

## Election Reform from the Middle and at the Margins

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Forthcoming in Jessica C. Teets and Bill Hurst edited, *Local Governance Innovation in China: Governance Challenges, Adaptation, and Subnational Variation*, (Routledge, London, 2014)

### Abstract:

Mid-level officials at the municipal and county levels have implemented various innovations (*chuangxin*) in village and town governments to improve elections and local governance. Some of these innovations include local deliberation and popular participation in the selection of village and town party secretaries. However, these innovations are neither top-down nor bottom-up reforms. Rather they originate from mid-level cadres, and reflect a regional horizontal diffusion pattern from the middle. While the central leadership provides some political opening with vague references for greater local reform, it is municipal and county officials who initiate these village and town election innovations. There are also institutional incentives for these mid-level officials to create the “model” innovation that might be widely adopted by the higher authorities. The leading cadre who innovates may gain a positive reputation and promotions. However, rather than innovation as a means to an end, such as changing the election system, innovation itself has become the goal. The cadre management system creates incentives such as promotion for county officials to introduce local innovations, but not institutional change. As a result, many innovations tend to only influence party-state institutions at the margins rather than offer significant change to election laws. Thus, the experimentation system after the year 2001 has not systematically changed or improved the local governance. Instead, current local reforms tend to produce local election innovations that may marginally improve local participation, maintain the status quo, or create a more closed and less participatory process.

*Introduction:*

Village elections in China began as an experiment with a trial law in 1987 that became a formal law in 1998. However, after 25 years, competitive direct elections with an open nomination process for local leaders have not developed beyond the village level. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), experiments with village elections and land reform began in the 1930s during the Jiangxi Soviets period and developed further in northern Shaanxi province in the 1930s and 1940s (Hsu 1945; Keating 1997). After 1949, village elections were part of the land reform from 1950 to 1952, but administrative villages were consolidated after 1957 into communes (township level authority). It was not until the end of the Maoist era (1949-1976) and the disintegration of the communes in favor of the household responsibility system that direct elections for village leaders were reintroduced. In the 1990s, a number of Chinese and foreign scholars suggested that the introduction of village elections was an indication of greater democratic reforms (Epstein 1996; Horsley 2001; Rowen 1996). There was a general expectation that after establishing direct elections with an open nomination process at the village level, we would observe the eventual introduction of direct elections for the township government and even county government leaders. Even the central leadership hinted at expanding popular elections. In 2006, Premier Wen Jiabao said in an interview, “we are confident that when the people are capable of running a village through direct election, they will later be able to run a township, then a county and a province, true to the principle that our country is run by the people (Xinhua 2006).” This established the impression of linear

development of election and participatory innovations moving towards greater democratic governance and more autonomous local government bodies. Yet, despite the optimism from some scholars and hints from central leaders, election reforms over the last 25 years have only developed at the margins and reflect “delimited innovations.” Moreover, some local election innovations reduced the autonomy of local governing bodies in order to strengthen grassroots party organization. The diffusion pattern tends to be sporadic and dependent of the timing and location of the initial election innovation. The three factors that lead to this type of delimited innovation are (1) vague cues from central and provincial leadership, (2) the promotion of innovations as an incentive for leading cadres, and (3) the cadre management system at the county and municipal levels.

Indeed, economic and social policy innovations in China have become part of the policy making process. Heilmann (2008) demonstrates that the CCP has pursued a continuous experimental-policy approach from the 1930s and 1940s until the present with “no systematic shift between Mao and Deng eras (p.27).” This includes incentives for leading cadres (party secretaries and government heads) to create and introduce local model reforms. While Heilmann suggests innovation as a means to an end for creating new policies and model reforms, we suggest that innovation has also become an end in itself for mid-level officials at the county and municipal levels. That is, most election innovations do not challenge the current institutions and election system. These are initiated for the sake of innovating rather than creating a new election system or a significant change to the current system. We argue that the meaning of the term innovation has changed over time and it has become a part of the local party-government lexicon. As a result, the act of creating an innovation, even a modest election innovation, may attract the attention of higher party officials and improve chances for promotion. In response to election

innovations that have challenged the system, the central leadership has resisted changes that require significant legal reform, such as amending the national election law to allow direct elections for township government heads. As a result, many of these reforms remain at the margins of institutional change.

Although dramatic and even radical local experiments have defined China's economic development for the last 30 years, political innovations have been more even paced and controlled. However, since the late 1990s, there has been an increase in local election innovations. From the "open recommendation and selection" (*gongtui zhixuan*) method at the township level to the "two ballot system" (*liangpiao zhi*) for electing village party secretaries, mid-level leading cadres at the county and municipal levels have introduced a wide variety of election innovations. Many of these election reforms have catchphrases that are connected with originating county or municipality, such as the Wenling model of Zhejiang province or Qing County model of Hebei province, while other models have a more numerical ring to them such as "two recommends and one vote" (*liangtui yixuan*) or the "three recommends, one study and one vote" (*santui yikao yixuan*). These innovations have neither changed nor challenged the existing election laws. Thus the modest and limited nature of these innovations suggests that the introduction of a new modest local election reform is an end rather than a means.

Despite the various types of local election innovations, there are three shared characteristics regarding the administrative level and the extent of innovation. First, innovations were launched and implemented at the village and township level. There are few, if any, experiments that attempt to introduce direct elections and open (public) recommendation process for higher levels of government, such as county or municipal leading cadres. Innovators at the county and municipal levels tend to be promoting election experiments at the lowest

administrative level (township) or below (village). Second, election innovations are tightly controlled and thus remain at the political and institutional margins. For example, the open-recommendation process creates an opportunity for local residents to participate in the selection of the township government head, but the final decision still remains with the township party branch and the county organizational department. Finally, these are mostly driven by a middle-down process rather than top-down from the center or bottom-up grassroots process emanating from the villages.

Neither the central leadership nor the village leaders have initiated the vast majority of these election innovations. It is the cadres and officials at township, county, or municipal levels that have launched most of the local election innovations. We argue that this can be attributed to cadre responsibility system and promotion opportunities. Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that the cadre responsibility system continues to shape the incentives for promotion at the county and township levels (Edin 2004; Heberer and Trappel 2013). During our 2012 interviews with a municipal mayor and county party secretary in Shaanxi province, the officials stated that responsibility system (*ganwei zerenzhi*) has a list of key duties that are counted towards promotion for county and township leading cadres. Of course, social stability, economic development and more recently urbanization are at the top of the list, but local political innovations are counted as promotion measures. However, how much these political innovations are counted towards promotion varies across municipalities and provinces. The difference among localities may depend on the weight innovation plays in cadre evaluation. Some areas have few opportunities for cadres to enact urbanization or economic development projects. For these cadres, innovations are a venue for promotion. Thus, we observe innovations across a wide variety of localities (i.e. wealthy and poorer regions). Moreover, not all leading cadres are

willing to initiate innovations. Although the party-government has recently popularized the term, there is an element of risk when introducing reforms, even modest election innovations. Thus there are institutional as well as personal factors that influence the decision to enact local innovations.

The literature on election reform in China analyzes both top-down and bottom-up approaches. In line with the experimental political culture explanation, scholars have identified bottom-up grassroots innovation as the initial start, but these local experiments became top-down national policy after central leaders discussed and adopted the innovation (Bai 2001; Kelliher 1997; O'Brien and Li 2000; Wang 1997; Wang 2003). For example, O'Brien and Li (2000) show that when a report on the 1980 village level democratic experiment with village committees in Guangxi province reached Peng Zhen, the vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the central debate on village elections began. Kelliher (1997) describes the central leadership debate over village elections that reflected the reformer versus conservative splits within the central leadership in the early 1980s. Once national leaders settled the debate, the national policy was enacted first as the trial law in 1987 and then the full law in 1998. Studies of recent election reforms suggest a bottom-up, grassroots process especially for local democratic consultation (*minzhu kentan*) or deliberative democracy (*xieshang minzhu*) (Fewsmith 2004, 2005; Leib and He 2006). However, within the top-down and bottom-up debate there is little discussion regarding the role of mid-level reformers such as leading cadres and officials at township level and the institutional incentives for local election innovations. Moreover, the explicit and stated goals of these election innovations are to create more representative and autonomous village and township governing bodies. Yet few studies have examined the success of these election reforms regarding stated goals and outcomes.

In our study, we find that election innovation in the 1990s was a unique and risky venture for local officials, and there were few incentives to change the election system or laws. However, propagating the idea of innovation provides an outward appearance that local and central leaders are attempting to resolve entrenched social and political problems. Moreover, after 2001, the central leadership was more receptive towards innovating existing election mechanisms at the margins rather than pursuing significant institutional reform. As a result, innovation in the current system may not result in substantial change but rather incremental adjustment that might not contribute to needed political reforms. Ironically, the experimental system that Heilmann points to as the foundation of past success may currently be hindering the development of systematic election reforms.

In this chapter, we will first examine middle-down reforms including village and township election innovations. Geographic location and diffusion of reforms are important factors in assessing these innovations, because these factors help determine success and failure of local innovations. Why have some election innovations become widespread while others have remained limited in one area? While successful innovations tend to diffuse to other political jurisdictions, a lack of such diffusion suggests failure of election innovations. We identify the cases where reforms were adopted and spread to other areas (success), remained within the region (stagnant) or those that ended (failure). Of course, this is a difficult analysis because only the successful or stagnant reforms tend to get publicized, but there are examples of innovations that were abruptly ended by higher authorities. We find provincial and central leadership tend to approve and encourage election innovations that do not challenge party control, but at the same time solve local problems, such as two-position contradiction and increasing citizen representation. Second, we examine the politics influencing mid-level reformers, and argue that

one of the key factors that can explain innovation and horizontal diffusion is the cadre management system for leading cadres and the corresponding incentives for introducing innovations. The experimental political culture creates an incentive structure whereby ambitious mid-level leading cadres attempt to introduce the appropriate innovation (in the right time and place) that could be widely adopted as a model reform and gain regional and national attention. The cadre evaluation system may also generate incentives for innovation. While the cadre management system is applied to all localities, the weight of innovation as a measure of promotion varies among municipalities and counties. Finally, we examine a county case study where election reforms have created less village autonomy and an increased township party-government influence in village affairs contributing to rural grassroots party building. This case illustrates the political process of local election innovation and regional pattern of diffusion. The implication of our findings is that despite the increase and diffusion of new election mechanisms and methods at the village and township levels, many of these innovations have not contributed to any significant change in election laws at the national level.

### *Middle-Down Reforms: Successful Diffusion of Village Election Innovations*

The history of village election reforms can be traced back to the late 1980s. The diffusion of reforms vary with some, such as the “open sea nominations,” becoming widespread, while others, such as various “open recommendation” methods for selecting village party secretaries, less broadly adopted. We define “success” of an election innovation based on whether the stated or implicit goals are achieved and whether the new method is adopted beyond

the originating township or county. However, change in the local election process does not necessarily mean greater villager participation or even innovation. Indeed, it is important to make a distinction between election innovation intended to advance reform and those used to manipulate the election process. For instance, amendments in village election procedures may result in greater villager participation and control over the election process, but others may reduce villager control and influence over village leader selection process. One example of this distinction is the nomination process for the village committee members and chair of the villager committee (i.e. village leader).

Before 1998, the nomination process for village committee elections was not written into the 1987 Organic (trial) Law. As a result, township and county leaders experimented with different types of nomination practices. One of the earliest innovations that allowed for the expansion of potentially qualified candidates during the nomination process was the “open sea” method. In December 1986, township and village cadres from Linshu township in Jilin province introduced the “sea-electing” (*haixuan*) or “open sea” nomination process to elect village leaders and villager committee members (Bai 2001). This process takes place at a village mass assembly on the day of the election and any eligible voter or group of voters can nominate the candidates, then the candidates make a campaign speech before the election. The key point is that villagers directly nominate the candidates on the day of the election. Throughout the 1990s, the “open sea” method was widely adopted in villages across rural China and the basic principle of this nomination process was added to the 1998 Organic Law of Villager Committees. According to Article 14, “For villager committee elections, eligible villagers [voters] have the right to directly nominate candidates.” Moreover, the law states that village and township party branches can provide guidance, but must not interfere in the election and nomination process.

This innovation diffused both horizontally across the village level but also vertically to be included in the Organic Law. However, the nomination process still varies across villages within the same province, county and even township. The reason for the variation is due to the resistance of some township leading cadres to fully implement the 1998 Election Law. Township officials depend on the village leader to implement unpopular policies, such as family planning, but an open nomination process reduces the township influence over who will be selected as the village leader. Thus, it is in the interest of the township officials to manipulate the election in order to ensure a cooperative village leader. However, there is no diffusion pattern; in fact, the nomination process can vary by municipality, county, township or even village. One study found a strong variation among counties suggesting that full implementation of the 1998 Election Law is at the discretion of the county leading cadres (Kennedy 2007). Although there is wide variation, several types of nomination methods dominate: “open sea” nomination, self-nomination, village small group nomination, head-of-the-household nomination as well as more controlled candidate selection procedures such as village party branch nomination and township government nominations. These controlled nomination procedures constitute election manipulation because they directly violate the Organic Law (1998). The result of this illegal interference in the village nomination process is reduced villager choice and increased local party control at the village party branch and township level. In the 1990s, a number of Chinese scholars reported on the manipulation of the nomination process (He 2000; Lu 2000; Wu 2000; Bai 2001). This manipulation of the nomination process continued after the 1998 Organic Law (Kennedy 2007). Thus, from the inception of the Organic Law in 1987, county and township leading cadres have introduced innovations to promote reform as well as those intended to manipulate the village election process.

The success of village elections especially with the open nominations and competitive selection process has also created greater tension between elected village leaders and appointed party secretaries (Guo and Bernstein 2004). This is the “two position” (*liangwei*) problem or two position contradiction (*laingwei maodun*). In the 1990s and after 2000, there have been two types of election innovations introduced to resolve the contradiction. One innovation promotes a more transparent selection of the village party secretary and maintains the autonomy of the popularly elected village committee while legitimatizing the selection of the local party leaders (Li 1999). Another innovation integrates the village party branch into the village committee thereby strengthening rural party organization and weakening village committee autonomy (Guo and Bernstein 2004). It is unclear whether either innovation completely resolves the two position contradiction, but each innovation has clear implications for the autonomy of the popularly elected village committees.

The “two-ballot system” innovation tends to focus on greater villager participation in the selection of party secretaries without interfering with the village committee elections. In 1991, a village in Chengguang township, Hequ county, Shanxi province implemented the first “two-ballot system.” In essence, the process involves two rounds of elections. First, villagers select (open recommendation) party candidates, and then village party members directly elect the party secretary. The selection begins with a village-wide meeting where representatives of all households cast a secret ballot for village party member candidates. The top vote getters are nominated as the official candidates only after the township party committee vets the list. During the second round, the township party committee provides the final list and party members choose the new party secretary and other members of the party branch committee. The two-step election process is believed to increase support from both party members and villagers (Li 1999;

Shi 1999). Chengguang township leaders introduced this innovation in 1991 in reaction to villager complaints about the wrongdoings of a village party secretary (Li 1999). In March 1992, Hequ county Organization Department institutionalized the reform in a seventeen-article regulation. According to the regulation, the secretary and all members of the village party branch are subject to a two-stage election (ibid.). The “two-ballot system” was successful in expanding villager participation in the party secretary selection process.

The diffusion of “two-ballot system” within Shanxi Province and later to other provinces also reflects the success of this innovation. It was first implemented in Hequ county and later adopted in at least six of Shanxi’s eleven prefectures. In 1996, it was initiated in the neighboring province of Inner Mongolia. In 1997, it was introduced in Henan province (Li 1999). In 1998, it was adopted in several counties in Hubei province (Wu and Jiang 2001). As recently as 2010, Longchang county in Sichuan province introduced the “two-ballot system” (Wu 2010). One factor that contributed to the diffusion of the “two-ballot system” was support from the central leadership. In 2002, the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly issued a “Notification on Further Improving the Work of the Village Committee Elections” that emphasized the right of villagers to recommend candidates for village party leaders (CCP 2002). Thus, the “two-ballot system” is a good example of a successful election innovation that has spread both horizontally and vertically beyond the initial pilot site.

Unlike the “two-ballot system”, the “one shoulder selection” (*yijiantiao*) innovation integrates the village party branch into the village committee thereby strengthening rural party organization and weakening village committee autonomy (Guo and Bernstein 2004). This innovation began in the 1990s as a reaction to the “two position contradictions” and has spread

throughout rural China. In 2002, Central Committee Secretariat and State Council General Office produced the “Circular Regarding Improving the Work of Village Council Elections” that endorsed the “one shoulder” model that requires the village party secretary to be a candidate for the village leader (Alpermann 2013). In essence, the township party committee puts the village party secretary on the slate of candidates for village leader. The idea is that the villagers can elect a party secretary to hold concurrent positions as the non-popularly elected party secretary and the popularly elected village leader. This is meant to resolve the two position contradiction as well as to make the party secretary-village leader more accountable to the electorate. However, this also reduces the autonomy of the village leader and village committee from the local party branch. In addition, the “one shoulder” model violates Article 14 of the Organic Law of Villager Committees (1998) that clearly states only villagers can nominate candidates. Despite this legal infringement, provincial and central leaders have allowed the diffusion of this “election reform,” since such innovation not only intends to resolve the two position contradiction, but also retains the control of party secretary at the village level.

The “one shoulder” innovation has also been selectively adopted. Rather than having a whole county or municipality adopt the specific method, only a selected number of villages within a county or township have the party secretary serving as the elected village leader. For example, Guo and Bernstein (2004) find in a 1999 evaluation of one municipality in Shandong province that 77 percent of the village leaders were elected party secretaries. In a 2004 survey, Liu et al. (2009) surveyed 114 villages in five provinces and found 19 percent of the villages had the “one shoulder” village leaders, but variation among the five provinces was high. One province reported 47 percent and another province reported only 10 percent of villages adopting the model. A 2010 county study in Shanxi province reported that 40 percent of the villages

implemented the “one shoulder” method (Wang 2011). Finally, our own 2010 survey of a single county in Shaanxi province found that 15 percent of the villages had concurrent village leader and party secretary positions.

While this innovation tends to strengthen the rural party organization, having the party secretary serve as the elected village leader may not be a problem for villagers depending on the local conditions and personalities. Indeed, village party secretaries are also rural residents and members of the community. However, the variation in the percentage of villages with the “one shoulder” model suggests uneven implementation and possible selective manipulation of the village election process. In their sample, Guo and Bernstein (2004) found that in many villages where the party secretary lost the election the winning candidate replaced the village party secretary (as long as he or she was also a party member). In another county, they found that county and township party leaders “adjusted” the composition of the villager committees so that 86 percent of the villages had congruent office holding for village leader and party secretary.

There are at least two possible conditions for such uneven implementation. First, one study suggests economic conditions influence the need for introducing the “one shoulder” model. In a government report from Kunming City, Yunnan province, Zhang (2009) suggests the “one shoulder” model is suitable for sparsely populated villages with a weak economy and incompetent village leaders. However, this model is not suitable for larger villages with numerous private enterprises and competent village leaders and committee. Second, in our own 2010 sample county, an official from the county Civil Affairs Department admitted that “one shoulder” model was selectively introduced to villages that had tension among several lineage groups within the village as well as problems with the “two position” contradictions. In other

words, the “one shoulder” model was used to reduce tensions as well as the autonomy of the village leader and committee.

### *Challenging Party Power: Unsuccessful Township Election Innovations*

Once village elections developed in the late 1990s, many scholars and even central leaders suggested that the natural evolution would be to hold direct elections for township leaders. However, experiments with direct township elections ended as quickly as they were introduced. There are official as well as unofficial reasons for these unsuccessful election innovations. The official explanation for the central government’s resistance to direct elections of township government heads is that these elections are unconstitutional in that it violates Article 101 of the state constitution, whereby only local people’s congress can elect the government head and deputy head of townships and towns. The irony is that the central leadership has selectively applied this election law to the township innovation while ignoring the “one shoulder” violation of the Organic Law of Villager Committees. The unofficial reason for central resistance to election innovation of township government head is that direct elections may strengthen the legitimacy and autonomy of the township government at the expense of the township party committee. Moreover, direct elections for village leaders have generated the “two position contradiction”, and this could be more complicated at the township level. Of course, there is a blurred line between government and party, and many township and county leading cadres may serve as a government head for three years and then be promoted as a party secretary (or vice-versa). Nevertheless, innovations that attempt to launch direct elections for township government heads have been discouraged in favor of less direct policy innovations that

include villager recommendations for candidates, but maintain local party influence in the selection process.

In the case of township government head elections, the innovations have gone through an evolutionary development where provincial, municipal and county party leaders have incrementally built on previous innovations until they reached a critical point where the innovation was stopped. Unlike the village reforms, these innovations were driven by bottom-up needs, and the mostly vertical diffusion that moves up the administrative level was halted by the central government when deemed threatening to party control. The first experiment with popular elections for township government heads occurred in early 1998 in Nancheng town in Sichuan province. The provincial organization department allowed for the direct election of government heads and deputy heads of the township. This is the first direct township election of its kind since 1949 (Li 2002, 2007). The experiment was initiated by party leaders in the provincial organization department, without any written communication with the provincial party committee, let alone approval from Beijing (Li 2002). The election process permitted every eligible voter an opportunity to nominate candidates. However, Nancheng township Party committee screened the nominees first then the county organization department vetted the list of candidates. After the preliminary candidates delivered speeches, the primary election was conducted with roving ballot boxes. The results were announced the next day that specified official candidates for township head and deputy heads. In December 1998, formal voting took place and the township head and deputy heads were elected. Still, this election was kept secret until 2001 (Li 2002, 2007). It seems that the provincial officials were aware of the central resistance to the direct township elections, and after 2001 the central leadership officially banned these direct election township experiments as unconstitutional (see below).

Another town in Sichuan introduced election innovation for township leaders in 1998. A district party committee within Suining city conducted direct nominations for candidates and a competitive election process in Baoshi town (Li 2007). This innovation combined the villager open nomination of candidates with municipal party organization department screening and a formal written and oral examination. After the district party committee confirmed two candidates for the township government head elections, the presidium of the Baoshi People's Congress made the formal nominations for a competitive election. However, this election was illegal because the presidium should nominate the exact number of candidates rather than introducing competition among candidates (Cheng 2001). In addition, district party leaders also included township-wide people's deputies, village party secretaries, village committee directors and villager small group leaders as selectors. Nevertheless, county, township and village cadres viewed the open nomination of the township government candidates in competitive election in Baoshi as a success. This innovation was even praised by Sichuan provincial organization department and was reported by the provincial television station and newspapers (Li 2002). Encouraged by this, district party leaders also organized the open selection process for three other township government head elections in 1998 and 1999 (Cheng 2001, Li 2002).

Following hints about election reform from the central leadership and recent local government experiments, municipal and county leaders held direct elections for the Buyun township government head in Suining municipality. All eligible village voters were allowed to participate in direct election of the Buyun township head, and it was conducted through secret ballot with vote by proxy prohibited. The election results were announced the day following the election, and the Buyun People's Congress confirmed the results (Cheng 2001, Dong 2006). In November 1998, the Shizhong district government, also located within Suining municipality,

released a document titled “Suining municipality Shizhong district trial method for the open selection of the heads of town and township people’s governments (discussion draft).” The district party committee made this decision to move beyond the open nomination for candidates in an indirect people’s congress election in favor of a direct election process not unlike the one spelled out in the 1998 Organic Law for village election. However, they made this move without formally consulting their superiors (Cheng 2001, Li 2002), a purposeful strategy to avoid potential opposition and to please the superiors in a way. If the innovation failed to succeed, uninformed superiors do not necessarily need to take responsibility; if the innovation was a success, the superiors can take credit (Li 2002). Consequently, Buyun township was used as a test site to implement direct election of township heads in late November 1998. The results of the Buyun elections were not kept secret, and there was swift reaction from the provincial and central leadership.

The central leadership considered the Buyun election unconstitutional nullified it. This reaction also provided a clear demarcation line for the election experiments. In October 2001, the Party Central Committee forbade the implementation of direct elections (Dong 2006). Besides the resistance from the central leadership, other township leaders also held reservations about direct elections. A 1998 survey of 115 township leaders in Zhejiang Province show that 77.4 percent of respondents thought it was too early to directly elect township heads (He and Lang 2001). All the township election innovations after the Buyun experiment were hybrids of partial elections and villager participation (the open recommendation and selection system). In essence, this is a compromise between direct township elections and those completely controlled by the county. Indeed, the central government identified the demarcation line for election reforms, and at the same time maintained the campaign for local innovation as well as the

incentive for local officials to innovate at the margins.

Among the township head election reforms, the “open recommendation and selection” method originated in Sichuan (Chen 2011). The Sichuan organization department tried to use “open recommendation and selection” to reform the cadre recruitment system (Li 2002). With this method, candidates may be openly nominated, but the nominations must be screened by the organization department through written and oral examinations. This method won support from the central organization department, and has been adopted throughout the country, especially after 2004 when a number of provinces, such as Yunnan, Chongqing, Jilin, Jiangxi, Henan, Hebei, Anhui, Guangxi, and Guizhou joined the list of experimental points. From 2003 to 2007, there were more than 300 township that used “open recommendation and selection” to elect township leaders (Chen 2011). The general understanding of the innovation demarcation line and the compromise with direct township elections among provincial and county leaders after 2001 may contribute to the broad diffusion of this method.

Examples of “open recommendation and selection” also include the Nancheng (province) and Baoshi (province) models. However, there is variation in this method as the Baoshi model is more inclusive, while local party organizations tend to have more control over the Nancheng model. In the Nancheng model, the township party committee and county organization department first screened nominees before they became official candidates. However, in the Baoshi model, all township people’s deputies, village party secretaries, village committee directors and villager small group leaders are involved in the selection of candidates. Moreover, the election results are directly announced rather than vetted through the township people’s congress for official endorsement. Consequently, the Baoshi reform was criticized as violating the constitution (Dong 2006; Saich and Yang 2003a; 2003b). One reason is that the model

seems to reduce the influence of the party organization department. As a result, the provincial and central leadership were not ready to relinquish the authority of municipal and county party organizations.

While higher authorities rejected the Baoshi and Buyun models, leading cadres in Suining municipality continued their election innovations through the “open recommendation and selection” method. They complied with the central government’s directive that “the current policy and legal framework of candidates nominated by the Party Committee to be elected indirectly (by the People’s Congress) with the number of candidates equal to the positions under contest” (Dong 2006). One explanation for the grassroots innovation in Sichuan and the continued push for institutional change in Suining municipality was the strong commitment to reform of the district party secretary Zhang Jinming. She initiated the township election reform in Suining municipality, but this ended after her 2001 promotion to another municipality in Sichuan (Fewsmith 2013, Zou et al. 2003). This is an example of a strong personality pushing the limits of election innovations, and demonstrates the variation in ambition among mid-level leading cadres to use innovation as a possible mode for promotion. She continued to initiate election innovation in her new position, but these remained within the confines of the post-2001 compromise.

### *Caught Between Higher Authorities and the Public: Mid-Level Innovators*

Mid-level leading cadres at the municipal and county levels are subject to the cadre management system and performance contracts. However, fulfilling the specific performance targets may not be enough for promotion. In his study of the performance contracts for municipal mayors, Landry (2004) found that specific economic indicators for mayors, such as

number of development projects and increase in local GDP, had no significant influence on the promotion of the mayors. Edin (2004) suggests that promotion decisions for leading cadres are based on strengthening political control and maintaining the line of command from the municipality and county to the township and even the village. This means strengthening organizational capacity of local party branches. Thus, performance contracts and targets, such as election innovations, are only part of the cadre evaluation.

The reason why one leading cadre may pursue an innovation strategy, while another may decide to adopt a different path for promotion is difficult to assess. Yet, it seems that leading cadres who meet their performance targets as well as cultivate key political connections may not have the political will or need to focus on local innovations to attract attention from higher authorities. Nevertheless, we believe that the cadre management system plays a role in the adoption and diffusion of local election innovations.

In our case studies, we find that incentives for mid-level leading cadres at the municipal and county level to introduce election innovations result from the cadre responsibility system and promotion opportunities. Indeed, Saich and Yang (2003b) examined election innovations at the township level in the late 1990s, and suggested that the growing competition among ambitious leading cadres in different locations might diminish the lasting power of most institutional innovations. This may explain the explosion of relatively marginal local election innovations after the year 2001 that involve indirect voter participation in township government and village party secretary elections. However, we argue that the proliferation of election innovations since 2001 is due to central, provincial and county party organizations that had co-opted the term “innovation” (*chuangxin*) into the cadre management system as a way to manage the election innovations and reform as well as to strengthen party organization at the local level. Thus

innovations became a measure for promotion rather than a means for institutional change and reform.

In this analysis, we consider “leading cadres” to be the party secretaries, mayors and government heads as well as the deputies at the municipal, county and township levels. The Party Organization Department (*zuzhibu*) manages the promotion of these cadres at each administrative level, and promotion to higher administrative levels depends on fulfilling policy obligations passed down from higher government offices. All personnel matters, such as appointments and promotions of leading cadres, must be approved by the Organization Department at the next level up the administrative hierarchy. Thus, the county organization department manages township officials. Higher authorities at the county levels therefore have a direct influence on the behavior of township leading cadres, and municipal levels have direct influence over county leading cadres (O’Brien and Li 1999, Edin 2003).

The mechanisms that these higher authorities use to control lower level officials are the one-level-down management system, cadre exchange system and responsibility (or performance) contracts. In the one-level-down management system, officials at each level have the authority to appoint their own subordinates one level down, so that promotion or reassignment depends on the ability of the subordinate to carry out policies of his or her immediate superior. In the cadre exchange system, leading township cadres are transferred to a different locality every three to six years (Edin 2003). Cadre exchange does not apply to the average township bureaucrats, only to leading cadres, such as the party secretary and the township government head. Limiting leading cadres to a short fixed term of office prevents them from developing local networks that might dilute their allegiance to higher-level authorities or provide opportunities for corruption. Promotion depends on fulfilling responsibility or performance contracts with vague as well as

specific goals or targets. For example, a vague goal seeks to promote and uphold the principles of the “Three Represents” or a “Harmonious Society”. However, more concrete targets include economic development projects and full implementation of family planning policy. Leading cadres who do not fulfill their policy obligations after a fixed term may receive a lateral transfer rather than a promotion. On the other hand, leading cadres who successfully complete their policy obligations may be promoted to a higher administrative level from township to county or from county to municipality. After 2001, local innovation may also be included as a performance target.

This change may also be seen by the inclusion of “innovation” in many recognition or “exemplar” campaigns. Starting in 2001, the Central Party School and the Center for Chinese Government Innovations run by Yu Keping at Beijing University established an annual award for government innovators. The award is called “Innovation and Excellence in Chinese Local Governance” (*zhongguo difang zhengfu chuangxin jiang*) and it offers 50,000 *yuan* and national recognition for the winners. A review of the winners over the last few years reveals that the awards went to a large number of mid-level officials such as municipal and county leading cadres. The organization publishes the main innovations in local governance as well as case studies and analysis of innovations by top Chinese scholars to encourage policy diffusion (see <http://www.chinainnovations.org>). In addition, there is a proliferation of innovation programs and policies especially for Party building at the local level such as the “Grassroots Party Building Innovation” campaign (*nongcun jiceng zuzhi jianshe chunagxin*). During fieldwork in Shaanxi, one county shared several pamphlets and study booklets created for leading cadres to promote this grassroots party innovation. In the same county, the county party and government leading cadres as well as department heads were encouraged to introduce policy innovation and

experiments. At the national level, the *People's Daily* and the Chinese Communist Party Information Webpage promoted the local innovations. However, as Saich and Yang (2003b) suggest, the boldness of these innovations have diminished and most of these election “experiments” tend to include villagers’ votes or recommendations as part of the broader selection process rather than significant institutional change or challenges to the existing election system. Moreover, there are wide variations of similar themes and innovations. For example, experimental policies for villager recommendation for village party secretary (party branch) elections or selection of the township government head have over a dozen permutations such as “three recommendations and one vote,” “one recommendation and two votes,” and “three recommendations, one review and one vote.” This propagation of innovation as a widely accepted concept and strategy for promotion has contributed to the diffusion of various local election methods. Moreover, widening the scope of local innovations moderates and erodes the uniqueness of these experiments.

### *The Politics of Election Innovation: Strengthening Grassroots Party Organizations*

In our analysis of which election innovations diffused and which were halted, we find that the type of election innovations allowed to diffuse reflect a broader political goal of deepening grassroots party organization. Leading cadres at the county and township level take policy cues from higher authorities at one level above for promotion and transfers. Therefore, it is important to observe how the introduction of a single election innovation at a lower level fits into the larger organizational aims of the county or municipal party-state. To trace the larger political context, we examine one example of a recommendation and election innovation for the village party secretary that resulted in reduced village committee autonomy, but increased

grassroots party organization. This case study is based on interviews with county officials from the Civil Affairs Department and two township party secretaries conducted in October 2010, as well as county and township party and government documents on village elections and issues related with the “two position” problem.

In 2007, a county in Shaanxi province implemented the “three recommendations, one examination and one vote” (*santui, yikao, yixuan*) model to elect village party secretary. The three recommendations are from the masses (head of the village household), village party members, and township party organization. The one examination is the township Party committee evaluation of the candidates, and the one vote is when village party members elect village party secretary from the list of qualified candidates. The head of the county Organization Department introduced the innovation to resolve the “two position” contradiction in the villages. The innovation is a variation of a popularized “two ballot system” in neighboring Shanxi province, and reflects an attempt to introduce a “new” election innovation for promotion purposes. The promotion system encourages diffusion as seen in the fact that many of these innovations only slight vary from election and participation mechanisms adopted elsewhere rather than seem to be developed specifically to deal with local problems.

The head of the county Organization Department introduced the “three recommendations, one examination and one vote” model to make the selection of the village party secretary more inclusive. This method allows the head of each village household to make a candidate recommendation for the village party secretary. Since the end of the 1990s, and even after the elimination of the agricultural tax and most fees, tension between villagers and the non-popularly elected party secretary has increased. According to an official in the county Civil Affairs Department, tensions within in a number of villages increased due to “disagreements” and

“contradictions” between the village party branch and villagers including specific groups such as clans and lineages. The official perspective is that the “three recommendations, one examination and one vote” will give villagers the opportunity to have input into the selection of village party secretary which should make them more willing to comply with policy implementation and village party work. Although it was too soon to determine if the model reduced tensions in the majority of villages, county officials indicated that the innovation successfully deepened grassroots party organization. While such innovation provides opportunities for greater participation for villagers, the local party is strengthened and popular participation is co-opted into party decisions without losing party control.

In addition, we also observe how specific election innovations fit into the broader county-level policy goal of strengthen grassroots party organization. In addition to the “three recommendations, one examination and one vote”, the county leading cadres also introduced a two recommendation system for the village committee elections. In this system, villagers participate in the recommendation for party secretary candidates, and in turn village party members nominate their own candidates for the village committee elections. Although villagers may recommend candidates, only the village party members elect the party secretary. During interviews, we found that the actual number of village party members per village is not very high, about fifteen to thirty members ranging between three to five percent of the village population. Moreover, the poorer and more remote villages had fewer party members. Thøgersen (2004) found a similar pattern in his study of grassroots party organization in rural Yunnan province. In our sample, the majority of party members were men over 60 years old, and the township party secretaries we interviewed admitted that it was difficult to get younger people to join the party and stay in these villages. This is not uncommon in the poorer villages, but it does have

important implications for party member elections and especially recommendations for village committee candidates. If there are few party members in a village, then the electorate for the party secretary is small as well. As a result, encouraging popular participation through recommendations for village committee candidates becomes an important means to strengthen grassroots party organization.

Additionally, in 2008, a township party innovation introduced congruent position holding where each township party secretary in the county was also a county deputy party secretary. The congruent position has become part of the promotion process and ensures stronger party connection between the county and township. This solidifies the direction of accountability for township party secretaries (i.e. upwards to the county). Edin (2004) also reports that same congruent position holding for township party secretaries in southern Jiangsu province as a way to assert greater party control. Thus, the combination of these “innovations” tends to strengthen grassroots party control from the county down to the village.

In this case, election innovation was vehicle for cadre promotion that also strengthened the connection between the county, township and village party organizations. Indeed, several county documents printed for village committee elections refer directly to the “Chinese Communist Party Grassroots Organization Work Regulation” (*zhongguo gongchandang nongcun jiceng zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli*). Interestingly, we find that contrary to initial expectations, election innovations might not challenge election laws but in fact may reinforce Party influence over village elections and selection of township leaders. The political context of promotion in a hierarchal system promotes innovation and policy diffusion in ways that do not challenge party authority. Innovations that do challenge party authority are quickly halted, and few mid-level cadres have the incentive to introduce reforms that will be dismissed. In fact, the county

department head who introduced the “three recommendations, one examination and one vote” innovation was promoted to the municipal party-government in early 2009. He was promoted out of the county even before the village election innovation completed a full cycle (three years). Therefore, it was the innovation itself rather than a specific outcome or institutional change that contributed to his political advancement. Within the county, department heads and leading cadres continue to contrive marginal innovations that will facilitate their promotion without fundamentally reforming the system.

### *Conclusion*

The experimental-policy approach through local innovations is part of the Chinese Communist Party political culture, and is responsible for introducing significant and exceptional innovations in economic and political reform especially in the 1980s and 1990s (Heilmann 2008). Many of these innovations are a means to an end for creating new policies and reforms that stimulate institutional change. However, we suggest that recent election innovations do not challenge the current institutions and the election system. For mid-level officials at the county and municipal levels, election innovations are instruments for promotion.

Unique election experiments have caught the attention of national leaders and spread to villages across rural China such as the “open sea” nomination process for village committee elections. The timing of these innovations contributed to the level of institutional changes and diffusion of these reforms. In the 1980s, significant change in local elections at the village level was necessary especially with the end of the commune system and the opening-up of villagers’ economic opportunities through the introduction of household responsibility system. Village election reforms also gained support from national leaders such as Peng Zhen that facilitated

more rapid diffusion of these innovations. In fact, mid-level innovations, such as “open sea” nominations, spread quickly due to receptive central and provincial leadership. However, by the late 1990s the central leadership was dealing with the closures of state-owned enterprises after 1997, and the growing rural dissatisfaction with increasing taxes and fees. Rural dissatisfaction also contributed to the escalating tension between popularly elected village leaders and appointed party secretaries. The introduction of innovations that challenged central election laws and also threatened to generate discord between the elected leader and party secretary at the township level would not be tolerated in this political and economic environment. Thus, for leading cadres in the 1990s, election innovation was also a risky venture, and there was little incentive for widespread efforts to change the election system or laws. Nevertheless, propagating the idea of innovation provides an outward appearance that local and central leaders are attempting to resolve entrenched social and political problems, such as citizen representation and the “two position” contradiction between party and elected leaders. The central leadership was more receptive towards innovating existing election mechanisms at the margins rather than pursuing institutional change. Indeed, after 2001, the proliferation of election innovations seems to have diminished the exceptionalism of local election experiments as well as the risk of innovating, especially for county-level leading cadres. Recent election innovations do not challenge or even attempt to change the current system of selection for township leaders and village party secretaries. Rather, leading cadres at the municipal and county levels are racing to introduce non-confrontational local innovations that only have peripheral institutional influence.

As the central leadership and provincial officials propagated the idea of local innovation as an incentive for improving local governance, it also watered down the influence of the local experiments. The field is growing crowded with minor reforms and slight variations on election

and selection methods at the village and township levels. As the number and type of election innovations expand, it has become more difficult for significant reforms to gain attention and stand out in the crowd. The increase in marginal and incremental changes means the central leadership has allowed limited and bottom-level election reforms and diffusion of the election innovations that do not challenge the current system. This does not mean experimentation has become irrelevant. Indeed, the experimentation norms of the CCP can continue to influence policy development in China. However, successful innovations that challenge the system require institutional incentives from above and motivated cadres from below willing to take the risk. Over the last decade, general resistance from higher authorities is hampering the current system, and there are few elite cues that encourage unique and innovative election reforms from below. Although the experimentation system reflects innovation from below, the central leadership decides whether or not to make policy adjustments. It is possible that a more receptive leadership may encourage new political openings in the future that spur risky policy experiments from below. Yet, in the end, the choice to adopt and disseminate policy experiments remains with the central authorities.

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