

Chapter 4

GRASSROOTS POLITICAL REFORMS IN RURAL CHINA

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the expectations of many outside observers at the beginning of the 1990s the political system of the People's Republic of China (PRC) experienced remarkably little transformation during the last decade of the twentieth century. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) weathered the aftermath of the bloody repression of the Tiananmen democracy movement of 1989 as well as the demise of other Communist Party dictatorships in Russia and Eastern Europe. Neither the transition of authority from the late Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin nor the passing of the helm from the latter to Hu Jintao at the Sixteenth Party Congress convened in Beijing in November 2002 have ushered in large-scale elite in-fighting or a systemic succession crisis disabling the functioning of the political system. Against this backdrop of stability, it has been the more subtle changes to that system on which most authors have pinned their hopes for a political transformation. These include *inter alia* the building of the rule of law, a more independent role for people's congresses at different levels of the political hierarchy, changing state-society relations and new intellectual trends.¹ However, one of the aspects receiving most attention in recent years has been ongoing political reform in the Chinese countryside. The very dearth of other eye-catching reforms in the political realm has made the adoption of direct elections at the basic-level of a Leninist Party-state seems even more spectacular. These elections pertain to villagers' committees (VCs), the executive body

¹See for example Pei Minxin, "China's Evolution Toward Soft Authoritarianism," in *What if China Doesn't Democratize? Implications for War and Peace*, ed. Edward Friedman and Barrett L. McCormick (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 74-98; Zhao Dingxin, "China's Prolonged Stability and Political Future: Same Political System, Different Policies and Methods," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 28 (2001): 427-444; and more general: Richard Baum and Alexei Shevchenko, "The 'State of the State'," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao*

at the rural grassroots-level which was instituted with the demise of collective farming and the people's commune system in the early 1980s. Only after a special law was passed in 1987 did these elections begin to resemble democratic procedures and during the 1990s the spread of these was still quite uneven. Yet, problems of implementation notwithstanding these elections have served as an impetus to pioneer elections for other positions of the Party and state apparatuses. All of these reforms, to be dealt with in more detail below, have raised the eyebrows of Western China-watchers.

While it appears easy to explain the attention paid to grassroots political reforms in rural China, the extent of these changes and their impacts remain hard to gauge given the huge area and diverse nature of the Chinese countryside.² In fact, Jonathan Unger aptly called rural politics in China "kaleidoscopic" because of the wide variations existing between different localities.³ Nevertheless, it is probably not too early to raise questions pertaining to the nature of these political transformations. Specifically, this article addresses the question which driving forces behind them can be identified. I will argue that political change at the grassroots-level in rural China has neither been a story of top-down reform, nor of bottom-up initiative, but rather a mixture of both and that during the process new actors which I will term bureaucratic entrepreneurs, policy advocates and policy entrepreneurs came to play significant roles. First, it will be necessary to sketch the economic transformations in rural China during the reform era to elaborate different reform patterns. We will then turn to the political reforms taking place in this new context and attempt to identify which pattern best serves to explain these. In doing so, I will focus on political reforms defined as a restructuring of formal political institutions. Accompanying changes in political attitudes and the political culture of rural China will be addressed only where they are perceived as either driving forces or results of these institutional reforms.⁴

REFORMING CHINA'S RURAL ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS

Major transformations of the Chinese rural economy have taken place during the 1980s and 1990s.⁵ Indeed, the starting point of all reforms under Deng Xiaoping was de-collectivization of agriculture at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s which greatly boosted agricultural productivity during the first half of the 1980s. Yet, there have been greatly varying explanations of how these systemic changes came about. While some observers focused on intra-elite dynamics to explain this reform,⁶ others depicted de-collectivization as a momentous reform from below in which peasants forced into similar circumstances by a

Reforms, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 333-360.

² For an assessment and comparison of village elections across China's provinces see: Robert A. Pastor and Tan Qingshan, "The Meaning of Village Elections," *China Quarterly* 162 (2001): 490-512.

³ See Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 197.

⁴ On possible and actual impacts of VC-elections on political attitudes see: Li Lianjiang, "Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China," *China Information* 16, no.1 (2002): 89-107.

⁵ Since these are generally well documented in the literature, I will not unnecessarily repeat them here. See for example David Zweig, *Freeing China's Framers: Rural Restructuring in the Reform Era* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997); Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2002).

⁶ See Joseph Fewsmith, *Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Debate* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), chapter 1.

seemingly overwhelming state acted in unison to replace the oppressive structures of collective farming with a family-farming system. In other words, in this perspective the driving force of the adoption of this so-called household responsibility system (HRS) in agriculture has been the peasantry.⁷ While the elite-focused approach is linked with a “top-down pattern” of reform in which reform progresses only as far as the leadership allows, the second explanation will be called a “bottom-up pattern.” In the case of the HRS both have their virtues, but their explanatory power is obviously limited, especially regarding the regional variations in the adoption of a certain policy.

Therefore, other authors refined the argument to what can be termed an interactive pattern of reform:⁸ Preceding initiative from below, a relaxation in economic policy emanated from higher political levels.⁹ This created an opportunity for experimentation which some peasants and local cadres seized upon. After initial success of less radical forms of the HRS provincial-level reformers acted as patrons of these experiments and legitimized them post facto. Again, this encouraged initiative from below resulting in more small-scale, low-risk infringements of existing rules, called fence-breaking.¹⁰ While this cumulative pressure from below led to step-by-step reforms and clearly went beyond initial expectations of Deng Xiaoping and other “reformers,” earlier attempts in a very similar vein did not succeed because of the very different political macro-climate.¹¹ Only the power struggle at the top between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng opened the necessary window of opportunity for these local initiatives to be sustainable. Elite policy champions in the provinces, such as Wan Li in Anhui and Zhao Ziyang in Sichuan, used the early success of this reform initiative to bolster the reformist position. Significantly, the central-level reformers at one point chose to adopt the HRS as a nation-wide policy, even implementing it against resistance in some localities.¹² Therefore, only the interactive pattern of reform seems an adequate explanation for de-collectivization in China. I will argue below that this explanatory pattern also goes a long way in analyzing rural political reforms in the 1980s, but that it has its limitations, too.

POLITICAL REFORMS

The change from collective to family-farming under the HRS created a new political situation in the villages. Functions of rural basic-level cadres as well as their relationships to the populace were radically altered. Peasants had considerably more decision-making power

⁷ See Daniel Kellner, *Peasant Power in China. The Era of Reform, 1979-1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 40-69; Kate X. Zhou, *How the Farmers Changed China: Power of the People* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 46-75; Thomas Heberer, “The Power of the Fait Accompli: The Peasantry as the Motive Force of Change in the People's Republic of China,” *Occasional Papers 3* (University of Trier, Center for East-Asia and Pacific Studies).

⁸ See Dali L. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China. State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 144-179; Zweig, *China's Farmers*, 12-5.

⁹ While most observers mention the documents of the famous third plenum of the eleventh CCP Central Committee in December 1978 as the starting point, Xu Yong points to the so-called Six Agricultural Articles of Anhui Province from November 1977 as the first opening-up document. Xu Yong, *Bao chan dao hu shenfu lu* [A Thorough Record of Contracting Output to the Household] (Zhuhai: Zhuhai chubanshe, 1998), 225.

¹⁰ Thomas Heberer, *Unternehmer als Strategische Gruppen: Zur Sozialen und Politischen Funktion von Unternehmern in China und Vietnam* (Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, 2001), 57-9.

¹¹ See Xu (1998) for a detailed analysis of these attempts starting as early as 1956.

¹² See Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 95-109.

in production and control over their harvest under the new HRS. Tensions between cadres and villagers centered on the extraction of grain and taxes and coercive state policies like birth-planning, in some places rising to a crisis of governance. Popular protests in rural areas erupted more regularly and more violently during the two decades of the reform-era than before. Without direct leverage on villagers cadres now sometimes used excessively harsh methods to extract taxes and fees from the populace or to impose birth quotas or in birth-planning campaigns actually abortion quotas. Without a functioning judicial system to rely on to redress their grievances villagers reacted with open violence or stealthily retaliated against local cadres.¹³ On the other hand, the general relaxation of political climate and ideological control throughout the system led villagers and cadres alike to concentrate on seizing the newly available economic opportunities. Many basic-level cadres quit their posts or neglected their duties, thus incapacitating village administrations.¹⁴ Others used their remaining control of collective assets to profit from the boom of rural industries, combining political and economic clout.¹⁵ Either way the power of the central state to control its basic-level cadres and through them the rural population was considerably weakened. Again, it was a combination of central political reforms and local initiatives which lead to institutional innovation. The creation of elected villagers' committees (VCs) to step into the political vacuum is commonly credited to "spontaneous" initiatives on the part of some villagers in Guangxi Autonomous Region.¹⁶ However, it should be noted that the CCP Central Committee had in December 1978 issued a document which called for a democratization of the election procedures for village cadre positions.¹⁷ And in 1979 Deng Xiaoping exclaimed: "Without democracy there can be no socialism, and no socialist modernization."¹⁸ Although the socialist democracy Deng had in mind is a far cry from Western liberal concepts of democracy and his use of the term might have been part of a ploy in the intra-Party struggles of that time, this still constitutes an unambiguous signal that change was in the air and Deng proved to be serious about administrative reforms. Therefore, Xu Yong is right to conclude that "[i]f one says that reforms of the economic structure created the necessary economic conditions for villagers' self-

¹³ On popular protests see Elizabeth J. Perry, "Rural Collective Violence: The Fruits of Recent Reforms", in *The Political Economy of Reform in Post-Mao China*, ed. : Elizabeth J. Perry and Christine Wong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 175-92; Thomas P. Bernstein and Lü Xiaobo, "Taxation Without Representation: Peasants, the Central State and the Local States in Reform China," *China Quarterly* 163 (2000): 742-63. An excellent case-study of birth-planning implementation in a village is Zhang Weiguo, *Chinese Economic Reforms and Fertility Behaviour. A Study of a North China Village* (London: China Library, 2002), 168-98; and more general Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China 1949-2000. Population Policy and Demographic Development* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 169-76.

¹⁴ See John P. Burns, "Local Cadre Accommodation to the 'Responsibility System' in Rural China," *Pacific Affairs* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1985-1986): 612-4; Tyrene White, "Political Reform and Rural Government," in *Chinese Society on the Eve of Tiananmen. The Impact of Reform*, ed. Deborah Davis and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 48-52. However, rural cadres tend more to neglect those duties which are assigned to them with only 'soft targets,' and are more willing to fulfill 'hard targets,' see Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 2 (1999): 167-86.

¹⁵ See in more detail Jean C. Oi, "Commercializing China's Rural Cadres," *Problems of Communism* (September-October 1986): 1-15.

¹⁶ See for example Bai Gang, "Zhongguo cunmin zizhi fazhi jianshe pingyi" [Assessment of the Legal Construction of Chinese Villagers' Self-administration], *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* 3 (1998): 88.

¹⁷ See John P. Burns, *Political Participation in Rural China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 88; Sulamith H. Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's Peasants. The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 102-105.

¹⁸ Cited in Xu 1997, p. 1; see also Wang 2001, pp. 6-7, for more on Deng's remarks on democracy during this era.

administration, then the process of democratization of the state directly promoted its rise.”¹⁹ Even if it remains murky whether the villagers in Guangxi knew about new trends in central leaders thinking on basic-level administration, it is above doubt that these new trends had enabled grassroots initiatives to flourish. What is more, the central leadership decided to integrate the new institution of VCs into the formal administrative hierarchy when it abolished the people's communes. Communes were replaced by township governments and production brigades by administrative villages led by VCs enshrined in the 1982 constitution as basic-level self-administration organizations of the masses. This implied a certain degree of autonomy from township administration—the lowest level of formal state bureaucracy—although a definition of rights and duties of both were left to be defined by special laws.²⁰ Moreover, the constitution required that cadres serving on VCs are elected by the villagers. Therefore, one could argue that villagers' self-administration with elected VCs at its core had thus been institutionalized in an interactive pattern of reform very similar to the HRS. However, there are major differences between these two reforms. While the HRS was implemented nationwide without regard to local peculiarities within a matter of three years and has remained basically unchanged afterwards,²¹ the system of villagers' self-administration remains only partially realized and proves still contentious even after two decades. The constitutional requirement to hold VC-elections was widely ignored even after promulgation of the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees in its trial version of 1987. Only after a final version of that special law which was already announced in the constitution of 1982 had been passed in 1998 did implementation become more forceful. Furthermore, during this long process of experimentation large revisions and profound additions have been made to the original shape of villagers' self-administration. We will address these in turn, when discussing driving forces for these political changes in the next sections.

ELITE POLICY CHAMPIONS AND LEGISLATION

It is certainly true that without the support of some high-ranking Party leaders the system of villagers' self-administration would not have taken off. In fact, even the mentioning of elected VCs in the 1982 constitution is credited to the efforts of one single Party elder, Peng Zhen.²² His backing also proved necessary to induce reluctant National People's Congress (NPC) delegates to pass the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees (Trial) in 1987 which defined more clearly the scope of self-administration and the functions of VCs. This law also required VCs to be elected directly by villagers although during the deliberations in the NPC

¹⁹ Xu Yong, *Zhongguo nongcun cunmin zizhi* [Villagers' Self-administration in Rural China] (Wuhan: Zhonghua shifan daxue chubanshe, 1997), 27.

²⁰ See Xu, *Zhongguo nongcun*, 38-9. In fact, this process of administrative reform took three years and often involved a redrawing of administrative boundaries: During 1982-1985 54,342 communes were replaced by 91,138 townships and 719,438 brigades by 940,617 VCs; see Bai Gang and Zhao Taoxing, *Xuanju yu zhili: Zhongguo cunmin zizhi yanjiu* [Elections and Governance: Studies on Chinese Villagers's Self-administration] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), 44.

²¹ This is of course not to say that China's land system is free from the need of reform; but, as Peter Ho argues, for the moment it serves both state and society well to delay reform. Peter Ho, "Who Owns China's Land? Property Rights and Deliberate Institutional Ambiguity," *China Quarterly* 166 (2001): 394-421.

²² See Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China," *China Quarterly* 162 (2001): 467-70. These authors link Peng Zhen's commitment to socialist democracy with earlier experiments in grassroots governance during the 1930s and 1950s.

many opponents had argued that this would make them less responsive to higher-level administration, thus aggravating, rather than ameliorating the rural governance crisis. In the end, with Peng's support the proponents' argument prevailed that elected VCs would be more able to carry out state-assigned but unpopular tasks because villagers would identify with them. Yet, again in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown of 1989, it took Peng's efforts and the assistance of another Party elder, Bo Yibo, to rescue the Organic Law from being scrapped altogether.²³ These Party leaders succeeded in first passing the Organic Law and then saving it through the political retrenchment of 1989 to 1990, but their victory was only partial and narrow. The law was merely passed for "trial implementation" and it took another ten years for a revised Organic Law to be promulgated by the NPC.²⁴ Thus, backing by parts of the highest echelon of Party leaders acting as policy champions proved a necessary condition for political institutional reforms, but by no means a sufficient one. The PRC's political system is as much characterized by authoritarianism as by fragmentation,²⁵ so that even had the law been less ambiguous it would have met with considerable opposition in its implementation. That the Organic Law left crucial issues ill- or undefined made matters worse. Most notably, the relationship of the township government to the VC was defined as one of "guidance"—not of "leadership"—which expresses respect for a certain autonomy of the VC vis-à-vis the lowest level of formal state administration. However, it remained unspecified how the VC would realize the prescribed cooperation with and assistance to the township government in carrying out state-set administrative tasks. Ever since de-collectivization this has been the most contentious point in rural governance reform.²⁶ Moreover, the village party branch, the highest organ in each village, was not even mentioned in the law. Only in party documents and the CCP statute the leadership of the party branch over the elected VC was clearly stated.²⁷ Of course, not even the most vocal proponents of villagers' self-government like Peng Zhen or Bo Yibo wanted the VCs to become independent of party leadership which to date remains the hallmark of the PRC's political system. But a clearer delineation of functions and authority would certainly have contributed to a successful development of village governance. As things stood, implementation of the Organic Law and direct VC-elections was sure to be obstructed by those who had most to lose from this reform: township administrations and village party branches. And the definition of the Organic Law as being only for trial implementation provided these opponents with a pretext to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Obviously, something else had to happen to drive implementation forward.

²³ See Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 2 (1999): 131-4.

²⁴ On the Organic Law and its revision in 1998 see Björn Alpermann, *Der Staat im Dorf: Dörfliche Selbstverwaltung in China [The State in the Village: Village Self-administration in China]* (Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, 2001), 27-43.

²⁵ On the concept of fragmented authoritarianism see Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "Introduction: The 'Fragmented Authoritarianism' Model and Its Limitations," in *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, ed. Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1-30.

²⁶ For a case-study on township-village relations see Björn Alpermann, "The Post-Election Administration of Chinese Villages," *China Journal* 46 (2001), 45-67. For a more general discussion see Jin Taijun and Shi Congmei, *Xiang cun guanxi yu cunmin zizhi [Township-Village Relations and Villagers' Self-administration]* (Guangzhou: Guandong renmin chubanshe, 2001), 195-247.

²⁷ See Xu Yong, *Zhongguo nongcun cunmin zizhi [Villagers' Self-administration in Rural China]* (Wuhan: Zhonghua shifan daxue chubanshe, 1997), 38. The fact that this leadership relation which includes the right to issue binding orders has never been in serious dispute has often been overlooked by Western observers.

INNOVATIONS BY THE MASSES

Ever since the successful adoption of the HRS “innovations by the masses” have played a special role in rural reforms. These have the special credentials of being conform to the mass-line approach which has been a central tenet of Mao Zedong’s thought about party work since the 1940s.²⁸ The mass-line is best described in Mao’s own words:

In all practical work of our Party, 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 such action... Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge.²⁹

There are obvious parallels between this spiraling process and what I termed an interactive pattern of reform. It is somewhat ironic, however, that this mass-line approach was in actual practice seriously disregarded during the Mao-era, and yet was revived in this new form as a major reform pattern under Deng in the 1980s. In rural governance reform, we regularly find the claim that some new mechanism is an invention of the masses even if involvement of local cadres is more than just likely. A case in point is the institution of villagers’ representative assemblies (VRAs). These organs are composed of 30-50 members which are either elected in villagers’ small-groups or proposed by groups of households. Because of their size they are more easily convened than an assembly of all villagers to deliberate and decide on important issues of the rural community. Apart from this participatory function they are also supposed to serve as a check on elected village cadres who often take part in VRA sessions.³⁰ Initially, assemblies of this kind seem to have been convened on an ad hoc-basis in villages in different parts of China during the 1980s to solve specific problems in village management. These local initiatives sometimes predated the promulgation of the Organic Law, but the institution spread more widely only with this law’s implementation starting in 1988.³¹ In other words, this institutional innovation would not have taken firm hold in the basic-level political system, but for the intervention of another driving force of political change, namely bureaucratic entrepreneurs—dealt with in more detail below—who helped to institute VRAs during this implementation drive. Another example is the case of village compacts and village charters. The first are rather simple codes of conduct, while the latter which

²⁸ See Kenneth G. Lieberthal, *Governing China. From Revolution Through Reform* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 64-5.

²⁹ Cited in Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 41.

³⁰ On limitations of VRAs’ decision-making power see Jean C. Oi and Scott Rozelle, “Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages,” *China Quarterly* 162 (2001): 516-22. For a case-study of an unusually active VRA see Susan V. Lawrence, “Democracy, Chinese Style,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32 (1994): 61-68.

³¹ See Wang Zhenyao, Tang Jinsu et al, *Zhongguo nongcun cunmin daibiao huiyi zhidu* [The Research Report on the Villagers Representative Assemblies in China] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui keyue chubanshe, 1994), 7-9; Zhu Hong and Yan Hao, “Yi ge you nongmin chuangzao de jiceng zhengzhi minzhu zhidu. Nanlou cun cunmin daibiao huiyi zhidu de diaocha” [A Democratic System at the Political Grassroots Created by Peasants. A Study of the Villagers’ Representative Assembly in Nanlou Village] *Zhongguo Minzheng* 4 (1989): 6; and Zhang Zhenxian, “Zhongguo nongmin de xin chuangu” [The New Pioneering Work of China’s Peasants] *Zhongguo Nongcun* 5 (1997): 34.

are sometimes called ‘small constitutions’ regulate political life in the village.³² The adoption of village compacts through an assembly of all villagers as an instrument to restructure community life and to strengthen rural governance was pushed in a national campaign starting in 1982.³³ As Ann Anagnost has shown, these village compacts have a history dating back to the Neo-Confucian revival of the eleventh century, yet “these historical antecedents are never mentioned. On the contrary, the compacts are consistently portrayed as an organizational *innovation* of ‘the masses’.”³⁴ Village charters which clearly share these historical antecedents are supposedly an invention of the masses of Zhangqiu County, Shandong Province during the implementation of the Organic Law.³⁵ From there their adoption spread nationwide during the MCA-led movement to create demonstration-sites for villagers’ self-administration after 1990.³⁶ But very often the wide-spread adoption of village compacts and charters could only be attained by sacrificing the original procedure of the document being drafted by the villagers themselves. Instead various administrative levels simply took the initiative to issue these documents to the villagers.³⁷ An example is the county-level city of Anqiu, Shandong Province, where cadres of the Party’s organization department at that level seemingly promoted the distribution of these documents starting in 1989.³⁸ The motives of cadres seizing such initiatives will be explored in the next section.

A last example of a local innovation—this time going back to a public protest of ordinary villagers well-documented by an independent researcher—is the two-ballot system for the election of the village Party secretary.³⁹ Due to the leadership role of the CCP throughout the political system which is enshrined in the PRC’s constitution the village Party branch, headed by the Party secretary, usually dominates local decision-making although there might be exceptions if the VC controls more income-generating activities.⁴⁰ According to the CCP’s Provisional Regulations on Election Work for Basic-Level Organs all Party members are eligible to elect the relevant committee of their own units. However, candidates have to be examined

³² See Kevin J. O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform in China’s Villages,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32 (1994): 43–4.

³³ See Ann Anagnost, “Socialist Ethics and the Legal System,” in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China. Learning from 1989*, ed. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (Boulder: Westview, 1992), 182.

³⁴ Anagnost, “Socialist Ethics,” 188–9. (emphasis in the original).

³⁵ See Wang Wen, *Xiangzhen zhengquan jianshe* [Construction of Rural Political Power at the Township-level] (Guangzhou: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe, 1993), 139.

³⁶ See “Implementing Political Reform,” 43; and Wang, Xiangzhen, 142–6.

³⁷ See Bai Gang, “Zhongguo cunmin zizhi fazhi jianshe pingyi” [Assessment of the Legal Construction of Chinese Villagers’ Self-administration], *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* 3 (1998): 88–104.

³⁸ See Zhonggong Shandong sheng Anqiu shiwei, *Shandong sheng Anqiu shi renmin zhengfu* (1996): “Hu wei jidian. Yifa zizhi. Cujin nongcun liang ge wenming jiankang fazhan” [The Household as the Basis-point. Govern according to the Law. Foster the Healthy Development of the Two Civilizations in the Villages], in Bai Yihua and Wang Zhenyao, eds., *Quanguo cunmin zizhi shifan gongzuo jingyan jiaoliu ji cheng xiang jiceng xianjin jiti he xianjin geti biao Zhang huiyi wenjian huibian* [Documents of the National Conference to Exchange Experiences in the Work on Models for Villagers’ Self-administration and to Honor Urban and Rural Progressive Collectives and Individuals] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996), 96–102. Similar observations were made by the author during fieldwork conducted in two counties of southern Hebei Province in 1997.

³⁹ See Li Lianjiang, “The Two-Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Village Party Secretaries to a Popular Vote,” *China Journal* 42 (1999): 103–118.

⁴⁰ See Oi and Rozelle, “Elections and Power,” 530–1. On reconfigurations of the village authority structure under reforms see Guo Zhenglin, “Guangdong nongcun quanli jigou de minzhu zhuanxing” [Democratic Reconfigurations of the Authority Structure in Rural Guangdong] (paper presented at the International Symposium on Grassroots Governance in Contemporary China, 30 August – 1 September 2002, Shizuoka, Japan).

and approved by the party organ on the next higher level. And after election the same organ again has to approve the elected secretary and vice-secretary.⁴¹ However, villagers of Hequ County, Shanxi Province, protesting in 1991 against their village party secretary's alleged wrongdoings forced a party work team dispatched to solve the crisis to apply a new election procedure. The villagers' demand for participation in the selection of the party secretary was accommodated by a two-step process in which an all-village assembly could nominate two candidates for the position. Then all village party members could cast a second ballot to decide which of the two would serve as secretary. This innovative election method worked so well that it was soon instituted in the whole county.⁴²

These cases demonstrate that societal pressures for institutional reforms exist in many parts of the Chinese countryside. However, there is nothing to suggest that a spontaneous, unorganized, leaderless, nonideological, apolitical movement of the rural populace is about to introduce sweeping changes in grassroots governance structures. Advancing her version of the bottom-up pattern of policy-making Kate Xiao Zhou's claimed that such a movement was responsible for most rural reforms in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁴³ This claim has proved dubious as shown above and would surely be all the more so had it been made for the rural political reforms treated here. Moreover, even in combination with support by some of the highest party leaders acting as policy champions these societal pressures proved not enough for any sweeping changes as the actually very arduous implementation of political reforms at the rural basic-level during the last decade testifies. What is still lacking in this picture to explain even the limited successes that these reforms have achieved are the driving forces of reform in the middle between the apex and the bottom of the political system.⁴⁴

BUREAUCRATIC ENTREPRENEURS

Building on the work of Nancy Roberts, Kaye Bragg introduced the concept of public entrepreneurship into the study of policy-making in the PRC. An entrepreneur is conceptualized as someone engaged in each of the three phases of creation, design and implementation of a policy. Furthermore, Bragg differentiates four subtypes and identifies bureaucratic entrepreneurs as those holding formal positions in government below the level of leadership of a nationwide bureaucracy.⁴⁵ Of course Bragg is not the first to deal with the roles of bureaucrats

⁴¹ See Zhongyang jinrong gongwei zuzhibu, *Dang de zuzhi gongzuo shiyong shouce* [A Practical Handbook for the Organizational Work of the Party] (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1999), 228. These regulations were promulgated on the June 27, 1990, and remained in force throughout that decade.

⁴² See Li, "The Two-Ballot System," 103-5.

⁴³ See Zhou, *Farmers*.

⁴⁴ A mutual empowerment of the political center and the peasantry through VC-elections at the cost of bureaucrats in the middle is the central thesis of Wang (1997). This huge middle ground is, however, omitted in his analysis. Wang Xu, "Mutual Empowerment of State and Peasantry: Grassroots Democracy in Rural China," *World Development* 25, no. 9 (1997): 1431-42.

⁴⁵ See Kaye C. Bragg, "Crossing the River by Groping for Stones: Factors Reshaping the Policy Innovation Process for Chinese Water Policies" (paper presented at the 2nd International Convention of Asia Scholars, Berlin, Germany, August 9-12, 2001), 5-6. The other three subtypes are also identified according to their positions as political entrepreneurs (elected leadership positions in government), executive entrepreneurs (not elected leadership positions) and policy entrepreneurs (without formal positions; these are dealt with in the next section). See also the discussion of entrepreneurship and political innovation in Heberer, *Unternehmer*, 92-5.

in the Chinese political process.⁴⁶ Yet, her concept proves useful to understand the crucial role played by mid-level bureaucrats in current political reforms at China's rural grassroots because it systematically differentiates between the three above mentioned phases. Therefore, we can analyze more clearly the roles which bureaucrats play. Shi Tianjian has argued that mid-level officials of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) were essential in this process since this ministry was designated to implement the Organic Law after 1988. They applied an incremental approach first spreading the institutionalization of VC elections and thereby compromising on their quality. Only in a second step after 1993 these MCA officials began to raise election quality by reforming the nomination procedures and fighting manipulation.⁴⁷ However, this focus on *policy-implementation* obscured the fact that major *innovations* within the system of rural governance took place along with this process. As we have seen, neither VC-elections themselves nor some elements described in the above section were innovations of MCA officials. Nevertheless, an entrepreneur is not necessarily characterized by his ability for (technical) innovations, but also by his alertness to opportunities which he creatively exploits.⁴⁸ Understood in this way MCA officials acted entrepreneurial on a number of occasions greatly contributing to political reforms. VRAs again prove a good case in point. Seizing the opportunity provided by this locally initiated institution MCA officials promoted their large scale adoption since September 1990. After receiving the support of Song Ping, then member of the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee, MCA issued a circular on the construction of demonstration-sites for villagers' self-administration which also required the institutionalization of VRAs. Furthermore, through consulting provincial people's congresses in drafting implementation procedures for the Organic Law MCA succeeded in introducing relevant clauses in the majority of cases.⁴⁹ According to MCA about half of all Chinese villages had implemented this new organ by 1994.⁵⁰ The establishment of demonstration-sites throughout China itself served two of MCA's purposes. On the one hand, it created a favorable environment for further innovations as these are designated areas which are supposed to continuously improve the quality of VC-elections. Thus, it is their very purpose to experiment with new institutions in rural governance. On the other hand, MCA could cash in on local initiatives preceding the designation of a particular area as demonstration-site. This strategy could be called picking winners as the MCA would declare a particular local development a model and propagate it. An important example is the open nomination procedure called *haixuan*. Throughout the 1990s many localities still conducted non-competitive elections, that is an election with an equal number of candidates and positions to be elected. Other localities offered limited choice in conducting semi-competitive elections (number of candidates = number of positions +1 or +2). With the revision of the Organic Law in November 1998 this semi-competitive method has become the legally required standard.⁵¹ Either way the nomina-

⁴⁶ See for example the seminal work by Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China. Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴⁷ See Shi Tianjian, "Village Committee Elections in China. Institutional Tactics for Democracy," *World Politics* 51 (April 1999): 385-412.

⁴⁸ See Heberer, *Unternehmer*, 94.

⁴⁹ Out of sixteen provinces adopting implementation regulations after September 1990 only six had no provisions on VRAs or a similar organ. Fujian Province in 1993 revised its implementation regulations bringing the total of provinces adopting this system into local law to sixteen at the end of 1994; see Wang Zhenyao, Tang Jinsu et al, *Zhongguo nongcun cunmin daibiao huiyi zhidu* [The Research Report on the Villagers Representative Assemblies in China] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui keyue chubanshe, 1994), 23-4.

⁵⁰ See Wang, *Zhongguo nongcun*, 35.

⁵¹ On variations in provincial legislation see Alpermann, "Provincial Legislation," 9-11.

tion procedure and the process of reducing nominations to final candidates are of ultimate importance if any choice at all shall be provided. Most localities allowed nominations by groups of voters and certain village-level organs, including the party committee.⁵² In a second step the number of nominations used to be whittled down to the desired number of final candidates by a process of consultation in which the party branch had considerable power to influence the choice of voters. In their effort to raise the quality of VC-elections MCA officials were looking for ways to reduce this influence.⁵³ With Lishu County, Jilin Province, they found a suitable opportunity to seize upon.⁵⁴ As early as 1986 there had been a case of open nomination by village voters which was reported to the central leadership and was allegedly well received by Peng Zhen. Similar to the development of the two-ballot system the starting point had been an effort to resolve the political problems of one particular village. After further explorations in VC-elections of 1988/89 and 1991/92 the Lishu government issued new election regulations in 1993 and pushed for the county-wide adoption of the *haixuan*-method. In this process, every voter first casts a ballot with nominations. Those nominees who receive most votes are eligible to run in the final election. In this way, a primary after nomination becomes unnecessary although some localities still prefer holding a primary to a decision based on nominations. Either way the power of village party secretaries or township governments to manipulate voters' choice is severely circumscribed by this process. Therefore, bureaucratic entrepreneurs at MCA decided to seize this opportunity and popularize the Lishu experience as a model to emulate.⁵⁵ As a fruit of this effort the revised version of the Organic Law, passed by the NPC in November 1998, clearly requires direct nominations by the voters thus abolishing all previously common forms of consultations and negotiations in that process.⁵⁶ However, it would be a simplification to credit only a handful of officials in the central-level MCA with this innovation. Obviously, the initial impulse was a local solution to a particular village's problems in governance. And even before the inception of the demonstration-site movement through MCA the Party committee and government of Lishu promoted the use of primaries and semi-competitive elections throughout the county in 1989.⁵⁷ With these re-

⁵² See Jørgen Elklit, "The Chinese Village Committee Electoral System" China Information 11 (1997): 7-9. Even publications by MCA-officials differ in their assessment which nomination method is the most common: Wang (1998) calls nominations by Party committees rare, whereas Liu (1998) lists these and nomination by the preceding VC as the most common methods. See Kennedy (2002) for an assessment of the effects of these different nomination methods. Wang Zhenyao, "Village Committees. The Basis for China's Democracy," in Cooperative and Collective in China's Rural Development. Between State and Private Interest, ed. Eduard B. Vermeer, Frank N. Pieke and Woei Lien Chong (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 250. Liu Xitang, "Cunmin zizhi yu woguo nongcun minzhu de dutexing" [Villager's Autonomy and the Distinctiveness of Democracy in China] Zhongguo Nongcun Jingji 12 (1998): 59. John James Kennedy, "The Face of 'Grassroots Democracy' in Rural China: Real Versus Cosmetic Elections" Asian Survey 42, no. 3 (2002): 456-482.

⁵³ See Robert A. Pastor and Tan Qingshan, "The Meaning of Village Elections" China Quarterly 162 (2001): 495-6.

⁵⁴ The following account of Lishu County's experiments is based on Bai Gang and Zhao Taoxing, Xuanju yu zhili: Zhongguo cunmin zizhi yanjiu [Elections and Governance: Studies on Chinese Villagers's Self-administration] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), 156-62.

⁵⁵ See Shi Tianjian, "Village Committee Elections in China. Institutional Tactics for Democracy," World Politics 51 (April 1999): 406.

⁵⁶ See Quanguo renda changweihui fazhi gongzuo weiyuanhui guojiafa xingfa shi, Cunmin weiyuanhui zuzhifa xuexi duben [Study Book on the Organic Law on Villagers' Committees] (Beijing: Zhongguo minzhu fazhi chubanshe, 1998), 35-6.

⁵⁷ See Yu Weiliang, "Haixuan' guxiang de xuanju licheng. Jilin sheng Lishu xian cunweihui si ci xuanju de kaocha" [The Election History of the Native Place of 'haixuan.' An Analysis of Four Rounds of Elections in Lishu County, Jilin Province], in Zhongguo cunmin zizhi qianyan [The Forefront of China's Villagers' Self-administration], ed. Wang Zhenyao, Bai Gang and Wang Zhongtian (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000), 323-27.

quirements Lishu established itself as a frontrunner in rural governance reforms. This position was formalized when several townships within Lishu County were designated as demonstration-sites during the VC-elections of 1991. In fact, prior to 1994 Lishu seems to have been the only county-level demonstration-site in the whole of Jilin Province.⁵⁸ So we can assume that it received considerable attention from regional-level Civil Affairs officials. Although it now seems impossible to accurately disentangle the different inputs that enlightened county leaders, Civil Affairs officials at the provincial- or district-level and MCA officials from Beijing have provided to Lishu's development it is obvious that all of these three groups of actors have acted as bureaucratic entrepreneurs and made considerable impact.⁵⁹ A more important question to answer is which motives these actors pursued in driving political reform forward. Shi Tianjian argued that a new generation of bureaucrats was responsible for the implementation of the Organic Law with personalities like Wang Zhenyao seriously committed to reforming the political process at the grassroots.⁶⁰ However, these bureaucrats needed to apply politically correct arguments to avoid offering an open flank for criticism.⁶¹ This instrumental argumentation makes it hard to assess their genuine commitment to reform. Moreover, another equally compelling motive might be careerism. As MCA is the bureaucracy charged with implementing the Organic Law its officials could rightly assume successes in grassroots political reform to foster their individual careers as well as the prestige of the whole organization.⁶² This careerist motive might be also be at work with bureaucratic entrepreneurs engaged in political reforms with positions in local and regional government and Party leadership positions. This point was made by Li Lianjiang after studying the few known cases of another attempted reform: the introduction of direct elections for the position of township head.⁶³

According to the constitution and the Organic Law of Local People's Congresses the head of a township government is elected by the local people's congress (LPC). However, as this position falls within the purview of the Party's *nomenklatura* system the delegates are usually presented only with a single candidate pre-selected by the county party committee.⁶⁴ Never-

⁵⁸ See Jilin sheng minzhengting, "Bawo jiyu. Jiji tansuo. Renzhen zuohao cunweihui xuanju gongzuo" [Seize the Opportunity. Explore Enthusiastically. Conscientiously Carry Out the Task of Villagers' Committee Elections], in Quanguo cunmin zizhi shifan gongzuo jingyan jiaoliu ji cheng xiang jiceng xianjin jiti he xianjin geti biao Zhang huiyi wenjian huibian [Documents of the National Conference to Exchange Experiences in the Work on Models for Villagers' Self-administration and to Honor Urban and Rural Progressive Collectives and Individuals], ed. Bai Yihua and Wang Zhenyao (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996), 304-5.

⁵⁹ In April 1988 a township in Lishu County was chosen by these regional Civil Affairs offices as experimental-site for the elections of 1988/89. The first visit by a MCA official, Bai Yihua, is recorded in March 1989. See the meticulous chronicle of events in Yu, "'Haixuan' guxiang de xuanju licheng," 365-6.

⁶⁰ See Shi, "Village Committee Elections," 390-2.

⁶¹ See Shi, "Village Committee Elections," 397-8. The debate over villagers' self-administration is analyzed in more detail in Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government," *China Journal* 37 (1997): 63-86. See also Björn Alpermann, *Der Staat im Dorf: Dörfliche Selbstverwaltung in China* [The State in the Village: Village Self-administration in China] (Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, 2001), 43-51.

⁶² On this last point see Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate," 76.

⁶³ See Li Lianjiang, "The Politics of Introducing Direct Township Elections in China," *China Quarterly* 171 (2002): 722. A similar argument was made by Oi and Rozelle (2001): Power-holders in villages with a financial surplus might be attracted to hold contested elections because this would not threaten their position (they could buy out voters with favors) and would still polish their village's image as a progressive political unit. Jean C. Oi and Scott Rozelle, "Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages," *China Quarterly* 162 (2001): 532-5.

⁶⁴ The elections of LPC delegates itself is carefully orchestrated by the CCP. For a detailed account of electorates and selectorates at the township level see Melanie Manion, "Chinese Democratization in Perspective: Electorates and Selectorates at the Township Level," *China Quarterly* 163 (2000): 764-82.

theless, this domination of CCP organs has recently been more vocally criticized within China.⁶⁵ And what is more, some localities experimented with more direct involvement of residents. The first of these experiments was conducted in Nancheng Township, Sichuan Province, at the end of 1998 and has been described as “essentially a carefully conducted political show”⁶⁶ since in the two-stage process of candidate selection voters’ choice was severely circumscribed. Another author praised the historical significance of the fact that direct voting for the whole township leadership was possible, but criticized procedural flaws like the highly restrictive qualifications to stand as candidate and the adoption of mechanisms (like *haixuan*) developed for VC-elections but unsuitable for a wider electorate.⁶⁷ The controlled nature of the process is explained by the fact that the provincial CCP organization department took the initiative to arrange this election. Yet, the motivation of these cadres to do so remains obscure. In fact, the whole election was kept secret for more than two years.⁶⁸ Therefore, the first township election to grab the headlines in China and abroad was the now well-known election in Buyun, Sichuan Province, conducted only shortly after Nancheng’s.⁶⁹ Here, the motivations of bureaucratic entrepreneurs, the leaders of Shizhong City, seem clearer. In the face of economic difficulties they attempted to regain legitimacy with the populace and to present themselves as successful in political reforms towards their superiors. However, these cadres legitimized their experiment with the general political trend after the 15th Party Congress of 1997 and instigated a demand for reform from below to share the political risks involved between different administrative levels.⁷⁰ Though not without flaws itself the Buyun election process surpassed the Nancheng experiment in being freer, fairer and more competitive in almost all aspects.⁷¹ The central leadership reacted with a harsh condemnation of this election process and tried—but failed—to institute a news blackout. Although this condemnation itself was the target of a number of criticisms so far no other local experiment went that far again.⁷² Those applied for example an open nomination process or a vote of confidence to align candidate selection and voters’ preferences, leaving the final ballot to LPC delegates.⁷³

Although not much is known about the motivations involved it is interesting to note that several of these testing grounds of electoral reform had been demonstration-sites for villagers’ self-administration before.⁷⁴ Therefore, it seems plausible to assume that the officials in-

⁶⁵ See for example Jin Taijun and Shi Congmei, *Xiang cun guanxi yu cunmin zizhi* [Township-Village Relations and Villagers’ Self-administration] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2002), 158-60. See also Zhang Qingcai and Huang Qiang, “Kuoda jiceng minzhu zhi wo jian” [Our Views on the Expansion of Grassroots Democracy], in *Jiceng minzhu yu shehui fazhan* [Grassroots Democracy and Social Development], ed. Zhang Zhirong and Yang Haijiao (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2001), 38.

⁶⁶ Li, “Politics,” 710.

⁶⁷ See Li Fan et al, *Chuangxin yu fazhan. Xiangzhenzhang xuanju zhidu gaige* [Innovation and Development. The Reform of the Township Head Electoral System] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2002), 386-8. Apart from the head of the township government, the vice heads were also elected.

⁶⁸ Li, “Politics,” 709-10.

⁶⁹ For a detailed account see Li, *Chuangxin yu fazhan*, 115-52.

⁷⁰ See Li, “Politics,” 710-13.

⁷¹ Li, “Politics,” 714-5.

⁷² On this debate see Li, “Politics,” 716-9. For a sample of arguments in defence of the election see Li, *Chuangxin yu fazhan*, 182-4.

⁷³ On the experiments of Zhuoli Township, Shanxi Province, and Shenzhen’s Dapeng Town, Guangdong Province, see Li, *Chuangxin yu fazhan*, 71-96, and on the experiment of Xincui County, Henan Province see Li, “Politics,” 720.

⁷⁴ This is true of Meishan Prefecture, in which Nancheng is situated. (Li, “Politics,” 709) This is also the case in Linyi and Hequ, where the two-ballot system for village Party secretaries was first developed. See Shi Weimin, *Gongxuan yu zhixuan. Xiangzhen renda xuanju zhidu yanjiu* [Open Selection and Direct Election.

volved had come to see political innovations as a way to improve career prospects as Li Lianjiang has suggested.⁷⁵ In any case, this is a more plausible explanation than the one offered by these cadres themselves that they were enthused about political reform by Jiang Zemin's praise for grassroots democracy during his address to the 15th CCP Congress. Seen in context, this eight line paragraph is hardly arousing, but rather the usual musing about "deepening reform" prevailing throughout this document of more than fifty pages.⁷⁶ If these cadres were encouraged by mixed signals from higher levels they seemingly were acutely aware of the risks involved, too.⁷⁷ Otherwise it would not be understandable why they attempted to keep the electoral experiments secret. An election would only be deemed successful if the chaos which opponents of too much democracy fear does not break out. Therefore, the hope of those local reformers probably was to let some time pass before claiming a successful political innovation.⁷⁸ However, the time obviously was not yet ripe for the adoption even of some experimental-sites in township electoral reform since these local bureaucratic entrepreneurs could obviously not find a policy champion in the highest level leadership.

POLICY ADVOCATES AND POLICY ENTREPRENEURS

A lively Chinese research community interested in rural political reforms has developed in the 1990s. Here, opponents of VC-elections are in the minority and we find many policy advocates who engage in both creation and design of policies.⁷⁹ This is largely done through case-studies—sometimes conducted with investigative methods—that point to local innovations, publicize them and add to their design in the form of policy proposals. Among the huge number of publications on the reforms discussed in this paper some of the most outstanding works emanated from Huazhong Normal University's Rural Problems Research Center where Xu Yong and Zhang Yan'an act as general editors of a book series on village governance. Another important research unit is the Center for Public Policy Research at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, headed by Bai Gang. Although the actual impact of scholarly work on the policy process is notoriously hard to assess, there can be no doubt that these think-tanks and other academics have played a role in the elaboration of villagers' self-administration legislation. And should a Party leader decide to act as policy champion for the introduction of direct elections at the township-level he will probably turn to those academics

Research on the Electoral System of Township Peoples Congresses] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000), 351, 360.

⁷⁵ See Li, "Politics," 722-3.

⁷⁶ See Jiang Zemin, "Gaoju Deng Xiaoping sixiang de weida qizhi, ba jianshe you Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi shiye quanmian tuixiang ershiyi shiji" [Hold High the Great Banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory for an All-round Advancement of the Cause of Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics], in: Zhongguo gongchandang di shiwu ci quanguo daibiao dahui wenjian huibian [Documents of the 15th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1997), 33.

⁷⁷ In the case of the Nancheng election the CCP organization department of Sichuan Province was the source of encouragement (Li, "Politics," 709). White (1998) even cites a CCP Central Committee document of June 1998 which "announced the Party's intention to 'make active efforts' to extend elections to the township level." Unfortunately, this quote is not set into its context, so its nature remains hard to judge. White Tyrene, "Village Elections: Democracy from the Bottom Up?," *Current History* (September 1998): 267.

⁷⁸ See Anne Thurston, "Democracy and Grassroots Change in China," in *Political, Economic, and Social Change in China: Prospects for Instability*, ed. Denise Groves (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2001), 52.

⁷⁹ See also the analysis of that debate in Liu Yawei, "Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China. Better Governance or More Consolidation of State Power," *China Perspectives* 31 (2000): 21-4.

who have previously released works on the topic to get their support in designing a policy. Another group of policy advocates in China has a uniquely strong presence in the field of rural governance reforms. Since the MCA has been quick to realize the potential of foreign academics and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to strengthen its case for villagers' self-administration, those actors have been involved in the scene throughout the 1990s.⁸⁰ They have not only conducted election observations and brought international publicity to the program of village elections, but they also have made real impact on discussions and even the actual design of election laws.⁸¹ Foreign academics and NGOs involved in discussions about future reforms will probably continue to exert an influence on policy-making, but they will have to be careful not to be seen as lecturing Chinese about democracy as doing so would not be politically acceptable to the party-state. One way to get around this is pursued by the Ford Foundation in collaboration with the Carter Center. In 2002 these institutions started to jointly publish a book series entitled *Contemporary China's Rural Governance and Election Observation*. Thus, they provide a forum for critical publications on rural governance by Chinese academics and practitioners of rural governance and act as policy advocates in an indirect way. It is the author's impression that the Chinese and international researchers as well as foreign NGOs and the MCA are connected in a strong network that as a community is driving for more reforms. There are now even signs that a new type of actor is about to emerge in China, namely the policy entrepreneur, that is "an individual working outside the formal government system to introduce and implement innovations."⁸² In the 1980s Chinese intellectuals with a mind for political reform usually tried to work from within the system. Even the few cases left outside generally tried to be integrated into it.⁸³ Now at least some individuals are beginning to act as policy entrepreneurs. They are actively engaged in instigating local election experiments, contribute to policy design through commenting on political development in his own research publications and try to implement reformist policies on the ground in acting as consultants to local governments. The direction of their work is clear. According to one of this group "VC-elections have outlived their historical mission. Now it is time to move on to direct elections of the township head."⁸⁴ As shown above, some local officials are beginning to feel the same and there are definitely more local experiments underway than we know about since by intent these are kept secret at first.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ On this see Kelliher, "Debate," 75-7.

⁸¹ See Shi, "Village Committee Elections," 408-10. See also Becky Shelley, "Political Globalization and the Politics of Organisations: The Case of Village Democracy in China," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 2 (2000): 130-1. Shelley also provides a fuller account of NGO activities in this policy area.

⁸² C. Kaye Bragg, "Crossing the River by Groping for Stones: Factors Reshaping the Policy Innovation Process for Chinese Water Policies" (paper Presented at the 2nd International Convention of Asia Scholars, Berlin, Germany, 9-12 August 2001), 6.

⁸³ For a case study on Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao see George Black and Robin Munro, *Black Hands of Beijing. Lives of Defiance in China's Democracy Movement* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993).

⁸⁴ Personal communication with the author, March 2001.

⁸⁵ See International Republican Institute, *Elections at the Grassroots. An Assessment of Local Elections in Guangxi, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, and Yunnan Provinces, People's Republic of China* (Washington: International Republican Institute, 2000), 24-5. See also Thurston, "Democracy," 52.

CONCLUSIONS

This discussion of grassroots political reform in rural China has identified a number of actors playing significant roles in the initiation, design and implementation of new political institutions and governance mechanisms. Since the actual extent to which these changes to the basic-level political system have already taken hold in the Chinese countryside is impossible to gauge, we are at a loss to accurately assess the magnitude of the impacts these different reforms have had on rural political life in different regions. This article instead focused on the patterns according to which reforms were initiated, elaborated and adopted. The major finding is that no actor or single group of actors is in a position to successfully promote political reform on his or its own. In the context of a political system characterized by fragmented authoritarianism not even the highest leaders can see their policy initiatives implemented smoothly without building a coalition of supporters. Similarly, the actors trying to behave like entrepreneurs, that is innovating, designing and implementing a policy, need to rally policy advocates and policy champions around them to get their initiatives adopted. In other words, the different functions of the entrepreneurial process tend to become divided among several actors and public entrepreneurship is facilitated by a tentative coalition of actors functioning as nodes of a network.⁸⁶ The political reforms under scrutiny are best explained as products of this whole network rather than as emanating from either the apex or the bottom of the political system. The bottom-up pattern of reform tends to neglect that the peasantry needed a window of opportunity provided by a divided political elite to see its moves consolidated. Conversely, the top-down pattern is prone to ignore that leaders were consistently driven forward to more and more far-reaching reforms by initiatives from below. And both cannot account for the entrepreneurial role played by bureaucrats who engaged in far more than just policy implementation in being inventive themselves, creating environments conducive for inventions or appropriating innovations by others. In sum, the explanation for rural political reforms offered here points to another pattern of policy-making which could tentatively be called a nodal pattern since each of the nodes within the described network has a significant and necessary role to play to realize grassroots political reforms. Certainly, more research in this vein will be needed before such a reform pattern can be more confidently claimed in existence. For this research, this study can offer but a starting point.

However, a conclusion which can be drawn regarding the study of policy-making in China is that we sometimes might not be able to identify the single most important actor behind a particular policy, but instead need to look for the *processes* leading to change if we want to more fully account for the driving forces of political development. This finding parallels the conclusion some time ago drawn by Lieberthal and Oksenberg that the PRC's policy process is "*disjointed*, with key decisions made in a number of different and only loosely coordinated agencies and inter-agency decisional bodies."⁸⁷ But it extends this view by also taking societal actors into account which function as initiators, advocates or entrepreneurs of policies. Regarding further political reforms in the Chinese countryside the prospect for the moment is somewhat dim. Despite the usual pledge to extend grassroots democracy Jiang Zemin made in his address to the 16th National Congress of the CCP, the Central Commit-

⁸⁶ This is consistent with the findings presented by Bragg, "Crossing the River," 18-9.

⁸⁷ Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China. Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 24.

tee's Document No. 12 from July 2001 which declared direct elections for the position of township head unconstitutional and illegal remains in force.⁸⁸ However, as we have seen there is accumulating evidence of stirrings for further political reforms in the countryside. Therefore, if one or some of the leaders rising in the aftermath of Hu Jintao's succession to Jiang chose to act as a policy champion for such a reform he would find other actors to support his move. Nevertheless, given that the township-level belongs to the formal state bureaucracy and not the self-administration level this would be a bold move indeed since leading-cadre positions within the state administration fall within the purview of the Party's *nomenklatura* system. Furthermore, with the adoption of direct elections to executive positions at the township-level the conflict of elected officials and Party secretaries only accountable to higher levels which is currently widely perceptible at the village level would probably be moved one step up the administrative ladder. And finally, elections are but one side of the policy-cycle which also includes decision-making and policy implementation.⁸⁹ Therefore, even where elections are successfully instituted it is still too early to speak of full-fledged democracy and this would be true of the township-level, too.

⁸⁸ This document is cited in Li, "Politics," 704. For the English version of Jiang Zemin's speech refer to <www.16congress.org.cn/english/features/49007.htm> (7 February 2003).

⁸⁹ See Björn Alpermann, "The Post-Election Administration of Chinese Villages," *China Journal* 46, (2001): 45-67.