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Political Reform in China's Cities: Introducing Community Elections

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Abstract

This paper examines the importance of local initiatives in China's slow-moving process of political reform. Since 1999, free and open "direct elections" for community residents' committees have emerged in a number of Chinese urban communities. These include open nominations of candidates and secret ballots for all citizens. Why have such democratizing reforms emerged within some communities but not others, when all communities are tightly embedded in a Leninist political system in which the dominance of the ruling Communist Party remains an indisputable principle?

First, this variability indicates that local factors can play a critical role in China's process of gradual political reform, where local conditions in some areas are conducive to establishing electoral reform "test-sites" while in others they are not. Based on field work in communities in three Chinese cities, evidence points to a number of structural factors which facilitate such reforms, including social stability and cohesion and lack of vested institutional interests .

Second, it is argued that these institutional reforms proceed gradually through the ordinary policy process, in which policy entrepreneurs (sometimes outside the party-state nexus) committed to participatory reforms are able to invoke state ideology to convince key decision-makers to implement electoral reforms.

In the summer of 1998, residents of two neighbourhoods in the Chinese coastal city of Qingdao went to the polls to directly cast votes for candidates for their local Residents' Committees. For the first time in China, urban Residents' Committees were directly elected by the people themselves, rather than indirectly through a system of representatives voting for a single government or party-nominated candidate. In 1999, similar events occurred in Shanghai, followed soon after by the cities of Shenyang, Nanjing, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Ningbo. In Guangxi province, direct elections for urban Residents' Committees were held simultaneously in cities across the province. The sudden spread of these innovative reforms appears to suggest a concerted push by the central government to start democratizing urban governance, ten years after the introduction of similar grassroots elections in the countryside.

Surprisingly, the emergence of these urban elections was not the result of a sustained policy push from Beijing. Instead, they arose spontaneously as the product of decisions by small numbers of local officials in various cities, as they responded simultaneously to local conditions and policy signals from Beijing. For it must be noted that compared to the handful of cities introducing direct community elections between 1998 and 2005, there were over 600 Chinese cities which were doing no such thing. This paper will explore the dynamics of such local decisions in order to explain how these democratizing reforms have emerged within some urban communities but not others, when all communities are tightly embedded in a Leninist political system in which one-party rule by the Communist Party remains an indisputable principle. Indeed, at this very same time, the Communist Party was conducting a crackdown on founders of a fledgling China Democracy Party, as well as on Falun Gong practitioners as these were perceived to undermine Communist Party rule and social stability.

The explanation is structured around the confluence of socio-economic structural factors and political institutional factors, and how these condition the opportunities and constraints which influence the behaviour of individual agents. In explaining why and how such reforms occurred in some urban areas but not others, it is shown how economic structural changes have induced social transformation, which in turn challenges existing institutional arrangements, causing these institutions to fail. Marketization, liberalization, privatization and globalization of the Chinese economy have engendered a major social transformation, characterized by increased physical and social mobility, greater social differentiation and stratification, and decay of the traditional-socialist social order.[1] This happens through the increasing failure of institutions of governance to effectively channel and mitigate social conflict, as Huntington's dilemma of socio-economic development becomes increasingly apparent.[2]

In this paper, focus is on the urban Residents' Committee, which has seen a fundamental transformation in its role from organizing, managing and controlling the most disadvantaged in society under the socialist planned economy, to an institution required to plan, organize and deliver universally available social services in a dynamic and highly diverse social setting. This new function requires new capacities for efficiency, responsiveness and flexibility, which these institutions are only gradually acquiring. Democratizing the process of leadership selection is part of this process of capacity building, in an effort to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness

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[1] Ya Ping Wang, Urban Poverty, Housing and Social Change in China, (London: Routledge, 2004); Norman Stockman, Understanding Chinese Society, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). See especially chapter 9, 203-227.

[2] On institutional decay see Minxin Pei, "Will China Become Another Indonesia?" Foreign Affairs 16 (Fall 1999), 94-109.; Minxin Pei, "Creeping Democratization in China," in Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner and Yun-han Chu, eds., Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Themes and Perspectives Vol. 2, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 213-227. In Samuel P. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968),

of this institution, so that it may better fulfil its critical new functions in Chinese urban governance.

However, that only a small number of urban areas has adopted direct election of Residents' Committees suggests that such a broad sketch is not sufficient to understand these particular outcomes. Broad processes of structural changes become apparent only through the behaviour of individuals. Therefore this study will argue that the response of strategically positioned individuals (those who have the capacity to significantly influence policy) to structurally induced pressures for institutional change depends very much on the local configuration of structural forces, as well as the institutional constraints operating on these individuals. Thus local officials seeking to reform underperforming Residents' Committees, must carefully weigh out the interests of different groups in their communities, such as the unemployed, retirees, migrants, youth or party members, to determine the feasibility of reform. They must also closely consider their institutional incentives, for as members of the party or state they are embedded in extensive hierarchical organizations as agents, with often conflicting sets of organizational goals they are expected to meet. For local officials, their and their families' livelihoods, social standing and opportunities for advancement depend significantly on their performance. Given so many constraints and complexities for local officials to overcome, it is not surprising that urban community elections are still few and far between in China.

In those areas where elections have been successfully implemented, local officials have been very careful to safeguard their institutional interests, adopting innovative electoral procedures only when it was not expected to upset social stability, the regime's highest value and most dangerous area for transgression. These opportunities appear to have been perceived

mostly in communities with more homogenous and socially cohesive populations, where the risks of disturbing explosive social cleavages were minimal. Thus local socio-economic (structural) conditions combined with officials' institutionally determined incentives or constraints to influence where innovative electoral reform might take place. In the final analysis, it was up to individual local officials and policy entrepreneurs to calculate these costs and determine whether or not they would try to implement direct community elections. In essence, they had to balance competing pressures for institutional change (increasingly diverse social demands on Residents' Committees) with counter-pressures for continuity and stability (perpetuating Communist Party rule). It is thus only when stability and reform coincide and positively reinforce one another that local officials choose to implement direct community elections.

The Changing Landscape of China's Urban Governance

Residents' Committees are at the very bottom of an extensive administrative hierarchy in Chinese cities. Sitting at the top of this administrative pyramid is the municipal government. One level down, most large cities are divided into several districts (Beijing has 16 districts, each with an average population of 3/4 million), each of which has a District People's Congress and District Government, with the legal power to pass laws. Each district government in turn has roughly eight administrative branch offices or sub-district offices (sometimes also called wards, or street offices - *jiedao banshi chu* in Chinese), with a population of roughly 80-100,000 each. Sub-district offices are charged with implementing policies enacted by the district government in particular, but also the municipal government, the provincial government, and even the central government. The sub-district offices are *formally* the lowest branch of the state in Chinese cities,

at the bottom of a the hierarchy on the state's organization chart. However, below the sub-district administrative office can be found the Residents' Committee. Encompassing only several hundred households each, these are formally non-state institutions, designated as "mass organizations of self-management at the grass-roots level" in the PRC Constitution.[3] Nevertheless, these nominally autonomous residents' organizations are mandated by the state, and have traditionally functioned as appendages of the party-state, directly implementing its policies and following orders from above.[4]

The Residents' Committees' formal functions, according to the PRC's Urban Residents' Committee Organic Law, passed in 1989, are 1) to transmit information about state laws and policies to residents; 2) carry out work relating to local community affairs and the public interest; 3) solving residents' problems 4) coordinating and promoting public security; 5) helping government agencies carry out their work in the community, and 6) transmitting residents' opinions and desires to the relevant authorities.[5] Yet despite their outward importance in Chinese urban governance, Residents' Committees under the planned economy actually had quite a marginal role. This is because their basic functions of organization, management and social control were reproduced by another, effectively more important organization: the urban work unit. Work units (*gongzuo danwei*) are the factories, offices and public institutions that employ Chinese residents. Under the planned economy, the work unit system developed into a comprehensive welfare delivery system, providing urban Chinese with lifelong jobs, housing, medical and a whole range of other social services, including pensions, daycare and so forth.

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[3] See Article 111 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 1982.
[4] Fu Luo, "City Dwellers and the Neighbourhood Committee," Beijing Review (November 3, 1980), 19.
[5] Article 3, "People's Republic of China Urban Residents' Committee Organic Law," (1989).

Since employment mobility was close to zero under the plan, work units became essentially self-sufficient cells within the city, leaving little for municipal governments to do. Work units and the full range of social services they provided were instead directly financed and administered by the ministries they operated under, whether the ministry of heavy or light industry, or education, or aviation or whatnot. The very few who were not taken care of by any work unit (the unemployed, the disabled and the self-employed[6]) fell under the jurisdiction of the Residents' Committee.

However, with the advent of liberalizing economic reforms, an increasing number of urban residents fell out of the "*danwei* system" and entered the non-state sector economy as private entrepreneurs or employees. Throughout the 1990s, as urban economic reforms accelerated, state-sector employment shrank rapidly, especially after serious attempts to reform the money-losing state-owned sector in the late 1990s. This sector, shed 50% of its employees between 1998 and 2003, through layoffs and retirements.[7] From its peak total employment of 113 million Chinese in 1995, the sector shrank to only 72 million by 2002.[8] At the same time, the private sector grew from virtually zero in 1982 to employing over 40 million urban Chinese in 2002, making up over one quarter of the work force, up significantly from less than 10% in 1995.[9] This meant an ever increasing number of urban residents were exiting the traditional welfare system, and becoming fully exposed to the vagaries of the market. In this context, urban

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[6] Benjamin Read, "Revitalising the State's Urban 'Nerve Tips,'" The China Quarterly 163 (September 2000), 810.

[7] Shahid Yusuf, Kaoru Nabeshima and Dwight D. Perkins, Under New Ownership: Privatizing China's State-Owned Enterprises, (Washington: World Bank, 2006), 79.

[8] John Giles, Albert Park and Juwei Zhang, "What is China's True Unemployment Rate?" China Economic Review 16 (2005), 150.

[9] Wang, Urban Poverty, 2004, 39-41.

Residents' Committees took on renewed importance, as they became responsible for the welfare of a rapidly increasing number of people, of which a greater proportion than ever before was unemployed and in need of some assistance.

Wu Fulong has argued that the state's relaxation of economic planning controls "leads to the mobility of production factors across different scales, [and] has created enormous difficulties for maintaining the hierarchical organisation of society."[10] The existing Residents' Committees, more suited to the organization, management and social control of only targeted groups of vulnerable residents, were not well positioned to expand these responsibilities to cover the a much larger part of the urban population. They simply didn't have the capacity to suddenly provide an expanding array of services to the growing, increasingly sophisticated and demanding population under their jurisdiction. This failure can be seen as a partial contributor to urban unrest in the 1980s, which culminated in the tragedy of June 4th, 1989. This led to the quality of grassroots urban management's appearance on the reform agenda, with an emphasis on improving the capacity of grassroots organisations through better staffing, clearer allocation of responsibilities, and the raising of funds to provide these services.

The increasing complexity of the required reforms led to the adoption of a broad-based package of policy objectives by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in the mid-90s, and subsequently publicly endorsed and circulated to all local jurisdictions by the Party's Central Committee and the State Council in 2000. This influential policy document was entitled "Opinion of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Advancing Urban Community Construction," or Central Document #23. This

[10] Fulong Wu, "China's Changing Urban Governance in the Transition Towards a More Market-oriented Economy," Urban Studies 39(7) (2002), 1089.

new "Community Construction" policy (*shequ jianshe*) built on the previous policy goal of expanding community servivces (*shequ fuwu*), by adding community health, community security, community culture (including education, sports, the arts, etc.), community economy and community management as additional policy objectives.[11] The most important item for our purposes here is community management, which involves a wholesale restructuring of the institutions of grassroots governance. It included the merger of Residents' Committees to form larger, more efficient and effective administrative communities which could better deliver urgently needed community services and have access to a more equitable base of community resources. Part of the management reforms included promoting the democratic self-governing nature of the new urban communities, including "democratic elections."[12] However, this term remained undefined, meaning that few officials were willing to take the risk of introducing democracy where there had been none before.

In practice, this meant that period elections of urban Residents' Committees carried on in the manner characteristic of Leninist systems: they were dominated by the ruling party. In China, individual citizens did not exercise the right to vote for their leaders at any level. Rather, this right was delegated to elected Residents' Representatives, each one representing a certain number of households in the neighbourhood. These representatives were generally elected by the heads of all the households they represented, but in practice only representatives acceptable to the party and government were chosen. Candidates for Residents' Committee positions were

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[11] Xu Huang, *Chengshi Fazhan zhong de Shequ Jianshe* (Community Construction in Urban Development), (Beijing: Chinese Urban Press, 2004), 115.

[12] General Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, "Opinion of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Advancing the Building of Urban Communities" (Central Document #23, 2000).

"nominated" by higher authorities, and subsequently "confirmed" by residents in formalistic mandatory one-candidate elections. In more recent times, higher authorities have held competitive examinations to staff Residents' Committees, selecting the best candidates who meet professional and other qualifications set by the government, giving urban residents no say at all in who their local community leaders are.[13]

Introducing Direct Community Elections Across China

Direct elections in China's urban communities made their first appearance in the summer of 1998 in Qingdao, a large city on China's coast. Over the next five years, urban community elections spread to another dozen cities, all concentrated along the coast and areas immediately contiguous. Two distinctive features mark this diffusion of electoral reform in China's cities. The first is the spatial pattern of this distribution, and the second is the policy process leading to these fledgling

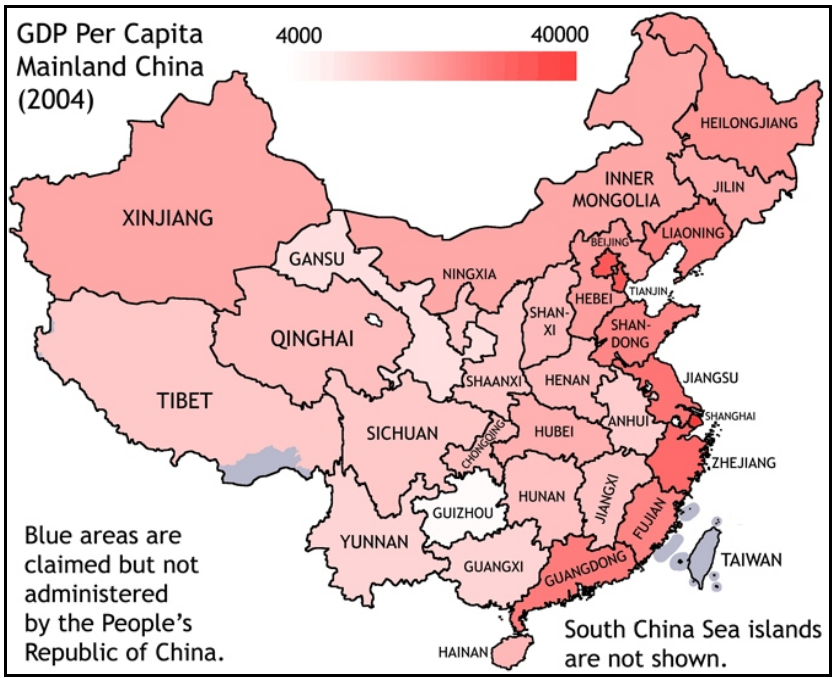

Figure 1 List of China administrative divisions by GDP per capita (2004). Currency units are Chinese Renminbi. From Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia.

[13] Fan Li, "Urban Community Residents' Committee Electoral System Reform," in Fan Li, ed. *Zhongguo Chengshi Xuangju Zhidu Gaige* (Reform of China's Electoral System), (Shanghai: Shanghai Jiaotong University, 2005), 44.

political reforms.

In terms of spatial distribution, direct elections in urban communities occur mostly in China's largest and wealthiest cities, which are situated in coastal provinces. Between 1998 and 2005, direct elections for urban Community Residents' Committees took place in Qingdao (Shandong Province), Shanghai, Beijing, Shenyang (Liaoning Province), Nanjing (Jiangsu Province), Ningbo (Zhejiang Province), Shenzhen and Guangzhou (Guangdong Province), seven of China's top nine provinces in terms of GDP per capita (see Figure 1.) However, a significant outlier in this pattern is the introduction of direct community elections to *all* cities in Guangxi Province, one of China's poorest provinces ranked at number 28 out of 31 provinces. This important outlier prevents any simple application of classical modernization theory, whereby high levels of economic development are positively correlated with democracy.[14] Indeed, contrary to such expectations, Guangxi has not only counted itself among China's sites of democratizing urban reforms, but is actually a leader in this regard, having gone much farther than the other cities and provinces in the scope of its implementation of urban direct elections. While these electoral reforms are limited to one city in each province mentioned above, (or two in Guangdong's case) in Guangxi they have been implemented in all of its urban centres, including small towns in the countryside. In addition, where the wealthy cities have only dabbled with electoral reforms in a limited number of their communities, Guangxi had within a year of its initial experiments, implemented electoral reforms in 54% of all its urban communities, province-wide, for a grand total of 364 individual urban communities.[15] Within Beijing, the

[14] Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (Heinemann, 1959).
[15] Fan Li, "*Chengshi Shequ Juweihui Xuanju Zhidu Gaige*,"...

number of communities holding direct elections was 182 in 2003 (8.1% of all communities),[16] and expected to increase to up to 700 in 2006, which is still less than one third of Beijing's communities.[17]

Other cities have introduced direct community elections to a much lesser extent. However, the pattern of implementation within each city is also worth noting, as there are some important differences between them, both in their timing and their scope of implementation. Beijing's direct community elections have been introduced in a very gradual, piecemeal fashion, starting with a single experiment in 2002, followed by implementation in 186 communities scattered throughout the city's 2400 communities in 2003. This year (2006), the implementation rate is projected to rise to around 30%. Qingdao's direct elections similarly started with two experiments in the summer of 1998 (China's first). However the reform reportedly did not expand in following years, due to rotation of local leaders who had initially promoted the reforms.[18] In Shenzhen and Ningbo however, the pattern of implementation was very different. Following a handful of initial experiments, a single district in each of these cities chose to implement direct community elections in every single community in their respective jurisdictions. In Shenzhen's Yantian District, this amounted to all 17 of its communities. In Ningbo's Haishu District, the scope was much more significant, covering all 59 of its communities. Implementation of direct elections in the other districts in these cities remains spotty, and limited to a handful of experiments if any at all.

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[16] Peng Gao, "*Yi Jumin Zizhi wei Hexin, Jiji Tuijin Minzhu Fazhi Jianshe* (Taking Residents' Self-Governance to Heart, Actively Promote the Construction of the Democratic Rule of Law," available online from http://www.bjsf.gov.cn/bipf/fzllyt/t20050714_117402.htm, (accessed May 13, 2006).

[17] Interview with a Beijing district-level official, 2005.

[18] Interview with a Beijing think tank director, 2005.

The diversity of these patterns of implementation of direct community elections and the reform's spread to all types of socio-economic regions in China (instead of being limited to the wealthiest and best educated cities) point to the fact that local factors are key determinants of these policy outcomes. Indeed, this reform is not simply driven by central policy priorities. Instead, China's grassroots urban elections are the product of local initiatives, which have proceeded independently of the central government. Qingdao's first elections in two communities in 1998 were organized independently by local authorities, with no central input. It is only after the fact that the central government's Ministry of Civil Affairs became involved, participating in work to further implement the reform. A similar situation took place in Shanghai in early 1999, as local Shanghai officials introduced similar experimental reforms in a handful of communities, before implementing more broadly.[19] Beijing's first direct community election in August 2002, was also the product of a bottom up initiative. This case –described in detail below– is particularly interesting due to the pivotal role of a civil society organization in taking the initiative and acting as a policy entrepreneur. The introduction of direct elections in Ningbo is also the product of a local initiative, in this case by a progressive District leader in Haishu district. Under his initiative, in 2003 the district became the first one in China to carry out direct community elections in all of its communities. This feat was replicated in Shenzhen's Yantian district two years later, similarly under the leadership of a progressive district level civil affairs leader.[20]

Perhaps the most significant case is that of Guangxi Province, in 2000-2001. The director

[19] Ibid.

[20] Interview with academic in Shenzhen, 2005.

of the Provincial Civil Affairs Department was greatly disappointed that their province had been left off the Ministry of Civil Affairs' list designating 26 urban districts throughout China as experimental test sites for community construction innovations. Most other provinces had had at least one of their cities included on the list, which was meant to be a representative cross section of all the different types of cities in China. In response, with the approval and support of the provincial party secretary, the Guangxi Civil Affairs Department decided to move ahead with its own autonomous initiatives in the wide policy field of community construction, including broad adoption of direct community elections.[21]

In each of these cases, one or several progressive individual leaders, holding strategic positions within the party or government, are able to promote and implement innovative policy initiatives in the absence of explicit directives from higher authorities to do so. While this is only natural in a country as large and diverse as China, it is important to recall the context in which it occurs. China is a unitary, post-totalitarian Leninist state, meaning that social and economic pluralism coexist with political monism in the form of a formerly ideologically-driven ruling party, which retains its monopoly claim on power and all forms of political organization. However in practice the ruling party is fairly pragmatic, and its ideological commitment has become quite diluted compared to the past.[22] Nevertheless, in such a context, the introduction of political competition through electoral reform is somewhat surprising; even more so that it is introduced by local mid-level officials within the party and state hierarchy. The precise dynamics

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[21] Interview with Beijing think tank director. See also Minjie Deng, *Chuangxin Shequ* (Innovating Community), (Beijing: Chinese Society Press, 2002).

[22] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Community Europe, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). 42-51.

of this process will be explored in greater detail below, in a case study of Beijing's first direct community election in 2002.

Jiudaowan: Beijing's First Direct Community Election

Beijing held its first direct election for a community residents' committee in August of 2002. This election was notable for a number of reasons. First, being held in the political centre of the country, it was seen to have a significant demonstration effect on other cities around the country. If direct elections could be introduced at the seat of power, then surely they were deemed acceptable by the highest party leadership.[23] Under this rationale, the national level Ministry of Civil Affairs ranked the Beijing election in its "top ten" list of most influential events for the year. Second, the election was supported by the international community. The Canadian International Development Agency's Civil Society Program in China provided financial support for the election, in particular for the period of "citizenship training" which preceded the election, to educate local residents on the dynamics and principles underlying this new electoral system. Finally, this election is most interesting for the role civil society played in its inception. The Beijing New Era Citizen Education Research Centre (New Era) was instrumental in spearheading the reform as a policy entrepreneur outside the state, seeking out state partners to help implement its plan, and providing organizational resources and extensive "citizenship training" for all community residents in order to successfully implement the election in Beijing's Jiudaowan community. Other civil society think tanks also participated by providing expertise and technical advice on how to run an effective and fair election.

New Era is an NGO which carries out research on participatory political reform, and then

[23] Interview with NGO director and reform activist, Beijing, 2005.

seeks to put its theories into practice through various citizen education initiatives. Following a successful training program in rural Hubei in which villagers received training to help them understand the rights and responsibilities associated with voting and public participation, the organization turned its eyes to Chinese cites in hopes of doing something similar there. In an influential essay, the director of this NGO theorized that village elections, which were introduced nation-wide in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, should be viewed as a model for urban political reform. He viewed this process as the third surrounding of cities by the countryside, following two other great historical transitions in modern Chinese history, namely the 1949 Communist victory in China's civil war, achieved by winning the countryside first, then effectively besieging the urban base of the Chinese Nationalists. The second great transformation was the launch of market reforms, in which agricultural decollectivization and the rise of markets and private entrepreneurship in the countryside in the late 1970s and early 1980s preceded the launch of economic reforms in urban China. Now, argued Zhou Hongling, was the time for the diffusion of political reform from the countryside to the cities.[24]

This argument coincided with a broader debate on the nature of urban grassroots governance reforms. Due to the great socio-economic transformation of urban society increasingly evident in the 1990s (liberlization, marketization, globalization, SOE reform and layoffs, ageing population, increasing demand for social services and welfare), the increasing needs of a diversifying society demanded a more systematic response to improve social service delivery for pensioners, the unemployed and other vulnerable populations; to better protect the

[24] Hongling Zhou, "*Di san ci nongcun baowei chengshi* (The Third Encirclement of the Cities by the Countryside), 1999."

local environment; to better balance new conflicting interests between long-time residents, budding businesses, and incoming migrants; to protect the property of a new class of home-owners; and especially to maintain social stability, the ruling party's top priority. The old institutions of urban governance, especially at the grassroots level, were poorly equipped to handle these new tasks. Local leaders were too used to waiting for instructions from above, and weren't able to effectively respond to new demands from below - partly due to the excessive administrative burdens placed on them by the state. Resources were especially short, making the establishment of a comprehensive network of community services extremely challenging. Finally, decades of reliance on their work units meant urban residents didn't know where to turn to for relief, and had little sense of a broader community outside the factory walls.

Two broad approaches emerged to deal with these issues. One was most effectively implemented in Shanghai, where thanks to its strong fiscal capacity the government was able to take charge and implemented a series of organizational reforms from above. It established a comprehensive system of "two levels of government, three levels of management," using the state's administrative and fiscal power to reorder the urban environment.[25] Under government leadership, extensive systems were established for the effective provision of social services, staffed and administered by the state in consultation with various societal stakeholders which had been organized by the state into various representative associations and committees.

The alternative approach was to allow the state to pull back and give more space for a

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[25] Na Wei, *Shequ Zuzhi yu Shequ Fazhan* (Community Organization and Community Development), (Beijing: Red Flag Press, 2003), 70-71. See also Ying Wang, "Self-Governance for City Residents and Changes in Community Management Styles," Institute of Development Studies Report (n.d.), available online at http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/civsoc/final/china/chi1.html (accessed August 2002).

measure of grassroots autonomy. This was done under the banner of community "self-service," "self-management," "self-supervision," and "self-education," where in theory grassroots urban communities were genuine "mass organizations of self-management at the grass-roots level" as stipulated in the constitution. In this configuration, the role of the state was to support financially and give guidance when necessary, but otherwise let communities decide for themselves on all manner of issues relating to daily community life, as long as they remained within legal limits. Important issues might include developing regulations for the keeping of pets in apartment buildings, the parking of cars, noise control, to prevent illegal construction, to help negotiate the siting of new businesses, as well as providing a suitable array of community services to help local pensioners, migrant workers, unemployed youth, and so forth. This type of model emerged in such cities as Qingdao, Shijiazhuang, Guizhou, and so forth.[26]

Zhou's article placed him squarely on the community autonomy side, which was eventually endorsed by China's top leadership in November 2000. The Party Central Committee and the State Council forwarded to all local jurisdictions a policy paper drafted by the Ministry of Civil Affairs which endorsed the view of communities as having important self-governing functions. This "Opinion of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Advancing the Building of Urban Community" which became known as Document 23, gave reformers such as Zhou a great source

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[26] For more information on different models of community see James Derleth and Daniel Koldyk, "Community Development in China: Harbinger of a Civil Society?" Paper presented at ISA Annual Convention, New Orleans, USA. March 20, 2002. Available at http://www.isanet.org/noarchive/derleth.html. 2002; Fan Li, ed., *Zhongguo Jiceng Minzhu Fazhan Baogao* (Report on China's Grassroots Democracy), 2000-2001 and 2002 editions (Xi'an: Northwestern University Press); Jieqiong Lei, ed., *Zhuanxing zhong de Chengshi Jiceng Shequ Zuzhi* (Community Organisation in Transitional China), (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2001); Minjie Deng, *Chuangxin Shequ (Innovating Community)*, (Beijing: China Social Press, 2002); Robert Benewick, Irene Tong and Jude Howell, "Self Governance and Community: A Preliminary Comparison between Villagers' Committees and Urban Community Councils," China Information 18(1), (March 2004); Na Wei, Community Organization and Community Development, (2003), 68-73; See also articles on Shanghai, Shenyang and Qingdao as distinct models of *shequ* at http://www.sowosky.com/Article_Show2.asp?ArticleID=645 (accessed August 29, 2004).

of ideological legitimacy on which they could hang their arguments and advocacy. This in fact became in important element of the success of many local initiatives, including those in Ningbo and other cities. Due to the often vague and general terms of central policy documents, local policy entrepreneurs have a lot of leeway to interpret them and argue that they are in fact calling for some specific type of reform. This dynamic is almost certainly partly by design in such a large country as China, where provincial and more local authorities beneath them are expected to take generally worded central policies and draft more specific, parallel provincial or municipal "enabling laws." In the absence of such specific legislation, and even in its presence, there is significant space for interpretation, which is used effectively by all players in Chinese politics.

In the case of Beijing's first election, this new central policy initiative provided a window of opportunity for reform by calling for the "expansion of democracy and residents' self-governance... carry out democratic elections, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision..."[27] The call for democratic elections seems clear enough to Western observers, who would instinctively know what types of institutions and arrangements would satisfy this requirement. However to Chinese local officials, who have little or no experience with liberal democratic institutions, norms and practices, the meaning of this is quite unclear. They are certain that the central leadership doesn't mean they should implement western style multi-party elections, since the Communist Party is very clear in its insistence that only it has the legitimacy to govern China. So within this context, what do democratic elections mean? They only know the policy represents a call to be *more* democratic than they currently are

[27] General Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and General Office of the State Council, "Opinion of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Advancing the Building of Urban Communities" (Central Document #23, 2000).

- but they have no idea to what extent, and how, as they have very few if any reference points on this score. For most local officials embedded in the bureaucracy and overburdened with administrative tasks and priorities, this is too difficult a question, and probably not worth the great effort and risk required to figure it out. It thus easily falls to the bottom of their list of priorities.

For committed policy advocates outside the state system, who are unburdened by the constraints and obligations of officials, such policy statements come as a window of opportunity. New Era thus began to actively search for an urban site where local officials would be amenable to trying the system of one person, one vote, and open candidate nomination long used in rural village elections. However for some time they simply "couldn't find an opportunity," as the Beijing government just wasn't interested in this kind of reform. Indeed, the search was conducted in other cities at first, but through fortuitous personal contacts within the Ministry of Civil Affairs, one official in particular supported this venture, and used his channels to help find a possible test-site. Beijing's Dongcheng District was finally identified as a potential site, since that district's Deputy Director of Civil Affairs was personally interested in grassroots governance reforms, and had already been considering ways to effect changes within his district. This district level leader then identified a sub-district office director (in Beixinqiao sub-district) who had formerly been his colleague within the District Civil Affairs Bureau, and would thus have an understanding of governance reforms. Under agreement of this sub-district's party committee, Jiudaowan Community in Beixinqiao sub-district was chosen to carry out Beijing's first direct election of the Community Residents' Committee.[28]

[28] Interview with director of New Era, Beijing, 2005.

New Era secured program funding from the Canadian Embassy's Civil Society Program to produce a video and other educational materials for the process of citizenship training. Dozens of volunteers were mobilized from a local school to help hold sessions introducing local residents to the principles of democratic direct election: open nomination of candidates, as opposed to the traditional method where a single candidate was usually "nominated" by higher authorities; and each resident having one vote to cast freely for whichever candidate he or she wanted, compared to the common practice of having only household heads (usually the oldest male) or representatives of groups of 10 or more families cast ballots for the single party-nominated candidate. The election was successfully held on August 18 2002, and attracted extensive national and international media coverage, thereby definitively establishing a highly visible model of direct community election in China's cities.

The successful execution of this local experiment was directly attributable to New Era's connections to a number of strategically positioned officials. One particular official in the district's Civil Affairs Bureau assumed personal responsibility for the project, giving it a requisite cachet of official approval. Nevertheless, without higher approval (such as from the City of Beijing's Civil Affairs Bureau) and/or broader approval (such as from the District Party Committee), this reform experiment was not entirely officially sanctioned. The Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau had to be lobbied after the fact to officially certify the result of the election and confirm its validity, meaning a new election would not need to be held as scheduled in 2003 during the regular three-year election cycle. Thanks to the smooth implementation of the citizenship training and the electoral procedures, the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau finally certified the result. Furthermore, Civil Affairs Beijing also decided to expand the use of direct elections,

mandating that 10% of Beijing's communities should try this form during the regularly scheduled city-wide community elections in the spring of 2003. Higher sanction still was secured when the National Ministry of Civil Affairs designated the Jiudaowan direct election as one of the year's top ten achievements in the country's civil affairs work. This signalled the symbolic importance of holding a direct election in the state capital, and in effect confirmed the mode of direct election as a national model to be emulated when local conditions warrant it.

Implementation of a direct community election in Beijing's Jiudaowan was possible on the authority of a single district-level Civil Affairs official because it was only a single, limited case of reform, and did not fall in a regularly scheduled election year. If it failed, it would still be possible to officially elect a new Community Residents Committee the following year, as scheduled.

Structure reprised: beyond agency as an explanation

Having seen the critical importance of individual agency by local officials in this case, it would be tempting to conclude that such leadership is the key determining factor in explaining how such innovative political reforms can be introduced at the local level. We will recall that similar motivated leadership by strategically positioned officials was a key factor in the introduction of direct elections in other cities: Qingdao, Shanghai, Ningbo's Haishu Distirct, all of Guangxi Province, and Shenzhen's Yantian district. However such a conclusion would be hasty, as further exploration suggests that while this kind of strategic leadership may be necessary, it is certainly not sufficient. Indeed, China's policy landscape is littered with failed local reform experiments, despite the presence of influential and committed policy entrepreneurs. To be successful, these policy entrepreneurs must operate in a context of enabling structural and

institutional conditions.

In their search for an urban test-site for implementing democratic grassroots elections, the Beijing New Era Citizen Education Centre focussed on certain areas in which they thought they would have the best chances of success.[29] Thus they focussed on urban areas which they felt best reflected the reality of the reform era's new China: newly built sub-urban areas of high growth with dynamic market activity, low unemployment, and generally populated by the biggest winners of reform, China's emerging urban middle class. In these newly built areas in the near suburbs of most cities, middle class families live in modern condos which they now own themselves, drive their own cars to work, shop in giant supermarkets and have high-consumption lifestyles compared to the rest of the Chinese population. In contrast, old inner-city neighbourhoods were densely populated and characterized by dilapidated traditional housing, many without modern plumbing, public bathrooms, old state-run or collective factories and public institutions, many with 1950s style dormitories, many blue collar families and high levels of unemployment.

Despite New Era's early preference for more modern, recently developed urban areas, their director was told by his contact in the Ministry of Civil Affairs that such socio-economic factors were not crucial; more important was finding a local leader willing to risk undertaking this kind of reform.[30] When they did find a willing local partner, it was in fact in the old, traditional urban core. Jiudaowan is a blue-collar community located in Beijing's *hutongs*: old winding laneways in the urban core cutting through a dense agglomeration of traditional one-

[29] Interview with New Era director, Beijing, 2005.
[30] Ibid.

story houses.

This outcome suggests two plausible explanations. The first places socio-economic or structural factors in opposition to agency, by suggesting that one might trump the other. In this case, the outcome may plausibly be interpreted as a motivated, reformist leader being able to overcome the limited potential for democratizing reform of an area with a relatively stagnant local economy, dominated as it is by socialist era state-owned and collective enterprises, saddled with an older, dependent population used to decades of state support and lacking the education or norms necessary to thrive in a competitive market economy. Such a leader, having significant discretionary authority by virtue of access to the dominating power of the authoritarian state, would be able to impose an institutional system (direct elections) not entirely suitable to the socialist neo-traditional norms and socio-economic characteristics (working class, ageing population with limited education) of his community.

The second plausible explanation is that the structural characteristics of such traditional neighbourhoods might actually be assets which can reduce the costs for local leaders in their pursuit of institutional change, allowing them to more easily adapt to the realities of the new globalized, competitive market economy –including all the social changes it engenders. That is to say, that structure and agency come together in a self-reinforcing fashion which can facilitate institutional change. Evidence suggests that the latter explanation is more convincing in the case of the introduction of direct community elections, since in nearly all the cities surveyed, the vast majority of direct elections took place in the more traditional districts in the urban core. Only a handful of direct elections were carried out in newly developed, more modernized sub-urban districts.

As noted above, each city which carried out direct elections did so only to a limited extent. In no case were direct elections adopted for 100% of communities in any given city, with the possible exception of several towns in Guangxi. Examining statistical data available for districts in these cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Qingdao, Shenzhen, Ningbo and Nanning, Liuzhou and Guilin in Guangxi) revealed some important commonalities in those districts in which direct elections were tried. These are significant because the urban district has been identified as the most important locus of policy-making in regards to direct community elections (more directly influential than the municipal government above it, and more powerful than the sub-district offices below it, which don't have policy-making authority).[31]

Wang Ya-ping has argued that modern Chinese cities can be sub-divided into three distinct spatial regions. The first is the pre-1949 area, the central core of Chinese cities, characterized by small shops, government buildings and traditional housing, which in many cases are redeveloped into high-rise commercial and office buildings, and some luxury residential apartments. The second region, usually a broad mixed industrial-residential band encircling the old core, is that built up between 1949 and the mid 1980s, the "socialist planned work unit zone." Since reform and the marketization of land values, many of these struggling work units and their staff have been forced to relocate further out from the city centre. They are being replaced by the newly built agglomerations of modern high-rises populated by middle class Chinese consumers which New Era were initially targeting with their reforms. The final outer ring of most Chinese cities is the post-1985 "market property zone," in which land was finally allocated entirely according to the exigencies of the market responding to global economic forces. This area is

[31] Interview with think tank director, Beijing, 2005.

characterized by agricultural land being built over with high-value town-house style residential compounds for the *nouveau-riche*, and in other districts has become new economic development zones, or relocated factories.[32]

Statistical data gathered for this analysis reflects the spatial regions identified by Wang.[33] Districts within the central core of the sampled cities are characterized by very high rates of non-agricultural residents (usually around 90% for large industrial cities, and less for smaller, more commercially oriented cities), and relatively low rates of incoming migrants (10 to 15%). They have the highest proportion of retirees, roughly averaging 20% of residents, and the best educated population (15-20% or more holding post-secondary degrees). These urban core districts also have the highest (official) rates of unemployment relative to other districts in the same city, ranging from 4-5% for cities in better economic shape (Shenzhen), to 10 or 15% in cities with a large restructuring state-owned sector. Based on these figures, one can see that the core districts in Chinese cities have relatively stable and homogenous populations, with relatively fewer migrants, and a high proportion of local retirees living out their days in their traditional communities. The high post-secondary education rates suggest that young white-collar professionals are not fleeing the area, but are rather taking up residence in the new expensive, centrally located high rises which are gradually replacing the old traditional housing. A significant part of this group are likely original residents of these or other central districts, having inherited the cumulative benefits of a lifetime of urban residence (such as easy and ongoing

[32] Wang, Urban Poverty, 2004, 43-47.

[33] Data is drawn from county-level and urban district-level figures from China's National Census (2000).

access to education) which since reform translate into higher socio-economic status.[34] At the same time, these communities have very high demand for community services, due to the large number of retirees and unemployed. These bring very specific and intense pressures to bear on local community leaders, as they must allocate scarce resources among a number of competing claimants, and remain flexible and responsive to residents' needs to maintain social stability.

The socialist planned work unit zone is quite different in character according to the data gathered. Their rates of incoming migration are the highest of all urban areas, averaging around 25% of the local population. Similarly, post-secondary education rates are somewhat lower than the urban core, although the statistics hide pockets of higher learning mixed with less educated rural migrants in near proximity. Thus these districts are highly heterogeneous in terms of life styles, education, employment and income, housing, and geographical origin of residents. Unemployment is much lower, indicating the more vibrant local economy, which attracts a high proportion of migrants from rural areas. Young professionals of the new urban middle class are moving into the increasing numbers of high rise complexes, while migrants are living in low-quality rental housing in immediate proximity, In these districts, the percent of retired population is only in the teens, indicating that many young, upwardly mobile residents (of all income levels) are moving to these areas. Nevertheless, the highly heterogeneous and mobile populations place significant strains on local communities, as new migrants need services to help them integrate socially and survive economically. In the meantime, middle class condo-owners are concerned

[34] Wang, Urban Poverty, 2004, notes that age, educational background, social connections and other personal capital become more important factors for competition under the market system, having strong effects on future life chances (51-72). All these factors are facilitated by having an urban background, giving urbanites a strong head-start over rural migrants.

with beautifying the local environment, convenient amenities for shopping and entertainment, and keeping streets clear and orderly for parking and driving. Combining the various demands can make local social stability somewhat tenuous.

Finally, the outermost suburbs of China's cities are even more heterogeneous, as expensive residential compounds appear among the fields of local farmers, post-secondary education levels drop to extremely low levels, as does unemployment, since figures do not reflect underemployment in the predominantly agricultural population of these areas.[35] In some areas, industrial production is concentrated, attracting high levels of migrant labour to a significant concentration of unskilled jobs. Thus the very young (teenaged or early 20s), and least educated migrants often concentrate in these areas.

That successful implementation of direct community elections should occur so predominantly in the older, inner city cores suggests that local officials there may have greater incentives (or fewer costs) to carry out electoral reforms. I argue that the party-state's concern with social stability is the principal reason. High level leaders, in viewing elections, are most concerned with the outcomes they produce, rather than the fair democratic process they represent. Their main goal is to see "successful elections" which produce clear winners with strong public support.[36] They place great value in such high levels of support, seeing them as a sign of strong social consensus, cohesion and stability, factors which strengthen the party-state's legitimacy. They are not interested in seeing closely fought elections in which contentious issues are resolved through open competition, nor in stalemated elections where victory is uncertain, as experienced

[35] Giles, Park and Zhang, " China's True Unemployment Rate," (2005).
[36] Discussion with a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 2002.

in the US Presidential election (2000), or in Taiwan (2004). Electoral rules are thus designed to produce strong winners, with primaries held to reduce the number of candidates to two in order to guarantee a majority vote for the winner.

This kind of stability and clear electoral outcome is more likely in homogenous, cohesive communities, rather than the dynamic, heterogeneous communities of more recently developed urban areas. Indeed, the un-cohesive character of these areas has been noted as an obstacle to community construction. In a case study of community construction in Beijing, Yang Kaifeng notes that old communities in the urban core, with their "relatively constant population" make for easier policy implementation. "In some other communities, the implementation would be more complicated. Communities in Fengtai District, for example, are connecting spots between villages and cities, so they have more fluid and diverse populations, with relatively poorer economic conditions."[37] In such areas, it is much more challenging to achieve consensus, and the allocation of scarce community resources (cash funds are very limited, but attention to various groups' issues from community personnel, and advocacy on their behalf towards government agencies are important issues to community residents) can become very contentious. Thus local leaders in these areas are more comfortable with traditional methods of indirect election for community leaders, and for controlled party nomination of single candidates.

Furthermore, Yang also found that young people and those who have full time jobs are not interested in community issues, since they don't require community services. In his interviews, he found that "95 percent of retired people are very interested in community

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[37] Kaifeng Yang, "From Danwei Society To New Community Building: Opportunities and Challenges for Citizen Participation in Chinese Cities," Chinese Public Administration Review 1(1) (January/March 2002), available online at http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~yuwx/CPAR%20VO1%20no1/yangkf.htm, n.p.

activities, but only 13 percent young people and 15 percent adults are interested."[38] This factor further favours inner-city core districts for implementation of electoral reform, due to their higher population of senior citizens, who would be more motivated to vote. This point, combined with the higher social cohesion of old neighbourhoods, favours a higher electoral turnout, which is another important official priority as it provides stronger legitimacy to the eventual winner.

Conclusion

To explain the variability of implementation of direct urban community elections in China, structural and institutional factors must be considered *at the local level*, as well as individual behaviour or agency of both policy entrepreneurs (within or without the state) and officials who have the authority and resources to implement innovative policy initiatives. Structural changes in the Chinese economy and society have led to stresses on institutions of urban governance –such as Community Residents' Committees– to perform new functions more suitable to the new market economy era. These include managing the delivery of a wide array of community services to a rapidly diversifying population with higher expectations. This challenge requires the introduction of new skills and capacities to Residents' Committees, one of which is the direct election of committee members by all residents to ensure their legitimacy and their responsiveness to residents' concerns. Nevertheless, such reforms have only occurred in a tiny minority of all Chinese urban communities, suggesting that there are significant obstacles to their implementation, but also that these can sometimes be resolved through strategic interaction of different actors at the local level.

First among these institutional obstacles is the ambivalence of China's top leadership

[38] Ibid., n.p.

towards democratic reforms. While occasional official pronouncements are made paying lip service to the eventual goal of implementing democracy in China, this has obviously not yet happened to any great extent. Thus while the constitution has stipulated that Residents' Committees be democratically self-governing mass organizations, no concrete moves have been made by Beijing to make this happen. Similarly, article 8 of the 1989 Organic Law on Residents' Committees, which defines their basic functions and duties, stipulates that direct election by every resident is one possible method of choosing committee members. Yet this was never implemented. Finally, Document #23 [2000] once again stipulated that democratic elections could be held "where conditions warrant," and yet no moves were made by Beijing to implement this. This lack of action was likely taken as a signal by many local officials that this policy objective was not a top priority, and could be acceptably ignored "if local conditions warrant it." Further, this goal was bundled in with so many others in the wide-ranging Community Construction policy statement that it was easy to ignore in favour of taking care of other more pressing policy objectives.

Nevertheless, all this accumulating discourse amounted to an opportunity for policy entrepreneurs or activists who truly believed in the benefits or necessity of direct elections. In seeking to convince others and justify themselves, they could cloak themselves in the mantle of state discourse of "socialist democracy" and justifiably claim that all they were doing was promoting the implementation of state policy, as specified in the constitution and various laws. This allowed even outsiders from civil society to successfully play critical roles as policy entrepreneurs. This is one institutional feature which supported rather than constrained the ability to pursue innovative reforms at the local level.

In addition to these factors, structural conditions are critical in determining whether or not direct elections might be feasibly implemented. Community social stability and cohesion appear to be generally correlated with urban districts where elections are implemented. Shenzhen's Yantian District, one of the apparent exceptions to this correlation, may actually support it in the final analysis. In Shenzhen, practically everyone is a migrant, and there are very few original inhabitants from the days when this present day city of 11 million was an agricultural county and sleepy fishing town of only 300 000 people (just over 25 years ago!). Thus social stability and cohesion in Shenzhen might come from different factors. In the case of Yantian district where direct elections have been implemented, it is a new district with high-quality condos and time-share units. The homogeneity of society may well come from the type of resident this new district attracts. Entry may be prohibitive for most due to in-affordable real estate, and minimal low-cost rental housing available, meaning that a more homogeneous middle-class community might be emerging.

However, it must be underlined that it is not necessarily the fact of having a homogenous society that is important. Instead, it is the apparently common perception by local leaders that having a homogenous and more stable society is more conducive to making electoral reforms successful. This bias is built in to the ruling party's Leninist ideology, which sees the Communist Party as the proper locus of all interest aggregation and resolution of major social cleavages or "contradictions." Open contention of social cleavages is not acceptable and is perceived to lead only to chaos. Thus community leaders and representatives are expected to represent the "whole interests" of their communities, and conflicts are dealt with behind closed doors by party insiders. This means that the Communist Party is more interested in using

electoral mechanisms for their legitimizing and stabilizing functions than for their public conflict resolution function.

This is an important institutional norm in Chinese politics, and any new political-institutional arrangements will be expected to conform to it for some time to come. This raises an important point about institutional reform: that it will most likely proceed in a gradualist manner adaptive to pre-existing institutional arrangements rather than any radical break with the past. Qian Yingyi has argued that "getting institutions right is a process involving incremental changes interacting with initial conditions."[39] Thus new institutions will need to fit into the nexus of pre-existing institutions. When considering democratizing electoral reforms, it is clear that these will not be "ideal" multi-party or western-style elections. Rather, they will be some "transitional form of institution" which combines some aspects of elections with many aspects of one-party rule. However slow and frustrating some may find this process of political reform to be, its tendency towards maintenance of overall institutional integrity and continuity may ensure its long-term success, as China gradually develops a hybrid form of governance based on a process of very rich local experimentation.

[39] Yingyi Qian, "How Reform Worked in China," in Dani Rodrick, ed., In Search of Prosperity: Analytic Narratives on Economic Growth, (Princeton University Press, 2003), 9.

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