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Yusheng Yao

*Rollins College, [yyao@rollins.edu](mailto:yyao@rollins.edu)*

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# Village Elections and Their Impact: An Investigative Report of a Northern Chinese Village

## **The State of the Field and the Rationale of This Study**

Since their experimental stage officially launched in 1987, especially since the promulgation of the organic law of the village committees in 1998, China's village elections have drawn much attention and debate as to their character, impact and implications. After twenty some years into the elections, it is appropriate to pause and reflect on what we know about the field and where to go next. Last year a group of political scientists who had done much work in the field organized a forum in the *Journal of Contemporary China* to do just that. Kevin O'Brien, one of the best known in the field, and Rongbin Han, contributed a central piece assessing the status of China's elections and the state of the field. O'Brien and Han state, "Election procedures in rural China have improved greatly over the last 20 years and a good number of reasonably free and fair elections have been held" (O'Brien and Han, 2009: 359). Based on vital statistics on these elections presented by many Chinese and international scholars and observers, they conclude, "By many indicators, the future of grassroots democracy in China is bright, much as Tianjian Shi foresaw some years ago" (O'Brien and Han, 2009: 360). On the other hand, they see a serious lag in China's rural democratization that "changes in the 'exercise of power' (governance) have not kept up with changes in the 'access to power' (elections)" (O'Brien and Han, 2009:359).

Viewing "the mountain of evidence" in the existing literature, O'Brien and Han point out a general bias in research focusing on procedural study of elections without due attention to governance. This approach "leads analysts to over emphasize form at the expense of content"(O'Brien and Han, 2009: 360). For the future study, they propose to

shift the focus from “access to power” to “exercise of power.” To address the research bias and to explain the gap between much improved elections and little improved governance, O’Brien and Han examine the power configuration in the grassroots politics that puts constraints on village committee including township, Party branch and social forces from clans, religious organizations and criminal elements. They come to the conclusion that “...the quality of democracy in much of the countryside remains stubbornly low, mainly because village committees, once an election is over, are situated in a sociopolitical environment that has changed surprisingly little”(O’Brien and Han, 2009: 376).

The problem with their analysis of institutional constraints is the assumption that popularly elected village committee is an agent for democratic change, only various formal institutions and informal forces around it prevent it from doing so. For various reasons, however, elected officials in many villages do not try to govern democratically. In their study of the effect of the incentive structure—mainly the salary—on village officials, James Kung, Yongshun Cai and Xiulin Sun conclude, “when village cadres face competing demands from their families, the village community and the state, they tend to give priority to state tasks first, ...and they put community needs last” (James Kung, Yongshun Cai and Xiulin Sun, 2009: 61). In this study, I will show more factors, personal and structural, for elected officials not to govern democratically or in public interests. Another problem with this approach is that by focusing on the power structure in which village committee is embedded, we cannot learn the actual dynamic of village politics, for example, factionalism, which, I will show below, cuts across these formal institutions or informal groups. When village director and the Party secretary are of the

same faction, the institutional divide seems to be meaningless, providing no checks and balances. O'Brien and Han recognize the limit of their institutional approach in the study of village governance and suggest a set of specific questions for further study including "how, when and where elections have changed the relationship between cadres and voters;" "whether elections deter power holders from seeking personal gain above all else;" and whether "limited changes in governance after several rounds of elections a cause of increasing voter apathy"(O'Brien and Han, 2009: 377-378)<sup>1</sup> These questions overlap with some of those I am addressing in this article and their demand for a change in research approach also coincides with what I am doing here.

With the one possible exception, other scholars in the forum more or less agree with O'Brien and Han's assessment of the status of China's village elections and proposal to shift focus to post-elections governance.<sup>2</sup> However, Melanie Manion, John James Kennedy and Bjorn Alpermann all seem to disagree with their assessment that a large gap exists between (much improved) elections and (little improved) governance. Emphasizing a positive correlation between the quality of village elections and of governance, they see more positive changes in rural democratization beyond improved elections.<sup>3</sup> These three scholars represent the views of the majority in the field that we may call "the empowerment school," while O'Brien and Han may be seen as two who are parting ways with the school but not yet joined the opposite "disempowerment school," definitely the minority in the field.<sup>4</sup>

In their discussion of research methodology, O'Brien and Han, implicitly, while Melanie Manion and Gunter Schubert, directly, call for more case studies. Schubert, in particular, proposes "a new approach" closer to the one used by anthropologists

(Schubert, 2009: 387-388). To address the bias of over-emphasis on procedure rather than content and the imbalance of the field dominated by political scientists it is necessary to have more fine-grained case studies. While anthropological studies of village elections by Chinese scholars are numerous, they are few and far between in the English literature. Zongze Hu published an ethnographical study of a North China village while I made one of a village near Beijing.<sup>5</sup> Different from macro studies that dominate the field, what a case study can do is to help us discern the causal mechanisms at work, thus enhance our knowledge about how and why these elections work or do not work. For example, Hu's article analyzes how and why the majority villagers reacted negatively to a good democratic election and supervision, while mine illustrates how and why direct elections led to factional politics and continued popular discontent after the change of leadership.

What is the rationale, then, for another study of the same village? In my previous article, I conclude that significant progress has been made in the village's elections after a crisis caused by vote buying during the 2004 election. Compared with the old leadership, the governance of the first elected village committee (2004-2007) had improved to the degree that its members were not accused of financial corruption. However, popular discontent persisted because the new leadership had failed to address the accumulated and continued problems of encroachment on the village property. This conclusion about the (improved) elections and (little improved) governance fits more or less with O'Brien and Han's recent assessment that village elections have much improved while governance lags behind.

Since 2007 important changes have taken place in the village politics including a new round election. The most notable one for the worse was the rise of official financial corruption and of village toughs, some of whom had turned into predatory entrepreneurs. The financial misconduct by officials was increasingly committed in collaboration with predatory entrepreneurs and village toughs. This had deepened popular discontent and aroused sporadic public resistance. What is more, the 2010 election saw a rampant vote buying that sent two predatory entrepreneurs to the village committee, one being the new village director. The vantage point today has given me a broadened perspective and a sense of clarity to the problems troubling the village. Reviewing my interview notes gathered since 2005, the problem of village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs jumps to the fore: almost everyone, from village cadres to ordinary villagers, complained about *hunhun'r* (toughs, rascals), who have monopolized the illegal business of the two village sand farms, and predatory entrepreneurs, who have refused to pay their contract dues since 2003 or early. However, as villagers' major complaint and the first two direct elections clearly aimed at the old leadership, I regarded the problem of village toughs mainly as a byproduct of the village's poor governance. After learning about the collaboration between village cadres and village toughs in recent years, especially about two predatory entrepreneurs, formerly village toughs, had won the 2010 election, I realized that the rise of village toughs had much more serious implications and consequences than I had recognized. They have become a powerful force in the village and done more damage than corrupt village officials. The dramatic downturn in the quality of governance and election since 2007 and the changing attitude of villagers

towards elections and the Communist leadership call for another study as well as reconsideration of my previous conclusions.

### **Background of the Village and Methodology of the Research**

The village (I call it West Village) under study is located 58 kilometers to the northeast of Beijing. It is a large agrarian village with multi-surname groups and a population of over 2,200. The village has 4,300 mu of land, less than half are good for farming, the other half are sandy and stony. For most households, farming is for family consumption rather than the market. In the past two decade, two collective enterprises and two private business of some scale had failed one after another, leaving villagers look for job opportunities outside. Several hundred able-bodied men and some women work in construction or in service industry in the nearby township, the county seat or in Beijing. According to villagers, the village had been in good shape from the collectivization period through to the reform era of late 1990s. Since then, the village cadres had increasingly worked for themselves. The social, economic and political order of the village has kept deteriorating due to official corruption, poor governance, and rise of unruly villagers, village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs. Thus, West Village can be categorized as a badly governed and dysfunctional village and this study can serve as a test case on whether introduction of democratic elections can or cannot help improve its conditions.

My study covers four direct elections from 2001 to 2010, which villagers consider “free” (*hai xuan*). To obtain a comprehensive picture of changes and continuities, it is necessary to adopt a time series approach. To achieve a balanced view, it is also necessary to conduct multiple interviews from both members of governing and non-

governing elite of different factions and ordinary villagers. Based on in-depth and, for some, repeated interviews conducted over the last five years and participant observation, I first reconstruct a narrative to illustrate the changing political dynamic in the village after direct elections were introduced. To avoid repetition with my previous article, the 2001 to 2007 elections will be discussed only briefly to illustrate the dynamic of the factional politics<sup>6</sup> and to provide the necessary background for what happened afterwards. Then I discuss and analyze the impact of direct elections in village politics including the problems of elections and governance, the elite and popular participation and the main problems and contradictions in the village. In the conclusion, I summarize my findings and try to explain why democratic elections have failed to improve governance in West Village and the necessity for forceful state intervention to curb the problem to village toughs.<sup>7</sup>

### **Major Findings**

Direct elections empowered both the politically ambitious and ordinary villagers at first and resulted in a radical change in the village leadership by removing both the old village director and the old Party secretary. However, new leaders could neither address the accumulated problems left over by the old leadership, nor govern with competency, transparency and accountability. As their expectations for change failed to materialize, villagers' political enthusiasm was soon dampened and replaced by disillusionment, apathy and cynicism.

In contrast, interest in political participation among political and economic elite remained high because of high returns in holding office. Direct elections provided opportunities for an enlarged group of elite to compete for office including both members



of the old style political elite (most had served in the village government) and newly emerged economic elite. Competing for power gave rise to strong factionalism and opposition activism, which helped to improve the quality of the first two competitive elections (2004, 2007) and provide a degree of checks and balances to the new leadership. On the other hand, factionalism reduced the effectiveness of the first new leadership (2004-2007) largely because neither the old nor the new Party secretaries cooperated with the first popularly elected village director; but it enhanced financial corruption of the second (2007-2010) because the second popularly elected village director and the Party secretary were of the same faction.

With the decline of meaningful popular participation, elections and governance in West Village were largely reduced to elite politics. Disillusioned with the elected officials and hoping for a change, most villagers accepted or resigned to vote buying in the most recent election and helped send two predatory entrepreneurs to the power center, thus putting both the village's property and democratization in jeopardy. Through the power of money and threat of violence, the two predatory entrepreneurs easily defeated their opponents and overcame the logic of factional politics, which had helped improve the quality of the 2004 and 2007 elections.

The core problem that had aroused most popular discontent under the old leadership—encroachment and unfair distribution of the collective property--continued under the new leadership and worsened in recent years. It defined the main contradiction in the village today to be that of economic justice with villagers on one side, and ineffective or corrupt officials, and predatory entrepreneurs and village toughs on the other. This main contradiction in its various forms can be found in many villages because the ongoing

economic transition and political reform in rural China have been carried out in an environment of social, political and moral deterioration and unsupported by a rule of law.

This study challenges the basis for O'Brien and Han's assessment about much improved quality of village elections and for various theories of empowerment representing the majority's view in the field by highlighting the difference between formal and meaningful participation, the fluidity of direct elections in their early stage and the serious threat posed by village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs. It also shows the risk of introducing democratic elections in those villages with the problem of village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs because the latter can take advantage of democratic elections and control the public power and village property with a semblance of legitimacy.

### **Major Players and Factions**

The major players and the factions they form in the past four elections in West Village are listed in the order they appear. First, the old village director and the old Party secretary, who constituted the old entrenched leadership (the old cadre faction), had been in power since late 1980s. They were removed one after the other from their office in the first competitive election of 2004 and its aftermath. The old village director, however, managed to stay on in the Party branch committee until today. Second, RW, a member of the old village committee, was the first popularly elected village director, serving from 2004 to 2007. He did not seek reelection as the village director mainly because he could not effectively deal with village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs. With a solid popular base, he has continually been reelected into the village committee until today. Third, XM, a predatory entrepreneur, has not paid his contract due to the village since

2003. As a close friend he supported RW in the 2004 election. RW and XM form the first opposition faction to challenge the power establishment (the old cadre faction). XM himself competed for the office of village director in 2007, winning the primary, but defeated in the formal election by a coalition of the old and new Party secretaries, the old village director and the would-be new village director. The four men introduced above were born from 1955 to 1959. The old village director and RW were middle school graduates while the old Party secretary and XM were high school graduates. Except RW, all three had served in the navy after school. Fourth, the five Party members who formed an opposition group within the Party branch, were mainly responsible for the downfall of the old Party secretary. But they were unsuccessful in making one of their own as the new Party secretary. Fifth, CF, born in mid-1960s, was an entrepreneur and protégé of the old Party secretary. He became the interim Party secretary in 2005 when the old Party secretary was forced to resign and then the Party secretary through Party members' elections in 2007 and 2010. He and the old village director form a new faction ( the reconstituted old cadre faction), which has dominated the Party branch ever since and the village committee from 2007 to 2010. Sixth, RL, born in late 1940s, is thoughtful and eloquent about the village's problems and strategies to deal with them. One of the strong supports for RW in the 2004 election, he became one of his most vocal critics during his term. RL and a retired Party secretary who had served in the 1970s and 80s form the fifth faction and he competed unsuccessfully for the office of village director in the 2007 and 2010 primaries. Seventh, SL, born in mid-1960s, had served at various village posts before elections and competed unsuccessfully for an office in village committee since the 2001 election. SL became the second elected village director in the 2007 election with

the support of the alliance of the reconstituted old cadre faction. He lost to Tiger, a predatory entrepreneur, in the 2010 election. Eighth, Tiger, born in late 1960s, is a village strongman and the wealthiest predatory entrepreneur who got rich in doing illegal business. Through vote buying and threat of violence, Tiger became the third elected village director in 2010. Dog, his uncle, a village tough and predatory entrepreneur, also got elected as a village committee member. The two predatory entrepreneurs form the sixth faction, who now dominates the village committee.

### **The 2001 Election: Popular Demand for Change and Elite Compromise**

Direct elections came to West Village in 2001 and the popular desire for change was clearly indicated in RW's lead of 200 votes over the old village director in the primary. RW, a member of the village committee, was an outsider to the inner power circle made up of the old Party secretary and the old village director. He enjoyed good reputation among villagers for being clean, honest and without airs, while the old village director was considered by many as rude and "a gun for the old Party secretary."

Uncertain about what the first direct election would entail, RW accepted mediation by XM, a predatory entrepreneur and a mutual friend to both candidates: If, according to the gentlemen's agreement, he would not compete this time, the incumbent promised not to compete with him in the next election. Thus the political status quo was maintained through behind-scene politics between the elite involved. However, the popular discontent about the old leadership and the desire for change were expressed loudly and clearly in RW's significant lead in the primary.

### **The 2004 Election: Downfall of the Old Village Director**

When the 2004 election came, the old village director refused to honor the gentlemen's agreement. RW easily built a broad coalition of elite and non-elite supporters to challenge the incumbent. What had transpired in the first competitive election reminded villagers of both sides of the Cultural Revolution and they indeed used the Cultural Revolution vocabulary to describe the struggle as between "the rebels" (*zaofan pai*) and "the old cadres" (*laoganbu*).

In the primary, RW led the old village director by about 150 votes. Desperate to win in the formal election, the old village director and his followers resorted to vote buying with petty cash, dinners, and other illegal activities. In the formal election, the old village director got 60 some votes more than RW. RW's supporters would not accept this result. They put up big character posters accusing the old village director of election fraud. Further, they demanded investigation of questionable financial deals in recent years. That was directly aimed at the Party secretary, who had been in control of the village finance. On the day of the run-off election, a group of RW's supporters blocked the entrance to the polling station, making voting impossible.

The crisis alarmed the township leadership, which sent a work team to the village. When neither persuasion nor intimidation worked, it had to offer the opposition an acceptable compromise. A new election was held and yet another attempt at disrupting the election by the incumbent was aborted. RW finally beat the incumbent by a small margin and became the first popularly elected village chief.

Four months behind the schedule the 2004 election finally concluded; but the election triggered political crisis was far from over. The old village director refused to recognize the election result and continued to come to his office as before. The old Party secretary,

on the other hand, had not shown up in his office or in the village for months (he lived in the county seat), for fear of confronting opposition activists who demanded to audit the account under his control. Every villager I interviewed in 2005 would mention a failed joint venture of the village's chicken farm. As the outside partner breached the contract in 1999, he was supposed to compensate to the village as much as 80, 000 yuan annually. But the case has not been resolved after six years and villagers suspected that there existed a secret deal between the outside partner and the old Party secretary. The protestors also wanted to investigate the Party secretary's and the old village director's private ventures—selling the sand belonging to the village without proper compensation. Although they had stopped doing this under the pressure of villagers and the township leadership, the illegal business was taken over by several village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs.

### **The Downfall of the Old Party Secretary**

After the first competitive election that removed the old village director, a group of five Party member activists emerged (as the third faction) out of the opposition coalition formed in the 2004 election, aiming to remove the Party secretary. Through persistent petitions, they finally succeeded in getting the township's attention. Their charge of the Party secretary's negligence of duty—the village Party branch had held no meetings for ten months after the election—brought attention to the leadership of upper levels rather than the alleged financial corruption. The group of five maneuvered, without success, to get one of their own to become the interim Party secretary. Neither was their attempt in the election of the Party branch committee in 2007. According to the procedural rule, the interim position should go to RW, as the only member of the Party branch committee

untainted by the charge of financial misconduct. However, the township helped CF, an entrepreneur and a protégé of the old Party secretary, to get the job.

### **Rise of Interim Party Secretary and**

### **Decline of the First Elected Village Director**

CF had been an owner of small construction team and a friend of the old Party secretary, who had once contracted him a profitable job of constructing the village irrigation system worthy of several hundred thousands yuan. On resignation, the old Party secretary recommended CF as his successor and another older, retired Party secretary who had served from mid-1970s to early 1980s also recommended CF to the township leadership. All three were of the same clan and the retired Party secretary said “the Party secretary position should never go out of the clan.” Before the 2007 election, the interim Party secretary had won over the majority Party members: Under his charge, a small park with exercise facilities was built (although later on villagers found a big gap between the budget for the project and the actual spending). He succeeded in persuading the majority of the Party members and villagers representatives to accept a compromised solution for the case of the failed chicken farm. In the 2007 election of the Party branch committee, CF gained full legitimacy by receiving the most votes of the party members.

In contrast, the support among villagers for RW, the new village director, was eroded for his failure to display strong and capable leadership in dealing with unruly villagers and village toughs. Villagers mentioned several incidents to show that RW was not a good guardian for the village property. Once, he was unable to make a few unruly villagers and village toughs pay for the trees they had illegally cut down. In addition, he failed to sell the recovered trees on the highest bid, thus draining the collective income by

several tens of thousands yuan. On another occasion he was unable to collect payment from a few villagers who had used the collective mechanical plowing service. Some villagers' criticism was probably right that RW was a good man but not a principled leader. In the election for the Party branch committee, in which the old Party secretary still had a strong power base, RW did not get reelected while his deadly enemy—the old village director—did. When the 2007 election for the village committee came, RW decided not to seek reelection as village director. The major reasons behind his decision seemed to be two: one, he could not deal with unruly villagers and toughs; two, he could not get cooperation from the Party leadership.

### **The 2007 Election: Prevail of the Reconstituted Old Cadre Faction**

Two contenders came forth to seek the office of village director in the 2007 election. The first one was RL, energetic and articulate man in his early sixties. From the same surname group and used to be a strong supporter for RW in the 2004 election, RL has since become a most vocal critic of the new village chief for being “weak and incompetent.” Of all the village officials and candidates I have known, RL was the most thoughtful with an actual and comprehensive plan to rejuvenate the village's economy, although its feasibility can be questionable. For some, the plan was suspicious of restoring to the collective farming, even if it was based on voluntary basis. He also had ideas to address the accumulated problems of public concern-- the illegal exploitation of the village sand farms, enforcement of contract terms and reallocation of land. With the reputation of a mere talker, RL did not enjoy wide popular support. This was shown in his twice defeat in the 2007 and 2010 primaries.



The second contender was XM, RW's ally since the 2004 election. XM made his first fortune sometimes with illegal means in transportation business in the 1980s<sup>8</sup> He claimed that in the 1990s he had been the wealthiest man in the village. Since the beginning of the new century, XM's food and printing businesses had closed down because of keener competition and poor management. His search for a new business partner has been without success. That seemed to be the major reason for him to run for office. Besides a good salary and other benefits, the political power could help his business opportunities.

Both candidates shared the same character flaw in the eyes of villagers--arrogance. Comparing the two, however, XM had a few advantages in the eyes of villagers: he was over ten years younger; he had more outside connections; (his father, now retired, used to be a section chief of the county police department) and more active young campaigners. Unlike the previous elections, there seemed to be no clearly good or bad choices for villagers between the two candidates.

I observed the 2007 primary and part of the campaigning process. At least, the primary election, if not its campaigning,<sup>9</sup> was free, fair and competitive. Besides three cadres and two security guards from the township to monitor the election, all the candidates were on site most of the time to keep an eye on the election process. As the memory of the 2004 election crisis was fresh, the procedural rules were well observed this time. Two hours after the booths were closed, the votes were tallied with supporters of both candidates watching: of 1800 eligible voters, about 1200 cast their votes. Between the two main candidates seeking the office of the village chief, XM got 444 votes or 37 per cent of the votes; RL got 268 votes or 22 per cent.

Shortly after the primary, the despondent RL revealed his intent to withdraw, despite the reconstituted old cadre faction's offer of their full support in the formal election. On learning the news, SL, an opportunist who had lost his bid for village committee in the primary, jumped to the opportunity. Under the normal circumstances, SL would have no chance. But the full support of the reconstituted old cadre faction made a difference. The two incumbents in the leadership—the new Party secretary and the old village director had the most to lose if XM was elected. They went to the old Party secretary for help. Even though no longer in office (he found a job in the county's economic development zone), the old Party secretary still had considerable political influence in the village. The three men decided to actively campaign for SL. In his early forties, SL had a small business of a meat stall on a market in the county seat. A man of political ambition, he had run without success for a membership in the village committee since direct elections were introduced in 2001. Related to the old Party secretary by marriage and owed him his Party membership, the man could be easily won over to the reconstituted old cadre faction.

Apart from the effective maneuvers by the reconstituted old cadre faction, the popular will was ultimately the decisive factor for the result of the 2007 election. The dramatic turnabout must be understood as XM's lack of popular support. Besides his proverbial arrogance, XM had been delinquent for the contract fee of 20,000 yuan annually for his factory compound for a number of years. The violation of this kind was widespread in the village: Between 2001 and 2003, most villagers, imitating one another, had stopped paying contract dues. But the delinquency of ordinary villagers could not even compare with a dozen predatory entrepreneurs who either possessed a dozen or several dozen mu

of farm land, or rented a few village housing compounds or controlled the cash cow of the sand farms. By encroaching on the village's property over tens or hundreds of thousands yuan annually, they should be categorized as "predatory entrepreneurs." Today, only one family of the lower economic elite in the village continues to pay its annual due of 875 yuan. This tremendous loss of the collective property was a priority issue that most villagers wanted their leaders to address. That XM was one of the most glaring problems in this area had been well-known and his opponents exploited it fully to undermine his credibility as a potential leader. Villagers had good reasons to doubt if XM had political will or desire to deal with this problem. Without this problem, SL could at least give villagers a little hope for change.

Crying foul after the defeat, 30 to 40 of XM's supporters went to the township and the county seat to protest. Without hard evidence, the election result was considered legal. (I heard later from sources other than XM's faction that SL had resorted to vote buying)

After the 2007 election, the village leadership including the village committee and the Party branch committee was increasingly dominated by the reconstituted old cadre faction including CF (the new Party secretary), the old village director and now a member of the Party branch, SL, the new village director. RW, the first popularly elected village director, now reelected a member of the village committee, was further marginalized after his loss in the election of the Party branch committee earlier the same year.

### **Governance under the Reconstituted Old Cadre Faction**

With the benefit of a unified leadership, SL and CF still would not touch the thorny problem of continued erosion and unfair distribution of the village property. Like RW, their lack of political will to enforce regulations and contract terms was mainly out of fear to confront strongmen like XM, Tiger and village toughs. It was also due to the lack of public pressure and support from villagers, who would complain in private but would not raise the issue on formal occasions. As much as the village cadres, villagers were afraid of offending village toughs and strongmen. Different from RW's term, village toughs and some predatory entrepreneurs became more aggressive because of the increased economic opportunities in the village. Under their harassment, villager leaders more often than not chose appeasement and even collaboration.

Besides the abolition of the agricultural tax, the central and, even more so, Beijing municipal governments increased investment for rural reconstruction (*jianshe shehuizuyi xin nongcun*). In addition, the village hit a jackpot, so to speak: the municipal government began in 2009 to compensate it a whopper sum of 1.84 million yuan annually for five years for the land the village had given up (about half of what it owned) to the neighboring migrant village reallocated here for the construction of the reservoir in 1958. The money was earmarked for projects to enhance the village's economic development and public service. Headed by the retired Party secretary, who had served from 1974 to 1982, and RL, ten Villagers' Representatives and Party members wrote a letter to Premier Wen Jiabao early in 2009, appealing without success for distributing the compensation among villagers. Sometime before this, there was a larger petition on which 97% of the villagers signed their names. CF, the Party branch secretary and SL, the village director, were among the few who did not. However, the way they handled the public fund in the

past two years was suspicious of financial corruption, which aroused increasing public discontent and even sporadic resistance.

The first incident took place in early 2008 regarding a large budget project funded by the municipal government for upgrading the running water system. The village director and the Party branch secretary contracted the project, while having a meeting in the county seat, to a construction team without villagers' knowledge. When information leaked that there was a trick (*maoni*) in the deal,<sup>10</sup> the same retired Party chief, who led the petition to distribute equally among villagers the municipal government's compensation to the village, along with a few Party members challenged the Party secretary on a meeting. Quoting a rule for village governance that village leaders must consult villagers or their representatives in making decisions on any project over 100,000 yuan, they insisted that the two village leaders cancel the contract. Under the public pressure they ended up canceling the contract even at the risk of being sued by the construction team. (The materials and equipment of the construction team had already been moved to the village.) What they did afterwards, however, was even more problematic. With the old saying "fertile water should not flow into outsiders' fields," (*fei shui bu liu wairen tian*), the two leaders persuaded the Party members and villagers' representatives to sign a new contract with Tiger and Dog, two predatory entrepreneurs. The retired Party secretary was silenced after receiving a job as a supervisor for the project.

The financial misconduct by CF and SL continued in at least two other projects. One was the construction of a village archway. Instead of contracting it to an outside bidder at a lower price, they again contracted to Tiger with the budget of 180,000 yuan. When

finished, the total spending amounted to 210,000 yuan but no official explanation was given. The largest project, also the most outrageous one, was financed with the village's own coffer in the construction of a movie theatre and the new village government office in 2009. With their estimated cost of a million, the leadership obtained the approval from Villagers' Representatives Assembly and again contracted the project to Tiger and Dog, who again recruited other village toughs. When the construction was finished, however, the total spending amounted to three million. The predatory entrepreneurs, now debtors of the village, said that the increased cost was due to added facilities and amenities. Further demand by villagers for officials to disclose itemized spending was disregarded. Before the 2010 election for the Party branch committee, five old Party members (not the same five who were responsible for the downfall of the old Party chief) had reported the case through internet to the Beijing anti-corruption agency with CF and their own names identified.

There were other incidents showing increased tension and conflict between villagers and cadres. In March 2008, CF, SL and the old village director decided to sell the tractor and the combine belonging to the village because they could not find operators in the village. For fear of increased service cost, the angry villagers locked the yard where the farm machines were parked to block the sale. The attempted sale did not materialize but the tractor was later found destroyed by a fire. Besides these incidents, it was common knowledge that the village director and the Party secretary frequently dined with Tiger and Dog. They were also known gambling together. For a village without a good economy, the village officials' consumption with public money was quite reckless and extravagant. Like the old Party branch secretary, the new secretary hired a driver with an

annual salary of 30,000 yuan. His cell phone monthly bill once reached 1,200 yuan while the cap for reimbursement set by the township was 150 yuan. The entertainment expenses (*zhaodai fei*) (mainly for eating and drinking) by village officials for the month of April, 2008 were over 90, 000 yuan. The village's spending on the 2010 election was over 100,000 yuan; with the working dinner for the election committee members costing 2,700 yuan daily (3 tables at 900 yuan for each). Poor governance, financial corruption and fiscal irresponsibility of this leadership alienated most villagers. The retired Party secretary described the sorry plight of the current village leaders to their face: "nobody listens to you and nobody lends you a hand." (*shuohua meiren ting; banshi meiren bang*).

### **The 2010 Election: Rise of Predatory Entrepreneurs**

Rumors were well around that Tiger would compete for office in the 2010 election when I visited the village in 2008. Sometime before the 2010 election, Tiger paid a courtesy call to XM, asking if he would compete again. At this meeting, Tiger disclosed his desire to get rid of the incumbent and asked XM and RW for help, thus a new alliance was formed to challenge the reconstituted old cadre faction.

Never finishing his primary school, Tiger is street smart and with some business sense. In the 1990s, he made some money as a broker in transporting and selling cloths from Beijing to Wenzhou. However, his fortune had been made in recent years mainly through his illegal business on the village sand farm. Unlike other predatory entrepreneurs, who engaged in sand business completely illegally, Tiger had actually contracted a sand farm while the old Party secretary was in office, thus at least more legitimate than the others in the illegal business. In the past few years he was further enriched by contracting construction projects both within and outside the village. Being

the wealthiest man in the village today, Tiger is also a strongman, commanding respect from village toughs, predatory entrepreneurs and cadres alike. In the construction of the movie theatre and the government office, however, the village director did not seem to have always accommodated him. This contributed to Tiger's determination to replace the incumbent in the upcoming election.

Unlike other village toughs, Tiger seems to be free from bad reputation and even to be admired by some. He is known as a kind of a *Water Margin* or Chinese Robin Hood figure: some say that he only gives trouble to village cadres but never bothers villagers. Young men consider him "loyal and generous," (*zhangyi*) a quality highly regarded by most Chinese. The example they gave was that whenever villagers asked him for some sand for house construction, Tiger would give it to them for free. Tiger has good connections with highest township officials through his sister, who works there as a cook and is known for both being attractive and promiscuous. When he drives to the township, Tiger is treated as a respectable entrepreneur. Whenever there is a crackdown on the illegal business of sand digging, he would be informed ahead of time.

Tiger used both carrot and stick in campaigning. Each household received one hundred yuan before the primary and another hundred before the formal election. To the active supporters of his main opponent, he played tough. Learning the lessons from XM's defeat in the last election, Tiger's followers gathered those who had campaigned for the incumbent last time and threatened them with use of force not to do so this time. Thus, the reconstituted old cadre faction, the most powerful in village politics, could not effectively function for fear of retribution. In the primary of the 2010 election, four candidates competed, with the incumbent getting about 400 votes and Tiger about 700.



In the formal election, the incumbent's votes dropped to about 200 while Tiger's increased to over 1,200.

Thus, Tiger, a village strongman and a predatory entrepreneur won a landslide victory by using both cash and intimidation. The incumbent also used vote buying but his financial resources simply could not keep up. No doubt Tiger's vote buying played a role, even though we cannot be certain how much. So was his tactics of intimidation, which prevented SL's supporters to effectively campaign for him. But the incumbent's defeat was not a surprise. In the past three elections he competed, the incumbent, on his own, never got more than 300 votes out of 1,200 or above. As village director, his bad temper and rough manner in handling things had upset a number of people and his suspected financial misconduct was even more alienating. Three years in office did not enhance his popular support. Compared the two, many villagers considered Tiger to be a better alternative.

If it was uncertain about how much role cash played in Tiger's rise to power, it was crystal clear that money was everything for another predatory entrepreneur's rise. Dog, Tiger's uncle but a junior partner, was without any redeeming virtues to speak of among villagers. Like his nephew, Dog never finished primary school. After serving in the army, he worked in a private debt collection agency and was said awarded two sets of apartments by the local government for relocating the nail households (*daizi hu*). After the direct elections began, he began to go back to the village and talked about "getting a little land." Dog is a village tough, pure and simple, with rough manner and foul mouth; yet he could easily win the race by giving 50 yuan to each voter over a two-term

incumbent of a decent reputation. In the primary, Dog got only 175 votes while the incumbent got about 500 votes. In the formal election, vote buying gave him 799 votes.

A few elite members of different factions were all very bitter about the rampant vote buying, if not with SL's defeat, calling the CCP leadership and the system "rotten." Unlike in the election of 2004, in which vote buying by the incumbent aroused a popular protest, no one made a fuss about it in public or reported it to the upper levels. Fear of retribution was certainly a major cause. After all it would be useless since everyone knew that Tiger had good connections in the township and the county. In fact the township was fully aware of vote buying in most elections of its villages. In West Village, the township had three cadres and two security guards on site daily during the election period. Ironically, the township awarded 50,000 yuan bonus to the village leadership for holding a smooth election. Even more ironically, the bonus was given to no one but Tiger, the perpetrator of the rampant vote buying. Instead of handing the money over to the village leadership, he gave it to five of his most hard working campaigners for a tour in the south. "If it's not enough, I'll cover the rest." So much for Tiger's "loyalty and generosity."

The election changed the power balance in the village leadership, and divided it equally between the village committee controlled by Tiger and Dog with RW tagged along, while the Party branch committee controlled by CF, old village director and a new person used to be CF's driver. With his political ambition, financial strength, strong personality and personal connections in the township, Tigers was predicted to dominate the new leadership. In fact, he had already turned in his application for the Party membership and finished a training session in the township in October. CF was rightly

worried about how long he could stay in office as Tiger's predictable next move was either to subdue the Party secretary or to replace him.

### **The Old and New Problems and Contradictions in the Village**

After three competitive elections and four changes of top officials including the change of the Party secretary and the three consecutive changes of the village director, the accumulated problems left by the old leadership before direct elections remained or continued to evolve under the new leadership. In my interviews, the problems repeatedly coming up included: village cadres' questionable business deals and spending, their incompetency to enforce rules and contracts terms, village toughs' and predatory entrepreneurs' encroachment on the village property, in particular, the sand farm, the delinquency on contract dues and the questionable construction deals with village officials. Villagers also wanted to reallocate land, and to develop the collective economy. These problems of public concern can be summarized as: First, village officials' financial corruption and fiscal irresponsibility; second, village officials' incompetency in maintain a good social and economic order; third, village toughs' and predatory entrepreneurs' growing encroachment on the collective property and fourth, fair redistribution of land and development of the collective economy. All these problems harmed villagers' economic interests and sense of wellbeing, and they wanted village officials to address them. These problems indicate clearly that the main contradictions in the village today are between villagers on one side, and incompetent, corrupt officials, predatory entrepreneurs and village toughs on the other. With Tiger and Dog's election, the hope is even dimmer to address the central concern of the villagers because these two were the greatest beneficiary of the existing unfair and unjust economic and political order. As a

smart businessman, it is conceivable that Tiger would give villagers a little more carrot to pacify them just as he did in vote buying. But there is no doubt that he will try to get back his investment and much more.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

How did direct elections impact West Village's politics? What have changed and what remains unchanged after four rounds of direct elections? The promotion by the central government of the Organic Law for Village Committee (1998) had an immediate and powerful impact on villagers' political participation. Their strong desire for change was clearly expressed in RW's significant lead, without campaigning, over the incumbent in the primary of the 2001 election; but a deal behind the door between the governing elite and the potential challengers prevented it from happening. This set the tone for direct elections in West Village as mainly the means of elite politics. In the 2004 election, RW, the only candidate that could rally elite and popular support, felt ready to challenge the entrenched village director. The opposition coalition successfully removed the old village director in the election; then, the Party secretary through petition, who was regarded by most villagers as the one more responsible for village's poor governance. The downfall of both the old village director and the Party branch secretary was no less than a revolutionary change because it went beyond the official purview of village elections with a complete leadership shake up. It reflected strong discontent of villagers towards old, entrenched and corrupt leadership and their great empowerment by direct elections.

However, the popularly elected leaders since 2004 have consistently failed villagers' expectations for change for various personal and environmental factors. RW, the first

elected village director, inherited a deeply divided leadership between village committee and Party branch committee and an empty village coffer. Even more challenging were the accumulated problems left by the old leadership, which could be boiled down to serious encroachment of the village property by a number of village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs. Although he possessed the popular mandate, RW lacked political will and resources to address the accumulated problems or to adopt a democratic and principled governing style. In our interviews, he made such comments more than once, “Democracy won’t work in a Chinese village because it is still a community of acquaintances (*shouren shehui*), of human feelings and relations (*renqing shehui*). I’d love to work for my fellow villagers (*xiangqin men*). But if you ask me to hurt brothers of old and young (*laoshao yemen’r*), I won’t do it.” Villagers’ criticism of him was to appropriate that RW was a good man but not a good leader. That is why that half way into his term villagers had already been disappointed at his weakness and unprincipled way in handling the new problems caused by unruly villagers and village toughs. On the other hand, without an effective rule of law and strong support from the local governments, it seems both unfair and unrealistic to expect an elected official to stand up to village toughs who have no qualms in harming people and their property.<sup>11</sup>

SL, the second elected village director, was in a much better position in terms of leadership unity and financial resources. During his term, he and CF (the Party secretary) were of the same faction and the village’s coffer had never been so abundant. These two leaders were confronted with the same challenge as RW of village toughs’ and predatory entrepreneurs’ continued encroachment on the village property. Not only did they fail to address this problem, they were, unlike RW, suspicious of financial corruption

themselves. What was more, they were also suspicious of colluding with Tiger and Dog, predatory entrepreneurs and other village toughs in village's construction projects. This administration seemed to have returned to the pattern of poor governance and financial corruption under the old, entrenched leadership before the direct elections. Or in all likelihood, the new leaders after 2007 went even further in colluding with the more powerful predatory entrepreneurs.

In their study of the institutional barriers to village democratization, O'Brien and Han have identified five major impediments of formal powers and informal forces for democratically elected village committee to improve governance. In West Village, three—the township, the Party branch, and the criminal elements (or pseudo-criminal elements in this case)--played a major role in affecting village governance while lineages and religious organizations did not.

As the local government directly above the village, the township failed to play a positive role in village politics and governance because it had intervened where it should not have, but had not intervened where it should have: it did not, after the 2004 election, follow through its promise to investigate the old Party secretary's financial record. It did not help stop the illegal business of the sand farms by village toughs and the vote buying in the most recent election. It violated the procedural and democratic rules in helping CF become interim Party secretary. It probably had the knowledge but tolerated the vote buying in the 2010 election. No wonder villagers have no confidence in the township leadership.

The relationship between the Party branch and the village committee in West Village depended very much upon the factional politics (discussed below) that O'Brien and Han

have not identified. Clans and kinship groups in the village were the basic units for political mobilization; some believed that they had affected the outcome of the elections. However, they did not seem to have affected the quality of governance, as factions among the elite cut across the lines of lineage or kinship groups. Although the belief in *fengshui* and deities is popular, there is no organized religion in the village.

Of all the impediments, O'Brien and Han identify, "Local strongmen and gangsters pose a far more direct threat to democracy"(O'Brien and Han, 2009: 375) That is certainly true of West Village, where village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs posed the most serious challenge to the village leadership, both the old and the new, the community, and most recently, democratic elections. Taking advantage of the disorder created by poor governance in the village's economic and political transition, a few village toughs had turned into predatory entrepreneurs, Tiger being the most successful one. Village leaders, both the old and the new, were afraid of them, tried to appease them, and more recently even colluded with them for mutual benefits. Direct elections gave them opportunities to gain political power, which would, in turn, further enhance their economic interest and opportunities to encroach on the collective property. As we have seen, Tiger and Dog had won the 2010 election through vote buying and threat of violence, and they now dominate the new village committee. And Tiger has already taken the next move toward dominating the Party committee and the whole leadership.

Chen Baifeng has done extensive study on the rising problem of *hunhun* (toughs) in rural China. He identifies three generations of village toughs evolved from 1980s to the present. Tiger belongs to the smart and sophisticated minority of the second generation who had taken advantage of the economic transition since the 1990s and transformed into

successful businessmen. As “the super power” beyond control in the village, village toughs have fundamentally changed the logic of human interactions, power relations and moral order in the rural communities. They are actually both a major cause as well as a symptom of the deepened rural crisis of deteriorated order. Villagers and village cadres are either intimidated or helpless, and “even the state power sometimes is powerless.” Village toughs are hard to deal with because, like Tiger, many of them are not openly criminal and enjoyed good connections with local officials and even good reputation among villagers. What is more, some village toughs, against like Tiger, have already become village leaders through elections, which give them further protection of legitimacy. The problem, according to Chen and other Chinese scholars, is widespread in many regions of rural China (Chen, 2008: thesis synopsis, 1).<sup>12</sup>

Besides the problem of village toughs, another reason for little improved governance in West Village was lack of popular control and participation in governance. Some scholars stress the improvement made in China’s village governance with the establishment of democratic institutions promoted by central and provincial governments (Fubing Su and Dali Yang, 2005; Alpermann, 2009). But the crux of the matter was how these institutions actually operated. In West Village, institutions for checks and balances such as Villagers’ Representatives Assembly (*Cunmin daibiao huiyi*), Villagers’ Financial Supervision Group (*Cunmin licai xiaozu*) and the system of Village Affairs Transparency (*cunwu gongkai*) were established but, like most villages, could not function.<sup>13</sup> Officials could manipulate them by assisting their allies elected or by incorporating those who were not their allies through material inducement or pulling relations. If these democratic institutions had truly functioned, they could have made village officials more accountable



and might help them stand up to village toughs and predatory economic elite.

Unfortunately, villagers have not developed citizenship awareness to actively participate in village elections and governance. They had not taken seriously election and operation of Villagers' Representatives Assembly, thus allowing these agencies to serve mostly as the rubber stamp for village leaders.<sup>14</sup>

For the reasons mentioned above, neither new village committees (2004-2007, 2007-2010) had addressed the accumulated problems of public concern-- continued encroachment and unfair distribution of the collective property. Nor had they much improved the village's governance in terms of transparency and accountability. It should be pointed out that villager leaders in most cases have followed the procedural rules in governance: for example, they got their construction projects approved by Villagers' Representatives Assembly and their reimbursements endorsed by Villagers' Financial Supervision Group. But this observation of procedural rules did not prevent them from financial misconduct. As a consequence, villagers' sense of empowerment was soon replaced by a growing sense of powerlessness, apathy and cynicism. Based on my interviews from 2005 onward, more and more villagers came to believe that elections had made no difference and elected officials were no better than old cadres: "Whoever comes to power is to grab for himself (*tan, lao*).” This increased political pessimism and cynicism had prepared for the general acceptance or resignation to the vote buying in the 2010 election.

More than a loss of confidence in elected officials, little improved governance in West Village had also eroded villagers' confidence in the electoral system. Yet it was the rampant vote buying in 2010 that fundamentally shook their confidence in the leadership

of the Communist Party. To my surprise, four elite members of different factions including RW who was part of the coalition with Tiger and Dog, made the same comment on different occasions, “the Communist Party is hopeless” or “the Communist Party is finished.” Previously, these four would always make a distinction between corrupt local officials and good Party center and its policies.<sup>15</sup> It shows their frustration and cynicism to the extreme. There are many factors for their confidence crisis: to begin with, vote buying in village elections became increasingly serious in the township with 31 out of the 34 villages practicing it this year. What was more, the township and county authorities failed to intervene, even with the full knowledge of what was going on. They also had other failed experiences in trying to get help from the local and even Beijing authorities to stop officials’ financial corruptions (unaccounted overspending of 2 million in the 2009 construction) or predatory entrepreneurs (the illegal sand business). All these made them believe that the Party leadership all the way up was rotten to the core and beyond repair. This change in attitude reflected a deepened confidence crisis of the mainstream in the political system and contradicts various theories of empowerment as well as the conclusion by Kennedy and others that “almost universal dissatisfaction with elected village cadres” does not affect villagers’ trust in the central government and confidence in the democratic elections (Kennedy, 2009: 393).

In contrast to the decline of villagers’ enthusiasm in political participation, interest in elections among the elite remained high because of high returns in holding office. Due to the size of the village and its location in Beijing area, the annual salary for village director, the Party secretary (21,600 yuan) and committee members (14,000 yuan) was five to six times higher than the national average.<sup>16</sup> It is a large sum in rural China,

especially in a village that was not very rich. Besides, officials can enjoy various perks such as annual bonus and liberal spending with public fund on food, entertainment and communication. The most outrageous is the monthly transportation subsidy for the Party secretary in the amount of 1,600 yuan. He recently had spent over 400,000 yuan on a new car. For predatory entrepreneurs like Tiger, what was more attractive was the opportunity as village leaders to get bribes, kickbacks or other forms of embezzlement from the increasing number of construction projects and the recently enriched village coffer. These illegal financial gains can be ten or even a hundred times more than a regular salary. Because of the loopholes in the village's budgetary and accounting system and the power of connections, the recent reform in "the management of village's finance by the township accounting office" (*cuncai xiangguan*) has not effectively controlled village officials' financial corruption. RW, the first elected official, revealed an insider's point of view, "The policy is good nowadays. To be village director has a lot of benefits. There are plenty of opportunities to apply for money (for various projects). Be sure to treat the guy in charge with a good dinner. Then give [him] a little [cash]. He will approve it (the project application)."

Competitive elections in West Village led to the formation of factions and factional politics. According to Chen Baifeng, factionalism is quite common in village politics as well as in daily life of north China. He considers kinship groups (*xiaoqinzu*) to be the deep cause and basic units of factionalism while political movements including elections are the triggering factor or manifest cause (Chen, 2009). My study finds otherwise: factions in West Village are invariably formed by elite members with common interest while kinship groups play little role in the political affiliation. Factions formed among

elite members since direct elections began are stable because they are based on friendship and long-term interests. Factional alliances, on the other hand, formed by more than one faction before each election are driven by temporary interests of their members to help each other to win the election, hence less stable.

Factionalism and partisan politics had produced both positive and negative effects for democratization: it effectively frustrated the vote buying by the incumbent in the 2004 election and helped improved the quality of the first two competitive elections (2004, 2007). On the other hand, it resulted in a serious division in the leadership after the 2004 election and reduced effectiveness of the leadership. Conversely, if the two top leaders were of the same faction like SL and CF, then the checks and balances between factions in the elections could not reach them. That was an important reason for the rise of officials' financial corruption after 2007. The weak and marginalized RW seemed unable to function as an effective check in the leadership.

Elite empowerment includes both competitions for office and opposition activism. For the latter, a clear pattern of resistance to official abuse of power can be seen in their persistent petition to remove the Party secretary after the 2004 election, their challenge to a secret deal by the leadership in the 2008 running water project, and their report in early 2009 to the Beijing municipal anti-corruption bureau about the officials' financial misconduct. Although these challenges helped deter, to a degree, official corruption, opposition activism has not translated into an effective system of checks and balances in the village governance.

Most damaging to democratization was predatory entrepreneurs who would not abide by the rules in political competition. Yet the phenomenon in West Village was more

complex. Tiger is no ordinary village tough but a smart and sophisticated one deceptive to some villagers. They seem to cherish hope or illusion that Tiger, known as a strongman of “loyalty and generosity,” might bring about changes for the better. They seemed unable to see through his ulterior motive and scheme on the village property and the recently fattened village coffer. Or even if they could, they seemed to hope that Tiger would deliver them a larger share of material benefits than other officials could.<sup>17</sup> Was this opportunism of the powerless to make the best of a bad situation? On the other hand, Villagers’ acceptance of or resignation to vote buying had much to do with their discontent and disillusionment with the incumbent, the current leadership and the elected officials since 2004. It indicated a profound cynicism and desperate hope against hope for an alternative.

Comparing West Village’s case with O’Brien and Han’s assessment of China’s village elections as a whole, we find that until the 2010 election, the pattern of elections and governance in the village’s first three direct elections seemed to fit what they identify as the general trend that elections have much improved while governance lags far behind. On closer look, however, the improvement in West Village’s elections was more in form than in substance. It was true that voters’ turn-out remained high from 70 to 80 percent, elections were truly competitive and secret balloting was strictly observed. Yet this high procedural quality was belied by a steady decline in the quality of popular participation due to villagers’ loss of confidence in elected officials and the electoral process itself. If the majority felt empowered in the 2004 election, that sense of empowerment was reduced or gone in the 2007 election. In the 2010 election, many villagers seemed to have been willing to trade their democratic right for a cash payment.

The knowledge that this study has gained about popular participation tells us that the *procedural quality* on which O'Brien and Han as well as the scholars in the empowerment school base their assessment of village elections is not sufficient and can even be misleading. For a more complete and nuanced picture we need to include *actual behavior* of the political participants, which constitutes the substantive quality of elections. For instance, if we looked at West Village's 2010 election per se, it did not seem to have violated the procedural rules. For its smooth operation the township even gave the village leadership a cash award. Yet once we went beyond the actual elections into the campaign process, illegal acts of vote buying and threat of violence emerged. As these shady practices usually take place in private and are hard to detect, it cautions us all the more to probe below the surface rather than relying solely on the procedural study for the quality of elections. The same caution should apply to those who adopt institutional approach in the study of the post-election governance.

O'Brien and Han's assessment of much improved elections and little improved governance is also questionable because the dichotomy is self-contradictory and cannot stand for long. The West Village's case shows us that good elections in terms of active popular participation need improved governance or the hope of it to sustain. Without such improvement or hope, the quality, if not the number, of popular participation is bound to decline. This should again alert us to the problem in most studies on village elections in over-emphasizing the procedural quality of elections without enough attention to the quality of content and of result in both elections and governance.

The dramatic downturn in the quality of the most recent election in West Village and those of other villages in the township tells us that direct elections in their early stage

were very fluid and we should be more cautious in making conclusions about them after one or two good or bad ones. It also helps us better appreciate Qingshan Tan's urgent call to create "a national electoral commission, tasked with implementing, supervising and adjudicating village elections"(Tan, 2009: 411).

## **Conclusion**

This study examines a series of four direct elections and their impact in West Village from 2001 to 2010. The issues under discussion include the quality of elections and governance, the popular and elite participation, and the accumulated problems and main contradictions in the village. Factionalism, opposition activism, vote buying, village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs are also examined. What I have found is a complex picture. In elections, much progress had been made in the procedural quality in the first three elections (2001, 2004 and 2007). However, the most recent election (2010) suffered a severe setback with two predatory entrepreneurs coming to power through vote buying and threat of violence. In governance, the new leadership has made little improvement despite radical and multiple changes in leadership. In fact, we can see a downward spiral from incompetency of the first new leadership (2004 to 2007) to both incompetency and corruption of the second new leadership (2007 to 2010). In political participation, elite interest and participation remained high but it enhanced factional politics rather than democratic governance in terms of transparency and accountability. In contrast, villagers' early sense of empowerment was replaced by a sense of disillusionment, apathy and cynicism. If we consider the substantive quality of popular participation, the seemingly steady progress in the first three direct elections should be discounted. And the sudden reversal of the 2010 election also makes more sense. After

four rounds of direct elections, the beneficiaries were a few members of political and economic elite from holding office and maintaining the unfair socioeconomic status quo. These findings, as a whole, support the disempowerment argument of direct elections.<sup>18</sup>

If democratic elections introduced into West Village since 2001 have so far failed to improve its governance, why could they not work? This study can identify at least three basic causes or problems to be addressed: first, lack of citizenship awareness for both villagers and elected officials prevented them from engaging in democratic governance with effective checks and balances; second, village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs had grown to be an uncontrollable force in the village; and third, the state and the local governments were unable to provide an effective rule of law and necessary protection for villagers' basic political rights and sense of security. Mainly because of these, radical changes in leadership have not been able to improve governance with the result that the accumulated problems left over by the old cadres continue and the popular discontent persists. Most recently, village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs have hijacked elections and controlled both the public power and the village property. Thus, democratic elections have gone to the opposite by empowering village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs while making villagers feel powerless and helpless. West Village was by no means an exceptional case but a small part of the ongoing "graying of the rural society."<sup>19</sup> To address the widespread and the most damaging problem of village toughs, the state must play its crucial role in building an effective rule of law and in protecting villagers' basic political rights and sense of security.<sup>20</sup>

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#### NOTES



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<sup>1</sup> The specific questions they ask include the following: “Beyond specifying the obstacles to democratization, we need more studies that explain how, when and where elections have changed the relationship between cadres and voters”; “more research on whether elections deter power holders from seeking personal gain above all else”; and more examinations on whether “limited changes in governance after several rounds of elections are a cause of increasing voter apathy”(O’Brien and Han, 2009: 377-378).

<sup>2</sup>Only Qingshan Tan seems to disagree with O’Brien and Han by arguing, “Village elections are presently at a crossroad: processes and rules must be improved and further delays will only undermine the credibility of village elections”(Tan, 2009: 411).

<sup>3</sup> Melanie Manion, Bjorn Alpermann and John Kennedy all seem to believe that a more positive correlation exists between elections and governance than O’Brien and Han do. (Manion, 2009: 380, 382; Alpermann, 2009: 397-409; Kennedy, 2009:391-395).

<sup>4</sup> For a review of a variety of the literature that can be categorized as the empowerment school see (O’Brien and Han, 2009: 367-68 with notes 48-56; Hu, 2008: 612-613 with notes 3-9).

<sup>5</sup> In the English literature, Zongze Hu examines villagers’ views on elections and democratic supervision in a northern village. Although the 2003 election was “pretty free and fair, at least quite competitive,” and the popularly elected “democratic supervisory small group” was effective, Hu found most villagers were either indifferent or negative towards direct elections and the supervisory group (Hu, 2008: 611-631). My study of a northern village near Beijing found that progress had been made in the three elections from 2001 to 2007 while not much improvement had been made in governance (Yao, 2009: 126-144). To put them in the theoretical debate on village elections, Hu’s study

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belongs to the disempowerment school while mine supports O'Brien and Han's conclusions.

<sup>6</sup> Those who are interested in the details on this topic can refer to my article (Yao, 2009: 126-144).

<sup>7</sup> I stayed altogether eighteen days in my five trips from 2005 to 2008 and interviewed more than 40 people, including the old Party secretary, the old village director, the members of the first elected leadership and those of the non-governing elite who agreed to be interviewed. Most of interviewees were men of over forty-five years old and were interested in village affairs. Among these, I had formal interviews with 16 people including 2 women, among whom I had more than one session with nine. I also had numerous phone conversations with four informants of different factions in the village for clarity and up-to-date information.

<sup>8</sup> XM told me how he had taken advantage of the loopholes in a state owned construction company in collaboration with its production-and-materials coordinator. The coordinator would put in the book an amount of cement that XM did not deliver. Then XM would sell it on the market and shared the income with the coordinator. The illegal ways that XM and Tiger, who would appear later, got rich tell us about the complex composition of rural entrepreneurs, who almost always get positive media coverage. Another entrepreneur of a village near Shijiazhuang I studied had the similar problem.

<sup>9</sup> I observed one of XM's campaign workers—a village tough--made phone calls to seek votes with both cajole ("let's have a couple of drinks after the election.") and threat (if you dare not to vote for my No. 3 elder brother, I won't tolerate it."). Of course, it is hard to say how effective this kind of crude campaigning would be.

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<sup>10</sup> The retired Party branch secretary learned about the deal from his nephew, a village tough and a beneficiary of the deal. According to him, the sum total to be paid to the construction team specified in the contract was 2.53 million. In addition, two leaders promised to pay the village toughs 100,000 yuan for doing small jobs such as digging ditches. They intended to keep the rest in the amount of 80,000 yuan. This kind of financial corruption was common for village leaders in handling large construction projects.

<sup>11</sup> When I asked a seemingly capable and principled man serving as the first elected leader of the Villagers' Financial Supervisory Group why he didn't compete for office, his answer was meaningful: "I won't do it because: one, I don't have money (referring to the empty village coffer), two, I don't have connections (referring to the support of the township government), three, I don't know about martial arts (referring to the ability for self-defense against village toughs)."

<sup>12</sup> Yu Jianrong and He Qinglian have studied the more serious problem of the rural "dark and evil forces" (*hei'er shili*), although the demarcation between them and village toughs is not always clear cut and their differences often seem to be a matter of degree rather than of quality. As the "dark and evil forces" can be more harmful and destructive to the social order, they sometimes become the target of the law-enforcement. The village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs in West Village are more akin to the *hunhun* that Chen studies, whom he aptly categorizes as "a gray force." See (Yu Jianrong, 2005; He, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> In her study of vote buying in eight villages in Zhejiang Province and based on the studies of other scholars, Wu Sihong concludes that although democratic governing

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institutions have been established in most villages and are comprehensive in form, they do not function effectively as there are various loopholes (Wu, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> It is conceivable that this assembly of 32 members evolve into a standing body with its own head to effectively represent villagers' interests and voices. Thus empowered, it can effectively participate in village governance including decision making, supervision and management as stipulated in the Organic Law.

<sup>15</sup> Many scholars including Liangjing Li and John Kennedy argue that most villagers including "rightful resisters" would make that distinction between local officials and the Party center. (Li, 2004, 228, 248; Kennedy, 2009, 391).

<sup>16</sup> The average annual salary for 374 villages in their 2004 national survey was 3,300 including subsidies (James Kung, Yonghsun Cai and Xiulin Sun, 2009: 67). A large village of similar size and better economic conditions near Shijiazhuang, where I did field study in 2006, was 3,600 for village director and the Party secretary.

<sup>17</sup> This was similar to what Zongze Hu had found about the mentality of many villagers in a Northern village in Heibei Province: "For them, 'corruptions are inevitable today. Just let those cadres eat meat [i.e. engage in gross embezzlement] so that we can also drink some soup [i.e. gain some modest benefits]'! (Hu, 2008: 629).

<sup>18</sup> The remarks of O'Brien and Han sound as if those in the empowerment school and those in the disempowerment school are quite evenly distributed: "For every analysts who concludes 'except in a few localities, elections have little positive impact on preventing rural authorities from abusing power', another finds that elections have empowered villagers or enhanced accountability" (O'Brien and Han, 2009: notes 107 and 108, 377). As far as I can see, those who argue the empowerment effect far outnumber

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their opponents, especially in the English literature. I consider Zongze Hu's 2008 article and this article of mine belong to the latter school, although the causes we found are different: While he traces villagers' negative views on direct elections to their cultural mentality, I attribute it to their experience of the poor governance under the elected leadership (Hu, 2008: 629-631). In the English literature, very few scholars who argue the disempowerment effect of direct elections have explored actual election process and post-election governance, herein lies a major contribution of this study.

<sup>19</sup> Chen Baifeng refers to the rising problem of village toughs in rural China as "the graying of the rural society," which has driven the political, social and moral order of the village communities to the edge of collapse (Chen, 2008: 209-212).

<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 2010, Beijing municipal and the reconstituted district (still known by villagers as "county") governments worked together to crack down on "evil forces" of village toughs and predatory entrepreneurs in at least two villages. The crackdown and sentencing process received wide media coverage. The two defendants-- brothers coming from the village 10 kilometers south of West Village, were charged with illegal business of sand digging and use of violence in village elections and were sentenced to 17 and 8 years in jail respectively with a fine of 2 million each. The crackdown is part of a larger government action and has affected West Village: In October, 2010, the illegal sand digging that had lasted over a decade, which had severely drained the village property and caused environment damage in the area, finally stopped. This recent development indicates that a determined intervention by the state power can effectively contain, if not resolve, the problem of village toughs.

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*Yusheng Yao is an associate professor in the History Department of Rollins College. He is currently working on a monograph on Tao Xingzhi and educational radicalism in the Republican era.*