

## Pressures for Expanding Local-Level Democracy

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has faced numerous pressures in recent years to reform its governing practices, particularly at the local level where these practices directly affect the lives of citizens. Despite years of campaigning against it, corruption continues to get worse; the abuse of power by local officials has inflamed relations with the local citizenry; and there seems to be a palpable need to enhance the legitimacy of local officials. Village-level elections were introduced in China in the late 1980s to respond to such needs, but they created new problems: party secretaries clashed regularly with village heads, and township cadres resented newly assertive village leaders. Moreover, the electoral process stalled as efforts to promote it at the township level met resistance. In recent months, however, there have been new and expanded experiments with local-level democracy involving increasing the importance of local people's congresses, opening up the electoral process, and using some form of election to choose local cadres. Importantly, these experiments are not limited to the village level but are taking place at the township and sometimes county levels. Such innovations may not be the harbinger of democratization, but they do reflect increased pressures to cope with the problems of local governance.

Local governance has been a troubled area in China in recent years. Although village elections, started in 1987, offered hope of better governance and more democratic choice, their implementation has been uneven at best, and they have not yet been permitted to move up to the township level on a regular basis. Meanwhile, tensions between local cadres and peasants have increased. Yu Jianrong, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), has written vividly of peasants' efforts to resist the tax burden imposed on them.<sup>1</sup> Not coincidentally, Zhao Shukai of the State Council's Development Research Center has depicted local government as ever more focused on the task of revenue collection.<sup>2</sup> Chen Kuidi and Chun Tao's *Zhongguo nongmin diaocha* (Investigation of China's peasants), which became a best-seller this year before it was banned, has similarly described the poverty and oppression of China's peasants.<sup>3</sup> Over the past year or so, there have been notable efforts to reduce this tax burden, but they have only shifted the focus of peasant protests to disputes over land rights.<sup>4</sup> Good governance has been in very short supply; Shanghai researcher Xiao Gongqin has warned of the development of "sultanism" at the local level.<sup>5</sup>

Breaking this cycle of political oppression, excessive taxation, resistance, and violence has become a major focal point for researchers and policy advisers in China, as well as an object of citizen activism. *Xinwen zhouban* (Newsweek) labeled 2003 the year

of the “new popular rights movement” because of the many efforts to use legal means to articulate and protect the rights of citizens.<sup>6</sup> Two major reflections of this trend have been the expansion of citizen participation in local people’s congress elections and Chinese Communist Party efforts to develop “inner-party democracy” (*dangnei minzhu*) in response to problems at the local level.

## Township People’s Congresses

According to China’s election law, people’s congresses (the legislative body) below the county level (meaning the township level in the countryside and either the municipality or the district level in large urban areas) are to be elected directly. This stipulation has not, generally speaking, led to an expansion of democratic rights, because the nomination process has been dominated by higher-level authorities and because local people’s congresses have been toothless, rubber-stamp bodies. Whereas the National People’s Congress (NPC) has acquired some saliency in the political process, that development had not been duplicated at the local level. In recent years, especially in 2003, that situation has begun to change. The election law includes provisions for self-nominated candidates (candidates can get on the preliminary ballot if more than 10 people sign a petition in support of their candidacy) as well as for write-in candidates. Whereas self-nominated candidates are generally eliminated by the local election commission, which goes through a process of “fermentation” (*yunniang*) and discussion to decide on formal candidates (there is no requirement for a primary election), some have been allowed to get on the ballot and even be elected in recent years. Along with this slight opening of the electoral process has come greater electoral campaigning, including the use of the Internet, campaign flyers, and even posters.

Below, we look at several cases that have become well known in China but are rarely covered abroad.

### *Antecedents in Hubei*

Born in 1958, **Yao Lifa**, of Qianjiang City in the central province of Hubei, was apparently the first person in China elected through self-nomination to a municipal-level people’s congress. Apparently ambitious, Yao, who has a vocational school education and works at an elementary school, began competing for a seat in the local people’s congress in 1987, when the election law was first promulgated. The law allows for self-nominated candidates, and Yao used this provision to run for office. Twelve years later, in 1999, he was finally successful. Over the course of the next five years, Yao was a busy and controversial figure—he raised 187 of the 459 suggestions, opinions, and criticisms presented to the local people’s congress. Yao also undertook a survey of the 329 villages under Qianjiang City and found that 187 village chairmen and 432 vice chairmen and village committee members in 269 villages who had been elected in 1999—some 57 percent of the total—had been dismissed over the course of the following three years.<sup>7</sup>

In 2003, Yao and 40 other people—including teachers, village heads, lawyers, workers, and peasants—put themselves forward as candidates for the Qianjiang Municipal People’s Congress, and 32 of them became formal candidates. In an election fraught with controversy, the whole group of self-nominated candidates lost the election, though Yao at least vowed to run again in the next election. Because Yao and the others were not backed by local authorities, their only chance of being elected was to wage a write-in campaign. Yao had succeeded in doing so in 1999, but local authorities were determined to prevent more than one successful write-in campaign in 2003. As Li Fan put it, the local administration felt it was bad enough to have one Yao Lifa in the people’s congress; they would not have been able to tolerate 32 Yao Lifas!<sup>8</sup>

In 2001, **Lü Banglie** of Baoyuesi Village in Zhijiang City, Hubei, was angry at the way local cadres demanded taxes despite the failure of his (and the rest of the villagers’) crops. After failing in his petitions to the township authorities, Lü traveled to Beijing. After a few weeks, township cadres brought him back to Hubei, saying that everything would be resolved. When matters were not resolved, Lü returned to Beijing in December, but he was again brought back by local officials. In April 2002, after reading Li Changping’s best-seller, *Telling the Truth to the Premier*, Lü returned to Beijing, where he sought out Li Changping. Later, back home in Hubei, other villagers sought out Lü to discuss their charges against local officials—that when flooding forced them to move, the government had allocated 15,000 yuan in compensation, but township authorities had distributed only 13,000 yuan. So off to Beijing went Lü Banglie once again.

In November 2002, having learned something of China’s laws, Lü ran for village head, winning the highest number of votes. Complaints arose that his *hukou* was not in that village, and Lü’s candidacy was disallowed. In January 2003, Lü returned again to Beijing, where he participated in a training class organized by CASS and other organizations. Understanding more about China’s laws, he returned to his township and demanded that the village election be investigated, enforcing his demand with a hunger strike. In June, he organized a petition to recall the village head and got 709 of the 2,152 villagers to sign, well over the one-fifth needed. Shortly thereafter he was assaulted by three youths who beat him with clubs. When he did not drop his campaign to recall the village head, he was beaten yet again—resulting in a 43-day hospital stay.

As the year-end election for people’s congress approached, Lü began thinking about running for office. He contacted Yao Lifa, and soon used Yao’s method of organizing a write-in campaign. On December 6, 2003, Lü was elected to the township people’s congress with 4,551 votes out of a possible 6,000-plus ballots.

Lü’s struggle for justice suggests not only his own stubbornness, but also the willingness of local officials to use all sorts of methods, including physical violence, to prevent people like Lü from becoming members of the local people’s congress. In 2000, one **Zhang Jiagui** was elected village head in a village not far from Lü’s, but because he insisted on clearing up public finances from the preceding period, he was beaten to death.

In Songci Municipality, across the Yangtze River from Zhijiang, one **Yang Changxin**, who was a member of the local people's congress, was arrested and sentenced to jail for three years for disturbing the public order. The struggle to break the hold of the local political elite is not only difficult but also dangerous.<sup>9</sup>

### *The 2003 Shenzhen Election*

In April and May 2003, districts under Shenzhen Municipality in Guangdong held elections for the local people's congresses. Whereas previously nominations, as elsewhere in China, were controlled and manipulated by higher authorities, this time 10 or more self-nominated candidates took part in the election, two of whom were elected. Whether resulting in election victories or not, each of these candidacies challenged to a greater or lesser extent the old ways of doing things while reflecting social change.

One interesting case is that of **Xiao Youmei**, a 48-year-old woman who had been elected to the municipal people's congress in 2000. Believing that her chances in the next election were not good (for reasons unexplained), Xiao decided that she would run for the people's congress in the district where she lived, Luohu District. She was able to collect 33 signatures to put herself on the ballot, but she was the weakest of the three candidates. Those who had supported her nomination were the retired and unemployed, while the other two candidates were backed by large work units.

In April 2003, a meeting was held to introduce the candidates to voters' representatives, but only 15 representatives attended the meeting, and Xiao realized that it would be impossible to introduce herself to the voters in this fashion. Faced with the indifference of residents' committees to her pleas to meet the voters, Xiao and her husband decided to print up campaign posters to introduce her credentials and experience to the voters. Her slogan was, "Listen to the voices that come from the grass roots, supervise the government's work style and political reform, reflect the desires of the broad masses, and be a bridge between the government and the citizens." Xiao's election poster was a first in China. Local residents' committees were skeptical, so Xiao turned to the district election commission for a decision. In an equivocal but nonetheless surprising decision, the election commission ruled that it would neither support nor oppose putting up posters; local residents' committees "may support" (*peihe*) her.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately for Xiao, security at the first work unit she went to would not let her post her campaign material, and security at the second ripped it down. After the intervention of the district election commission, she was allowed to put up her poster in several prominent places, thus drawing much attention. In the end, however, these efforts were not enough. Xiao received 191 votes, much better than expected but not more than half of the 809 votes cast.<sup>11</sup>

Xiao Youmei obviously failed in her quest to be elected, but her campaign activities inspired others, and the relatively enlightened response of the district election commission suggested a willingness to adjust to the changing needs of society.

One person inspired by Xiao Youmei was **Wu Haining**, who read about Xiao's campaign posters in the April 22, 2003, edition of *Nanfang dushi bao* (Southern metropolitan daily). Wu had been nominated through the support of 151 people, but the election, originally scheduled to be held on April 23, was canceled after another candidate suddenly withdrew. Wu immediately complained about the canceled election, and the district election commission decided that the election would be held on May 9. Besides Wu, the other candidate would be one Chen Huibin, head of the residents' committee in that area as well as head of the election commission leadership small group. Realizing that he was at a disadvantage, Wu visited Xiao to see her campaign poster. On May 6, Wu posted his own campaign material in several places and stuffed some 1,900 open letters in residents' mailboxes. Although he was subjected to pressure from officials, his posters were not torn down. The day before the election, the election commission posted a new list of voters' names. The list contained 849 names, 189 more than the list had had when voter registration was closed on April 3.

Wu lost the election, but he did not yield. Rather than concede defeat, he issued a statement that questioned the election procedures. He also filed a complaint with the municipal people's congress (no decision has been reached as of this writing).<sup>12</sup> On May 25, some 33 voters signed a petition calling for Chen Huibin's removal.<sup>13</sup> *People's Daily* weighed in on the side of the petitioners, saying that the drive to remove Chen, whether successful or not, "will have considerable impact on the improvement of the people's congress system in China, promotion of the process of grassroots democracy, and still more sufficient protection of voters' democratic rights."<sup>14</sup>

Another person to run for election was much more of an insider than either Xiao or Wu. **Wang Liang** had been sent to the United States to study for his master's in public administration, which he received in 2002. Returning to Shenzhen, Wang was appointed principal and party secretary of the Shenzhen High-Tech and Industrial School. He was also qualified as an accountant and a lawyer, and was studying for his doctorate.

In late April 2003, Wang decided to declare his own candidacy, only to discover that the students and staff at his school had been left off the voter registration rolls, making him ineligible to run. After talking to students and staff at the school, Wang called the district election commission to say that he wanted to run. The election commission supported his effort, but because formal nominations were over, it suggested he run a write-in campaign. It also allowed the students and staff to register to vote. Wang noted that the campaigns of Xiao Youmei and Wu Haining had stirred controversy, so he adopted a lower-key style, printing up very simple campaign sheets. In the end, he won the district election to the people's congress with the highest vote total.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Beijing Election*

China's media were supportive of Shenzhen's election, and in August 2003 the *People's Daily* web site carried an article saying that "increasing the number of self-nominated candidates allows the masses to better select their own spokespersons,

enlarges the scope of orderly participation in politics by the citizens, enriches the elections of people's congresses, and infuses fresh content into the people's congresses' work."<sup>16</sup> So a more open atmosphere was extant as the Beijing district people's congress elections approached.

In these elections more than 20 self-nominated candidates took part, although only three were elected. One was **Xu Zhiyong**, a 30-year-old instructor in the law school at Beijing Postal Academy. Xu was one of three law professors who had posted an appeal on the Internet after Sun Zhigang was beaten to death in detention in May 2003. That appeal led to the revision of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) law on detention. In October of the same year, Xu was the lawyer who argued on behalf of Sun Dawu, a wealthy entrepreneur who had been detained on trumped-up charges.

In November, Xu declared himself a self-nominated candidate for the local people's congress in Beijing's Haidian District (the area in the northwest of the city where most of the universities are located). He posted an appeal for support on the Internet, and within three hours had received over 700 responses. Xu also received the support of his school, and on December 10 he was elected with the highest number of votes—some 10,106 out of 12,609 cast. Since Xu was supported by his school, his candidacy cannot be considered an “opposition” candidacy, but his involvement in the Sun Zhigang and Sun Dawu cases certainly reflects a willingness to challenge the status quo.<sup>17</sup>

Another candidate was **Nie Hailiang**, one of six property owners (*yezhu*) who presented themselves as self-declared candidates. Nie had a master's degree from Qinghua University in environmental science and engineering, and he had gone on to open a company dealing with energy management. He was also the developer of the Yunquyuan residence in the Huilongguan community. Originally, three property owners from the same district were planning to participate in the election, but the other two dropped out so that support could be concentrated on Nie. In the end, Nie received about two-thirds of the votes in that district. Nie's election, like the candidacy of Wu Haining in Shenzhen, represented a new phenomenon—property owners banding together to protect their rights through the electoral process.<sup>18</sup>

The other self-nominated candidate to win election in Beijing was **Ge Jinbiao**, a 35-year-old with a doctorate in law who was an instructor at the law school at Beijing Industrial and Commercial University. A total of 276 people received votes in the first round of the election (competing for three seats), and none of the candidates surpassed the required 50 percent of the votes. By placing third in the voting, Ge secured himself a place on the final ballot along with the three officially backed candidates. Like other self-nominated candidates, Ge placed a lot of effort into campaigning. He went to the student dorms and passed out thousands of campaign brochures, promising to serve the interests of the voters and to protect the interests of the students. When the votes were counted on December 16, Ge placed first, with a total of 7,839 votes out of 11,512 ballots.<sup>19</sup>

It should also be noted that **Yao Yao**, the 20-year-old son of Yao Lifa who is a law major at China Politics and Law University, was one of the other self-declared candidates.<sup>20</sup> Another was **Shu Kexin**, who attracted a great deal of attention for his attempts to create a campaign office that was staffed with volunteers to shape his media image and try to persuade potential voters. One of Shu's campaign aides noted in an interview that the candidate had been inspired by Yao Lifa.<sup>21</sup>

## Political Reform in Pingba

The initiatives to push the bounds of political reform discussed above all involved efforts to invigorate the district and township people's congresses. They also were marked by attempts to open up the system, with or without the support of higher levels, and introduce new modes of participation, including campaigning and the use of write-in candidacies. In Pingba Township in Chengkou County in Chongqing Municipality, there was a much broader push to reform the political system, including increasing the importance of the people's congress, and it was led by the local CCP branch. These measures were approved by a township-level party plenum and a simultaneous meeting of the township people's congress. The reform consisted of the following aspects:

1. Selection of the township party secretary would be in accordance with the three-ballot system. First, if the number of candidates for party secretary were to exceed one, then the party congress would hold a primary to determine primary candidates. Second, formal candidacy would be decided by a vote of all residents (whether members of the CCP or not). Finally, all party members in the township would choose among the formal candidates. The township head would be elected by direct vote of all residents. The newly elected township head would then select his or her own "cabinet," subject to the approval of the township people's congress.
2. A party congress standing committee would be established at the township level. The standing committee would meet every three months (considerably more often than the usual proposal to have it meet once a year).
3. Similarly, the township people's congress would establish a standing committee. Each of Pingba's 17 electoral districts would choose one person from its delegation to the people's congress to serve on the standing committee. The standing committee would meet every two months. Specialized representatives (presumably those with more knowledge of such topics as public finance) could meet on an ad hoc basis.
4. A new relationship would be established among the party, the government, and the local people's congress. The party committee would no longer interfere in the work of the government. The party committee would be restricted to deciding on major matters to be executed by the local government and supervising the implementation of resolutions passed by the local people's congress. The party committee would also be responsible for supervising the conduct of its own members.
5. An inner-party supervisory mechanism would be instituted.
6. The government would also be under the comprehensive supervision of the local people's congress.

7. Public finance would be made open, and the government's budget would have to gain the approval of the local people's congress as well as be subject to supervision during its implementation.

On August 26, 2003, three candidates for township party secretary in Pingba put forth their governing platforms and responded to questions from the audience (which was open to the general public as well as local cadres). A lively discussion then took place covering all matters of local concern, including education, transportation, the environment, family planning, land distribution, and so forth.

On August 28, just as final preparations for the election were getting under way, the county party committee ordered the election and the reform stopped. Moreover, the county party committee put the Pingba Township party secretary, Wei Shengduo, under "dual supervision" and appointed a new party secretary. After two weeks, Wei was allowed to return home, but was left awaiting higher levels' decision on his next job assignment, if any.<sup>22</sup>

It does not seem strange that this reform plan was stopped by higher-level party officials; what is intriguing is that the plan went as far as it did and that party officials at the township level approved it. Allowing the public to vote for a party secretary at the township level—if only in the form of an opinion poll—is unprecedented, but what is unique, and in accord with the other examples looked at in this analysis, is that the plan envisioned a far greater role for the local people's congress. Most townships are scheduled to reelect their people's congresses in late 2004 and in the first half of 2005, making the various trends traced here relevant as we go forward.

## Inner-Party Democracy

Inner-party democracy—an old topic in the CCP lexicon—has been revived in recent years as another way of channeling the calls for reform at the local level. In particular, calls for inner-party democracy are a direct response to village elections: once people could elect the village chief, people began to ask why they could not also elect the village secretary. In addition, inner-party democracy is seen by party researchers as a way of breaking up the corruption and personal networks that are associated with having power concentrated in the hands of the "number one leader" (*yi ba shou*) at each level.<sup>23</sup>

Implementation of the three-ballot system in Baicheng City in Jilin Province to decide cadre promotions was described in a previous issue of *China Leadership Monitor*.<sup>24</sup> That experiment started in 2000, when the newly installed party secretary found himself under so much pressure from leaders at different levels to promote one person or another that he finally decided to open up the process and promote cadres through democratic mechanisms. The experiment remains limited because it is restricted to the section (*chu*) level, but it did receive the endorsement of higher levels in the party.<sup>25</sup>



In Sichuan Province, which has pioneered many of the experiments in local democracy, the party secretary of Pingchang County designated one-third of the townships under his administration to experiment with direct election of the township party secretary by all party members in that jurisdiction. In one of those townships, Lingshan, eight party members competed for five positions in what the press hailed as a “breakthrough” in the cadre selection process.<sup>26</sup> Recently the CCP Organization Department in Sichuan declared that cadres at and below the county level must be recommended by the “masses.”<sup>27</sup> If implemented, that policy would mark a substantial raising of the level at which some form of democratic process is used. Other experiments are taking place elsewhere in the country. For instance, Luotian County in Hubei Province replaced its CCP standing committee with a broader 15-person committee elected directly by the party congress—which also meets annually to monitor affairs.<sup>28</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Yu Jianrong, “The Evil Forces in the Rural Areas and the Deterioration of Grassroots Administration—A Survey of the South Area of Hunan,” *Zhanlue yu guanli*, September 1, 2003, 1–14, trans. FBIS CPP-2003-1008-000183.

<sup>2</sup> Zhao Shukai, “Governance in Villages: Organization and Conflict,” *Zhanlue yu guanli*, November 1, 2003, 1–8, trans. FBIS CPP-2004-0102-000114.

<sup>3</sup> Chen Kuidi and Chun Tao, *Zhongguo nongmin diaocha* (Investigation of China’s peasants) (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Yu Jianrong, “Tudi wenti yicheng wei nongmin weiquan kangzheng de jiaodian” (The land problem has already become the focal point in peasants’ protests and efforts to uphold rights) (n.p., n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> Xiao Gongqin, “Jingti defang quanli ‘Sudanhua’ xianxiang” (Beware of the ‘sultanization’ of power at the local level), *Neibu canyue*, 2003, no. 10 (March 14).

<sup>6</sup> Li Fan, ed., *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao* (Grassroots democracy in China) (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 2004), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Huang Guangming and He Hongwei, “Striking Dilemma in Grassroots Administration in Dianjiang [*sic*, Qianjiang] Village [*sic*, City], 187 Elected Village Officials Dismissed in Three Years,” *Nanfang zhuomo*, September 12, 2002, trans. FBIS CPP-2002-0916-000029, and Dang Guoying, “The Reality and Future of Villagers’ Autonomy,” *Nanfang zhuomo*, September 30, 2002, trans. FBIS CPP-2002-1008-0000051.

<sup>8</sup> Li Fan, ed., *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao*, 158.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 168–76.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. See also Yi Ying, “Shenzhen’s Election Campaign Storm,” *Nanfang zhuomo*, May 29, 2003, trans. FBIS CPP-2003-0606-000021.

<sup>12</sup> Li Fan, ed., *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao*, 40–41.

<sup>13</sup> *China Daily*, August 9, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> *Renmin ribao* (Internet version), June 27, 2003, trans. FBIS CPP-2003-0707-000142.

<sup>15</sup> Li Fan, ed., *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao*, 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 122–23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 125–26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>20</sup> Irene Wang, “A Whiff of Freedom in Beijing Election,” *South China Morning Post*, November 21, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Lin Chufang, “Penetrating Deeply into the Depths of Success: A Campaign Office for an Independent Candidate Quietly Opens Its Doors,” *Nanfang zhuomo*, October 30, 2003, trans. FBIS CPP-2003-1103-0000007.

<sup>22</sup> Li Fan, ed., *Zhongguo jiceng minzhu fazhan baogao*, 179–235.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews in Beijing, August 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, “The Third Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee,” *China Leadership Monitor* 9 (winter 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Interviews in Beijing, August 2004.

<sup>26</sup> “Direct Elections Move to Township Level,” *China Daily*, May 18, 2004, and Li Wei, “Political Achievements of the ‘Openly Nominated and Directly Elected Secretary,’” *Sichuan ribao*, trans. FBIS CPP-2004-0130-000043.

<sup>27</sup> Min Jie, “Sichuan: Cadres Must Be Selected through Mass Nomination—Those without Democratic Recommendation or Not Approved Of by Majority of Masses in Democratic Recommendation Cannot Be Named as Candidates to Be Examined for Filling Vacant Posts,” *Zhongguo qingnian bao*, August 3, 2004, trans. FBIS CPP-2004-0803-000075.

<sup>28</sup> “China’s Ruling Party Seeks to Decentralize Power,” Xinhua News Agency (English), July 1, 2004, FBIS CPP-2004-0701-000219.