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# Village Elections in Contemporary China

New Spaces for Generating Regime Legitimacy? Experiences  
from Lishu County

GUNTER SCHUBERT  
AND CHEN XUELIAN

**This article discusses the impact of direct village elections on regime legitimacy in China's local government. Applying a model based on David Easton's political systems theory, it is argued that village elections in Lishu county, Jilin province, have contributed significantly to increased social stability and the quality of local governance, resulting in more regime legitimacy. "Rational trust" on the part of the peasants in their cadres may best explain the observation that the cadres' political supremacy has not been challenged by direct elections.**

Twenty years after the promulgation of the experimental "Organic Law on Village Committees", the implementation of Chinese village elections and their impact on rural governance has lost, as it seems, quite a bit of the attention it formerly generated among scholars both in the PRC and abroad. One reason for this observation is disappointment: Although the direct ballot promised the institutionalisation of more transparency, accountability and democratic awareness in China's villages, regarded as necessary prerequisites for the gradual extension of elections to higher administrative levels in the near future, this initial optimism has hardly been translated into reality. Today, elections are fairly well entrenched in China's vast countryside. Moreover, many scholars have stated—albeit cautiously—that at least in those places where elections are conducted regularly and in accordance with the stipulations of the Organic Law, which was promulgated and made effective nationwide in 1998, they have become a meaningful part of village life by elevating peasants' political efficacy, giving them more influence on village politics and helping to restore strained cadre-peasant relations.<sup>(1)</sup> However, all local efforts to push direct elections to the township level have so far failed, as the central government has made it repeatedly clear that such a move—though part of the long-term agenda—is not to become official policy in the foreseeable future.<sup>(2)</sup> At the same time, reports on village riots caused by local cadre corruption and misconduct have strikingly increased in number over the last years. In many parts of China, illegal land acquisitions—paired with the unlawful or absent financial compensation of peasants, generating windfall profits for greedy

local officials—have constituted the main impetus for rural upheaval and outright violence. In these places, direct elections have proved an inefficient means to rein in powerful cadres, and often enough they have heightened political tensions by inducing peasants to use their democratic rights against law-breaking and corrupt local officials.<sup>(3)</sup> Conse-

1. However, village elections have also resulted in elevated tension in rural China as peasants came to understand their democratic rights and more vigorously resist cadre authority. See He, Baogang and Lang, Youxing, "Cunmin xuanju dui xiagcun quanli de yingxiang (The influence of village elections on rural power)," *Xianggang shehui kexue xuebao (Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences)*, n° 16, 2000, pp. 99-124; Li, Fan (ed), *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao, 2000-2001 (Report on the development on China's grassroots democracy, 2000-2001)*, Beijing, 2002; Wu, Chongqing and He, Xuefeng, *Zhixuan yu zizhi (Direct elections and self-government)*, Guangzhou, Yangcheng wanbao, 2003; Li, Lianjiang, "The Empowering Effect of Village Elections in China," *Asian Survey*, n° 4, 2003, pp. 648-62; Kennedy, John James, Rozelle, Scott and Shi, Yaojiang, "Elected Leaders and Collective Land: Farmer's Evaluation of Village Leaders' Performance in Rural China," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, n° 1, 2004, pp. 1-22; Chen, Jie, "Popular Support for Village Self-government in China," *Asian Survey*, n° 6, 2005, pp. 865-85.
2. There have been a few experiments with direct township elections, though. See Li, Fan, *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao, op. cit.*; Huang, Weiping and Shubin, Zhou, *Xiangzhengzhang xuanju fangshi gaige: anli yanjiu (Case studies on the reform methods concerning the election of township chiefs)*, Beijing, Shehui kexue wenjian, 2003; Schubert, Gunter, "Democracy under One-party Rule," *China Perspectives*, n° 46, 2003, pp. 15-25; Li, Fan (ed), *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao 2004 (Report on the development of China's grassroots democracy, 2004)*, Beijing, Zhishi chanquan, 2005; Liu, Hairong, "Semi-Competitive Elections at Township Level in Sichuan Province," *China Perspectives*, n° 51, 2004, pp. 13-27, and Li, Lianjiang, "Direct Township Elections," in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 97-116. Still, in many places the local cadres are not interested in expanding direct elections, as they are afraid of losing control over local politics and of the instability caused by politically mobilized peasants—similar to the situation twenty years ago as the implementation of direct village elections was hotly debated.
3. The case of Taishi village (太石村), located near Guangzhou in southern Guangdong province, became most notorious in this respect. In July 2005, peasants tried to legally petition for the dismissal of their village head whom they accused of corruption, causing a violent confrontation with township authorities that persisted for months and captured much international attention.

quently, those scholars who continually observe and research political developments in China's vast countryside have turned their focus to the dynamics of peasant protest and how what Li Lianjiang and Kevin O'Brien once termed "policy-based" or "rightful resistance" may be seen as currently evolving into new and more proactive forms of resistance and peasant organisation.<sup>(4)</sup> This change in focus squares with the impression that village elections have failed as a means to enhance the quality of local self-government—the Communist Party's major objective in implementing them. Finally, the significance of village elections seems to be downgraded by China's ongoing fiscal and administrative reforms.<sup>(5)</sup> As townships and villages are increasingly deprived of opportunities to generate income for the sake of strengthening central control over rural debts and illegal off-budget revenues, and counties gain in allocation and policy-making power, village committees are in danger of being gradually transformed into local service centres of county governments. With nothing to distribute and nothing to decide upon in terms of economic and political strategy, village elections would then be meaningless.

However, this pessimistic outlook may be somewhat premature, as we can only now begin to discern the contours of a new fiscal regime currently being built in rural China. At this point in the debate on rural governance reforms, it is more interesting to note that village elections have never been systematically assessed with respect to their factual impact on stability and regime legitimacy in the local state. To achieve both of these goals has been the major motivation behind the central government's decision to promote the direct ballot in the countryside, besides pushing for economic development and putting more capable cadres in place. Only with officials more attuned to the local populace out of fear of being voted out of office, so it was assumed, could social stability, economic development and harmonious peasant-cadre relations in rural China be secured and made sustainable. Village elections, therefore, were assigned the task of ensuring better local governance to serve the well-being of the peasants, to enhance the quality of local cadres and to reinvigorate the regime's political legitimacy at the grassroots level.<sup>(6)</sup> In this study, therefore, we hypothesise on the capacity of village elections to produce stability and regime legitimacy by drawing on a set of qualitative data collected as part of a comprehensive research project on peasant participation and political awareness in six villages and six urban neighbourhoods. More precisely, we look at the famous county of Lishu in China's north-eastern Jilin province, where fieldwork was conducted in two villages be-



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longing to the township also named Lishu in the summer of 2004.<sup>(7)</sup> We argue that direct elections in Lishu have produced a high degree of peasant political awareness (measured in terms of political knowledge, efficacy and participation), resulting in greater political support for and legitimacy of the Communist Party regime as it is perceived in the local state.

Designated a model county—or demonstration (*shifan*) area—by the Chinese government for its successful implementation of direct village elections from a very early date, Lishu is certainly a success story for the regime. The county has been widely reported in the foreign media and visited by numerous observers of international agencies concerned with the promotion of democratic elections in non-demo-

4. O'Brien, Kevin and Li, Lianjiang, "Popular Contention and its Impact in Rural China," *Comparative Political Studies*, n° 3, 2005, pp. 235-59; O'Brien, Kevin and Li, Lianjiang, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, Cambridge/Mass., Cambridge University Press, 2006; Yu, Jianrong, "Dangdai Zhongguo nongmin weiquan zuzhi de fayu yu chengzhang" (Growth and Development of Peasant Assistance Organisations in Contemporary China), *Zhongguo nongcun guan*, n° 2, 2005, pp. 57-71; Yu, Jianrong, "Social Conflict in Rural China Today: observations and analysis on farmers' struggles so safeguard the rights," *Social Sciences in China*, n° 3, 2005, pp. 125-36.
5. See Kennedy, John James, "The Implementation of Village Elections and Tax-for-Fee Reform in Rural Northwest China," in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, Cambridge/Mass., Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 48-74, who also discusses the relationship between village elections and the fiscal reforms implemented over the last years.
6. O'Brien, Kevin J., "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, n° 32, 1994, pp. 33-59; O'Brien, Kevin J. and Li, Lianjiang, "Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party-State: Introducing Village Elections in China," *China Quarterly*, n° 162, 2000, pp. 465-89.
7. For details see appendices 1 and 2.

cratic countries. For these reasons, Lishu county may be declared an invalid empirical case to test the success of election-driven legitimacy-building in rural China. However, Lishu was not a site that was officially pre-selected for the implementation of direct village elections from above. It gained its reputation only *after* the efficacious conclusion of some rounds of competitive elections as well as the successful institutionalisation of so-called *haixuan*<sup>(8)</sup> nominations for electoral candidates by reform-minded local officials (see below). Only then did Lishu come to the attention of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which is responsible for the nationwide implementation of the Organic Law, and was declared a model that other local governments should emulate. The contention that Lishu does well today because the government has had its eye on it can therefore not explain the whole story.

Certainly, the villages of Lishu county do not permit generalisations concerning the relative success of direct elections in rural China. However, the same may be true for those places where these elections have seen mixed results or failed, given the limited number of localities that have been investigated so far by scholars and the media. Taking into account the sheer size of China, one might even hypothesise that for each village where elections are manipulated and have resulted in even more local conflict, there is another village where such elections operate well, make the cadres accountable and responsive, create a feeling of empowerment on the part of the peasants, and generate social stability as well as regime legitimacy. In any case, the reasons for the different outcomes of direct village elections must be properly analysed to understand the decisive conditions that make them work in one place and run into problems in another. In that sense, Lishu is certainly instructive and should not be excluded from this analysis merely due to its prominence as a showcase of village democracy in contemporary China.<sup>(9)</sup>

## Political support, regime legitimacy and system stability

In this study, we apply a model based on David Easton's concept of support as decisive for the stability of a political system. A system is stable if it enjoys the support of the people:

*We can say that A supports B either when A acts on behalf of B or when he orients himself favourably toward B. B may be a person or a group; it may be a goal, idea or institution. I shall designate supportive actions as overt support and supportive attitudes or sentiments as covert support.*<sup>(10)</sup>

According to Easton, support is directed at three major objects in a political system: the *political community*, i.e. "that aspect of a political system that consists of its members seen as a group of persons bound together by a political division of labour"<sup>(11)</sup>; the *regime*, i.e. the political or constitutional order, which refers to the fundamental *values, norms* and institutions (*authority structure*) of the government; and the *political authorities*, i.e. the incumbent leaders as representatives of the political order. Support is further differentiated by Easton into "specific" and "diffuse" support. *Specific support* refers to the satisfaction with the responsiveness of the government concerning specific demands. It is short-term and always directed at the political authorities, who are judged by the people with respect to their policy performance, their "day-to-day actions taken in the name of a political system"<sup>(12)</sup>. *Diffuse support* indicates a person's long-term conviction that the existence and functioning of the government conform to his or her moral or ethical principles concerning what is right in the political sphere. It is usually directed at the political community and—more importantly in our context—the regime: People support a regime if they identify with its fundamental values, norms and institutions. However, diffuse support can also be related to incumbent power-holders, i.e. the political authorities:

*Whereas specific support is extended only to the incumbent authorities, diffuse support is directed towards offices themselves as well as towards their individual occupants. More than that, diffuse support is support that underlies the regime as a whole and the political community.*<sup>(13)</sup>

8. *Haixuan*, "voting out of the sea", is a term referring to the free nomination of candidates by all villagers before an election is called.
9. Data collection in Lishu county may also be questioned as it is often assumed that external researchers—especially from the West—are misled by local cadres who have accumulated years of experiences with domestic and foreign visits. We still opted to go to Lishu and examine its success story. To restrict external intervention as far as possible, we chose two villages which had not been visited by any scholars or international observers before. Our questionnaires were not checked by the local authorities, and we were widely left alone to carry out the interviews. There was no indication that peasants had been briefed by local cadres before we arrived at the villages, as they spoke straightforwardly and did not shy away from criticism concerning cadre behaviour and the implementation of village policies. To our understanding, the interviewees responded honestly and were unconcerned if the village cadre, who led us to their houses, stayed on for a couple of minutes. For the questions posed, see appendix.
10. Easton, David, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 159.
11. *Ibid.*, p.176.
12. Easton, David, "A Reassessment of the Concept of Political Support," *British Journal of Political Science*, n° 9, 1975, pp. 435-57 (p. 437 for the quotation).
13. *Ibid.*, p.445.

**Table 1.** Types of legitimacy according to Easton

Sources of Legitimacy	Objects of Legitimacy	
	Regime	(Political) Authorities
<b>Ideology</b>	<i>Ideological Legitimacy:</i> Moral convictions about the validity of the regime	Moral convictions about the validity of incumbents of authority
<b>Structure</b>	<i>Structural Legitimacy:</i> Independent belief in validity of the structure (institutions) and norms of the political order	Overflow from belief in structure to the incumbent of the authority roles
<b>Personal Qualities</b>	<i>Personal Legitimacy:</i> Overflow from belief in the validity of the incumbents of authority roles to the authority roles (structure and norms of regimes themselves)	Independent belief in validity of authorities because of their personal qualities

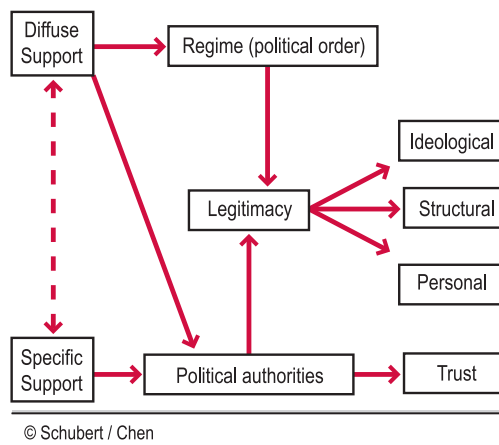
Source: Westle, Bettina, *Political Legitimacy: Theories, Concepts, Empirical Findings* (in Germ.), Baden-Baden, Nomos, 1989, p. 69

In Easton’s framework, (the belief in) legitimacy is one form or manifestation of diffuse support—the other being trust<sup>(14)</sup>—and means:

*the conviction on the part of the member that it is right and proper for him to accept and obey the authorities and to abide by the requirements of the regime. It reflects the fact that in some vague or explicit way he sees these objects as conforming to his own moral principles, his own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere.*<sup>(15)</sup>

For Easton, legitimacy as the moral consent to the regime and the authorities is the strongest form of diffuse support

**Figure 1.** Support, legitimacy and trust in the Eastonian model



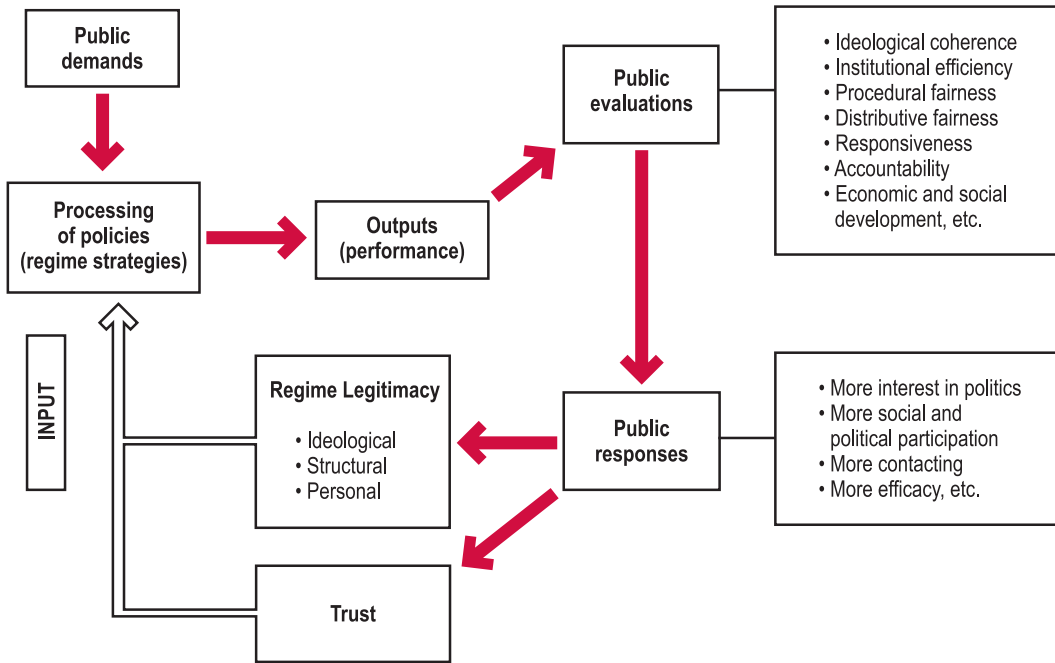
and may derive from underlying ideological principles (*ideological legitimacy*), from an attachment to the regime’s norms and institutional order (*structural legitimacy*), or from a devotion to or recognition of the personal qualities of incumbent political leaders (*personal legitimacy*).

From this matrix, which summarises Easton’s argument, it becomes clear that legitimacy depends on the public perception of a regime’s moral and structural validity (or quality) and on the validity of the authority roles therein; and on the perception of the validity and quality of the incumbent political leaders. Long-term specific support for incumbent power-holders based on their good performance may translate into diffuse support and, *eo ipso*, overall regime legitimacy.<sup>(16)</sup> Assessing regime legitimacy requires, therefore, data for both diffuse and specific support.

14. According to Easton, *trust* as the second form of diffuse support refers to the belief in most systems that there is a common good that transcends individual interest, which can be described as “the interest of realm, the public, common, or national interest, the general good and public welfare, or the good of ‘our people’” (Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 312). Trust means the conviction that this common good or general interest is granted without direct individual interference and permanent control of those in power; and is based on a feeling of symbolic satisfaction with the political order and the processes of government. The main difference between legitimacy and trust in the Eastonian framework is the following: People may lose trust in their political leaders’ capability to rule, but they may still believe in the latter’s general moral right to rule and to expect obedience (see Westle, Bettina, *Political Legitimacy: Theories, Concepts, Empirical Findings* (in Germ.), Baden-Baden, Nomos, 1989, pp. 70-71). It is a long path to tread from shattered trust to open resistance against the existent political order, while strong bonds of trust between the ruler and the ruled strengthen this order. Moreover, political leaders may enjoy a “bonus of trust” based on experience with their past behaviour as corresponds to a community’s established perception of that which constitutes the common good (Westle, *Political Legitimacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 85).

15. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

16. At the same time, diffuse support suffers if a system’s output is permanently deficient and judged as such by the people.

**Figure 2. Legitimacy-building in an Eastonian political system**

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From another perspective, stability results from public demands on and subsequent evaluations of a system's output (performance). This, in turn, is followed by a round of responses to this performance, which constitute new demands concerning legitimacy (ideological, structural, personal) and help to stabilise the political system. Assessing regime legitimacy, therefore, requires an empirical analysis of these public evaluations and responses and their legitimacy-building effects in each of the Eastonian sub-categories.

So how can we empirically measure support – or legitimacy and trust for that matter? In Muller and Jukam's well-established operationalisation<sup>(17)</sup> of regime legitimacy applied in a number of studies, diffuse support is measured by asking respondents to assess the following six items:

- I am proud to live under the current political system.
- I have an obligation to support the current political system.
- I respect the political institutions in China today.
- I feel that the basic rights of citizens are protected.
- I believe that the courts in China guarantee fair trials.
- I feel that my personal values are the same as those advocated by the government.

These items reflect Easton's sources of legitimacy in the matrix introduced above: Items 1 and 6 are designed to detect the popular feeling for the values and norms of the regime (*ideological legitimacy*); items 2 and 3 intend to reveal the respondents' general feelings about major political institutions and the current political system (*structural legitimacy*); and items 4 and 5 relate to personal evaluations of the political authorities in terms of whether they have functioned and wielded their power in accordance with one's sense of fairness and basic interests (*personal legitimacy*).

Specific support, for its part, refers to policy fields that supply information on the efficiency of political leadership. Based on the framework of Muller and Jukam, but also on past field observations by other China scholars, Chen Jie<sup>(18)</sup> has asked questions related to the following nine items in his study on political support in urban China:

17. Muller, Edward N. and Jukam, Thomas O., "On the Meaning of Political Support," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 77, n° 77, 1977, pp. 1561-1595. As regards the operationalisation of diffuse and specific support, we mainly refer to Chen, Jie, "Political Support and Participation in a Non-Democratic Society: A Study of Chinese Urban Residents," paper presented at the Conference "The Transformation of Citizen Politics and Civic Attitudes in Three Chinese Societies," Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica, Taipei (Taiwan), 19-20 November 2004, pp. 8-9.

- Controlling inflation
- Providing job security
- Minimizing the gap between rich and poor
- Improving housing conditions for all
- Maintaining order in society and community
- Providing adequate and universal medical care
- Providing welfare services to the needy
- Fighting official corruption
- Combating pollution

These items must certainly be modified in the context of rural China. For instance, listening to villagers' opinions and acting according to their demands (responsiveness), improving the village economy (entrepreneurship), and guaranteeing fairness in land distribution and financial compensation (reliability) are arguably more important to ensure specific support than minimising the gap between rich and poor, improving housing conditions and combating pollution. There seems to be less necessity to adjust the items of diffuse support, though, as they can certainly be relevant topics both in the countryside and in China's cities. Interestingly, some studies have found strikingly high degrees of trust among peasants in the central government, which surpassed the trust they accorded to their local leaders.<sup>(19)</sup> This would seem to indicate high levels of regime legitimacy in terms of diffuse support but low levels of legitimacy (concerning the local political authorities) in terms of specific support in the Eastonian sense.<sup>(20)</sup> However, as will be seen, our fieldwork in Lishu has found rather high levels of specific support for local cadres which may—as we hypothesise in accordance with David Easton's own assumptions—translate into diffuse support for the CP regime.

The Muller/Jukam approach to the measurement of support and regime legitimacy by using quantitative methodology is useful, but also certainly not the only viable method. Qualitative research offers itself as another possibility, although this approach is usually more time-consuming and works with much smaller samples. We believe that a distinction between public evaluations of and public responses to a regime's strategies to produce satisfying outputs and generate (system) stability serves as a good departure point for tackling the legitimacy conundrum (see figure 2). Questionnaires would then need to be designed in such a way that allows for assigning the contexts of the given answers to the different sources of legitimacy (and to trust). The data that we present does not fully correspond to this demand; but it may be good enough to stimulate more debate on how regime legitimacy can and should be empirically grasped and traced.<sup>(21)</sup>

## A brief account of village elections in Lishu

Since the founding of the People's Republic up until the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's villages were the pillars of energetic collectivisation efforts by the Party-state, culminating in the People's Commune system established in the late 1950s. While the People's Communes exercised rigid control in all spheres of the peasants' life, their economic performance was mixed. Although they successfully finalised the Communist regime's drive for collectivisation in agriculture, they were plagued by inefficiency and failure concerning the goal of raising agricultural productivity. In the late 1970s, the introduction of the household responsibility system (家庭聯產承包責任制) led to the gradual collapse of the People's Communes. Although this greatly enhanced the peasants' autonomy and material well-being by triggering rapid production gains in the countryside, the village administrations ran into trouble. The Party leadership had to find new answers to the question of which policies could change this situation for the better.

In 1980, so-called villager committees (村民委員會) were spontaneously established by peasants in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and the provinces of Sichuan and Hebei in order to fill the administrative vacuum caused by the demise of the commune system.<sup>(22)</sup> These developments aroused the interest of Peng Zhen, a veteran revolutionary leader and at the time vice-president of the NPC Standing Committee who quickly became the main protagonist in advocating villager self-government.<sup>(23)</sup> When the commune

18. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

19. Li, Lianjiang, "Political Trust in Rural China," *Modern China*, n° 2, 2004, pp. 228-58; O'Brien and Li, "Popular Contention and its Impact in Rural China," *op. cit.*

20. Peasant trust in higher levels of government can only be abstract (diffuse) while (dis-)trust in local officials is empirically grounded and specific. Trust in the central government becomes clear by the peasants' belief that, for instance, petitioning at higher levels can help to reign in corrupt local cadres. The government is thought to be fair and benevolent, and the structures of government efficient. However, given the failure of the petitioning system in many places where peasants have unsuccessfully turned to higher levels for help, regime legitimacy in terms of diffuse support is in increasing danger.

21. For further reference concerning the conceptual handling of the "support"-category see also Chen, Jie, "Popular Support for Village Self-government in China," *op. cit.*, and Chen, Jie; Lu, Chunglong and Yang Yiyin, *Popular Support for Grassroots Self-Government in Urban China. Findings from a Beijing Survey* (forthcoming in *Modern China*).

22. See Horsley, Jamie P., "A Legal Perspective on the Development of Electoral Democracy in China. The Case of Village Elections," in Stephen C. Hsu, *Understanding China's Legal System*, New York-London, New York University Press, 2003, pp. 295-352 (p. 298).

23. Peng Zhen's support is normally attributed to his positive experiences with village self-government during the revolutionary war. For a compilation of his comments on the issue between 1982-1987, see Minzhengbu (Ministry of Civil Affairs), *Peng Zhen tongzhi guanyu cunmin weiyuanhui jumin weiyuanhui de zhongyao jianghua* (Important Speeches of Comrade Peng Zhen on Villagers' Committees and Residents Committees), Beijing, 1990.

system was formally abolished in the revised PRC constitution of 1982 and the township reinstated as the lowest level of government, directly elected village committees became officially sanctioned as “autonomous grassroots organisations of the masses” (基層群眾性自治組織), responsible for administering public affairs, mediating in civil disputes and maintaining social order. Hence rural self-government was beginning to take root in the countryside; and though it was not yet specified by law, it allowed the township authorities to exert wide-ranging control over the villages. When in 1987 the “Organic Law on Village Committees” was promulgated (at first on an experimental basis), the legal grounds of villager self-government were strengthened and its practice experienced rapid initial progress.

Already in 1986, Jilin province’s Lishu county established a *Guiding Small Group on the Experimental Restructuring of and Tutoring on Village Committees* (梨樹縣村委會整頓補課試點指導小組) as a response to a *Circular on Earnest Efforts to Make Better Village and Urban Neighbourhood Committees in the Process of Grassroots Party Consolidation* (關於在基層整黨中認真搞好村民委員會和居民委員會建設的通知) issued by the provincial authorities. In December 1986, under the control of the *Guiding Small Group*, the first direct village elections ever held in Lishu took place in Beilaohao (北老壕) village. In accordance with the 1982 constitution, peasants in Beilaohao were allowed to freely nominate candidates who were then allowed to run in the official village election according to the number of votes they received in the primary. The outcome of this experiment was expressly welcomed by the Jilin provincial government and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the latter of which took charge of implementing the system of villager self-government.<sup>(24)</sup>

Further elections were held in 1988, 1992 and 1995. In the 1992 round, Pingan (平安) village in Lishu’s Shuanghe (雙河) township faced some trouble: The local Party authorities determined the candidates, yet Pingan’s peasants rejected them. At the same time, the villagers’ preferred candidates were not permitted to run for office by the village and township Party officials. Finally, the county authorities decided to turn to the method which had been applied in Beilaohao village back in 1986. Each peasant was given a white piece of paper and asked to write down the name of their candidate of choice. Those who gained the most votes were entitled to run in the upcoming village elections. When this solution turned out to be successful, as publicly nominated cadres were indeed elected into office, it was formalised in 1993 and quickly institutionalised throughout the county.<sup>(25)</sup>

**Table 2. Village Elections in Lishu County**

Election year	Eligible Voters	Votes cast	Turnout in %
1992	410,923	387,359	94.3
1995	416,819	396,395	95.0
1998	458,964	449,785	98.0
2001	443,020	434,159	98.0
2004	434,995	372,572	85.6

Source: Data provided by the Bureau of Civil Affairs, Lishu County.

In the fourth round of village elections held in 1995, the *haixuan* method described above was finally applied throughout Jilin province. Furthermore, the candidates were allowed to make campaign speeches up until the final vote. The principles of multi-candidate elections and casting secret ballots were, among other issues, written into local election regulations. Finally, when the Organic Law (村民委員會組織法) was revised and enforced nationwide in 1998, the central government drew on the Lishu experience to include the direct election of candidates in the law (Art. 14). Since then, village elections in China must have open primaries before the final ballot is cast. In the 1998 elections, Lishu county went a step further and let the members of the village committee be voted directly into office by the *haixuan* method if they immediately secured more than 50% of all votes cast.<sup>(26)</sup> Since then, it has seen

24. See Xu Weiliang (徐維良): The diary of Lishu’s village autonomy (梨樹縣村民自治大事記), [http://www.chinarural.org/news\\_show.aspx?cols=221410&ID=29589](http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=221410&ID=29589) (accessed on 22 March 2007). It is not quite clear for what particular reasons the authorities initiated the direct ballot in Lishu county at the time. According to one of our interviewees at Lishu’s local office of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, some peasants in a village tried to get rid of a cadre whom they strongly disliked and came up with the idea of having an election to do so. This incident aligned with the debate on implementing direct village elections within the Party leadership, made the peasants’ demand politically opportune and induced Lishu’s local officials to give it a try. If that is true, local agency and risk-taking—probably motivated by hopes of earning “career credit” in case of success or simply feelings of public responsibility by concerned cadres—were the main factors responsible for creating the “Lishu experience”.

25. For details see: “*Haixuan* is a brand-new democratic model created by the peasants” (“海選”是農民創造的一種新民主模式), [http://www.chinarural.org/news\\_show.aspx?cols=11&ID=32513](http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=11&ID=32513) (accessed on 22 March 2007). *Haixuan* means—in a metaphorical sense—to fish for pearls in the open sea, i.e. voting, among many choices, for somebody of one’s own trust or liking.

26. See Xu Weiliang: The “*haixuan*” model develops by being practiced—view and learn from the fourth re-election of village committees in Lishu county, Jilin province (“海選”模式在實踐中發展 - 吉林省梨樹縣村委會第四屆換屆選舉觀摩), [http://www.chinarural.org/news\\_show.aspx?cols=11&ID=29589](http://www.chinarural.org/news_show.aspx?cols=11&ID=29589) (accessed on 22 March 2007).



another two rounds of successful elections (2001, 2004), maintaining its reputation as a showcase of village self-government and stable cadre-peasant relations in contemporary rural China.

## Assessing the field data

In our comparative project on institutional change in rural China,<sup>(27)</sup> we were mainly concerned with the relationship between (the implementation of) direct village elections and the political awareness of peasants, the latter measured in terms of political knowledge, political efficacy and political participation. Our objective was to learn more about the development of citizenship in China's villages, and how that affects regime legitimacy and system stability. We did not set up our questionnaires along the lines of Muller and Jukam and their operationalisation of Easton's model. However, some elements of their work can be found in individual questions. We start with a brief summary of our main findings in Lishu county as they relate to four thematic sets of questions: knowledge of the electoral process; knowledge of village politics; political efficacy; and political participation. We then interpret the data against the background of the Eastonian model in order to determine the relationship between village elections and regime legitimacy. We add some caveats to our results, pointing at the possibility that the data may be interpreted differently.

### 1. Knowledge of the electoral process

The peasants interviewed in our two field sites in Lishu County were generally well informed about the electoral process and strongly welcomed the direct ballot in their villages. Among the respondents, 39 out of 56 (69.6%) were able to precisely or approximately remember the number of direct elections that had taken place in their village so far, and 47 (83.9%) called them "very popular". Among respondents 41 (73.2%) stated that all their neighbours and relatives had voted. Proxy voting seemed to have occurred only in some isolated cases. In all, 33 (58.9%) respondents could recall precisely or approximately the nomination procedure in their village, which was based on the *haixuan* method and a successive series of campaign speeches of those candidates who qualified to run in the final election. Twenty-seven (48.2%) interviewees knew about the Organic Law, which is propagated actively in Lishu county. Many of our respondents were very proud of their village enjoying regular direct elections and not a few pointed at the elections' steady rise

in popularity among the people after the *haixuan* method had been institutionalised. Obviously, the relatively high degree of knowledge related to the electoral process was also a result of the efforts of township and county authorities. All local cadres in Lishu who are responsible for village elections must undergo regular training at higher government levels. They must also teach the peasants about the Organic Law as well as the local regulations concerning electoral implementation, especially when another election is approaching. Consequently, Lishu's peasants are well informed about the legal framework of the direct ballot in their villages.

### 2. Knowledge of village politics

Most peasants in the two villages that we visited seemed to be very to at least fairly familiar with the role that the village Party branch plays in an election: 22 out of 55 (40%) respondents seemed to be fully aware of this role, whilst 18 (32.7%) showed at least some understanding of it. Moreover, 22 interviewees (40%) appeared to fully understand the impact of direct elections on the relations between the Party branch and the village committee, with another 19 (34.5%) having at least some understanding of it. More precisely, the overwhelming majority of peasants had no doubts about the predominance of the Party branch over the village committee and the final say of the Party secretary in all important matters, even if the village director had been elected and enjoyed more democratic legitimacy.<sup>(28)</sup> The overall majority emphasised that no significant change regarding the administration of the village had taken place since the introduction of direct elections, though there were some who pointed at such change and stated that relations between the Party branch and the village committee were more "up-to-standard" (現有規範) today. Apparently, the hierarchical relationship between the village Party secretary as the "first hand (or string)" (第一把手) and the village director as the second (第二把手) had survived the institutionalisation of village elections and the Party secretary's authority was not contested.<sup>(29)</sup>

27. For details see Appendix 1.

28. See also Guo, Zhenglin and Bernstein, Thomas P., "The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between the Village Committees and the Party Branches," *Journal of Contemporary China*, n° 39, 2004, pp. 257-75, who place emphasis on the unchallenged authority of the Party secretary in many villages as well, albeit from a more institutional perspective.

29. It must be noted here that only 16% of our respondents were Party members (see Appendix, Tab. 3), underlining that a substantial majority of non-Party members held this opinion.

At the same time, our respondents did not seem well informed about or interested in the state of village-township relations, though still a majority of 34 out of 55 (61.2%) interviewees made statements suggesting full or at least some understanding of this issue, for instance by firmly stating that such relations were good, that the township guided the villages or that the villages had to obey the township. But contrary to their assessment of relations between the Party branch and village committee, peasants in Lishu seemed less aware of the impact of the direct ballot on village-township relations: Only 2 (3.6%) respondents were clear on this matter, while 53 (96.4%) could not make statements suggesting full or at least some understanding of the issue, and many of the respondents simply did not know. In most cases, the peasants would say that no change had occurred (“沒有變化”; “都一樣”), indicating that they had no specific opinion on the township government’s role in village elections and village politics. At the same time, however, 32 (58.2%) respondents seemed to fully or approximately understand how the township government reacted to direct village elections, mostly ascertaining that the township welcomed these elections and would take good care to implement them properly, for instance by sending down township government and Party officials to oversee the electoral process and advise village cadres. Obviously, the peasants in our two research sites had nothing bad to say about their township government and just stated matter-of-factly the latter’s predominance over the village as they had always perceived it. Some respondents evoked the impression that to them the township’s guidance of the village was a good thing, and that relations between the two were similar to those in a family (“關係都挺好, 他們像一家人”). Concerning the influence of clans, 31 (56.4%) of our respondents made a statement indicating full understanding and another 23 (41.8%) seemed to have at least some understanding of the issue, with both groups maintaining almost unanimously that even if clans were existent and some clan influence on village politics could be perceived, it did not have any major political impact. As a matter of fact, clans are not assumed to be important power-brokers in northeast China, an area of heavy migration in former times that worked against any firm entrenchment of clan structures in the countryside.<sup>(30)</sup>

### 3. Political efficacy

Generally spoken, peasants in Lishu show a high degree of political efficacy. However, this finding must be qualified:

All 55 respondents had voted in the last village election and 51 out of 55 (92.7%) respondents remembered exactly how many times they voted in the last election—which can entail multiple votes, as any candidate must cross a 50% threshold before he/she is declared a winner. When asked why they voted (or did not vote) in the last election, 39 out of 56 (69.6%) respondents made a statement indicating strong support for village elections, often by emphasising that this was their right (“這是我的權力”). Only 4 (7.1%) respondents showed indifference towards village elections by stressing that there were rules to follow (“有規定”), that voting was an obligation (“我的義務”), that everybody voted (“大家投”) or that voting is of no use (“沒用”); none of the village residents was totally negative in their response concerning the direct ballot. Fifty respondents (89.3%) declared that they would vote in the next election too, and emphasised—when asked for the reasons—the importance of electing officials of their liking (“喜歡的人”), installing capable cadres (“有能力的幹部”), or bringing people into office whom they trusted (“信任的人”). Forty-eight respondents (85.7%) insisted that their vote was important because the outcome of an election could depend on a single ballot, and because only by voting could the election of capable and trusted officials be ensured. These findings were compatible with many positive assessments of electoral implementation in our two villages: all 56 respondents (!) maintained that elections were fair, while 48 (85.7%) believed that the election procedures were honest and fully executed according to the law. Moreover, 47 (83.9%) respondents expressed their satisfaction with the nomination procedure of candidates for an election.

Forty-seven respondents (83.9%) stated that an elected village leader serves the people better than a nominated one, which highlights that direct elections of the village committee in Lishu have become “the only game in town”. Even more importantly, 46 (83.6%) respondents claimed that direct elections had brought advantages to their village, enumerating very different issues ranging from practical improvements of village life (e.g. road building and repair; agricultural development; credit distribution) to overall economic progress (including more jobs) and—most notably—the recruitment of better and more responsive cadres. Only 10 (17.6%) interviewees saw no change compared to former times. Thirty-four respondents (60.7%) made a positive

30. However, two respondents from B village stated that clans controlled significant numbers of votes and were an important factor in the Village Representative Assembly.

statement when asked if direct elections have made the village committee better at listening to the peasant's demands. Eighteen respondents (32.1%), however, saw no significant change in their village since the introduction of direct elections and four (7.1%) expressed disdain for village elections with respect to cadre responsiveness. Twenty-six respondents (46.4%) said that they felt a significant or at least some degree of change in the behaviour of the village director since the introduction of direct elections, suggesting more cadre responsiveness to the peasants' demands. However, more than half of our respondents (53.6%) saw no significant change or were unable to make a clear statement. Finally, 28 (50%) of our respondents thought that direct elections had given them more influence over village politics, though they often could not specify to what extent and in regard to which issues; the same number either said that there was no significant change concerning their political leverage vis-à-vis the village authorities or simply could not give a clear answer. Hence, in terms of political efficacy we came across an interesting gap concerning what peasants think about their general empowerment by the direct ballot which they regard as very substantial (pointing at a high degree of *internal* efficacy), and how they assess the relevancy of these elections for making local cadres more responsive to their demands, which they consider less substantial (pointing at a lower degree of *external* efficacy).

#### 4. Political participation

In our two research sites direct village elections did not greatly increase the level of political participation in terms of active involvement in village affairs between elections, nor did they raise expectations of more democratic change in the future. Twenty-five out of 56 respondents (44.64%) stated that they had indeed become more interested in village politics because of direct elections and would also participate more in the present, for example by contacting their village committee concerning personal matters or taking part in a village assembly session. However, 18 (40%) respondents declared that village elections had not raised their political interest whatsoever, while another 13 (23.6%) simply remarked that they had not experienced any change or were not able to answer the question. Only 2 (3.6%) respondents participated in any form of political protest in the village, while 39 (69.6%) never did and 15 (26.8%) respondents did not answer the question at all, indicating that such protests were not an issue in our villages.

Twenty-nine respondents (52.7%) thought that the village

party committee should actively engage in the organisation of an election, welcoming its leadership role in this process. Eleven respondents (20%) opined to the contrary and rejected an active involvement of the Party branch, while 15 (26.8%) held no specific stance on this issue or were not aware of it. Twenty-one (38.2%) of our interviewees expressed a desire that the Party secretary be elected by all villagers, i.e. including non-Party members. Eighteen (27.3%) rejected this option and maintained that the Party secretary can or should only be elected by the members of the village Party committee. Eighteen respondents (32.7%) held that this issue did not matter or they had no knowledge of it. Apparently, village elections—although they have taken place for years—have not generated a significant trend towards demands of greater 'horizontal democratisation', i.e. with the introduction of a direct ballot for choosing the Party secretary.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, when asked if they would like to see the extension of direct elections to the township level, 21 (37.5%) of our respondents agreed, while 18 (32.1%) declined the idea, mostly because of the personal distance they saw between the villagers and the township head, who they hardly knew ("不認識他"). A surprising number of 17 (30.4%) respondents had no specific opinion on this issue, or made unspecific or contradictory statements, e.g. by stating that though direct elections of the township head were a good thing, peasants would not be able to know for whom to vote ("直選好,可是我投給誰?"). It becomes clear that village elections in Lishu have—at least so far—not been successful in producing any loud demands for a 'vertical democratisation'. We made some additional interesting observations in the field:

- Cadre turnover in the village committee had remained very low over the years, indicating the existence of an established "political class" of village cadres who were in charge. However, some villagers who we met were very eager to run as candidates for the village committee and prepared for their campaigns by posting themselves near the village committee building and talking to peasants whenever the opportunity arose.
- The relationship between the Party secretary and the village director seemed to be co-operative and professional, especially in village A, which had a rather sound collective economy and just recently set up a small Economic Development Zone (經濟開發區) for attracting local

31. However, 38.2% could also be read as a pretty substantial number when compared to data gathered in the 1990s. This highlights the problem of making sound statements on figures that are not taken from data sets covering longer periods of field observation.

capital.<sup>(32)</sup> Both officials followed a clear division of labour, with the village director taking care of the daily matters of village administration and the Party secretary maintaining communication with the township authorities. However, it was clear that the Party secretary was in command and enjoyed much more respect and power in the village.

- All village and township cadres responsible for the execution of village elections seemed to take their work extremely seriously and repeatedly emphasised that the outcome of these elections was the most important indicator of a cadre's efficiency and overall quality. They also stressed that elections had contributed significantly to the maintaining of local stability.
- The overwhelming majority of the villagers we met seemed to feel truly empowered by the direct ballot, as they emphatically insisted on the importance of their right to vote and its significance for making a difference in an election. However, they did not show any inclination to translate this felt empowerment into concrete pressure on their cadres. On the one hand, they vehemently insisted on their democratic right to vote and expressed their strong interest in taking part in elections. On the other hand, they did not consider the direct ballot as a weapon to be used against unfair or bad cadres in the first place, but much more as a complementary instrument to place trusted officials in charge. This suggests that peasant-cadre relations are less tense in Lishu than they obviously are in other localities in rural China.

## Discussing legitimacy

So what does our data say about the possibility of more regime legitimacy through institutional change in the local state? We are fully aware—as will appear in the caveats below—that our interpretations have a somewhat lopsided character given the ambiguous nature of some of the data that we gathered. This highlights a couple of methodological problems as well as some other concerns regarding the empirical measurement of legitimacy. These are not easy to overcome, especially in the Chinese context with its still limited possibilities to conduct fieldwork on such sensitive issues as political support and regime (cadre) legitimacy in the local state. However, as mentioned above, our assessment may contribute to the current debate on the CP regime's "authoritarian resilience", to borrow a term from Andrew Nathan, and on the scope and limits of reform-led legitimacy-building in contemporary China that may explain why the current regime is more stable than usually acknowledged.<sup>(33)</sup>

## Ideological legitimacy

Ideological legitimacy derives from the moral conviction that the current regime (the political order) as such and the (roles of the) political authorities are valid and acceptable. Hence, we must ask at a general level if the political order in the local state and the authority roles of the local leaders enjoy such legitimacy in the eyes of the peasants in Lishu. As is well known, the Party-state has introduced direct village elections in order to enhance the quality of local governance. To that end, peasants should participate more actively in village self-government and have some control over their cadres. Quite certainly, village elections were not implemented in order to initiate some sort of bottom-up democratisation in which the Party would be gradually submitted to the Chinese *demos* by a successive extension of the direct ballot to higher administrative levels. Village elections were, as it seems, of pure instrumental value to resolve problems in administering the countryside; they were supposed to stabilise cadre-peasant relations and to remain "parochial", i.e. strictly bound to the rural villages of China.

Our data does not explicitly tell us if and to what extent peasants in Lishu subscribe to the regime's rationale for village self-government and grassroots democracy (基層民主). However, they obviously support electoral reform as an important step to give more political power to the people and enable them to elect "good" and capable cadres into office. Our respondents did not demand the extension of direct elections to the township level and did not criticise the township authorities. On the contrary, those who showed full or partial understanding of the township's role concerning the implementation of direct elections and local politics in general were rather supportive of its authority. All in all, the peasants in Lishu seemed to give considerable credit to the government for implementing village elections, and to the political authorities for taking their interests more seriously, suggesting high levels of ideological regime legitimacy in the Eastonian sense.

32. This "village EDZ", as many others, had been declared illegal in 2003 by higher authorities because it violated government regulations concerning environmental protection and the misuse of energy, but also because of low infrastructural quality. However, in 2005 the government of Lishu county established an "Economic Development Zone" itself of which A village then became a part by setting up a sub-unit EDZ.

33. See "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 14, n° 1 (January 2003), pp. 6-17. See also Schubert, Gunter, "One-Party Rule and the Question of Legitimacy in Contemporary China: preliminary thoughts on setting up a new research agenda," (forthcoming in *Journal of Contemporary China*).

## Structure

Structural legitimacy derives from the belief that the institutional order and the norms of the current regime are valid and acceptable. We found that the system of direct village elections in Lishu, the main feedback mechanism within the institutional order at the grassroots level, enjoyed great popularity among the peasants. A high degree of support could be established for their procedural and legal fairness. Village elections obviously gave our respondents a feeling of empowerment vis-à-vis the village authorities, as solid majorities of peasants claimed that their vote was important, that they had become more interested in village politics, and that the direct ballot had made the village committee listen more to the wishes and demands of the peasants. Interestingly, our respondents were evenly split on the question as to whether direct elections had given them more influence in village politics, with 50% holding this viewpoint and another 50% stating no change or giving no clear answer. Apparently, the peasants' feeling of personal empowerment—or their internal efficacy—was not fully matched by an expectation that the village cadres, as institutional power holders, would respond to their demands, indicating lower levels of external efficacy compared to internal efficacy in the two villages that we investigated. This phenomenon, however, is not necessarily jeopardising structural regime legitimacy (see below).

The established power hierarchy between the Party secretary and the village director had not been challenged by the direct ballot and was widely taken for granted. Although a relative majority of peasants thought that the Party secretary should also be elected by all villagers, 60% of our respondents rejected this option or held no specific opinion on the question. As a matter of fact, the privileged position of the Party secretary in the village seemed to be generally accepted. None of our respondents brought up the issue of a village-wide election of this post on their own accord during the interviews. Moreover, a strong majority of peasants welcomed the active participation of the Party committee in the organisation and execution of village elections. At the same time, many respondents stated that the township government followed village elections with much attention and took care that they were properly carried out, indicating a rather positive view of the township authorities' role in the electoral process. Also, the guiding role of the township government vis-à-vis the village was not critically questioned, but rather taken for granted, and actually welcomed by most peasants. Generally speaking, an overwhelming majority of our respondents saw both the relations between the village Party

branch and the village committee and between the village and the township government as remaining unchanged by the direct ballot and obviously did not lament this fact. This suggests at least a “tacit structural legitimacy” based on the “tradition” of the existing political order in Lishu, as strong peasant support for village elections has not led to demands for substantial change concerning the existing political institutions and power relationships in the local state.

### Caveat I

We have not focused in our interviews on the degree of our respondents' (diffuse and specific) support of the existing order and the political authorities. So what we have denoted “tacit structural legitimacy” must be taken as hypothetical and substantiated by further research.

## Personal legitimacy

Personal legitimacy derives from the belief that the incumbents, i.e. the political leaders, are well qualified and, thus, acceptable. Although our respondents welcomed direct elections as an institutional innovation, they were somewhat more cautious in judging their cadres, i.e. the incumbent leaders in the village whom they meet on a daily basis. As has been mentioned above, a 60% majority of peasants thought that they had gained more leverage over the village committee in the era of direct elections, as cadres would now listen more to their wishes. At the same time, however, only half of our respondents stated that they had gained more influence over specific decisions made by village authorities, e.g. with respect to fixing grain quotas, constructing roads and schools, modernising irrigation systems or founding new collective enterprises. Still, this does not necessarily suggest that the local cadres in our two villages suffered from a legitimacy crisis. Although some respondents uttered disapproval of them for various reasons (often related to their disappointment over the village committee's restrictive decisions on allocating credits), many of them acknowledged that the cadres had become more responsive to the villagers' demands and that they accepted the direct ballot as a measurement of their right to rule.

In our surveys, an overwhelming majority of more than 80% of our respondents declared that direct elections had brought advantages to their village. Besides naming economic and agricultural development in general, they pointed at practical improvements (such as new roads and irrigation systems, a new school, etc.), and many peasants emphasised that elec-

tions had produced better cadres! At the same time, our respondents established a strong positive correlation between direct elections and more cadre efficiency and trustworthiness, but—as stated before—a weaker correlation between village elections and their immediate impact on the political decision-making process in the village. To put it differently: The cadres seemed to enjoy a high degree of autonomy (in spite of being elected), but were seen to use this autonomy in a more responsible (and responsive) way than they had in the past. Though our questionnaire did not focus on generating more systematic findings as to what the peasants thought about their political leaders, we found quite a few indications that trust in the cadres did play an important role, and that trust may be a key concept in understanding the observations of election-driven cadre autonomy and increased cadre responsiveness vis-à-vis the peasants' demands (see below).

### Caveat II

Trust was not systematically checked in our questionnaires as an explanatory variable for the cadres' autonomy and the gap between the peasants' internal and external efficacy. The suggestion that a low degree of external efficacy remains unproblematic, because a bond of trust between the cadres and the peasants sufficiently compensates for it, must certainly be investigated more thoroughly.

## Conclusion and future research

If we discount the caveats made above and find our main hypothesis verified, then the “empowering effect of village elections”<sup>(34)</sup> in rural China does not necessarily bring about pressure on local officials and the institutional order, nor does it pose a threat to political stability. Equally possible is a consolidation of peasant-cadre relations, resulting in more legitimacy for incumbent leaders and for the institutional order in the local state, arguably translating into overall regime legitimacy. This is conditional upon the local cadres' willingness to subject themselves to the direct ballot, a willingness that itself certainly depends on their confidence in their political survival in the age of elections. But where does this confidence come from?

In Lishu, as we concluded, it does not originate in the skilful manipulation of the electoral process by an established and powerful political elite. Elections were well implemented following the stipulations of the Organic Law and

positively received by the peasants. Economic success—or economic performance of Lishu's cadres for that matter—may be a factor, but given the moderate degree of development in Lishu county, it does not appear to be decisive either. At this point, informal institutions may come into play as explanatory variables. For instance, Lily Tsai has pointed at the significance of “solidarity groups”—most notably temple and lineage institutions—that can ensure peasant co-operation and enforce compliance with policy requirements in a village, but also bestow authority on local cadres who assume the roles of leaders within these groups.<sup>(35)</sup> However, in our villages in Lishu, no such “solidarity groups” existed or wielded significant influence.

Hence, we would argue that the concept of rational trust—or trust as “encapsulated interest” (Russell Hardin)<sup>(36)</sup>—within a “modernised” moral economy<sup>(37)</sup> of asymmetric (but mutual, i.e. reciprocal) relations between cadres and peasants is helpful to understand what is going on in Lishu. We believe that rational trust—a special manifestation of contractual thinking—is a concept that deserves more attention in further research on post-election village politics.<sup>(38)</sup> Lishu's peasants trust their cadres as they can reasonably expect that these cadres respond positively to the peasants' interests, since the cadres want to get re-elected and hence maintain a close relationship with the peasants. This results in social stability and the continuation of the established order in the village which is in the interest of both the cadres and the peasants. Although their relationship is not characterised by horizontal political ties and the established cadre

34. Li Lianjiang, “The Empowering Effects of Village Elections,” *op. cit.*

35. Lily Tsai argues that these informal institutions are therefore far more effective for public goods provision than formal institutions like village elections. See “The Struggle of Village Public Goods Provision,” in Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China*, Cambridge/Mass., Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 117-48.

36. Hardin, Russell, “Trusting Persons, Trusting Institutions,” in Richard J. Zeckhauser, *Strategy and Choice*, Cambridge/Mass., MIT Press, 1991, 185-209 and “Do We Want Trust in Government?,” in Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Trust*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 22-41.

37. The term “moral economy” certainly needs more theoretical refinement. Generally speaking, we refer here to the village community as a closely-knit economic and social entity based on principles of reciprocity, fairness, and justice to ensure survival in the face of scarcity.

38. See Brandtstädter, Susanne and Schubert, Gunter, “Democratic Thought and Practice in Rural China,” *Democratization*, n° 5, 2005, pp. 801-19; Schubert, Gunter, “Authority, Trust and Legitimacy in the PRC (in Germ.),” *China aktuell*, n° 2, 2006, pp. 5-39; Schubert, Gunter, *Village Elections, Citizenship and Regime Legitimacy in the PRC*, Tuebingen, Institute of Chinese and Korean Studies, GCS-Paper No. 5, 2006. Trust and trustworthiness are also investigated—though from a different analytical angle—by Melanie Manion, “Democracy, Community, Trust: The Impact of Elections in Rural China,” *Comparative Political Studies*, n° 3, 2006, pp. 301-24, who identifies contestation and inclusive voting procedures as their major explanatory variables.

elite in the village remains in charge, it is the peasants' trust in their cadres, strengthened—or rejuvenated—by the electoral mode, that lends it sufficient stability. At the same time, village elections serve as an assurance that this trust is honoured, but—once again—*not* as a means to submit the cadres to the peasants' will and, consequently, to undo the established power structure which is entrenched in the moral economy of the village: As the cadres respect the fact that the peasants have been made citizens by the direct ballot and must be taken seriously as such, the peasants respect the cadres' supremacy in the village and do not challenge their exclusive power. Only if the cadres misuse the “bonus of trust” that they enjoy by engaging in corruption, electoral manipulation or outright repression of peasants, then the latter would start to mistrust, protest and rebel. However, as trust in Lishu is honoured on both sides, the villages that we investigated remain stable and the political order fairly legitimate—at least for the time being. Rational trust in law-abiding and responsive local officials supported and reinforced by fair elections may explain why in Lishu turnover in the village committees is low and cadre legitimacy high. Rational trust in combination with a moral economy based on reciprocal relations and an established social order that hon-

ours “just leadership”<sup>(39)</sup> may also explain why cadre legitimacy does not require a *complete* horizontalisation of peasant-cadre relations at the present time.

These assumptions, however, must be more thoroughly explored by sound empirical research. If they do hold and the Lishu experience can be repeated in other places, this would open a window of opportunity for the CP regime to further strengthen its “authoritarian resilience” by piecemeal reform and adaptation. With trust apparently destroyed in many parts of rural China by law-breaking and corrupt cadres, as so many reports tell us, the perspectives for generalising the Lishu experience seem bleak. Still, there could be many (non-reported) places like Lishu “out there” yet to be identified as what they are, namely “trust villages”. These are villages in which the cadre-peasant nexus is firmly established by contractual thinking derived from both the traditional village order and modern political institutions, most notably village elections. Though this is a hypothesis that sounds not familiar to the ears of many China scholars, to dismiss the Lishu example as too unique—and therefore irrelevant—could be a major analytical mistake leading to serious misunderstandings and flawed interpretations of China's ongoing process of political and administrative reform. •

39. The issue of “procedural justice (or fairness)” comes to mind, which has been highlighted by some authors to explain why peasants would support elections and accept official policies even if they find their cadres morally unacceptable or disagree with their policies. In a fine recent paper, John J. Kennedy (2007) has introduced the term “intrinsic support” to name the peasants' preference for procedural fairness over outcomes in China's grassroots democracy. Peasants may have very negative opinions on the state of the local economy but still support village elections—and the cadres who are responsible for their proper implementation. Procedural justice—facing the odds of a sluggish local economy—may indeed be an important explanatory variable for explaining still decent levels of political stability and legitimacy in China's countryside and must be more thoroughly researched in the future. Also, it should and can be linked to the concept of (rational) trust embedded in a village's moral economy that we suggest here.

## Appendix 1. General remarks concerning fieldwork

This article is part of a comparative research project entitled “Institutional Change, Participation and Political Awareness in Rural and Urban China” jointly undertaken by the author and Thomas Heberer (University of Duisburg-Essen). Fieldwork was conducted in two villages of Buji Township in Longgang District of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone during November/December 2002 and—after both villages were transformed into urban neighbourhoods—again in March 2005; in two villages of Dongcun Township, Fenyi County, Xinyu City in Jiangxi province during July/August 2003; and in two villages of Lishu Township, Lishu County, Siping City in Jilin province during August 2004. Qualitative data was gathered on the basis of three different sets of semi-structured questionnaires for peasants, elected village cadres and higher cadres working at the township, county and prefecture levels. In each village of the Jiangxi and Jilin case studies, thirty villagers (selected at random by drawing on the household registration records of each village first, after which the sample was modified to give gender and age appropriate representation and then complemented by a backup group where a selected villager was not available) and three elected village cadres were interviewed. In addition, ten to twelve higher cadres were also interviewed. In Shenzhen, the sample had to be reduced in each category for organisational reasons. The entire sample covered 204 respondents. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and two hours, during which our respondents—according to the sample category to which they belonged—were asked to recall and opine on a wide range of issues concerning direct village elections. The questionnaires—besides asking for basic information related to each village’s demographic and economic situation and for respondents’ biographical data—contained 37 questions for peasants, 23 questions for elected village cadres, and 16 questions for higher cadres. Data evaluation was based on the conventions of qualitative content analysis. This was complemented by a standardisation of the responses by simple coding to develop an index of (democratic) political awareness for villagers and village cadres in each of the three locations.

In this article we only draw upon the data gathered in interviews with selected peasants in villages A and B in Lishu township, Lishu county.

## Appendix 2. Jilin case study: basic data from villages A and B

	Jilin Case Study'	
	Siping City, Lishu County, Lishu Township	
	Village A	Village B
Number of natural villages	9	6
Number of Small Election Groups	16	15
Inhabitants	4,037	2,777
Eligible voters	2,953	2,102
• Male voters (in % of eligible voters)	49.3	48.9
• Female voters (in % of eligible voters)	50.7	51.1
Number of households	1,131	782
Collective economy	yes	Yes
Village income (Rmb)	6,500,000 Rmb (2003)	9,070,000 Rmb (2003)
Per capita income (Rmb)	3,980 Rmb	3,482 Rmb
Number of Village Representative Assembly members	78	75
Number of Village Committee members	7	5
Year of first elections held according to the 'Organic Law'	1988	1988
Year of first haixuan elections	1992	1992

Figures as of August 2004 (if not otherwise indicated).

## Appendix 3. Respondent data of Jilin case study

Sample	Peasants	Elected cadres	Peasants	Elected cadres	Upper level cadres
	Village A		Village B		Lishu Township & County Siping City
<b>Total Number</b>	29	3	27	3	10
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	19	3	17	3	10
Female	10		10		
<b>Age Cohorts</b>					
20-29	1		2		
30-39	5	1	7		1
40-49	12		7		4
50-59	8	2	8	2	4
60-69	3		2	1	1
70-79					
80-89			1		
<b>Formal Education</b>					
No formal education	2		1		
Primary school	8		6		
Junior high school	15	1	18	3	1
Senior high school	4	1	2		
Vocational/technical school		1			1
College/university					8
No response					
<b>(Former) Occupation</b>					
Peasant	24		25	1	
Worker in TVE	2		1		
Worker in private enterprise	1				
Migrant worker					
Owner of individual business					
Manager of TVE					
Private entrepreneur	1	1			
Village/township clerk		2		2	
Demobilised soldier	1				
Cadre					9
No response			1		1
<b>Organisational Membership</b>					
Communist party	9	3	2	2	10
CP Youth League			10		
Democratic party					
Business association					
No organisation	20		13	1	
No statement			2		
<b>Permanent resident</b>	28	3	24	3	
<b>Member of dominant lineage</b>	1		4	1	



## Appendix 4. Survey questions

### A. Knowledge of the electoral process

1. How many direct elections have taken place in your village to date?
2. Are elections very popular in your village?
3. Do your family members, neighbours and friends also vote?
4. How are candidates for elections nominated in your village?
5. Do you know or have you ever heard of the "Organic Law on Village Committees" and its regulations?

### B. Knowledge of village politics and institutions

6. According to your understanding, what role does the Party branch play in an election? Can you explain what the Party branch does exactly?
7. Do you think that elections have changed the relationship between the Party branch and the village committee to any extent?
8. Do clans play an important role in village elections and village politics?
9. Generally speaking, how has the township government reacted to the elections in your village?
10. Have you observed any change in village-township relations since the introduction of direct elections? Have any major problems arisen?
11. How do you see the present state of relations between the village committee and your township government?

### C. Political efficacy

12. Did you vote in the last election?
13. How often did you vote in the last village election?
14. Why did you vote? Why didn't you vote?
15. Are you going to vote in the next election, too?
16. Do you think that your vote is important?
17. Do you think that elections in your village are fair? Do you think that you have a real choice between candidates in elections?
18. Do you think that election procedures in your village are honest and carried out according to the law?
19. Are you satisfied with the nomination procedure of candidates for elections in your village?
20. Do you think that an elected village director serves the people better than a leader nominated by the township government?

21. Generally speaking, do you think that elections have made the village committee listen to the villagers more?
22. Do you perceive any change in the behaviour of the village director as a result of the direct elections?
23. Do you think that the elections have brought advantages to your village (for instance, more economic development and social welfare, better roads, new schools etc.)?
24. Do you think that elections have given you more influence on important decisions made in the village, (e.g. concerning the fixation of grain quotas, the construction of roads and schools, development projects such as irrigation systems, the founding of new collective enterprises, etc.)?

### D. Political participation

25. Have you become more interested in village politics since direct elections have been implemented in your village? For instance, do you attend more meetings of the Village Assembly or do you contact the village director/village committee for personal matters more often than you did before?
26. Have you ever participated in some form of political protest? Have you ever initiated or organised such a protest yourself?
27. Do you think that the Party branch should actively engage itself in the organisational process of a village election?
28. Do you think that if the village director is elected by the villagers, the Party secretary should also be elected by them? Or do you think that this is not important or not good?
29. We have learned that there is a broad discussion going on in China that direct elections should be extended to the township level. What do you think about this?

### Additional

30. Do you think that it is more or less efficient if the posts of Party secretary and village director are assumed by one person? Or do you think that they should be held by two different persons?