

China's First Direct Election of the Township Head: A Case Study of Buyun¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a detailed case study of China's first direct election of the township heads, examining the driving forces for and obstacles to direct township election, and Chinese utilitarian approach toward local democracy. The paper discusses the prospect of direct township election in China and highlights the Chinese paternalist model of democracy being implemented in practice.

On 31 December 1998, 6,000 Buyun residents cast their votes in heavy rain, and for the first time in China, the township head was elected through direct election and without central approval. The election involved 13 open, free, and fair campaigns. Following the Buyun election, a two-vote system (which will be discussed in the section 'Lessons from the Buyun Election') was introduced as a form of township election in Zhouli township, Linyi county, Shanxi province on 18 April 1999 (*Xiangzhen Luntan*, May 1999, pp. 4–6), in Dapeng township, Shenzhen, Guangdong

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province on 29 April 1999 (*China Youth Newspaper*, 11 April 1999; *Nanfang Daily*, 28 April 1999; Huang, 1999: 68–73),² and in the townships of Sunzhao and Fogesi, Xinchai county, Henan province in March 2000 (*Xinkuaibao*, 21 March 2000; Ma, 2000).

Townships are the lowest level of state organization and township heads have great power with regard to taxation and levy, a crucial issue for the villagers. Township heads are usually selected and appointed by the Party committee, approved and ratified by the deputies of the township People's Congress, and not through the direct voting of ordinary villagers. Such a practice is now challenged by the Buyun election and other subsequent forms of township election. Township elections affect the basic unit of the state, the source of state power and the way in which local cadres are selected. They are the initial building blocks for the emerging local democracy in China and bear significance for China's 45,000 townships, each of which has a population of up to 20,000 and each of which usually includes at least ten villages (*Washington Post*, 27 February 1999, p. 12).

Direct township election is an extraordinary step for China, because the present village election involves only the autonomous mass organization of self-government which, strictly speaking, is not a governmental organization. Direct township election would open the way to local democratization of state organization at local level. If village elections are seen as a process of the democratization of rural society, direct township election can be regarded as the beginning in the democratization of state organization.

While celebrating the extension of village election to township election, we should cautiously note that the Chinese Communist Party is searching for its own model of democracy which will not threaten the Party's hold on power, and which will not take, in Melanie Manion's words, 'a step closer to a normative vision of electoral representation familiar in liberal democracies' (Manion, 2000: 782). Township election aims to achieve unity and consensus, not conflict and dispute. It aims to maximize public interest, not personal ones. For central leaders, township elections offer a platform for change and redistribution of local powers without any disruption to the authority of the centre. Authorities have the right and duty to initiate election, decide final candidates and ensure procedural fairness, while peasants are given a choice through a vote, and freedom to nominate their candidates. Township democracy must strike a balance between authority and freedom, and central interest and local interests. This is a key feature of 'Chinese local democracy', which will be clearly demonstrated in the subsequent description and discussion of township elections.

² A report on this election is also contained in *Zhongguo shehui kexue jikan* (Chinese Social Science Quarterly), No. 26 (Summer, 1999), pp. 27–30.

The origin of Buyun election

*From village to township election*³

The preface of the commemorative book of the Buyun election states clearly that in commemoration of the 'tenth anniversary of the practice of village self-governing, we carried out an experiment of direct election of township heads'. This statement reveals a close link between the village election and the township election (for a study of village election, see O'Brien, 1994: 33–60; Shi, 1999: 385–412).

The introduction of the village election had unintended consequences. The village election can be seen as a catalyst to change the existing distribution of power and system of authority. It promises a new political structure at the local level and constitutes a new source of legitimacy: the power of village leaders comes from peasants through periodic elections. This practice is in conflict with the authoritarian practice where the local power is derived from above. As a result, the elected village heads are conflicting not only with the village Party secretaries, but also with township leaders. In other words, there are internal tensions between the electoral logic and the authoritarian logic. In the authoritarian logic, power comes from above, and higher officials are able to appoint and replace subordinate cadres. In the electoral logic, however, legitimate authority comes from below, and electorates can elect their leaders or displace them if necessary by their votes. When village chiefs are elected, the authority of the village Party Secretary whose position is appointed from above, or elected by Party members, is undermined. How do local political actors deal with this institutional tension? The common practice is to subordinate village chiefs to village Party secretaries through special institutional rules such as the one that puts the village Party Secretary in charge of village economy and enterprise.

Nevertheless, a democratic way is to extend election to the village Party Secretary and to township head. Such a deepening democratic process is likely to reduce the institutional tension. The logic of the village-level election has thus led to the requirement of direct election for the village Party Secretary.

However, for such a requirement, a legal issue arises. According to the constitution of the CCP, the Party Secretary should be elected by Party members rather than by non-members. To solve this problem, in rural Shanxi province, for example, a two-stage election is devised. The first is a secret ballot of all villagers in which they can cast their vote for as many Party members from the village as they please. This is regarded as 'confidence vote', or a vote to test the popularity of village heads. Such a practice does not contradict the Party's constitution. Then a second ballot, confined to Party members, formally selects the Secretary from among the candidates who had

³ While there is a logic of extending village election to township election, it should be noted that the problems occurring at village election does not necessarily appear in township election, and the positive effects of village election do not automatically take place at the township election. Each level has its own problems and effects. We cannot assume a simple logical extension.

Table 1. *Township cadres' opinion of working relations with village heads after election*

Opinion	Number of respondents	Percentage (per cent)
Much more difficult	20	17.4
Much more easier	53	46.1
No change	37	32.2
Missing data	5	4.3

Source: the 1998 Survey by Baogang He and Youxing Lang

been approved by more than 50 per cent of the voters in the first round (Li Liangjiang, 1999: 103–18).

Village election also challenges the authority of township leaders who are not elected. If township leaders are not elected, how can they have legitimacy to effectively run the daily business of the town and have the political and moral authority to issue orders to village chiefs? Village election demands that legitimacy for township leaders should come from election. All cases of township election in Shanxi, Guangdong, and Henan are in fact a sort of confidence vote for township leaders, aiming to strengthen their political authority through popular election. The vote is called confidence vote, or an extensive opinion poll. Such terms indicate that township leaders are searching for legitimacy for township leadership.

In addition, recognition of the benefits of village election has made the extension of election possible. As one may argue that if the practice of electing village chiefs proves relatively successful, why not try elections for rural township leaders? Our survey shows that 46 per cent of township leaders think that village election has improved the working relationship between township leaders and village chiefs⁴ (see Table 1).

From Gongxuan (Public Election) to Zhixuan (Direct Election)

Direct elections (*zhixuan*) were preceded by 'public elections' (*gongxuan*), a limited primary system whereby deputies of township people's congress, township officials, village heads, and representatives from villages elect candidates for township leadership. What triggered this public election in the Shizhong district was a crisis resulting from corruption and illegal conduct by more than 20 members of the standing committee of a township people's congress, as well as its Party Secretary and township head. One pressing problem faced by the district leadership was how to set up a structure of management in the township. The crisis stimulated much discussion among township leaders, and there was a growing demand for the open

⁴ The survey was conducted in four areas of Zhejiang province in 1998. We had numerous group meetings and interviews with township officials on village election and usually after the meeting or interview they were requested to fill the survey questionnaire. As a result, we got a total of 115 respondents from township officials including township head, deputy head, Party secretaries, and staff members.

selection of township administrators. In response to the demand, the district government decided, in a pioneer project, to openly select the deputy directors in eight of its bureaus. What happened in the public elections was that two of the nominated candidates were selected through a majority vote by village and township administrators and villager representatives. The two candidates were then put to a vote at the township people's congress. The villagers showed considerable enthusiasm for the public elections. In Hengshan of Shizhong District, for example, there were 76 candidates; and 800 people showed up at the ballot box, although it was estimated that around 600 people were going to vote.

With the public elections at township level, a potential tension exists between the Party Secretary and the head of the township, and thereby adversely effecting the role of the Party in the rural areas. This became a major concern for the district leadership. Thus a further question was then raised as to whether the Party Secretary could also be openly elected. After some deliberation, the district leadership decided to go ahead with public elections of the Party Secretaries. Trial elections were held in Lianhua and Dongchan of Shizhong District. The procedure was similar to that of the public elections of township heads in that all the Party members in the two townships directly elected the Party Secretaries through a ballot. Of the Party members in Dongchan 60 per cent voted in the election.

The public election of Party Secretaries and township heads went through three stages. First, open nominations were called for, qualifications of candidates were assessed, and the eligible ones sat for a literacy test. In the second stage, the top six candidates from the literacy test met with deputies of the township people's congress, village leaders, village representatives, local government, and Party officials and township leaders, and answered their questions; and then an opinion poll was conducted on the spot. In the third stage, the two most popular candidates were nominated by the Party committee of the township and put to a vote at the township people's congress. The head of the Hengshan township was elected in this way in a pioneer project in November 1998. The Secretaries of Party committees in Lianhua and Dongchan townships were similarly elected (Zhang, 1999: 16). The idea was to ensure that the elections would not deviate too much from the current laws and would 'appropriately combine the Party's effective management of the cadres, full democracy and the order of law'.

Although peasants regarded public election as a good thing, they still thought township heads were decided by leaders and elected by a minority instead of by the peasants themselves (*Nanfang zhoumo*, 15 January 1999, p. 2). General dissatisfaction and demands for further democracy posed a dilemma for the district leadership raising the question of whether a further step forward (this means direct township elections) should be taken in the forthcoming elections of township heads in November 1998 across the district. In fact, that was what the district leadership had in mind then, though they were worried about a lack of interest among the villagers in the elections as well as clan influence on the elections. Among the concerns were

what to do if the elections failed as a result of inexperience and how to make the elections compatible with existing laws. The divergence of opinions raised doubts as to whether direct township election was a good thing.

A key person in the decision making in the Shizhong District was the Party Secretary, Zhang Jinming, who was open-minded, innovative, and highly conversant with current issues. Her determination contributed to the district's final decision to go ahead with the direct elections. Eventually a consensus emerged among the main leaders of the district that in wanting to expand local democracy, direct elections would have to take place sooner or later. If the elections succeeded, they would provide others with a useful model for reference. Even if they failed, others could learn from their mistakes. Agreement was reached on the necessity and feasibility of direct elections following discussions among the Party Secretary, the deputy Party Secretary in charge of Party-mass relations, main cadres in the Party's Organization and Propaganda Departments, and the Office of the Party Committee of the District.

Why were direct elections first held in Buyun? The first consideration was that the risk of failure could be minimized in a small township like Buyun. The risk would likely increase in large townships with 30 or 40 villages. Buyun consists of ten villages within 24 square kilometers area, one neighbourhood committee, and 80 villager teams. The township has a relatively small population of 16,421 (or 4,016 households), with 15,428 (or 3,965 households) engaged in farming. Economically it does not fare well, with an average income of 1,636 yuan in 1998. The total savings of its residents amount to 15,500,000 yuan.⁵ The second consideration was that Buyun, although a mere 50 kilometres from Suining City, is a mountainous and predominantly agricultural area. If the election failed, it would not have a big impact on other townships; and its geographical isolation makes it easier to guarantee confidentiality. The third consideration was that there was a large degree of solidarity between Party and government officials in the township, which would provide sufficient organizational support for the elections. The fourth was that the people of Buyun are known for their honesty. Although the Cai family represents over half of the township's total population, active clan groupings do not exist, and there are no local gangsters in the township. All these ruled out the possibility of interference with the direct election by clan affiliations.

⁵ Buyun has 15,261 mu of arable land, and its annual grain output is 894.41 kilos, averaging 580 kilos per head. The township has an annual agricultural and industrial output of 67,660,000 yuan. Its taxation revenue in the same year was 1,174,800 yuan. The township has over 70,000 metres of road, more than 30,000 metres of trenches and an irrigation capacity of 490 kilowatts. There are 2,830 enrolled students; an average of 4,675 migrant workers who work in other regions every year. These workers generate an annual income of 6,930,000 yuan. Migrant labour plays a significant role in Buyun's local economy.

The process of direct election⁶

On 28 November 1998 a leading working group for the elections was formed. The composition of the group was rather interesting and telling of the intentions and considerations of the decision makers. The leader of the group was Chen Guangjin, deputy chairman of the People's Congress of the Shizhong District. His two deputies, Ma Shengkang and Chen Yangrong, were respectively the directors of the Party's Organization and Propaganda Departments in the district. This make-up clearly reflects the Party's attempt to effectively manage the exercise of democracy in the election process. The Working Committee for Direct Election in Buyun was established on 29 November 1998, with the Party Secretary of the township, Qin Jiping, as chairman, and the deputy Party Secretary, Zou Kun, and the vice-chairman of the People's Congress of the township, Cai Changrun, as vice-chairmen. The Committee was responsible for organizing the direct election.

'The Decision on the Direct Election of the Head of the People's Government of the Buyun Township' (hereafter the Decision on the Direct Election), which was passed on 30 November 1998, set out the criteria of eligibility and the nomination procedures. Criteria for candidate were: 'Any citizen of the People's Republic of China, 25 years of age or above, with a senior high school education or equivalent, is registered as a permanent resident of or employed in the township and who has the right to vote and to be elected is eligible to register as a candidate for the position of Mayor of the Township People's Government' (Shizhong Committee of CCP 1999). Individuals can register as candidates if nominated by 30 people or more. Political parties, people's organizations, and social groups can nominate, individually or collectively, candidates for the position of Mayor of the Township People's Government.

The Decision on the Direct Election allows for election campaigns. Formal candidates are to be introduced to the residents of every village and urban residential area in the township by the Township Election Committee. Election campaigns are to be organized by the Township Election Committee. During the campaigns, candidates can engage in campaign activities according to the law and enjoy the freedom of speech. Candidates can utilize TV, radios, newspapers, and other media in their campaigns. The Election Committee is to guarantee equal opportunity for all candidates. Candidates can meet electors independently if they notify the Election Committee 24 hours in advance. Campaign activities are to be open, transparent, equal and civilized; and they should focus on plans and policies (Shizhong Committee of CCP, 1999).

On the morning of 30 November, an unexpected announcement blasted through the loudspeakers that had been silent for quite some time: 'In accordance with Document 100 (1998) of the District Party Committee, in order to expand local

⁶ The source of this section comes largely from Shizhong District Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (1999) (thereafter Shizhong Committee of CCP), interviews and numerous newspaper reports.

democracy and enable the people to exercise their rights as masters of the country, the decision has been made to hold a direct election to choose the head of the Twelfth People's government of the Buyun Township.'

In an article headlined 'China's First Township for Direct Elections', a reporter of the newspaper *Suining Bao* described the villagers' responses to the news as follows. 'Grandpa Zhou took a few steps back and listened carefully to the first lines of the song "In the Field of Hope". He then said to himself, "Hang on a second! Those loudspeakers in blast again! Something must be happening. It has to be something important too."' Zhang Xuying in Village No. 8 was feeding her pig when she heard the loudspeakers. Surprised and excited, she put down her bucket and started to listen. Another woman in the village stopped her sewing, and said to herself, her face lit up with radiance, "What? A township head from amongst us? One of us can be the head? My husband should have a shot at it." All of a sudden Buyun was alive with excitement' (*Suining Bao*, 31 December 1998, p. 4).

On the same day, letters were sent out to those working in other regions to encourage them to come back and participate in the election. According to the statistics available, more than 6,000 Buyun residents work away from home. This amounts to 40 per cent of the township's total population of over 16,000. It is hard to tell in what ways they will affect the election. What is clear though is that, most of them are better educated, younger, and well-traveled, and might bring into the election quite different concepts and criteria for judging the candidates. This is demonstrated by their support for Mr Tan, who won 2,000 out of 3130 returned migrant workers votes. Tan believed their support had much to do with the fact that they were better informed and were not swayed by personal interests alone in their choice.

On 2 December 1998, the Eleventh Presidium of the People's Congress of Buyun, after more than ten amendments and revisions, passed the draft of 'How to Vote in the Direct Election of the Head of the People's Government of the Buyun Township'. The document details the guiding principles, organizational structure, nomination of candidates, election campaigns, the ballot, ballot verification and counting, assumption of office by the township head, elector appeals and investigation, supervision and recalling of the head of the township. Soon after the document was released, many commented that the essential criteria of eligibility were not all appropriate. It was suggested that the first criterion was perfunctory. The second criterion was too vague to be of much practical use: it was not clear what was meant by 'the possession of the knowledge, experience, organizational skills, analytical skills and integrated communication skills necessary for performing the duties of the head of the township'. Even more controversial was the third criterion in respect of the candidates' age and education, according to which only those between 25 and 45 years old and with senior middle school education or equivalent are eligible to be nominated. This criterion was based on the Party's cadre selection criteria. Most of the villagers agreed that the fewer the restrictions imposed, the better it was.

Consequently, the Election Committee revised 'How to Vote in the Direct Election of the Head of the People's Government of the Buyun Township' and removed the maximum age limit.

By 6.00 pm on 10 December 1998, when nominations closed, 15 candidates were nominated. Of the 15 nominees, Zhang Ming was a manager of a factory in Guangzhou. He returned to participate in the election at the encouragement of his fellow villagers. Tan Pan and Yang Xiaobin, husband and wife, nominated themselves and became competitors in the election.

All the 15 nominees were required to speak in front of a panel made up of the members of the Election Committee, the head of each village and 162 villager representatives. The speeches took place on 15 December 1998 and they attracted thousands of on-lookers. At the end of the speech session, the panel selected two candidates through a vote. Toward dusk, six hours after the session started, counting was completed, Zhou Xingyi and Cai Ronghui became the formal candidates for the head of the Buyun township (please note that the Party/government retained the right to nominate a formal candidate without going through pre-election process and it did nominate Tan Xiaoqiu, thus resulting in three formal candidates in the final election).

The result was quite unexpected. It was a surprise that Zhou Xingyi topped the list with 75 votes. Zhou believed his success had much to do with his speech and the fact the many of the people in the township knew him well and he got on well with them. It was also a surprise that all the cadres fared poorly in the vote. Liu Shiguo, CCP member, cadre of township government, won only six votes; Peng Lucheng, CCP member, cadre, ten; and Zhou Rong, CCP member, cadre of township government, three. Liu Shiguo, the current Party Secretary of the township, identified four reasons for their poor performance. One, there was little understanding of the cadres by the people and little communication between the cadres and the people. Two, there was a general perception that the cadres' job was only to collect money and grain; and for that reason the cadres were not popular with the villagers. Third, their speeches were ill-prepared and there was little in them to touch and inspire the voters. Fourth, some of them were newcomers to Buyun and they were not well known.

In accordance with the election procedure, the three formal candidates, Zhou Xingyi, Cai Ronghui and Tan Xiaoqiu (who was nominated by the local Party branch and government and screened from the initial selection process), spent the following week travelling across the township's ten villages to speak to the electors and answer their questions. The first debate took place in Village No. 9 on 20 December 1998, chaired by the deputy Party Secretary of the township, Zou Kun. Zou laid down the rules for the election campaign before the debate: 'All campaigns are to be organized by the Election Committee. No individual candidate is allowed to campaign on his/her own. Any promises made to the voters must be realistic. No candidate is allowed to deceive the people with big, false or empty talks. Personal attack is forbidden.'

Thirteen rounds of speeches took place in seven days, attracting tens of thousands of people and with questions from over 700 voters answered by the candidates.

Even if not nominated by the Party and government, Tan Xiaoqiu would have liked to contest. The Party and government backing was not Tan's only strength. Although he was not a native of Buyun, he had spent many years at the grass-root level and was very experienced in rural administration. He had served as deputy head of the Baima township, director of the Militia Department (*wuzhuang bu*) of Buyun and acting head of the Buyun township before the election. He would have remained in the last position had it not been for the elections.

Zhou Xingyi, who had been teaching since 1978, was a very competent chemistry teacher, and he had received a number of awards and accolades. But he was at a loss when he was asked such questions as 'Which is the best corn? Which is the best rice? What are the 24 seasonal periods? What do farmers do in each period?' It was reported in the local media that Zhou's first campaign was a disaster. It was natural for farmers to ask questions like these, but they were not things that a school teacher was expected to be familiar with. In contrast, the other two candidates, Tan and Cai, handled similar questions with no difficulty. It is not surprising that after a few rounds of campaigning, Zhou appeared to have been ruled out from the contest.

Cai was the head of Village No. 10. A native of Buyun, he knew every facet of life there like the back of his hand. He also knew what was on the mind of the local people and what they wanted. In addition, he was a Cai, the largest family in the township. He was a tough opponent for Tan.

The election day was 31 December 1998. There were 11 meeting sites and 17 polling stations across the township. Photos of the candidates appeared on the ballot paper to help illiterate voters so that they could vote by pointing to the photo of the candidate they had chosen. Despite the heavy rain on the election day, 6,236 out of a total of 11,349 eligible electors voted. In other words, 54.95 per cent of the eligible voters turned out at the election. Of the 6,236 ballot papers issued, 6,212 were returned. The voting started at 9.00 am and counting was completed by 5.00 pm. Tan won 50.19 per cent (3,130) of the votes and became China's first directly elected township head. Cai won 1,995 votes, and Zhou, 1,017.

For the sake of confidentiality, police checkpoints were set up at all the major entries into the township, where outsiders, particularly journalists, were stopped. Nevertheless, news of the direct election in Buyun spread afar. On 3 January 1999, *The Western China Cosmopolitan* (*Huaxi dushi bao*), an influential paper in South-Western China, reported the election. It generated much pressure and it interfered with the Buyun's timetable. The People's Congress, originally due to convene on 8 January 1998, had to be brought forward to the 4th to endorse the result of the Buyun election.

At 5.00 pm on 4 January, Tan Xiaoqiu placed his hand on the national flag and took his oath: 'I will be loyal to the motherland. I will love the people of Buyun. I will abide by the constitution and the laws of the People's Republic of China. I will fulfil

my duties, remain incorruptible, work hard for the public and give it my all for the interest of all the people of Buyun.' Tan was interviewed by CCTV Channel 2 on 12 January. Tang Jianguang, a *Chengdu shangbao* reporter, wrote the report 'Township Head Directly Elected', which appeared in the weekly *Nanfang zhoumo* on 15 January. The report generated enormous interest in the Buyun election.

Local leaders regarded the first township election as a success. In replying to a journalist, Zhang Jinming defined two criteria for success. The first criterion was whether the electors were enthusiastic and willing to participate; the second criterion was whether the newly elected head of the township was acceptable to all – the electors and leaders. Judging by the first criterion, the election was successful. Judging by the second, it was also successful by and large, but it would be some time before the final judgement could be made (Tang, 1998; *Suizhou bao*, 31 December 1998, supplement). Political advisors such as Li Fan praised the success of the election with respect to the establishment of institutionalized procedures and the adherence to laws and regulations. The use of separate polling booths, in particular, ensured that the election was open, just, and fair. Otherwise, it would be difficult to know whether people voted as they wished (Li Fan, 1999: 119; Tian, 1999: 80–2).

On 3 February 1999, *China Daily* ran a commentary on rural elections. On 26 February 1999, *China Central Television* broadcast an extended news report praising the initiative of the local leaders. Foreign media also reported the event (*Newsweek International*, 4 February 1999; *Boston Globe*, 26 January 1999; *Washington Post*, 27 January 1999).

Utilitarian approach toward township election

Who are the driving forces behind this direct election in the first place? Is the Buyun election initiated at the grass-root level by village leaders and villagers? Or was it conducted at the instruction of the authorities in the first place? The answer is not one or the other but a combination of the two: the driving forces move both bottom-up and top-down. The demand for direct elections comes from the villagers. It reflects their enhanced democratic awareness and the desire for expanded democracy on the one hand, and their dissatisfaction with the existing election system, on the other.

Nevertheless, it is not up to the villagers whether direct elections can be held. Instead, it was Suining's leaders who decided that a direct election was the best way to govern township. For that reason, one can say that direct elections are the results of directions from the district authorities since it would be impossible either to choose an election system or to conduct an election without the approval, endorsement and organization support of the local authorities. Evidence of the involvement of higher authorities in giving the go ahead could be found in documents like 'Reply from the Party Committee of the Suining City to the Proposal of Direct Election of the Head of Buyun Township' and 'The Establishment of the Working Group for the Direct Election of the Head of Buyun Township by the Party Committee of the Shizhong District of the Suining City'.

Importantly, some planners and organizers in the election are the main leaders of the District. Their support and interest in the election reflect their expectations and concerns. They do not want to see a mediocre result and they hope this experiment will be fruitful, so that the people's worries will be alleviated and their choice justified. Although in fact this is a top-down process, in procedure it is the opposite in order to ensure maximum agreement with the current laws and legitimacy for the election. For this reason the procedural starting point in the Buyun election was the document entitled 'An Application for a Direct Election of the Head of Buyun Township by the Party Committee of Buyun Township, the Shizhong District of Suizhou City'. The application reads:

In order to further implement the spirit of the Fifteenth Party Congress, *in order to ensure that the people enjoy comprehensive rights and liberty, in order to expand local democracy and enable the villagers to manage their own affairs* [emphasis added], we plan to directly elect the head of the township, following repeated discussions by the Party Committee and the Presidium of the Township People's Congress. (Shizhong Committee of CCP, 1999)

As spelt out explicitly, the purposes of the election were to realize people's right and liberty and to extend local democracy. Apart from these considerations, a utilitarian view of democracy is also at work.⁷ District leaders' motivations for direct township election can be summarized as follows:

Subjecting the authority of township to a local vote of confidence. For district leaders, standing for competitive election would make the position of township chief more secure.

Looking for a way to discipline lower-level cadres. Here, direct election was designed to resolve the problem of unpopular and unresponsive local officials. It was seen as a very handy device to remove entrenched, corrupt, and recalcitrant local officials without spending all the political capital necessary to carry out a full-scale purge.

Seeking for honour to carry the first township election in China. District leaders had the clear idea that they wanted to create something new which would be remembered by history. Buyun township published a commemorative book of the Buyun election, keeping all official documents with signatures of all 11 organizers and 15 working staff members. They saw themselves as history makers.

The search for honour is a strong motivation for experimental township election, and to be the first in the country in directly electing the township head was of utmost concern. Candidate Zhou Xingyi revealed that he knew he would lose the election for his poor performance in answering peasants' questions. But he did not give up as it

⁷ Similarly, the arguments for village election are also utilitarian. See Kelliher, 1997: 67–75.

was 'history in the making', and he reminded himself, 'I'll stick it out right to the end.'⁸ Indeed, the election was widely praised inside and outside China. The media presented Buyun as 'the first one', as an experience that would eventually help to break down the old system, and to create a new China. An editorial in the *Legal Daily*, for example, said history would remember Buyun for its role in promoting direct township elections and wondered if Buyun would be a sign of China's political system reform (*Fazhi Ribao*, 29 January 1999).

It is interesting to observe that there was a political competition for the first to conduct such an experiment and present a model for emulation. Guangdong Province, which is generally believed to have lagged behind in the development of village elections, submitted to the National People's Congress an application for experimenting in direct township election, but the application was turned down. Later Shenzhen Municipality in Guangdong submitted a proposal for a two-vote (ticket) system which does not conflict with the existing law, and the proposal was approved in 1999 (*Xiaocankao Daily News*, 29 April 2000; <http://www.ifcss.org/ftp-pub/org/dck/xiaocankao/9904/990429.txt>). The head of Dapeng township, Shenzhen, was successfully elected on 29 April 1999, but this election was behind the township election in Zhouli township, Linyi County, Shanxi Province, which was held on 18 April 1999. It is amazing that the planners and media in all the other three cases of township elections in the wake of the Buyun election claimed that theirs was the 'first' in China without acknowledging Buyun.

It should be noted that the question of which township held the first direct election of township heads is not as significant as the question of what consequences for the prospect of democracy and for pluralism and of what kind of an electoral process they are developing. One of the consequences is the formation of the consensus on democracy for a future China. Behind the competition for honour among the local elites are significant and important changes in the political culture at the local elite level. By participating in the game of winning honour, these local leaders have confirmed and reinforced the assumption that China should be democratized.

Moreover, in order to present their models of township election for emulation, local cadres had studied democratic procedures seriously, consulted political scientists and lawyers (for example, Li Fan, director of World and China Institute, was advisor to the Buyun election. Li Fan *et al.* 2000) for better methods and procedures, and learnt from each other. In short, these local leaders were the driving forces as well as skilled organizers of direct township election. They initiated political reforms and direct township election despite opposition from the central leadership.

The motivation for honour should of course be seen in the context of pressures that township leaders face. They have been confronting peasant protests and

⁸ Interview with Zhou; also *Suining Bao*, 31 December 1998, p. 4; *Nanfang zhoumo*, 15 January 1999, p. 2.

discontent, the tension between local cadres and peasants, the problem of corrupt leaders, and the difficulties of collecting tax and fees. It is thus political pragmatism that leads some local leaders to employ election and democracy as a new way of political ruling and a new mechanism of control. In such a context, the district leaders see the following advantages of direct township election.

Improving the Party's management system. District leaders believe that the Party's management of cadres should shift from the direct appointment of specific persons to the establishment of a mechanism or system whereby the Party committees could manage the cadres by fair and just means. In this way, Party leaders can be freed from large numbers of trivial personnel disputes, reduce grievances and friction to some extent, and successfully avoid all sorts of suspicions and misunderstandings that people have about the management of cadres (Zhang, 2000: 16). Public and direct elections are thus seen as the cost-saving method to produce trustworthy leadership backed by an involved electorate.

Reducing the tension between cadres and peasants. As is always the case, those who are selected by the Party's personnel organization are not welcome by the peasants. To reduce the tension, local leaders sought a democratic method, that is, to let peasants elect cadres, and be responsible for the people they choose. Moreover, the whole election process was also used for publicizing the rural policies of the Party and government. Take the example of Tan Xiaoqiu. The people in Buyun did not know him well or trust him. As he spoke more to people and explained the policies, they had a better idea about matters like the retention of collective funds, taxes on pork, and the burden of the peasants (Tian, 1999: 80–2). In the eyes of the peasants, it was hard to access the cadres in the past; now they have become very approachable and nice to ordinary peasants. One peasant commented: 'We can ask them questions without any qualms, and they say 'thank you' very politely after answering our questions. Otherwise, they won't have our vote next time. Also, the people elected are usually responsible and take their job seriously. They cherish the trust of the people and they get on well with them.' (Tian, 1999: 80–2) Indeed after election the township government under Tan Xiaoqiu had gradually improved farmers' welfare, consulted the public before raising charges, and curbed the use of public money for entertaining (Chan, 2000).

Strengthen the Party's leadership in the rural areas. One pressing problem in the villages is the danger of some seeking to promote their own interests and causing social instability – under the guise of serving the villagers – by taking advantage of the villagers' eagerness to participate in political decision making. Thus, Zhang Jiming held that if the Party fails to guide people, anarchy is bound to take place and the farmers' interests will be jeopardized. The farmers have faith in the Party, and they hope the Party provides strong leadership and effectively manages village

affairs. The question is how to make sure villagers are happy with the Party and government. Direct elections can produce a form of government that the farmers can be satisfied with.⁹

Mobilizing peasants. Over the years peasants have become less and less interested in the election for deputies of local congress and their political enthusiasm has decreased. To reactivate peasants politically, district leaders decided to let the peasants directly elect township leaders. They believed such a move could stimulate peasants' political enthusiasm for political reform and enhance their political participation. Direct election of township leaders by the people is substantial, giving them the power to make a choice. In contrast, election of township leaders by the local congress is only a formality.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in the wake of the Buyun election, some peasants still felt they did not exercise such a right. This was one great regret that Zhang Jinming had in the wake of the election.

Lessons from the Buyun election

Township election and the authority of the Party

Direct township election did not undermine the authority of the CCP because it was organized by the Party organization. The rule of election was defined by the Party; the whole process of election was under the control of the Party; and the candidates were approved by the Party. More importantly, it was Tan Xiaoqiu, a Party member and governmental official, who was finally elected.¹¹ Tan's success was due to the formal institutional support from the government and the Party. Similarly, Taiwan's township executive election in 1973 did not weaken the domination of the Kuomintang, for the nomination was made by the KMT and the candidates were chosen according to the KMT Headquarters' confidential reports at the county level. Interestingly, 57.8 per cent of Taiwan's township executive elections had only one candidate (Jacobs, 1980: 160–72).

The Buyun election has many flaws. In the primary election system, only 162 'electors' voted for the final candidacy, and the final decision on the candidacy was made by the Buyun Election Steering Committee, a Party-controlled organization. Tan, the Party-designated candidate, by-passed the primary election process. In addition, he had official resources for his campaigns; for example, a motorcycle entourage was supplied by township authorities (*Nanfang zhoumo*, 15 January 1999, p. 2). There was unfair competition between Tan and the other two candidates, though such a practice was understandable because the district leaders risked being charged with violating Party discipline and had to ensure a successful election in the sense that the Party-designated candidate won. Hence the township election itself

⁹ Interview with Zhang Jinming on 4 August 1999

¹⁰ Interview with Ma Shengkang on 4 August 1999.

¹¹ Interview with Liu Shiguo, the Party Secretary of Buyun township on 6 August 1999.

does not mean democracy and political pluralism. Taiwan's case shows that 'various kinds of local elections have been held in Taiwan since 1950. But it was not until the lifting of the Emergency Decree in 1987 that a new era of political pluralism emerged' (*The Free China Journal*, 19 June 1998, p. 6).

The current township election in China is different from a case in India, where the election of the Councilors, for example, in Badnawar in 1968 was hotly contested on a party 'ticket' between candidates of the Congress Party and the Jan Sangh Party. The selection of Party candidates was directly dependent on who the candidate from the opposite side would be. Each Party had organized 'secret' campaigns to meet individual voters and convince them to vote for the particular Party's candidates (Agrawal, 1971: 495–502).

Questions concerning the legality of the direct election

The Buyun election has raised the question of legality. Cai Qingjiu, for example, regards the township election as illegal and unfit as a model, saying 'As people are excited by democratic progress in rural areas, few seem to have noticed the fact that Buyun's election ran against the law, which stipulates that the power to elect and remove the head of a township is held by the people's congress at the township level. To local residents, it is within their right to elect the representatives of local people's congresses.' (*China Daily*, 3 February 1999).

In the above legal context, the Sichuan People's Congress also announced that Buyun election was unconstitutional and violated the organizational procedure of the Party because there was no request made to the appropriate provincial leaders for approval (*Yazhou Zhoukan*, 8–14 February 1999, p. 26; *Lianhe Zaobao*, 11 April 1999). The district leaders employed a number of strategies to defend their action. First, they appealed to the fundamental principle of the Constitution: 'All power belongs to people in the PRC.' This statement was printed on the second page of the commemorative book of the Buyun election. 'Direct election' is perfectly consistent with the constitutional spirit that 'all power belongs to the people'. It agrees with the constitution to put the result of the election to the People's Congress for endorsement, and it also recognizes the power of the People's Congress (Tang, 1999; *Suizhou bao*, 31 December 1998, supplement). Second, Zhang Jinming, the district Party Secretary, argued that the current election laws should be modified to recognize the result of direct elections, or the indirect election system through the local People's Congress system should be modified (Lang, 1999: 83–4). Zhang asserted, 'So far as the laws are concerned, what is most important is to be faithful to their spirit and principle. For even well-established laws cannot remain the same forever.'¹² Third,

¹² Chen Sixi, the official from China's National People's Congress, skirted the issue of the election's constitutionality. 'Although it has some areas that do not completely coincide with the current law, it does seem to coincide with the spirit of the regulations,' he said. The election brought up a new question for discussion in the lawmakers' efforts to adapt to the common people's demands for democracy. *Washington Post*, 27 January 1999.

there was a genial climate for the elections in 1998. The Fifteenth Party Congress stated clearly that 'local democracy is to be expanded and the people will directly exercise their democratic rights'. The Party's resolution at the third session of the Fifteenth Congress instructed that 'laws and regulations that guarantee the direct exercising of democratic rights by villagers should be made and improved so as to ensure the healthy development of local democracy in the rural areas'. As Zhang Jinming, the leader of the district understood it, 'the central leadership means to encourage us to improve some aspects of our work or even be innovative' (Zhang's remarks cited in Tang, 1998).

In response to the legality question of direct township election, some local officials found a way to overcome this legal problem. They devised a two-vote system. The first vote was to test the popularity of the township leaders. In Zhouli township, those who won 85 per cent of popular votes automatically won the candidacy; those who won 60–70 per cent could become candidates but needed to be investigated by the Party organization; those who got less than 60 per cent of popular votes would be warned; and those who gained less than 50 per cent were disqualified from candidacy (*Xiangzhen Luntan*, May 1999, pp. 4–6). In the second stage, those who passed the 'confidence voting' test would be 'elected' by the People's Congress, or endorsed by the People's Congress. Such an institutional devise helped local officials overcome the legal problem and obtain approval from the centre for this form of direct township election. It could also help to overcome the potential problem of plebeian manipulation of the masses. However, the system also had its problems. For example, in the townships of Sunzhao and Fogesi, Xinchai County, Henan Province, two candidates who had each gained 100 per cent vote in the local people's congress in March 2000 would only win 50.2 per cent and 57.1 per cent of popular votes respectively (*Xinkuaibao*, 21 March 2000).

Political culture does not constitute an obstacle to direct election

The Buyun election shows that demobilized veterans, entrepreneurs, and emigrant workers have a higher level of democratic consciousness and a sense of their rights than widely thought. For example, a couple of entrepreneurs competed for candidacy. Many peasants participated in the selection process and asked candidates numerous questions in the campaigns. Many came to township election sites one hour earlier, turning up to vote in spite of a heavy rain, a sharp contrast to the attendance at other official mass meetings. The Buyun election clearly demonstrates that low literacy and the lack of political knowledge among the villagers do not pose a significant obstacle to the expansion of election in the rural areas. The overwhelming majority of the people are not only able to exercise their democratic rights but are also eager and enthusiastic to do so (Zhang, 1999: 17). It should be noted that through the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese have become a sort of 'political man' in the sense that they care about politics and even find more meaning in life through

participating in politics. These political men will play out their roles in the unfolding drama of Chinese democratization (He, 1996: 157–74).

The open election (*gongxuan*) and direct election (*zhixuan*) have shown that the view that democracy cannot be extended to China where there is large illiteracy in the rural population and little political knowledge is one-sided and unfounded. Exercising one's democratic rights is not too complex; anybody with a sound mind and the ability to judge what is right and what is wrong can exercise his or her democratic rights correctly (Zhang, 1999: 17). One comment by some villagers about a candidate is telling.

His idea of a delegation going to coastal areas for alleged purpose of attracting investment may well be an excuse for a sight-seeing trip. His proposal of three enterprises with an annual turnover of over 500,000 yuan each is not suited to the township while his plan to increase the average income of every villager to 3,000 yuan within three years is not realistic. Worse still, it means that individual contribution to the collective funds would go up to 150 yuan per head; and his speech was the longest, which is a sign of inefficiency (Zhang, 1999: 17).

The influence of kinship is no obstacle to the extension of local democracy

The fact that candidate Cai, who came from the biggest clan, did not win the election reveals that the influence of kinship is not so strong that it will dictate the outcome of the election. However, this does not mean that kinship does not play any role in election. If the official ideology had not regarded kinship as 'feudal', it is likely that kinship would have played a part in township election. Nevertheless, the relative weak influence of kinship in Buyun's election contrasted with the strong influence of kinship in township election in Taiwan (On the role of kinship in Taiwan's election, see Jacobs, 1980).

Size is not a problem for township election

Plato once asserted that 5,040 is the optimal number of citizens for a democracy. Smaller democracies provide more opportunities for citizens to participate efficiently in decision making. However, Madison, the founding father of American democracy, believed that the increase in size favored democracy because the increased size with its diverse interests could act as more effective checks and balances. Modern democracy has proved that democracy can survive and develop on a large scale (Dahl and Tufte, 1973). The Buyun case also demonstrates that size itself is not a major obstacle to township election.

Nevertheless, the size does give rise to a number of practical issues. The weight of each vote decreases when the size of the electorate increases. Each vote is regarded as having much more weight in the village election (e.g., one out of a few hundred) than in township election (e.g., one out of a few thousand). This may help us understand the lower turnout rate in township election. Although many efforts were made to

encourage all, including people doing business outside Buyun, to cast their votes, 32.6 per cent of the eligible voters did not turn up on election day, including 3,700 people working in other regions. This was a great pity, according to the Party Secretary Zhang Jinming. The lower significance of each vote, the cost of returning to the hometown for those working away and the lower reward for each vote had all contributed to the lower turnout at the township election.

The prospect of direct township election in China

The extension of election from village to township has been discussed for quite a long time. The Ford Foundation attempted to provide financial support for an experiment of direct township, or even county, election in 1996. Jiang Zemin, China's Communist Party Secretary and President, himself tentatively endorsed the idea in 1997 (White, 1998: 263–7). In 1997 and 1998, a Jiang adviser had proposed upgrading and expanding the elections to the level of township by the year 2003. But Jiang had dropped the proposal although he was not opposed to conducting limited experiments with elections up to the level of township (Lam, 2000). Jiang at the 15th Party Congress in 1998 supported the village election, but removed the statement on the township election. It was said that the centre has prepared to experiment with the township election, but had cancelled the plan for fear of losing control. The fear was strengthened by the application for the establishment of the Democratic Party in several provinces in 1998 and the upsurge in Falun Gong activities in 1999. The centre also feared the political competition, which would challenge the existing monopoly of power and lead to the failure of local cadres in the election process. The central leaders' concern with political stability overrode the democratization program and reduced the incentive for political reform. In later February 1999 the National People's Congress sent a research team to Buyun. Since then, all files and materials were closed off, and there was no more discussion of the issue. The Chinese Central Television abruptly cancelled the planned return of the Buyun election program. The authorities in Guangdong have instructed that there should be no media report on trial township elections in Shenzhen without its permission (*The Independence Daily* [published in Australia], 5 July 1999, p. 4).

The opposition to the direct township election comes not only from the central leaders, but also from some local township leaders. Our survey of township leaders reveals that the majority of respondents (77.4 per cent) think that direct township election is too early (see Table 2 below).

Nevertheless, the Buyun election and other forms of township elections seem to constitute a second mini wave of institutional democratization at the local level if we regard the village election as the first mini wave. Some local officials have been demanding for township election before and after the Buyun election. Officials in Jiangxi and Hunan provinces wanted to send a delegation to Buyun to learn the lesson of the first direct township election. Guangdong province had submitted to the National People's Congress a proposal for a experimental township election in

Table 2. *Do you think there is a need for direct township election?*

Answer	Number	Percentage (per cent)
Yes	24	20.9
No	89	77.4
No answer	2	1.7

Source: the 1998 Survey by Baogang He and Youxing Lang

1998. Seven provinces had also submitted an application for conducting a direct township election (*Yazhou Zhoukan*, 8–14 February 1999). Lishu in Jinlin Province even submitted a proposal for a direct county election. All were turned down.

The crucial question for China's local democratization is, where and how does the centre meet local demands? Will top leaders play the democracy card or work through their factions to consolidate their power? It is said that Zeng Qinghong, the man in charge of Party personnel, issued an internal document to encourage more experiments of township elections. Is this a sign of Zeng 'playing the democratic card' in the politics of succession? It is also reported that Wei Jianxing, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, called upon officials of aggregate villages and townships to 'increase the transparency of government work and promote democracy, so as to boost rural reform and stability' (Lam, 2000).

It is also said that Shenzhen has been designed as the experiment site for township election in anticipation of all township heads being elected by 2002. More experiments of township election are expected in the second half of 2001 when the heads of many townships will be changed.

It seems that the central leadership is likely to allow more township elections to be held when it faces pressure for democratic changes from below and if it has the capacity to control the process. If the Buyun and other township elections show that township election does indeed reduce the cost of the state and minimize the disadvantages, sooner or later, China will see the widespread practice of direct township election.

In comparison, Indonesia had a village election in the late 1970s, followed by national democratization in 1999 (Schiller, 1996: Chapter 6). In Taiwan, the first popular election for a Hualien county was held on 2 July 1950; the first direct elections for city mayors and county magistrates were held in December 1951; and the first direct election of the Provincial Assembly was held in April 1954 (Bellows, 1994: 114–48). After the 1950 local election in Taiwan, 38 years later, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was formed in 1986, and 50 years later the DPP won the presidential election in 2000. As China is bigger than Taiwan and as China faces more complex issues, its journey to national democracy would probably be much longer than Taiwan's.

More importantly, Chinese leaders attempt to build a paternalistic model of democracy (He, 1996: 46–9, 219–20). It is paternalistic because leaders thought they

had given peasants the right and opportunity to participate in a democratic process. Democracy is bestowed upon people. The township election is designed to strengthen authority rather than weaken it, and to serve the collective good rather than individual interests. Another feature of this kind of paternalistic democracy is the combination of election and selection, and a balance between Party's authority and people's free choice. In other words, township election mechanisms 'are designed to align voter preferences with the preferences of Communist Party committee' (Manion, 2000: 764). In short, this is a guided democracy, a sort of 'illiberal democracy'.

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