

Varieties of Electoral Institutions in China's Grassroots Democracy: Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Evidence from Rural China

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Abstract

Grassroots democracy has been practised in rural China for more than a decade. However, despite the existence of a mountain of evidence, evaluations of the quality of China's rural grassroots democracy, particularly electoral institutions, have unfortunately been inconclusive, due to primary reliance on case studies and local surveys. Moreover, the lack of comparable data over time prohibits effective studies on the evolution of grassroots democracy in Chinese villages. This article tries to provide some systematic information on how village committee elections are practised and have evolved in China, using two village surveys based on comparable national probability samples, implemented in 2002 and 2005 respectively. It further explores the validity of some key theories in contemporary literature on the uneven implementation of village committee elections in China with the help of an integrated regression model.

Keywords: Rural China; grassroots democracy; varying implementation; electoral institutions; national surveys; longitudinal comparison

Grassroots democracy in rural China, that is to say, village committee elections (VCEs), has attracted enormous attention from scholars and observers of China politics in the past decades, with “a mountain of evidence” accumulated.¹ Unfortunately, as some criticism points out, China scholars can basically find the evidence to support any argument.² In addition to the lasting debate on how to interpret contradictory empirical evidence, China scholars are also

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1 For the most recent comprehensive review on VCEs in rural China, see K.J. O'Brien and Rongbin Han, “Path to democracy? Assessing village elections in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 18, No. 60 (2009), pp. 359–78.

2 M. Manion, “How to assess village elections in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 18, No. 60 (2009), pp. 379–83.

actively deliberating over the pros and cons of different approaches in assessing VCEs.

O'Brien and Han recently promoted a shift in the focus of contemporary research from "access to power" to "exercise of power," and a move beyond examining electoral institutions.³ Others acknowledge the significance of "exercise of power" in Chinese villages, but still argue for the salience of the procedural dimension of grassroots democracy, that is, "access to power."⁴ Though fully sympathizing with O'Brien and Han's research agenda, this article, in alignment with other China scholars, argues that it is important to assess the empirical findings on electoral institutions before moving on to the "exercise of power" in rural China, for the following reasons.

First, promoting liberal democracy in an authoritarian regime relies highly on the implementation of transparent and competitive elections. In other words, democratic "exercise of power" cannot be isolated from "access to power" following democratic procedures. Such procedures, once strictly followed, should be able to improve political accountability, facilitate participation and ultimately enhance the quality of governance.⁵

Second, despite its initial bottom-up momentum, the evolution of grassroots democracy in rural China has primarily followed a top-down process involving multiple actors with conflicting interests.⁶ A transparent and competitive VCE with village cadres held accountable to fellow villagers, when compared to a rigged VCE with township officials dominating the nomination process with their favourite candidates, has significantly different implications for the "exercise of power" in villages. Moreover, once VCEs become the only officially sanctioned arena for political competition, various social forces could be channelled into this arena.⁷ Thus the process of implementing VCEs becomes a focal point in Chinese village politics, offering a great opportunity to examine the state–society

3 O'Brien and Han, "Path to democracy?"

4 Besides Manion's piece, see Qingshan Tan, "Building democratic infrastructure: village electoral institutions," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 18, No. 60 (2009), pp. 411–20; Bjorn Alpermann, "Institutionalizing village governance in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 18, No. 60 (2009), pp. 397–409.

5 On how transparent VCEs have improved political accountability and political trust, see M. Manion, "Democracy, community, trust: the impact of elections in rural China," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2006), pp. 301–24. On how villagers have responded to electoral institutions in their participation, see T. Shi, "Voting and non-voting in China," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (1999), pp. 1115–39. On how VCEs have improved local governance, see Renfu Luo, Linxiu Zhang, Jikun Huang and Scott Rozelle, "Elections, fiscal reform and public goods provision in rural China," *Journal of Comparative Economics*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2007), pp. 583–611.

6 On the bottom-up momentum of VCEs, see K.J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating 'democracy' in a one-party state: introducing village elections in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 162 (2000), pp. 465–89. On different political actors with conflicting interests in VCEs, see John James Kennedy, "The face of 'grassroots democracy' in rural China: real versus cosmetic elections," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2002), pp. 456–82.

7 On the role of clan and lineage organizations in VCEs, see Tangbiao Xiao, *Zongzu zhengzhi: cunzhi quanli wangluo de fenxi (Politics of Clans and Lineages: An Analysis of the Nexus of Power in Village Governance)* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan Press, 2010). On the role of "evil forces" in VECs, see Xuefeng He, *Xiangcun zhili de shehui jichu (Social Foundation of Rural Governance)* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2003).

relationship in rural China and providing a salient process for understanding the dynamics among numerous political forces in Chinese villages.

In response to Manion's appeal for more systematic and comparative work on the "varieties of elections" in rural China,⁸ this article examines the implementation of VCEs with the help of two unique sets of data collected in 2002 and 2005.⁹ The first covers 241 administrative villages in 22 provinces and the second covers 379 administrative villages in 27 provinces. This article tries to provide systematic information on the institutional quality of VCEs, examine how the practice has been evolving and explore the plausibility of different arguments on the existence of such dramatic variance.

Because of some limits in the data, all conclusions drawn are tentative and should be further evaluated against other high-quality representative data. Nevertheless, given all logistic and financial constraints, it is rare to be able to assess the quality of VCE electoral institutions using two comparable nationwide probability samples. Thus, all information in this article should be of significant value in enriching our understanding of the political ecology in rural China in general and democratic politics in these communities in particular.

Varieties of Electoral Institutions

In addition to promulgating that administrative leaders of any village should be directly elected by its residents and such elections should be held every three years, the Organic Law of Village Committees (OLVC, drafted in 1987 and amended in 1998) also provides detailed stipulations on how to implement VCEs:

Article 13: Members of Village Election Committee should be recommended by Villager Assembly (*cunmin huiyi* 村民会议) or Villager Small Groups (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组).

Article 14: Nominations should be directly made by eligible villagers. And the number of candidates should be more than the number of positions.

To what extent have VCEs been implemented following such stipulations? Previous case studies and local surveys have generally agreed upon the following: first, the implementation is uneven across regions; and second, over the years, the quality of electoral institutions has steadily improved. To evaluate the first statement systematically at the national level, more information is required than that provided by case studies and local surveys. To assess the second statement effectively, longitudinal evidence collected through comparable surveys is needed. Contemporary literature on grassroots democracy in rural China has limited pertinent information for either purpose.¹⁰

8 Manion, "How to assess village elections in China."

9 The 2002 survey was part of the Asian Barometer Survey I project, examining political culture, attitudes and behaviour in Asia. The 2005 survey was sponsored by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Carter Centre, examining grassroots democracy and governance in rural China. For more information on the projects, see www.asianbarometersurvey.org and www.chinaelections.org respectively.

10 With a few exceptions, most quantitative studies on VCEs examine a large number of villages within only a few selected provinces. There are 325 villages from 25 provinces in T. Shi, "Economic development and election in rural China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 8, No. 22 (1999), pp. 425–42,

Fortunately, two village surveys, embedded in two nationwide surveys implemented by the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2002 and 2005, provide valuable information to evaluate both statements.¹¹ With richer data at hand, it is appropriate to examine whether “procedural features mandated by the revised Organic Law on Village Committees are the norm in village elections after 2000” or not.¹² And it is also possible to scrutinize the evolution of grassroots democracy in rural China, particularly in institutional quality.¹³

For most VCEs, four stages are involved: organization of a village election committee; candidate nominations; certain procedures to identify finalists if there are too many nominated candidates; and ballot casting.¹⁴ In 2002 and 2005, village clerks (*cunwenshu* 村文书) of sampled villages were interviewed about the various measures adopted at different stages of their most recent VCEs.¹⁵ Pertinent information is summarized in Table 1.

In 2002, when it came to organizing village election committees, 42.7 per cent of sampled villages followed recommendations from their villager assemblies and 14.1 per cent took recommendations from villager small groups, both of which are compatible with the revised OLVC. In 2005, the figures dropped a little:

footnote continued

and 961 villages from 22 provinces in Sato Hiroshi, “Public goods provision and rural governance in China,” *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2008), pp. 281–98. Nevertheless, Shi only evaluates VCEs based on whether multiple candidates are used, and Hiroshi’s data have little information on the quality of VCEs.

- 11 A stratified multistage area sampling procedure with probabilities proportional to size measure was used to select the sample in 2002. This is a national representative sample covering both urban and rural areas. Since VCEs are the focus, only the rural subsample is used in this article. In rural areas, the primary sampling units (PSUs) were counties, the second sampling units (SSUs) were townships and the tertiary sampling units (TSUs) were administrative villages. Altogether, 253 villages were selected from 22 provinces. A village questionnaire was used to collect information on various aspects of the selected villages, including the electoral procedures of the most recent VCEs. A total of 241 village questionnaires were completed and returned. The same stratified multistage area sampling procedure was used in 2005. The 2005 sample was a national representative sample *only* for rural areas. The PSUs were counties, the SSUs were townships and the TSUs were administrative villages. Altogether, 379 villages were selected from 27 provinces and a village questionnaire similar to that in 2002 was used. All 379 questionnaires were returned in 2005. Sampling weights have been adjusted accordingly for analysis, following best practice in analysing complex survey data.
- 12 Manion, “How to assess village elections in China,” p. 380.
- 13 Though these two surveys do not follow a panel design, at the national level they are legitimate repeated evaluations of VCEs in rural China across time. For methodological justification on this longitudinal evidence, see Daniel F. Chambliss and Russell K. Schutt, *Making Sense of the Social World* (Washington, DC: Pine Forge Press, 2010), pp. 31–37.
- 14 Since the survey was not designed for examining electoral institutions, some critical aspects, e.g. using roving ballot boxes, were not included. Nevertheless, if the quality of electoral institutions is evaluated all-inclusively on whether all procedures are transparent, this article provides a liberal estimate.
- 15 In the 2002 survey, multiple adopted measures were recorded for organizing village election committees, nominating candidates and identifying finalists. However, in 2005 only one measure was recorded for such procedures. Therefore the 2005 data could overestimate the percentage of villages strictly following the revised OLVC, due to the possible adoption of both legitimate and undemocratic measures. However, these are the best data now available.

Table 1: **Electoral Institutions of VCEs in 2002 and 2005**

	2002	2005
Organization of village election committee		
Recommended by the villager assembly	42.74% (103)	39.58% (150)
Recommended by villager small groups	14.11% (34)	8.71% (33)
Recommended by the villager representative assembly	37.76% (91)	42.74% (162)
Recommended by the Party branch	17.84% (43)	3.96% (15)
Recommended by the outgoing village committee	3.32% (8)	1.32% (5)
Recommended by the township government	3.32% (8)	2.37% (9)
Nomination of candidates		
Primary election (<i>haixuan</i>)	36.51% (88)	55.67% (211)
Joint nomination by eligible villagers	33.61% (81)	16.89% (64)
Self-nomination	17.84% (43)	3.17% (12)
Nomination by the Party branch and other organizations	15.77% (38)	3.96% (15)
Nomination by higher-level officials	4.56% (11)	0.53% (2)
Nomination by villager small groups or villager representative assembly	36.10% (87)	16.62% (63)
Nomination by village election committee	8.20% (20)	2.90% (11)
Finalization of formal candidates		
Pre-election (<i>yuxuan</i>)	35.68% (86)	36.94% (140)
Finalized by villager representative assembly	48.96% (118)	46.44% (176)
Finalized through internal negotiations (<i>xieshang yunniang</i>)	9.54% (23)	5.01% (19)
Finalized by village election committee	9.13% (22)	5.01% (19)
Finalized by the Party branch	4.98% (12)	0.53% (2)
Finalized by higher-level officials	4.98% (12)	1.85% (7)
Other	0.41% (1)	3.96% (15)
Multiple candidates		
Committee chairman	85.06% (205)	91.56% (347)
Committee members	86.31% (208)	95.25% (361)

Notes:

Raw frequencies in parentheses. Because of the adoption of more than one measure at some stages, the summary of percentages is not equal to 100.

Sources:

2002 village survey (N = 241) and 2005 village survey (N = 379) in mainland China.

39.6 per cent counted on villager assemblies and 8.7 per cent followed recommendations from villager small groups. At the same time, other measures not endorsed by the OLVC were also used. In 2002, more than 37.8 per cent used villager representative assemblies, 17.8 per cent followed the instructions of Party branches, and a small number of villages even took orders from township governments (3.3 per cent) or outgoing village committees (3.3 per cent). In 2005, more villages (42.7 per cent) counted on villager representative assemblies while far fewer (3.96 per cent) took orders from Party branches. However, there were still some villages that followed instructions from township governments (2.37 per cent) or outgoing village committees (1.32 per cent).

Similar variance emerges when the measures used for nominating candidates are examined. In 2002, primary election (*haixuan* 海选) (36.5 per cent), joint nomination by eligible villagers (33.6 per cent) and self-nomination (17.8 per cent) were adopted in a fair number of villages. Nevertheless, Party branches

(15.8 per cent), higher-level officials (4.6 per cent), villager small groups/villager representative assemblies (36.1 per cent) and village election committees (8.2 per cent) also played significant roles, activities that are expressly barred in the revised OLVC. In 2005, a much larger percentage of sampled villages (55.7 per cent) adopted primary elections, with significant drops in the adoption of the other two legitimate measures, with joint nomination at 16.9 per cent and self-nomination at 3.17 per cent. The influence of other local organizations and groups was also dramatically reduced: Party branches (3.9 per cent), higher-level officials (0.5 per cent), villager small groups/villager representative assemblies (16.6 per cent) and village election committees (2.9 per cent).

When there are too many candidates, the candidate pool has to be further narrowed. In 2002, 35.7 per cent of sampled villages used pre-election (*yuxuan* 预选). Other villages chose different strategies: villager representative assemblies (49 per cent), internal negotiations (*xieshang yunniang* 协商酝酿) (9.5 per cent), village election committees (9.1 per cent), Party branches (5 per cent) or higher-level officials (5 per cent) influenced the selection of finalists. The situation did not change much in 2005: 36.9 per cent used pre-election and 46.4 per cent authorized villager representative assemblies to make decisions. The rest finalized their candidates through internal negotiations (5.0 per cent), decisions from village election committees (5.0 per cent), Party branches (0.5 per cent), higher-level officials (1.9 per cent) or other unspecified means (3.9 per cent).

With regard to adopting multiple-candidate elections (*cha'e xuanju* 差额选举), Table 1 shows much less variance. In 2002, 85.1 per cent used multiple-candidate elections to select the chairmen of their village committees and 86.3 per cent adopted the same procedure for selecting other members. In 2005, these two figures jumped to 91.6 per cent and 95.3 per cent respectively.

Since more than one measure could be used at some stages of VCEs, in order to evaluate the quality of electoral institutions rigorously I have strictly assessed each procedure against the OLVC. Any measure not officially sanctioned by the revised OLVC was coded as a violation. Table 2 shows the percentage of sampled villages that strictly followed the revised OLVC in implementing their most recent VCEs in 2002 and 2005 respectively.

Table 2: VCEs Following the 1998 OLVC in 2002 and 2005

	2002	2005
Organization of village election committee	42.32% (102)	48.48% (183)
Nomination of candidates	51.87% (125)	75.73% (287)
Finalization of formal candidates	29.46% (71)	36.94% (140)
Multiple candidates	79.67% (192)	91.03% (345)
Electoral institution as a whole	11.20% (27)	16.62% (63)

Note:

Raw frequencies in parentheses.

Sources:

2002 village survey (N = 241) and 2005 village survey (N = 379) in mainland China.

Table 2 shows that in 2002, 42.3 per cent of sampled villages organized village election committees strictly following the revised OLVC. Slightly more than 51 per cent nominated their candidates through various legitimate means. With regard to finalist identification, 29.5 per cent did not violate the revised OLVC. Moreover, 79.7 per cent had multiple candidates for both the chairman and member elections. In 2005, varying progress was observed: 48.5 per cent strictly followed the revised OLVC in organizing election committees; 75.7 per cent had their candidates nominated through legitimate means; 36.9 per cent did not have any violations in identifying finalists; and 91 per cent adopted multiple-candidate elections. This comparison between 2002 and 2005 provides some new and stimulating information for evaluating the two general agreements in contemporary literature: the uneven implementation of VCEs and the improvement in the electoral quality of VCEs over the years.

The implementation of VCEs is obviously uneven across Chinese villages. However, the empirical evidence given above also suggests that the variation is much more than the regional variance suggested in contemporary literature; there is also significant difference among procedures in the same election. Comparatively speaking, adopting multiple-candidate elections has become something close to the norm in VCEs. However, other procedures mandated by the OLVC are not yet commonly used. More specifically, candidate nomination is very likely to be manipulated,¹⁶ and the most serious manipulations in both 2002 and 2005 show up in finalist identification.

This comparison over time for each stage also reveals the progress in VCE institutional quality over the years. Nevertheless, the situation is still worrying when the overall quality of VCEs is evaluated. In this case, to be an overall high-quality VCE, all stages of the election must have been implemented strictly following the revised OLVC. Applying this criterion, as shown in the bottom of Table 2, only 11.2 per cent of sampled villages had high-quality VCEs in 2002. Although this number climbed to 16.6 per cent in 2005, a large majority of Chinese villages still violated the revised OLVC at some stage or other. Basically, seven years after the revised OLVC, only a little more than 16 per cent of Chinese villages had high-quality elections, ensured by non-compromised electoral procedures. This discouraging reality prompts a natural question: why is there such variance in the electoral institutions of VCEs?¹⁷

Different Arguments on the Variance of VCE Electoral Institutions

Contemporary literature on China's rural democracy suggests four primary explanations for the uneven implementation of VCEs: socioeconomic features,¹⁸

16 O'Brien and Han suggest that primary elections have spread to 26 provinces. However, this conclusion is based on election procedures and legal documents made by different provinces, rather than practice in reality. O'Brien and Han, "Path to democracy?" p. 364.

17 Here I focus on the regional variance to facilitate the dialogue with contemporary literature.

18 For detailed arguments on this, see Shi, "Economic development and election in rural China"; Rong

intervention from higher-level governments (particularly township governments),¹⁹ the influence of social groups (especially clan/lineage organizations) in rural communities,²⁰ and political learning.²¹ Fortunately, the 2002 survey includes some data on the features of sampled villages. This enables a preliminary exploration of the validity of different arguments in an integrated model.²²

The average per capita income was used as a proxy for the level of economic development.²³ Distance to the township seat and the percentage of villagers who were CCP members were used as a rough guide to the possible influence of township officials.²⁴ Regarding the influence of clan/lineage organizations, the clan structure of each sampled village was divided into three: a community without clans, with a dominant clan or with competing clans.²⁵ Finally, whether rounds of VCEs had been held before the most recent one, and whether they were held before the trial of the OLVC was announced, were used as two proxies for villages' experience with VCEs.²⁶

In addition to the aforementioned four primary explanations, China scholars have pointed out another two structural features that might affect the quality

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Hu, "Economic development and the implementation of village elections in rural China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 14, No. 44 (2005), pp. 427–44.

- 19 For detailed arguments on this, see Kennedy, "The face of 'grassroots democracy' in rural China"; K.J. O'Brien, "Implementing political reform in China's villages," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (1994), pp. 33–59.
- 20 For detailed arguments on this, see Tangbiao Xiao, *Politics of Clans and Lineages*. The influence of clan and lineage organizations is not unique to south China. For similar cases in north China, see Zongze Hu, "Power to the people? Villagers' self-rule in a north China village from the locals' point of view," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 17, No. 57 (2008), pp. 611–31.
- 21 For detailed arguments on this, see Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi, "Political experience: a missing variable in the study of political transformation," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2009), pp. 103–20.
- 22 For unknown reasons, the 2005 survey did not collect information on villages' clan structure and migrant workers. Thus, a parallel model cannot be estimated with the 2005 data.
- 23 Villages were categorized into four groups according to the sample distribution of per capita income. Villages falling between the lowest value and 25% of the sample distribution were categorized as low income; those between 25% and 50% were categorized as medium low income; those between 50% and 75% were categorized as medium high income; and those between 75% and the largest value were categorized as high income. The 25%, 50% and 75% percentiles of this variable in the 2002 sample were 800, 1,264, and 2,150 yuan respectively. To capture the possible curvilinear relationship, its quadratic item was also included.
- 24 These two indicators are not perfect but they are the best available information in the 2002 survey. This percentage of CCP members was transformed into an ordinal variable. Villages were categorized into four groups according to the sample distribution of this percentage. The 25%, 50% and 75% percentiles of this variable in the 2002 sample were 1.79%, 2.29% and 3.01% respectively. The number of CCP members has also been tried for analysis, and the results do not change much.
- 25 It was transformed in to two binaries for analysis. The base-category for comparison is villages without clans. This measure is not perfect, but offers critical advantages over other measures for cross-regional analysis. Surname index is a misleading indicator of the clan/lineage structure in a village, since people sharing a surname may come from different clans/lineages. The number of ancestral halls is a good indicator of clan/lineage structures in south China, but much less meaningful in north China. Other voluntary associations like the Senior Association may also play some role here. Unfortunately, the 2002 survey did not have related information.
- 26 More specifically, the existence of VCEs before 1988 was used to control for the bottom-up momentum in VCEs.

of VCEs: the average level of political sophistication²⁷ and outward migration.²⁸ The former was captured by the percentage of villagers who had completed at least primary education,²⁹ and the latter was measured by the percentage of villagers working as migrant workers in other cities.³⁰

Before moving on to regression analysis, two methodological concerns need to be addressed: the operationalization of the dependent variable and missing values in the data. Two possible approaches for operationalizing the dependent variable are a summary index³¹ and a binary variable.³² The first assigns equal weight to different procedures, and the second assigns “veto power” to each procedure in determining the democratic nature of VCEs. To minimize the possible influence of the operationalization and check the robustness of the explanatory power of different variables, I have adopted both approaches and specified parallel models for comparison. A logistic model was chosen for the dichotomous approach. For the summary index approach, both ordered logistic and OLS models were used.³³ Moreover, to reduce the possible influence of missing values, all missing values have been filled in with predicted values based on multiple imputations.³⁴ The average results over five completed data sets are summarized in Table 3.

Among all four primary explanations, only social groups have shown persistent and significant influence across different model specifications and operationalizations. Villages with competing clans are significantly more likely to have high-quality electoral institutions. Basically, VCEs have effectively attracted and channelled the efforts of social groups within rural communities. Moreover, the involvement of social groups in VCEs has pushed for more transparent and competitive elections. This should not be a surprise given the lack of officially endorsed platforms for organized campaigns in VCEs, as well as the power of clan and lineage organizations in mobilizing collective efforts, enforcing social sanctions and spreading information.

The socioeconomic explanation is not significantly supported by the regression analysis. Regardless of model specifications, neither per capita income nor its

27 For detained arguments on this, see Shi, “Voting and non-voting in China.”

28 For detained arguments on this, see Yong Xu and Zengyang Xu, *Liudong zhong de xiangcun zhili (Governance and Floating Population)* (Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 2003).

29 This variable was transformed into an ordinal variable according to its sample distribution. The 25%, 50% and 75% percentiles of this variable in the 2002 sample were 35.99%, 48.95% and 61.91% respectively.

30 This variable was transformed into an ordinal variable according to its sample distribution. The 25%, 50% and 75% percentiles of this variable in the 2002 sample were 4.21%, 10.37% and 17.85% respectively.

31 Since all four procedures examined in Table 2 have been evaluated against the 1998 OLVC and coded as dummies, the summary index ranges from 0 to 4.

32 In this dichotomous approach, elections with any procedural violations are categorized as rigged.

33 Given the nature of summary index, it should be more appropriately analysed as an ordinal variable. Nevertheless, similar summary indexes have also been analysed as continuous variables in contemporary literature.

34 On multiple imputation, see Gary King, James Honaker, Anne Joseph and Kenneth Scheve, “Analyzing incomplete political science data: an alternative algorithm for multiple imputation,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2001), pp. 49–69.

Table 3: Results of Logistic, Ordered Logistic and OLS Models

	Logit		Ordered Logit		OLS	
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Income per capita	0.189 (0.242)	-0.933 (1.633)	-0.065 (0.147)	-0.269 (0.684)	-0.029 (0.085)	-0.125 (0.411)
Income per capita squared		0..217 (0.325)		0.041 (0.136)		0.019 (0.081)
Level of education	0.069 (0.247)	0.060 (0.244)	0.054 (0.154)	0.055 (0.153)	0.031 (0.087)	0.029 (0.087)
Percentage of migrant workers	-0.467 (0.268)*	-0.457 (0.267)*	-0.093 (0.152)	-0.089 (0.150)	-0.054 (0.088)	-0.052 (0.087)
Distance to the township seat	-0.100 (0.446)	-0.108 (0.461)	0.082 (0.176)	0.082 (0.177)	0.057 (0.100)	0.056 (0.100)
CCP's influence	-0.068 (0.261)	-0.112 (0.287)	0.049 (0.123)	0.041 (0.128)	0.031 (0.074)	0.028 (0.077)
Existence of competing clans	2.504 (0.685)***	2.511 (0.694)***	1.458 (0.544)***	1.451 (0.540)***	0.810 (0.290)***	0.806 (0.290)***
Existence of a dominant clan	-0.225 (0.791)	-0.217 (0.798)	-0.119 (0.324)	-0.119 (0.325)	-0.060 (0.192)	-0.059 (0.192)
First election	2.045 (0.934)**	1.994 (0.930)**	0.328 (0.739)	0.316 (0.734)	0.262 (0.408)	0.258 (0.407)
Rounds of elections	0.204 (0.177)	0.227 (0.197)	-0.075 (0.108)	-0.073 (0.109)	-0.024 (0.061)	-0.023 (0.062)
Election before 1988	-0.878 (0.918)	-0.929 (0.944)	0.311 (0.482)	0.306 (0.483)	0.092 (0.280)	0.090 (0.281)
Constant	-2.598 (2.076)	-1.383 (2.423)			1.183 (0.612)***	1.933 (0.769)**
Threshold 1			-2.465 (1.160)**	-2.669 (1.325)**		
Threshold 2			-0.479 (1.044)	-0.683 (1.229)		
Threshold 3			0.787 (1.059)	0.583 (1.244)		
Threshold 4			2.368 (1.049)**	2.165 (1.230)*		

Notes:

Entries are averaged regression coefficients based on five imputed data sets. Averaged robust standard errors, corrected for clustering, in parentheses. * p < 0.1 ** p < 0.05 *** p < 0.01.

Source:

2002 village survey in mainland China (N = 241).

squared term shows any significant influence. Both proxies for the possible intervention from township officials have also failed to achieve even the lowest significance level in all model specifications.

The argument for political learning has received some non-robust conformation from the regression analysis. Villages where the latest elections were their very first VCEs were significantly more likely to have high-quality electoral institutions. It seems that “rookies” may be faster learners whereas veterans find it more difficult to make changes to their previous flawed procedures. Nevertheless, this pattern does not show up in either the ordered logistic model or the OLS model. In addition, a higher level of outward migration may hurt the quality of grassroots democracy in rural China. The larger the percentage of villagers working as migrant workers, the less likely the most recent VCE was implemented strictly following the revised OLVC. However, this variable is not significant in either the ordered logistic model or the OLS model.

Conclusion and Implications

In response to contemporary literature’s appeal for more systematic and comparative examinations on the institutional quality of VCEs, this article uses two unique data sets collected through comparable national probability sampling in 2002 and 2005 to provide a comprehensive and dynamic picture of the quality of electoral institutions in rural China. It further explores the validity of some primary explanations on why the implementation of VCEs has been uneven across regions.

First, there is a large variety in the quality of VCEs in rural China, not only in terms of their institutional quality across regions but also the quality of electoral measures at different stages of a VCE. Basically, multiple-candidate elections have been widely adopted, but most violations happen during the process of nominating candidates and identifying finalists.

Second, taking all procedures into consideration, seven years after the revised OLVC, Chinese villages implementing VCEs strictly following the revised OLVC is far from the norm. More effort is needed to enforce the revised OLVC and ensure high-quality VCEs.

Third, using an integrated regression model, this article has rigorously tested the validity of primary explanations proposed in contemporary research on why VCEs show dramatic variance across regions. In the 2002 national sample, when other critical features of villages are controlled, the influence of social groups and political learning over the institutional quality of VCEs has been confirmed to some extent. Villages with competing clans are significantly more likely to have transparent and competitive VCEs. Communities that held their very first VCEs after 1998 are also more likely to follow the stipulations of the revised OLVC. In some model specifications, villages with a higher level of outward migration are significantly worse at holding high-quality VCEs. Explanations emphasizing economic development and political intervention from higher-level

officials do not receive significant confirmation. Again, all these statements are not conclusive, given the limit of data and the imperfection of proxies.

Last but not least, although the focus of this article is on the procedural dimension of VCEs, the underlying mechanisms uncovered actually show an intimate relationship between “access to power” and “exercise of power” in Chinese villages. The significant impact of competing clans on VCE implementation strongly suggests that social groups play active and influential roles in “access to power.” Externally imposed formal institutions have redrawn the arena for competition within Chinese villages. This change in the rules of the game has consequential implications not only for how to acquire the legitimate means for resource allocation, but also for how to interact with other political actors whose political influence may be adjusted, increased or significantly reduced as a result of the different electoral institutions adopted. In this sense, “access to power” and “exercise of power” are indeed endogenous to each other.