit non-Party members who succeed in village elections because these individuals have already shown that they have won the support of villagers.91 The Party-state at all levels believes that popular support will make it easier for those candidates to enforce unpopular state policies with a minimum of resistance. Even if they are recruited into the Party," says Howell, "this may still accelerate a process of change within the Party, and in particular a greater openness towards more participatory, if not necessarily competitive, forms of rule."92 Sylvia Chan refers to this as "societization," or penetration of the Party by members of society. This penetration, she contends, will help push the transformation of the Party from within, at least at the village level.93

Most villagers expect and even tacitly accept that village leaders, both Party and non-Party, will use their official positions for some degree of personal profit.94 But now that elections serve as an accountability mechanism, elected cadres must be much more cautious than before about the extent to which they use their office for personal enrichment. Villages are small and insular places with a high degree of personal familiarity, significantly lowering the cost of information for other villagers.95 The incentive for that leader, assuming he wants to be re-elected, to avoid abusing his position for self-enrichment is therefore fairly high.96 Furthermore, each village’s relative isolation means that all villagers, including elected cadres, can expect to have to

91 Howell, pp. 91.
92 Ibid., pp. 105.
93 Chan, pp. 251.
96 Pei, pp. 127.
interact with each other well into the future. Changes in the Party's criteria for rural members signify that the nature of the Party's village-level leaders, and therefore village leadership, has changed in often underappreciated ways. If the central Party-state values skills such as entrepreneurial ability and aptitude in economic management, and the villagers who possess those skills are also those seeking and receiving Party membership, then it is likely that those Party members elected to VCs would likely be elected regardless of whether they are Party members.

97 Little, pp. 41.
Conclusion

For many academic observers of Chinese village elections, one of the most troubling outcomes has been the disproportionately high percentage of Party members elected to Village Committees. Many of these observers have interpreted this as a sign that the Party is manipulating both the elections process and village government bodies to further their own aims, irrespective of villagers' political preferences. I have challenged that assumption by emphasizing the role of two reform-era factors: socio-economic insecurity among many grain belt peasants; and the changing nature of Party membership, particularly at the village level.

First, any income gains accrued to peasants from the rural economic reforms have been highly vulnerable to economic and agricultural policies such as artificially low grain prices, fluctuating prices of agricultural inputs, unpredictable taxation, and scarce access to rural micro-credit. The uncertainty caused by these policies circumscribes the range of choices available to peasants when choosing village leaders. Opting for leadership with which they are familiar, namely local Party members, is preferable to leadership which is relatively unfamiliar. The reason is that peasants under socio-economic duress want to minimize any further risk by avoiding further uncertainty. Although that leadership may not be ideal for peasants, familiarity permits them to know how they may maximize the benefits to themselves within that system.

Second, we should not interpret voting for Party members to be a vote for the status quo. As I have discussed above, the re-ordering of political economy priorities under the Deng Xiaoping government has required local Party members, particularly village leaders with their wide range of responsibilities, to have professional skills that
support economic growth. These are also precisely the type of leaders peasants would generally support. Although the Party’s interests are not congruent with the peasants’ interests in all areas of policy, on the question of increasing economic opportunities they are quite congruent. And although the current Party membership at the village level is comprised of a mix of newer, younger, and more entrepreneur-minded individuals and older status-quo minded individuals, the more opportunities peasants have to exercise the “right to reject,” the more that balance will tilt in favor of the former.

What this study does not suggest is that China is inexorably moving towards an electoral system that even remotely resembles the liberal democratic elections in Western states. Rather than having multi-party elections with differentiated policy platforms, village elections in their current incarnation can only hope to become a more fair and open contest between Party and non-Party individuals, or more likely, different Party individuals, who campaign not on differing policy views, but on their own ability to implement existing policy fairly and effectively. Nevertheless we cannot say that these elections do not impact Chinese peasants’ lives in perceptible and positive ways. Because VC members are subject to increasingly legitimate elections every three years, they cannot afford to ignore the interests of their village constituents. While VC members must still balance those interests with the central Party-state’s interests, the elections give villagers a mechanism for registering their collective voice.

Students of Chinese rural politics should look forward to more recent and upcoming studies of village elections which will reflect the 1998 constitutional provisions for procedural and functional aspects of village elections and government. If peasants are able to maximize the opportunities afforded them by these legal changes, it
should not come as a surprise to see VC leaders taking on more of an advocacy role for their rural constituents. This may not translate into a peasant role in *creating* policy, per se, but rather in vetoing, through non-compliance, certain extremes of policy that adversely affect peasant livelihoods. At a minimum, twenty years of practicing elections has made the change in choosing village leaders nearly irreversible. The extent to which peasants are ultimately empowered by this new system of choosing village leaders has yet to be seen.
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