Roundtable discussion on Village Democracy in China
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Testimony by Anne F. Thurston

I want to thank my friends and colleagues on the staff of the Congressional-Executive China Commission for the opportunity to be here today and to share with you some of my experiences with village elections in China.

I have been observing village elections in China since 1994 and have both spoken and written about my observations over the years.[1] Since my two fellow panelists and colleagues, Elizabeth Dugan and Liu Yawei, each direct active, on-the-ground programs related to village elections in China, I think my contribution to today's hearing can best be made by providing some historical background to how village elections came into being, by giving a very broad overview about what we know about how successful those elections have been, and by saying something about how significant these elections may be both to the rural people who participate in them and to the possible evolution of the Chinese political system. I should also point out that I have traveled to China with both the International Republican Institute and the Carter Center as part of their ongoing efforts to monitor and advise on the electoral process at the village level. I have the utmost respect for the work of both these organizations.

Let me begin by saying something about how village elections came to be introduced in China. The process traces to the demise of the people's communes, the collective system of agriculture, that began in the late 1970s and was complete by the early 1980s. Most people who study rural China now probably agree that the dissolution of collective farming was the result of both top down and bottom up efforts. In the greatly liberalized political atmosphere that followed the death of Mao Zedong and the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping, it was Chinese farmers in areas that had suffered greatly from Maoist rule who first began disbanding their collective farms. In a matter of years, all of the Chinese countryside had followed their example.

In the initial few years after collective farms had been disbanded, only the fruits of decollectivization seemed apparent. Agricultural production shot up. So, too, did the incomes of most of China's farmers.

After a few years, however, some of the unintended and less beneficial consequences of decollectivzation began to be evident. First, the earlier increases in agricultural production began to level off. Second, and more important from Beijing's perspective, villages began to face serious problems of leadership. Those problems were basically of two kinds. In some villages, previous village leaders were able to take advantage of the new economic opportunities afforded by decollectivization and left their positions of leadership for other, more lucrative pursuits. Villages were thus left with a vacuum of leadership. This vacuum in turn often resulted in a breakdown of social order-the rise of banditry and lawlessness, and an increase in violence, for instance. In other cases, villages came under control of what the Chinese often call local emperors-strong men capable of exploiting and bullying and generally making life miserable for ordinary people within their control.

Both Chinese who were early advocates of village elections and Western scholars who have studied the period agree that by the mid-to late 1980s, rural China was in a state of potential crisis. Above all, the Chinese Communist Party was worried about the potential for instability and chaos in rural areas. Anyone who has studied China for any length of time soon learns how greatly both the Chinese leadership and the Chinese people fear chaos and thus how important stability is to virtually everyone in China.

There was at the outset considerable disagreement within the Chinese leadership about how to counter this growing instability. Some people naturally wanted a strengthening of party leadership within the village and a tightening of top down controls. These people, aside from being fundamentally anti-democratic, were afraid that without tightened party controls, enforcing such not-very-popular policies as family planning and grain procurement might be impossible to implement. Others, however, including some of China's senior revolutionary leaders who were generally considered quite conservative, suggested that the best way to restore order was to institute village elections. The faction who favored elections seemed genuinely afraid that without the institution of elections, China's peasants might revolt. By instituting popular elections, they reasoned, village leadership would at least fall to more popular and respected members of the village community. Moreover, if those elected were not party members, perhaps they could be recruited to the party, thus infusing the party at the local levels with a new respect.

Thus, the debate surrounding the issue was not about the "good" of democracy as an ideal but rather whether elections would promote or impede chaos. In the end, those who argued that elections would promote stability won the first round. In 1987, the National People's Congress passed the Organic Law on Village Elections which promoted village elections on an experimental basis. Elections were not mandatory under the new law. They were simply encouraged. Nor were the instructions and regulations as to implementation very well spelled out. The Ministry of Civil Affairs in Beijing was responsible for overseeing overall implementation, but it could only provide guidance and direction. Each province was responsible for coming up with its own concrete regulations.

Implementation of these guidelines was, not surprisingly, stalled after June 4, 1989, when the army moved into Beijing to quash the peaceful protests that had been going on for weeks. But efforts to implement village elections were revived in the early 1990s. By 1998, these experiments had been going on long enough and with sufficient success that they were mandated into law. Since 1998, all villages in China have been required by law to hold competitive elections. At that time, the guidelines for village elections were also more thoroughly spelled out. Most of these measures move village elections further along the democratic spectrum. Candidates must be chosen by the villagers themselves-not, for instance, by either the party or higher level township officials. Secret ballots are required. And the number of candidates must exceed the number of positions to be chosen. On the other hand, the leading role of the party has also been firmly reasserted.

One of the great frustrations of anyone trying to make sense of these village elections is that we simply do not know how widespread they are-how well and how universally they have actually been implemented. Nor, it must be pointed out, do we have any real idea how widespread the protests and occasional violence that we still hear about in the Chinese countryside is. There are some 930,000 villages in China. Some 900 million people live in them. The number of villages visited by foreigners is painfully limited. I hesitate to hazard a guess, but surely the number could not be more than several hundred.

My own experience has also been limited. I have nonetheless seen a broad spectrum of types of village leadership and ways of selecting village leaders:

First, the local emperors who came to power with the collapse of the communes still exist in some places. Usually they are able to exert control because they are also very rich, are in control of much of a village's resources, and are able to influence higher levels in the government and party hierarchies.

Second, many villages continue to exist in a vacuum of leadership. When, for instance, I have had the opportunity to visit Chinese villages with friends rather than through official sponsorship, it seems I invariably happen upon villages which are suffering crises of leadership, villages where elections, if they have been held at all are only pro forma, and the village leader is generally weak and ineffectual.

Third, I have seen cases, too, where the local emperors are actually elected, ostensibly democratically. These are instances, for instance, where the second candidate seems to have been put there only for the sake of complying with election regulations and where the village chief who is running for re-election also controls a major portion of the village resources, some of the profits of which he may distribute to villagers, perhaps because he is magnanimous but also as a way of insuring his re-election.

Finally, and most important, I have also seen elections that by any measure anywhere in the world would be recognized as genuinely competitive, fair, and democratic. I should also say that I have seen such elections while accompanying both the IRI and the Carter Center.

If I could generalize about the most successful elections I have seen, I would say first, that the issues confronting the electorate and addressed by the candidates were (not surprisingly) local, practical, and economic. The voters behaved they way democratic theory says they should have behaved: they voted in their own self interest. They wanted very simple things. They wanted stones placed under their dirt roads so they could still be navigated in the rain. Better yet, they wanted a paved road that could take them quickly to market. They wanted cheaper prices for plastic sheeting so they could build greenhouses to grow crops in the winter. They wanted better ties with the county seat so they could get more licenses to market their produce there. They wanted better schools and educational opportunities for their children. They wanted fewer taxes and fees. And they wanted their leaders to be people who could make those things happen.

Most of the people I have seen being elected have been younger, entrepreneurial, better educated, and richer than the older generation of collective leaders. Whether these new leaders were members of the communist party or not seemed not to be an issue with the voters, though most often in my experience the new leaders were members of the party-simply because communist party members generally have more connections with higher levels and thus more ability to make things happen at the village level. We do not really know what percentage of village chiefs are also party members, but the figure is high-perhaps as high as 80 percent nationwide, though in some places it is lower-only 60 percent, I have been told. Remember that the party is also using village elections as a tool for recruiting popular new members.

It is hard to say why some elections are successful and others not. The key, from my own experience, is leadership. In order for elections to be successful, you need commitment at every step of the political ladder, from the top, which is the Ministry of Civil Affairs, to the province, to the township, to the village, right down the political chain. I would also say that elections are a learning process. With good leadership and experience, they get better over time.

One of the most important things I have learned observing village elections over the years is that the technical details of how to organize an election are by no means intuitively obvious. Election officials have to be properly trained. The details of election procedures must be taught, supervised and learned. Here I would again commend both the IRI and the Carter Center for the work they have done both training officials at several levels of the election hierarchy and in directly monitoring elections, which gives them an opportunity to make recommendations for improvement.

What difference do these elections make? Certainly they are a major advance over higher-level appointments of village leaders, election by acclamation and non-competitive elections. They present rural people with choices they did not have before, give them a voice in the selection of their leaders, and provide a sense of political participation, community, and empowerment. Moreover, there is some evidence, though we certainly need more research, that governance in such villages has improved, finances have become more transparent, and corruption has declined. Above all, by giving rural people the experience of electing their local leaders, elections at the village level are putting in place the mechanisms for elections of higher level officials.

And that is the final question. Can we expect elections at the village level to begin working their way up-to the township, the county, the province, and eventually the national level? This is how Taiwan began its long-term process of democratization, starting with the grass roots, at the village level, and working gradually upward. This, of course, is also the hope of many reformers in China and certainly the hope of champions of Chinese democracy in the United States and other parts of the world.

But there is nearly universal agreement, both in China and among Western academics, that reforms of this type will have to be instituted from above, from China's top leadership. China's current leadership has been decidedly conflicted about the issue of democratization. Jiang Zemin on the one hand has called for socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics and on the other warned against the possibility of chaos were China to introduce Western-style parliamentary democracy.[2] And as we all know, China is currently in the process of a major leadership change, and there is increasing nervousness in China as the time for those changes to begin approaches. In recent days, we have begun hearing about Jiang Zemin's growing reluctance to give up some of his posts. This is not a time for political innovation in China-nor can we expect much political reform in the early months and possible years after the leadership transition is in place. Full-blown democracy is not likely to come soon to China.

Having said that, I nonetheless hear more sentiment in favor of democracy in China today than ever in the 24 years I have been visiting there. Among China's intellectuals in particular, there is a general understanding that democratization in the long term is both necessary and inevitable. The question is--and it is a very big question-how to proceed along a more democratic path without risking the chaos and instability that everyone in China fears. No one seems to have an answer to that question, but many believe that democratization is tied to China's continued economic development and to the spread of economic benefits from urban to rural China and from the coast to inland areas. In the meantime, however, the Chinese government's continuing commitment to village elections offers us in the United States a rare opportunity to cooperate with China in a very positive way in their long-term, albeit uncertain, political evolution.

Anne F. Thurston is an associate professor of China studies at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and has spent more than six years in China. She is the author of several books, including *Enemies of the People, The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (with Li Zhisui); and *Muddling toward Democracy: Political Change in Grass Roots China*.

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1. See, for instance, *Muddling Toward Democracy: Political Change in Grass Roots China* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1998); and with Amy Epstein Gadsden, *Village Elections in China: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Washington, DC: International Republican Institute, 2000)

2. Compare, for instance, the following two statements: *Without democracy there can be no modernization. We will ensure that our people hold democratic elections, make policy decisions democratically, carry out democratic management and supervision, and enjoy extensive rights and freedoms under the law. The overall goal of our political restructuring is to build socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics while upholding and improving our basic political system*. (Jiang Zemin, October 30, 1997); and *Should China apply the parliamentary democracy of the Western world, the only result will be that 1.2 billion Chinese people will not have enough food to eat. The result will be great chaos, and should that happen, it will not be conducive to world peace and stability*.(Jiang Zemin, August 8, 200)