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MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL,  
WHO IN THE LAND IS MOST DEMOCRATIC OF ALL?

Should the Village Elections in China Be Called Democratic?

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**Documentos de Trabajo en Estudios Asiáticos**

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**DOCUMENTOS DE TRABAJO EN ESTUDIOS ASIÁTICOS No. 9**

**MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO IN THE LAND IS MOST  
DEMOCRATIC OF ALL?**

***Should the Village Elections in China Be Called Democratic?*<sup>1</sup>**

Eduardo Olivares C.

August 2012

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 1980s, under the newly implemented Organic Law of the Village Committees, selected villages in the People's Republic of China (hereafter, PRC or China) had their first elections.<sup>2</sup> Elections at the grassroots level excited observers of Chinese politics because they thought that China's authoritarian regime had opened a democratic pathway in the country. After analyzing survey data from various sources and appealing to some of the most advanced research studies on village elections published in the last years, I will contest that grassroots democracy in the PRC has no real depth. Furthermore, I would like to go beyond and ask what can be considered proper criteria when evaluating whether a village system is democratic. In addition, how and under which conditions could the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) really allow openly contested elections at village level? Is the CCP facing the same self-delusion of the Queen in Snow White, when after asking her mirror whom the fairest in the kingdom was, the mirror said: you are... until Snow White arrived?

In assessing these issues, I will first outline what the literature defines for democratic elections. I will narrow the scope of democratic elections, highlighting that contested elections do not guarantee democracy. Then, I will describe how villages in China have held elections, for which I will thoroughly analyze the results of different surveys that have collected the most accurate data.<sup>3</sup> Third, I will outline how authorities in China exercise power, and to what extent the electoral system accomplishes the objective of self-governance. Finally, even though having elections does not mean that the PRC is paving a route for democratization, I will conclude with some suggestions on ways for freer and fairer elections at the village level to succeed.

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<sup>2</sup> A few years ago, some townships also conducted free and fair elections, but then the central authorities declared them unconstitutional. To avoid the constitutional ban, some provincial delegates began an indirect process of selection/nomination to choose their townships' leaders, but ultimately they are elected by the party. Therefore, I am not considering township elections as part of my framework here.

<sup>3</sup> So far, data about the electoral system in the PRC is only available through surveys who ask people how they remember events; the PRC does not have (or at least does not share) official information on the electoral process.

## 2. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS?

### 2.1 Democracy and Democratic Elections

One of the most ambiguous concepts in social sciences is democracy, despite the fact that we use it in different contexts as if it were an absolute truth and the same for everyone. In a classic conceptualization of democracy, Schumpeter goes directly to a procedural framework:

*“The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote”.* (Schumpeter, 1943, pág. 269)

His procedural definition does not account for other elements we should include as part of a democratic system. Nonetheless, Huntington points out a very similar and even more categorical definition of democracy, saying that open, free and fair elections are the essence of democracy, no matter which quality the resulting government might have (Huntington, 1991). This view of democracy is called *electoralism*, because it neglects the role of intermediate actors in between elections, as well as the whole range of possibilities that citizens can play in times other than elections. Then, democracy cannot be understood merely as the system where only free and fair elections occur. Schmitter & Karl present a more comprehensive definition of democracy:

*“A system of governance in which rules are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives”* (Schmitter & Karl, 1991).

This definition brings several elements together: that a democracy is a system of governance, not just a method or one institution (e.g. elections); that there should be rules and accountability, which in turn necessarily links rulers to citizens during the period of governance. Authors frame this system within a competitive and cooperative model.

Other authors have distinguished two types of democracies: liberal and illiberal (For an in-depth discussion, see: Zakaria, 1997). A liberal democracy —or constitutional liberalism— refers to all the other requirements beyond elections that make democracies work, such as civil liberties and guaranteed political rights, especially in between elections. It is liberal because it considers human beings as free in their immanent rights, and it is constitutional because these rights are protected and promoted by law. The concept of illiberal democracies, in turn, refers to systems where the *electoral procedure* indicates freedom and fairness, but where the other rights in between elections are not sufficiently protected. Therefore, Schumpeter and Huntington's definition of democracies are delimited to frame illiberal democracies, while Schmitter & Karl refers to the broad idea of liberal democracies.

The Freedom House is one of the oldest organizations measuring the state of democracy in the world. Since 1973, they have produced an annual survey, *Freedom in the World*, which reports a score for political rights and civil liberties. *Freedom of the World* does not measure democracy as an isolated term, but rather its expected outcomes. The sub-index of political rights is highly correlated with the idea of *electoralism*, while the sub-index of civil liberties is more correlated with constitutional liberalism. Experts from the Freedom House and the academia, media, think tanks and human rights groups score each country every year. Both indices have a 1-7 scale, where 1 marks the most amount of freedom and 7 the least amount of freedom. Countries where combined average ratings sum below 3.0 are considered "Free;" between 3.0 and 5.0 are "Partly Free," and above 5.0 are considered "Not Free." In addition, *Freedom in the World* identifies countries as electoral democracies and non electoral democracies, focusing only in whether they have free, open and fair elections.

Despite the fact that a procedural conceptualization of democracy does not properly assess what a democracy without adjectives should be, there are still some minimal conditions for a democracy to work. In his classic work about poliarchy, Robert Dahl listed seven conditions that help delimiting his definition of democracy. Schmitter & Karl added two more, so the final list includes nine conditions (Schmitter & Karl's contributions are typed S&K):

- 1) The polity must be self-governing (S&K);
- 2) Control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials;
- 3) Popularly elected officials must be able to exercise their constitutional powers without being subjected to overriding (albeit informal) opposition from unelected officials (S&K);
- 4) Elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is quite uncommon;
- 5) Practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials;
- 6) Practically all adults have the right to run for elective offices in the government;
- 7) Citizens have the right to express themselves without the danger of severe punishment on political matters;
- 8) Citizens have the right to seek, and the law is ought to protect, alternative sources of information, and
- 9) Citizens have the right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups. (Schmitter & Karl, 1991, p. 81-82 and Dahl, 1982, p. 11).

It is important to mention that authors talk about the first level of political administration. That is, the polity unit here is the state. Most of world's countries are unitary states, where this definition is applied very straightforwardly. Confusion may emerge for federalist states, where strong administrative sub-divisions apply in many degrees (Schmitter & Karl, 1991).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an approach to the federalist definition and scopes, see Riker (1975) and Stepan (2001).



## 2.2 China's Democratic Performance

According to *Freedom in the World*, the PRC rates 6 in civil liberties, and 7 in political rights. It is not an electoral democracy. Between 1989-1990 and 1998-1999, both measures were at its maximum of 7. Only between 1978 and 1988-1989 both indices scored 6. In any case, the difference between 6 and 7 is not big enough to claim that China is more democratic now than in the 1990s. The 2011 report by Freedom House describes that the CCP continued in 2010 “to suppress dissent and strengthen its security apparatus while neglecting institutional reforms that would address the root causes of citizens’ grievances” (Freedom House, 2011).

**Table 1: Sub Category Scores of *Freedom in the World* 2011**

Country or group	Political Rights			Civil Liberties			
	Electoral Process	Political Pluralism and Participation	Functioning of Government	Freedom of Expression and Belief	Associational and Organizational Rights	Rule of Law	Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights
<b>China</b>	0	1	2	4	3	2	6
<b>Not Free (excluded China; n=45)</b>	1.6	2.5	1.8	5.2	2.5	2.7	4.7
<b>Partly Free (n=60)</b>	6.9	9.1	4.9	10.6	6.8	6.7	8.3
<b>Free (n=88)</b>	11.4	14.6	9.8	15.0	11.2	12.7	13.1
<b>Maximum possible score</b>	12	16	12	16	12	16	16

Source: Freedom House (2011)

If we assume that China is improving its civil liberties index, we should take a look at its electoral procedures to seek more accurate details on the side of the political rights index. One of the sub-category scores of *Freedom in the World* refers to “Electoral Process,” with scores

varying between 0 (the lowest degree) and 12 (the highest degree).<sup>5</sup> China's score is 0. Among all seven sub-categories for China, Electoral Process is the only one rated the lowest possible (Table 1). There are 18 countries (out of 194 of this survey) with scores of 0 in Electoral Process. If we apply the Schumpeterian definition of democracy, China still lacks of legitimacy to invoke democratic performance.

As it is obvious, China gets 0% of the maximum score for Electoral Process, while the other not free countries' average reaches 13.4% of the maximum possible for that sub category. Therefore, China is even worse than the average of not free systems for this particular sub index. There are only three sub categories where China is better than the average of not free countries: 1) Functioning of Government, 2) Associational and Organizational Rights, and 3) Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights. In none of these cases does China reach more than 40% of the maximum possible score.

As a rule of thumb, it seems that all sub categories are related to a certain extent. This is, if we trace a graph line between the three groups of countries, they will show a similar pattern across the board in terms of their relative distance to each other per sub category. Even more, it seems that the greater the value, to say, in civil liberties, the greater the value is on political rights' components. To verify this preconception, a regression using the *Freedom in the World* 2011 would suffice (Table 2). The Electoral Process is the dependant variable, and the other sub categories are the control variables. To assure different levels of results, I divided the outcomes into four groups: all countries of the report 2011 altogether, and then country groups depending on whether they are classified as free, partly free and not free. The wider the sample, the more likely results will be significant; the fewer the sample (that applies here for not free countries), the less significant might be the outcomes.

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<sup>5</sup> Each question in the questionnaire has an outcome between 0 and 4. For the Electoral Process sub category, there are three questions referring to 1) how fair and free is the election of the head of government, 2) how fair and free is the election of the legislative representatives, and 3) whether electoral laws and framework is fair (my wording). For more details about the methodology, see at: [http://www.freedomhouse.org/printer\\_friendly.cfm?page=384&key=216&parent=21&report=81](http://www.freedomhouse.org/printer_friendly.cfm?page=384&key=216&parent=21&report=81). Accessed October 15, 2011.

**Table 2: Multivariate OLS regression results of *Freedom in the World 2011***

<i>Control variables</i>	All countries N=194	Free countries N=88	Partly Free countries N=60	Not Free Countries N=46
<i>Political Rights</i>				
Political Pluralism and Participation	0.63*** (0.06)	0.41*** (0.09)	0.79*** 0.14	0.33** 0.13
Functioning of Government	0.16** (0.08)	0.08 (0.09)	0.17 (0.17)	0.15 (0.18)
<i>Civil Liberties</i>				
Freedom of Expression and Belief	0.05 (0.07)	0.08 (0.10)	0.02 (0.16)	0.04 (0.13)
Associational and Organizational Rights	0.20** (0.09)	0.27** (0.11)	0.03 (0.19)	0.45*** (0.16)
Rule of Law	-0.12* (0.06)	-0.11 (0.06)	-0.14 (0.17)	-0.21 (0.13)
Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights	-0.03 (0.06)	0.07 (0.08)	0.12 (0.15)	-0.15 (0.10)
R2	0.92	0.72	0.61	0.60
Adjusted R2	0.92	0.70	0.57	0.53

Dependant variable: Electoral Process

Standard error in parentheses; \* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01

As we can see, each point of Political Pluralism and Participation plays a positive role in having free and fair elections in all groups.<sup>6</sup> I come back to this point at the end of this paper. The Associational and Organizational Rights sub category does play an even higher role in all the

<sup>6</sup> This is more important in party free countries than either free and not free countries. The difference may be explained because partly free countries can be in the shifting process of becoming full democracies, where more pluralism is added as a natural effect of democratic openness. Rather, not free democracies are by definition not plural, while free democracies may deal with factors such as de-alignment and turnout declines.

countries on average, but especially among not free countries. Given the fact that China does better in that sub category relative to the other not free countries, it may show that these rights of association in China are allowed (to a highly restricted point) for purposes other than for electoral processes. Among the results, there are other factors having small incidence for all countries, like Functioning of Government (positive effect) and Rule of Law (negative effect<sup>7</sup>), but they are statistically insignificant when are tested for each group separately.

Furthermore, when political scientists refer to free and fair elections, they are actually talking about elections for the highest leaders of a political system (Huntington, 1991). The Chinese villages represent the smallest administrative units of the PRC, and they are one-level down from the smallest political unit of the CCP, townships (including nationality townships and towns). Therefore, China has by no means begun its democratization process—as some scholars have argued (Horsely, 2001)—when elections (ignoring for now their quality) are only allowed in villages.

Even if we accept that China is striving to have free and fair elections at the village level, we still have to ask which kind of elections they really are. According to a 2001 Carter Center funded survey on the quality of elections in 40 villages randomly selected from five counties in Jilin Province (Long & Tong, 2001), the high levels of voter turnout (95.1% in the sample of villagers surveyed) and high levels of competition (42.9% of the villages examined had an index of competition over 0.667, considered high<sup>8</sup>) are proof of fair elections. However, the elections cannot be considered free when the institutional framework restricts ways of public campaigns: according to the villagers interviewed, almost 87% of communication with voters occurred only in village assemblies, and less than 1% of communication was by public means (radio and TV). In

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<sup>7</sup> This finding is hard to explain. Interestingly, the closest the variable Rule of Law is to be statistically significant is in free countries (p-value=0.104), with  $\beta = -0.106$ .

<sup>8</sup> Authors created an index of competitiveness, called Y, ranging from 0 (no competition) to 1 (perfect competition). The formula is as follows:  $Y = 1 - (X_1 - X_2)/X_0$ , where  $X_0$  is the total number of valid ballots;  $X_1$  the total number of ballots gained by 1<sup>st</sup> place candidate for villager committee chair, and  $X_2$  the total number of ballots won by the 2<sup>nd</sup> place candidate.

addition, villagers from the 35% of the villages surveyed reported that In-Trust Voting<sup>9</sup> occurred, accounting for an average of 12.5% of votes on those cases. Under such circumstances, the secret ballot and the considerations of free and fair elections are meaningless, because they lack the minimum conditions of transparency and publicity from the candidates' side, and privacy to vote from the voters' side. Such results are even more illustrative if we take into account another survey, this time presented by Niou (Niou, 2002), which shows that Jilin had the best implementation of village elections throughout the entire country. An obvious question arises: if Jilin had the best developed system of electoral implementation and lacked actual free-and-fair devices, how democratic is the situation in the rest of the PRC's villages system?

### **3. THE SYSTEM**

#### **3.1. Electoral Laws**

In 1987, the National People's Congress passed the Organic Law of the Village Committees of the People's Republic of China, stipulating that the chairman, vice-chairman, and members of village committee had to be elected directly by villagers every three years (Niou, 1999). Each committee is accountable before its constituents represented in the assembly, which in turn must be made up of all villagers at or above the age of 18. An assembly meeting can work either with the simple majority of the aforementioned adults, or with the representatives of two-thirds of the village's households. The latter seems to be more common, because assemblies work with 25-50 people appointed by small groups (Carter Center, 1997). This law had a trial implementation in some provinces close to Beijing.

Then in 1998, the Central Committee enacted the definitive Organic Law of Village Committees (OLVC) to facilitate the idea of self-governing units in the countryside, leading to a formal implementation of this set of rules. The main purpose of the law is to allow villagers to

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<sup>9</sup> According to the (formalized) Organic Law of 1998, one person can vote on behalf of another if he is authorized by a legal document. In some places they allow up to three In-Trust Votes; in others, only one. It seems that that exact number of proxy votes has been up to the official in charge of the ballot station.

self-govern in issues ranging from cooperative economic entrepreneurs to public order, including public infrastructure, education, dispute settlements, and of course, pursuing the socialist market economy. Typically, between 1,000 and 2,500 people inhabit each village, which might be very different from each other: there are villages with homogenous and heterogeneous ethnicities, and there are ones with grouped and scattered populations.<sup>10</sup> With few resources, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) took the lead role in making the law applicable throughout the country, in a process that was progressively spread out from Beijing to the periphery.<sup>11</sup>

There are two considerations to make before moving on to procedural details of elections. First, Article 1 of the OLVC establishes that the purpose of the law is to ensure self-government by rural villagers, in order to develop “democracy at the grassroots level in the country side” (“*nongcun jiceng minzhu*”). Thus, democracy is at the heart of this law’s self-declared objective. Second, that the CCP Central Committee, the highest authority of the party, has enacted several circulars trying to regulate the appropriate performance of rural grassroots elections,<sup>12</sup> but at the same time, has strengthened the idea that even rural village organization should follow party’s principles and Marxist ideology.<sup>13</sup> Even more, Article 3 states that the Chinese Communist Party must play a role of leading nucleus, and support villagers and ensure they carry out self-governance properly, exercising their democratic rights. Thus, the CCP has a more paternal role to play over villages than authorities from townships—who are one-level up to villages.

The electoral process begins with the appointment of the village election committee, which members might be secretaries of the CCP branch in the village. Although the OLVC requires those committees to be appointed by the villagers assembly or by all the villagers groups, it does not prohibit the CCP branch from intervening in the process, and even more

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<sup>10</sup> For villages with scattered populations, the law encourages the formation of villagers groups. They elect their own representatives for the villagers assembly.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed description of the historical process, see Su & Yang.

<sup>12</sup> This consideration is energetically highlighted in Pastor & Tan (2000)

<sup>13</sup> Originally in Chinese: [http://mzt.jl.gov.cn/zcfg/jczqhsqjs/200808/t20080827\\_437814.html](http://mzt.jl.gov.cn/zcfg/jczqhsqjs/200808/t20080827_437814.html). Accessed October 21, 2011 (in English using engine translators).

important, does not prohibit candidates from belonging to election committees.<sup>14</sup> Twenty days prior to the date of elections, both the names of voters and candidates should be made public. According to the law, there must be more candidates than persons to be elected, but there are no provisions in this law for cases where candidates are scarce. Each villagers committee is made up of a minimum of three and a maximum of seven members, including the chairman, vice-chairman (or two deputy chairmen), and the members. The OLVC also stipulates that women and ethnic minorities (for cases where more than one ethnic group exists) should be represented, but it does not provide thresholds to comply with this. All persons older than 18-years old have the right to cast a vote and to run for office, regardless of any personal, religious or ethnic condition. However, there is no freedom in regards to ideological position.

The law establishes that the elections must be by secret ballot and open-vote counting, with results being announced on the spot. For an election to be valid, at least a half of villagers who have the right to vote must cast their votes, but nothing is said for cases that do not meet this requirement. For example, whether there is a second call to vote, or whether committees' members can just be appointed by township's authorities. Candidates win with a simple majority of votes—again, nothing is said about possible runoffs if nobody has met the minimum threshold.

Although the law established minimum requirements and ways to hold elections, in practice, provinces effectively abandoned the procedural managing of elections. Many types of voting systems are present in a single province, and that means that each county or even township chooses its own electoral method. Voting systems ranges from candidates running for all positions altogether, by phases (first chairmanship, then deputy vice-chairmanship, then members), by a Two-Round-System or even by a variant of Alternative Vote where voters can rank their preferences in order to fill up the different positions available in a village (Niou, 2002). No reasons are given by provincial authorities, at least to public knowledge, explaining why they choose one system over the other. Organizers conduct elections in different ways and under different contexts. Some have provisions to guarantee the secret ballot while others do not. In

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<sup>14</sup> Pastor & Tan (2000) remind that most of provinces enacted rules to ban election committee members to run as candidates, but they saw same cases where candidates were members of the election committees.

many places, proxy voting is a common practice, and in others is not, giving the entire process in the country vagueness in the rules that many scholars are prompt to criticize (Tan, 2004).

### 3.2. Electoral Implementation

Today, there are direct elections in almost every village. However, we should be cautious with the concept of direct elections because simply allowing villagers to vote does not mean that elections are free and fair. In many cases, as we will see, the selection and nomination process is top-down, and therefore villagers have no genuine alternatives from the bottom, according to surveys conducted especially since the mid-1990s. As Pastor and Tan lament, a typical problem in assessing China's local elections are the size of the sample and the lack of national information collected by central authorities (Pastor & Tan, 2000).

Niou constructed an index of the implementation qualities of village elections based on the 1990s elections (Table 3). He used the number 4 to indicate the best implementation (direct election, competitive nomination, competitive election, faithfully implementation); 3 for satisfactory implementation; 2 for unfaithful implementation (or if in the case of a direct election, candidates were selected and nominated by the party or other government officials); and 1 if there was no direct election at all.

**Table 3: Overall Distribution of the Quality of the Implementation of Village Elections**

	1 [Worst]	2	3	4 [Best]
Number of answers	826	1,079	575	1,099
Percentages	23.08	30.15	16.07	30.71

Source: Emerson M.S. Niou, *Village Elections: Roots of Democratization in China*, in John F-S Hsieh and David Newman (eds.), *How Asia Votes*. New York: Seven Bridges Press. P. 26.



As previously mentioned, Jilian was ranked first in the index constructed by Niou. Therefore, it would be a good exercise to compare Niou's findings with how the competition was in a subsample of 28 villages surveyed in Jilian in the study funded by the Carter Center. Table 4 shows the level of competition corrected for the size of the villages.

**Table 4: Competitive Elections in Villages of Different Sizes**

<i>Level of Competition</i>	Villages with Population Size	
	Lesser than 1,000	Greater than 1,000
Low	7.1%	42.9%
Moderate	35.7%	28.6%
High	57.1%	28.6%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (14)</i>	<i>100% (14)</i>

Ganma<sup>§</sup> = 0.594, p < 0.05

<sup>§</sup> The Ganma value indicates a negative correlation between size of the village and level of competition: the greater the size, the lower the level of competition. It is significant. Source: Long & Tong (2001);, p. 14.

In Jilian, where the level of competition of its fifth round of village elections surveyed in the Carter Center study was the highest in its sample of the PRC, the most populated villages had the worst performance. According to the authors, the lower level of information about candidates (due to a large territory) and the elite importance in the decision-making process are possible explanations for the low level of competition in the most populated areas. The inverse applies for the less populated villages (Long & Tong, 2001). I have made a further conclusion: this dataset exposes the extremely short reach of elections at the village level. When smaller units have elections, the central authority and its cascade of sub-level officials all the way down to townships are less of a concern because such small units do not represent any significant challenge for the way the party makes its policies. In other words, if peasants of a small village criticize the way the central government distributes benefits to them, few leaders will pay attention. On the other hand, the bigger the unit, the more potential challenges the party may

face if critics grow in number and, therefore, the less competitive their elections should be. This is a natural consequence of having a state party rule.

### 3.3. Authority

Concerning elections of the most powerful collective decision makers, Huntington says that when voters elect fronts or puppets of other groups, there is no democracy at all in such a system (Huntington, 1991). Although his scope is limited to the highest level of political elections, we may apply his framework to the village level as well. To put it in context: it is one thing to have free and fair elections and a very different thing to have authorities exercising such electoral power in the decision-making process. O'Brien and Han actually make this important distinction when they differentiate between 'access to power' in China (which they consider pretty improved after 20 years of elections in villages) and 'exercise of power' (O'Brien & Han), following the conceptualization by Mazzuca (Mazzuca, 2007). As O'Brien and Han state:

*The process of putting democracy in place goes well beyond 'getting the procedures right', especially in an authoritarian setting where democracy is not the only game in town [...] Governance, even in a single village, has many components and expanded access to power conditions, but does not determine how power is exercised. 'High quality democracy' in rural China, let alone the whole nation, rests on much more than good village elections. (O'Brien & Han, pág. 378)*

I contend that elections in what O'Brien and Hall call "rural China" are simply non-democratic. How can we call them democratic if there are no well-established procedures, minimum requirements, standardized requisites and mechanisms of conflict resolutions throughout the whole (unitary!) country? Many see the PRC as a federalist or semi-federalist country in terms of economic issues, but very few would argue that the country is politically federalist; on the contrary, the exercise of power is absolutely centralized.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, if a unitary political system lacks unitary electoral procedures, it means that those elections are

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<sup>15</sup> Many scholars differentiate both dimensions, which clearly emerged after the fiscal reforms of 1994. Some examples: Yang (2003), Huang (2008) and Shirk (1993).

more a façade of democracy (or grassroots democracy, as many mistakenly call them) than a real one.

Voters also have different reasons to cast a vote, and they are not always closely related to democratic incentives (Shi, 1999). As Chen and Zhong found, the more democratic a person is in China in terms of their values and expectations, the less likely they will vote in village elections (Chen & Zhong, 2002).<sup>16</sup> There are no reasons provided of this behavior, but we can infer it occurs because such voters do not trust the system, so do not even bother to vote. In addition, there are subsidies associated with voting in many provinces, like in Jilin (Long & Tong, 2001), which subverts the idea that democracy is about a non-direct monetary rewarded exercise of popular power.<sup>17</sup> In a large-scale survey project, other researchers found that elected village authorities provided more public goods to their constituents than those who were not elected. At the same time, incumbent authorities who were re-elected were more subject to do pork barrel politics later, therefore diminishing the quality of governance (Luo, Zhang, Huang, & Rozelle, 2007). Elections are the first step in the origin of an authority, but it does not limit the extent to which an authority exercises his power.

O'Brien and Han rightly assert that international scholars have placed the most attention on the act of elections in villages, probably because of their novelty, rather than the post-election stage. As they recall, the PRC's OLVC includes four so-called democratic features of village self-governance: elections, decision-making, management, and supervision (O'Brien & Han). Elections have arguably been free and fair; at most, one can say that in some counties, village elections have a high degree of freedom and fairness. Is it enough to declare the system as free and fair? As for decision-making, management, and supervision aspects, the law contemplates ways to make authorities accountable when. For example, villagers themselves can organize to dismiss all or part of their village committee. In addition, village committees

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<sup>16</sup> Authors' results are in explicit contrast of Shi (1999a). Both used different survey data: Chen and Zhong's one is more recent (1995) and focused on urban and rural Beijing area, while Shi's is older (1990-1991) and nationwide based.

<sup>17</sup> Many democratic countries apply compulsory voting, but they do not compensate voters with valuable goods or money in exchange.

must convey an annual assembly meeting to report its work. These oversight devices are welcome, albeit the most influential supervision still comes from the Party.

The real exercise of power of villagers comes not from their elected authorities or even from one-level up (like township officials), but from higher levels of the CCP. As Niou shows from a survey conducted across the whole country, where elections had the worst performance, the authority really exercising power was predominantly the village party chief, and where elections had the best performance, the village council had the real power (Table 5). Overall, the final say in the village came from the village council in only 43% of the sample, but roughly ¼ of them were not directly elected by villagers.

**Table 5: Election Quality and Village Power Center**

<i>Who has the final say in your village?</i>	1 [Worst]	2	3	4 [Best]	Row Total
Township Government	8.8%	4.6%	3.7%	0.6%	4.2%
Village Party Chief	37.3%	35.9%	19%	6.4%	24.6%
Joint Committee (party branch and village committee)	22.7%	25.8%	26.1%	18.3%	22.9%
Committee's Chairman	7%	5.3%	5.7%	1.6%	4.7%
Village Council (groups' representatives)	24.2%	26.4%	45.5%	73.1%	43.6%
<i>Total</i>	<i>23.3%</i>	<i>30.6%</i>	<i>16.3%</i>	<i>29.9%</i>	<i>100%</i>

Source: Emerson M.S. Niou, Village Elections: Roots of Democratization in China, in John F-S Hsieh and David Newman (eds.), *How Asia Votes*. New York: Seven Bridges Press. P. 29

Furthermore, elected village leaders must also compete *after* the elections for the margin of power they supposedly have. They have to compete against township officials, clans, party branch members in the village, and criminal organizations such as gangs (O'Brien & Han).

Given that most of the real power does not come from the ones elected, peasants wanting greater respect for their rights can use a more effective way to reach justice by using the petition claim (*xinfang*) before higher level authority (Minzner, 2006). In addition, the fire alarm role of media, NGOs and association of lawyers on human rights are also more powerful means for the people to be listened at higher levels.<sup>18</sup> The real exercise of power is at upper levels; the rest—for which I mean elections and local governance—seems little more than good intentions at best.

Liu Zhihua the chief of the Dongjie village, in Henan Province,<sup>19</sup> says that “democracy is alive” in rural China. In her village the system of governance is as follows: each village household is an active shareholder of the Jinghua Industrial Corporation, the organization that manages the properties of the village and controls its resources. “All the projects, from garbage disposal, road construction to waterway cleanup, must come under the ‘sunshine’ policymaking,” she declares. Certainly, she seems to have a real power over which decisions should be made; however, we should clarify something else: Ms. Liu is also a National People’s Congress (NPC) deputy with several years of membership in the CCP. To what extent does she represent the two principals she is an agent of (her constituents and the party)? If I were pressed to respond, I would say that if she did not accomplish her tasks in Dongjie properly, she would still have a position in the NPC; if she did not do the same in the party, her position in the village would be at risk.

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<sup>18</sup> Hart, Melanie. Environmental Protection: Official Malfeasance and Fire Alarm Policy in a Medium-Risk Sector. Unpublished PhD dissertation chapter, Department of Political Science, UCSD.

<sup>19</sup> This story and its following quotes have been excerpted from Li (2011).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholars were excited to learn that the PRC held their first election at the village level in the 1980s and how such a system has evolved to cover the whole 31 provinces of the country. As a skeptic, I argue that much of the so-called grassroots democracy is no more than a façade of democracy, as 1) the elections are competitive in a restricted number of villages; 2) villages do not exercise the power the law supposedly gives them; 3) village authorities, either elected in a competitive selection process or not, are still under the power of higher level authorities or else; 4) villages themselves are too small in size and scope to really be taken as an electoral unit with powerful effects; and 5) there are no minimum electoral standards shared by all villages. Many scholars magnified the “democratic” consequences of having village elections, just because they were dressed in competition, but they are not really competitive elections.

As we saw from combining the sub-categories of the *Freedom in the World* 2011, Political Pluralism and Participation makes a positive contribution to Electoral Process. If we were forced to accept that at least political participation in rural China has evolved (the sub-category for China scores 1, which is better than 0), we still cannot agree that political pluralism exists. In a country where its constitution and further laws establish a one-party state, pluralism is derogated by definition. “Acknowledgement from the parties make discoveries non-essential,” any lawyer would say. Thus, China cannot have breakdown improvements in the way direct elections are conducted in the countryside as far as pluralism has no space to grow.

The approach the PRC should take to make elections truly competitive is a series of steps guaranteeing fairness and freedom. These include:

- 1) Standardizing procedures and rules throughout the 31 provinces and its more than 900,000 villages, including: a) the voting system, b) a period time of fixed elections, c) finance campaigning restrictions, d) freedom of campaigning, e) term limits of incumbency, f) prohibition of competition of the members of the CCP, and g) introduction of formal manifestos;
- 2) Establishing a central electoral commission overseeing the strict enforcement of free nomination process of candidates and their elections, and also gathering and

publishing official information of the process and outcomes of elections. To have public information of the outcomes of elections may strongly help the quality of politics in China, as well as its reputation both inside and outside;

- 3) Creating a stronger division of functions and responsibilities for village administrations, including a greater autonomy on resources distribution. Village committees' members should earn a monthly payment and have exclusive dedication to their charges. To avoid financial problems with townships and counties, resources should be legally distributed by provincial authorities under village formal and documented request; the Central Committee of the CCP should, in turn, designate a commission to randomly oversee the feasibility of village' requests and the way provinces respond to them.
- 4) Forcing the village council to release to the public a yearbook of goals achieved and goals pending; and
- 5) Promoting nearby villages to associate in particular projects to lower costs and enhance production efficiency, in order to strengthen the self-governance of these units.

Each particular measure proposed here should probably have an incremental effect over efficient performance when taken together. The CCP would gain legitimacy at the grassroots level for allowing more effective participation in both the elections and the decision-making process. All in all, rural citizens would feel they are playing the same playing field with other citizens in the country, while at the same time their elected authorities are more accountable. Nonetheless, having these advances does not mean that democracy is *really* happening in China, even at its grassroots.

To be called democratic, Chinese village elections should accomplish a major task: to have no single interference from their one-party ruler. That, in an authoritarian system by definition, is currently impossible. For instance, the elections might be freer and fairer, but the CCP will never allow declared opponents to the CCP to control (in paper or effectively) any single unit of the country.

Some argue that the Western view of democracy is biased to the way Westerners conceive it, and that China is developing its own way of democracy, so call grassroots democracy is not a misspelling term. Of course, even in the West there is no a single catch-all definition of democracy, or at least one that makes everyone happy, as I discussed in previous pages. But as science makes progress, so theory does, and what is democracy here *must be* democracy there. In other words: democracy needs some minimum requirements, and China does not meet them. Democracy, for instance, cannot be understood as the sum of pieces in a country (to say, villages) even if they improve to a point that many of the elements of freedom and fairness are met to a certain extent.

The Queen tried several times to kill Snow White, but always failed. The Chinese attempts at having democracy is like those failed tries of the Queen: although they try to give to the people a substitute of democracy, sooner or later the people will realize that the flavor of real democracy is not falsifiable. By then, the mirror on the wall could already be broken.



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