

**GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN CHINA: POWER,  
PARTICIPATION AND PROBLEMS, 1998- 2010**

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**DECLARATION**

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**Grassroots Democracy in China: Power, Participation and Problems, 1998- 2010**” submitted by me in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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## Abbreviations

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| BBC   | British Broadcasting Corporation                  |
| CASS  | Chinese Academy of Social Sciences                |
| CCP   | Chinese Communist Party                           |
| CRSBG | China Research Society of Basic- Level Governance |
| CUPL  | Chinese University of Politics and Law            |
| CVE   | Committee for Village Embellishment               |
| LAO   | Legal Affairs Office                              |
| MCA   | Ministry of Civil Affairs                         |
| NPC   | National People's Congress                        |
| OLVC  | Organic Law of Villagers' Committee               |
| PRC   | People's Republic of China                        |
| SCIO  | State Council Information Office                  |
| SWB   | Summary of World Broadcasts                       |
| TAR   | Tibet Autonomous Region                           |
| UN    | United Nations                                    |
| VC    | Villagers Committee                               |
| VEC   | Village Election Committee                        |
| VRA   | Villager Representative Assembly                  |
| WTO   | World Trade Organisation                          |

# Chapter I

## Introduction

China is undergoing an incredible transition in its economy, society and global politics. As David Shambaugh articulates, “everywhere one turns, China is in news-gobbling up resources, soaking up investment, expanding its overseas profile, throwing its weight around Asian neighbourhood, being the sought- after suitor in global governance diplomacy, sailing its navy into new waters, broadening its global cultural presence, and managing a mega- economy that is the engine of global growth” (Shambaugh 2011: 1). Yet, things are not quite well in China. International observers are critical of human rights violations in China. Rising social unrest, including protests, demonstrations, picketing, and group petitioning in the recent years indicates increasing dissatisfaction among people. According to China’s official sources, “public order disturbances” reported in 2005 were 87,000, which is an increase of 6.6 percent increase over 2004’s figure of 81,600 (*People’s Daily*: 20 January 2006). Amidst all this, the silver lining is the evolution of grassroots democracy whose success will have far reaching implications for its political system in the years to come.

Grassroots democracy in China is a manifestation of the political liberalisation undertaken by the Chinese leadership. This study looks at the evolution of grassroots democracy in China. While it is debatable what the real motivations were for the Chinese government to initiate village democracy in the first place, many scholars seem to agree that it is an effective instrument used by the Chinese government to stabilize the rural society, which saw great tension between cadres and peasants in the aftermath of the 1978 economic reforms. Democracy was not on the minds of Chinese leaders in the 1970s and in fact, some leaders were afraid that village democracy might cause more chaos in rural China. However, twenty years after village election was put forth as national policy, a more democratic rural society wherein village elections are held and leaders are accountable to the interests of peasants who are able

to participate in village affairs through Village Committee and Village Representative Assembly. Without directly addressing the larger question of whether village elections will lead to democratization in China, this study will examine three specific dimensions of power, participation and problems of rural democracy in China.

China continues to reject political liberalization at the national level but has instituted elections in rural villages. Village government, unlike township government, is autonomous and self-governing, which means that villagers are supposed to manage their own life through electing village officials to administer village affairs. Since 1980s, elections for villagers' committees have become a major means of political participation for Chinese peasants. Along with the elections, the Chinese government also established other institutions in villages to check the power of Villagers' Committees and monitor their activities.

### ***Background: Grassroots Democracy in China***

The debates around democracy in general and grassroots democracy in China in particular both at the national and international levels indicate their significance. Grassroots democracy is often identified with the struggle for empowerment and various micro-movements brought about at the grassroots level. Grassroots democracy addresses the problem of making institutions more accountable, transparent and participative and, on the other, creates new political spaces outside the state structure, in which the people themselves are enabled to make decisions collectively on issues directly concerning their lives. But such an effort at decentralisation often enters into confrontation with the state, the bureaucracy and the local power structures. The Chinese case is peculiar as the initiative of this kind of decentralisation had come from the state. Since the political and economic reforms carried out in the countryside, relations between the state and the village saw a change. One significant outcome of this is the widening process of villagers' participation in local affairs.

The main form of China's grassroots democracy, village committee elections have received great attention in recent years. Following the collapse of the people's commune, the Chinese countryside found itself devoid of any representative



institution. To address the social disorder created by the fall of the production brigade, villagers elected their own leaders by popular votes. It was first formed in two Guangxi counties- Yishan and Luocheng- in early 1981. Impressed with this experiment, the then vice chairman of NPC, Mr. Peng Zhen began to promote village elections all over the country. He believed that the village elections would put village cadres under the supervision of the villagers, and thus serve as an important tool to stabilize the party's rule over the countryside. Under his leadership, the 1982 Constitution defined the Villagers' Committee (VC) as a self-governing body of the villagers (Article 111). The definition of VC could be seen as evolving over the years, interpreting by many in different ways. It is necessary thus to first understand how the law incorporates VC in theory and how it works in practice.

Jiang Zemin called villager self government one of the three crucial reforms in China's countryside. In the political reports of both the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> CCP National Congresses, Jiang identified villager self-government as the point of breakthrough for China's political reform. The State Council Information Office published a White paper in 2005 entitled *Building of Political Democracy in China*. In March 2006, Premier Wen Jiabao's call to build the new socialist countryside states that the issues concerning agriculture, rural areas and farmers are fundamental ones. He clearly says that the democratic rights of the farmers should be safeguarded especially their rights on land contracting and management. From the campaign to promote open administration of village affairs to the elimination of taxes and fees, one can see pragmatic measures to create better conditions for peasants' lot.

However, these efforts at implementing grassroots democracy in a one-party authoritarian state are being interpreted by scholars in many ways. The interpretations vary as the case studies differ; from coastal villages to villages in the hinterland, from villages in the North to villages in the South. This unevenness in the implementation of concept of democracy at the basic level is an important issue to be looked at. In delineating this issue, the study raises the following questions: In spite of a law being enforced regarding the grassroots democracy, why is there a differential treatment in its implementation?; Why did the Chinese government agree to launch villager self-government, which may eventually trigger the collapse of the political system based

on one-party dominance?; What problems do the leaders face in implementing these laws?; Is there a need to revise the existing Law?; How do the villagers see the concept of grassroots democracy?; Are they against democracy?; What are the other factors which influence the local power structures?; Does the party support grassroots democracy for stabilising the rural countryside and bringing these areas under strict central control or does it support a bottom-up gradual revolution?; What impact does villager self-government have on rural governance and the life of Chinese peasants?

With this brief backdrop, this study looks into the various dimensions of the grassroots democracy in rural China in detail.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

The grassroots initiatives for political freedom are significant in China because early attempts in bringing in democracy were ruthlessly crushed under the leadership of CCP who later adopted the very same measures of grassroots democracy in their official policy. Expanding the scope of grassroots democracy is an important base for the improvement and development of political democracy within China. Among China's population of 1.3 billion, over 800 million are rural residents. So it is an issue of great importance in China's attempt to build and develop grassroots democracy. This study thus examines the nature and scope of the concept and implementation of grassroots democracy in China. The research endeavours to delineate issues such as the role of state in the entire process and people's approach to grassroots democracy in China.

This study, being a microcosm of the macro political change unfolding in China, is quite critical to understand the larger context of the limited political reform initiated by the Chinese leadership. Besides conceptualising and contextualising grassroots democracy in China, the study examines three key issues of power contestation between the Party leaders and people, various processes of electoral reform and participation of villagers and problems in its implementation.

## ***Literature Review***

There is a rich corpus of literature on the grassroots democracy in China. The basic question in this literature is- does CCP support grassroots democracy for stabilising the rural countryside and bringing these areas under strict central control or does it support a genuine bottom-up gradual revolution. The literature on grassroots democracy in China could be divided into two sections; village self government as a tool of the state and village democracy as villager empowerment through village elections.

### **i. Village Self-Government as a ‘tool’ of the State**

Manoranjan Mohanty highlights two perspectives on local self-governance; one sees it as an arena of democracy to transform the unequal local society into a democratic community and the other treats it as an agency or a channel to implement centrally formulated policies and programmes. According to him, there has always been a tension between these two approaches. The local governance model can operate in a unitary centralised polity where the local institution is not only an instrument of central authority which provides resources to them but it is an agency of legitimation of the system and its rulers. The local democracy perspective implies that the local level exercises a degree of clearly defined autonomy, has control over its own resources and shares power with the other levels in a multilayered federal framework in which each layer possesses dignity and autonomy.

Raising the fundamental question of what is village democracy; He Baogang posits that village democracy is a political process whereby village affairs can be managed by villagers and for villagers, and village citizens are capable of participating in village decision making either through direct democratic mechanisms, such as all-villagers assemblies, or through representative institutions, such as elected village committee members and village representative assemblies. In the context of village elections in China, He Baogang finds that there are three power relations affecting the emergence of village democracy: the political power of Local Township and village elites, the economic power of the neo- rich, and the social power of

kinship. It is the interaction between different clusters of power and interests that helps to account for the emergence or absence of village democracy and to shed light on its future prospects. The author says that the village democracy if it exists in some villages is largely for the benefit of the neo rich who enjoy the fruits of village democracy. The combined powers of the village party secretaries and the neo rich dominate village political life, marginalize the poor, women, and migrants, and exacerbate political equality. He introduces the idea of a mixed regime which can be seen as a complex social control mechanism, a strategy of balancing democracy and authority, and a special political form of government. He highlights certain limitations for the implementation of rural democracy. For instance, the globalization of village and township economy provides an opportunity for outsider business communities to influence the election process. The author is hopeful that China will eventually introduce national competitive elections. Village elections and democracy represent grassroots developments that have taken root, blossomed, and borne democratic fruits in some villages which will ultimately help in the future of Chinese democratization.

Elizabeth Perry and Merle Goldman trace the attempts at grassroots democracy since Late Qing period onwards. According to them, the picture of grassroots politics is a mixed one. On the one hand, the state has introduced reforms that it expects will improve the performance and accountability of local government officials, reduce corruption, channel public discontent and maintain stability, on the other hand, mounting pressures on local officials both from the central state and from their constituents place grassroots cadres, in an extraordinary difficult position. They are of the view that China's current grassroots political reforms could help forestall rather than facilitate the advance of formal democracy at the national level.

According to Yijiang Ding village self government is called "grassroots democracy", which is said to be part of China's "socialist democracy" and the centre's promotion of village self government may represent a sort of centre-grassroots political coalition-building against the local officials- to hold them more accountable not only to peasants but also to the centre. He explains that for the leadership, village self government could mean: develop grassroots democracy, rebuild rural political institutions, overcome rural lawlessness, combat cadre corruption, alleviate tension in

the cadre-peasant relationship, check local state encroachment on peasants, facilitate central policy implementation.

Liu Yawei is of the view that villager self-government is transforming the political language, culture and landscape in China which will indeed constitute an opening crucial for China's long overdue political reform. He describes villager self government as a meaningful democracy with Chinese characteristics, or in other words, it is an embryonic form of a unique democratic practice that is different from other forms of democracy. He strongly argues that villager self-government is conducive to the firming of the Party's legitimacy and likeability in the countryside which will reduce the fear of officials at higher levels that engaging in democratic elections and decision making will lead to chaos and eventually break the back of the party.

The major argument by Xu Wang is that the practice of self-government in rural China was promoted by the state to regain the legitimacy and governability it had lost during the economic reforms. It is a critical process in which the state and the peasantry are mutually empowering each other by linking peasant demands to state power through the mechanism of grassroots elections and self-governing villager committees. He shows that in the case of China, the empowerment of new social forces does not necessarily weaken the capacity of the state to govern society and therefore, in the long run, a peaceful and orderly democratic transition might be possible.

## **ii. Villager Empowerment through Village Elections**

Village elections are an indicator of democracy at the basic level. In this regard, the study by Robert Pastor and Qingshan Tan on how meaningful are the elections in the Chinese villages, is an important work. The fact that positive steps are being taken towards democracy, for instance, village elections being held within the context of 5,000 years of Chinese authoritarianism and the key political actors deciding to work within the rules of the electoral game, shows that Chinese leadership supports grassroots democracy, but with a low priority. They firmly believe that national leaders were not trying to control the village elections as CCP is not threatened by

village elections and it uses elections to identify and recruit new leaders and rejuvenate itself. With an efficient leadership, a significant allocation of resources and a massive campaign on the national level, the authors argue that a “limited” democracy can lead to genuine democracy.

By closely examining the village elections in China, John James Kennedy reached at a different conclusion. He shows that support for democratic institutions and ideals can develop within an authoritarian regime and the introduction of village elections and grassroots democracy are meant to stabilize the rural areas rather than democratize China. He views that there is an uneven *supply* of democratic reforms and that is why the quality of village democracy varies throughout rural China. The author argues that the success of grassroots democracy in rural China requires the full enforcement of new laws as well as citizen support for the local democratic process. In another study, the author finds out that the type of nomination method used in each village election has a strong impact on villager satisfaction with the election process. In villages with an open nomination process, villagers are notably satisfied with the election process.

A study by Shuna Wang observed no strong evidence for an effective functioning of competitive elections than that of a closed one. In fact, she observes that the elections have enhanced the accountability of the village committee, but weakened local fiscal sharing and the State’s grip. Viewed against the results of her findings, the abolition of taxes and fees will likely to further strengthen the autonomy of the village and may lead to atomistic division in the countryside if no proper action is taken to revert it. In addition, without the authority to collect fees, the village government is required to raise funds for local public goods on a case-by-case basis.

Qingshan Tan’s study shows that despite progress made in Chinese village election laws, there exists considerable variation in rules and procedures stemming from vagueness in the laws and in various implementation methods. There is a lack of standardization in electoral procedures. According to the author, a new national election law to replace the 1998 Organic Law is the need of the hour. Synchronization

of election rules and procedures deepens the village electoral system and consolidates the evolving electoral institution in the countryside.

Is conducting an election enough to call a system democratic? In addressing this question, Kevin O'Brien and Rongbin Han suggest a distinction between two dimensions of democratisation namely access to power and exercise of power. There is convincing evidence showing competitive elections enhancing ballot secrecy and security. According to the authors, the introduction of elections has indeed begun to change the way in which village authorities gain power, but this has not necessarily transformed the way they exercise that power. In short, the argument is that 'high quality democracy' in rural China, let alone the whole nation, rests on much more than good village elections. In another article, Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li conclude that elections are designed to increase the mass support for the Party, and grassroots democracy is understood to be fully compatible with strong state control. In this context, the self-government programme is best seen as an effort to rejuvenate village leadership by cleaning out incompetent, corrupt and high-handed cadres, all for the purpose of consolidating the current regime.

Since village elections could be taken as a parameter for measuring the breadth and efficacy of democracy as it implies more than just conducting a democratic election argues Richard Levy. He further states that although Chinese State has encouraged increased village participation in local forms of governance, real power is located in those who own successful enterprises rather than in the village committee. Besides in numerous villages such as Wanfeng, investment by stock companies in large- scale development projects, the planning for these projects rarely includes the active participation and input of the people most affected by them. Therefore, the real questions are how mass democracy and economic liberalization go hand-in-hand? ; And does grassroots democracy guarantee everything or just a participation in the election process? Ralph Litzinger views that the mobilisation of grassroots collective action to fight social injustice, corruption, malfeasances and neglect and to empower those who are marginalised in the process of state-orchestrated economic liberalisation is an unprecedented development in China's recent history, one that suggests real social change could be possible.

The above review of literature can be summed up as follows. One set of arguments considers grassroots democracy initiatives as a clever step by the party to control the disturbed rural areas. The other set argues for the germination of the seeds of genuine democracy in China. Therefore, studying just the election process is not enough to reach any definite conclusion. There is a need to look at more complex relations at the local level in order to understand how grassroots democracy works. In this context, this study found the following gaps in the literature.

Firstly, the power relations at the village level consist of the following: party branch, village committee, entrepreneurial class, religions and kinship ties. The society at the most basic level has several overlapping influences. The political, economic, cultural and religious fronts of an individual are significant. When most of the studies have dealt with the political (ideology), economic, social (kinship) aspects, the influence of religion is missed out. The latest conclusion is that Buddhism could generally build a harmonious relationship with CCP and the socialist state at the social level, though there is still a big gap in terms of ideology and personal outlook. Thus at the rural level, the moral impact that religion has on an individual cannot be overlooked.

Secondly, while it is important to have open nomination and secret ballots, the more important issue is whether the villagers are granted their democratic rights in making significant policy measures or in other words, do they have the right to participate in important policy making decisions. How villager-friendly are these rights? A system cannot be called a democracy if the state is trying to keep away the villagers from important decision making process which may directly or indirectly affect their lives.

Thirdly, there are many issues like the concept of village citizenship, problems of migrant people and the issues related to women who are married out of a village but still retains the old villager status, together with issues like corruption which could be seen as genuine concerns when one talks about grassroots democracy. Some of these issues are discussed in the existing literature. However, focus on women candidates is



sidelined to a great extent. It is thus important to see how the Chinese law works in the case of women and in areas of ethnic minority population.

Fourthly, most scholars on grassroots democracy in China agree that the quality of democracy in much of the villages remains low. One of the reasons for this is the larger context within which it works. It thus becomes relevant to see how procedures are introduced and improved, how village committees interact with other actors in the local power configuration, how do the development of grassroots democracy in a village and a state controlled township interact with each other? The interactions between the two at different levels will be a significant one to understand the working of the local institutions in China at the basic level.

Finally, it is important to look at how the government-led grassroots democracy has been affecting peasants in rural China. There is a difference between self-motivated political participation and the passive, mobilised participation during the periods of Great Leap Forward movement and Cultural Revolution. How much support does village self government enjoy from China's villagers and why do villagers support the self government system in their villages? What are the perceptions which shape the peasants' attitudes towards both self government institutions and elected leaders?

### ***Research Questions***

Apart from the above relevant questions, this dissertation answers the following important questions: What is the nature and scope of the concept of grassroots democracy in China?; What are the power structures at the local level and how do they impact the various dynamics of grassroots democracy in China?; Why did CCP agree to implement villager self-government which can place the party under pressure and redefine the traditional power equations in the countryside?; Has the political culture in the Chinese villages witnessed a major change in the last two decades?; What impact does villager self-government have on rural governance, the life of Chinese peasants and ultimately their relations with the state?; What are the problems confronting grassroots democracy in China?

## ***Hypotheses***

This study tests two hypotheses: a) Grassroots democracy in China, though fraught with certain problems, has been redefining the power equations at various levels, including between local Party leaders and elected leaders and; b) Village elections, a central component of grassroots democracy, have been strengthening political participation in rural China in the last two decades leading to better governance as well as empowerment of people.

## ***Research Methodology***

The study uses the ‘participatory democracy’ model developed by Carole Pateman and C. B. Macpherson and tries to assess grassroots democracy in China. The research is benefitted from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include speeches reprinted in *Beijing Review* and government documents and White Papers issued. Secondary sources include books, seminar papers, newspaper reports, journals and online articles and video clips and materials. In the study, grassroots democracy is the independent variable and the State, the dependent variable. Economic developments, political culture in China act as intervening variables.

## ***Chapterization***

The study is organized in the following order. Chapter one gives a general outline with objectives, research questions and hypotheses of the study. Chapter two reviews the theoretical works on democracy. Chapter three detail the various power structures at the local level and the sites of contestation between these power centres and their role in strengthening or weakening the process of grassroots democracy. A discussion on the political participation of the villagers by assessing the Organic Law on Villagers’ Committee and the procedures in conducting village committee elections forms the core of the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter structures the problems related to implementing grassroots democracy in China: issues of centralisation, corruption, marginalization of ethnic minority nationalities and women, village citizenship and migration being some of them. In the final chapter, the findings and the conclusions are delineated.

## **Chapter II**

### **Democracy: Theoretical Debates**

Democracy in China is a puzzle for many scholars. From the argument of economic development being more important than democracy to that of some cultures being more conducive for the growth of democracy than others, there is no unanimity among scholars regarding which path China will take for her democratization process. But all of them agree on one thing: China will not adopt a complete Western style democracy. After considering the historical legacy and particular situation in China, leadership of the Chinese Communist Party advocates democracy with Chinese characteristics. In order to have a thorough understanding, there is a need to look at what is Western style democracy and what do the Chinese leaders imply by democracy with ‘Chinese characteristics’.

Democracy is a rather contested concept with various and diverse theories. The meaning of the word ‘democracy’ in Greek is that ‘the people (demos) rule’; it is rule by the people i.e., people rule themselves (Harrison 1993: 4). Over this general definition, there seems little dispute. But what constitutes such rule has been a subject of intense debate. The evolution of the concept of democracy could be traced back to classical times. Even though the concept of democracy was debated and discussed by thinkers from classical times to nineteenth and twentieth century witnessing its evolution, a comprehensive definition of democracy is still not possible.

For conceptualizing democracy, one should trace its origin and evolution, which came to be known as the classical view on democracy. It becomes the base on which later discussions on democracy are built. Classical view emphasised people’s participation and involved self governance. Among the classical thinkers, Aristotle, Alexis de Tocqueville and Joseph Schumpeter are more prominent and appropriately referred to in current writings (Cunningham 2002).

Aristotle regarded democracy as the best option of an available bad lot of forms of government.<sup>1</sup> For Tocqueville, American democracy is made possible by ‘equality of condition,’ that is, by equality in people’s access not just to voting or holding public office but also to economic advantages and culturally, in anti- aristocratic attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Schumpeter in the twentieth century gave a revisionist challenge to the classical interpretation of democracy. He reduced democracy<sup>3</sup> to a method for selecting political leaders and defined that method as “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter 1980: 269).

Theorists on democracy classify the evolution of democracy under two general traditions. The first tradition of liberal theorists consists of Hobbes and Locke to Rawls and Nozick.<sup>4</sup> The second stream consists of Rousseau to Hegel, Marx and later idealists.<sup>5</sup> With this conceptual backdrop, this chapter tries to explore various strands of theories on democracy. The first section will delineate liberal- democratic tradition. The second section will analyse the Marxist perspectives on democracy. The third

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<sup>1</sup>Government might be led according to Aristotle by one person, by a few people, or by many people, and in each case such rule may be exercised for the common good or for private interests. This may lead to classification of rule into six forms. He gave a sociological formulation for democracy: “For the real difference between democracy and oligarchy is poverty and wealth. Wherever men rule by reason of their wealth, whether they be few or many, that is an oligarchy, and where the poor rule, that is democracy. But in fact the rich are few and the poor many, for few are well-to-do, whereas freedom is enjoyed by all, and wealth and freedom are the grounds on which the two parties claim power in the state.” See *Politics* (III, 8, 1280, 5).

<sup>2</sup>Tocqueville was able to identify a highly democratic situation and to see many advantages and virtues to democracy while remaining critical of it. He writes: “Although a democracy is liable to error than a monarch or a body of nobles; the chances of it regaining the right path when once it has acknowledged its mistake, are greater also; because it is rarely embarrassed by internal interests, which conflict with those of the majority, and resist the authority of reason. But a democracy can only obtain truth as the result of experience, and many nations may forfeit their existence whilst they are awaiting the consequences of their errors.” See *De Tocqueville*, p. 367.

<sup>3</sup>Schumpeter identified the following preconditions for the democratic method to succeed : availability of qualified political leaders; assurance that experts and not the public decide matters requiring special knowledge or talents; a well- trained bureaucracy; and a public whose members are tolerant of one another and are prepared to allow politicians a relatively free hand in governing. See Schumpeter (1980), p.290.

<sup>4</sup> According to this tradition, all should ideally have freedom on their own and is only limited by others and the state. They give importance to voting and elections.

<sup>5</sup>According to this stream of thought, freedom consists not in the arbitrary play of desire but in achieving what is really wanted. People may be helped to achieve this by others, or by the state. So the state can have a positive role in the creation of the right kind of desire, giving people what they really want rather than just what they think they want. People may be forced to be free. On this account, realisation of the peoples’ will depends much less on elections than on having the right kind of structure. See Harrison (1993), p. 9.

section will discuss the Chinese view on democracy. The fourth section will give a brief discussion on the concept of grassroots democracy. The final section will summarize the central arguments of the chapter.

## **I. *Liberal-democratic Tradition***

The liberal democratic tradition espouses some of the fundamental values of freedom of choice, reason and toleration in the face of tyranny, the absolutist system and religious intolerance. At its core is the goal of freeing the polity from religious control and freeing civil society from political interference. Gradually liberalism became associated with the doctrine that individuals should be free to pursue their own preferences in religious, economic and political affairs. Liberalists advocate three central mechanisms for coordinating individuals' interests: a constitutional state, private property and a competitive market economy (Held 2006: 59).

The starting point of classical liberal theory<sup>6</sup> was human nature. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) were the first exponents of this tradition. Thomas Hobbes<sup>7</sup> marks an interesting point of transition between a commitment to absolutism and the struggle of liberalism against tyranny. Locke<sup>8</sup>, in contrast, signals the clear beginnings of the liberal constitutionalist tradition. While there are different variants of liberalism, all were united around the advocacy of central mechanisms for coordinating individuals' interests. It is important to stress that individuals were

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<sup>6</sup>Many liberals believe that there is a connection between liberalism and democracy while some opponents believe that democracy is incompatible with liberalism. Throughout the development of early liberalism, democracy was merely a means to achieve the realization of a number of basic human rights. The nature of the liberal ends determined the character of the democratic means, but democracy was not an end in itself. Classical Liberalism had something to do with individual rights of which the most important were life, liberty and property. Early liberalism found human rights in what was called natural law. This natural law was first attributed to the will of God.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes maintained that human beings had a pre- social nature, and from that nature, he developed a model, based not on people's capacity for perfection but on their brute emotions. The mechanistic psychological model which Hobbes constructed was termed the 'State of Nature'.

<sup>8</sup> Locke's *First Treatise* is a lengthy and erudite attack on Sir Robert Filmer's (an English political theorist who defended the Divine Rights of Kings) attempt in his *PATRIARCHA* to trace back to Adam the asserted Divine Right of the Stuarts to rule; the *Second Treatise*, in which most of Locke's own political philosophy was incorporated, is a more abstract defense of government by consent. It is believed that the *First Treatise* was written in about 1680, and the *Second Treatise* was written a long time before and adapted in a hurry to meet the need for a reasoned defense of the 1688 Revolution. See Maurice Cranston (1964), pp. 54- 55.

conceived as 'free and equal', with 'natural rights'; that is, with inalienable rights they were endowed with at birth (Ibid).

### **i. Thomas Hobbes**

Thomas Hobbes argued that the individuals ought to surrender their rights of self-government willingly to a powerful single authority<sup>9</sup>, thereafter authorized to act on their behalf, because, if all individuals do this simultaneously, the condition would be created for effective political rule and for security and peace in the long term (Ibid: 61). Hobbes thus writes, "A commonwealth is one person, whose will, by the agreement of several men, is to be taken as the will of them all; to make use of their strength and resources for the common peace and defence."(Hobbes: V, 9, Government).

He adds further that:

"In every commonwealth, the Man or Assembly to whose will individuals have subjected their will is said to hold sovereign authority [SUMMAM POTESTATEM] or Sovereign Power [SUMMUM IMPERIUM] or Dominion [DOMINIUM]. This Authority [Potestas], this Right to give Commands, consists in the fact that each of the citizens has transferred all his own force and power [Potentia] to that man or Assembly. To have done this simply means that he has given up his right to resist. Each of the citizens, and every subordinate civil person, is called a Subject of him who holds the sovereign power."(Hobbes: V, 11, Government).

Hobbes advocates three kinds of sovereign: Democracy, Aristocracy and Monarchy.

"the differences between commonwealths are derived from the difference in the persons to whom sovereign power is committed. When sovereign power lies with an Assembly in which any citizen has the right to vote, it is called democracy. When sovereign power lies with an Assembly in which not all but only a certain part have a vote; it is called Aristocracy. The third is where sovereign power lies with one man; it is called Monarchy. In the first, the dominant power is called the

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<sup>9</sup>As human beings multiplied in the State of Nature, the problem of how to preserve the one fundamental human right became more and more acute, to the point that people combined to form a commonwealth. They did this by entering into a covenant one with another to select a sovereign (individual or collective) and contracted not to disobey the sovereign's commands. Fidelity to that contract was the source of all law, but the sovereign, who was the product of but not party to the contract, was not bound by any law except that of God. Only God, therefore, could punish the sovereign so long as that sovereign was able to guarantee the security of the individuals who made up the commonwealth.

People (populus), in the second, the nobility (optimates), in the third, the Monarch (Monarcha)” (Hobbes: VII, 1, Government).

Hobbes supported Monarchy as the best commonwealth from among the three.

“Some think that Monarchy has fewer advantages than Democracy, because it has less liberty than democracy. If by liberty, they mean exemption from the subjection due to the laws, i.e., the commands of the people, there is no liberty anywhere, either in a democracy or in any other form of commonwealth. If they understand liberty to mean few laws, few things forbidden, and those the sorts of things without which there would be no peace, then I deny that there is more liberty in a democracy than in a monarchy. For monarchy can rightly co-exist with such liberty as well as democracy....When private citizens, i.e., subjects, demand liberty, what they are demanding in the name of liberty is not liberty but Dominion; but in their ignorance, they never see this. Thus the citizens have no greater liberty in a popular state than in a monarchical. What gives the impression that they do is equal participation in public offices and in power [IMPERIUM].”(Hobbes: X, 8, Government).

Hobbes’s position stands at the beginning of modern liberal preoccupations with the need to establish both the liberty of the individual and sufficient power for the state to guarantee social and political order (Held 2006: 61). Locke’s emphasis on rationality of man forms the basis for a proper State of Nature.<sup>10</sup>

“Freedom then of Man and liberty of acting according to his own will, is grounded on his having Reason<sup>11</sup>, which is able to instruct him in that Law he is to govern himself by, and make him know how far he is left to the freedom of his own will.”(Locke: II, 63).

## ii. John Locke

John Locke defined natural liberty of man as freedom from any superior power on earth, but emphasised the need of Law of Nature for his rule. Even when he posited “All men by nature are equal”, Locke identified issues like age, virtue, excellence of parts and merit placing some above the others.<sup>12</sup> “The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the

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<sup>10</sup>The State of Nature is simply the condition in which the executive power of the law of nature remains exclusively in the hands of individuals and has not been made communal.

<sup>11</sup> “We are born free, as we are born Rational.” John Locke (II, 61).

<sup>12</sup> Locke proceeds to two inferences that we are all free and we are all equal; free of each other, that is to say, and equal to each other, for we are not free of God’s superiority and not equal to him. Robert Filmer argued that God had set some men above other men, fathers above sons, men above women and so on. Locke argues that such superiority is necessary for the preservation of mankind.

preservation of their property; to which in the State of Nature there are many things wanting.”(Locke: II, IX, 124, 1-4).

Locke found an established law, a judge and an execution authority lacking in the State of Nature. His theory argues for individual liberty, economic liberty, and representative government as the basis of civil society (Traudt 2001:139) John Locke’s perspective on the vital relationship between democracy and government is quite insightful.

“The majority having as has been showed, upon men’s first uniting into society, the whole power of the community naturally in them, may employ all that power in making laws for the community from time to time, and executing those laws by officers of their appointing, and then the form of the government is a perfect democracy; or else put the power of making laws into hands of a few select man, and their heirs or successors, and then it is an oligarchy; or else into the hands of one man, and then it is a monarchy.”(Locke: II, X, 132, 1-10).

This is a further improvement in the evolution of historical perspectives on democracy as Traudt highlights. Locke gives a broad outline of what his political system would encompass. Property- owners, with an enormous stake in the political system by virtue of ownership, would comprise of the citizenry. A representative legislature selected through consent of the people should hold supreme power, making the laws of the land. Legislative power is to be separated from executive power. Majority rule was to be the governing principle of the decision- making process. And finally, when the legislature or executive usurps power or becomes tyrannical, sovereign power is returned to the people who may dissolve the government and institute a new one that governs for no other purpose than the public good (Traudt 2001: 143).

The sovereign power of the modern state was established, but the capacity of citizens for independent action was compromised radically. His work failed to articulate either the concepts or the institutions necessary to delimit state action satisfactorily.



### iii. John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill<sup>13</sup> largely set the course of modern liberal thought. Writing during a period of intense debates about the reform of British government, Mill sought to defend a conception of political life marked by enhanced individual liberty, more accountable government and an efficient governmental administration unhindered by corrupt practices and excessively complex regulations (Held 2006: 79-80). He gives a definition for a good government in *Essays on Politics and Society* as:

“The first question in respect to any political institution is how far they tend to foster in the members of the community the various desirable qualities, moral and intellectual; or rather moral, intellectual and active. The government which does this the best, has every likelihood of being the best in all other respects, since it is on these qualities, so far as they exist in the people, that all possibility of goodness in the practical operations of the government depends.” (Mill 1977: 390)

He further says:

“there is no difficulty in showing that the ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty, or supreme controlling power in the last resort, is vested in the entire aggregate of the community; every citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of that ultimate sovereignty, but being at least occasionally, called on to make an actual part in the government, by the personal discharge of some public function, local or general.” (Mill 1977: 403-04)

Thus, Mill was a clear advocate of democracy.<sup>14</sup> Liberal democratic or representative government<sup>15</sup> was important for him not just because it established boundaries for the pursuit of individual satisfaction, but because it was an important aspect of the free development of individuality. Participation in political life was vital to create a direct interest in government and consequently, a basis for an informed and

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<sup>13</sup>The transition from the older liberalism to a reformulated liberalism in J. S. Mill changed not the instrumental role of democracy but the scope of human rights. The move was from a static psychology, where human nature was taken as unchanging to a developmental psychology where considerations of potentiality became more important.

<sup>14</sup>Mill argued for a vigorous democracy to offset the dangers of an overgrown, excessively interventionist state. He identifies two kinds of democracy: True and False Democracy, in which he says in false democracy, representation is given only to the local majorities and the voice of the instructed minority is largely unheard. Mill took occupational status as a rough guide to the allocation of votes and adjusted his conception of democracy accordingly: those with the most knowledge and skill should not be outvoted by those with less, i.e. the working class. See David Held (2006), pp. 83-85.

<sup>15</sup>“But since all cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business; it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative.” See J. S. Mill, p. 412.

developing citizenry, male or female, and for a dynamic ‘developmental polity’ (Held 2006: 79).

Mill is famous for his belief in the element of participation. He saw positive features in representative democracy and argued to combine it with direct participation wherever possible. He is remarkable in breaking with the dominant masculine assumptions of the liberal tradition by counting women as ‘mature adults’ with a right to be ‘free and equal’ individuals.<sup>16</sup> This can be substantiated when he said:

“I have taken no account of difference of sex. I consider it to be as entirely irrelevant to political rights, as difference in height, or in the colour of the hair. All human beings have the same interest in good government; the welfare of all is alike affected by it, and they have equal need of a voice in it to secure their share of benefits. If there be any difference, women require it more than men, since being physically weaker, they are more dependent on law and society for protection.” (Mill 1977: 479)

#### **iv. Liberal- democracy: Some Issues**

The scholarship on democracy is largely influenced by dominant Western understanding. But the main Western tradition down to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was largely undemocratic or anti-democratic. For instance, the classical ‘polis’ was marked by unity, solidarity, participation, public deliberation and a highly restricted citizenship. It is interesting to note that citizens were men and mostly male property- owning individuals. Athenian political culture was an adult male culture. Women had no political rights. The slave population was highly politically marginalised. The dominance of men in private and public life was largely left unchallenged by many thinkers (Held 2006: 59). The revisionist interpretation of Schumpeter’s democratic system has its demerits. The only full participants are the

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<sup>16</sup>The liberal tradition has generally taken for granted that ‘the private world’ free of state interference is a non-political world and that women naturally find their place in this domain. Accordingly, women are located in a wholly marginal position in relation to the political and the public. Mill’s position was novel among those of liberal democrats in its insistence on the impossibility of the realisation of human happiness, freedom and democracy while the inequality of the sexes persisted. The sexual division of labour has led to the partial and one-sided development of the characters of women and men. The ability of both sexes to respect merit and wisdom has been eroded gradually. See David Held (2006), p. 87- 90.

members of political elites in parties and in public offices. The role of ordinary citizens was highly limited and portrayed as an unwanted infringement on the smooth functioning of 'public' decision-making.

Hobbes' political system failed to articulate either the concepts or the institutions necessary to delimit state action satisfactorily (Ibid: 61). The traditional theories have come under criticism for their limited conception of freedom as an absence of constraint and for their restriction of democracy to the political sphere. There is a need to go beyond political and juridical equality to equality in social and economic rights or benefits. Some of the recent scholars on democracy such as C. B. Macpherson, Carole Pateman, and Steven Lukes have expressed views which are different from the traditional ones.

#### **v. Participatory Democracy**

Liberal-democratic theory has various strands. One of them is participatory democracy, which emerged primarily as a result of the political upheavals of the 1960s, internal debates on the left and dissatisfaction with the heritage of political theory- both liberal and Marxist (Ibid: 209). According to Jane Mansbridge the term 'participatory democracy' was coined by Arnold Kaufman in 1960. This was on the eve of the student movements in the US, the aims of which were chronicled in a document, the 'Port Huron Statement', prepared by radical students at the University of Michigan and serving as a reference point for students across the country and beyond. These students were simultaneously demanding participation in university and other sites of governance and criticizing the anti participatory views of their professors, among whom the neo-Schumpeterians were prominent (Cunningham 2002: 123).

The idea that the individuals are 'free and equal' in contemporary liberal democracies is questioned by the New Left scholars. As Carole Pateman put it, 'the "free and equal individual" is, in practice, a person found much more rarely than liberal theory suggests' (Held 2006: 209). She argues for ensuring more accountability both at the state and societal level through new forms of struggle at the local level like factory based politics, women's movement and ecological groups.

C. B. Macpherson also shared problems with liberal theory. He writes:

“the difficulty of modern liberal- democratic theory is its possessive quality, which is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a large social whole, but as an owner of himself.”<sup>17</sup> (Macpherson 1973).

Here the argument is not that seventeenth century concepts of freedom, rights and justice are entirely derived from the concept of possession, but are powerfully shaped by it. The justifying theory of Western democracies rests on two claims- a claim to maximise individual utilities and a claim to maximise individual powers- and Macpherson argues that there is a need for change in these assumptions.<sup>18</sup>

Participatory model developed by Carole Pateman and C. B. Macpherson believes that participation maximises individual freedom and political equality by directly involving the citizen in the decision- making process.<sup>19</sup> They believe that if people know opportunities exist for effective decision making, they are likely to believe participation is worthwhile. Such involvement is vital because it helps cultivate democratic personality and fosters the development of democratic community.

According to Pateman, the very liberal conception of a clear separation between ‘civil society’ and ‘the State’ is flawed with fundamental consequences for key liberal tenets. In her judgment, the state is inescapably locked into the maintenance and reproduction of the inequalities of everyday life and, accordingly, the whole basis of

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<sup>17</sup>According to Macpherson, the basic assumptions of possessive individualism- that man is free and human by virtue of his sole proprietorship of his own person, and that human society is essentially a series of market relations, were deeply embedded in seventeenth century foundations. It was these assumptions that gave the original theory its strength, for they did correspond to the reality of seventeenth century market society. The assumptions of possessive individualism have been retained in modern liberal theory to an extent not always realized. Yet they have failed as foundations of liberal-democratic theory. See Macpherson (1973), p. 3-6.

<sup>18</sup>The claim to maximize the aggregate of individual utilities involves an insuperable logical difficulty according to Macpherson. He says that the satisfactions that different individuals get from particular things cannot be compared on a single measuring scale. Therefore they cannot be added together. Therefore it is not possible to show that the set of utilities which the markets have produced is greater than some other set that might have been produced by some other system. Therefore it cannot be shown that the market maximizes aggregate utility.

<sup>19</sup>Participatory society must be an experimental society, a society able to experiment in the wake of the radical reform of the rigid structures hitherto imposed by private capital, class relations and other systematic asymmetries of power. Pateman writes, “It is this deal with a long history in political thought that has become lost from view in the contemporary theory of democracy.” See David Held (2006), pp. 210- 13.

its claim to distinct allegiance is in doubt (Held 2006: 209). Macpherson and Pateman believed that many of the central institutions of liberal democracy- competitive parties, political representatives, and periodic elections- will be unavoidable elements of a participatory society. Direct participation and control over immediate locales, complemented by party and interest group competition in governmental affairs, can most realistically advance the principles of participatory democracy (Ibid: 212).

## ***II. Marxism and Democracy***

Marxist ideology emanated in the mid- nineteenth century differed from the liberal tradition in its framework. The Marxist critique of liberal democracy begins from the perception that liberal democracy is bourgeois dictatorship and not genuine democracy. Marx put forward his own, essentially communist conception of democracy as a social system free from social oppression and worthy of man. While Marx and Engels did not deny that people had unique capacities, desires and an interest in free choice, they repeatedly attacked the idea that the starting point of the analysis of the state can be the individual, and his or her relation to the state. As Marx puts it, “Man is the world of man, the state, society.” (Marx 1975: 175)

According to Marx and Engels, class structure provides the basis to understand the relations between various sections of the political system. They believed that classes in a society are not a universal phenomenon. They have maintained that class antagonism and class distinctions would fall as inevitably they arose at an earlier stage. Marx’s theory of human nature- critical to democracy in the liberal democratic tradition- departed radically from the rational, strategic, self-seeking person of liberal thought. In the social production of their existence, Marx wrote:

“Men enter into definite, necessary relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production corresponding to a determinate stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which there arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite norms of social consciousness.” (Marx 1859: 356)

For Marx, it is not the single human being who is active in the historical process; rather, it is the creative interplay of collectivities. In the context of society: human

nature is, above all, social. Freedom entails the complete democratization of society as well as the state<sup>20</sup>; it can only be established with the destruction of social classes and ultimately the abolition of class power in all its forms.<sup>21</sup>

### **i. Marx's Idea of Democracy**

One of Marx's earliest discussions of democracy is found in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*.<sup>22</sup> He talks about separation of each individual into an abstract public person and an actual private person who is denied real access to the public sphere, i.e., to political institutions, thereby preventing individuals from exercising their human capacities as decision makers. Marx refers to democracy as a constitution that overcomes this dualism.

“In democracy the constitution itself appears only as one determination, that is, the self-determination of the people. Democracy is the solved riddle of all constitutions. Here, not merely implicitly and in essence but existing in reality, the constitution is constantly brought back to its actual basis, the actual human being, the actual people, and established as the people's own work. The constitution appears as what it is, a free product of man. It could be said that in a certain respect this applies also to constitutional monarchy; but the specific distinguishing feature of democracy is that here the constitution as such forms only one element in the life of the people- that it is not the political constitution by itself which forms the state.” (Marx 1975: 29)

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<sup>20</sup>There are two strands in Marx's account of the relation between classes and the state: the first conceives the state with a degree of power independent of class forces; the second upholds the view that the state is merely a 'superstructure' serving the interests of the dominant class. Marx's work suggests important limits to state action within capitalist societies. If state intervention undermines the process of capital accumulation, it simultaneously undermines the material base of the state; hence, state policies must be consistent with the capitalist relations of production. Marxists argue that freedom in a capitalist democracy is purely formal; inequality fundamentally undermines liberty and leaves most citizens free only in name.

<sup>21</sup>For Marx, democracy was distorted in a class divided society. With the abolition of classes, communism and democracy will become synonymous. He maintains that liberal representative democracy fails because it ignores the problem of social and economic inequality rising out of a class-based capitalist society. For without social and economic equality, there is no genuine political freedom and equality for the average individual. The most important task thus is to establish an egalitarian and classless society where the means of production is collectively owned and there would be no exploitation of one human being by another. Only in this kind of society, the Marxist believes, can equal citizenship and democratic participation become a reality. Marx saw the importance of a real revolution for a new constitution

<sup>22</sup>In the process of criticizing Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*, Marx was led to the conclusion that the state is determined by civil society, i.e., the sphere of private- first and foremost material- interests and the social relations connected with them, and not civil society by the state, as Hegel had asserted.

Marx writes that democracy starts from man and makes the state objectified man. He argued that it is man who creates religion and not religion which creates man. Similarly, it is not the constitution which creates the people, but the people who creates the constitution. Marx compares the relationship between democracy and all other forms of state as one between Christianity and all other religions:

“In a certain respect the relation of democracy to all other forms of state is like the relation of Christianity to all other religions. Democracy is the essence of all state constitutions- socialised man as a particular state constitution. To democracy all other forms of state stand as its Old Testament. Man does not exist for the law but the law for man- it is a human manifestation, whereas in other forms of state, man is a legal manifestation. That is the fundamental distinction of democracy.” (Ibid)

Marx’s discussion on democracy per se is limited. His major concern was on the theory of state. The early communist form of Marx’s theory of the state sketched out four main points: the essence of the state was political power, which was the official expression of the opposition of classes within bourgeois society; it would consequently cease to exist in communist society; in the present system it represented not a general interest of society but with the revolutionary victory of the proletariat it would, during the expected transition period, not disappear immediately but take the temporary form of ‘the proletariat organized as a ruling class’ or the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. (Hobsbawm 2011: 52).

## **ii. Lenin on Democracy**

Lenin talks of communist notions of democracy as follows:

“Only in communist society, when the resistance of the capitalists has been completely crushed, when the capitalists have disappeared, when there are no classes, only then “the state...ceases to exist” and it becomes possible to speak of freedom. Only then will complete democracy become possible and be realised, a democracy without any exception whatever. And only then will *democracy* begin to *wither away*, owing to the complete fact that freed from capitalist slavery, from the untold horrors,...people will gradually become accustomed to observing the elementary rules of social intercourse that have been known for centuries and repeated for thousands of years in all copy-book maxims...The dictatorship of the proletariat, the period of transition to communism will for the first time create democracy for the people, for the majority, along with necessary suppression of the exploiters, of the minority. Communism alone is capable of providing complete

democracy and the more complete it is, the sooner it will be unnecessary and withers away its own accord.” (Lenin 1917).

Since democracy and state are associated closely, Lenin argues the irrelevance of democracy itself when the state withers away. In this conception, what is more important is the model of democracy advocated for the transition period.

### **iii. Marxism and its Critique**

By reducing political power to economic and class power and by calling for the ‘end of politics’, Marxism itself tended to exclude certain types of issue from consideration in public discourse. Classic examples of this are the domination of women by men, of certain racial and ethnic groups by dominant groups, of some religions by other faiths. Marx’s conception of the end of the politics radically delegitimizes politics within the body of the citizenry.

Eric Hobsbawm, a neo-Marxist, argues that classic Marxism faces a crisis (Hunt 1983). In his critique on early Marxism, Hobsbawm maintains that there is a need to move beyond the classic text of Marx.<sup>23</sup>

“At any given moment and in any specific country or region, the Marxian political analysis could be formulated as a set of policy recommendations, but they did not, by definition, apply to situations different from the ones for which they were compiled. But post- Marxian situations were inevitably different from those in Marx’s lifetime, and insofar as they contained similarities; these could only be discovered by a historical analysis both of the situation Marx had faced and the one to which later Marxists sought his guidance. All this made it virtually impossible to derive from the classic writing anything like a manual of strategic and tactical instruction, dangerous even to use them as a set of precedents, though they have nevertheless been so used. What could be earned from Marx was his method of

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<sup>23</sup>According to Hobsbawm, it is unlikely that Marxist “classics” will often be referred to again, as a coherent corpus of internally consistent theory and doctrine, as an immediately usable analytic description of present economies and societies, or as a direct guide to current action by Marxists. The break in the continuity of the Marxist tradition is probably not completely repairable. “The classic texts cannot easily be used as handbooks to political action, because Marxist movement today and presumably in the future, find themselves in situations which have little in common with those in which Marx, Engels and the socialist and communist movements of the first half of this century elaborated their strategies and tactics. It is significant that half a century after Lenin’s death, most of the old communist parties were still engaged in the struggle to support capitalism in their countries, looked for new strategies, and therefore abandoned the Marxist equivalent of biblical fundamentalism.” See Eric Hobsbawm (2011), pp. 377-78.



faring the tasks of analysis and action rather than ready-made lessons to be derived from classic texts.” (Hobsbawm 2011: 87).

According to him, Marxist legacy did leave many questions which were to be answered by its successors. He gives two such instances. Firstly, there was a complication in the theory of state given by Marx.

“If state is not an apparatus of rule, but one based on territory, the state also had a function in bourgeois economic development as the ‘nation’, the unit of this development; at least in the form of a number of large territorial units of this kind. The future of these units is not discussed by Marx or Engels, but their insistence on the maintenance of national unity in some centralized form after the revolution, is not in doubt. Marx always disclaimed federalism.” (Ibid: 54).

Secondly, instead of withering away, the state in fact is getting more strengthened.

“the transitional proletarian state must eliminate the separation between the people and government as a special set of governors. One would say it had to be ‘democratic’, if this word were not identified in common parlance with a specific institutional type of government by periodically elected assemblies of parliamentary representatives, which Marx had rejected. This has been the most difficult part of Marx’s legacy for his successors- all actual attempts to realise Socialism along Marxian lines so far have found themselves strengthening an independent state apparatus (as have non- socialist regimes), while Marxists have been reluctant to abandon the aspiration so firmly regarded by Marx as an essential aspect of development of the new society.”(Ibid: 84-85).

He further adds that Marx’s theory lacked homogeneity in at least one important aspect.

“..It might be held that it consisted both of an analysis of capitalism and its tendencies and simultaneously of a historic hope, expressed with enormous prophetic passion and in terms of a philosophy derived from Hegel, of the perennial human desire for a perfect society, which is to be achieved through the proletariat. In Marx’s own intellectual development, the second of these preceded the first, and cannot be intellectually derived from it. In other words there is a qualitative difference between e.g., the proposition that capitalism by its nature generates insuperable contradictions which must inevitably produce the conditions of its supersession as soon as ‘centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with capitalist development’, and the proposition that the post- capitalist society will lead to the end of human alienation and the full development of all individuals’ human faculties. They belong to different forms of discourse, though both may eventually prove to be true.”(Ibid: 379).

But it is unfortunate that in spite of acknowledging the weakness of the theory and various efforts to modify the doctrines of Marxism, no single version of such rethinking has established itself as a predominant one. But the urge to revise the classical Marxist theory is welcoming and can save Marxism from its crisis.

### ***III. Democracy: Chinese view***

China's legacy on democratic thinking is commendable. Various attempts to democratization were tried since early twentieth century, although none of them proved successful. Communist Party of China is promoting grassroots democracy and intraparty democracy in recent times which is essentially a big step towards democratization in China. Scholars at the Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China published a book titled "Research Report on Political Reform in China", in October 2007.<sup>24</sup> In the book, they suggest that China will work toward a low level of democracy by 2020, a middle level of democratic development between 2020 and 2040 and an advanced level of democracy between 2041 and 2060 (Lee 2010: 75).

Chinese perspectives on democracy can be classified under four sections: early Chinese perspectives; Communist; post- 1970 and post- Communist or recent ones. The Chinese discourse on democracy was certainly not lacking in China's modern history. It dates back to early twentieth century. Orville Schell (2004: 117, 18) traces the legacy of the democratic thought in China and says:

"In the first decades of the twentieth century, China was a fermentation vat of free thinking, political inquiry, open discussion, self- criticism, research and writing. In the face of new ideas challenging Confucian traditionalism and accompanying calls for reform and revolution, the Qing dynasty fell, plunging China into a period of chaotic change..... listening to some of these century- old voices, it becomes clear not only that China has a legacy of vibrant discussions that focussed on reinventing its system of governance, but also that many of the leaders and thinkers who led these discussions were of towering intellect and sophistication, which are all of enormous relevance to China's current predicament."

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<sup>24</sup> *Tianyong Zhou, Changjiang Wang, Anling Wang, Gongjian: Zhongguo zhengzhitizhigaige yanjiu baogao* [A Research Report on Reform of the Political System in China], (Xinjiang, China: Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Press, 2007), p.2 cited in Jung Nam Lee (2010), p. 75.

### **i. Early Chinese perspectives**

Early Chinese experiments on democracy in modern China were a) in 1909, provincial assemblies were elected in all Chinese provinces; b) in 1910, Qing government convened a National Assembly half of whose 200 members were appointed by the court and half of whom were elected from the provincial assemblies; c) in 1912-13, a Parliament was elected, consisting of a Senate elected by the provincial assemblies and a House directly elected by an all- male, economically elite franchise consisting of about 10.5% of the population; d) in 1918, a new parliament was elected which lasted until 1923; e) in 1947-48, the National government held elections in those areas it controlled for National Assembly, Legislative Yuan and Control Yuan where suffrage was universal, but due to wartime conditions and Kuomintang dominance of politics, the elections were neither complete nor competitive. (Nathan 1997: 64- 5)

The ‘May Fourth’ era of relative freedom of the press, political organisation, and academic investigation and debate, dating roughly from 1917 to 1937, constituted another phase of democratic experimentation in the early Republic. In an essay published in January 1919 to celebrate the third anniversary of the publication of *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth), Chen Duxiu, one of the intellectual leaders of the New Culture Movement, respectfully gave democracy and science the nicknames Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science and proclaimed that only these two gentlemen can save China from the political, moral, academic and intellectual darkness in which it finds itself.<sup>25</sup>

Dr. Sun Yat-Sen was one of the pioneers who considered democracy as an inevitable step in the advancement of civilization. He says, “Government is a thing of the people and by the people; it is control of the affairs of all the people. The power of

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<sup>25</sup> After China’s international humiliation at Versailles in 1919, Chinese students in Beijing, on May 4, 1919, went on an angry demonstration and beat up the government officers who had failed to defend the nation’s interest. The agitation prolonged and transformed itself into a ‘New Culture’ movement popularly called the ‘May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement’. It was this movement which finally bid farewell to the traditional Chinese ruling ideology and began the quest for modernization in China. See Tan Chung (1999), pp. 1411-12.

control is political sovereignty, and where the people control the government we speak of the “people’s sovereignty”<sup>26</sup> (Sun 1924:2).

Sun Yat-sen’s idea of Three People’s Principles<sup>27</sup> and separation of powers among five ‘*yuan*s’- Legislative, Executive, Judicial, Examination and Control- forms the basis for democratic ideas in the Republican period. He further argued for four ‘fundamental rights’ for the people- initiative, referendum, election and recall.

“The people control the government through the suffrage, the recall, the initiative, and the referendum; the government works for the people through its legislative, judicial, executive, civil examination and censoring departments. With these nine powers in operation and preserving a balance, the problem of democracy will truly be solved and the government will have a definite course to follow.” (Sun 1924a: 137)

He further says:

“The people control the government and their four powers are four methods of control. Only as the government is given such power and the opportunity to work in such in these different directions can it manifest great dignity and authority and become an all powerful government. Only as the people are given great power and the various checks upon the government will they not be afraid of the government becoming all powerful and uncontrollable. The people can then at any time command the government to move or to stop. The prestige of the government will grow and the power of the people will increase. With such an administrative power on the part of the government and such political power on the part of the people, we will be able to realise the ideal of an all powerful government seeking the welfare of the people- and to blaze the way for the building of a New World.”(Ibid: 142).

Rejecting the notion that people are born equal, Sun understood equality as merely a political concept.<sup>28</sup> He emphasised a distinction between sovereignty and ability. He

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<sup>26</sup>Sun Yat-sen describes four stages in human history. The first period was one of struggle between man and beast in which man employed physical strength rather than any kind of power; in the second period man fought with Nature and called divine powers to his aid; in the third period, men came into conflict with men, states into states, races with races, and autocratic power was the chief weapon. In the fourth period, people are battling against their monarchs and kings- power of the people is steadily increasing- and termed this age of people’s sovereignty- the age of democracy.

<sup>27</sup>‘Three People’s Principles’, formulated in 1905, consisted, in their embryonic form, of three statements. The principle of nationalism called for the overthrow of the alien Manchu regime; the principle of democracy stated that in place of monarchy a republican form of government was to be established; and the principle of people’s livelihood proposed the equalisation of land rights.

<sup>28</sup>Sun Yat-sen believed that since there was no natural equality, any attempt to force equality upon human society would result in a false equality. Men were endowed with varying intelligence and ability. What men needed was an equal position to start with, and an equal opportunity for each to

held that people were different in intelligence and ability and could be classified into three categories: those who are the first to see and perceive; those who see and perceive later; and those who do not see and perceive. The first category consists of discoverers; the second category, promoters; and the third category, operators, who simply follow instructions. “Progress in everything depends upon action, so the responsibility for the world’s progress rests upon the third group.”(Sun 1924b: 93)

## **ii. Communist Perspectives**

The Chinese understanding of democracy by communist leaders such as Mao Zedong is confined to the ideological framework of Marxism and Leninism combined with elements of traditional culture. For Mao, the policy of ‘mass line’ was a form of democracy. He firmly believed that without criticism there is no democracy and to keep oneself away from such criticisms is treacherous and close to bourgeois or liberal democracy where criticisms are done within the four walls of the parliament. He writes:

“All correct leadership is necessarily ‘from the masses, to the masses’. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in action.”(Mao 1943: 119)

Mao understood the communist revolution in China to occur in two stages.

“The historical characteristic of the Chinese revolution lies in its division into two stages, democracy and socialism. The first step is to change the colonial, semi-colonial and semi-feudal form of society into an independent, democratic society. The second is to carry the revolution forward and build a socialist society.”(Mao 1940: 342)

He was talking about a ‘New Democracy’, a state system where joint dictatorship of all the revolutionary classes and democratic centralism constitutes the main politics.<sup>29</sup> In this view “the people” is both a social class concept and a collectivist or

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develop his career according to his intellectual endowments and capacities. The first important step thus, in ensuing equal opportunity was to give men equal political status. See Tan Chester (1972), pp. 126-32.

<sup>29</sup> Old Democracy is monopolized by the bourgeoisie and an instrument for oppressing the common people. New Democracy talks about a new politics, new economics and a new culture. Mao wrote that

community-centred concept. In 1949, after years of self-criticism and ups and downs in the Communist Party of China, Mao Zedong formulated the policy of people's democratic dictatorship.

“Democracy is practised within the ranks of the people, who enjoy the rights of freedom of speech, assembly, association and so on. The right to vote belongs to the people, not to the reactionaries. The combination of these two aspects, democracy for the people and dictatorship over the reactionaries, is the people's democratic dictatorship.”(Mao 1949: 418)

Democracy here is understood in two dialectical relations, expressed in two seemingly self-contradictory terms: democratic dictatorship and democratic centralism. Democracy and dictatorship are two sides of the same state system. Democracy is to be exercised among the people, while dictatorship is to be exercised over the enemies. In other words, “people” is not all-inclusive; it denotes one part of the society, and there is another part to which democracy does not apply. Further, democracy is considered to be dialectically related to centralism and is to be practised under the guidance of the centre, the leadership of the party.

### **iii. Post- 1970 Perspectives**

Post- 1970 Communist China witnessed the growth of two distinct perspectives- the state and the liberal intellectual. First, the Third Plenum of Eleventh Central Committee held in 1978 saw Deng Xiaoping's successful attempt to change China's focus from politics to economics. In his speech, Deng discusses the question of how to emancipate the minds, seek truth from facts and unite as one in looking to the future.<sup>30</sup> In his speech, Deng gave importance to democracy as a major condition for emancipating the mind. He observed that centralism was divorced from democracy and there was little democracy. He says,

“In political life within the Party and among the people we must use democratic means and not resort to coercion or attack. The rights of citizens, Party members and Party committee members are respectively stipulated by the Constitution of the People's Republic and the Constitution of the Communist Party.

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there is a need for a change from the Old colonial, semi-colonial and semi-feudal society to a new one in ‘*On New Democracy*’ (Jan 1940).

<sup>30</sup> According to him, emancipating the mind is a political task and talked about emancipation in the realm of economy and not politics.

These rights must be resolutely defended and no infringement of them must be allowed.”(Deng 1978: 155)

The central leadership also realised the significance of democracy in China. Jiang Zemin raised the issue of democracy seriously in the National People’s Congress (NPC) and worked hard to implement democracy at all levels. He said that there existed neither abstract concepts of democracy that would transcend classes, nor absolute concepts of democracy. According to him, the development of democracy was linked with certain class interests, a suitable economic foundation and socio-historical conditions.<sup>31</sup> He considered the rule of law as a key component of socialist democracy (Lee 2010: 82).

In an interview with the *Washington Post* in November 2003, Wen Jiabao acknowledged that “without the guarantee of political reform, economic reform will not be successful.” Hu Jintao once said, “If there is no democracy, there will be no modernization”. The White Paper of 2005 is an attempt by the leadership to bring in political reforms in China. The White Paper states:

“Democracy is an outcome of the development of political civilization of mankind. It is also the common desire of people all over the world. Democracy of a country is generated internally, not imposed by external forces.....embarking on this road of development of political democracy chosen by the Chinese people themselves not only realised the Chinese people’s demand to be masters of their own country, but is also gradually realising their common ideal to build their country into a strong and modern socialist country.....the socialist political democracy of China is rooted in the vast land of fertile soil on which the Chinese nation has depended for its subsistence and development over thousand years of years. It grew out of the experience of the CPC and the Chinese people in their great practice of striving for national independence, liberation of the people and prosperity of the country. It is the apt choice suited to China’s conditions and meeting the requirement of social progress.”

Throughout history Chinese intellectuals have had a unique relationship with their government. Post- 1970 period saw many intellectuals debating on the question of democracy in China. Many of them were victims of Cultural Revolution. Recognizing the need for greater political freedom, intellectuals like Fang Lizhi, Wei Jingsheng, and Hu Ping came to the forefront demanding democracy openly.

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<sup>31</sup> Jiang Zemin, *Lun dangde jianshe* [Jiang on party construction], (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2001), p. 215 cited in Jung Nam Lee (2010), p.82.

Fang Lizhi, an astrophysicist, challenged the party's executive right to rule by calling for human rights and democracy. In an interview with Orville Schell, Fang said, "a sense of duty, responsibility, and loyalty to the country had been inculcated within me as a youth, but what I saw around me now made me feel that the leaders weren't similarly concerned about the country and weren't shouldering responsibility for its people." (Schell 1988: 125) Fang advanced four principles namely science, democracy, creativity and independence. But his principles conflicted with those of the party, because the latter "advocated superstition instead of science, dictatorship instead of democracy, conservatism instead of creativity, and dependency rather than independence." (Ibid: 139)

Wei Jingsheng and Hu Ping advocated for human rights and freedom and emphasised on procedure and rule of law. Wei Jingsheng has become famous for his dictum that China needs democracy as a 'Fifth Modernization'. He argued that individuality is first and sociability secondary. Wei's idea reinforces the Western liberal position that collectives matter only because they are essential for the well-being of the individual.<sup>32</sup> He emphasised that people can be said to enjoy equal rights if nobody is allowed to infringe upon the rights of others, and if everyone has the actual opportunity to realize his or her rights (He 1996: 59-60).

Hu Ping defined democracy as the political system in which the freedom of speech, especially that of the minority, is guaranteed and protected. He has criticized the Chinese communist idea of positive freedom, adopting instead Isaiah Berlin's idea of negative liberty.<sup>33</sup> He defines freedom of speech as the freedom to express different views, including wrong ones, which implies that expressing one's views may never lead to one being accused of crime. This goes against the official CCP definition,

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<sup>32</sup> Although Wei Jingsheng criticized the utopianism underlying 'socialist democracy', his idealized image of democracy does not provide any clues as to how liberal democracy can be achieved in practice in China. See He Baogang (1996), pp. 56- 61.

<sup>33</sup> Isaiah Berlin gave two concepts of Liberty: Negative liberty is when one is prevented by others from doing what he or she could otherwise do and to that degree they are unfree. If this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, he or she can be described as being coerced, or may be enslaved. Positive liberty, on the other hand, derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. "I wish to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realize that it is not." See Isaiah Berlin (1969), pp. 118- 172.



which states that freedom of speech is limited to what the leadership allows to be expressed. Hu explores the complex relationship between democracy and private ownership and concluded that at least in theory, democracy is compatible with a centralized planned economy (Ibid: 61-64).

#### **iv. Post- 1989 Perspectives**

The post- 1989 views on democracy took some time to crystallize given the crushing of 1989 democracy movement, which argued for genuine need to democratize China. Given the rise of China coupled with political relaxation in the late 1990s and early twenty first century, Chinese intellectuals and the official media have engaged in a nationwide public discussion about democracy, something David Shambaugh has called the “democracy wave” debates. This “wave” began with a well known article entitled “Democracy Is a Good Thing” by Yu Keping, a professor at Beijing University.<sup>34</sup> While acknowledging many of the potential problems that democracy may cause, Yu argues that China could make a transition to democracy.<sup>35</sup> Calling this approach “incremental democracy”, Yu suggests that China’s political reforms should be incremental over time. Specifically, political reforms should place priority on inner-party democracy, grassroots village elections, and legal development (Yu 2009: 3-5).

A rule of law regime reform proposal by Pan Wei is a recent addition to the debates on democracy in China. Pan Wei’s key point is that rule of law and democracy, often viewed as inherently linked in the West, are two separate things, i.e., one can exist without the other. According to him, China needs the rule of law but not democracy. He highlights the following reasons for his argument: open political competition is not

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<sup>34</sup>The article, which was based on an interview with Yu by the Hong Kong-based *Takung Pao* in 2005, was reprinted first in *Beijing Daily* in the fall of 2006. The article discusses the desirability, feasibility, and identity of democracy in China.

<sup>35</sup>According to Yu Keping, a democratic system is a marriage of universality and particularity. One cannot deny the specialty of democracy simply with its universal features. On the other hand, one cannot exaggerate the particularity of democracy and totally ignore the existence of a universality of democracy only based on the evidence of diversified political and economic conditions in different countries. Therefore, one cannot deny the universality of democracy simply with its special features and consider that Chinese democracy has no similarities compared to other countries. The democracy that Chinese people are striving for features public elections, power supervision, and citizens’ participation. But the election, supervision, and participation systems will have to be branded with unique Chinese characteristics.

respected in Chinese culture and would be polarizing in the Chinese context, serving the interests of the wealthy rather than the masses. If democracy is to work well, he adds, it requires a foundation in rule of law, which is not yet established in Chinese society and hence should have priority as a task for political development. Furthermore, if rule of law is established, it will by itself fix most of what is wrong with China's current system. It will produce honest, effective, transparent government and protect citizens' legitimate freedoms without the need for destructive competition among class based political parties (Wei 2006).

China has practiced three forms of democratic experiments: Social Democracy<sup>36</sup>, Constitutionalism<sup>37</sup> and intra- party democracy so far as argued by Zheng Yongnian. Democracy in China will happen with a regime change or democratization of the Communist Regime, according to Zheng. Since democratization of Communist regime is not a feasible option, he argues for a regime change and gives four possible scenarios: external forces, sudden collapse triggered by the forces within the regime, from below, i.e., overthrown by popular uprisings and lastly, as a result of political reforms and liberalization initiated by the leadership as had happened in South Korea and Taiwan. According to Zheng, the most probable option for China is the last and village elections are a good step towards it.

There are many scholars who doubt the potential for democratization in China. They find reasons like presence of predominant Confucian culture and strong kinship and clan ties as stumbling blocks in the path of democracy. Chinese expert Andrew Nathan<sup>38</sup> writes in the preface of his book about the specificity of the Chinese system.

“The Chinese system, belongs to a large family of socialist and other states that share a philosophy of politics as a realm of harmony rather than antagonism between the citizen and the state, of one-party leadership, of the supremacy of the

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<sup>36</sup> It is a democracy from below and is a gradual process. Implementation of village elections and emerging civil societies has increased the political participation to a great extent.

<sup>37</sup> This form of democracy comes from above with Rule of Law. The roles of National People's Congress and People's Congresses have strengthened.

<sup>38</sup> Nathan is of the view that economic development does not bring any hope of democracy to China; instead, it strengthens the resilience of the Chinese authoritarian regime. But according to him, China's Confucian political culture and collectivist understanding of democracy are the major obstacles to democratization.

public interest over citizens' rights and of the power of the state to make laws it deems necessary without judicial contradiction.” (Nathan 1986: *Preface*)

He further analyses democratic movements in China from the inception of the Chinese state.<sup>39</sup> His recent findings also confirm his early study on Chinese democracy that the recent political reforms are in fact strengthening the authoritarian system. Nathan writes that persons of influence in China who call for democracy are not advocating competitive elections for top posts. Therefore, “the governance reforms under way or proposed for the future aim to make the authoritarian system more fair, more effective, and more—not less—sustainable.” (Li 2008: 39) He further says that Chinese actors who currently hold influence are not likely intentionally to steer their system toward what most in the West call democracy, for the simple reason that most of them do not believe in it. This led him to conclude that, “what is knowable is that for the time being the wind in China blows but weakly in the sails of the democratic idea.”(Ibid: 40).

Major studies by scholars in the field of Chinese culture show that Confucian principle provides a philosophic presupposition for democracy. A study by Xu Keqian is an example. He says:

“One principle of democracy is the principle of majority decision. The culture of democracy may be understood through which a balance among the conflicting values can be reached. In a certain sense, this principle is compatible with the essential spirit and value of Confucian ‘*zhong yong*’ or ‘Doctrine of Mean’....In terms of decision making, ‘*zhong yong*’ means making the eclectic, balanced and also most acceptable choice between the extremely opposite claims....Another principle embodied in ‘*zhong yong*’ is ‘being harmony but not monotony’, which means that the gentlemen can be together in harmony with those who have different ideas, but not necessarily to echo them, nor force them to give up their opinions.” (Xu 2006: 142-43).

He Baogang (2003) argues that the difficulty associated with establishing democracy in China is historically embedded; that is, Chinese democratization challenges the territorial basis of the Qing Empire, and the business of nation building in China confronts this historical legacy. He presents a structural argument that

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<sup>39</sup> According to Nathan, participatory democracy runs contrary to development and smooth functioning of social life. He takes up the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward and other social movements in Mao's China to explain the disasters of such political trends. He takes a liberal stand in his approach.

democratization does not favour reunification. These two arguments combined, according to him, provide an explanation for why China has enormous difficulties in establishing democracy, and why Chinese state tends to reject democracy in practice.

Apart from the political leadership and the intellectuals, common people in China are expressing their concern for democracy through various platforms like internet. Cyber space has widened the scope of participation of people where they can debate on various issues. A recent blog by Han Han on democracy caught great attention. According to him:

“The quality of the citizens will not prevent democracy from arriving, but it can determine its quality. Nobody wants a Rwanda-style democracy, but that is not a genuine democracy. Sometimes it arrives slowly, sometimes it arrives abruptly. Sometimes it arrives neither thoroughly nor completely. Sometimes it is neither American nor European in form. But it will arrive at some point in your lifetime. When you look back, you may find it to be somewhat dull and unexciting. Today, the Chinese Communist Party has 80 million members. 300 million persons live in families which have members with party membership. The Party is no longer just a political party or a class. Therefore, many of the flaws of the Communist Party are also the flaws of the people. I believe that a very strong one-party-system is the same as a no-party system. When the party organization reaches a certain size, it becomes the people itself. So the issue is not to deal with the Communist Party this way or that. The Communist Party is just a name. The system is just a name. If you change the people, everything changes. Therefore, it is more important to seek improvement. Rule of law, education, culture ... these are the basics.”<sup>40</sup>

#### ***IV. Concept of Grassroots Democracy***

Grassroots democracy is often identified with the struggle for empowerment and various micro- movements initiated at the grassroots level (Kumar and Tiwari 2010). It facilitates the process of making institutions more accountable, transparent and participatory and, on the other, creates new political spaces outside the state structure, in which people in the villages are enabled to make decisions collectively on issues directly concerning their lives.

Zhenghuan Zhou (2005) defines democracy as self-government through participation in the management of collective affairs. Without the involvement of the

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<sup>40</sup> The original blog is in Chinese. With essays on democracy, he stirred debate among the reformers. Due to its wide attention nationally and internationally, a translated version is available online.

people at the grassroots, no political order can qualify as a democracy. How democratic a political regime is, thus, can be determined by the extent to which it maximises equal and meaningful citizen participation at different levels and in different spheres of collective life.

Rajni Kothari, a strong advocate of participation and citizenship, argues that:

“In reality, we are witnessing a growing dichotomy between representation and participation- cum- citizenship. Direct democracy suggests a form of government in which all of the people are able to decide in all public matters, all of the time. Such a form could not be expected to function efficiently in modern, large scale, often continent size nations with millions of citizens. Representative democracy has therefore emerged as a substitute for the purer forms of democracy, a form of democracy in which some of the people, presumably chosen by all; govern in all public matters, all of the time. This approach produced efficiency, but at enormous costs to participation and citizenship. Decentralised and self- rule oriented democracy tries to revitalise citizenship without wholly neglecting efficiency by defining democracy as a form of government in which all of the people govern themselves in at least some public matters, at least some of the time. In effect, representation is tied down to diverse interests, and as a result destroys participation and citizenship in general.”(Kothari 2005: 151-52).

He says that the need is to do away with the identification of democracy with either classical liberalism or capitalism. His support for direct democracy is clear when he writes:

“participation in a democracy can be defined as a process of arriving at a general consensus by a critical exchange of views in which the individual joins in active fellowship with others on the basis of his own choice and conviction and with the end of furthering a good life for him as well as for others: and for others because of him. It is such a concept of participation that lies at the basis of the democratic ideal. The totalitarian concept of participation, on the other hand, is the very negation of democracy, direct or indirect.”(Kothari 1988: 206)

He further says that:

“Self government through participation in the decision making process provides, a workable definition of direct democracy. Its distinction from parliamentary democracy is that it considers both the rights and the responsibility of individuals as inalienable; its emphasis is less on exact institutional patterns and more on individual creativity; it expands the scope of individual participation in the political process far beyond the casting of votes; and, finally, in it power remains necessarily diffused.” (Ibid: 204-05)

Kothari proposes the word 'decentralised democracy' for his model to differentiate it from participatory democracy. This concept considered classical rationalism as an inadequate basis for democracy and considers all men and women to be potentially capable of participating in public affairs. As Kothari (Ibid: 210) puts it, "it is a concept that is not limited to the political states; its stress is on organising the whole society on democratic principles."

The concept of local self governance demands the active participation of people in the local affairs. It is an effective way of direct democracy. Manoranjan Mohanty (2007) highlights two perspectives on local self-governance; one sees it as an arena of democracy to transform the unequal local society into a democratic community and the other treats it as an agency or a channel to implement centrally formulated policies and programmes. According to him,

"There has always been a tension between these two approaches. The local governance model can operate in a unitary centralised polity where the local institution is not only an instrument of central authority which provides resources to them but it is an agency of legitimation of the system and its rulers. The local democracy perspective implies that the local level exercises a degree of clearly defined autonomy, has control over its own resources and shares power with the other levels in a multilayered federal framework in which each layer possesses dignity and autonomy."(Mohanty 2007: 15).

He Baogang and Liu Yawei defines grassroots democracy in the context of recent political reform in China. Raising the fundamental question of what is village democracy; He Baogang posits that:

"Village democracy is a political process whereby village affairs can be managed by villagers and for villagers, and village citizens are capable of participating in village decision making either through direct democratic mechanisms, such as all-villagers assemblies, or through representative institutions, such as elected village committee members and village representative assemblies." (He 2007: 8)

Liu Yawei view grassroots democracy as a small step towards the greater democratization of whole China. He says:

"Villager self-government can transform the political language, culture and landscape in China; creating an opening crucial for China's long overdue political reform. He describes villager self government as a meaningful democracy with

Chinese characteristics, or in other words, it is an embryonic form of a unique democratic practice that is different from other forms of democracy. Villager self-government is conducive to the firming of the Party's legitimacy and likeability in the countryside which will reduce the fear of officials at higher levels that engaging in democratic elections and decision making will lead to chaos and eventually break the back of the party." (Liu 2009: 4)

Grassroots democracy helps in broadening the meaning of the concept of democracy. Democracy is not merely a system of institutional arrangements through which political decisions are made for the ordinary citizen. It is more importantly a participatory process in which the average citizen should take an active part in making those decisions; only through active participation can democracy as self-rule be truly realised. Participation becomes such an important idea, for it is not only an act of casting votes, but also a valuable learning opportunity for citizens to explore and deliberate together the meaning of democratic autonomy and equality as well as possible ways of resolving conflict and building a commonly shared life (Zhou 2005).

## ***V. Summary***

This chapter, besides conceptualising democracy, has discussed liberal- democratic tradition, Marxist tradition and Chinese perspectives on democracy. It has also delineated the concept of grassroots democracy. This framework will broaden the theoretical understanding of democracy and widen the scope for reaching at various new possible interpretations.

The liberal- democratic tradition basically argued for a constitutional state, private property and market economy. From Hobbes to John Locke to J. S. Mill, the strand of liberal thought emphasised that people are the best judges of their own wants. All are free unless this freedom is limited by others or the state. People try to realise their wants and the main task of the state, according to liberal- democrats, is not to get in the way of the realization of these wants. In reality, state is inescapably locked into maintenance and reproduction of the inequalities of life. In response to this, Participatory democracy, a variant of liberal – democratic theory highlights the need for strengthening direct citizen participation in decision- making process.

Marxists developed a critique to liberal- democratic theory. For them, democracy and state are closely associated. The state plays a significant role in helping people realise their wants by providing the right kind of structure. Here, the state plays a significant role during the period of revolution in general and during the transition period from Capitalism to Socialism in particular. Marxism predicts the withering away of the state reducing the irrelevance of democracy thereafter. The Neo- Marxists argue that all attempts to realise Socialism along Marxian lines have in fact strengthened an independent state apparatus.

Theoretical debates on democracy in the traditional liberal- democratic and Marxist understanding are not acceptable to majority of current Chinese leaders. From the Republican to post- Communist era, various experiments on democracy are tested in China. Almost all of them failed. For the Chinese leadership, the mere copying of a Western model of democracy cannot be a solution for China's current political scenario.

Decentralisation of power and the concept of grassroots democracy widen the possibilities of establishing democracy with direct citizen participation. When people in the villages are given an opportunity to have a say in at least their day- to- day matters, an efficient democracy is practiced because what really counts in a democracy is where exactly the power to decide resides and how it is exercised. China is a good example of her recent experiments with grassroots democracy. A detailed discussion on grassroots democracy in China is followed in the subsequent chapters.



## Chapter III

### Grassroots Democracy and the Power Structures at the Local Level

China began allowing villagers to elect their local leaders in an experiment that democracy advocates hoped would eventually lead to more pluralism throughout the political system. The impact of such an experiment on China with a population of 1.35 billion, of which 50.32% live in villages<sup>1</sup>, is tremendous. With such a majority in rural population, it becomes imperative to understand mainly two things: firstly, what are the major loci of power in the countryside and secondly, how does democracy work in such a set up of multiple power centres.

In the case of rural China, there are influences of several overlapping power structures. The power relations at the village level majorly consist of the following: party branch, Villagers' Committee, entrepreneurial class, religious and kinship ties. Though these structures find themselves at loggerheads, they strive to work in harmony.

According to He Baogang, village democracy is a political process whereby village affairs can be managed by villagers and for villagers with a view that the village citizens are capable of participating in village decision making either through direct democratic mechanisms, such as all- villagers assemblies, or through representative institutions, such as elected village committee members and village representative assemblies. But such a process of decentralisation of political power often enters into confrontation with the state, the bureaucracy and the local power structures. The Chinese case is peculiar as the initiative of this kind of decentralisation

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<sup>1</sup>Even though there is an increase in urban population compared with 2000 census data, rural residents are still in a majority in China. The data is for the population enumerated in the 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities and servicemen of the mainland China in 2010. Compared to the 2000 population census, the number of urban residents increased by 207,137,093 persons, and the number of rural residents dropped by 133,237,289 persons. The proportion of urban residents rose by 13.46 percentage points. Source: [www.statsgov.cn](http://www.statsgov.cn), National Bureau of Statistics of China Report, April 28, 2011.

was a bottom-up process. Because of the political and economic reforms carried out in the countryside since 1978, the relations between the state and the village saw a considerable change. One major change is the widening process of villagers' participation in the local politics.

Given this background of grassroots democracy and various power structures at local level, it is highly relevant to see how these power equations work in the Chinese countryside. This chapter will test the hypothesis that grassroots democracy in China, though fraught with certain problems, has been redefining the power equations at various levels, including between local Party leaders and elected leaders.

There are four sections in this chapter. The first section delineates the evolution of grassroots democracy in China. The second section traces state initiatives for the development of grassroots democracy and discusses the changes at the official policy, if any. Third section details the various economic, social, cultural and religious actors in the countryside and analyse the sites of contestation between these power centres and their role in strengthening or weakening the grassroots democracy. The final section summarizes the central debates.

### ***I. Democracy in China: Grassroots Initiatives***

Democratization of China is a keenly observed phenomenon in the international politics. It can reshape the political system of China and impact the Asian region to a great extent. The democratization of the world's most populous nation, if it happens, will greatly enrich the theoretical understanding of the essential features and varied forms of democracy. Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman argue that accounts of village democracy date back at least to the mid-nineteenth century. According to them, the first formally democratic political institution in China was a city Council in the Chinese sections of Shanghai founded in 1905 (Perry and Goldman 2007 : 5).

The Nationalist and the subsequent Communist government under Mao Zedong had tried to implement some elements of democracy in their government, but largely failed. Post 1970 scenario in China was different. Intellectual awakening on the issue

of democracy began to flourish. The Democracy Wall movement and the pro-Democracy movement of 1989 are instances of mass movements due to dissatisfaction among the citizens of China towards the state and its policies. Mass protests witnessed participation of various sections of the society. However, these attempts in bringing in democracy were ruthlessly crushed under the leadership of Chinese Communist Party. There was a silent grassroots initiative in self- governance which was adopted later by the Chinese government.

**i. Villagers' Committee (VC)**

With the dismantling of commune system and the introduction of rural reforms since the late 1970s, villages found themselves in a period of transition. The decision-making powers of village cadres had declined and villages had no institution to replace the commune system. As a result, peasants have relatively more choices and decision-making power over both private and public affairs.<sup>2</sup> For instance, peasants could decide what crops they would like to plant, how much they want to sell, whether to open a small business, or whether to go to urban areas to find a job.

In fact, there was a vacuum in the rural political structure. To address the governance- deficit created by the fall of the production brigade, villagers elected their own leaders by popular votes. It was first formed in two Guangxi counties- Yishan and Luocheng- in early 1981. Formed without the knowledge of local authorities, these were created by village elders, former cadres and community- minded villagers. Their purpose was to address the unravelling crisis in social order and a broader political crisis that was first becoming apparent as family farming took hold and brigades and production teams stopped functioning. Within a matter of months, county administrators in Yishan and Luocheng had reported this development to their superiors in Hechi prefecture and had recommended its popularization. The prefectural Party committee then decided to establish VC throughout the region and

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<sup>2</sup> According to Xu Wang, during 1982-85 brigades were converted into autonomous villages and production teams into village small groups. This organizational change left village cadres with vaguely defined authority and limited resources. This combined with increased household income and autonomy, led to two results. On the one hand, peasants denounced their village leaders more often, who controlled less collective property and provided fewer services than in the past. On the other hand, the rapid decline in the functions and powers of village leaders increased the peasants' unwillingness to take on the "burden" of serving as village leaders. See Xu Wang (1997), p. 1432.

reported its plan to the provincial government, which in turn reported it to Beijing (O'Brien and Li 2000: 465-66).

In the early 1980s, VCs were genuine organs of self- government.<sup>3</sup> Committee members were elected, rather informally and their responsibilities were confined to managing neighbourhood affairs in the villages. They were not expected to help township governments enforce state policies such as birth control and tax collection, nor did they rely on township assistance to conduct their work. According to Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, if two farmers rejected a committee's efforts to settle a dispute, for example, the committee might invite all adults in the village to assemble and decide by secret ballot who was in the right. Both parties would be required to pay a deposit before the hearing began; whoever received a two-thirds majority of the ballots cast would then receive his or her money back plus a portion of the loser's deposit. The remaining funds would be used to compensate the "jury" for their time and efforts (O'Brien and Li 2000: 466).

Vice Chairman of National People's Congress (NPC), Mr. Peng Zhen<sup>4</sup> was impressed with these grassroots initiatives. He believed that the village elections would put village cadres under the supervision of the villagers, and thus serve as an important tool to stabilize the party's rule over the countryside. He instructed the NPC and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) to send investigators to Guangxi to find out what was going on. At the same time, he encouraged other provinces like Anhui, Beijing, Fujian, Gansu, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shandong and Sichuan to experiment with VC. In a short time committees spread widely, especially in areas that had taken the lead in abolishing communes and establishing township governments. Under his leadership, the 1982 Constitution defined the VC as a self-governing body of the villagers (Wang and Yang 2007: 1637).

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<sup>3</sup> The 1980s were not the first time that the party had experimented with basic-level elections. As early as Jiangxi Soviet (1931-34), popular assemblies had been established to draw villagers and gentry into local government. See Kevin O'Brien & Lianjiang Li (2000) p. 467.

<sup>4</sup> In a report delivered to the Politburo in 1941, Peng explained why and how local elections had been held and suggested establishing "district and village assemblies" to oversee elected, village cadres. In his view, elections were not only compatible with party rule; they were the right instrument for tightening the party's grip in areas where its dominance was still uncertain. According to him, democracy and governmental power could develop together.

## ii. Villager Representative Assembly (VRA)

More important, a critical institutional arrangement for village-level democracy was the Villager Representative Assembly (VRA)<sup>5</sup>, which was spontaneously established by villagers with the help of officials from the MCA.<sup>6</sup> Villager representatives are directly elected by the villagers as their spokesmen.<sup>7</sup> The representative meeting was first referred to in provincial laws in 1989 when Hubei province started to implement the national law of VC. It was subsequently referred to in September 1990 by the MCA in its directive on a national campaign of village autonomy (He 2007: 88). In many villages, in addition to oversee the work of VCs, VRAs have also taken on the functions of making decisions on important issues that affect the villages<sup>8</sup>, removing the corrupt members of the VC, helping village leaders to fulfil the villagers' obligations to the state, and even supervising the CCP village party branches.<sup>9</sup> The government supported and viewed villager representative assembly as a part of basic-level self-government. By 1998, about two-thirds of the villages throughout the

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<sup>5</sup> VRA is defined as a supervisory and participatory institution. VRA is also defined as a consultative body. Some VRAs are undemocratic in the sense that the party secretary selects representatives, chairs the meeting, and controls the agenda. Villagers feel cheated and fooled and therefore demand change. There is, in turn, evidence to support the view that some VRAs are breaking through the party's defence line and moving in a democratic direction as villagers are able to put their agenda on the table of VRAs, dismiss corrupt villager chiefs or members of village committees, and displace the party branch meeting as a final decision-making. See He Baogang (2007a), p. 95

<sup>6</sup> According to official reports, in November 1996, the people's congress of Zhaoxian County, Hebei Province passed a resolution that promotes VRAs throughout the county with a principle that states "democratic elections, democratic decisions, democratic management and democratic supervision." See Jiang Wandu, (1998), p.13.

<sup>7</sup> Generally, a typical villager representative is either an economic strongman, or a retired village cadre, or a senior member of clans within the village. As villager representatives come from all sides, representing different interest groups of the village, resolutions passed by the villager representative assembly tend to be more acceptable to the peasants than decisions made by the VC or any other village organizations. Reports from the Ministry of Civil Affairs show that so far villager representative assemblies have played extraordinarily active roles in improving village governance, including helping solve knotty problems within the villages, democratizing decision making and everyday management of village affairs, preventing village leaders from corruption, and enhancing social cohesiveness within the villagers. See Research Group on Village Self-Government, 1995, pp- 37-50 cited in Xu Wang (1997), p. 1438.

<sup>8</sup> The "Village Opinion Card" is designed in Shandong and Hainan to ensure that all villagers voice their opinions on a case-by-case basis before major decisions are taken. A mechanism of weekly dialogue is another innovation. In some areas of Shandong Province, a weekly dialogue is held between villagers and VC, during which villagers inquire about the village financial or other affairs, and cadres give them answers. See He Baogang (2007), p. 99

<sup>9</sup> Susan V. Lawrence in her study on Village Representative Assembly in Beiwang village says that VRA frequently challenged the VC and the local Party branch on specific economic policy. Thus she concludes that the driving force for change in Beiwang has not been the VC, but VRAs which have co-existed with VC since 1990. See Susan V. Lawrence (1994), pp. 64- 8.

country had established their villagers' representative assemblies (Jiang 1998: 13). The VRA has become a political institution as important as the VC (Wang 1997: 1438).

VRAs emerged to be more efficient than an all villager assembly. He Baogang (2007: 88) gives several reasons for it. The first and more obvious reason is the size of the village. Its population in general is between 1,000 and 3,000 individuals, sometimes even as many as 8,000 to 10,000 people. The second is the range and location. In some mountainous parts, a village committee may cover several natural villages, and villagers are scattered over a large area. The third is that with the introduction of household responsibility system, land goes to each individual household. Finally, in some underdeveloped villages the majority of the labour force may have left and is working or doing business in other areas. All these add to the difficulty of holding more than a few villagers' meetings.<sup>10</sup>

A report on VRAs written by China Research Society of Basic-Level Governance (CRSBG) provides a lot of stories in which VRAs helped improve not only decision making of village self- governments but also their capabilities of providing public services and implementing state policies. For instance, an investigation made in Beiwang village in Hebei province showed that the task of grain procurement, which used to take 20 days to complete, can now be finished in three days with the help of the VRA in convincing the villagers to hand over their allotted quantity of wheat and corn (Wang 1997: 1439). The 2001- 02 National Survey found that 66.3% of the respondents reported that the all- villagers' assembly or VRA was the most important institution in village decision- making process; and 74.4% of township leaders' respondents reported that major decisions were through all- villagers' assembly or VRA (He 2007: 95-6).

It is the peasants, a historical force of countryside, who changed China during the last three decades; the dynamism and energy of the Chinese reforms since 1978 sprang from the peasants and profoundly transformed the economic and political

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<sup>10</sup> Working Legality Committee of the NPC Standing Committee (1998), pp. 53-54 cited in He Baogang (2007), p. 88

reality of China. They ignored or broke the rules restraining their farming systems in order to survive and thereby started the rural reforms. Even China's top leaders, after years of relative silence, have praised "villagers' self-government" as one of the "great inventions" of Chinese farmers (Jiang 1998a:1). In other words, it can be said that the peasants' views and preferences have been such a strong and irresistible power, to which the Chinese state has yielded.

## ***II. Democracy in China: State Initiatives***

The state in China appropriated the initiatives from below and later framed policies for implementing democracy at the grassroots. The reformers and conservatives within the CCP debated on the issue of democracy. The political liberalization was seen as an attempt to reduce the power of the party by one set of leaders, and on the other side, a convincing case for stabilising the countryside through grassroots democracy was raised. The recent enthusiasm for initiating more political freedom by the state is a clear departure from its earlier apathy towards granting political liberalization.

### **i. The Constitution and Grassroots Democracy**

The Preamble of the Constitution of People's Republic of China (PRC) adopted on December 4, 1982 states that:

"Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the guidance of Marxism- Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, the Chinese people of all nationalities will continue to adhere to the people's democratic dictatorship and the socialist road, steadily improve socialist institutions, develop socialist democracy, improve the socialist legal system and work hard and self-reliantly to modernize the country's industry, agriculture, national defence and science and technology step by step to turn China into a socialist country with a high level of culture and democracy."<sup>11</sup>

Further, Article II of the Constitution reads:

"All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people. The National People's Congress and the local people's congresses at various levels are the organs through which the people exercise state power. The people administer State affairs and manage economic and cultural undertakings and social affairs

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<sup>11</sup>*Constitution of People's Republic of China*. (1982). In March 2004, it was further amended to include Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thought of Three Represents in it.

through various channels and in various ways in accordance with the provisions of law.”

Article III of the Constitution is on the principle of democratic centralism. It states that “the division of functions and powers between the central and local State organs is guided by the principle of giving full scope to the initiative and enthusiasm of the local authorities under the unified leadership of the central authorities.”

The significance of democracy in China’s socialist path is thus clear. The Constitution also has laid down provisions for democracy at the grassroots. The organization and working procedures of organs of self- government are given in Section 5 and 6 of Chapter III of the Constitution. As China began to govern according to the rule of law it became necessary to establish a solid legal foundation for villager self-government.

Article III of the 1982 Constitution stipulates:

“The residents committees and villagers committees established among urban and rural residents on the basis of their place of residence are mass organizations of self- management at the grassroots level. The chairman, vice-chairmen and members of each residents or villagers committee are elected by the residents. The relationship between the residents and villagers committees and the grassroots organs of state power is prescribed by law. The residents and villagers committees establish sub-committees for people’s mediation, public security, public health and other matters in order to manage public affairs and social services in their areas, mediate civil disputes, help maintain public order and convey residents’ opinions and demands and make suggestions to the people’s government.”

With the constitution ratifying the construction of villager committees through direct village elections and villager self- government, the MCA launched a legislative research.<sup>12</sup> As a ministry that was revived only in 1978 and given the light responsibility of running local elections and welfare, it did not have the resources or power to move forward uninterrupted. It needed help from the top. At an NPC small-

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<sup>12</sup>A survey conducted by China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs in 1988 suggested that about 30% of village administrative agencies were paralysed or semi-paralysed. In some poor areas, the amount of paralysed village governments even accounted for more than 50% of the total. Reports from some rich provinces such as Guangdong showed that about 17% of village governments were paralysed there, and an addition 42% suffered from cadre with low spirit and energy who did not put their heart into village works.



group debate on the Regulations draft in 1987, Peng Zhen offered his support. He said, “Old China did not give us any democratic tradition.” There was democracy during the period of the Revolutionary War, but “we suffered gravely since the founding of our state” because of the absence of any form of democracy. At the top democracy and rule of law should be restored at the national and provincial people’s congresses, and, at the bottom, direct democracy should be practiced. “The villager committee is precisely a popular organisation of self- government and a very important form of direct democracy.”(Peng 1987: 26-33)

## **ii. Organic Law of Villagers’ Committee (OLVC)**

From the very beginning, discussions and debates were part of the process of implementing VCs in China. Questions like how much autonomy should VCs have from Party branches and township governments and how the replacement of brigades with VCs would affect its relation with townships were raised. The MCA reviewed the 1983 Central Committee circular on VCs and in August 1984, produced the first draft of the Organic Rules on Villagers’ Committees. At this stage, the main sticking point continued to be whether relations between township governments and committees should be ones of leadership, guidance or some combination of both. Some, provincial officials favoured turning VCs into cogs in the administrative machine, while legal drafters in the MCA, citing the Constitution, defended autonomy and the status of VCs as elected, mass organizations (O’Brien and Li 2000: 470-72).

On April 8, 1987, the Fifth Session of the Sixth NPC approved, in principle, the Organic Law on the Villagers’ Committees of the People’s Republic of China (Draft) and authorized its Standing Committee to review the questions raised at the meeting on the Organic Law. After months of discussions and debates, the law was adopted on a provisional basis on November 24, 1987, to become effective in June 1988. Preliminary implementation of the Organic Law<sup>13</sup> had promoted the healthy

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<sup>13</sup>According to Wang Zhenyao who was then director of the Rural Division of the Department of Basic-level Governance, by the end of December 1989, 27 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions had completed the pilot implementation of the Organic Law, which covered 1,093 county- level government units. But different procedures were adopted in different areas. Seven provinces or municipalities, namely, Fujian, Zhejiang, Jilin, Liaoning, Guizhou, Beijing and Sichuan have completed the first stage of full- scale implementation of the Organic Law in 485 counties or cities. In places where the Organic Law has been implemented on a full scale, it has been common practice to hold

development of the construction of democratic self- government at the grassroots level in rural areas, strengthened the grassroots units, improved the relationship between the Party, the government and the peasants and eased the differences between villagers and village leaders.<sup>14</sup>

Later, Zhao Ziyang in his report presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> National Congress of CPC had come up with the idea of devolution of power to lower levels. In it he states,

“Decisions and functions that can be properly handled at lower levels should be handled there. This is a general principle. The function of the government is to provide service for enterprises and to supervise them, in accordance with laws, regulations and policies. In the relations between the Party and the government on the one hand, and mass organizations on the other, it is essential to give full play to mass organizations and to self- managed mass organizations at the grassroots level, i.e., residents’ and villagers’ committees, so that the people will handle their own affairs always in accordance with the law.”(Zhao 1987)

Over the years, the significance of decentralisation of power and the role VCs can play in this regard were highly appreciated. The MCA had submitted the request for revision of the Organic Law as early as 1995 due to the impracticability of implementing many of its provisions. The 1996 Annual Report of MCA complained that the provisional status of the law was making it very hard to get provincial governments to implement it. Another matter of concern for the MCA was that the law was too broad and general to be implemented and it was impossible to practice democracy without specific and operational procedures<sup>15</sup> (Liu 2001a: 3-4).

Immediately after this, Jiang Zemin in the fifteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China had laid great emphasis on socialist democracy.<sup>16</sup> He says,

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villager committee elections in accordance with the Organic Law, which provides the basis for formulating relevant regulations and measures. See Wang Zhenyao (1990), p. 50.

<sup>14</sup>Report on the National Implementation of the Organic Law on the Villager Committees (Provisional) (June 1988- December 1989) submitted by Wang Zhenyao. Wang is known as the chief architect of villager self- government. See Wang Zhenyao (1990), p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> According to Liu Yawei, the law was so broad that it could easily be manipulated by obstructing officials at the township/ town level. Wang Zhenyao, one of the key MCA officials in charge of implementing the law, wrote in 2000 that, from 1993 through 1995, the peasants across the country complained more fiercely about the fraudulent elections. See Liu Yawei (2001a), p. 3-5.

<sup>16</sup> In the report “Accelerating the Reform, the Opening to the Outside World and the Drive for Modernization, So as to Achieve Greater Success in Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”,

“Without democracy there would be no socialism or socialist modernization. The essence of socialist democracy is that the people are the masters of the country. We shall extend the scope of democracy at the grassroots level to make sure that people directly exercise their democratic rights, manage their own affairs according to law and create a happy life for themselves. This is a practice of socialist democracy on the most extensive scale. The grassroots organs of power and self- governing mass organizations in both urban and rural areas should establish a sound system of democratic elections, and keep the public informed of their political activities and financial affairs so as to enable the people to take a direct part in the discussion and decision making concerning local public affairs and welfare undertakings, and exercise supervision over the cadres. We must resolutely correct such erroneous acts as suppressing democracy and resorting to coercion and commandism.”(Jiang 1997)

In early 1998, thus MCA was told to revise the law in cooperation with the State Council’s Office of Legal Affairs (LAO) and submit it to the National People’s Congress (NPC) for approval.<sup>17</sup> The consensus of the party paved the way for the adoption of the revised Law by the NPC Standing Committee, which took place on November 4, 1998.<sup>18</sup> The law states, “To ensure that villagers in the rural areas implement self- government and manage their own affairs in accordance with the law, to promote socialist democracy at the grassroots level, and to enhance rural socialist material and spiritual civilizations, this law is formulated in line with relevant provisions of the constitution.”

Article II of the OLVC of the People’s Republic of China defines a VC as “a self governing organization at the grassroots level for villagers’ self- management, self- education and self- service that exercises democratic elections, decision making, management and supervision”.<sup>19</sup> In the earlier draft of the law there was no mention of

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Oct 12, 1992, at the Fourteenth National Congress of the party, Jiang Zemin identified the need to push forward reform of the political structure to build a socialist democracy suited to Chinese conditions and in no respect a Western, multiparty, parliamentary system. He advocated for strengthening democracy at the grassroots level.

<sup>17</sup> It is important that factors like a sharp decline in agricultural revenue, a drastic drop in peasants’ income, an unfortunate shrinking of township and village enterprises and a large scale migration of peasants into the cities gave a push for the party and the state to take the issue of agriculture, countryside and peasants seriously by 1998.

<sup>18</sup> The 1987 experimental version of the Organic Law contained 21 articles. In 1998, the law became permanent and was extended to 30 articles. Although a number of improvements were made, the law still lack in several respects.

<sup>19</sup> Villager Committee is comprised of three to seven members depending on the size of the village. The core members are the chairman, vice chairman and accountant. The term of the committee is three years.

democratic elections, supervision, decision making or management. It is clearly defined in the law that the members of a Villager Committee should be elected directly by the villagers and no organization or individual can designate, appoint or replace any member of a committee.

Article III of Organic Law states:

“The rural grass- roots units of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shall abide by the CCP Charter in its work and play a core role in leadership. They shall, in accordance with the Constitution and other laws, support and guarantee villagers the right to carry out self- governing activities and directly exercise their democratic rights.”

The revised version of the law gave emphasis to the role of CCP, under whom the democratic rights of the villagers had to be developed gradually. A Villager Assembly is also defined specifically in the law (Article XVII).

“The Villager Assembly consists of all villagers in the village over eighteen years of age. The Villager Assembly shall be attended either by more than half of all villagers over eighteen in that village or by more than half the household representatives. More than half the villagers who have the right to vote must approve all resolutions. When necessary, representatives from the enterprises, institutions, and nongovernmental organizations in the village may be invited to attend the assembly.”

The Villager Assembly is given a higher status where the VCs are obliged to report to. The right to convene the Villager Assembly is vested in VC when one- tenth or more of the villagers propose it. Village representatives are also included in the law (Article XXI).

“Villager representatives may be elected in village that is of a sizable population or of a scattered residential pattern. The Villager Committee may then convene villager representatives to discuss and decide issues that are authorized by the Villager Assembly. Villager representatives shall be elected by villagers on the basis of one out of five to fifteen households or by the villager small groups on the basis of a few from each group.”

### **iii. Post- 2000 Initiatives**

In 2002, a proposal to improve the implementation of grassroots democracy in China was put forward. In the Sixteenth National Congress of the CPC, Jiang Zemin talked about the need for political development and restructuring in order to build a

well- off society in all round way and create a new situation in building socialism with Chinese characteristics. The idea of improvement of self governance under the leadership of village party organizations and thereby developing grassroots democracy more effectively was put forward. He said:

“we will improve grassroots self- governing organizations, their democratic management system and the system of keeping the public informed of matters being handled, and ensure that the people directly exercise their democratic rights according to law, manage grassroots public affairs and programmes for public good and exercise democratic supervision over the cadres. We will improve self- governance among villagers and foster a mechanism of their self- governance full of vitality under the leadership of village Party organizations.”(Jiang 2002)

In 2005, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) published a White Paper entitled *Building of Political Democracy in China*<sup>20</sup>, which stated that “democracy is an outcome of the development of political civilization of mankind. It is the common desire of people all over the world and is generated internally, not imposed by external forces.” The document, composed of 10 chapters, gives a detailed account of the inception, development, contents and principles of the country’s political democracy. It was for the first time the Chinese Government issued a White Paper on political democracy.

The White Paper clearly says that China is against the “anarchic call for democracy for all and against anybody placing his own will above that of the collective.” The socialist political democracy, thus, should have distinctive Chinese characteristics. It should be under the leadership of the CPC where overwhelming majority of the people act as masters of state affairs. Its basic principles remain people’s democratic dictatorship with democratic centralism.

Regarding grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas, it reads:

“Expanding the scope of grassroots democracy is an inevitable trend and the important base for the improvement and development of political democracy with Chinese characteristics. Along with China’s development and progress, the scope of grassroots democracy in urban and rural areas has been expanding continuously, with more channels for citizens’ orderly political participation and

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<sup>20</sup>It was published on 19 October 2005.

ever-increasing ways to realize democracy. China has now established a grassroots democratic self- government system, which mainly includes the rural villagers' committee, urban neighbourhood committee and the conference of workers and staff in enterprises. In these grassroots mass organizations of self-government in urban and rural areas, the Chinese people directly exercise their legal rights of democratic election, democratic decision- making, democratic management and democratic supervision, so that they can manage the public affairs and welfare undertakings of their grassroots organizations and communities by themselves. This has become the most direct and broadest practice of democracy in China today.”

The state asserts that despite tremendous achievements in building socialist political democracy over the years, they still have to overcome many problems as the democratic system has not reached its perfect form.

Wen Jiabao in 2006 advocated for building a new socialist countryside in which the issues concerning agriculture, rural areas and farmers are fundamental ones. He clearly said that the democratic rights of the farmers should be safeguarded especially their rights on land contracting and management (*Beijing Review*: 23 March 2006). He identified that the most important aspect of building a harmonious society is strengthening democracy and the legal system to promote social fairness and justice. He said, “We will expand democracy at the community level, improve the system for transparency in government, factory and village affairs and ensure that people are able to directly exercise their democratic rights in accordance with the law.” (Wen 2007)

In the Seventeenth Party Congress Report delivered by President Hu Jintao, grassroots democracy's greater significance was emphasised. He said:

“Develop grassroots democracy and ensure that the people enjoy democratic rights in a more extensive and practical way. The most effective and extensive way for the people to be masters of the country is that they exercise their democratic rights in accordance with the law to manage public affairs and public service programs at the primary level.”(Hu 2007)

According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, by 2007, there had been more than 620, 000 VCs in China's rural areas, and 92% of the heads of VCs were elected. Organizations for supervision such as villagers' property management groups and villagers' public supervision groups had been set up in 90% of the rural areas nationwide. With legal protection and farmers' participation, villagers' autonomy

based on direct election had become a basic system at the grassroots level in rural areas (Lan 2008).

In his speech at the meeting marking the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Reform and Opening up, Hu Jintao (2008) stated that the goal in front of China is to build a more affluent and well- off society for the billions of people in China by the centennial anniversary of the CPC (2021) and realise basic modernization, and build a rich, strong, democratic, civilized and harmonious socialist modern country by the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the People's Republic of China (2049) (*Beijing Review*, 01 January 2009). Chinese News Agency Xinhua reported in 2009 that Hu Jintao has urged to establish and improve the mechanism of democratic self- governance of villages that can both secure the Communist Party's leadership and safeguard villagers' rights. According to the report, in a written instruction, Hu called on local officials to make efforts to improve the grassroots governance mechanism in rural areas in line with the basic conditions of the country (*BBC Monitoring*, 10 November 2009).

The Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China published its first working plan on human rights protection (2009- 2010) on April 13, 2009. The document reads:

“China will continue to strengthen work to improve democracy and the rule of law, improving systems for democracy, diversifying the forms of democracy and expanding the channels of democracy, strengthening the protection of civil rights in the execution of administrative laws and in judicial practices and raising the level of ensuring people's civil and political rights.”

The working plan further added that, “the system of people's self- governance at the grassroots level will be improved, its scope expanded, and the system of democratic management perfected. The amendment of the Organic Law of the Villagers' Committee will be pushed ahead, and the level of villagers' self- governance and democratic management enhanced.” It also laid down the significance of democratic and scientific decision- making so that greater public participation in the decision- making process could be achieved.

“In principle, public opinions will be solicited when laws, regulations or public policies which are closely related to the interests of the people are

formulated. Institution building will be promoted for holding public hearings on the legislation of important laws and regulations, soliciting public opinions for the formulation of major policies and measures, and holding expert consultation or third-party verification when making decisions over major issues.”

Recent times have seen many policies by the state to strengthen grassroots democracy. In 2010, on the occasion to mark the anniversary of the May 4 movement, Wen Jiabao sat down with students from Beijing University to talk about fairness, justice and democracy. “Justice shines more brilliantly than sunshine”, Wen remarked. Further, talking to the students gathered, he said, “to commemorate May 4, we must above all carry out its spirit of scientific learning and democracy. Everyone needs to not only understand the meaning of these words, they must also practice them.” (Garnautt 2010: 17).

Most importantly, the Chinese government announced new policies to help students-turned village officials develop their career, in an effort to sustain the programme that recruits college graduates to work in rural areas.<sup>21</sup> According to the policies, they will be allowed to run in village elections for party chief, village head and deputy head and if elected, they will continue to enjoy government subsidies. The student-turned officials can also apply to extend their contracts as village officials, according to the new policies. The policy document mentions that they will enjoy preferential treatment if they wish to join the civil service or do post-graduate education. The government encourages these young people to start their own businesses based on their experiences in rural areas like farm produce processing, orchards, small farms and cooperatives. The government also promises to provide more opportunities for internships and microcredit lending as incentives (*China Daily*, 24 May 2010).

Enacting of the People’s Mediation Law of the People’s Republic of China, which was adopted at the 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee of the 11<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress on August 28, 2010, is yet another milestone in the evolution of grassroots democracy. Du Chun, director of the legislative affairs department of the Ministry of Justice, said the practice of people’s mediation dates back to the 1920s

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<sup>21</sup> China started recruiting college graduates to become village officials in 2008 as a way to boost development in its less developed regions.



and was legalized in 1954, but was abolished during the Cultural Revolution, to be resumed and written into the 1982 Constitution (*China Daily*, 23 June 2010). The role of VCs and Neighbourhood Committees in the mediation process is emphasised in the law. “Villagers’ Committees and Neighbourhood Committees shall form the people’s mediation commissions. A people’s mediation commission is composed of 3 to 9 members”, reads Article VIII of the law.

Article IX of Mediation Law states that,

“The members of the people’s mediation commission of a villagers’ Committee or Neighbourhood Committee shall be selected at the villagers’ meeting, the villagers’ representative meeting or the Residents’ Meeting; while those of the people’s mediation commission of an enterprise or a public institution shall be selected by the employees’ assembly, the employees’ representative meeting or the labour union.”

It is emphasised in Article XII of the above law that, “Villagers’ Committees, Neighbourhood Committees, enterprises and public institutions shall provide working conditions and necessary funds for the people’s mediation commissions to carry out the mediation work.” The main function of mediation is resolving disputes at the grassroots level by allowing people to settle differences through peaceful talks and mutual understanding. Data shows that China has more than 4.9 million mediators working in more than 800, 000 mediation committees. These organisations handled more than 7.67 million disputes in 2009, with a resolution rate of 97.2% (*Xinhua*: 23 June 2010).

The last two decades have seen an increasing response from the state towards the call for a more efficient grassroots democracy. The change in official attitude and implementation of more policies are evidences for this fact. From the campaign to promote open administration of village affairs to the elimination of taxes and fees, one can see pragmatic measures to create better conditions for people in rural China.

### ***III. Power Structures at the Local Level***

According to Flemming Christiansen and Zhang Junzuo (1998: 2), the village<sup>22</sup> is where the state, the community and the peasant converge, where assets and political power are managed according to formal and informal rules and dynamics that have acquired their own rationality and significance. They add that the village is an agency stretching from the county level down to the household. It links discrete formal government offices and party branches with voluntary organisations and institutions of mutual aid, as well as with patronage networks, to form a “fuzzy” system of authority.<sup>23</sup> They also posit that the structure of village governance consists of several continuums which include: government and party authority spanning a whole set of institutions from the county to the rural household; ownership and economic control ranging from state dominance through collective dominance to private dominance; the specialised, a departmental division of government policy; the whole spectrum of formal and informal authority. It thus follows that (a) state policy is integrated in local governance, (b) the state’s control is limited, (c) individual rural places have diverse conditions, and (d) changes in local political power structures are gradual (Christiansen and Junzuo 1998: 3).

Since the political and economic reforms carried out in the countryside, the nature of the relations established between grassroots levels of government and local inhabitants has been a core issue in many debates. Has the power retained by the local cadres has declined or increased during this time or has its nature shown a change?

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<sup>22</sup> There were 652,718 villages in 2004 and approximately 3 million “village officials” in China. The word “village” (*cun*) has two meanings in Chinese: either a natural village or hamlet composed of residents who live together (*ziran cun*) or an administrative rural area (*xingzhen cun*). An average village has approximately 382 households. The size of villages varies. For instance, of all the villages in Ningbo city, 1,956, or 38%, have fewer than 100 households. Of these, 57 have no more than 30 households. A further 2,613 villages (51%) have between 200 and 500 households, with 556 (11%) having 500 households or more (Dept. of Civic Affairs of Ningbo municipality 1994). Each village usually has a branch of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as a village committee and a village representatives’ assembly. These three organizations generally constitute the village political power structure. Ideally, the village committee should hold administrative power, with the village representatives’ assembly exercising legislative and supervisory powers.

<sup>23</sup> According to them it is a system that incorporates incommensurable and unquantifiable interacting influences and structures whose rules are complex and whose outcomes cannot be predicted in a straightforward way. Self-governance and village elections have come about in three stages. The term is borrowed from the theories on neural networks. See Flemming Christiansen & Zhang Junzuo (Ed) (1998), p.2.

Various power centres can be divided under three sections: Local party leaders, kinship and clan influences and religion.

**i. Local Party Leaders**

The local party branch Secretary retains political power in the villages. He holds the supreme position in administering a village before the law on VC was implemented. Nobody questions his decisions and most of the village affairs were decided by party cadre. With the implementation of Organic Law of Villagers' Committee, there is a gradual decline in the power of the party leaders. The direct election of the village head has resulted in complicated power relations between the village head and the local party secretary. The establishment of the VRA with legislative power has further complicated the power play. The party secretary, whose power has partly gone to the directly elected village head, has to give up more power to a third party; the fledging VRA (He 2007: 97). With the election of a village head, various changes in the power structure were occurring. For instance, more educated young people and non- communist people were getting elected as village heads.

**Table 3.1 Age Distribution of the VC Members in Laofangqiao Township, 1999**

| Position         | Age in Years |         |          |         |          | Average |
|------------------|--------------|---------|----------|---------|----------|---------|
|                  | 20-29        | 30-39   | 40-49    | 50-59   | 60&above |         |
| Village Head     | 0(0)         | 4(23.5) | 11(64.7) | 2(11.8) | 0(0)     | 44      |
| Committee Member | 4(10.3)      | 9(23)   | 18(46.2) | 7(17.9) | 1(2.6)   | 42      |

Source: He Baogang, (2007), p. 105.

An analysis of the village committee members in terms of their education, age, gender, political background, and profession by He Baogang reveals some features that indicate this change in village power distribution. According to him, village power has shifted from old cadres to new village chiefs who either had party membership when they were in the army or became newly rich in the commercial economy. His study also shows that the age of the newly elected village committee

members tends to be younger as the table above highlights. The average age of the village heads in Laofangqiao Township is about 44 years old, while the average age of committee members is about 42 years (He 2007: 105).

Another feature of the changes in village power distribution is the rise of rural rich men who have been successful in business or industry. They now have developed an interest in the village power and the more successful ones have become part of the rural political elite. As a result, *laobanshuji* and *laobancunzhang* (party secretaries and village heads who are also entrepreneurs) are not uncommon in the more developed provinces such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang (He 2007: 106). For example, a survey of 111 village heads revealed that 18% of them were managers of village enterprises, private entrepreneurs, or businessmen. Among the 1,000 village committee members of Jiaojiang district, 218 or 21.85% are managers and the like.<sup>24</sup>In the three economically most-developed townships of a certain municipality of Zhejiang, 20% of the village party secretaries were entrepreneurs in 1996. The figure in Zhejiang jumped to 35.8% (out of 33,370 elected village chiefs) in 2005.<sup>25</sup>

Another startling change is the increase in the percentage of non- communists in the Village Committee.<sup>26</sup> A Study by Anne Thurston also supports this trend. According to her data, Party membership in the village- Bend in the River (several hundred miles south west of Beijing) declined considerably. She cites official reports of 1997 that party branches in a third of the country's 1 million villages had decayed, and major drive to recruit new members and revive the party committees was under way. In late 1993, among the 1,000 village committee members of Jiaojiang city, Zhejiang, 410 or 45.1% were neither communist party members nor communist youth league members.<sup>27</sup>In 1997, non-communists amounted to 41.2% of the committee

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<sup>24</sup>Dept. of Civic Affairs of Jiaojiang municipality 1994 cited by He Baogang, (2007), p. 106

<sup>25</sup>Dept. of Civic Affairs of Zhejiang province 2005 cited by He Baogang, (2007), p. 106

<sup>26</sup>Study by Anne Thurston also supports this trend. According to her data, Party membership in the village- Bend in the River (several hundred miles south west of Beijing) declined considerably. She cites official reports of 1997 that party branches in a third of the country's 1 million villages had decayed, and major drive to recruit new members and revive the party committees was under way. Even though Nationwide statistics for the party membership of VCs are not available, in some areas where there are statistics, the percentage of non- members of the party being elected seems to have increased- from about 20% in 1993 to 40% in 1995.

<sup>27</sup>Dept. of Civic Affairs of Jiaojiang municipality 1994 cited by He Baogang (2007), p. 107

members in Wuyun Township. In Laofangqiao Township in the year of 1999, non-communists comprised 41.2% of village heads.<sup>28</sup> In Chengzhou municipality, in September 1999 there were 1,111 village heads, of whom 579 (52.1%) were communist, 532 (47.9%) were non-communist. In the whole province of Zhejiang, 18.9% of elected village chiefs were communist party members in 2002, and this slightly increased to 20.9% in 2005.<sup>29</sup> This trend can be interpreted in two ways: the party is losing its firm hold in the villages or the villagers are becoming aware of their rights and demanding it through standing in the elections. The latter seems to be more probable.

The key feature of the institutional structure of Linhai village<sup>30</sup> is that many villagers have opportunities to participate in decision making processes in public affairs. Although both the Party Branch and the VCs have been established in Linhai, neither the Party Secretary nor the Committee members have dominated public decision making since the dismantling of collective farming in the late 1970s and early 1980s according to Wang Jianxun's survey. Instead, many villagers actively participate in the decision-making processes in the public affairs in one way or another. First of all, while making decisions relating to the village, village cadres usually hold a meeting attended by all Party members and Villagers' Representatives to discuss the key issues involved. The main aim is to get the support of the Party members and the Representatives. The village cadres know that, with their support, the decisions are often implemented more easily, since the Party members and the representatives can influence many villagers, at least those in their own families.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Office of CCP Committee and Government of Laofanqiao township 1999 cited by He Baogang (2007), p. 107

<sup>29</sup>Dept. of Civic Affairs of Zhejiang province 2005 cited by He Baogang (2007), p. 107

<sup>30</sup>Linhai lies in the eastern part of Zhejiang province, a coastal and relatively rich region in south-eastern China. The village is adjacent to the East China Sea, and forms itself around a mountain. This village is also a multi-lineage one, with 18 lineages. The larger lineage has about 150 people, and the smaller one has only 21 members. See Wang Jianxun (2008), p. 86-7.

<sup>31</sup>There are 49 Party members and 55 Villagers' Representatives in the village. The Party members are recruited through an application procedure, while the Villagers' Representatives are recommended or elected by villagers. Nine Party members are also Villagers' Representatives. Thus, including Party Secretary and members of Villagers' Committee, about 100 people, over five percent of all villagers, have chances to participate in a decision-making process over public affairs. Moreover, most of the Party members and the Villagers' Representatives are ordinary peasants, and they share some common interests with their fellow villagers. See Wang Jianxun (2008), p. 89.

However the dominance of party branch does exist in other villages as Wang Jianxun shows in his thesis. The distinctive feature of Minlu village's institutional structure is the dominance of its Party Secretary in decision-making processes.<sup>32</sup> In some sense, the Party Secretary is like "local emperors" termed by other scholars. Although, in theory, the Party Secretary is mainly in charge of Party affairs and the VC is responsible for village affairs, the Party Secretary extends his power to village affairs and subjects the Committee to him. He thinks that it is legitimate for him to dominate decision making, since the Organic Law on Villagers' Committee provides that the Party assumes the leadership of village affairs. The village has never held a session of the Villagers' Assembly, consisting of all adult villagers, although the Organic Law on Villagers' Committee requires that some key decisions should be discussed at and made by the Assembly. The Party Secretary gets the support of the township leaders to continue in his post (Wang 2006: 68-74).

China's regional newspaper *Nanfang Zhoumo* from Guangdong has carried an investigative article on the difficulties elected village chiefs face when they beat incumbent party officials (SWB: 22 December 2000). Attempted killings, beatings and intimidation of popularly elected officials were reported. For instance, in the spring of 1999, in the spectacular "public elections" in all Shandong villages, Lu Yankui had been elected as the sixth Village Committee Chairman of Yujialan village, Heluo Town, Laiyang City by an absolute majority of 208 votes (out of a total of 278), to become Yujialan's first directly elected VC chairman. On 1 May 2000, five men forced their way into his home and slashed Lu eight times. Guo Shengli, who was in the group, later revealed that he received 7,000 *yuan* from Yujialan Party Branch Secretary Sui Zhibin and accountant Lu Yuanjie for the plot (Ibid).

The situation has not changed much even now. The story of Ms. Gong Zhanying of Shanxi province is very recent. "Five years after being elected village chief by popular vote, Ms. Gong Zhanying still cannot sign off on any government documents for her villagers", reports *The Straits Times* (Yin 2010). That authority, embodied in

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<sup>32</sup> Located in the central part of Hubei province, Minlu village is on the verge of Jiangnan Plain, one of the major regions for grain production in China. The village is about 70 miles from the Yangtze River. It is a multiple-lineage village, and there are fifteen surnames in the community. Only three surnames have over 200 people. Thus, many lineages are quite small, with about 100 people or less.

the village seal, remains in the hands of another boss, one appointed by the ruling Chinese Communist Party. The tussle between the party's appointed men and the chiefs elected by villagers in polls is highlighted by a joint petition that nine village chiefs from four provinces including Ms. Gong's, objecting the revisions to the Law on the Organisation of Village Committees, which allows villages to hold elections. They argue that the proposed changes would re-impose even more of the party's authority in the villages, quashing even the right that elected chiefs now have, in theory, to challenge the party's appointee.

A study by Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan found out that in addition to formal structures of power, numerous informal structures of power are emerging at the grassroots level. The number of organizations backed by official provisions also shows an increase. For instance, Yu Keping in his paper on Dongsheng village in Fujian province talks about thirteen organizations supported with some kind of official documents: the Village Committee, the Elders' Association, the Birth Control Association, the Youth League Branch, the Women Representatives' Committee, the Committee for Security and Protection, the Mediation Committee, the Economic Cooperative, the Research Committee on cereals and sugarcane and the Research on fruit- trees, the Villagers' Militia, Villagers' Representatives and the Group for Financial Management.<sup>33</sup>

Another type of space includes all kinds of village organizations, unofficial as far as state authorities are concerned but very formal from local inhabitants and local cadres' perspectives. These bodies are often anchored in religious, kinship or economic spheres.<sup>34</sup> Anne Thurston (1998: 33-39) found that in a village of Fujian province, lineages, religious organizations, and other associations contribute to the spirit of community, which helps check the power of village cadres and facilitates village self-governance. A similar study by Lily Tsai finds that in a significant number

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<sup>33</sup>Yu Keping, "Zhongguo nongcun de minjian zuzhi yu zhili", (Local organizations in Chinese villages and their administration), *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (Social Sciences in China) 30 (2000)" 85-96, and 31 (2000): 99-106 cited in Isabelle Thireau & Hua Linshan (2002), p.161.

<sup>34</sup>In a study by Yang Shengmin in the Tashikuergan Tajik Autonomous County between 1992 and 2001, it is found that the traditional extended family forms a reliable shelter under harsh conditions and local government in the form of a VC has not been able to influence much the lives of the local people. See Yang Shengmin, (2007), pp. 379-90.

of villages, officials rely on community institutions such as temple and lineage groups to fund and manage public services (Tsai 2002: 1). Preliminary results from a survey of 316 villages conducted by Tsai in 2001 in Shanxi, Hebei, Jiangxi and Fujian indicated that lineage or religious organizations in 54 of these villages- that is, 17% of the villages- have organized public projects. 62 villages reported that at least one public project in the past five years had not been organized by village officials<sup>35</sup> (Tsai 2002:1).

## **ii. Clan and Kinship**

Though the Chinese society was highly shaped by the Socialist ideology, it continued to adhere to lineage- centric dynamics in the villages. Lineage power permeates through the governance of the rural community. Kinship was an essential unit of Chinese society, a basic social organization through which rural China was organized and controlled. During the reform era of Deng Xiaoping, it is argued, there has been a re-emergence of the lineage force. Factors that have led to the revitalization of the lineage culture include the rural economic reform, the establishment of the responsibility system in production and the loosening-up of ideological control. The power of kinship has various roles and its impact depends upon how local actors use it.<sup>36</sup> Smart village party secretaries often use it to consolidate their power basis. The neo- rich use the traditional power of kinship to challenge the domination of village party secretaries.<sup>37</sup> Minority kinship groups do establish a coalition force to resist the domination of majority kinship.

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<sup>35</sup> Lily Tsai argues that a long time reliance on community institutions without developing formal institutions that link grassroots organizations to higher levels of the state not only limits the quantity and quality of public services but may also weaken the capacity of the state to govern rural society. By giving a comparative analysis of Kenya and Russia, Tsai argues that the overuse of local self-help groups has left people exhausted and disinclined to participate in any self- help institutions initiated by the government. See Lily Tsai (2002), pp. 24-7.

<sup>36</sup> A study by four scholars Fubing Su, Tao Ran, Xin Sun and Mingxing Liu (2011) also argue that clans as a traditional organizational principle have regained their influence in governing rural communities. According to them, clans have provided an alternative form of governance in places where local authorities were inept.

<sup>37</sup> Xu Wang cites that according to one semi- official report, most of the 16 million private enterprises and 2 million township and village enterprises in rural areas are controlled by lineage groups. See Xu Wang (1997), p. 1435.



A study by Wang Jianxun examines the lineages in Xin village.<sup>38</sup> The institutional structure of Xin village<sup>39</sup> is deeply influenced by the active and well organized lineages. Although village cadres usually organize decision-making meetings and initiate proposals, lineage leaders and some senior villagers often participate in the meetings and make suggestions, especially with regard to important public affairs. Since the village is organized along the lines of lineages, and lineage leaders are very influential in peasant life, the cadres rely on the leaders to mobilize villagers and implement village decisions. If the cadres act alone, they will find that they face immense difficulties to put their policies into practice, since the lineage leaders can easily organize villagers to resist the policies. Thus, the cadres recognize that it is important to ask the lineage leaders and some senior villagers to participate in the decision making over public affairs and to offer advice (Wang 2006: 84).

At the same time, the selection of the village cadres, in fact, is also influenced by lineages. Usually, the leading cadres, especially the Party Secretary and the Chairman of Villagers' Committee, are from the two larger lineages, the Chen and the Na, while other cadres are from the smaller lineages in Xin village of Jiangxi province. In some cases, the smaller lineages' interests are not well-represented among the cadres, since the Party Secretary and the Chairman, playing a larger role in the decision making, tend to protect their own lineages' interests. Although members of the VC are elected in theory, the elections are often controlled and manipulated by township officials. Since the officials know the influence of the lineages, they take into account this factor when selecting candidates of the Committee members. The officials usually do not pick up candidates of the Committee Chairman from the smaller lineages, because this would run the risk of resistance from the larger lineages (Wang 2006: 85).

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<sup>38</sup> Xin village is located in the western part of Jiangxi province in South China. The village is in a mountainous area, about 300 miles to the south of the Yangzi River. Lineages are strong and active in Xin village.

<sup>39</sup> As an administrative village, Xin consists of seven natural villages. Each natural village is a mono-lineage community. The lineages are well-organized, with their heads as leaders, and the heads are usually senior members in senior generations, who demonstrate their capabilities of leadership and administration of justice. The larger lineages are divided into several branches called "*fang*," and each *fang* includes several sub-branches called "*zhi*." The *fangs* and *zhis* have sub-heads. The lineage heads are responsible for public affairs with regard to the whole lineages, and the sub-heads mainly deal with affairs with regard to their branches or sub branches. The latter often assist and coordinate with the former. See Wang Jianxun (2006), pp. 81-2.

In Ping'an village, a Committee for the Village Embellishment was created at the beginning of the 1990s. Its composition reflects a fundamental concern for kinship ties: each of the four lineage segments existing in the village are represented by one or two individuals. The VC although associated with many discussions, often acts as a mere executive body. More interestingly, a decision of the VC that would not enjoy the support of the Committee for the Village Embellishment would be rather difficult to enforce (Thireau and Hua 2002: 174).

Lineage organizations, to some degree, help check the power of the village Party branch and the VC. The cadres in villages that actively practice and organize lineage rituals and activities tend to rely on lineage organizations for fundraising, and are more inclined to be sensitive to social disapproval if they impose unpopular policies. Lineages might have a negative impact on public decision making in some communities as Kevin O'Brien and Rongbin Han observe: the quality of democracy in much of the countryside remains low because VCs are situated in a socio-political environment that has changed little. Majority rule sometimes bring in dominance of one clan, or disruptive, ongoing struggle between several clans, which leads to fierce conflict and makes governance nearly impossible (O'Brien and Han 2009: 359-78).

The clan system is a complicated one to understand. In another case, a powerful CCP chief ruled the village of Yanling in Hebei like a fiefdom. Patrick Besha talks about the story of a Party Secretary named Gaodianqing who ruled the village for thirteen years. In 1985, he became Party Secretary and VC and cancelled future elections. The following years saw misuse of his office in different ways and becoming an all powerful person in the village. In 1998, he was removed due to the number of complaints against him and a new cadre from a major clan replaced him. In the election followed, many rival clan members ran for election. Eventually, a rival clan member of the replaced Party Secretary was elected. Clan power relations often underlie village politics and in isolated communities, it is the de facto form of government.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Patrick Besha observes that this has been reported in isolated communities in Gansu, Xinjiang, Yunnan and Tibet. See Patrick Besha (2006), pp. 48-49.

Xu Wang's study in six villages in Shaanxi province and Fujian province suggests that by including clan interests into its framework and allowing their voices to be heard in the process of drawing up regulations for village affairs, villager representative assemblies have provided a good place for the reconciliation of clan conflicts and therefore lineage groups are not necessarily an obstacle to grassroots democracy always (Wang 1997: 1440).

### iii. Religion

Even though with less prominence, the importance of religion in rural China is gradually emerging, making the local self-governance a complex process.<sup>41</sup> A study by Lily Tsai found that village temple committee in Fujian had taken over all roads in the community. According to the study, the temple committee manages around 400,000 *yuan* in annual donations from the worshippers, which was far more than the village government's annual revenue of 100,000 *yuan*. In addition to religious and social activities, the temple also paved four village roads in 2000, each costing between 70, 000 and 120, 000 *yuan*, and organized the construction of village basketball courts. In the words of the committee chair, "the village committee doesn't have enough capacity or power to carry out public projects." (Tsai 2002: 11).

Another research by Yu Changjiang looked at the party branch, the VC and Buddhism which are the three main forces in a grassroots community in a small village in the western region of China, where ethnic Tibetans live and studied their functions and interactions. Three main forces work at different levels of society and therefore there is no overt conflict of interests because each of them is oriented towards specific aspects of life and not to life as a whole.<sup>42</sup> He found that under the impact of development, Buddhism provides a psychological buffer and leeway in people's adjustment and adaptation to a changing society. Thus he writes that religion

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<sup>41</sup> Xu Wang notes that churches have taken important functions such as assisting local governments in completing state assigned tasks, providing public services and taking care of social welfare. She gives the example of Liangning Province where grain procurement is done with the help of church. See Xu Wang (1997), pp. 1435-36.

<sup>42</sup> The village administration fulfills the routine duties, keeps the regular operations running smoothly and maintains the basic integration and order. The Communist Party is primarily a dynamic system devoted to promoting reform, progress and handling exceptional crises. Religion provides spiritual support, moral guidelines and psychological leeway for the villagers struggling with social change. See Yu Changjiang, (2007), pp. 431- 56.

is a necessary balancing force to maintain a relatively stable moral foundation and social norms in a rapidly changing society<sup>43</sup> (Yu 2007: 446).

*Kaxie*<sup>44</sup> system of the Lahu people is a political- religious system. As a religious head, the *kaxie* was in charge of preaching the Buddhist scripture and tenets and as the political head, had to help the elected *kaxies* arrange seasonal activities such as teaching, spring ploughing, farming, cereal cropping and storing. Apart from the VC, there exists an unofficial but parallel power centre of *kaxie* system in Nanduan village of Yunnan province. It is a social organization of the local people, though the government never accords its public recognition. The parallel apparatus of the VC and the *kaxie* system are, in fact, mutually complementary and interdependent. According to He Shaoying, existence of this system fills up the power vacuum in the state-society relations (He 2007a: 402).

Thus it can be seen that the power relations at the village level consists of the following: party branch, VC, entrepreneurial class, religious and kinship ties. The society at the most basic level has several overlapping influences. This provides for an in depth understanding of the various power structures at the countryside and how they become an integral part of grassroots democracy initiated in China's countryside.

#### ***IV. Summary***

The initiative for grassroots democracy from below and its appropriation by the state later is an important political process unfolding in China. The consciousness for having a fair system in order to overcome the crisis of inequality and disorder shows that the Chinese are not alien to democratic elements or its procedures. The success of initial experiments of grassroots democracy made officials to adopt those ideas from the peasants and apply in a large scale to all over rural China. This very first step has

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<sup>43</sup> Yu Changjiang writes that in many cases of eastern China, there is more than one religion or folk belief coexisting together and the religious part then could be much more complicated and less integrated than that in the case of a single religion area. In addition to this, in coastal regions where economical and social development is proceeding at a high speed, there appears some other social force besides the three in his study, such as newly rising entrepreneurs, NGOs and even some cults and underground societies, where interactions could be much more complex.

<sup>44</sup> *Kaxie* is a transliteration into Chinese, of the Lahu characters 'ka', which means 'village' or 'residence block' and 'xie' which means 'master' or 'local authority'. He Shaoying, (2007a), p. 392.

to be acknowledged since this can probably change the power equations at the grassroots level at least in the years to come.

The policies of the state from the beginning of the reform era were to mainly push forward the economic reform and largely ignored the corresponding political reforms. The Organic Law of Villagers' Committee was, however, a turning point to a certain extent. The provisional law of 1987 saw its wide acceptance among rural residents. Even though vague in many of its terms, the law was welcomed. According to Jiang Zemin, the expansion of grassroots democracy in rural areas should be in a step-by-step and orderly way under the Party's unified leadership and the role of township (town) and village level grassroots party organizations as the nucleus of leadership should be brought into full play. This was later incorporated into law to become the revised Organic Law of Villagers' Committee in 1998. It is expected that China will enact more policies which will complement the Organic law on VC in the years to come.

The most notable change in the years from 1987 till present is the expansion of the rural power structure in China. One of the factors responsible for this phenomenon is the rise of more classes emerging as a result of reform and opening up. The traditional power structure of a party secretary and VC is, changing into a multiple interaction space where traditional power of the party secretary is declining with the new emerging powers like entrepreneurs, clans and kinship and religion to some extent. Another important feature is that VC heads getting elected are largely non-communists and some of them are successful entrepreneurs. The villagers vote for them in the hope that people with money can develop the village more efficiently. The lineage system is becoming alive to regain and support their kin to elections for VC. The legitimacy for a VC position comes when people choose their leaders themselves and therefore, the old methods to retain power with authority are seen illegal and not acceptable. It can thus be concluded that there is a plurality of interests being witnessed in China. These plural interests and interest groups have been redefining the power equations at various levels, including between local Party leaders and elected leaders, and are the basis for village power structure.

In the last few decades, China has seen a tremendous change in its understanding of power and interests. Today, for elected village heads, interests include their power to distribute rights and duties in the village and other benefits from their posts. For the rich, village democracy is an institution whereby they can advance their business interests. For most villagers, village democracy is a platform to demand fair distribution of village wealth and in some cases, to take revenge against party bosses through elections. This aspect of participation of villagers in grassroots democracy through village elections will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Village Elections: Political Participation in Rural China**

Competitive elections are viewed as an important indicator of a viable democracy, although not the only indicator. Free and fair elections are at the core of Western liberal democracy. Similarly village elections are central to establishing grassroots democracy in China. Many studies are conducted on the basis of empirical data from village elections to analyze how successful village democracy in China is. International observers are allowed to watch and report and make suggestions based on their experience of observing an election in China to further help China improve on her path to democracy.

Political participation in rural China can be taken as an index to understand how successful grassroots democracy in China is. The most important indicator of participation is village elections which is very evident in the case of China. Political participation of villagers is understood differently in China because of the existence of powerful governmental and party organs, the thorough penetration of society by the state, the scarcity of independent advocacy groups and other mechanisms for interest articulation, a shackled mass media and the long absence of free and competitive elections (Jennings 1997: 361). With the introduction of the Organic Law, considerable changes have occurred. Elections have generated a sense of awareness among the villagers regarding their rights, influencing their political perspectives and participation. This is a development with tremendous potential in empowering the so called least political strata of the Chinese society.

With this backdrop, this chapter tries to test the hypothesis that village elections have been strengthening political participation in rural China in the last two decades leading to better governance as well as empowerment of people. This chapter will proceed in the following way: first section analyses the evolution of China's electoral laws over the years; the second section will highlight the electoral institutions and procedures followed in a village in China with regard to

implementation of grassroots democracy; an analysis of some data regarding citizenship and participation in elections in the last one decade forms the third section and the final section will summarize the main findings of the chapter.

### *I. Electoral Law in China*

Elections are an integral part of China's vast countryside. Many scholars have stated that at least in those places where elections are conducted regularly and in accordance with the stipulations of the Organic Law, which was promulgated and made effective nationwide in 1998, they have become a meaningful part of village life by elevating peasants' political efficacy, giving them more influence on village politics and helping to restore strained cadre- peasant relations (Chen and Schubert 2007: 12).

While village elections are new and recent, elections per se are not. The People's Republic of China (PRC) government adopted the first Chinese Election Law in 1953, and established the National Election Commission.<sup>1</sup> This law regulated that direct elections should be held to elect deputies to the People's Congress below the county level, and the first nationwide election was conducted in the beginning of 1954 with 85.88% turnout rate. (Peng 2008: 116-17). "The law provided a legal basis and basic principles for China's grassroots elections, such as emphasizing the universality and equality of the right to vote", said Zhang Jincai, a researcher with the Institute of Contemporary China Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Tang 2011: 23).

In 1979, the Second Plenary Session of the Standing Committee of the Fifth NPC amended "The Election Law of the National People's Congress at All Levels", which stipulated that the direct election of the People's Congress deputies should be held at

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<sup>1</sup> PRC's first Election Law in 1953 stipulates, every 100,000 urban population, defined as residents of city of over 500,000 population, is to have one deputy to the national people's congress (the national legislative organ), while every 800,000 population in rest region is to have one deputy to the national people's congress. This provision was not revised until the year of 1995, when the ratio changed from 1:8 to 1:4, that is every 240,000 urban populations in contrast every 960,000 rural population is to have one deputy to the national people's congress. And in the year 2010, the revised election law changed the ratio from 1:4 to 1:1, which means urban and rural citizen now enjoy equal constitutional right in voting.



both the county and township level. The MCA was responsible for administering these direct elections. Afterward, the Electoral Law was revised in 1982, 1986, 1995, 2004 and 2010 to expand the level of direct democracy and to improve the quality of elections.<sup>2</sup>

The 1979 law contained two major modifications of the 1953 law. First, the 1953 electoral law restricted nomination authority to political organizations, whereas the 1979 law extended the right to nominate candidates to individuals. The 1979 Electoral Law states:

“Nominations of candidates can be made by the Chinese Communist Party, the various democratic parties, people’s organizations, or any voter or deputy when seconded by no less than three others; the electoral committee or the presidium of a congress will collect the names of persons nominated by various circles and pass the name list to the voters for repeated discussions; if the number of candidates nominated is too big, the final list may be decided on by a preliminary vote. The official name list of candidates is to be decided on according to the wishes of most of the voters.”

Secondly, the 1979 electoral law stipulated that the number of candidates must be greater than the number of seats.<sup>3</sup> Because of these two important additions, the 1979 electoral law was procedurally more democratic than the 1953 law. More

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<sup>2</sup>Adopted at the Second Session of the Fifth NPC on 1 July 1979; amended for the first time per the Resolution on Revising Certain Provisions of the Election Law of the NPC and Local People’s Congresses of the PRC adopted at the 5<sup>th</sup> Session of the Fifth NPC on 10 December 1982; amended for the second time per the Decision on Revising the Election Law of NPC and Local People’s Congresses of PRC adopted at the 18<sup>th</sup> Session of the Sixth NPC Standing Committee on 02 December 1986; amended for the third time per the Decision on Revising the Election Law of the NPC and Local People’s Congresses of the PRC adopted at the 12<sup>th</sup> Session of the Eighth NPC Standing Committee on 28 February 1995; amended for the fourth time per the Decision on Revising the Election Law of NPC and Local People’s Congresses of the PRC adopted at the 12<sup>th</sup> Session of the 10<sup>th</sup> NPC Standing Committee on 27 October 2004; amended for the fifth time per the Decision of the Election Law of the NPC AND Local People’s Congresses of the PRC adopted at the Third Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> NPC on 14 March 2010.

<sup>3</sup> In the past the election of deputies to the people’s congresses at all levels was conducted in an “exact number” way (that is, the number of candidates equaled the number of deputies to be elected). But in 1978, in some places this practice was changed. For instance, at Chengjiang Commune in suburban Zhongqing, Sichuan province, the number of deputies to be elected to the commune people’s congress was 142. When the voters were nominated candidates at the first round, they put 760 names on the list. After three rounds of democratic discussions from the top down and the bottom up, according to the wish of most of the voters, a list of 488 official candidates was worked out and published. This was three times the number of deputies to be elected. The deputies who were finally elected went in on a landslide. People were satisfied with the election, saying that these deputies had their full trust because they had gone through four siftings and were like flowers sorted out from among flowers. See Cheng Zihua (1979), p. 17.

significantly, the voting method of raising hands in a public meeting was replaced by the secret ballot at polling stations, and proxy voting was allowed by the Election Leadership Committee. The Electoral Law provides that all voting can be conducted by secret ballot and that one may vote for or against someone, or vote for any other candidate (not in the name list) or abstains from voting<sup>4</sup> (Cheng 1979: 17).

Since the founding of PRC, a new chapter has been added to the electoral law on the supervision, recall and by- election of deputies. In this chapter, the law clearly states that the voters or electoral units have the power to supervise and recall their deputies. It also specifies the procedure for the recall of deputies by the people while stipulating that the charge against a deputy should be verified and the deputy to be recalled may appeal at the meeting held for his recall. These ensure that the right to recall would be exercised strictly in accordance with the democratic methods and legal procedures (Cheng 1979: 18). Under the 1979 law, however, the CCP still monopolized the final selection of candidates after they are nominated.

One of the most significant breakthroughs for democracy in China occurred with a new legislation in 1987. Organic Law of Villagers' Committee was adopted on a provisional basis on November 24, 1987, to become effective in June 1988. Article IX of the Organic Law of Villager Committee states that:

“The villager committee chair, vice chair (s), and members shall be elected directly by the villagers. The villagers committee shall have a term of three years, and its members may be re-elected for consecutive terms. All villagers who have reached eighteen years of age, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, occupation, family background, religious belief, educational level, financial situation, or length of residence, have a right to vote and the right to be elected. But those who are deprived of political rights in accordance with the law are excluded.”

It mandated direct village elections every three years, but did not define precisely what kind of elections to be held and how elections were to be conducted. The law had only one article that stipulated age requirements and terms of those elected to serve. The law delegated to the provinces the authority to make specific election procedures and to implement village elections. The 1987 election law did not spell out

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<sup>4</sup> The law further says that the small number of illiterate people and those who are disabled and cannot write may ask somebody else they trust to write on their behalf. See *SWB/ FE/6128/BII/6*, 30 May 1979.

basic election principles. Two important aspects of election were missing in the 1987 VC election law- namely, election principles and electoral procedures (Tan 2004: 4). Key elements of elections- such as secret ballots, one person/one vote rules, absentee ballots, multi-candidacy- were not stipulated. Free and fair elections require both conformity to democratic election principles and adherence to fair election procedures. The law did not set national standards for village elections with regard to election principles and procedures.

Compared with the 1987 VC election law, the new law of 1998 has 30 articles, 9 more than the original law. Seven articles deal specifically with election requirements and procedures. Article IX specifies the composition of a village committee of three to seven members: a chair, vice chairs and members. Article XXI makes it clear that

“No organization or individual can appoint, designate, or replace Villager Committee members. The villager committee shall have a term of three years. At the end of each term, a new election shall be held in a timely manner. Villager committee members may be re-elected for consecutive terms.”

It also lays down that the list of the villagers with the right to vote and the right to be elected shall be made public twenty days before the election.

Article XIV is the most important and detailed legislation on village election procedures and their implementation.

“Villagers in the village shall directly nominate candidates for the Villager Committee. There shall be more candidates than positions to be filled. The villager committee election shall be valid if more than half the villagers with the right to vote cast votes. A candidate shall win the election only if he or she receives more than half the votes that are cast. In the election, the ballots shall be anonymous and counted openly. The election results shall be announced on the spot. Secret ballot booths shall be set up for the election. Specific electoral measures shall be made by the standing committees of the people’s congress of the provinces, autonomous regions, and centrally administered municipalities.”

For the first time, winning requirement was written into the article- that an election is valid if the winner garners more than 50% of the votes cast, so long as more than 50% of those eligible cast their votes. The article also specifies that secret ballots and open counting be adopted in the electoral process, and that private voting booth be set

up during elections, remarkable improvements given that voters earlier elected their chiefs with a show of hands.

Incidents of corruption, bribery and illegal practices are part of elections elsewhere and the case in China is no different. Liu Zirong, a village official in south China's Guangdong province, stood trial for allegedly misappropriating almost 24 million *yuan* of public money. He was also the secretary of the CCP branch in Zidong village. Liu was among the 78 village cadres who were investigated over allegations of abuse of power by prosecutors in Guangdong in the first quarter of 2009. According to the statistics issued in April by the Supreme People's Procuratorate, a total of 4,968 village cadres in village committees were involved in corruption cases in 2008, 1090 more than in 2006. From 2003 to 2009, corruption cases involving 50,000 *yuan* or more accounted for 98 percent of the economic cases in rural areas of the relatively well-off Pearl River Delta, compared with 37 percent in less developed rural areas, according to the provincial anti-corruption bureau (*BBC Monitoring*: 02 December 2009).

The 1998 law has further empowered the villagers with more rights, even to recall the Villager Committee. Article XV says:

“If illegitimate means such as threats, bribery, clique forming, or producing counterfeit ballots are employed to prevent villagers from exercising their right to vote or to be elected and disrupt the Villager election, villagers have the right to report and appeal to the people's government at the township, minority-nationality township, or town levels or to the people's government at the county level and relevant authorities in charge. Relevant government organs shall investigate and settle the appeals in accordance with the law. The election results of those who are elected through such illegitimate means as threats, bribery, clique-forming, or producing counterfeit ballots shall be nullified.”

Article XVI of OLVC enunciates:

“One-fifth or more of the villagers with the right to vote can jointly petition for a recall of a Villager Committee. Reasons for the recall must be listed in the petition. The villager committee member to be recalled shall be given an opportunity to appeal. The villager committee shall promptly convene a villager assembly to vote on the recall petition. More than half the villagers with the right to vote must approve the recall in order for it to be valid.”

Following this Article, over 3,000 villagers living at the foot of the Great Wall voted for their village head three times in three days, with the final result being the reverse of the first election. About 80 kilometers from downtown Beijing, Xiwengzhuang village of Miyun County started a direct election for village head. In the election, Yang Derong, 57, beat his rival Hou Dongsheng by a margin of 102 votes. Yang, a member of the CCP, had been the village head for four three-year terms, but appointed by the superior. Hou, the loser in the vote, went to the village Party Secretary, claiming the election was unfair. Resorting to a pamphlet about the village election issued by the Beijing Municipal People's Congress, Hou pointed out that an elder brother of Yang and the wives of Yang's two nephews were working on the electoral committee, which is forbidden by law. Hou's objection was accepted. The representatives re-elected the electoral committee. The second round of elections happened on the next day which went invalid because Hou failed to win at least half of the votes cast. A third election was held the next day with Hou gaining over half of the votes to win the position (*Xinhua* 2001).

In provinces like Fujian, there are additional laws added to the original one. For instance, electoral law in Fujian reads: "If the number of votes cast in each election is greater than the number of voters, the election is invalid. If the number equals or is less than the number of voters, the election is valid. If the number of candidates marked on a ballot is greater than the number of positions to be elected, the ballot is invalid; if the number marked on a ballot is equal to or less than the number of positions to be elected, the ballot is valid. Ballots that are indecipherable or not marked in accordance with the stipulations are invalid." In this law, the role of the village election committee is more specified.<sup>5</sup>

Beijing has released an edict stepping up control over the credentials of candidates in village elections, tightening supervision of the voting process and holding local officials responsible for election-related protests. The edict is intended to curb corruption and assuage the grievances of villagers by pledging to punish local officials who improperly seize farmers' land and public assets. It also

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<sup>5</sup> "Fujian Province's Measures for the Villager Committee Election (December 26, 1990)". See Liu (2001), p. 68.

contained a vow to clamp down on bribery, the use of violence, fraud, and ballot-fixing in elections. County and township party chiefs would be held responsible if demonstrations and protests broke out during the elections. The edict orders the village election committees to encourage local businessmen, veterans, college graduates and returning migrant workers to stand. The rules say local cadres can “organize question- and- answer sessions between candidates and voters, but campaigning is banned. It also instructs local governments to set aside a budget for the village committees and promised pensions for retired village officials (Ma 2009: 06).

Chinese legislators are also considering giving rural people greater powers to remove village committee members and to convene their own meetings to decide village affairs.<sup>6</sup> Discussions for law amendments, first reviewed in December 2009, had started in October 2010 mainly to give rural residents greater say in village affairs (*BBC Monitoring*: 04 March 2010). The annual appraisal mechanism of village committee members was introduced earlier though sacking the disqualified officials required a complicated recall procedure. Some NPC Standing Committee members have proposed a smoother channel for the removal of unpopular village officials, so the latest version makes it an automatic consequence if the official is rated as unqualified for two consecutive years. Village heads who fail to pass appraisals in the villages for two consecutive years will automatically be removed from their positions, according to the latest draft law amendment designed to better supervise rural officials and village elections (Zhu 2010).

The new draft law would require at least a fifth of the village electorate or at least a third of village representatives to sign a petition to remove committee members. The draft amendments said candidates using violence, menaces, cheating or offering bribes, or fabricating ballots, would face administrative or legal punishment.

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<sup>6</sup> Chinese scholars had called for a change in the voting system to allow people to vote according to where they live as opposed to where they are registered. Many migrant workers live in cities far from where they registered as residents. At the fourth session of the 10th National People’s Congress (NPC), 31 deputies proposed to revise the Organic Law of Village Committees. In the proposal, deputies set forth the issue of defining the village voters, setting up a village election law and improving the assembly of the village deputies system. See, “Chinese Scholars Call for Change in Villagers’ Voting Rights”, *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific* 09 April 2006.

It also proposed supervisory agencies to make village financial accounts and other affairs more transparent. The draft amendments would extend the original 30 articles of the law to six chapters and 39 articles, clarifying village democratic management (*BBC Monitoring*: 23 December 2009).

China's economy and society have developed rapidly, urbanization has progressed swiftly, and the urban and rural population composition has changed considerably since the reform and opening up. There was a need for change in the existing laws based on new circumstances and situations. The National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009- 2010) clearly laid down that "the government will expand citizens' participation in political affairs in an orderly way at all levels and in all sectors, so as to guarantee citizens' right to participate." According to the plan,

"Revisions will be made to the Election Law to improve the election system. Deputies to the people's congresses will be elected according to the same ratio of population in both urban and rural areas; the proportions of deputies from among ethnic minorities, returned overseas Chinese, women, grassroots workers, farmers and migrant workers in the total number of deputies to people's congresses at all levels will be increased appropriately, and closer ties between the deputies and their constituencies will be maintained."

The NPC Standing Committee has made improvements to the electoral system, and has amended and improved the provisions on electing deputies to people's congresses based on different population ratios in urban and rural areas. The amendment grants rural residents equal rights in electing deputies to the people's congresses.<sup>7</sup> It won 2,747 votes from the 2,909 deputies at the closing ceremony of the third session of the 11<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress (*China Daily* 2010). "The latest amendment to the Electoral Law can be summarized as one focus and eight highlights", says Li Lin, Director of the Law Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*Beijing Review*: 25 March 2010).

One focus pertains to electing deputies to the people's congresses based on the same population ratio for both urban and rural areas. Article XIV of the amendment states that:

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<sup>7</sup> Cai Fang, director of the Institute of Population and Labour Economics under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), said with rapid industrialization and rural economic development, the time was right for equal representation of rural and urban people. See *People's Daily*, 23 December 2009.

“The number of deputies to local people’s congresses shall be allocated by the standing committees of local people’s congresses or the election committees at the same level on the basis of the populations of the administrative areas at the next lower level or the populations of the electoral districts in their own administrative areas and in accordance with the principle that each deputy represents the same number of urban and rural people and the requirement guaranteeing an appropriate number of deputies for every region, ethnic group and sector of society. In people’s congresses of counties and autonomous counties, there shall be at least one deputy representing townships, ethnic minority townships or towns with an exceptionally small population.”

Article XVI of the amendment stipulates that:

“Number of deputies to the National People’s Congress shall be allocated by its Standing Committee on the basis of the population of each province, autonomous region and municipality directly under the Central Government, and in accordance with the principle that each deputy represents the same number of urban and rural people and the requirement of guaranteeing an appropriate number of deputies for every region, ethnic group and sector of society.”

Some of the significant highlights of the amendment included providing basic information such as personal identification and curriculum vitae of the recommended candidates for deputies to the election committee or the presidium of the people’s congress; arranging meetings between deputy candidates and voters to allow the former to introduce themselves and answer latter’s questions; setting up polling stations and conduct elections based on the distribution of voters in each electoral district and in accordance with the principle of facilitating voters to vote; setting up “confidential polling booths” for taking secret ballot and addition of a chapter entitled “Organizational Bodies” , which provides specific provisions on the creation, withdrawal, duties, and work requirements of election committees (Wang 2010).

The amendments to the Election Law still have many caveats. The voting rights of migrant population have not been included causing some deputies and experts to express concern (Tze-Wei 2010). Wu Xiaoling, a deputy to the National People’s Congress made the proposal of establishing a single system that includes all basic information about every individual. “To protect the citizen’s basic rights to vote and rights to stand for election, we need to establish a single system to include all basic information about every national citizen”, he said. He further added that if the current



public security information system can be upgraded and integrated with other information systems to contain all information about each individual citizen, the right to vote for every eligible citizen could be guaranteed, even if they have migrated elsewhere (*BBC Monitoring*: 08 March 2010).

## ***II. Institutions and Procedures***

Many institutions have been actively involved in making grassroots democracy work. In addition, several procedures, besides the Electoral law, as discussed above have been put in place.

Elections are supervised mainly by provincial bureau officials of civil affairs and carried out by county civil affairs bureau officials. The Ministry of Civil Affairs officials provide guidance, training and supervision of implementation of the VC elections. Although most provinces have adopted election methods as mandated by the law, in practice, various implementation methods, with different rules and standards, have resulted in quite different electoral processes and outcomes. Robert Pastor and Qingshan Tan (2000) argues that conducting village elections within the context of 5,000years of Chinese authoritarianism and the key political actors deciding to work within the rules of the electoral game shows that Chinese leadership supports grassroots democracy, but with low priority. With an efficient leadership, a significant allocation of resources and a massive campaign on the national level, the authors argue that a “limited” democracy can lead to genuine democracy.

Basically, the preliminary work of the VC election is initiated by Civil Affairs Departments at the county and township level. First of all, they collect the basic information about individual villages such as the complete list of current VC members, the village population, and the number of eligible voters and then send this data to the Communist Party, to the government and to the county People’s Congress. Secondly, the township government summons a preparatory meeting with the secretaries of the Party branch at the village level, announces any directives relating to the election, and trains the working staff by studying the Organic law and the election manuals. Afterward, there is an assembly of the Party branch at village level,

preceding the VC election, which reorganizes the party committee and elects a new Party secretary. This arrangement initiates the whole process for the VC elections (Peng 2008: 119-20).

Electoral administration at village level is conducted by the village election working group, which normally consists of five to seven members. The working group has the following essential responsibilities: drawing up plans for the election, identifying election methods, mobilizing the villagers, facilitating the nominations of candidates, finalizing the list of formal candidates and publicizing it, and choosing the date of election (He 2007: 26). The 2005 National Survey found that nearly 60% of respondents reported that the village election committees were formed through an all village assembly, village group meetings and an assembly of village representatives. Only 4% conformed that they were appointed by the village party branch and 2.6% by township leaders (Ibid: 27).

**Table 4.1 Villager Elections Committee, 2005**

|  | <b>No. of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Elected by All Villagers Assembly          | 1,006                     | 39.4              |
| Elected by Village Group Meeting           | 235                       | 9.2               |
| Elected by Village Representative Assembly | 249                       | 9.7               |
| <b>Elected: Cumulative</b>                 | <b>1490</b>               | <b>58.3</b>       |
| Appointed by Village Party Branch          | 103                       | 4.0               |
| Appointed by Leaders of Township authority | 66                        | 2.6               |
| <b>Appointed: Cumulative</b>               | <b>169</b>                | <b>6.6</b>        |
| Others                                     | 17                        | 0.7               |
| Not Clear                                  | 880                       | 34.4              |
| Total                                      | 2,556                     | 100.0             |

Source: The 2005 survey conducted by the Ministry of Civic Affairs and the Institute of Sociology, CASS cited in He Baogang (2007), p. 28.

Article XIII of Organic Law of Villagers' Committee states that "the Villager Election Committee shall be in charge of the election of the Villager Committee. The Villager Assembly or villager small groups shall elect the members of the Villager Election Committee." This is the legal basis for the institutional guarantee of conducting elections. The survey by MCA shows that 58.3% villagers agreed that Village Election Committee (VEC) in their village is elected by All Villagers' Assembly, or Village Group Meeting or VRA. 34.4% were not clear about the way the VEC was elected. 6.6% responded that their VEC is not elected but appointed by local Party leaders or township leaders. The table above shows a declining trend in the power of local Party leaders and township administration in VEC.

Before the formation of the Village Election Committee (VEC), the party branch at the village level often elects a new secretary under the leadership of the township. To solicit more opinions from villagers and to win the villagers' support, the CCP has started to employ two- ballot system, which originates from Hequ county of Shanxi province. The election process consists of two stages. First, the incumbent secretary of the Party branch presents a report to all of the villagers' representatives and answers their questions in a democratic appraisal meeting. After the meeting, voters cast votes with confidence to recommend candidates for the posts of the Party secretary, the deputy secretary and the committee members of the Party branch. The ballot is blank and villagers can vote as many names as they like. The people who receive over 50% of the votes become the preliminary candidates, and the township selects its favourite one to be the official candidate from the slate of preliminary candidates. In the second stage, the party members of the village elect the secretary and the members of the Party branch committee (Peng 2008: 120).

A complete VC election procedure consists of six stages: election-management, registration, nomination, campaigning, voting and tabulation.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> A study by Shuna Wang observed no strong evidence for a better working of competitive elections than that of a closed one. In fact, she observes that the elections have enhanced the accountability of the village committee, but weakened local fiscal sharing and the state's grip. Viewed against the results of her findings, the abolition of taxes and fees will likely to further strengthen the autonomy of the village and may lead to atomistic division in the countryside if no proper action is taken to revert it. In addition, without the authority to collect fees, the village government is required to raise funds for local public goods on a case-by-case basis. See Wang Shuna (2007), pp.1635-49.

major task of the election management is to set up an election leadership committee, which is responsible for all affairs and activities of the election. The second stage of the election procedure is registration. The VEC must post the registration list on the village bulletin at least 20 days before the election. Because of the high mobility of rural population, especially in poor areas, voter registration is not an easy task (Ibid: 121).

The next stage is the nomination and selection of the preliminary candidates. It is one of the most important procedures in village elections. A set of procedures that guarantees the villagers' right to nomination is an institutionalization of a genuine self-governing autonomy (He 2007: 27). O'Brien and Li deem the nomination procedure as an indicator of a well-run election. John James Kennedy finds out that the type of nomination method used in each village election has a strong impact on villager satisfaction with the election process. In villages with an open nomination process, villagers are notably satisfied with the election process (Kennedy 2010). There are four models of nomination procedure across the country. The first is direct nomination, individually or jointly by villagers or by the candidates themselves. The second is indirect nomination, either by village representatives or by household representatives. The third is the nomination by the village election leading group, by the village party branch, or by the township government.<sup>9</sup> The fourth and the last is a joint nomination by villagers, the party branch, and township government, or by an assembly of village representatives, branch-village heads, party members, and village cadres (He 2007: 28). Villagers invented and practiced *haixuan* (naming from the floor or direct nomination for candidates), which originated in Lishu county, Jilin province in 1993. In the 2005 village elections, 16,546 villages constituting 48.8% of the total voting area adopted the *haixuan* method in Zhejiang province; some counties achieved a 100% rate (Ibid: 29)

The nominations often involve two separate processes: producing a list of initial candidates and subsequently reducing that list into a list of final candidates. The 2005 National Survey by the MCA and Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy

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<sup>9</sup> In Ningxia, for instance, township government officials were found to appoint candidates for village elections, a method that was against the spirit of the VC election law. See Qingshan Tan (2004), p. 7.

Social Science (CASS) shows that there is a significant increase in the direct nomination method, villagers nominating their candidates jointly. At the same time, the study indicates that the role of the village Party branch and Township administration in deciding the candidates has reduced to a great extent. Table 4.2 and Table 4.3 below show the pattern of nomination process.

**Table 4.2 Initial Nomination of Candidates, 2005**

|  | <b>No. of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Nominated Directly by Villagers            | 1,211                     | 48.1              |
| Nominated Directly by Election Committee   | 278                       | 11.0              |
| Nominated Directly by Village Party Branch | 139                       | 5.5               |
| Nominated Directly by Township Authority   | 95                        | 3.8               |
| Not Clear                                  | 797                       | 31.6              |
| <b>Total</b>                               | <b>2,520</b>              | <b>100.0</b>      |

Source: The 2005 survey conducted by the Ministry of Civic Affairs and the Institute of Sociology, CASS cited in He (2007), p. 31.

**Table 4.3 Selection of Final Candidates, 2005**

|   | <b>No. of People</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|----------------------|-------------------|
| Voted by Whole Villagers                              | 1,458                | 58.0              |
| Voted by Village Groups                               | 151                  | 6.0               |
| Discussed or Voted by Village Representative Assembly | 163                  | 6.5               |
| Decided by Village Party Branch                       | 69                   | 2.7               |
| Decided by Township Authority                         | 64                   | 2.5               |
| Not Clear   | 607                  | 24.2              |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>2,512</b>         | <b>100.0</b>      |

Source: The 2005 survey conducted by the Ministry of Civic Affairs and the Institute of Sociology, CASS cited in He (2007), p. 31.

After nomination, there is campaign period. Once final candidates are determined, candidates do openly conduct election campaigns. Candidates either do not have to campaign at all, or conduct a brief campaign right in front of mass voters on the election day (Peng 2008: 123-24). Reports say that an enterprising village election candidate in southern China, who thought he could garner more votes by campaigning on closed-circuit television, was fined for violating broadcasting laws. Thinking that the method would help him reach out to the masses more effectively, he made a video that outlined his track record and his plans for the community. Mr. Liao was fined 10,000 *yuan* by the local broadcasting authorities for “producing a television programme without permission.” Most people feel that as long as the video is morally acceptable, it should be screened over closed-circuit television, which is a medium widely used by factories, schools and villages across China. Fujian officials suggest that local campaigning rules should be amended to be in line with broadcasting laws (*The Straits Times* 2001).

Nevertheless, campaigns are not widespread. There are various forms of informal campaigns. For instance, one candidate threw a birthday party ahead of his real birthday and legitimately invited his fellow villagers to his place and advertised his plan if he were to be the village chief. There are also various campaigning strategies. The first one is a disruptive strategy. For example, two or three days before the election date, one candidate sends his close friend from another area to his opponent's place, this friend pretends to offer the opponent a wonderful business opportunity so that the opponent is fully engaged in the business meeting and has little time for his informal campaigning activities (He 2007: 58).

The second strategy is cooperation. In some villages of Xiwu district, Hangzhou, there were five or six groups fighting each other for their own candidate. As a result none of them won in the 1997 elections. Learning a lesson from that experience, these groups have developed a cooperative strategy and formed one group to run for elections. After realising this new development, other groups also formed

another cooperative faction in the 2002 election. As a result, in the functional sense the village had two factions competing for village power (Ibid).

Voting is the next process. There are two popular types of voting methods: mass voting and individual voting. There are several issues related to the voting process: voting booths, secret ballots and roving boxes. First, there were no standards regarding the placement of voting booths. In Jilin, polling booths were set up in villagers' homes. Second, although secret booths remained highly desirable, voting booths were often just several lined-up tables with no separation of any sort between tables, or were just individually placed in different parts of the room; and again, there was no blocking of the views of other voters. Third, there were a high percentage of voters who voted in roving boxes and other moving polls, and yet there were no standards regarding the supervision of such roving boxes. Roving boxes were designed for voters who were physically unable to come to the poll to vote. In villages where high percentages of votes in roving box were found, roving boxes were used as a convenience rather than their intended use (Ibid: 31-3).

Another unregulated issue is proxy voting. Proxy voting was permitted in most of village elections, and yet there was no clear rule regulating its scope. In some places, proxy voting accounted for more than 20% of the total votes cast on the Election Day. Proxy voting is not consistent with the election principle of one person/one vote and participatory democracy. Proxy voting does not comply with the secret balloting principle, which is a particular problem when there is no rule for proxy voting.

Wang Jinhua, deputy director of MCA's Department of Basic Governance and Community, acknowledged on 3 August 2008 that there is an increasing tendency of vote- buying in the village committee elections. But there are difficulties in dealing with the vote- buying practice. First, it is difficult to specify what constitutes vote- buying because the current laws and regulations are not clear regarding the vote- buying practice. Second, obtaining evidence is problematic since neither a candidate who offers bribes nor a voter who accepts a bribe would normally be willing to testify. Third, there are no specific legal sanctions for election bribery, so the worst that can

befall a candidate offering bribes is a disqualification. “There is a need to improve the election procedures”, Wang Jinhua adds (*BBC Monitoring*: 04 August 2008).

The final stage of the election process is the vote count. Usually, the working staff will put all of the votes on a table first; then arrange the votes; identify the invalid votes, show them to the assembled people and count them out loudly so that the recorder can tally the number on the blackboard. The Organic Law regulates both the public count and the announcement of the result right away which helps to improve the legitimacy of the count. After the publication of election results, the township cadres confer the certificates on each elected member of the VC (Peng 2008: 127).

There are visible changes in the rural institutions and procedures of local government. “I am a village leader under contract”, said Wang Xiantao. He was newly elected director of Hongguang Village Committee of Ruian city in east China’s Zhejiang Province. He had signed a contract with his fellow villagers stipulating that he would pay financial damages incurred in the event of potential mismanagement or wrongdoing on his part. This type of democratic supervision mechanism is increasingly popular in developed, rural coastal areas. Numerous villages in the Zhujiang Delta, in south China’s Guangdong province, have established special committees to supervise the implementation of the village regulations. Xiangshan County in Zhejiang has taken steps to begin decentralizing power. Every village in the county has its own group of auditors to supervise village accounting practices and to make periodic reports to the villagers (*Xinhua* 2002). According to Kevin O’Brien and Rongbin Han (2009), the introduction of elections has indeed begun to change the way in which village authorities gain power, but this has not necessarily transformed the way they exercise that power. In short, the argument is that ‘high quality democracy’ in rural China, let alone the whole nation, rests on much more than good village elections.

As a result of scientific and democratic developments, a number of procedures within local governments have gradually transformed existing decision-making bodies. The systems include: the public opinion system, the public hearing system, the



participation system, the expert consultation system, and the pursuit of huge responsibility system. The public hearing system has been included as part of the daily routine of local governments at all levels. For example, before introducing policies related to people's daily lives, a public hearing meeting has to be held. In 2005, Shanghai municipal government laid down rules stipulating that transcript of public hearing meetings and meeting reports prepared by the authorities concerned must be publicized on government websites within 10 days of the public hearing meeting (*BBC Monitoring: 27 September 2005*).

The critical question is whether these elections are competitive. The practice of *haixuan* had dramatically increased the competitiveness of the village elections. The competition was also intensified as elections shifted from one candidate to multiple candidates. In 2002, 95% of all the villages of Fujian province held multiple-candidate elections. The 2005 National Survey found that 2,064 respondents (88.7%) confirm that the elections for village heads are competitive in the sense that there are more than two candidates for the post (He 2007: 54).

Qingshan Tan's study shows that despite progress made in Chinese village election laws, there exists considerable variation in rules and procedures stemming from lack of clarity in the laws and in various implementation methods. There is a lack of standardization of electoral procedures. According to the author, a new national election law to replace the 1998 Organic Law is the need of the hour. Synchronization of election rules and procedures deepens the village electoral system and consolidates the evolving electoral institution in the countryside (Tan 2000).

### ***III. Villager Participation and Empowerment***

Grassroots democracy in China with elections at its core is a significant and positive development in empowering China's 900 million farmers. Rural participation in elections is a significant parameter for understanding the changing political culture of the villagers. Village elections were started at different times in different provinces. According to the statistics of the MCA which supervises the village-level self-government, the first province to hold village elections was Fujian in 1982. By 2006,

nine rounds of elections had been held in the province. The latest province to introduce elections was Yunnan in 2001. According to a survey conducted by CASS in 2005, about 98% of villages in China had conducted at least one election by the year 2005 (Wang 2008: 5).

Participation in large numbers is an indicator of villagers' awareness of their rights and thereby the question of empowerment of the villagers becomes easy to answer. Before talking about the empowerment of the villagers, it is essential to define first and foremost who is a villager? By definition, a villager or a peasant is one who resides and works permanently in a rural area and one who not only has a household registration in the village but also ownership over some land in the village (He 2007: 42).

The OLVC has provisions in which it encourages openness of village affairs to the villagers and the right to villagers to question the irregularities if any. Article XXII of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committee specifies that:

“The Villager Committee shall adhere to the principle of open administration of village affairs. The VC shall promptly make public the following issues among which financial issues shall be made public at least once every six months- thus subjecting itself to the villagers' supervision: issues that are discussed and decided by the Villager Assembly in accordance with the stipulations in Article XIX of the Law and their implementation; plans for the implementation of the national policy of birth control; distribution of funds and materials for disaster relief and other forms of relief; and collection of water and electricity charges and any other issues that are of great importance to the villagers' interests or concerns.”

It further reads:

“In the event that VC fails to publicize promptly issues that should be publicized or if the publicized issues are not truthful, villagers have the right to inquire about this, as well as to report it to the people's government at the township, minority- nationality township, or town levels or to the people's government at the county level and other relevant responsible authorities. Relevant government organs shall investigate and verify any complaints and order the results to be publicized. If indeed unlawful are verified, the perpetrators shall be held legally responsible.”

Villagers' struggle for democratic citizenship can be taken as an important step towards villager empowerment. There are many instances as discussed by He

Baogang to substantiate this trend. Firstly, retired cadres, who were members of a village, had household registration in a city but who are now living in his/her home village, demand the right to vote. Secondly, those who have gained household registration in cities, after their collective lands were appropriated by the government or other agencies in the cities, demands their original villager status and their right to vote. Thirdly, married out women demand their right to vote in many townships, as they attempt to retain their household registration in their native village and refuse to acquiesce to the village leaders' demand that they should reregister their household in their husbands' villages. One woman who did not have proper marriage registration and was therefore deprived of her right to vote demanded its restoration. Fourthly, migrant workers demand their right to vote in the village where they have worked for a long period. Fifthly, ordinary villagers demand the right to vote whenever their names are missing in the voter's list or their votes are uncounted. During the 1998 village election in Tianli, Huping Township, votes from one household were somehow left uncounted. Though the electoral working team tried to convince the family that it was owing to a technical mistake, the family was very angry. They went all the way to the township leaders to protest against "being unlawfully deprived of voting rights." The leaders had to apologize profusely before the family's anger was appeased. And finally, ordinary villagers demand the right to run for election. Zhang Yubin who was deprived of his right to vote by township leaders appealed to a local court and won back his right to contest the village election in 1998 (Ibid: 46). Thus it can be seen that the villagers' willingness to fight for status and the right to vote signals a broad trend toward development from peasants to citizens (Ibid: 50).

Villagers' participation is one of the forces that have transformed formal democratic institutions into functioning ones. Concerned with a fair distribution of village wealth many villagers demand regular and frequent holding of village representative meetings. In this way political participation becomes meaningful and villagers empower themselves by using formal democratic institutions to minimize corruption and to demand a fair distribution of village wealth. Despite the emergence of a democratic culture, parochial political culture and political apathy still exist, and the emergent democratic consciousness falls short of an ideal democratic standard.

The contradictory coexistence of democratic and nondemocratic political cultures is one of the factors that contribute to the variations of village democracy in China. While a highly democratic culture helps to develop village democracy, the apathetic attitude continues to support the authoritarian leadership and structure in many villages (Ibid: 84-5).

Tianjian Shi used voting behaviour as an indicator for participation and found that people who tended to vote were the ones who had stronger internal efficacy and supported democratic values (Shi 1999). He Baogang, in his survey looked at the various participatory activities by villagers in Zhejiang province and found that ‘going to vote’ is the most important participatory action by the villagers, (53.3%) followed by ‘attending electoral meeting’ (34.5%). In deciding the final candidates, the villager participation is less compared to the expected turnout for a grassroots democracy initiative, (18.8%). In general, one can say that there is an improvement in the percentage of participation. The table below will give the participatory activities by villagers in Zhejiang in 1998.

**Table 4.4 Participatory Activities by Villagers in Zhejiang, 1998**

| <b>Activities</b>                             | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|---------------|-------------------|
| Going to Vote                                 | 663           | 53.3              |
| Attending Electoral Meeting                   | 429           | 34.5              |
| Nominating Candidates                         | 333           | 26.7              |
| Participating in Deciding in Final Candidates | 234           | 18.8              |
| Introducing Candidates                        | 121           | 9.7               |

Source: Survey Report of He Baogang conducted in 1998 cited in He (2007), p. 76.

If we see the participation in election- related activities in rural China in 1999, the most number of villagers went for voting for VC members (79.3%). When we add the percentage of all election related activities, the percentage of politically active villagers are much greater than the percentage of politically passive villagers. The table below gives us the details.

**Table 4.5 Participation in Election- Related Activities in Rural China, 1999**

| <b>Activities</b>  | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--|---------------|-------------------|
| Participating in Propaganda to Encourage People to Vote        | 542           | 20.6              |
| Nominating Candidates  | 346           | 13.1              |
| Voting for VC Members  | 2,096         | 79.3              |
| Participating in Village Assembly or Party's Members' Assembly | 259           | 9.8               |
| Never Participating in Anything                                | 263           | 10.0              |
| Don't Know   | 65            | 2.5               |
| No Answer  | 20            | 0.8               |

Source: David Zweig's 1999 Survey of rural China cited in He (2007), p. 76.

It can be thus said that the voter turnout in village elections has been high throughout. In 1998, Huiping township, Zhejiang, 3, 080 (96.5%) cast their votes. Lingfen municipality of Shanxi province had a voter turnout rate of 87.5%. In the 26 villages of Yangcheng Township, Wushe County, Henan province, the rate was 95%. The average provincial rate in Fujian was 97.3% and, of the 875 villages in its Putian municipality over half the number had a turnout rate of 100%. Of the villages in Xianyou County, 254 had a rate of 100%. In Lishu County, Jilin province, the turnout reached 93.1% in 1988, 94.3% in 1991, 95.1% in 1994, and 98% in 1998. The 2005 National Survey found that 1, 931 respondents (76.6%) said they cast their vote, while 554 (22%) said they did not, which is actually a drop in the turnout rates in the recent past (He 2007: 71).

International observation teams assess the village elections in China and formulate their opinions for further developing the grassroots democracy. Even though problems were identified with the current election procedures, the international agencies are

satisfied with the way China is progressing towards better village elections every year. According to the International Republican Institute's report, Banxi village in Shizhong Township had a total of 979 registered voters, of whom 917 were registered in the 2000 election. The election was held on October 14, 2000. 817 voters directly participated in this election. A total of 816 ballots were received for the position of Chairman, of which 805 were valid and 11 were invalid. A total of 816 ballots were received for the position of member of which 798 were valid and 18 were invalid. One Chairman and four members were chosen in this election (*Election Observation Report 2000*).

Similarly in Baiye village, in Shizhong Township had a total of 242 registered voters, of whom 236 were registered in 2000 election. The election was held on October 13, 2000. 206 voters directly participated in this election. A total of 206 ballots were received for the position of Chairman, of which 201 were valid and 5 were invalid. A total of 206 ballots were received for the position of member, of which 202 were valid and 4 were invalid. One Chairman and two members were chosen in the election (*Ibid*).

In another report in Fujian province in May 2003, out of 635 total eligible voters, 490 ballots were issued and 481 were returned (76% participation rate) in Gongqiao village. Out of 110 voters living outside of the village, 34 returned to vote (31% participation rate). There were only two invalid ballots. In Tupu village, out of 850 registered voters, 777 ballots were issued and all were returned. There were 7 invalid ballots for Vice Chairman and 28 for Chairman casted (*Election Observation Report 2003*).

The percentage of the invalid votes cast can be taken as an indicator for increasing awareness among the villagers about their rights. The argument that the villagers are less educated and therefore, cannot understand the election procedures then becomes a myth. The above example of four villages in two elections of 2000 and 2003 shows that number of invalid votes cast are very less and clearly shows that the villagers are empowered to a great extent.

Casting a vote is not necessarily an indicator of political participation. The increase in voter turnout need not necessarily imply that the villagers are more aware of their rights and empowered to a greater degree. The local government tries to keep the voter turnout high to get the attention for their work and efforts for democracy at the grassroots. Another important aspect is the economic incentive for a villager to vote. Villagers often receive an allowance for their voting activity as compensation for missing work. In Zhejiang province, the sum varies from 2 to 60 *yuan*. In Wuyun it is normally 40 *yuan*. (He 2007: 72). These incentives will attract the villagers to cast their votes. As a consequence, an increased voter turnout will be registered. But this data does not explain whether villagers are empowered politically and initiate interest in the political affairs of their villages.

It is therefore essential to have a different methodology for analysing the political behaviour of the villagers. Many activities such as a protest and participation in village representative assembly can and should be seen as forms of political participation. Here again, the problem is a lack of statistical data for substantiating the argument. The case of Han Baocai, an 80 year old farmer, shows that village elections have not actually increased the space for more villager participation; in fact an undemocratic upper level of government makes it difficult for grassroots democracy to thrive in villages. Baocai filed a complaint with the Tianjin municipal government about the way in which the Huiguan village<sup>10</sup> council had sold more than 50 acres of commonly held land to the higher- level township government of nearby Xiaozhan. Huiguan villagers believed they had been cheated of proper compensation and thus began the process specified by the village democracy law to recall their elected council. The recall vote went ahead in spite of all the difficulties, garnering 617 votes in favour and none against, well over the 50 percent of village residents required for the motion to pass. Mrs. Fang Zhaojuan, a recall committee member, was landed up in a hospital and later in jail. Fang's sister saw this detention as a warning to other fellow members of the recall committee. "If they arrest Fang, other people won't dare cause any more trouble. They do it to suppress ordinary people", she said (Ford 2008).

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<sup>10</sup> This village was on the verge of being swallowed up by a fast- expanding city. Its farm land has all but disappeared under new factories.

Dr. Liu Yawei, head of the China Programme at Atlanta's Carter Centre, observes that Chinese law prescribes direct democratic elections for village councils, and provides for recalls if a majority of villagers lose faith in their leaders. "But that is only the law", he says. "Once you move into the real world it is very difficult to enforce," he adds. Fang's fate illustrates one key weakness of the experiment: it is very hard for grassroots democracy to thrive in a vacuum where superior levels of government are undemocratic. "Unless there are changes higher up, this kind of democracy cannot be sustained," fears Dr. Liu (Ford 2008). A villager says, "When ordinary people try to use their democratic rights, they will definitely suffer the consequences. The phenomenon of having a law supporting people's rights that they cannot actually enjoy is too common in our country." (Ford 2008)

Another incident in which two groups of close to 200 villagers confronted and remonstrated with each other in front of the office of the Shenzhen Baoan District party committee. The then secretary of the village party branch, Wen Zhisen, held dual household registration; he is a CCP member as well as a Hong Kong resident. Villagers said that village cadres having dual household registration violated the relevant state provisions (*BBC Monitoring*: 11 June 2005). In Taishi, Guangdong province, villagers have given up a three-month battle to remove their unpopular village chief after repeated threats to their lives. Allegations that Mr. Chen Jinsheng, the village chief had misused village funds had led to a spate of protests, including petitions and hunger strikes in 2005 (Chan: 2005a). These episodes bring to the fore the fact that villagers, at least in some numbers, are becoming aware of the rights and demand their rights from the higher echelons of power.

According to Civil Affairs Ministry official in Beijing, Pan Hongcong was the first village chief in China to be ousted by villagers before completing his term in office. In the past, village officials who caused a lot of complaints by farmers either were dismissed by superiors or stayed in office until the next election. On 24 May 1999, in the village of Liaodong near the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, 1,290 of the 1,351 eligible voters met to decide Pan's fate. He was the director of the Liaodong VC and 1,112 villagers voted against him. Department reports showed that for 3 years the 48 year old Pan and other members of the Liaodong Villagers



Committee had spent some 660, 000 *yuan* of the village's funds, nearly a quarter of its total, on themselves (*BBC Monitoring*: 11 June 1999). This again proves how the villagers act in a well coordinated way to protect their rights granted under the Organic Law.

In another case in Panyu's Daxing village, Guangdong province, the villagers refused to vote in an election for a new village committee in 1998. By referring to the document of the third plenary session of the 15<sup>th</sup> CCP Central Committee and the requirements of the Guangdong Province on direct, democratic elections, the villagers discovered that the notice for election did not comply with the provision that "all villagers aged above 18 have the right to elect and be elected as long as they are not deprived of their political rights." If the notice were to be observed, the voters in the village would be reduced from 800 to 300 and villagers in different production teams would not be allowed to elect each other's candidates; which would narrow the scope of democracy. Several hundred villagers came to the election site and demanded full democracy. They said that without allowing all villagers to vote, the peasants' opinions could not be fully portrayed. As a result, the election was postponed (*SWB*: 10 November 1998).

Some of the voters have a very clear perspective on elections. For instance, Wang Jiling, 33, Yunnan has this to say: "I voted because I have the right to vote", said Ang Chenli, a 63 year old peasant from Yunnan. "The head of our village should be chosen by us. We should pick the one who dares speak out for us". Ma Juli, a Social Welfare Professor at Yunnan University who spent three years (2002-05) researching and consulting on village voting ascribed Yunnan's high participation level in part to a strong identification with villages among a population that lives largely in rural and often remote areas (Cody 2004: A24).

In Shadui Town's Lianan village, villagers clashed with police for two days in a row because they were worried that village cadres seeking their interests might fail to get elected after cadres' discontent with the town government's arbitrary land requisition- led them in vigorously contending with the town administration when more than 300 of them were for no reason disqualified as voters in the elections of

grassroots people's congress deputies in 2006. The authorities put four villages under criminal detention for "illegal assembly" and "charging government offices". The villagers demanded that the government release those detained and investigate whether there were irregularities in the land requisition and elections (*BBC Monitoring*: 15 September 2006).

He Baogang's study shows that the level of participation is influenced by three major factors: the perceived worth of election itself, regularity of electoral procedures, and the fairness of electoral procedures. It is clear that in order to raise the level of political participation of rural voters, it is essential to improve the electoral system and the institutions themselves so that villagers will appreciate the worth and significance of the elections. It is also important to improve electoral procedures to ensure villagers have full rights and the opportunity to nominate candidates. In order to guarantee their fairness there should be little or no manipulation of elections (He 2007: 84).

#### ***IV. Summary***

As theorists of direct democracy argue, participation is not just the act of casting votes, but the active involvement of citizens in discussing and deliberating on matters concerning their lives. Participation in elections alone cannot be taken as an indicator of efficient democracy. The real issue is whether they have the power vested in them at the same time. In the case of China, village elections are in fact bringing in changes in the political life of the villagers. The decision-making powers of the villagers are also improving.

This chapter looked at three aspects. Firstly, the evolution of Electoral law is traced in order to have a better perspective on elections. Even after five crucial amendments, the Electoral Law in China is still vague in its terms and becomes easy for the officials to interpret it in different ways to suit their interests. As John James Kennedy (2010) argues, the success of grassroots democracy in rural China requires full enforcement of new laws as well as citizen support for the local democratic process. There is a need for more specific laws for defining who is a villager and what

are the provisions under which he/she loses his/her right to vote, for example, in the case of married women and migrant population.

Secondly, village elections have been implemented throughout China for more than a decade. Much improvement has been made in the institutionalization of village elections. But there are drawbacks at the institutional and procedural aspects also. The election procedures require more clarity in many areas like nomination methods, unhealthy election campaigns and complicated voting procedures followed. The practice of proxy voting and roving boxes put serious questions on how genuine the elections are. There is no standardization of dates in conducting elections. This lack of clarity also allows many illegal activities and manipulations. Corruption, bribery and other malpractices have made the village electoral process complicated.

Thirdly, it is significant to note that in spite of weak electoral law, institutions and procedures, villager participation at the grassroots level has seen a tremendous increase. There is a gradual strengthening of political participation in rural China since the implementation of the Organic Law in 1998, mainly through the village elections. The data analysed shows that there is villager empowerment and better governance guaranteed in many villages. The degree of these developments may vary depending on other factors which are outside the scope of this study. Even though the degree varies, there is considerable improvement in the awareness among the villagers regarding their rights with each round of village elections. This can be seen as a significant positive development of the recent political reform at the village level with serious implications for the rest of the country.

Even though grassroots democracy has been strengthening political participation in rural China in the last two decades leading to better governance as well as empowerment of people, they are fraught with certain problems. The limiting factors of democracy at the local levels are of major concern. This becomes the core of discussion in the next chapter.

## **Chapter V**

### **Limiting Factors and Grassroots Democracy in China**

The evolution of grassroots democracy since 1980s is a remarkable development in the political history of China. This has largely laid the foundation for greater participation of both men and women in rural governance. This historical development initiated from below has acquired worldwide attention. The increasing presence of foreign observers in village elections is a testimony for this. The Chinese government also has proclaimed the success of this system, citing improvements in governance and economic and social developments in rural China.

But grassroots democracy in China has many caveats. According to the election reports of institutes like Atlanta based Carter Centre, International Republican Institute and many scholars, the quality of democracy in much of the villages remains low without any doubt. One of the reasons for this could be the larger context within which it works. The political liberalisation is occurring in a little changed rural society. Andrew Nathan argues for a lack of democratic culture being an important reason for poor development of democracy in China. Some other scholars argue for economic development to precede democracy in rural China. Yet another group of scholars argue that there is a need to change CCP because democracy cannot survive in an authoritarian one- party state. Instead of seeing what can stop or facilitate democracy a takeoff, the debate should focus on what is actually limiting the effective implementation of grassroots democracy.

This chapter has five sections. The first section will discuss the role of CCP in the process of grassroots democratization. The second section will try to see how village citizenship becomes a limiting factor in grassroots democracy. Here, the issue of migrants and married out women are significant. The second section will delineate two types of corruption at the grassroots level: electoral corruption like vote buying and economic corruption like diverting village funds for personal or private enterprises. The third section details the issue of marginalization in rural governance

of women and ethnic minorities to a large extent. The final section will summarize the main arguments of the chapter.

### ***I. Role of Chinese Communist Party (CCP)***

Grassroots democracy in China was an initiative from below and later appropriated by the state to bring stability to rural China. There is a gradual progress in the whole implementation process. A considerable official support for grassroots democracy is also evident in the various policy initiatives. However, grassroots democracy in China finds itself in the vortex of disconnect between CCP and government. While the government wants the political liberalization, the Party fears losing its traditional control leading to tension and chaos. There are several important issues leading to this tension: centralisation; lack of awareness programmes; and the attitude of state officials especially township officials.

#### **i. Centralization**

The fact that decentralisation of power occurred in a one- party state in itself is a great achievement. While promoting democracy at the grassroots, the government empowered the Chinese Communist Party in order to have a firm hold on the internal matters of China. This kind of centralization of power on the one hand and decentralization of power on the other has grave consequences for the future of democracy in China.

One of the most significant manifestations of this simultaneous process of centralization and decentralization is the increasing conflict between VCs and Party branches which is a major limiting factor for a successful grassroots democracy initiative. In China, it appears that the party and government officials had got used to the old system of top- down ‘vertical leadership’ or commandism from above. Because of this, the officials take VC’s suggestions with a grain of salt (Mathew 2007: 46). “As for democratic decision making, while making decisions on major village affairs, cadres have the final say and self- governance by villagers has been turned into self- governance by village cadres”, said Tang Ming, Professor of the Research

Centre of Chinese Rural Affairs of Huazhong Normal University (*BBC Monitoring*: 21 May 2009).

The following example highlights the tension between the government enthusiasm and the Party cadres approach. Song Jianzhong was just a handful of votes short of unseating Wei Jiandong as village chief of Raolefu, a small village on the outskirts of Beijing. However, when the final tally was done it appeared that Song fell short of the more than 50% majority required to be declared the winner. When villagers noted that 51 votes were missing from the total number they had cast, they demanded a recount. But Wei, the powerful incumbent village chief and the man in danger of losing the election, made a quick decision. He ordered the police to seize the ballot boxes and take them away. A clash between the villagers and police followed leading to detention of several villagers (*BBC Monitoring*: 25 August 2010). Wei said that as the village's Communist Party Secretary, he had the right to make the decision. "The people were fierce. They demanded the ballot boxes be open. So we had to take them away. According to the law, we had to protect the votes. If someone walked away with the votes, who would accept the responsibility?" he added. "The people have no voice. Only the cadres can talk. If you say anything you'll be taken away," said a distressed villager (Mooney 2010: 12).

## **ii. Lack of Awareness**

There is considerable lack of awareness among the electorate as they are not informed of their rights and duties. Therefore, there is a need to generate more awareness among the villagers regarding their political rights. Participation should not be based on gifts and fortunes offered which is a great constraint on the process of democratization.

Li Cheng (2010) in his Carter Centre Report says that the view that a majority of the Chinese population, especially farmers in the vast rural areas who lack even primary education, is ill-equipped to responsibly avail themselves of citizens' democratic rights is a misconception. The observation reports of foreign organizations like Carter centre has always suggested implementing Civic Education to instil in citizens the importance of elections and to teach correct electoral procedures. The

CCP has a role to play here in conducting various awareness programmes and to empower the villagers.

Another real problem in Chinese countryside stems from township and village cadres in their inability to follow procedures. Without qualified village cadres, the measures cannot be fully promoted. They do not know how to respond to peasants' increasingly strong desire to participate in the village politics and affairs.

### **iii. Attitude of Township Officials**

The attitude of the leaders at the higher levels of power structure often confronts with effective self- governance by the villagers. There are many instances reported over the years. The authorities of Panyu, Guangdong declared an end to the three- month struggle by Taishi villagers to exercise their civil rights and unseat their village chief. The official statement said that 396 of the 584 villagers who had earlier signed a removal motion had withdrawn their signatures. It said the villagers now believed their village chief was not corrupt and that a township government investigation had found no evidence of misconduct by him. Villagers in Taishi earlier alleged that the village chief had misused village funds, and that evidence was contained in account books kept in the village office. However, officials supported the village chief and seized the account books during a confrontation with villagers (Chan 2005).

On 07 January 2010, about 1000 citizens of Pizhou city, Jiangsu province staged a demonstration over the suspected killing of one of the villagers of Hewan village, Yunhe town by 100 thugs hired by the secretary of the Yunhe town Party Committee. The secretary, Lou Cunrai had been trying hard to force local villagers to sell 300 mu of land in Hewan village to Xuzhou Haitian Petrochemical Co. for 20 million *yuan*. The authorities have imposed a news blackout and called in hundreds of special police to block the main roads to prevent further demonstrations by the angry villagers (*BBC Monitoring*: 13 January 2010).

A recent study by Haijing Dai (2011) takes the case study of two villages in north China which are similar in their population and economic status. Chu Village is

recognised as a model of social stability with the villagers' indifferent attitude towards village politics: smooth elections with low participation rate, quick and quiet VRA meetings with little discussion and few petitions, open protests or uprisings. In contrast, unrest in Gold- Bull village with everyone actively involved in all sorts of political debates has earned Gold- Bull, a reputation of 'Cultural Revolution Village' on the county. Electorates fought as brave warriors in the elections of VC head and the VRA members in 2006. VRA gatherings are usually filled with fervent discussions and end in angry arguments and physical fights; there are so many collective petitions and protests in the village that it have become a constant headache and nightmare for the officials in the township and county (Dai 2011: 71).

Political participation in Chu village is organized under the leadership of the Party Secretary Wang Mei, who has occupied the secretary position for more than 20 years. The 2006 election in Gold- Bull was a war between the two major lineage groups, each of whom held many meetings to unify the votes of the lineage members. The two lineage groups recognize the authority of different leaders and are divided as two parties. Each is strongly motivated to build up the legitimacy of its own leader, and meanwhile prevent the opposition leader from developing his wider support (Ibid: 77).

Chu village is under the strong leadership of Party secretary and is stable and peaceful whereas the Gold-Bull village chaotic and unstable. According to Dai Haijing, the officials in townships and counties evaluate the performance of village cadres using the fundamental criterion of social stability, not the level of democracy implemented locally (Ibid: 79). This kind of attitude highly restricts the scope of democracy.

## ***II. Village Citizenship***

Village citizenship refers to privileged villager status and a set of rights enjoyed by villagers, including entitlement to collective land property and village welfare (He 2007: 42). This definition becomes a problem with the current developments



unfolding in China like economic development, urbanization and the increasing in-migrant workers. There are many issues pertaining to citizenship in rural China.

The Constitution of People's Republic of China defines anybody above the age of eighteen years old as a citizen, with the exception of those who are legally deprived of political rights. The Organic Law on Villager Committee also follows a similar definition. Merle Goldman and Elizabeth J. Perry (2007) have surveyed the development and changing meanings of citizenship from the later Qing dynasty to contemporary China. Kevin O'Brien (2001) has pointed out that citizenship is a claim to community membership.

He Baogang has identified some of the issues in defining a citizen of rural China. The cases of retired cadres- who were members of a village, had household registration in a city- but who are now living in his/her home village and those who have gained household registration in cities after their collective lands were appropriated by the government or other agencies in the cities are significant. Their demand for their original villager status and right to vote is a major issue. Similarly, married out women demand their right to vote in many townships, as they attempt to retain their household registration in their native village and refuse to acquiesce to the village leaders' demand that they should re-register their household in their husbands' villages. One woman who did not have proper marriage registration and was therefore deprived of her right to vote demanded its restoration. Migrant workers also demand their right to vote in the village where they have worked for a long period. He Baogang calls this trend a development from peasants to citizens (Ibid: 46-50).

Scholars have argued that with China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), there is a huge migrating population emerging in China. In such a situation, it becomes difficult to accommodate this floating population in the way it used to be in the pre- reform period when the population was largely static. This is an issue of great concern and the residence of the villager becomes a topic of dispute.<sup>1</sup> The household

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<sup>1</sup> Of the population enumerated in the 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities and servicemen of the mainland of China, 261,386,075 persons lived in places other than the towns (townships or streets) of their household registration where they had left for over 6 months. Of this total, 39,959,423 were persons with current residence different from the place of their household

registration system affects those who leave the village to work elsewhere and outsiders who come to a village for work. For example, in Wuyun township of Wenzhou municipality, the local population of 40, 000 is outnumbered by 50, 000 migrant workers (He 2007: 47).

Kevin O'Brien (2001) argues that rural- to- rural migration is accelerating day by day. He cites an example of Shandong village that relies on non- residents to work its gold mine and to perform other backbreaking labour, the exclusion and condescension trained on guest workers were hardly less. But under the Organic Law, non- residents cannot take part in village elections. A story of a migrant who has a factory in a village of Xianju county further makes the issue of rights of migrants significant. This migrant brought many job opportunities and other benefits to that village. During the 1999 village election, the villagers wished to elect him as village head and the man was interested in running for the post. But according to the Organic Law, he was a non- resident and could not stand for election. A similar case happened in Yuyao municipality where a general manager of a company who is a migrant, with the support of the villagers, wanted to stand for the post of village head but was denied (He 2007: 47).

There is a need for a legal framework to accommodate these problems of village citizenship. The latest amendments to the Electoral law in 2010 omit the migrant population. Many NPC deputies hailed the law amendments as an important first step in ensuring voting equality, but some deputies from the Beijing and Shanghai delegations said more needed to be done, especially in relation to the migrant population. According to them, currently, the right to vote is tied to one's *hukou* which is very difficult to transfer from a rural area to city or even from one city to another, unless the holder is employed by a state work unit. The law currently requires people to return to where their *hukou* is to vote, or authorise someone back home to vote for them (Tze-Wei 2010: 06).

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registration in the same city [10], and the remaining were 221,426,652 persons. Compared with the 2000 population census, population in this category increased by 116,995,327 persons, or up by 81.03 percent. See Communiqué of the National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China on Major Figures of the 2010 Population Census.

NPC Standing Committee Vice- Chairman Wang Zhaoguo said voting rights for the migrant population was an issue “that involves too many aspects and is too complicated” and that the conditions are not mature yet as “the *hukou* system is undergoing reform”. (Ibid)

Noting the seriousness of the issue, Beijing deputy Xu Zhihong said, “Apart from migrant workers, there is also a substantial number of young and middle- aged professionals in the cities who have not been able to obtain *hukou* there. Their right to elect and be elected must be protected.” (Ibid) According to administrative law Professor Cai Dingjian of the Chinese University of Politics and Law (CUPL), this group of non- *hukou* permanent urban residents included lawyers, accountants, journalists, IT consultants and others working in the private sector. They make up one- third of Beijing’s population and 50% of Shenzhen’s. Official data puts the mainland’s mobile population at the end of 2009 at 180 million, of which more than 149 million were migrant workers. According to Cai, “the migrant population should not have to wait until the abolition of the *hukou* system before they can vote” (Ibid).

Chinese scholars have called for a change in the voting system to allow people to vote according to where they live as opposed to where they are registered. “To use residence registration to determine where a villager can vote was feasible in the past when rural farmers, land and residences were relatively fixed,” said Xu Yong, a professor from the rural studies centre of east China’s Normal University. The 140 million migrant workers, who have worked and lived in the cities for more than a decade, still play the role of “an outsider” because their residence is registered back in the countryside (*BBC Monitoring*: 09 April 2006).

As more and more villagers leaving their villages to find work in cities, it is difficult to hold the village elections also. Wang Jinhua, a Ministry of Civil Affairs official said that the migrant population has soared to 150 million and increases annually by 5 million which represents the largest floating population in the world. Even when some return, the number of voters often fails to meet the minimum requirements to make the campaign legitimate. New amendments look to ensure the

rights of migrant workers by allowing them to participate in elections by casting their vote by phone or other remote means (Yuan 2010).

Another matter of great concern is the village citizenship of married- out women. The Chinese state policy specifies that married women have the right to choose their household registration and are entitled to a piece of land and economic benefits. But village democracy denies these rights to women through VRA where majority opinion matters and not the law of the state. For instance, in Simen village at Anyang Township in Zhejiang 22 women demanded the economic right to village wealth but their request was turned down by the VRA. When they appealed against the decision, the county leaders did not want to become involved in the case and only requested VRA to reconsider the decision. The women went to the local court which decided that the question of village status is a matter of village autonomy and should only be decided by VRA.<sup>2</sup>

In Zhejiang, married- out women in rich villages desire to retain village status in their native villages and have refused to register in their husband's residential area. These married out women are frequently denied their right to vote and entitlement to economic benefits by village assembly or village representative assemblies, which act democratically but in majoritarian fashion against these women's interests. Here, villages held VRA meetings to decide on the tough question of whether these women should retain their status. The decision was that if a woman marries out, she loses her village citizenship. In one village in Wenzou, even if a divorced woman returns to her home village and is registered there, she is still denied the right to vote. Only those who are married in are entitled to village status (He 2007: 126-7).

### ***III. Corruption***

Corruption is widespread at the grassroots level limiting the progress of rural democracy to a great extent. Minister of Civil Affairs Doje Cering promised that China will actively promote democracy to eradicate corruption in rural areas (*BBC Monitoring*: 26 June 1998). But the evidence shows that with the expansion of

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<sup>2</sup> *Zhongguo Nongcun Jiceng Minzhu Zhengzhi Jianshe Nianjie*, cited in He Baogang (2007), p.127.

democracy, corruption in rural areas is increasing. There are two kinds of corruption prevalent in China at the local level: electoral corruption and economic fraud.

Vote buying has been so common that it has become the norm in some village elections. According to the statistics issued by the Supreme People's Procuratorate, a total of 4,968 village cadres in village committees were involved in corruption cases in 2008- 1,090 more than in 2006 (*BBC Monitoring*:02 December 2009). "Pinned at the bottom of the power pyramid, their appetite somehow has grown insatiable," said Zhong Wendong, director of the Commission on Criminal Justice of Guangzhou Municipal Lawyers' Association (*Ibid*). Fozhou Yongtai County party secretary Huang Xuhe said that in richer rural areas, cadres buy votes. In poorer areas, effective local leaders move elsewhere to improve their prospects (*SWB*: 27 January 2001).

Xinsong Wang notes that there are two types of election bribery. The first was to bribe with cigarettes, liquors or hard cash before elections. The villagers are then asked for verbal guarantee to vote for the candidates. In the second type, the candidates designated a restaurant in nearby town and invite all voters to go for a free meal. Here, there is no guarantee that the voters will cast their votes to the candidate. For instance, in suburban Beijing, the candidates asked their assistants to buy voter ID cards from the voters so that on the Election Day they could see these ID cards to get ballots and cast proxy votes. The competition for voter ID cards became so intense that some voters raised the price of their voter cards. One voter put up a note on his door, "600 *yuan* for my voter ID card. Firm price." (Wang 2009: 12-13).

Wang Jinhua, deputy director of the Ministry of Civil Affairs Department of Basic Governance and Community said that there is an increasing tendency of vote- buying in the village committee elections. According to him, judging from the situation of complaints in the form of letters and visits from the public and the data collected by local authorities, the percentage of vote- buying in the village committee elections is about one to three percent. The vote- buying issues are very complicated. The candidates have a great variety of motives in resorting to vote- buying. Some people seek the right to control the resources and public rights. Some people want to realise their personal worth and perform good things and practical things for the villagers.

There are also some people who want to seek personal advantages and to gain private interests for his family and enterprises (*BBC Monitoring*: 04 August 2008).

The Report of an investigation conducted by the provincial prosecutors cited by Procuratorial Daily says that residents in some villages of the Xiuying district in Haikou city, Hainan province, said candidates to the Village Party branch and the Villagers' Self-governing Committee now have to pay as much as 1,200 *yuan* to each voter in exchange for their support at the ballot box. "The government puts too much emphasis on the form of the election than its substance. Self-governance is the true essence of grassroots democracy. Overemphasising the practice and ignoring the essence will, more or less, lead to some imperfections, including the vote buying phenomenon", said Tong Zhihui, a Professor at the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Renmin University of China (Zhao 2010: 04).

Li Fuzeng, owner of a snack shop in Dangxi village was offered EUR 40 in return for his vote for the candidate supported by the party in 2006. Due to a strong struggle between the local party leaders and a group of discontented peasants, the candidate supported by the party was giving money in return for their votes (*The Irish Times*: 2005). In another instance, a village communist party secretary sacked for bribery in a party poll is alleged to have spent up to 5 million *yuan* buying votes to win back his other position as head of the Hebei village. Wang Jiye, 55 offered 1200 villagers 5,000 *yuan* each- 3000 *yuan* as a down payment and other 2,000 *yuan* once they had voted for him (Shi 2004: 04) The money had come from the profits of village-owned and operated businesses, including a dolomite mine and a construction firm, which earned up to four million *yuan* a year (Shi 2004: 04).

Instances of elections getting postponed over alleged ballot-rigging and vote fraud is increasing. The villagers of Longgang district accused the candidates of trying to buy votes by promising a fridge worth 2,000 *yuan* (Chan 2008: 4). According to the Beijing-based weekly magazine *Outlook*, Yun Lianchang of Inner Mongolia was voted head of the village committee in Qian Baimiao Village of Jinhe Town after he spent 400,000 *yuan* on laying on banquets for villagers and paying them sums of cash. He defeated his only rival Qiao Yumei, who reportedly spent 260,000 *yuan* for the

same purpose. The loser even asked the villagers for her money back once she learnt of her defeat. Once elected, village officials are sometimes able to recover the election expenditure through land deals and some infrastructure projects (*BBC Monitoring*: 09 October 2006).

A more serious concern is that vote buying has become so rampant that many peasants started to take it for granted. Some peasants use village elections as an opportunity to earn extra cash, and are annoyed if bribes are not available. For instance, during an election in a Fujian village, both VC chair candidates went to the village temple and vowed before the God of Guan that they must not use bribery as a means to compete for votes. Local news reporters were attracted by the fact that local religious belief was tangled with the election and went for a news story. They were surprised to find that the villagers were very unhappy about the candidates' oath because they would lose several hundred RMB in bribery money. "That's a loss of more than a thousand *yuan* for my family!" (Wang 2009: 13).

The second kind of bribery is in the form of misappropriation of village funds by the village heads. According to the provincial anti- corruption bureau, from 2003 to 2009, corruption cases involving 50,000 *yuan* or more accounted for 98% of the economic cases in rural areas of the relatively well –off Pearl River Delta, compared with 37% in less developed rural areas (*BBC Monitoring*: 02 December 2009). In another report, it is estimated that 418 people were investigated in 356 cases involving corruption and bribery. It was a year- on- year increase of 11.6% and 13.3% respectively. The prosecution of those offenders recovered 150 million *yuan*. Among the bribery and corruption cases, 57 involved sums larger than one million *yuan*. The report mentions that the realms of urban development and rural elections were responsible for most of the corruption and bribery in 2010 (Li 2011).

Liu Zirong, secretary of the Communist Party of China branch of Zidong village, Guangdong Province was charged with squandering village assets of almost 24 million *yuan* on gambling and loans to his own company. Most of the money was compensation for land expropriated from villagers from 2004 to 2006 (*BBC Monitoring*: 02 December 2009). Villagers of Pinghu village in Shenzhen's Longgang

District had to shoulder debts amounting to more than 100,000 *yuan* per person on the average due to three successive party branch secretaries.<sup>3</sup> The reason for this was that the village had accumulated a debt burden of over 100 million *yuan* since 1995. One of the party branch secretaries Liu Zhaohong had spent millions of *yuan* to build a mansion in the style of the Imperial Palace as his office. He could even draw One million *yuan* just with a note without going through collective discussion since his daughter-in-law was the cashier-cum-accountant of the village's share-holding company. This lends proof once again to the irrefutable truth that unsupervised power is bound to lead to corruption (*SWB*: 13 September 2000).

Taishi, which is under the administration of Yuwotou township, had set up a co-operative to manage revenue from land sales and rent paid for village assets. Villagers were paid a dividend each year. However, villagers allege that Mr Chen - who manages the co-operative - had misused its funds and refused to reveal details of the accounts. The villagers went on a hunger strike demanding removal of the village leader accused of corruption (Chan 2005). In other case, thousands of Taiping villagers in Dongsheng township broke into their former village head Lu Shuidai's home and beat up the 60-year-old because of alleged corruption. He was accused of taking bribes and not paying the villagers enough money after selling their land (Chan 2008: 4).

An incident from Luzhong gives an insight into the fact that township officials also have their hands in the economic fraud happening in rural China. In a town in Luzhong, partial proceeds from land sales were illegally taken by the superior departments and leaders under the guise of "assistance". When the leader of a village in this town tried to misappropriate several million *yuan* to set up a roller factory in the village, he was vehemently opposed by the town accountant. Seeing the difficulty of the "town management" of "village accounts", the village leader immediately dismissed the accountant. The villagers went to the local industrial and commercial

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<sup>3</sup> Pinghu village in Shenzhen's Longgang District was hailed as one of China's "Top 100 Villages" in 1993. That year, there were more than 100 enterprises and its total industrial and agricultural output value exceeded 60 million *yuan* and average distribution per labour force was over 10,000 *yuan*. Total income from the transfer or rental of land in the village amounted to 250 million *yuan*. See "Guangzhou Paper on Corrupt Village Officials", *SWB*, Part 3 Asia-Pacific, FE/D3944/G, 13 September, 2000.



bureau to check if the village was listed as an investor in this roller factory. They found out that not only did the village not sign any joint venture contract with the town but that there was no loan agreement, either. So a million *yuan* from the village finances had just disappeared from the "village accounts books" based simply on the whims of the "town officials". There are also cases where towns and villages, taking advantage of the system of "town management of village accounts" acted at the behest of the town and village leaders by falsifying records and underreporting the collective income of the localities (*SWB*: 01 August 2002).

What is the motivation behind such wide scale bribery? A survey indicates that the average monthly salary of a VC chair was 357 *yuan*, far below the national average. Therefore, the value of being a VC extends beyond the salary. For a peasant who has a family business, being VC chair means that he could possibly make regulations that are favourable to his business by imposing fewer fees if his business takes up the village's public land. He could also interact with town or county level officials for developing business ties, obtaining external funding (Wang 2009: 13-4).

"In some villages, candidates spend more than 100, 000 *yuan* or even several hundred thousand *yuan* campaigning for the post of village chief the monthly pay for which is at most several hundred *yuan*," said Liu Xiguang, a deputy to the 10<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress. He expressed worries that if such problems could not be solved in a timely and effective manner, rural democracy in China will be seriously undermined (*BBC Monitoring*: 12 March 2006). Guo Fenglian, a female lawmaker from North China's Shanxi Province, has warned that China must first train its village heads in some 680, 000 villages to be 'honest, clean and competent' (Ibid). Mao Shoulong, Professor of Public Policy at People's University in Beijing said that the illegal activities in the village elections can be attributed to legal vacuum and lack of effective monitoring mechanisms (Shi 2004: 4). Wang Jinhua, an expert with the Law School of the Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics is of the view that lack of supervision over village affairs could explain the ever-increasing corruption at grassroots level. According to him, since village officials are not civil servants, regulations for civil servants fail to cover them which can be a loophole that has made corruption much easier at the grassroots level (*BBC Monitoring*: 02 December 2009).

Instances of increasing corruption are taken note of by the state, which has been trying to bring down the corruption level. A circular was issued in 1998 jointly by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council that required country's nearly one million villages to adopt a system called "open management of village affairs". According to Zhang Mingliang, director of the Grassroots Power Building Department under the Ministry of Civil Affairs this document reflected the central authorities' strong advocacy of an open and democratic village management system and effectively reinforce the anti-corruption efforts by the Party and the government (*BBC Monitoring*: 12 June 1998).

Yet another attempt was made by the state in 2004, by which villages were required to set up finance management committees to monitor how public funds are spent. Under this policy, village finance management committees have the power to approve the reimbursement of officials' expenses. The village chiefs were required to make public the details of infrastructure projects (Ma 2004).

A very recent circular issued in 2009 by the General Office of the State Council and the General Office of Communist Party of China Central Committee, aims to curb the bribery at village level. The circular states: "The VC elections are not properly conducted in some rural areas, where bribery is grave and seriously harms the impartiality of election." For the first time, this circular offered a clear definition of election bribery saying it is "any act by any candidate or their relatives to, directly or otherwise, alter or affect the Constituent's own will by bribing them, election workers or other candidates with financial or other interests." (Hu and Li 2009) According to the circular, candidates' behaviour must be "strictly regulated". Punishment ranging from disqualification from election, removing current post to criminal penalty will be given to those who try to win votes from villagers with money, violence or intimidation and those who cheat in vote count (*BBC Monitoring*: 31 May 2009).

Zhou Jianmin, a Professor with the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, said regional differences play a major role when it comes to local elections. "The competition in some rich areas is fierce, while no one wants to work in VCs in poor

regions”, he said. “While these villages develop, some heads make huge sums of money by turning farmland into commercial property.”(Hu and Li 2009)

#### ***IV. Marginalization***

The issue of marginalization confronts rural self- governance in China in many ways. Therefore, it is important to see the impact of rural democracy on women and ethnic minorities in a one- party state.

##### **i. Women**

The most severely affected by the reform era policies are women in rural areas. With the shift from the collectives to the household responsibility system much farming production has been placed under the authority of the heads of the household. Thus the house hold responsibility system has strengthened traditional authority structures so that the household head, usually male, who makes the major decisions concerning crop planting and income expenditure (He 2007: 134).

The legal support for women in China is very weak.<sup>4</sup>Article 48 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China states:

“Women in the People’s Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, in political, economic, cultural, social and family life. The State protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work to men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women.”

Article IX of Organic Law on Villager Committee states, “The members of a villagers committee shall include an appropriate number of women.”

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<sup>4</sup> Legislations designed to promote the status of women includes the Marriage Law of 1950 (revised in 1980, 1990 and 2001), which establishes equality of the sexes, free marriage and free divorce, and outlaws traditional practices such as marriage by purchase. The Law of Succession (1985) guarantees the inheritance rights of daughters and widows and enshrines the right of widows to take property into a new marriage. The Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women (1992) states, “Women have the right to all the access to the management of all public affairs, be they state, economic, cultural, or social.” For instance, Article 35 prohibits infanticide, Article 36 prohibits the abduction of and trafficking in, or kidnapping of women, Article 37 prohibits prostitution, and Articles 48, 49 and 50 lay out various legal responsibilities, enforcement provisions and administrative and judicial remedies. See He Baogang (2007), p.130.

Even though the Constitution guarantees equal participation, the Organic Law does only mention that an appropriate number of women should be included in VC. This is a loop hole in the law which always works against women. To make things even worse, Article XIV of the Organic Law is cited many times to invalidate several elections in which women contest for various posts. Article XIV states "...the election of a villagers committee shall be valid if more than half of the villagers who have the right to elect cast their votes; a candidate shall be elected only if he wins more than half of the votes cast by the villagers."

A White Paper titled *Gender Equality and Women's Development in China* issued by the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China in August 2005 (*Beijing Review*: 2005) has a section on women's participation in decision making and management. It states that, "the Election Law of the National People's Congress and Local People's Congresses at All levels of the People's Republic of China, promulgated in 1995, stipulates that deputies to the National People's Congress and local people's congresses at all levels should include appropriate numbers of women, and the proportion of women deputies should be increased step by step."

The document further says that participation of women at the grassroots level has increased.

"The level of participation in state affairs by women at the grassroots level has also risen continuously. Women in both rural and urban areas enthusiastically take part in the elections of neighbourhood committees and village committees. In 2004, the number of women neighbourhood committee members reached 237, 000 and that of women village committee members reached 443, 000 accounting for 55.8 % and 15.1% of the total members of neighbourhood committees and village committees, respectively. A large number of women have come to the fore as chairpersons of neighbourhood and village committees."

According to official reports, more than 15 million Chinese officials are women, accounting for 38.5% of the total (*BBC Monitoring*: 18 May 2007). The proportion of female officials above the provincial level has reached 10.3% up 1.3% points from 2003, according to the report, written by the National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council (Ibid). Feng Yuan, the former head

of Shantou University's Centre for Women's Studies, said the stagnant ratio of women in the NPC means China had fallen behind many African and Latin American countries in terms of female participation in politics (Yu 2011: 4).

The Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009-2010) promises to increase women's participation in the management of state and social affairs. It says, "People's Congresses, political consultative conferences and local governments at all levels should have at least one female member in their leadership." There is no mention of anything specific to VC except that "an appropriate number of women members will be included in community committees and village committees."

The local authorities in Hainan attach great importance to women's participation in villager's self-governance. The Hainan Provincial People's Congress Standing Committee revised the election methods of VCs in the province. The amended election methods stated, "There should be at least one woman among the candidates for a village committee. If voters have not nominated any woman candidates, the village election committee should designate one female candidate, with approval from the town-level government." (Wang 2010)

Hainan's Department of Civil Affairs also revamped the Election Procedures of Village Committees. The document says that if no woman is elected in the first round of an election, then the elected committee member with the fewest votes is replaced by the woman getting the most votes. If only one vacancy in the village committee is available, and more than one woman tie for most votes, then another round of ballots will be cast and the woman getting the most votes is elected. The amended election methods prescribe a condition for when a re-election should be held. It says that if the number of elected village committee members reaches three but is less than an adequate number, and someone is elected as the director and no woman is elected into the village committee, then a second round of elections should be held. The re-election needs not to be reported to the village meeting for approval but must guarantee one woman be elected onto the village committee. These initiatives were largely possible due to the active support of Hainan Women's Federation (Wang 2010).

However, the report by National Working Committee on Children and Women, pointed out that women in rural areas are still reluctant to take part in political and administrative affairs. Despite the slight rise of female village officials in recent years, women currently occupy 16.7% of the seats in village committees nationwide (*BBC Monitoring*: 18 May 2007). In rural China, although women make up 65 per cent of the labour force, they occupy only 1 per cent to 2 per cent of the local decision-making positions, according to the UN (Yu 2011: 4).

Scholars working on women's political participation in China, especially at the grassroots level, are not convinced by these official reports. He Baogang's survey on women in Xiayangtan village of Sanmen shows a disturbing trend.

**Table 5.1 Knowledge of 'The Organic Law of Village Committee Elections'**

| Answers           | Men          | Women        | Total         |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Good Knowledge    | 56 (6.7%)    | 11 (2.7%)    | 67 (5.4%)     |
| General Knowledge | 201 (24.1%)  | 76 (18.5%)   | 277 (22.25)   |
| Some Knowledge    | 253 (30.3%)  | 117 (28.5%)  | 370 (29.7%)   |
| No Knowledge      | 300 (36.0%)  | 199 (48.4%)  | 499 (40.1%)   |
| No Response       | 24 (2.9%)    | 8 (1.9%)     | 32 (2.6%)     |
| Total             | 834 (100.0%) | 411 (100.0%) | 1245 (100.0%) |

Source: He Baogang Survey (2007), p. 124.

The table shows that just 2.7% of women had a good knowledge of the Organic Law on VC whereas the percentage of men was 6.7. More striking is that 48.4% of women and 36.0% of men said that they had no knowledge of the law. He Baogang finds out that women are underrepresented in the political sphere in China. In Shuichan village, 8 out of 40-50 village representatives were women, only 1 committee member was female. Moreover, there has never been a woman village

head; the highest position a woman has ever occupied is the head of the Women's Federation (He 2007: 128).

The key findings of Kent Jennings from a data drawn from a mass public survey of four rural and semi rural counties located in the provinces of Anhui, Hebei, Hunan and Tianjin are that firstly, women and men are “processed” and treated differently by key social institutions and structures, including those in the educational, legal, and economic spheres. The state of literacy among women is a matter of great concern. Confined most of their lives to the kitchen and the fields, it is hardly surprising that they had little understanding of matters like village elections (Ibid: 136).

Secondly, men and women undergo different political socialization in the pre-adult years because rural China still possesses visible remnants of a patrilineal, patriarchal society (Jennings 1998: 970-71). According to her, grassroots participation in China is conditioned by the existence of powerful governmental and party organs, the thorough penetration of society by the state, the scarcity of independent advocacy groups, a weak mass media, and the long absence of free and competitive elections (Ibid: 957).

Jude Howell points out the paradox of “state- derived feminism”<sup>5</sup>, where on the one hand, it has been crucial to getting women both into economic production and politics; on the other hand, it has become an impediment to analysing afresh the new challenges facing women in the reform period and devising strategies to overcome these. A revision of this is the need of the hour according to her. Howell argues that women's double burden of internalizing construction of themselves as less capable and weak and discriminatory personnel practices in addition to the traditional feudal,

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<sup>5</sup> According to Jude Howell, state- derived feminism describes not just the official gender ideology in post- 1949 China but also the set of practical strategies used to enhance women's status and the particular institutional arrangements made to that end. It is ‘state- derived’ because the Party- state produces the official gender ideology, crafts the strategies for addressing the causes of female oppression, and mobilizes processes of social change. By establishing the All China Women's Federation as the mass organization representing women, the party state created a monopolistic structure of representation, an institutional channel through which to mobilise women both for their economic and political advancement and for the promotion of party policies and purposes. See Jude Howell (2004), p.19.

patriarchal thinking contribute to women's low representation in politics. According to her, the idea of quotas as a way of ensuring representation of women in VCs should be encouraged and implemented.

Yet another difficulty remains that numerical representation does not necessarily guarantee effective representation. Women are assigned the task of implementing government policy of family planning and not any task on village economic development for instance. This makes women look more like government officials trying to impose government policies rather than representative agents concerned with gender issues (Howell 2004: 20). Stanley Rosen's study also confirms that the large majority of women engaged in politics at the grassroots level are doing women's work. For instance, one survey of twenty- one townships and small towns in a county in Hunan province found that almost all of the women holding office held the position of "cadre of the Women's Federation"; these were supplemented by a small number of women cadres among the staffs of family planning offices. It was rare to find a woman in any other official post (Rosen 1995: 326). Du Jie, a researcher at the Women's Studies Institute under the All-China Women's Federation said in the countryside, women willing to participate in running village affairs are often not regarded as "decent women" because they are not putting their families first (Yu 2011: 4).

A study by Guo Xiajuan, Zheng Yongnian and Yang Lijun (2009) in Zhejiang province find that female deputies are put in charge of children's and women's affairs such as family planning, promoting new policies and mobilizing policy support for the local party and government. Female cadres are usually responsible for birth control or peace- making, mainly to manage conflicts among villagers. Women rarely hold the directorship of the VRA. They concluded that women and men share a similar level of political consciousness and motivation. But there is an apparent gap in their political participation in village power structures. This disproportionate share and marginalization of women in power structures continues because they are being judged by the law, traditional stereotype of sexual division of labour and patriarchal expectations (Guo et.al 2009: 163).



## ii. Ethnic Minorities

According to 2010 census of China, of the population enumerated in the 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities and servicemen of the mainland of China, 1,225,932,641 persons or 91.51 percent were of Han nationality, and 113,792,211 persons or 8.49 percent were of various national minorities. Compared with the 2000 population census, the population of Han nationality increased by 66,537,177 persons, or 5.74 percent; while the population of various national minorities increased by 7,362,627 persons, or 6.92 percent.<sup>6</sup> The encouragement and implementation of rural democracy in autonomous regions where the national minorities are in a majority is to be analysed to understand the effectiveness of political reforms in these regions and towards the national minorities of China.

Article IV of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China states:

“All nationalities in the People's Republic of China are equal. The State protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops a relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China's nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any act which undermines the unity of the nationalities or instigates division is prohibited. The State assists areas inhabited by minority nationalities in accelerating their economic and cultural development according to the characteristics and needs of the various minority nationalities. Regional autonomy is practised in areas where people of minority nationalities live in concentrated communities, in these areas organs of self- government are established to exercise the power of autonomy. All national autonomous areas are integral part of the People's Republic of China.”

A White Paper on *China's Policy on National Minorities and Its Practice* published by the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China in September 1999 (*Beijing Review*: 1999) states that, “In China, the minority and Han peoples participate as equals in the management of affairs of the state and the local governments at various levels, and the rights of the minority ethnic groups to take part in the management of state affairs are especially guaranteed.”

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<sup>6</sup> See Communiqué of the National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China on Major Figures of the 2010 Population Census.

It is specifically mentioned in the White Paper that regional autonomy for ethnic minorities is granted to them:

“In China, regional autonomy for ethnic minorities is a basic policy adopted by the Chinese Government in line with the actual conditions of China, and also an important part of the political system of China. Regional autonomy for ethnic minorities means that under the unified leadership of the state, regional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of ethnic minorities live in compact communities; in these areas organs of self- government are established for the exercise of autonomy and for the people of ethnic minorities to become masters and manage the internal affairs of their own regions.”

The White Paper also states that the organs of self- government in ethnic autonomous areas include the people’s congresses and people’s governments of autonomous regions, autonomous prefectures and autonomous counties, which perform the functions of local state organs as prescribed in the Constitution. They also exercise the right of self- government provided for in the Constitution, the *Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy* and other laws, as well as the right of carrying out and implementing state laws and policies in the light of specific local conditions (Wen 2005:30). It is mentioned in the White Paper that by the end of 1998, 126 regulations on the exercise of autonomy and 209 separate regulations had been enacted by various autonomous areas.

The state gives autonomy to the organs of self- government in autonomous regions, but with the approval of the higher state organs as articulated in the White Paper: “if resolutions, decisions, orders and instructions from the higher- level state organs are not suited to the actual conditions of the autonomous areas, the organs of self- government of these areas may be flexible in carrying them out or may decide not to carry them out after approval by the higher state organs.”

Another White Paper *Building of Political Democracy in China* published in 2005 also takes the matter of minority nationalities seriously. “The successful implementation of the system of regional autonomy for ethnic minorities has enabled the ethnic minorities to manage their own affairs in accordance with the law and participate in the democratic management of state and social affairs,” it states.

The National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2009-2010) promises to formulate ancillary regulations that promote the implementation of the *Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy* and revise the Regulations on Ethnic Minority Work in Cities and Regulations on Administrative Work in Ethnic Townships. On the question of the Rights of ethnic minorities, the plan states that:

“The state will continue to guarantee that among the chairman and vice-chairmen of the Standing Committee of the People’s Congress of an autonomous area there shall be one or more citizens of the ethnic group or groups exercising regional autonomy in the area concerned, and that the head of an autonomous region, autonomous prefecture or autonomous county shall be a citizen of the ethnic group exercising regional autonomy in the area concerned. The state will guarantee that people from minority ethnic groups are well represented in state power organs as well as administrative, judicial and procuratorate organs at the central and local levels to participate in the management of state and regional affairs.”

Article VII of Organic Law on Villagers’ Committee states, “In a village where people from more than one ethnic group live, the villagers committee shall help the villagers understand the importance of enhancing unity, mutual respect and mutual assistance among the ethnic groups and give them guidance in this respect.” Further, Article IX says, “.....In a village where people from more than one ethnic group live, they shall include a member or members from the ethnic group or groups with a smaller population.”

Shengmin Yang in his study on Tajik people in Tashikuergan Tajik Autonomous County finds that local government has little influence on people who are living under harsh environmental conditions. It is interesting to note that in accordance with state guidelines, the VC manages family planning programmes, public security and organises the villagers in the repair of canals and roadways. The economic and everyday lives of the villagers are essentially autonomous having little connection with the VC. Yang says that in reality, their mode of production, their production organisation and their natural environment has been fundamentally the same for hundreds of years and thus the need for elected body was never felt (Yang 2007: 389).

A revival of *kaxie* system of Lahus people of Nanduan Village of Lancang County in mid- 1980s provides evidence for the fact that ethnic minorities are not well accommodated in VC structure. Local rural leaders can handle the local affairs, both political and economic, more effectively than any political offices and committees. Thus the villagers elect their *kaxie*<sup>7</sup>, *zhuoba*<sup>8</sup>, *jiali*<sup>9</sup> and so on by traditional methods such as the ‘thatch stalk picking egg’, thereby forming a new self- governing *kaxie* organisation (He 2007a: 399). He Shaoyang argues that the village office and committee in Nanduan neither reject nor support the organisation, but try to cooperate with the leadership of the *kaxie* organisation in their governance of local farming and ethnic affairs. The official institutionalised VC power encouraging the growth of an unofficial parallel power of *kaxie* for rural governance highlights the sidelining of ethnic minority representation in VCs in China. More importantly, although the participation is high among the Lahus in *kaxie* system, they consider it as part of their cultural and social activities and not a political activity. The political emancipation has yet to come here.

In accordance with the Organic Law of 1998 and according to the local conditions of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), the twenty- fourth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh People’s Congress of TAR adopted the Measures of Tibet Autonomous Region for the Election of Villagers’ Committees effective from 01 March 2002. The Article XVII of this document states that the members of VC of a village inhabited by a number of ethnic groups shall include one or more members from the ethnic group with a small population. Article XVI clearly says that each member of a VC shall support CCP and love socialist China and the unity of nationalities and oppose separation.

There is a comprehensive legal system for safe- guarding self- governance by villagers in TAR. This institutionalization of local government in TAR is a positive

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<sup>7</sup> *Kaxie* is a means ‘master of village’ or ‘chief of a certain population’. A nominated *kaxie* is a living Buddha or an appointed guardian of Buddhism in his village, being responsible for both religious rituals and political activities.

<sup>8</sup> The *kaxie*, the *zhouba*, the *foxiepa*, the *zhangli* are elected by the villagers and form the membership of *kaxie*. Acting as village priest, the *zhouba* primarily engages in ceremonies performed in the village fair, village stake and manages Buddhist prayers for the common weal of the village and its production.

<sup>9</sup> *Jiali* is a man who arranges activities of making and repairing the villagers’ farming tools.

development for the national minority of Tibetans. According to Tanzen Lhunduo (2007: 427) the combination of the system of regional autonomy of minority nationalities with the system of self- government by villagers has enabled Tibet to realise innovations in society and development in politics.

## ***V. Summary***

This chapter looked at various limiting factors in grassroots democracy in China. Firstly, the dual role of the CCP as a Party and government threw some light on the slow pace of grassroots democracy in China. Other factors like centralization, lack of awareness and the attitude of the senior officials are discussed which act as major constraints on the functioning of democracy at the grassroots level.

Secondly, the discussion on the issue of village citizenship highlighted the current law lacking a proper definition in deciding who is a villager and who can enjoy the rights of a villager as granted in the Organic Law. Cases of migrants and women who are married out of a village raise serious issues of village citizenship which need immediate attention. A more elaborate legal framework has to be worked out to accommodate these matters of rising concern.

Thirdly, the issue of rampant corruption at the grassroots level in the form of bribery, vote buying and financial frauds was discussed. This is a serious issue highlighting a major limiting factor of the well proclaimed self- governance initiatives in China. The rising protests against the corrupt leaders indicate that villagers are aware of their rights and not happy with corruption which could become a major threat to their political rights. Overall, this can lead to villagers losing faith in the very system which tried to give them a say in managing their own local affairs.

Finally, the participation of women and national ethnic minorities in self – governance seems to be lagging far behind. The Organic Law is vague pertaining to women and national ethnic minorities. Village democracy is overwhelmingly male dominated. A very few number of women who get elected are given traditional job profiles. Evidences show that in some areas, there are violations of women rights as part of the democratic process of VRAs or majority rule. It is therefore appropriate to

conclude that village democracy does not favour women. Even though the state has specific laws for minority representation in rural governance, it is not clear about what is the ratio of representation in autonomous regions of villagers from ethnic minorities. Lack of statistical data impedes a correct judgement of the scenario. This is a huge gap in the research area. A good analysis of policies of government towards ethnic minorities gives a strong case for how successful rural democracy works in all over China.

## **Chapter VI**

### **Conclusion**

The evolution of grassroots democracy in post- Mao China is a remarkable phenomenon. The initiative first came from the peasants to solve the immediate crisis of power vacuum that unfolded with the dismantling of the commune system in the rural areas, later incorporated into the Constitution and finally implemented across China. This has created immense interest among scholars working on democracy in China. While one set of scholars argued for regime legitimacy through rural democracy, the other set of scholars saw an evolution of genuine democracy which may transform China in the foreseeable future. This study thus has made an effort to contribute to the ongoing debate on grassroots governance in China.

The village structure and governance in rural China shows enormous diversity. Rural China is composed of numerous diverse communities rather than a monolithic whole. The villages differ from each other in many respects, from ecological conditions to demographic features, from economic status to social conditions, from decision- making processes to peasant participation. The relevance of such immense diversity of rural life in contemporary China makes the process of drawing conclusions all the more complex. With this caveat, a major finding of this study is that grassroots democracy in China is possible only with a genuine and efficient Party-state and active participation of villager- citizens coupled with favourable and sound legal system. Another finding is that the grassroots democracy in China has a long way to go in its evolution given the many limiting factors.

The study situated the debate on grassroots democracy in China in the three-fold theoretical framework of liberal, Marxist and Chinese perspectives on democracy. The liberal- democratic tradition from Hobbes to John Locke to J. S. Mill emphasised that people are the best judges of their own wants. All are free unless this freedom is limited by others or the state. While it advocated for individual freedom, it undermined the significance of direct citizen participation. Elections are significant

and essential in liberal-democracy. In response to this, Participatory democracy, a variant of liberal – democratic theory highlights the need for strengthening direct citizen participation in decision- making process. Many of the central institutions of liberal democracy- competitive parties, political representatives and periodic elections are necessary elements of participatory society.

Marxists developed a critique to liberal- democratic theory and came up with their own perspective. For them, democracy and state are closely associated. The state plays a significant role in helping people realise their wants by providing the right kind of structure. Here, the state plays a significant role during the period of revolution in general and during the transition period from Capitalism to Socialism in particular. Marxism predicts the withering away of the state, reducing the irrelevance of democracy thereafter. The Neo- Marxists, on the other hand, argue that all attempts to realise Socialism along Marxian lines have in fact, strengthened an independent state apparatus.

In contrast to the theoretical debates on democracy in the traditional liberal-democratic and Marxist frameworks, the Chinese leaders and some Chinese scholars advanced a different perspective. In this context, the inception and the early demise of democracy in the beginning of twentieth century coupled with Maoist ideology shaped their perspective. For the Chinese leadership, the mere copying of a Western model of democracy cannot be a solution for China's current political scenario. This study confirms the argument of Pan Wei that if democracy is to work well, it requires a firm foundation in the rule of law, which is not yet established in Chinese society and hence should have priority as a task for political development.

While rule of law is crucial for democracy, decentralisation of power and the concept of grassroots democracy, adopted in rural China widen the possibilities of establishing democracy with direct citizen participation. When people in the villages are given an opportunity to have a say in at least their day- to- day matters, an efficient democracy is practiced because what really counts in a democracy is where exactly the power to decide resides and how it is exercised. Both processes of establishing an



adequate rule of law and decentralisation of power should go hand in hand for an effective grassroots democracy.

The recent enthusiasm for initiating more political freedom by the state is a clear departure from its earlier apathy towards granting political liberalization. The last two decades have seen an interesting response from the state towards the call for a more efficient grassroots democracy. The change in the official attitude and implementation of several policies are evidences for this fact. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China and the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees define the structure of Villagers' Committee. However, they do lack clarity in some of their provisions leading to misinterpretation and misuse. The subject of village citizenship of migrant population and married women are two specific examples.

Several procedures and regulations of direct village elections have improved greatly after 1998 such as elections without choice to elections with few choices or several choices and democratic procedures that are designed to protect ordinary villagers' rights and interests and provisions to complain and recall the VC if illegal practices are reported strengthens the rights of the villagers. However, the law remains silent on issues like proxy voting and roving boxes, corruption, bribery which needs due attention. These practices impede rather than facilitate the rural self-governance.

Another aspect is that the diversity of Chinese villages has been a major challenge to policy makers who are working on rural development and transformation. Uniform and centralized policies often fail, since they are not tailored to local conditions. Examples of local variations of centralized policies like those found in Fujian are welcoming. But this needs dedicated and determined village chiefs and officials who can work together to make specific village- friendly adaptations of the national policies without neglecting the core values of democracy.

The study indicates that rural democracy in China has seen a relatively passive support from the Chinese Communist Party especially in initiating various policies and procedures. This is evident in the moderate pace with which amendments are introduced by the state. The lack of initiating awareness programmes for the villagers also indicates the general attitude of the Party. There is a need to generate more

awareness among the villagers regarding their political rights because participation should not be based on just gifts and fortunes offered to them. Another issue is that there is a lack of qualified village cadre who fail to respond to peasants' increasingly strong desire to participate in the village politics and affairs. Awareness in terms of encouraging education is also urgent.

The study brought to light the impact of the pull of centralisation and the attitude of higher level officials, for instance, township officials towards rural democracy. The attitude of the leaders at the higher levels of power often confronts with effective self-governance by the villagers. This simultaneous process of centralisation and decentralisation of power has been complicating the real purpose of the democratization process which rural China is undergoing since two decades.

Another finding of the study is that there is a change in the power equations at the grassroots level in contemporary China. The traditional locus of power of the local Party branch secretary is now shared with an elected village chief, VRA, newly rich entrepreneurs and sometimes with religious bodies and institutions. This kind of power sharing, where compromises and decisions are made after deliberations, largely challenges the authority of Party branch. While some villages are still controlled by the Party Secretary, many others involve multiple decision makers and peasant participation in public affairs. Although village cadres dominate the decision-making process in some villages, lineage leaders play an important role in others. There is a plurality of interests which is witnessed in China. These plural interests and interest groups have been redefining the power equations at various levels, including between the local Party leaders and elected leaders.

Yet another visible phenomenon is that a considerable number of rich entrepreneurs, non-communists and young and educated are getting elected as village chiefs. This is a relatively new phenomenon and the traditional power spaces are again restructured. As the number of competing interests increase, a corresponding decline in the individual interests of a particular group is observed. This kind of power sharing will eventually weaken the power structure of the Party branch secretary and

strengthen the democratically elected village chiefs. This process should be encouraged to have better self- governance in China.

Impact of grassroots democracy on villagers is equally significant. While this study found that empowerment of villagers is happening in a relatively slow pace, villager participation in elections and protests saw a tremendous growth. The struggle for village citizenship by marginalised sections of migrants and married out women in a village describes the slow empowerment of villager from peasants to citizens. But on the other side, the right to take decision regarding matters related to a village still lies with the Party branch secretary in many of the examples cited. This implies that the decision making power of the villagers are not granted to them according to the law. This is a serious setback to the democratization process.

Villager participation at the grassroots level, especially in village elections shows a positive trend according to the data analysed in this study. Participation in huge numbers need not necessarily indicate that the villagers are becoming aware of their rights. This study has shown that economic incentives are a motive for many villagers to cast vote and many of them lack genuine affinity towards politics or democratization process per se. This trend is disturbing as it led to a low level of political development in some parts of rural China.

Another finding of this study is that there are a number of variations in the participation of women and national ethnic minorities in self- governance in rural China. A small number of women who are in office are largely given traditional roles of implementing government policy of family planning and promoting new policies and mobilizing policy support for the local party and government. Women are highly underrepresented in rural governance structure. Since the political understanding and capabilities of both the genders are the same, this kind of discrimination based on conservative notions deteriorates the efficiency of the system. In fact, the latent energy of women is not directed in a positive way towards the propagation of grassroots democracy.

The study found that peasant participation can push forward the accountability of elected leaders through various democratic supervision mechanisms. For instance,

every village in Xiangshan County in Zhejiang has its own group of auditors to supervise village accounting practices and to make periodic reports to the villagers. In another case, the Village chief of Hongguang Village Committee had signed a contract with his fellow villagers stipulating that he would pay financial damages incurred in the event of potential mismanagement or wrongdoing on his part.

Corruption is another major issue plaguing grassroots democracy in China. Vote buying and economic fraud by the village chiefs limit the scope of grassroots democracy. The rising protests against the corrupt leaders in the form of hunger strikes as in the case of Taishi village indicate that villagers are aware of their rights and not happy with corruption which could become a major threat to their political rights. Overall, this can lead to villagers losing faith in the very system that gives them a say in managing their own local affairs. Increasing corruption at the village level is taken note of by the state lately by issuing various circulars. A circular in 2009 for the first time gave a clear definition of election bribery. Punishment ranging from disqualification from election, removing current post to criminal penalty will be given to those who try to win votes from villagers with money, violence or intimidation and those who cheat in vote count. Rigid measures by the officials and an efficient leadership for implementing those measures will strengthen grassroots democracy.

Despite the emergence of a democratic culture, parochial political culture and political apathy still exist, and the emergent democratic consciousness falls short of an ideal democratic standard. The contradictory coexistence of democratic and nondemocratic political cultures is one of the factors that contribute to the variations of village democracy in China. While a highly democratic culture helps to develop village democracy, the indifferent attitude continues to support the authoritarian leadership and structure in many villages.

With regard to minority nationalities, even though the state has specific laws for minority representation in rural governance, this study found that it is not clear from the law about the permitted ratio of representation in autonomous regions of villagers from ethnic minorities. Instead of strengthening the local governance through village committees, many of them encourage the local religious and clan system to

take active role in managing the affairs of the village. The strengthening of the kinship and religious ties will hinder the progress of democracy in rural China. These gaps in the legal framework have to be immediately worked out for a better legal guarantee for the villagers and for smooth implementation process by the officials.

Migrant population of village are denied the privileges of a villager. Even the latest amendments to the electoral law in 2010 are silent on the migrant population issue. The case of married women is no different. They are denied their right to vote and entitlement to economic benefits by village assembly or village representative assemblies. Though the law empowers the villagers financially, this study found that, it also weakens the villagers on the issue of political rights. This is a discouraging trend. If the villagers lose faith in the institution of self- governance, they may refuse to take part in the initiatives for democratizing rural China. This is a matter of grave concern.

As discussed in the study, the democratic village committee often faces problems with non- democratic officials of township level. In order to have an effective democracy, grassroots democracy at the village level should be gradually accompanied by democratic reforms at the next level in the political structure. The focus of China's grassroots democracy building has shifted from the countryside to urban areas. In recent years, many Chinese cities, including Beijing, have been actively exploring ways to realize democracy at the grassroots level. Jiudaowan is the first community in Beijing to have a direct election for the community's residents committee in the year 2002 (Luo 2002: 14). This represents a significant impact of grassroots democracy on democracy in China.

At the community level, it is observed that there are problems because of improper relationship between the community committee and the government. One of the goals established by the Ministry of Civil Affairs when it set about shaping democracy in urban communities was to separate the community committee from the government, thus achieving community self-governance in a real sense. However, this goal has not been reached. Some local governments interfere in the operation of community committees, making the local self-governance difficult.

While distinct signs indicate that a clear take off has happened in terms of governance by villagers in matters concerning their life, there is little progress in the democratization process at the county, provincial or national levels. The successful and effective implementation of democracy at the county and provincial level will push forward the democratic elements in the political system of China. This has to be further followed by reforms at the national level. A favourable and comprehensive policy initiative from the CCP will be critical for the whole process. The elected village committees work in a larger political framework which has not changed much. This will dilute the democratization process and reduce the recent political reforms to a meaningless exercise.

The implementation of genuine democracy should overcome many of the limitations discussed in this study. This study points to many further research possibilities in the same area. One of them is to look at how rural democracy works in areas inhabited by ethnic minority nationalities and how the national minorities respond to the official policies of the state. This can give significant threads to understand and analyse the possibilities of democratization in China at the national level.

The grassroots democratization, initially led by the people and later implemented by the government, has finally taken its roots in China. This study has shown that even though fraught with certain problems, it has been creating political awareness among the villagers besides empowering the voters with their active participation and thereby leading to better governance. The future of grassroots democracy, in the final analysis, is in the hands of the Chinese people and the leaders. It remains to be seen how they shape grassroots democracy in the decades to come.

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