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Introduction

Social protests are frequent occurrences in rural China. In facing rural unrest, disorder and instability, the government has adopted various strategies. The main one aims to contain collective actions through prohibiting any unofficial national associations, punishing the organisers of collective actions, and disciplining local officials who are corrupt or incapable of controlling social protests. As a result, rural social protests and movements are not able to form a national political movement. They take place on a small scale – they are minor and mild, informal, isolated, sporadic, and dispersed.

The total suppression of political participation is dangerous. Alexis de Tocqueville (1955) observed that when the centralised French state reduced local autonomy and inhibited institutional participation, resultant confrontations were violent and led to chaos and disorder. This historical lesson seems to be relevant to today’s China. In order to prevent large-scale violent events from occurring and to direct all rural social protests into an institutionalised area within villages, the Chinese state has promoted and encouraged the establishing of village democratic institutions such as village elections and village representative assemblies. The Chinese government granted village committees the status of ‘mass organisations’ which are able to control village affairs through village autonomy. It also encouraged the development of limited local democratic institutions in order to avoid social trouble and reduce social conflicts. Rather than demonstrating on the streets or in public places, villagers are ‘seduced’ into fighting for their interests through village representative assemblies or elections; any potential radical social movement, therefore, can be turned into a constructive force to build an orderly society in rural China. Social protests thus constitute an essential process of state building and an instrument in the art of governance. In addition, the relationship between the state and rural society has been reconstructed in such a way that social pro-
tests have exercised great pressure on the state, and villagers through their social protests and limited collective actions have been able to negotiate with the agencies of the state at local levels.

State building and the rural policies concerning rural order and village autonomy have provided social protesters with 'an opportunity structure', a term coined by Sidney Tarrow (1994). Drawing on the State's Organic Law, villagers have carried out what Kevin O'Brien (1996) calls 'rightful resistance'. Social protests as a form of political participation are a driving force in making formal village democratic institutions meaningful and in improving the existing democratic institutions. When villagers are given an opportunity to exert control over their lives through self-governing institutions, their participation in village affairs is a central determinant of whether these institutions can actually work. Indeed, it is only through the political participation of villagers that formal institutions, which exist on paper, can be transformed into genuine democratic institutions. It is through 'rightful resistance' – a form of participation where villagers use official policies and state laws to confront local leaders (O'Brien & Li 1996) – that so-called 'cosmetic' village elections can be transformed into meaningful village democracy (Kennedy 2002).

This chapter studies social protests and their impact on key institutions of village democracy, such as electoral rule, village citizenship, and village representative assembly. It focuses on the political impact of social protests, addressing the essential question of how disruptive social events can be turned into a positive constructive force. My approach is different from that of Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien (2002), who study political attitudes and behaviour in choosing different forms of collective actions, and examines how village elections bring village committee members and villagers together in resisting unlawful local policies (Li 2001).

The chapter draws on ten years of research, conducted between 1993 and 2003, which has enabled me to track various trends and developments in the implementation of village elections and the rise of village democracy. Official controls on the information about social protests make it very difficult to get reliable statistical data on rural social protest. The chapter presents anecdotal data on the situation in particular villages. While it is not easy to discuss how widespread the phenomenon is likely to be, the story described in the chapter indicates a new trend which is significant for the democratisation of rural China.
Rural Social Protests

According to one study conducted by Professor Jae Ho Chung of Seoul National University, collective public security incidents (CoPSI, quantixing zhian shijian) – incidents whereby groups of people gather to disrupt public order and destroy public properties – have been increasing annually, from 8,700 in 1993 to 11,000 in 1995, 15,000 in 1997, 32,000 in 1999, and 40,000 in 2004 (Jae 2004). In my fieldwork I often encounter demonstrations and villagers' visits to towns or townships to complain about corrupt village leaders. In December 2004 in front of the official building at one township in Wenglin, Zhejiang, more than three hundred villagers gathered to read aloud collectively the Organic Law's provision that any major decision with regard to land and village welfare must be discussed by and passed through the village representative assembly. They were protesting against one exploitative developer who had bribed a few local officials for cheap land, and against corrupt officials who had appropriated village lands without gaining consent from the village representative assembly. In Han­yuan, YaAn, in 2004, hundreds of villagers protested against a relocation plan to such an extent that the government had to send the military to crush the public demonstration.

The issues concerning rural protesters are villagers' rights, the misappropriation of collective land, the collection of illegal fees, corruption and the misuse of public funds. Rural social protests express the following values: rights-based morality, personal autonomy, and a clear and accountable local government, as opposed to centralised control and bureaucratisation. The forms taken by social protests and collective action include the mobilisation of villagers to launch complaints, public appeals, demonstrations, actions against manipulated elections, the collection of signatures to submit a dismissal proposal, and many others. The social bases of rural protests are village kinships, factions, and even elected village committees or village representative assemblies. Increasingly, villagers appeal to elected village committees who organise collective protest complaints against excessive fees extracted by township leaders (Li 2001: 2).

Rural social protests can be understood as a diverse and multi-layered critique of the Chinese authoritarian system. Villagers are struggling against the exploitation and corruption of local governments. It can also be explained partly as a result of the inadequacies of the existing market system. In facing an unequal distribution of wealth created by the market economy, the most disadvantaged groups have to organise themselves to fight for their interests and rights.

In addition, it can be seen to be a result of the transformation of rural society in the age of modernisation. In traditional and communist
Chinese rural societies, the purpose of individuals is seen as contributing to the good of society. Indeed, the very existence of individuals is believed to rely on society, and the way of thinking and behaviour of individuals are said to be defined by society. Society, with its hierarchy and customs, is understood as a great source of the individuals' values and beliefs. It is a safe haven which offers individuals a sense of belonging. With the marketisation of the Chinese economy, Chinese rural society has been commercialised and individualised in the sense that rural individuals care about and pursue their self-interest. The individualisation and atomisation of Chinese society have been accompanied by increasing collective actions and social protests. Indeed, social protests and social movements can be seen as an instrumental tool whereby individuals can maximise their individual liberty and secure their individual rights. In facing ruthless markets and corrupt governments, a single individual is powerless and carries no weight at all. Individuals have to organise themselves, either by forming various associations or launching social protests.

Social protests and collective actions give the individual bargaining powers and a sense of social solidarity. Under the pressure of maintaining order and stability, local officials sometimes meet the demand made by social protesters. In subsequent sections, we will see how rural social protests have pressured the state as well as local governments into developing a system of village citizenship, improving electoral procedures, establishing a recall procedure, introducing competitive elections, and institutionalising the village representative assemblies. Of course, not all social protests lead to village democracy. I personally encountered a professional protester in Beijing in May 2005, who went to the capital city five times from a remote village in Hunan Province to launch his petition to get a fair deal on the appropriation of village land, but was beaten and arrested by local policemen several times, with the issue concerning the village land still unresolved, and there has still been no village representative meeting to address the common land issue in his village.

Fighting for Village Citizenship

Merle Goldman (2002) highlights the importance of citizens' initiative and struggle in the post-Mao era, by individuals and groups asserting their political rights, rather than waiting for them to be granted by the government. Indeed, it is through struggle that villagers now defend their village citizenship.

The following examples highlight key aspects of struggles for democratic village citizenship:
Retired cadres, who were members of a village and who had household registration in a city but who are now living in their home village, demand the right to vote.

Those who have gained household registration in cities, after their collective lands were appropriated by the government or other agencies in the cities, demand their original villager status and their right to vote.

Married-out women demand their right to vote in many townships, as they attempt to retain their household registration in their native village and refuse to acquiesce to the village leaders' demand that they should re-register their household in their husbands' villages. One woman, who did not have proper marriage registration and was therefore deprived of her right to vote, demanded its restoration.

Migrant workers demand their right to vote in the village where they have worked for a long period.

Ordinary villagers demand the right to vote. During the 1998 village election in Tianli, Huiping township, votes from one household were somehow left uncounted. Though the electoral working team tried to convince the family that it was due to a technical mistake, the family was very angry. They went all the way to the township leaders to protest against 'being unlawfully deprived of voting rights'. The leaders had to apologise profusely before the family's anger was appeased.

Those who were deprived of their right to vote, due to their breach of state laws under the one-child policy, have fought for their right to vote and the right to run for election.

Ordinary villagers demand the right to run for election. Zhang Yubin, who was deprived of his right to vote by township leaders, appealed to a local court and won back his right to contest the village election in 1998 (Ding 1999: 32-34).

Even family members whose parents died in the wake of the village's first round of elections argue that their parents should have the right to vote in the second round of elections (Wei 2001: 65).

Villagers are fighting to realise their political, social and economic rights and to force local cadres to respect and honour these rights. They equally defend their rights against the misuse of power by village cadres. For example, a widow defended her right to inherit the properties of her husband against the village leaders' decision that the properties should go to her son. An ordinary villager who was contracted to run a village enterprise defended his right against the decision of the village committee to end the contract before the term expired.
Migrant workers are fighting for village citizenship. In some villages, the decision whether or not to grant village membership to a migrant is made in village meetings on a case-by-case basis. Some village committees respect and guard the legal rights of migrants in the running of their business and consult them when migrant affairs are involved. In village enterprises, migrant workers participate in management through their representatives. In Beicun, Wuyan township, the local population is outnumbered by migrants. Taking this fact into account, the village has set up a system of multi-level consultations with the aim of collecting opinions from various groups, including migrant workers and business people in the village.

Women are fighting for their rights. In Zhejiang, married-out women in rich villages desire to retain village status in their home villages and refuse to register in their husbands’ residential area. These married-out women are frequently denied their right to vote and entitlement to economic benefits by village assembly or village representative assemblies, which act democratically but in authoritarian fashion against these women’s interests. In Zhejiang, several villages I visited held village representative assembly meetings to decide the tough question of whether these women should retain their status. The decision was often made that if a woman marries out, she loses her village citizenship. In one village in Wenzou, even if a divorced woman returns to her home village and is registered there, she is still denied the right to vote. Only those who marry in are entitled to village status.

Twenty-two women in Simen Village at Anyang township demanded the economic right to village wealth. Their request was denied by the village representative assembly. They appealed to county leaders who did not want to take any responsibility and only requested the village representative assembly to reconsider the case. The women also approached the local newspaper to publish their stories. Finally, they went to the local court, which decided that the question of village status is a matter of village autonomy and should only be decided by the village representative assembly. In 2002, however, in Shuangqiao village, it was decided that a married-out woman can retain her right to vote within one year of her marriage. In Guangdong, a few women challenged such a decision through judicial appeal and won the case. The local court in that instance decreed that the village assembly had no right to make a decision that denies women their political rights, which are protected by national law.

Minority groups are also struggling for their village rights. Village citizenship has the normative requirement that demands equal treatment within a village. The citizens of a village have the right to share equally in a portion of village wealth. In turn, the differentiated treatment sometimes imposed by the majority of villagers upon a minority
challenges this fundamental aspect of village citizenship. I will now examine a detailed case to illustrate this theme.

Jianshe village in Wuyun township in Lishun city has a population of 872 (400 are male, 472 female) and consists of six village teams. It has 171 mu of land, of which 109 mu are to be contracted to the villagers during the new contract period, and 62 mu are managed by the village committee. In 2000, the total income of the village was 625,000 yuan, and total expenses 697,000 yuan. Its annual average per capita income is 3,366 yuan.

On 18 August 1999, the first village representative assembly was held to discuss the new contract. The task was completed on 18 March 2000, taking seven months. The proposal that the first contract, with a few modifications, be continued for another 30 years was passed with the support of 72.7 per cent of votes in the second village representative assembly.

A dispute occurred during the process. The key issue was whether the fifth team should be treated equally. Historically, the fifth team was amalgamated into Jianshe village in 1958 by an administrative order. Geographically, it is located on the top of a mountain, far away from the rest of the village and the site of Wuyun township, so that its lands have little commercial value and contribute little to the collective wealth of the village. For these reasons, the other five village teams demanded that the fifth team maintain their old contract and that it should not enjoy the same benefits as all other village teams. While the villagers of all other five teams are given the amount of money equal to 12.5 kilogram rice, the fifth team is denied this benefit.

Subsequently, village representative meetings were held ten times. Each time the fifth team lost its appeal because its four village representatives were outnumbered among the 36 representatives. It then appealed to the township authority and local newspapers, and held a public rally. In the end, through compromise and persuasion inside and outside village representative meetings, a deal was reached. While the villagers of the fifth team are entitled to most of the benefits, a differentiated policy towards contracting and village welfare provision was also adopted.

In this case, the fifth team demanded a fair share of collective benefits. Basic village citizenship and the right to appeal enabled the minority group to defend its rights and interests. This case reveals that village democracy is making progress and that compromises can be made, a balance struck, and relative fairness achieved. Despite the dominance of majorities, village assemblies provide forums in which minority groups can express their needs and dissatisfaction, and ultimately reach accommodations.
In conclusion, villagers' willingness to fight for status and the right to vote signals a broad trend towards development from peasants to citizens. It might be argued that village democratic institutions have turned peasants into modern citizens, as villagers empower themselves by using democratic institutions and procedures to defend their interests. They are simultaneously active in establishing, consolidating and entrenching the democratic institutions of the village assembly or village representative assembly. The increasing importance of village citizenship is changing the local political culture and establishing a rights-based political morality. In such a context, we should use the term of 'villager' seriously and give up the older term of 'peasant', which seems inadequate to describe people, at least in the area I have visited, if not in the whole of rural China.

Procedures

Through various forms of protest, villagers have resisted manipulated elections and demanded fair and free elections. They have resisted election procedures they consider unfair, irregular or corrupt by refusing to pay tax. Such resistance has forced the state to adopt and promote open and transparent procedures, in particular, the state has endorsed hai-xuan (naming from the floor or direct nomination for candidates) to resolve practical problems.

My earlier field trips found that party secretaries appointed candidates in the earlier village elections in Zhejiang. In Jiangxia village of Chengguan township, village cadres decided their candidates through negotiation amongst themselves. Beizhang, Pukou and Cangyan townships each had one village where the candidates were secretly decided. Such a practice was justified by one official in the Ministry of Civic Affairs in 1994 as normal since party leaders decide candidates in all elections in China.8 In 1994, Wang Yongfei, an official from the Department of Civic Affairs in Zhejiang, stated that villagers did not have the time and knowledge for complex procedures, so the normal practice was that the party secretary or party branch would decide on the candidates. He also argued that it was too costly for villagers to take more than twenty days and to run four or five preliminary elections to choose the candidates in one village in Jinghua.9

The appointment of candidates by party secretaries, however, faced resistance from villagers who did not vote for the official nominated candidates. Sometimes official nominated candidates lost elections, sometimes elections failed to produce any village leader, thus leading to a vacuum in village governance. To overcome this practical problem, some villages experimented with direct nomination by villagers, and
township leaders had to make a compromise in letting villagers nominate candidates.

In the process of resisting manipulated elections, villagers invented and practiced *haixuan*, which originated in Lishu county, Jilin province (Jing 1999; China Association of Study of Grass-root Institutions & Research Team for Project of Chinese Village Autonomy 1994). In one village, 571 out of 693 eligible voters took part in *haixuan* (Chan 1998: 511). *Haixuan* was quickly adopted in the Xiangtan and Suining counties of Hunan province as well as five counties and two districts in Gansu province. This was a small minority in national terms (Ma 2003: 5). *Haixuan* was ultimately endorsed in the 1998 Organic Law. Article 14 stipulates, 'In village elections, candidates should be nominated directly by the eligible voters of the village, with the number of candidates exceeding the number of positions available.'

Recall

Elected village leaders might misuse power and/or fail to keep promises made in election campaigns. They might be incompetent or unaccountable or irresponsible. Villagers have collected signatures, submitted petitions, put forward motions, gone to local official offices or media institutions, and even marched in the streets to demand the removal of some incompetent and corrupt village leaders. Villagers' struggles have improved the recall procedure and made it work in some cases.

The 1987 provisional Organic Law made a very general and vague reference to the issue of recalling. Article 11 merely stipulates, 'the villagers' assembly has the right to recall village committee members or call for by-elections to elect new members' (The Division of Local Governments, The Ministry of Civic Affairs 1994: 4). It was insufficient to simply have a law that grants voters the right to recall the elected official but that does not lay out a procedure for doing so. In the face of protests and demands for recalling, the national government has had to revise the 1987 Organic Law. Specific dismissal terms ultimately were written in the 1998 Organic Law, Article 16 of which states:

(...) a proposal of dismissal of committee members is valid when it is put forward and signed by 20 per cent or more of eligible voters in the village. Reasons must be given for the dismissal. The members involved have the right to defend themselves. The village committee should in due time convene a meeting of villagers to vote on the proposal, which takes 50 per cent or more of votes for a pass.
According to the Organic Law, the dismissal should be handled by the village committee. The several cases we have at hand indicate that the village committee may be unwilling to carry out the process, in particular if the dismissal involves the village head. To solve this concrete problem, Article 27 of the Regulations of Village Election of Zhejiang, passed by the 16th session of the 9th Provincial People's Congress, stipulates:

A proposal to dismiss a committee member is valid when it is put forward and signed by 20 per cent or more of eligible voters in the village. The proposal should be submitted to the village committee in written form with reasons given for the dismissal. Copies of the proposal should be sent to township governments as records. Upon receiving the proposal, the village committee should convene a meeting of villagers to vote on the proposal no later than within a month. Meanwhile, the sponsors of the dismissal should have their representatives state their reasons at the meeting. Committee members involved in the dismissal proposal have the right to defend themselves. It takes 50 per cent or more of votes to pass the proposal, and the result should be reported to the township government. If the village committee does not convene a meeting 30 days after it has received the proposal, the township government should intervene and help to hold the meeting of villagers.12

It is apparent from this regulation that township governments have an important role to play in the recalling of committee members. Township intervention has proved invariably to be crucial in the dismissal of the village chiefs of Xikouwang, Bailian and Jile villages.

Since the promulgation of the new law, there have been quite a lot of dismissal cases. Almost all motions of dismissal are triggered by corruption in village affairs.13 In Yiwu county, 305 village leaders were dismissed through village representative meetings in 2000.14 Below is a case of the dismissal in the village of Bailian in Pandai township (Zhou 1999: 2). I describe this case in detail to elaborate on the detailed procedures and the whole process.

1. To put forward a proposal of dismissal. Because of an ‘irregular deal’ that involved the selling of a hundred mu of land and ‘mismanagement of economic affairs’ by the village committee, tension built up between villagers and the village committee in Bailian. On 13 November 1998, 451 villagers signed a motion to dismiss He Guangshou from his post of village head. The motion was directed to the leadership above.
2. Approval. On 29 March 1999, the township government sent its representatives to check the signatures on the dismissal motion and found that those who had signed amounted to over one-fifth of the total number of voters in the village. The next day, the deputy township head came to the village to announce the start of the dismissal procedure.

3. Villager representatives' meeting chaired by township government and the making of rule. On April 6, the township government held a meeting of ten village representatives, during which the Procedures of Voting on the Dismissal of Village Head in Bailian were passed.

4. Villagers' meeting and the hearing of charges. On 9 April, a villagers' meeting was held at Bailian Primary School, during which the township head Ding Shichun asked the villagers to 'speak truthfully and vote prudently'. Then, Li Jiankai, a member of the supervisory group of village finance, listed reasons for the dismissal.

5. The village head defending himself. As stipulated in the Organic Law of Village Committee, 'village committee members who are facing dismissal charges have the right to defend themselves'. Accordingly He Guangshou presented a different story on the issues of finance and the land deal.

6. Voting. At the conclusion of the villagers' meeting, voting took place. The result was that 413 votes were for the dismissal, 248 against it, and 3 abstained. On the afternoon of 9 April, township head Ding Shichun announced that the dismissal proposal was passed on the basis of the 664 votes collected out of a total of 666.

I must point out, however, that many villages, for one reason or another, have difficulty in convening a meeting of all villagers. The voters of Baoziying village in Hebei province, for example, were not so successful in their bid to recall their committee. Incensed by corruption, heavy taxes and a number of other problems, the villagers took the initiative and held a meeting on 11 December 1998 to vote on the motion to dismiss the village committee. Over 100 representatives took a petition to Shijiazhuang, Hebei's provincial capital, but they were blocked on their way by the police. Zhao Zengbing, Wang Liying, Fan Zhengjie, Zhao Lijun, Liu Yanfang and other young villagers were detained on 23 December 1998, and later arrested on charges of 'disturbing social order' and 'interfering with official business'.

Competitive Elections

Before examining competitive elections, I would like to briefly discuss two types of non-competitive elections. The first genre is muddled elec-
tions in which electors lack information about electoral procedures, and township and village leaders conduct elections without following a set of electoral procedures. These muddled elections are nothing more than a formality.

The second genre is manipulated elections in which village party secretaries manipulate electoral procedures, select their own favoured candidates, and pre-determine the result of elections. Prior to these elections, electors already know who will win, and elections lack uncertainty and excitement. These manipulated elections take place in authoritarian villages where competitiveness is absent and popular participation is low (O'Brien 1994: 54).

Both muddled and manipulated elections tend to invite the villagers' criticism, scepticism and resistance, and contribute little to good village governance. During the village elections in September 1999 in Shenzhen, the city received over 1,900 telephone calls, letters and personal visits. Approximately ten per cent of the calls, letters and visits sought election information, sixty per cent complained about violations of regulations by electorate staff and Party secretaries, twenty per cent the violations of the Organic Laws by election staff, and ten per cent financial mismanagement. Petitioners demanded that action be taken before elections could continue (Qiu 1999). Villagers adopted various measures against these forms of elections, such as non-participation, appeal to upper levels, or nomination of their own candidates. Through villagers' constant struggles, semi-competitive or full competitive elections have been gradually tolerated and adopted by the state.

Elections to positions on village committees have become increasingly competitive since they were introduced over ten years ago. The 1998 election was particularly competitive. The practice of direct and open elections, called haixuan (direct elections) in many localities, has dramatically increased the competitiveness of the village elections. One indication of this was the gap between the number of candidates and that of open positions: there were many more candidates than positions. Between April and July 1999, 786 villages in the Yuyao municipality held elections under the 'Organic Law of Village Committee'. The ratio of candidates to positions was 48:1, which was unprecedented in the history of village election. In Laofangqiao, a township selected by the Yuyao municipality for test elections, the villagers nominated 959 candidates for the 57 open seats. The candidate-seat ratio was 17:1, promising intense competition.

Competition was also intensified as elections shifted from 'one-candidate' elections, which dominated in 1994, to 'multiple-candidates' elections, which dominated in 1998–1999. In Linhai, for example, the number of candidates in 1995 was generally the same as the number of positions. In 1998-1999, however, multiple candidates were nomi-
nated for the position of village head. In 1995, the Ministry of Civil Affairs assessed the degree to which elections across the country met three criteria: competitive electoral process, public campaigning, and secret ballots. Judged by these criteria, Zhejiang was behind Fujian, Heilongjiang, Shanxi, Jilin, Hunan, Henan, Sichuan, and other provinces (Howell 1998: 96). Take the Tongxiang municipality of Zhejiang as an example. In late 1992, the then-Tongxiang county held its second round of village elections. Of its 306 villages, 244 (86.9 per cent) took the non-competitive approach: the same number of candidates for the same number of positions. Only 40 villages (13.1 per cent) held semi-competitive elections. By 1998, however, as Zhang Biao has found in his case study of the elections in the 10 administrative villages of Taoyuan township in July of that year, competitive elections were common. Quite a large number of villagers nominated themselves as candidates for village committee positions. As the township government made no effort to limit the number of candidates, elections became very competitive (Zhang 1998).

The competitiveness of elections is also related to the nominating procedures and the number of candidates. The intensity of competition very much depends on how candidates are nominated, how many can be nominated, and whether the number of candidates is larger than the number of posts. In past elections in Liuizheng township, candidates were chosen by the village branch of the CCP and were approved by the township party committee and government leadership before they were introduced to the voters. Voters actually had no right or opportunity to nominate candidates. In addition, in the case of elections for village heads, it was official policy to limit the elections to one candidate for one position. Thus, competition was simply not expected. Township leaders, out of concern for either employment or vested interests, would have a hand in the nomination process, particularly the nomination of the village head. Sometimes they even manipulated the nominations, ruling out the possibility of real competition.

One major difference between the ‘Organic Law of Village Committee’ of 1998 and its 1987 predecessor is that the new law stipulates that the village committee should be directly elected by the villagers. After the April 1999 elections in Laofangqiao township, we interviewed a number of villagers and asked them to compare the recent election with past ones. During the past elections, they said, the candidates were all hand-picked by the leadership above. The number of candidates was exactly the same as the number of positions open to election. As a result, villagers did not think much of the election, because their will was ignored, and all they were expected to do was draw a yes-circle around the names of the anointed candidates. However, nominating procedures in the new elections, such as haixuan, involve and encour-
age much competition. In such cases, the authorities do not try to control or dominate the nominating procedure. Instead, they allow the villagers to exercise their rights and nominate the candidates of their choice.

The Establishment and Improvement of the VRA

Village representative assemblies (VRA) were designed to elicit people's support for local projects or voice their opinions. Concerned with a fair distribution of village wealth, many villagers demand the regular and frequent holding of these assemblies. In this way political participation becomes meaningful, and villagers empower themselves by using formal democratic institutions to minimise corruption and to demand a fair distribution of village wealth.

As early as 1991, Li Qiaobai, the head of party organisation in Li Shui prefecture, advocated and promoted the VRA. However, many township and village leaders disclosed to me in my interview their reservation as to the multi-function of the VRA. They would cite the following cases in which the VRA could do little to solve a problem:

1. If a resolution passed by the VRA could not come into effect, help from township leaders would be indispensable for its implementation.
2. If a pre-made village decision proved to be inappropriate and needed some change, it would be up to the party committee and village committee to make the change.
3. The effectiveness of the VRA would be seriously impaired when some representatives express radical views or hold meetings without getting consent.
4. When the head of a village committee proved incompetent, s/he would need help from a stay-in-village cadre with functions such as chairing a meeting.22

VRAs were established only in a limited number of villages. It was not until 1998 that Wuyun township in Li Shui prefecture embarked on a trial stage in seven of its villages. When we conducted interviews in 1997-1998, most villagers there knew very little about the system. Only in some model village did the VRA play a full role and was appreciated by both representatives and villagers.

While the national law does not specify the timing and number of the village representative meetings, the provincial regulations of Zhejiang stipulated that it should be held at least once a year. The timing and the number of the meetings vary in different areas. Diyiqiao village was said to hold at least two meetings each year, in July and November.
Xiacun village also had two meetings, but the time was March and September. Laiwang village had four meetings each year, presided over by the village committee. These figures are consistent with Oi and Rozelle's survey in 1995 which found that the average number is 2.76 VRA meetings a year (Oi & Rozelle 2000). Local officials in Tangxiang township argued against frequent meetings of VRAs, contending that they gave too much power to village representatives, who would feel the importance of their positions but whose different views would make it difficult to reach a conclusion. Similarly, the party secretary, Zen He-ping, in Tuanjie village in Hongshang district in Wuhan, insisted that the proposal about the privatisation of village enterprises not be discussed in the VRA, citing as a reason that the representatives are not able to make a good decision when interests are involved. By contrast, in Beiwang village, 'the VRA is particularly active, meeting on the third day of every month' (Lawrence 1994: 64).

According to a survey by Yang Min, 57.8 per cent respondents in 1990 and 73.3 per cent in 1996 confirmed that they participated in VRAs only 1-2 times a year. Some 32.7 per cent and 20.7 per cent participated several times a year (Yang 2000). In Kent Jennings's survey, 47 percent of the respondents reported that they went to all-village meetings (Jennings 1997: 363), and David Zweig's fieldwork revealed that 16.4 percent of the 3,078 respondents looked to the village assembly if village cadres carry out unfair policies (Zweig 2002a: 44).

The decision made through VRAs tends to gain legitimacy, face less resistance and be implemented more easily, while decisions, for example, on village land, made by village leaders alone without going through VRAs often invite criticism and protest. Realising the value of VRAs' contribution to maintaining social order and containing social conflicts, the state has actively called for the institutionalisation of VRAs. Starting in 2000, VRAs became more active in Zhejiang province. For example, Jianshe village held more than ten representative meetings to decide the tough question of how to carry out the second round of contracting collective land in Wuyun township. Increasingly, more and more villagers are using VRAs to challenge village leaders. For example, one village chief in Yuhuan county signed a contract with a factory without consulting with the representatives of the VRA in 2000. Some representatives sued the village chief in the local court for violating the 1998 Organic Law, and they won the case. Such a successful story inspired many villagers who went to local courts to sue their village chiefs who failed to consult with VRAs when they made various decisions.

Liaodong village in Wenzhou municipality, Zhejiang, is another example of VRAs taking an important role in governance. On 24 May 1999, a villagers' meeting was held to vote on a motion of dismissal.
The result was that 87 per cent of the people voted yes for the dismissal of Pan Hongchong as village head, who three years ago was voted into office with a large majority. Pan was charged with, among other things, abuse of power and mismanagement of village affairs. As the check of village accounts revealed, during Pan's three years in office, he and others had squandered 660,000 yuan or one-fourth of the village income for their social entertainment.\(^2\)

In recent years, village leaders, recognising the importance of the VRAs, are more frequently using the meeting in their decision-making process. One such example is Shuangqiao village in Chengjiao township of Wenzhou. Believing it would pay off in the long run, the village leaders bought a 4-storeyed office building from a business company at 8 million RMB. However, since the deal was made without any consultation in advance with the village representative meeting, some villagers grew angry and suspicious. They challenged village leaders and demanded a say in the decision-making process, and they went to the leadership above to voice their anger and suspicion, which did not die down until half a year later. Drawing from this incident, the village committee began to pay more attention to the views of the representative meeting. Consequently, in the latter half of the year 2000 alone, as many as ten meetings were held. A record of these ten meetings shows the topics of the meetings. According to Bai Gang and Zhao Shuo-xing’s survey study, 21 percent of the respondents out of 34 village leaders confirmed that VRAs have made final decisions on major village affairs in Lishu county, Jilin province; 82.27 out of 51 in Hequ county in Shanxi province; and 14.99 out of 101 in Lunan county in Yunan province (Bai & Zhao 2001).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the role of social protests led by ordinary villagers in promoting village democracy.\(^2\) The opposition between the interest of ordinary villagers and the vested interests of cadres are driving forces for village democracy. This gives rise to an unstable and conflictive circumstance in which elections and village democracy are employed by the state as a mechanism to ease these tensions. In particular, the institution of village representative assembly has been developed and improved to deal with structural conflicts of interests.

Village democracy provides a mechanism whereby the state can co-opt the new rich into the system in order to prevent them from becoming a disruptive force. It is regarded by the state as a check system in which villagers can use the VRA to express their views, while village chiefs can use village committees as a counterbalance to the power of
Table 2.1 *Agenda of Villager Representative Meetings, Shuangqiao Village (June to December 2000)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Agenda and Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8 June</td>
<td>Discussing and passing the bill to turn the parking lot in the village into a household electronics market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20 June</td>
<td>Discussing and passing the bill on welfare distribution on a household base.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27 July</td>
<td>Discussing and passing the bill to raise the seniors' pension from the current monthly 70-80 to 200 RMB.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>31 July</td>
<td>Discussing and passing the bill that a woman is no longer eligible for village benefits once she gets married and lives away from the village.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 August</td>
<td>Deciding to get a lawyer to sue on the false report by the Zhejiang Daily Legal Report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>24 August</td>
<td>Discussing and deciding to settle the contract dispute between the village and the packing machinery factory through legal means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>16 November</td>
<td>Rallying support for the construction of the electronics market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>29 November</td>
<td>Further discussion and passing of the bill to settle the contract dispute between the village and the packing machinery factory through legal means, despite opposition from the township leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>7 December</td>
<td>Most representatives stick to the resolution of the previous meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>20 December</td>
<td>Discussing and deciding to reject the shares of one company. The rejection was partly the result of the villagers' dissatisfaction with the deal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: A Chronicle of Village Meetings in Shuangqiao*

the party secretary. Electoral institutions empower elected village chiefs and committee members. Village committees and representative assemblies in turn restrict the behaviour of village party secretaries.

Village democracy is now seen as an integral part of state building in rural China. The state has discovered that the benefits of village democracy outweigh its costs and that it helps to reduce conflict and promote stability. Township leaders were originally opposed to village elections that removed their power to appoint village leaders. But through the process of village elections, they found that VRAs can assist them in solving controversial questions about village membership. Furthermore, *haixuan* saves their energy and time by reducing conflict. Of equal importance, they discovered that democratic means can be used to regain their control over village leaders. For example, they even encourage electoral rivalry within a village so that competing factions will seek help from the township. Often they are able to use VRAs to dismiss village leaders whom they do not like. Most importantly, local officials find that 'village democratic institutions such as public consultation and the VRAs can help to avoid and reduce social troubles and vil-
Fang Lizhi, the famous Chinese dissident, is right to claim that democracy is not bestowed as a gift, rather that it is fought for by the people themselves (Fang 1987). Villager participation that takes the form of protest and appeal, collective action, and the mobilisation of village factions and kinship is what transforms formal institutions, which may exist on paper, into fully functioning ones.

The above Chinese story of social protesters and village democracy is a testament to the life project of Alain Touraine, a French thinker and renowned sociologist, who devoted his life to a study of democratic action through new social movements (Touraine 1985). According to Touraine, it is only through participating in social movements that individuals can recover their liberty diminished by the neoliberal state and markets (Touraine 1995). For him, the ideas of democracy have three basic elements: (1) basic rights, (2) citizenship, and (3) representativity (Touraine 1997). Indeed, in the case of village elections, some social protests have fought in these three areas through social protest and some villagers are struggling to assert what Touraine terms 'the autonomy of the human subject' in controlling village affairs.

Notes

1 Professor Baogang HE (BA, Hangzhou Uni, 1981; MA, People's University of China, Beijing, 1986; Ph.D., ANU, Australia, 1994) is chair in International Studies at the School of International and Political Studies at Deakin University, Australia. Dr. He is a member of the editorial board of New Political Science, China: An International Journal, Political Science Forum, and Rural Studies and the author of The Democratisation of China (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), The Democratic Implication of Civil Society in China (London: Macmillan, New York: St. Martin, 1997), Nationalism, National Identity and Democratisation in China (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, with Yingjie Guo), and Balancing Democracy and Authority: An Empirical Study of Village Election in Zhejiang, (Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, September 2002, with Lang Youxing). He has co-authored and co-translated several books in Chinese (including John Rawls's A Theory of Justice) and has published 23 book chapters and more than 31 articles in English.

2 The author's interview with the local official in November 2004.

3 For a theoretical discussion of the issue of whether social protests lead to democracy, see Tilly, C. (2003), 'When do (and don't) social movements promote democratisation?', in P. Ibarra (ed.), Social Movements and Democracy, 21-45. New York: Palgrave.


5 In this section, I have used some material from my article, 'Village citizenship in China: a case study of Zhejiang', Citizenship Studies 9 (2): 205-219.

6 Refer to the author's interview in Wenzhou on 4 June 2001.

7 See also Note 6.

8 Refer to the author's interview in Beijing on 29 October 1994.

9 Refer to the author's interview with Wang Yongfei in Hangzhou on 2 November 1994.
The former head of Xikouwang village of Pingqiao township, Zhejiang, for instance, had embezzled tens of thousands of yuan of village money. Self-willed, he had sold village housing grounds without any consultation. In addition, he was a heavy gambler. As a result, public opinions were against him. At the request of the villagers, the township CCP committee, government and people's congress held a villagers' meeting for the dismissal of the village head. All procedures were carried out according to the provisional 'Organic Law of Village Committee'. Being a small village, it had only 175 voters. The motion of dismissal was passed with 154 yes votes. Dept. of Civil Affairs of Tiantai county, 'Jiaqiang dang dai cunweihui de lingdao, gaibian luohou mianmao (Make improvement through the Strengthening of Party Leadership over Village Committee), 20 May 1994.

Interview with the cadres of the provincial Department of Civil Affairs in 1995, and a number of field trips in 1995 in Zhejiang.

'Cummin nen zizhi, dangjia shuan zuoeshu' (Villagers: now master of the house), a feature program by Zhejiang Educational TV Station, 10 August 1999.

The author's interview with Li Qiaoibai, deputy head of Party Organisation Dept. of Lishui Region, November 1998.

Refer to the author's interview in 1998.

Refer to the author's interview in Wuhan in 2000.

Other studies of village elections have already excellently covered the role of central leaders and the Ministry of Civic Affairs. See O'Brien, K. (1994), 'Village committees: implementing political reform in China's villages', Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs 32 (July): 33-59; Tianjian Shi (1999), 'Village committee elections in China: institutional tactics for democracy', World Politics 51 (3): 385-412; and Lang Youxing, my PhD student, has also written a thesis on Chinese elite's grafting of village elections in China. Also as Suzanne Ogden argues, 'the resistance or support of local town and township leaders for elections and local autonomy has been far more decisive than the ministry's wishes in determining the extent of village democratisation'. See Ogden, S. (2002), Inklings of Democracy in China, 255. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Refer to the author's interview with the local officials in Wenling in November 2004.