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Andersson, Patrik

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A Post-Mortem Analysis of China's Township Elections

Patrik Andersson*

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Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies
Lund University, Sweden

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* Patrik Andersson was a student on the Masters Programme in Asian Studies, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University between 2014-2016.
This is his Master thesis.
E-mail: patrikstig@yahoo.se

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s county party committees in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have experimented with semi-competitive township elections. The central government in Beijing encouraged such initiatives, hoping to use township elections to restrict the power of the county party secretary in appointing township leaders. However, these experimental elections were never institutionalized and, as of 2016, there are no signs of any new breakthroughs. The purpose of this study is to answer the question: 'Why were China's experimental township elections not institutionalized?' The thesis relies primarily on a textual analysis of Chinese and Western case studies. It takes an institutional perspective, applying concepts from both Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) and Historical Institutionalism (HI) to interpret and analyse data. The findings of the thesis show that the township elections failed because they challenged the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) core governing principle of 'the party manages the cadres', a principle that places power over cadre appointments in the hands of the higher-level party committee. By producing cadres that were slightly more independent from the party committee at the next higher level, the elections threatened the traditional patron-client relations between county party secretaries (*yibashous*) and their subordinates at the township level.

Key words: China, Township elections, Rational Choice Institutionalism, Principal-Agent model

Preface

The journey of writing this thesis began when I came across a journal article by the scholar Cheng Li, titled 'Intra-Party Democracy in China: Should We Take It Seriously?' I found the concept of Chinese 'intra-party democracy' highly intriguing and wanted to learn more. Little did I know I was about to stumble into a whole world of literature on democratic township elections in China. As I worked my way through this vast body of literature, I learned that the township elections had been discontinued, which made me curious as to why. My thesis supervisor Jesper Schlaeger suggested I approach this question from an institutional perspective. I now returned to this literature with a pair of 'theoretical glasses', which enabled me to see a lot of things I had not noticed before. I began to see conflicts between old and emerging institutions, between principals and agents, and between rational actors. In this way the thesis gradually evolved from a simple curiosity into a complete manuscript.

As part of this Master's programme, I have had the pleasure of spending the 2015 autumn semester as an exchange student at Tsinghua University in Beijing. At Tsinghua I had the opportunity to take many interesting classes on Chinese politics and discuss my topic with classmates and teachers. In the spring of 2016 I also had the opportunity to carry out fieldwork at Peking University, during which I collected valuable data for this thesis.

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Jesper Schlaeger for providing me with invaluable intellectual guidance throughout the process of writing this thesis. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the Birgit Rausing Language Programme and to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for providing me with the financial support needed to conduct fieldwork in China. Last but not least, I am very grateful to my family, and especially my wife, for supporting me (and putting up with me) during the writing of this thesis.

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

One of the main problems in top-down, hierarchical political systems such as China's is overcoming information asymmetry. In China's five-tier political system[1] each administrative level reports and answers only to the next higher level, and as a result the central and provincial governments receive little information about local level affairs. Asymmetric information provides ample opportunities for local party bosses to engage in corruption and power abuse, problems that are further exacerbated by the lack of a free and independent media (that could expose such behaviour), democratic accountability (which could ensure that corrupt cadres are voted out of office), and court independence from local governments (Pei 2006, 145).

These are of course problems that, if left unaddressed, threaten to seriously undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The party, therefore, has showed willingness to experiment with limited democratic reforms, under the condition that these do not challenge the one-party system. From the late 1990s, local party committees in Sichuan and other provinces have organized and implemented carefully designed experimental elections for township leaders. For a few years, these local elections met with cautious optimism by some scholars in China and abroad, who saw them as a potentially important step on China's path towards a more inclusive and open society[2].

However, these experimental elections eventually died out; 'direct elections' of township government leaders were the first to go, followed by intra-party elections for township party secretaries. Not even the more tightly controlled 'consultative elections' for party committees were sustained. As of spring 2016 there are no signs of any renewed interest among top leaders for these types of local elections. Most importantly, in 2014 the CCP Central Organization Department – the department in charge of millions of personnel appointments within the CCP – issued a revised version of the 'Regulations on the Work of Selecting and Appointing Leading Party and Government Cadres' (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例), replacing the earlier version from 2002 (Zhu 2014). A careful comparison of the two versions of this document reveals that the CCP is reducing the importance of democratic practices such as voting in the appointment of cadres, and that cadre management is becoming increasingly centralized.

[1] The formal administrative levels under the central government are province, prefecture, county, and township. Villages make up a fifth informal level.

[2] See for example the early case studies by Cheng (2001) and Li (2002).

1.2 Research question and theoretical approach

It is therefore, I believe, time for a comprehensive, in-depth 'post-mortem' of China's local experimental elections. The aim of this thesis is to identify and analyse the reasons behind the failure of these elections. The main research question of this study is: Why were China's experimental township elections not institutionalized? In answering this question, the thesis takes an institutional perspective, exploring the behaviour of actors within the existing institutions and how they responded when challenged by emerging institutions. It takes an eclectic institutional approach, applying concepts from both Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) and Historical Institutionalism (HI) to interpret and analyse data. RCI is good at explaining how actors behave and what their motivations are, and therefore it will be used in chapters 3–6 to explain the behaviour and motivations of different actors. One of the most popular analytical tools of RCI – the principal-agent model – will be used for this purpose. From HI, the thesis uses the concept of critical junctures in Chapter 6 to discuss important turning points in the rise and decline of China's township elections. Sociological Institutionalism (SI) will not be applied in this thesis. Although SI could undoubtedly provide interesting alternative explanations to some of our questions, it does not give sufficient emphasis to the role of individual agency within institutions, and is therefore not well suited to deal with this topic.

1.3 Research value and delimitations

Understanding what caused the death of the semi-competitive township elections can perhaps help us to better understand why the CCP under Xi Jinping's (习近平) leadership decided not only to stop encouraging such experiments, but also to actively centralize cadre management and roll back political reforms in general[3]. Knowledge of these variables will be very helpful for our attempts to analyse current political events in China, including possible scenarios for China's future political trajectory.

As will be explained in more detail in the literature review, the research on China's local democratic experiments is (with few exceptions) primarily descriptive in character, with numerous case studies from Chinese and Western scholars providing highly detailed accounts of the various experiments. Considering this, there is little academic value in replicating them. However, most of these case studies lack a rigorous theoretical discussion. In some of them, a theory is briefly introduced, yet nearly absent in the subsequent data analysis.

[3] Some argue that political reforms had been dormant for a few years when Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. According to David Shambaugh (2012), political reforms in China had been stagnant since 2009.

Hence the main contribution of this thesis will be to bring the research up to date while at the same time adding a more systematic theoretical analysis.

The topic of Chinese democratization is extremely broad and thus some narrowing down will be necessary. The thesis will focus on 12 cases of semi-competitive township elections that took place in China between 1998 and 2006 (see Table 1). These include elections for township heads (government side of the leadership) and the intra-party elections for township party secretaries and party committees. These are widely regarded as some of the most significant political reforms in China since the late 1980s. Other types of experiments, including party congress reform and experiments with deliberative democracy, will not be the focus of this thesis.

1.4 Method and case selection

The thesis relies primarily on qualitative (textual) analysis of Chinese and Western literature on China's experimental township elections. Case studies presented in journal articles and books form the basis of the analysis, but newspaper articles, websites and official party documents have also been of interest. The thesis draws on and contributes to a vast body of research.

Four sub-questions guided the collection of data. Answering each sub-question will enable us to arrive at a more conclusive and comprehensive answer to the main research question: Why were China's experimental township elections not institutionalized?

1. What were the motivations behind the experiments?
   Understanding the central government's rationale for encouraging and supporting the experiments can help us understand what they sought to achieve with them, and whether or not they succeeded. It can also tell us something about the sustainability of the experiments and whether the intention was to institutionalize them. Uncovering the motivations of the local initiators can help improve our understanding of the different variables that combined to cause the initiation of the experiments, and it can also provide some important clues as to why the experiments did not last.

2. How and by whom were the experiments initiated?
   What roles did the central government and the local cadres play in the initiation of the experiments? What incentives were used and how did the local cadres respond to them? Exploring the nature and quality of those incentives can provide some further hints of the central leadership's intentions with the experiments. We shall also explore other aspects of the initiation process, including at which bureaucratic level the

experiment was initiated and whether or not the initiator sought and secured support from superiors – all of which impacted the outcome and sustainability of an experiment.

3. How and by whom were the elections organized and implemented?
   What actors and institutions were involved in the organization and implementation of the experiments? Which actors maintained the most power during the process and who suffered from reduced influence? Answering these questions can provide an early insight into possible institutional clashes. The different stages and procedures of the elections will be discussed and analysed, with a focus on assessing the degree of democracy, participation and transparency of the elections. An analysis of these processes will further improve our understanding of the purpose of the elections, which will help us to estimate their sustainability.

4. What were the outcomes of the elections and how did the party receive them?
   Was the experiment successfully implemented? Was it recognized or criticized by the government? Was it sustained, and if so, for how long? Did it encounter resistance, and if so, from whom? Answering these final questions will help us understand why the old institutions endured and why the emerging democratic institutions were not sustained.

Each of the above four sub-questions deals with one aspect of the elections and comprises one chapter in the thesis (chapters 3 to 6). The chapters are arranged in a chronological order, allowing the reader to follow the whole process of an election.

The qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package NVivo was used to organize and analyse the collected data. PDF versions of journal articles and other digital materials were uploaded and stored in the software, followed by a careful reading of the collected materials. When preparing the literature review, word frequency queries were performed with NVivo to identify frequently occurring terms in the content. Among other things, this made it possible to compare differences in focus between Chinese and English language sources (see Appendix 3). Matrix coding queries were used to compare the focus of different authors and studies. During the qualitative data analysis process, case nodes were created for election types and for localities where township elections were carried out. Recurring themes and patterns in the text were identified and stored as nodes. Data that was considered relevant for the theoretical analysis was also coded, e.g. data concerning the central government's intentions behind the elections (to reduce local corruption, to increase oversight over local agents etc.) was saved into a 'principal-agent' node, and data concerning important turning

points in the development of China's township elections was stored in a 'critical junctures' node. Text search queries were performed frequently, and NVivo's 'word tree' function made it possible to identify and compare the different contexts in which particular words or phrases occurred. The appendices at the end of the thesis provide further insight into the data analysis process.

Table 1. Overview of cases of China's township elections[4]

No.	Locality	Province	Year(s)	Scale	Election type
1	Buyun	Sichuan	1998	One township	Direct election for township head
2	Dapeng	Guangdong	1999	One township	Open recommendation and selection for township head
3	Buyun	Sichuan	2002	One township	Direct election for township head
4	Xindu district of Chengdu	Sichuan	2003	Eleven townships	Open recommendation, direct election for party committees
5	Pingba	Sichuan	2003	One township	Aborted direct election for township head
6	Xuzhou	Jiangsu	2003	One county	Open recommendation and selection for county head
7	Pingchang	Sichuan	2004	Nine towns and rural townships	Open recommendation, direct election for party committees
8	Honghe Hani and Yi prefecture	Yunnan	2004	Eleven townships in Shiping county	Open recommendation, direct election for township heads
9			2004	All townships in the county	Open recommendation and selection for township party secretaries
10			2006	126 townships	Open recommendation, direct election for party committees
11	Xiangshui	Shaanxi	2005	One town	Open recommendation, direct election for party committee
12	Ya'an	Sichuan	2006	Four small townships	Consultative elections for township leaders (party and state)

4 The author's own compilation. Data for Buyun from Lai (2003) and Fewsmith (2013); for Dapeng from Cheng (2001); for Xindu, Xuzhou and Honghe from Fewsmith (2013); for Xiangshui from Wang (2010), for Ya'an from Thøgersen, Elklit, and Lisheng (2008); for Pingchang from Wang (2013b); and for Pingba from Li (2003).

As mentioned above, the thesis focuses on 12 of the most well-known and researched township elections. Many of these cases have received significant attention in Chinese mass media, and some of them have even been granted awards by the Chinese government for their degree of innovation (see Table 2). It makes good sense to focus on these cases for three reasons: firstly, they are believed to have been significant for the development of democracy in China; secondly, they had a big impact on subsequent experiments; and finally, there is plenty of data available on them, which facilitates research. Table 1 provides an overview of the main cases.

1.5 Ethical considerations and reliability of data

The data presented in this thesis was collected in accordance with the ethical guidelines defined by the Swedish Research Council. The author understood that the topic of democracy is politically sensitive in China and kept this in mind during the data collection process. The author had prepared to conduct interviews with several Chinese key experts in intra-party democracy, but unfortunately due to the tense political climate in China in early 2016 it was not possible to carry out those interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to improve the reliability of the research by confirming or challenging the findings from the textual analysis. To ensure quality in the data collection, the referenced works are from some of the most respected and frequently cited scholars in the field, and as an additional quality assurance measure, the Chinese journal articles are from so-called 'core journals' (核心期刊). Finally, appendices containing some relevant output from the QDA have been included at the end of the thesis, the purpose of which is to provide some insight into the data analysis process, thus further strengthening the reliability and validity of the study.

1.6 Previous research

Below we shall look at two bodies of research that are relevant for this thesis: literature on China's township elections and literature on institutionalization in China.

The story of China's township elections

Scholarly interest in China's township elections surged in the late 1990s when news broke out of China's first experimental 'direct election' of a township executive in Buyun (步云) – a small rural township with a population of around 16,000 in the western province of Sichuan. Prior to the Buyun election, direct

elections had only been practised at the village level, which is not part of the formal administrative structure in China[5].

The Buyun election became the starting point of a decade of local political experimentation in China. Some of the experiments introduced new methods for nominating and electing party leaders, whereas others were limited to state leaders. Moreover, in some of the elections only party members were allowed to vote or run for office, while others were open also to non-party members. In official CCP discourse and in Chinese studies on local elections there is a clear distinction being made between 'people's democracy' (人民民主) and 'intra-party democracy', (党内民主) the former referring to elections of state cadres and the latter to internal CCP elections. However, as Joseph Fewsmith (2013, 79) points out, given the party's dominant role in initiating, organizing and overseeing all of these elections, including those for state cadres, they can all be regarded as 'inner-party' elections.

The experimental elections can be divided into a number of different models, some of which exhibited a higher degree of democracy than others. The two main models used were 'open recommendation, direct election' (公推直选) and 'open recommendation and selection' (公推公选)[6]. Whereas the former usually allowed all party members in an area (and sometimes also non-party members) to vote for their preferred candidate during the final step of the election process, the latter allowed party and non-party members to participate in discussions and recommend candidates, while leaving the final decision to a smaller group of leading cadres. Both of these models sought to resolve principal-agent problems, and to restrict the power of the local party secretary, popularly referred to as the *yibashou* (一把手), in appointing township officials. However, most scholars seem to agree that none of them sought to pursue any genuine popular democracy, but rather to discover competent cadres who enjoyed popular support, thus strengthening the party's legitimacy at the local level (see for example: Yuan 2011; Fewsmith 2013; Li, Cheng and Shi 2015; He and Thøgersen 2010).

Most scholars who focus on township elections adopt a case study research design, in which they explore the development of an experiment or a series of experiments in a specific locality. Indeed, this appears to be a suitable approach since the most significant and pioneering democratic experiments were confined to a few isolated and scarcely populated localities, most of them in Sichuan province.

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[5] In China the state bureaucracy only stretches down to the township level, whereas party committees reach all the way down to the village level.

[6] It should be noted that 'open recommendation, direct election' and 'open recommendation, open selection' are not scholarly terms, but translations of official terms used by the CCP. Scholars have come to apply these terms in their discussions of these elections, which is why they will also be applied in this thesis.

There are about a dozen cases that have attracted the interest of Chinese and Western scholars, particularly the cases in Buyun, Ya'an (雅安), Xindu (新都) and Pingchang (平昌), all of which are localities in Sichuan province. Many of these cases were the subject of extensive media coverage in China and abroad, and some of them received explicit support from senior Chinese leaders; a few were even granted awards by the Chinese government for their achievements in terms of political innovation. Scholars choose to focus on these cases both because they were significant for the development of democracy in China and because there is plenty of information available on them (thus facilitating research).

Concerning methodology, this body of research is overwhelmingly qualitative, perhaps due to the shortage of relevant and reliable quantitative data. Whereas scholars who study Chinese elite politics have to rely primarily on old-fashioned Pekingology, those focusing on local level politics have a somewhat larger toolbox available to them. Data is usually collected in the field through archival work, and some have also carried out observations of local elections and interviews with local officials, e.g. Thøgersen, Elklit and Lisheng's (2008) observation of the 2006 Ya'an elections.

The case studies on China's township elections are primarily descriptive in character, providing highly informative and detailed accounts of the various aspects of the elections. With few exceptions, the authors of these case studies do not discuss their findings from a theoretical perspective. In some of the more comprehensive studies, a theoretical framework is briefly introduced, yet there is no systematic application of theory in the subsequent data analysis. In most case studies, theory is applied in an inconsistent and ad hoc manner. As shall be discussed below, this contrasts with the broader literature on institutionalization in China, which is theoretically highly sophisticated, e.g. the works of Minxin Pei (2006), Andrew Nathan (2003) and David Shambaugh (2008). Consequently, rather than remaking these case studies one more time, this thesis draws on the valuable empirical data contained in existing studies, while seeking to add a more systematic theoretical analysis.

Below we shall briefly summarize some of the most influential and frequently cited works on China's township elections. Joseph Cheng (2001) provided one of the earliest comparative case studies of the Buyun and Dapeng (大鹏) elections. His article, which is based on his own fieldwork and interviews, provides highly detailed accounts of the two cases, and tries to assess their future impact. In Cheng's view, the main purpose behind political reforms such as township elections is to strengthen the legitimacy and governing capacity of local governments. At the same time, he notes the many obstacles facing the reform, particularly the strong resistance encountered from the National People's Congress (NPC) – the staunch protector of China's Soviet-style constitution (note that Cheng's article was published shortly after the CCP Central Committee had declared the Buyun election 'unconstitutional'). His article ends

on an optimistic note: as China's leaders lack efficient methods of dealing with corruption, future leaders are likely to develop a greater interest in political reforms.

Two subsequent journal articles by Lianjiang Li (2002) and Tony Saich and Xuedong Yang (2003) emphasized the crucial role of individual actors in initiating and implementing township reforms. Li (2002) highlighted how Jiang Zemin's (江泽民) pledge to 'expand grassroots democracy' created a 'discursive opening' for reform-minded cadres to experiment with township elections (Li 2002, 704). However, Li argues that Jiang in fact does not believe in democratic reforms, and that he personally served as an obstacle to introducing township elections. A more serious barrier is the party's insistence on monopolizing cadre management. At the same time, Li listed several reasons for optimism. Firstly, he emphasizes how some of the new leaders that were about to ascend to power that same year (2002) may seek to consolidate their power through political reforms; secondly, inter-bureaucratic rivalry may incite some leaders to support democratic reforms as a way of restricting the power of the organization department; and thirdly, three decades of successful economic reform may embolden some reformers and convince them that history is on their side.

Saich and Yang's (2003) study also stressed the function of an 'insightful and strong-willed individual leader' in launching and implementing reforms. Their study explored the open recommendation and selection of township leaders in Suining city from the 2001–2002 election cycle. This model, they argued, 'broadens the scope of participation in the selection of local leaders in contrast with traditional methods, but it retains the Leninist concern for control of the process should anything deemed untoward happen' (ibid, 200).

Hairong Lai, a Chinese researcher at the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (an organ under the CCP Central Committee), conducted extensive fieldwork in Sichuan province, where he found that over 2,000 townships had implemented 'competitive elections' (竞争性选举) during the 2001–2002 election cycle (note that these were not direct elections, but belonged to the less 'democratic' open recommendation and selection model). This, he argued, represented a 'tremendous development' for competitive elections in China. Lai found that the elections emerged in Sichuan as an attempt to remedy flaws in the operation of the political system, and that the purpose behind the elections was to introduce some checks on power below the county level; the development of democratic politics was, he argued, a by-product (Lai 2003).

Thøgersen et al. (2008) look at open recommendation and selection of township party and government leaders in Ya'an city in 2006. They found that the election results served as just one of several inputs to the appointment process, and that the final decision was still taken by leaders at the higher level. Hence they argued that these elections should be labelled 'consultative' (as opposed to 'direct' elections), and suggested that such consultative elections could become 'an

important tool in the party-state's cadre management' (ibid, 46). Thøgersen and He (2010) later referred to this type of elections as 'consultative authoritarianism'.

As enough time has passed and more has become known about China's township elections, scholars have begun to draw some conclusions about the experiments. Hence in recent years a couple of important books have been published which discuss and summarize the outcomes of local political reforms in China. These works share the conclusion that China's township elections have failed.

In his comprehensive study of local political reforms, Zaijun Yuan (2011) looks at five types of democratic experiments: 'direct elections' for township heads, 'direct elections' for township party secretaries, township party congress reform, experiments with 'deliberative democracy' and experiments in allowing independent candidates in the local people's congress. In the first four, the party maintained strict control during the entire process of the experiments. The only reform that could potentially have challenged the party's monopoly of power – independent candidates in the local people's congress – met with strong resistance from the CCP. Yuan's conclusion is highly pessimistic – all five types of reform have failed and none of them is likely to lead to democratization in China.

Joseph Fewsmith's (2013) book *The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China* provides detailed case studies of some of the most significant and widely researched local democratic experiments in China. Fewsmith's core argument is that China is unlikely to experience any genuine democratic progress unless the CCP is willing to compromise its power over cadre management. The core principle of 'the party manages the cadres' (党管干部) ensures that officials respond to the desires of their immediate superiors rather than to the constituencies they serve. The party understands that the traditional method of appointing leaders places too much power in the hands of the local party secretary, and that this provides ample opportunities for corruption and power abuse. However, having local officials truly answer to the electorate (rather than to their superiors) is deemed an even greater threat to the party. Fewsmith notes that in recent years local democratic experiments have followed the more tightly controlled open recommendation and selection model. These elections, he concludes, 'took the democracy out of intra-party democracy', as they merely allowed for slightly greater competition among cadres who seek to advance their careers within the party (Fewsmith 2013, 107).

Literature on institutionalization in China

The literature on China's township elections overlaps to some extent with the broader literature on institutionalization in China, and some of the aforementioned scholars have contributed to this research as well (see for example Fewsmith below). Scholars tend to disagree on what level of institutionalization the country has reached. An overview of this literature reveals that there are those

who see significant institutionalization in China, those who see only partial or interrupted institutionalization, those who have observed a 'de-institutionalization' in recent years, and those who argue there has been institutional innovation, but little genuine institutionalization in China.

In his highly influential and frequently cited journal article, Andrew Nathan (2003) uses the term 'authoritarian resilience' to describe the CCP's ability to 'adapt and survive' through institutional adaptations and policy adjustments. Nathan mentions four such institutions: 1) increasingly norm-bound succession politics; 2) input institutions allowing ordinary citizens to participate in politics; 3) a cadre promotion system based on meritocracy rather than factional affiliation; and 4) the differentiation and functional specialization of party and state institutions. The view that institutionalization had made the Chinese regime more stable and even 'resilient' was for a long time accepted by many scholars in the China studies community. David Shambaugh (2008, 176) has also described the CCP as a 'reasonably strong and resilient institution', highlighting how the party has managed to reinvent itself and strengthen its rule through a number of adaptive measures.

It should be noted that many scholars, including the two just mentioned, have re-evaluated their positions in recent years. Nathan acknowledged in 2013 that 'the consensus is stronger than at any time since the 1989 Tiananmen crisis that the resilience of the authoritarian regime in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is approaching its limits' (Nathan 2013, 20). Shambaugh (2012, 8) has also noted a stagnation in political and intra-party reforms since 2009.

Some scholars argue that China has been 'trapped' in a stage of incomplete economic and political reform. According to political scientist Minxin Pei (2006, 8-9), China has found itself trapped in a 'partial reform equilibrium,' in which 'partially reformed economic and political institutions' are used mainly to serve the needs and interests of a narrow ruling elite. As Pei (2006, 7) puts it, China's post-Mao political reforms are 'at best, a series of tentative, partial, and superficial measures most likely to fail because they in no way challenge, limit, or undermine the Communist Party's political monopoly'. Given that a market economy requires at least a modicum of rule of law, and since building rule of law entails the institutionalization of curbs on state power, the party is unlikely to succeed in transforming China into a genuine market economy, nor is it likely to steer China in a more democratic direction.

Carl Minzner is a renowned expert in Chinese law and governance at Fordham Law School. Minzner (2015) is in agreement with Nathan's original thesis that the stability and 'resilience' of the Chinese regime has been a result of institutionalization. These reforms, however, have started to 'unravel' in recent years. China has now entered a new era, the 'age after reform', in which the country is 'steadily cannibalizing its own prior political institutionalization' (ibid, 142). Minzner identifies two possible reasons for this 'de-institutionalization' of

Chinese politics. Firstly, the constant fear that political reforms will spin out of control has locked the CCP in a 'one-step-forward, one-step-backward' cycle; secondly, it may be that President Xi Jinping has realized that his best chance to achieve a breakthrough is to tear up many of the formal and informal rules that have been adopted in recent decades. This second, more optimistic scenario leaves a window open for political reforms later in Xi's tenure (ibid, 141-142).

Finally, some scholars argue that there has been little, if any, substantial institutionalization in China. These scholars tend to stress that the resilience of the CCP has been a result of institutional innovations rather than any genuine institutionalization. Fewsmith (2013) argues that whereas the CCP has actively encouraged experimentation and institutional innovations to deal with temporary legitimacy crises (particularly at the local level), it has intentionally avoided institutionalization of the reforms.

Summary and conclusion

In this section, we have reviewed two bodies of research: literature on China's township elections and literature on institutionalization in China. Scholars disagree on the level of institutionalization in China. Since the early twenty-first century, scholars have argued that institutionalization has made the regime stronger and more stable, even 'resilient'. In recent years, however, some scholars have observed a stagnation of political reforms; some even speak of a 'de-institutionalization' of Chinese politics.

There seems to have formed a consensus in the field in recent years that China's experimental township elections have failed, and that they, at least for now, are unlikely to lead China in a more democratic direction. The case studies on China's local democratic elections provide informative and highly detailed accounts of the experiments – ranging from underlying motivation and organizational procedures to outcome and aftermath. However, most of the case studies lack a systematic theoretical discussion. At best, theory is applied in an inconsistent and ad hoc manner. Consequently, rather than replicating these case studies, this thesis draws on the valuable empirical data contained in them, while seeking to fill the theoretical gap in the research.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces the relevant theories and concepts that are used to analyse and interpret the data in the thesis. The thesis relies primarily on concepts from two of the schools of New Institutionalism – Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) and Historical Institutionalism (HI). New Institutionalism (also Neoinstitutionalism) is an analytical approach in the social sciences that explores how the choices and behaviour of individuals that participate in institutions are constrained by the structures, rules, norms and cultures of those institutions (Breuning). There are at least three distinct schools of New Institutionalism – Rational Choice Institutionalism, Historical Institutionalism and Sociological Institutionalism[7].

2.1 Rational Choice Institutionalism

Scholars within this tradition tend to define institutions in terms of rules. Economist Douglas North defines them as 'the rules of the game in a society', or in more academic terms, 'the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction' (North 1990, 3). This definition carries some important assumptions: firstly, institutions are understood as 'rules', as opposed to norms or culture; and secondly, institutional creation is regarded as a conscious process – people actively design and create institutions, and these institutions constrain the behaviour of individuals. As we shall see below, this definition is narrower and more specific than those offered by HI scholars, who tend to also include informal norms and ideas in their definitions.

For RCI, one of the main reasons behind institutional creation is to solve collective action dilemmas. Actors are viewed as rational and self-interested utility maximizers; without institutions, they would be free to pursue their own selfish interests without regard for the common good. Put differently, without institutions that constrain the behaviour of self-interested individuals it would be difficult to achieve outcomes that are collectively optimal (Hall and Taylor 1996, 12).

Institutions, thus, are created to facilitate and encourage win-win outcomes of political activities. When all (or at least most) members of an institution abide by its rules all members are believed to benefit from it since it reduces uncertainty about the corresponding behaviour of others. By making the behaviour of others more predictable, institutions reduce the risks of cooperation and lower transaction costs (Hall and Taylor 1996, 11). This observation helps to resolve an apparent contradiction of RCI: Why would a rational individual choose to be constrained by the rules of an institution? Joining an institution and allowing

[7] Some scholars argue that there is a fourth New Institutionalism – Discursive Institutionalism (DI). See for example Schmidt (2010).

oneself to be constrained by its rules – a seemingly irrational decision – becomes rational if one expects others to also abide by its rules (Peters 1999, 45).

However, within RCI there are those who take issue with the idea that all individuals benefit equally from institutions. Some argue that powerful actors create institutions as a means of imposing their preferences on others. These actors must anticipate that they would benefit from creating the institution, and they must be powerful enough to manipulate the political structure in order to create such an institution (Sened 1991). Interestingly, this argument is quite similar to that of HI, which stresses how the power asymmetry embedded in institutional structures allows some individuals or groups disproportionate access to the decision-making process (Hall and Taylor 1996, 9).

Of special interest for this thesis is the question of how institutional actors behave. RCI supposes that actors have a fixed set of preferences and that the goal of each individual is to maximize the attainment of those preferences. RCI distinguishes between exogenous and endogenous preferences. Exogenous preferences can be described as 'a general drive towards utility maximization' (Peters 1999, 44). Some of the actors' preferences are endogenous to their institutions, meaning that they are partly shaped through the actors' involvement with institutions. In achieving their preferences actors behave highly strategically, calculating the costs and benefits of each available option (Peters 1999, 43). This logic applies also to risk-taking: the potential risk of carrying out a political action is carefully weighed against the possibility of gaining something of value.

One way to explore the behaviour and motivations of individuals within institutions is from the perspective of principal-agent models. The basic idea of this model is that the principal hires the agent to implement a series of tasks on its behalf. The dilemma is that the agent is selfish and acts in his/her own interest – not the principal's. Moreover, the agent benefits from asymmetric information which allows him/her to violate the interests of the principal with a relatively low risk of getting caught (Laffont and Martimort 2009, 2).

The principal-agent problem is frequently encountered in the coordination and control of the public bureaucracy, where the goal is to ensure that organizations, as well as individual bureaucrats, comply with the wishes of political leaders. Hence, the main purpose of institutional design is to develop sets of institutions that will ensure compliance by their members with the desires of their principals (Peters 1999, 46–47). The principal can use incentives to encourage compliance and punishments to discourage deviation. Another way is to improve monitoring of agents (North 1990, 33). Measures such as these can increase the likelihood of the agent acting according to the principal's will. However, appointing an agent always entails a certain risk for the principal, especially when the behaviour of an agent affects people besides the principal. It can therefore be in the interest of the principal to involve more people in the appointment of the agent. In this way, should the behaviour of the agent harm

people, the principal will not need to single-handedly shoulder all the responsibility for the appointment.

Concerning the endurance of institutions, it is assumed that 'the more an institution contributes to the resolution of collective action dilemmas or the more gains from exchange it makes possible, the more robust it will be' (Hall and Taylor 1996, 8). In other words, the strength and endurance of an institution depends to a great extent on how well it performs the functions it was designed to implement.

RCI scholars typically assume that actors can easily create or change institutions when they want to (Peters 1999, 47). When an institution no longer serves the purpose for which it was created it will either adapt or be replaced by a new institution. As we shall see below, this contrasts with the idea of path dependence, which stresses how institutional change is a difficult and costly process, and that the range of available choices has been severely restricted by decisions made at the formation of the institution. However, there are also RCI scholars who stress how powerful actors with vested interests in existing institutions can use their influence to block new institutions. Indeed, if these powerful individuals still benefit from the existing institutional environment, it would be rational for them to resist change.

2.2 Historical Institutionalism

Historical Institutionalists Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor (1996, 6) define institutions as 'the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy'. Others view institutions as rules that shape and structure those who participate in political decisions and, at the same time, their strategic behaviour (Steinmo 2008, 123–124). As noted above, these definitions are somewhat vaguer and more inclusive than those offered by RCI scholars. We also note the emphasis on structure, i.e. the role of institutions in structuring power relations in society.

HI does not provide very precise explanations for the behaviour of actors, nor does it say much about the interaction between actors and institutions. Instead, scholars within this tradition seem to be more interested in explaining why institutions endure. At the core of HI is the conviction that 'history matters' (Steinmo 2008, 127). Put simply, what this means is that decisions taken when an institution is created will maintain a constant and decisive influence over that institution for a long time (Peters 1999, 63). Another way to describe this is 'path dependency'. Once a government or any other type of organization has stepped onto a path there is an inclination for those early policy decisions to endure. A path may be modified, but that requires that there is sufficient political pressure to change the equilibrium created at the formation of the institution (ibid, 64). Rhodes, Binder and Rockman (2008) liken the process of institutional

consolidation to that of hardening cement. Cement can be removed after it has hardened, but it takes a substantial effort and can be quite costly; it is a lot easier to modify the substance before it has dried.

However, path dependency is not as rigid and zero-sum as its name would suggest. Institutions can and do often change; the point is that the range of possibilities for that development will have been constrained by choices made when the institution was created. Most particularly, institutions do produce efforts to solve unintended problems resulting from inadequate choices made during the formation of the institutions. In fact, should an institution be incapable of addressing such inefficiencies it may ultimately cease to exist (Peters 1999, 65). This image of institutions as inefficient and sometimes even dysfunctional contrasts with RCI, which tends to view them as 'purposive and efficient' (Hall and Taylor 1996, 10).

Above we have described gradual or incremental change. However, we know that institutions sometimes do undergo substantial change, or are replaced altogether. HI uses two concepts to explain the more radical change of institutions – punctuated equilibria and critical junctures. The former argues that institutions, upon their formation, are subject to lengthy periods of equilibrium. Periodical crises 'punctuate' the equilibrium and cause relatively sudden change, after which long periods of institutional stability or inertia again kicks in (Thelen and Steinmo 1992, 15). The crises are believed to stem from changes in the external environment, causing the collapse of the old institutions, upon which political conflict over the shape of the new institutional arrangements begins (ibid). The concept of critical junctures shares the view that extended periods of institutional stasis is followed by periods of more significant change. It stresses that single individuals are not capable of generating radical change, rather it is when a variety of internal political forces join together to produce a movement that critical junctures occur (Collier and Collier 2002).

Now that we have introduced and discussed our relevant theories and concepts, we shall in the following chapters apply these to our analysis of China's township elections. RCI will be applied throughout the thesis to analyse the behaviour and motivations of actors involved in the township elections. From HI, the concept of critical junctures will be used in Chapter 6 to explore important turning points in the development of China's township elections.

3. Motivations behind China's township elections

3.1 The central government's motivation: resolving an agency problem

In order to understand the central government's rationale for encouraging and supporting semi-competitive township elections, we need to first say a few things about China's governing structure.

The source of the problem

Since the beginning of the reform era in the late 1970s, the Chinese state, while preserving its largely top-down, hierarchical political structure, has been critically transformed by both fiscal and administrative decentralization. As Minxin Pei (2006, 132) has shown, this has caused the emergence of a 'decentralized predatory state' in China, in which local officials, usually county or township party secretaries, have effectively monopolized local decision-making and revenue collection. As a result, corruption and power abuse in China have been 'decentralized', and have increased dramatically (at least the amount of perceived corruption). Not surprisingly, numerous popular polls in China over the years indicate that local governments – the policy implementers – enjoy lower legitimacy than the central government in Beijing – the policy designer (Gries, Rosen and Teets 2010, 7).

Moreover, the decentralization of cadre management, especially the power to appoint, promote, evaluate and monitor cadres, has weakened and narrowed the vertical links between the central government and its local counterparts. This has eroded the central leadership's capacity for hierarchical command and greatly exacerbated the problem of information asymmetry in its supervision of local cadres (Pei 2006, 144).

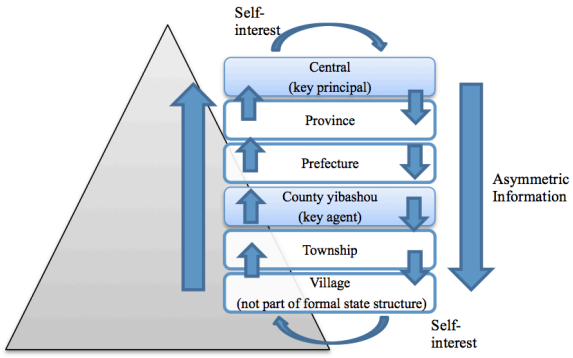
As the principal, the central government suffers from the weaker vertical links in two ways: firstly, whenever its orders and policies are passed down the five-tier government hierarchy, there is always a risk of some slippage along the way; and secondly (and most importantly), the reduced monitoring capabilities has made it possible for local party bosses (agents) to hide their corrupt activities from their principal. The lack of an independent media and a vibrant civil society that could help monitor and expose such wrongdoings further exacerbates this problem, as does the absence of court independence from local governments (Liebman 2007, 8–9). Furthermore, without democratic accountability corrupt agents cannot easily be voted out of office.

As was explained in the theoretical framework, the principal-agent problem exists because there is a conflict of interests between the principal and its agents. Given the strong focus on economic progress and social stability in China's

development (most performance indicators are related to either the economy or social stability), the interests of the principal and its agents would appear to coincide quite well. However, due to the technical difficulty and high cost of monitoring, local agents have had relatively free hands in choosing how to achieve their developmental targets (Fewsmith 2013, 23). As an unintended consequence, self-interested agents who are motivated primarily by a desire to maximize their individual utility have used their political positions to enrich themselves and in other ways engage in opportunistic behaviour – at the cost of the central government's interest (see examples in the next paragraph).

As indicated in Figure 1, the key agent in this principal-agent relationship is the *yibashou* (the local party boss). Administrative decentralization has granted the *yibashou* nearly absolute power over local cadre management, including power over the promotion, evaluation and demotion of cadres. Many *yibashous* have used this power to appoint their own clients to positions of power, thus building and expanding their own local power networks (Pei 2006, 134). It has also caused the emergence of an extreme phenomenon – the buying and selling of public offices (买官卖官). This practice became known in the 1990s, following shocking media reports of local party bosses awarding important government positions in exchange for hefty bribes. In the most extreme case, a former CCP boss in Suihua prefecture in Heilongjiang collected bribes of more than 24 million yuan in exchange for government posts between 1997 and 2002, involving more than 260 government officials (Pei 2016, 257–258; Chen 2014, 48). A more recent example involved general Xu Caihou (徐才厚) – a former vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission. Xu had allegedly accumulated so much cash and gems from aspiring military officials in exchange for promotions that it took 12 trucks to haul it all away (Waldmeir 2015).

Figure 1. China's agency problem[8]



[8] Figure was produced by the author.

The problem of corrupt and power-abusing party bosses not only affects ordinary people; it is perceived as a serious problem also among CCP members. In a Chinese survey conducted among CCP cadres and ordinary party members in three cities in Anhui province in 2010, 64.9% of the respondents expressed concerns that *yibashous* 'have too much power', and that this is 'a major factor affecting the dominant role and democratic rights of [ordinary] party members' (Di and Jia 2013, 268).

Dealing with the problem

The CCP has recognized the need to restrict the power of its local agents and has since the mid-1990s taken some concrete measures to deal with the problem. In 1995 the Central Committee issued the 'Interim Regulations on the Work of Selecting and Appointing Leading Party and Government Cadres' (党政领导干部选拔任用工作暂行条例), in which it set the guidelines for the work of the CCP Central Organization Department – the department in charge of millions of personnel appointments within the CCP. The document called for the establishment of a 'scientific and standardized' cadre appointment system, and a 'vibrant and dynamic employment system' (Zhao 1995). Most importantly, it sought to make the appointment of cadres more public by involving a larger number of cadres at different levels in the process. The idea was to limit the power of the *yibashou* by introducing some elements of democratic recommendation, consultation and appraisal into the cadre management process (Fewsmith 2013, 72). At the same time, it would help the party discover talented cadres who enjoyed popular support. In 2002, an extended version of the document was formally adopted (removing 'interim' from the title), which further elaborated on these democratic elements.

The experimental local elections, which will be explored in the following chapters, built on these regulations and sought to take them one step further. By introducing a limited degree of democratic accountability, local agents would be forced to take into better consideration the interests of their local constituents, who would also help to monitor the agents (on the principal's behalf). Moreover, the desire to be elected and re-elected would prevent cadres from engaging in corruption and other opportunistic behaviour; instead creating incentives for agents to behave more in line with the principal's wishes.

3.2 The local initiator's motivations

Individual cadres played key roles in initiating the semi-competitive township elections. Did these local cadres share the motivation of the central government to deal with a principal-agent problem, or were they driven by different motives? An overview of the 12 cases reveals at least three possible motivations for

launching township elections: 1) to gain credit that could generate faster promotions; 2) to restore the political legitimacy of the local leadership; and 3) to share the responsibility for personnel appointments.

A desire to gain acclaim that could help generate faster promotions appears to have been the primary motivation driving local cadres to experiment with township elections. The case studies show that the most significant experiments were carried out in poor and underdeveloped regions, often heavily indebted and ridden with social tensions, where cadres were unable to rely on economic performance to achieve their promotions (in China most performance indicators are related to economic development and social stability). In Pingchang county, for example, the average annual income for farmers was just slightly above 1,500 yuan (Li 2008, 44), and nearly one quarter of its population lived below the poverty line (Fewsmith 2013, 90); in Buyun township the average income among farmers was just 1,819 yuan per year (Zhang 2002); and in Honghe prefecture (红河州) it was about the same, at 1,807 yuan. Unable to make the infrastructure investments needed to develop the economy, ambitious and talented local officials had to search for alternative ways to impress their superiors and advance in their careers. The answer turned out to be political innovations (see for example: Gao 2010, 107; Ren 2012, 54; Chen and Huang 2012, 101; Chou 2005, 41; Fewsmith 2013, 105; Yuan 2011, 19).

Indeed, in several of the cases the reform-initiators have themselves hinted in interviews with journalists and scholars that they were driven partly by their personal ambitions. Luo Chongmin (罗崇敏) – a leading figure in the Shiping (石屏) elections – hoped to use the elections to 'gain acclaim' which would allow him to be transferred away from the crisis-ridden area (Gilley 2013, 1065). Zhang Jinming (张锦明), the initiator of pioneering township elections in Buyun and Ya'an, has claimed that she wanted to make 'a great contribution' by making her township 'the first in China to implement direct elections' (Li 2009, 23). Wei Shengduo (魏胜多), who planned the aborted experiment in Pingba township (坪坝镇), wanted the county to 'recognize his achievement and promote his ideas countywide' (Chou 2005, 41).

As shown in Table 2, most of the reform initiators were in fact promoted to higher posts shortly after their experiments. Zhang Jinming, for example, was promoted twice (once after each experiment), and has continued to receive promotions since – as of 2016 she serves as chairwoman of the regional committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Mianyang. Luo Chongmin was able to leave Honghe; he was transferred to the Yunnan Education Department. Hao Zongyou (郝宗友), the initiator of the election in Xiangshui township (湘水镇), was promoted to the Hanzhong municipal party committee. However, engaging in democratic reforms is not a risk-free activity – failure to secure support from higher levels could have

disastrous consequences for the initiator, as was made evident from the Pingba case (see Chapter 4).

A second important motivation that was present in some of the cases was to restore the legitimacy of the local leadership following a corruption scandal. In the Xiangshui case the party secretary of Yangchun had gambled away one million yuan of public funds that was designated for farmers as compensation for the construction of a highway, an incident that caused a public outcry (Wang 2010). Prior to the Buyun case, several scandals involving government officials had eroded the people's trust in their local government. A town mayor had, while intoxicated with alcohol, lost 800,000 yuan from a rural cooperative fund. A more violent incident occurred when the head of a local office of the People's Armed Police threw a grenade into the office of a local party secretary, allegedly because he feared an upcoming leadership transition would hurt his interests. In both of these cases, inviting ordinary people and party members to participate in the appointment of local leaders was regarded as a way of restoring legitimacy and reducing tensions between the cadres and the population (Li 2009, 22; Lai 2003, 63).

Thirdly, allowing more people to have a say in the appointment of township leaders was a way for local party secretaries to protect themselves. As discussed above, several of the experimental elections were initiated in the wake of a corruption scandal; should a popularly elected cadre be caught in another serious scandal, the responsibility for appointing him/her would not fall on the party secretary alone. In an interview with a newspaper, Zhang Jinming admitted to having been driven by this motivation (He and Thøgersen 2010, 685; Li 2009, 22–23).

Table 2. Data on the cases of China's township elections[9]

No.	Locality	Year(s)	Initiator	Position at time of initiation	Position after	Level of initiation	Support from next-higher level?	Won award?
1	Buyun	1998	Zhang Jinming	Deputy party secretary of Suining's Shizhong district	Head of the Ya'an organization bureau; member of the Ya'an municipal party committee	Suining's Shizhong district (county-level district)	Implicit support from higher levels; critical support from the Sichuan provincial leadership after the election	No
2	Dapeng	1999	N/A	N/A	N/A	Shenzhen city	Initiated in close communication with the top leadership	No
3	Buyun	2002	Zhang Jinming	Head of the Ya'an organization bureau; member of the Ya'an municipal party committee	Deputy secretary of the Ya'an municipal party committee	Suining's Shizhong district (county-level district)	Strong support from the Sichuan provincial leadership	Yes
4	Xindu district of Chengdu	2003	Li Zhongbin	Party committee secretary of Xindu district	Deputy party secretary of Bazhong city	Xindu district of Chengdu (county-level district)	Support from the Chengdu party committee secretary	No (shortlisted)
5	Pingba	2003	Wei Shengduo	Party committee secretary of Pingba township	Demoted from position as party secretary and deprived of people's congress membership	Pingba township	Initial support from incumbent township head; no support from higher levels	No
6	Xuzhou	2003	N/A	N/A	N/A	Xuzhou city (prefecture-level city)	Support from Jiangsu provincial organization department	No
7	Pingchang	2004	Liu Qianxiang	Party committee secretary of Pingchang county	Party secretary of the Sichuan Provincial Bureau of Public Bidding	Pingchang county	Support from provincial government; encouragement from highest leadership	Yes
8	Honghe Hani and Yi autonomous prefecture	2004–2006	Luo Chongmin	Party committee secretary of Honghe prefecture	Party secretary of the Yunnan education department	Honghe prefecture (autonomous prefecture)	Support from the local people's congress	No
9			Bai Baoxing	Chairman of the Honghe Hani and Yi prefectural people's congress	General secretary of the provincial people's congress			
10								
11	Xiangshui	2005	Hao Zongyou	Party committee secretary of Nanzheng county	Member of the Hanzhong municipal party committee	Nanzheng county	Support from Hanzhong city party committee	No
12	Ya'an	2006	Zhang Jinming	Deputy party committee secretary of Ya'an city	Deputy party secretary of Mianyang city	Ya'an city (prefecture-level city)	Strong support from the Sichuan provincial leadership	No

9 The author's own compilation. Data for Buyun from Lai (2003) and Fewsmith (2013); for Dapeng from Cheng (2001); for Xindu, Xuzhou and Honghe from Fewsmith (2013); for Xiangshui from Wang (2010); for Ya'an from Thøgersen, Elklit and Lisheng (2008) and Fewsmith (2013); for Pingchang from Wang (2013b); and for Pingba from Li (2003). Data concerning career development of Zhang Jinming from Zou (2016); of Liu Qianxiang from Li (2012); of Li Zhongbin from Fewsmith (2013); of Hao Zongyou and Luo Chongmin from Baidu Baike; of Wei Shengduo from Yuan (2011); and of Bai Baoxing from Yin (2013). Data concerning winners of the Awards Programme of Innovations and Excellence in Chinese Local Governance from Sina (2007).

Finally, although not the primary motivation, 'idealism' or a genuine wish to promote democracy could possibly have been a motivating factor for some cadres. Joseph Fewsmith's case studies suggest that 'idealism' could have been a motivating factor behind the township elections in Buyun and Honghe[10]. In the case of the former, he confidently states that 'there is no reason to doubt Zhang's idealist motives in launching the Buyun election' (2013, 82). However, there are strong arguments against idealism being a primary motivation. As Fewsmith (2013, 105) himself has noted, when engaging in experimental reforms in general there was a reluctance among local cadres to copy models that had been used in other townships, regardless of how successful those models had been. Instead there was a tendency among reformers to try to outshine one another by introducing some new elements into their experiments. The reason for this is understandable – if your goal is to advance in your career simply copying others will not grant you sufficient credit to warrant a promotion. Moreover, competition and rivalry between regions played a role in pushing ahead political innovation. Given that a successful experiment would bring recognition and benefits from higher levels, many localities were willing to serve as trial sites for experimentation (Saich and Yang 2003, 205). At any rate, had these cadres been driven primarily by a desire for democratic progress, this competitive behaviour and strong insistence on innovation is difficult to explain.

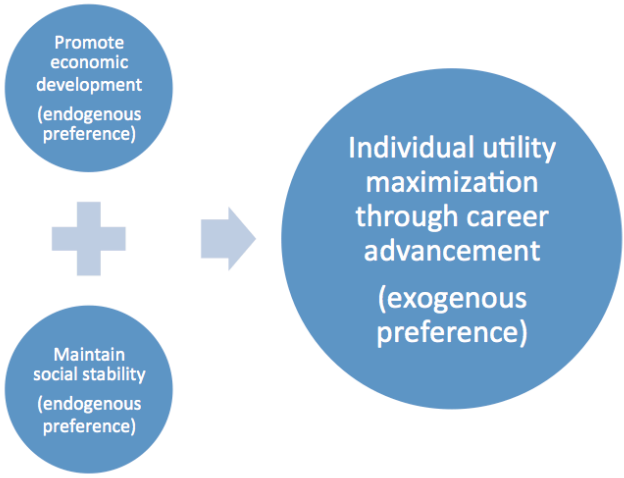
Discussion and analysis

To better understand the above-discussed three motivations for launching township elections, we need to explore the role of individual preferences in shaping those motivations. As was explained in the theoretical framework, actors have both exogenous preferences (a general desire to maximize one's personal utility) and endogenous preferences (preferences that are formed through an actor's involvement with a given institution). For cadres who launched township elections, the drive towards utility-maximization is manifested in their desire to climb the career ladder. Receiving a promotion would bring them a wide range of benefits, e.g. a higher salary, more power and influence, and increased personal prestige – all of which are highly valued and sought-after by human beings. There is good reason to assume that the two basic endogenous preferences held by local cadres are 1) economic development and 2) social stability, given that these are the two basic criteria against which their performance is evaluated (see Figure 2). The cadres' exogenous and endogenous preferences thus appear to align well, since the easiest and safest way for a cadre to maximize his/her personal utility (receive promotion) is to achieve these two criteria (economic development and social stability). However, as noted above, in most of our cases the cadres who

[10] However, Bruce Gilley (2013, 1065), based on his own field research in Shiping in 2007, claims that idealism played no part in the latter case.

initiated experiments served in China's poorer western regions, where they were unable to rely on a strong economic performance to achieve their promotion. Moreover, the low level of economic development in these areas had a negative impact on social stability. Cadres in these regions thus had problems attaining both of the basic endogenous preferences that would enable them to realize their exogenous preference (individual utility maximization through career advancement). This insight provides a possible theoretical explanation for some cadres' willingness to engage in political innovations, as political accomplishment (政绩) could serve as an alternative path towards promotion.

Figure 2. Local agents' preferences[11]



Concerning the second motivation we discussed (to restore the legitimacy of the local leadership), since social stability is one of the two basic criteria used to evaluate the performances of cadres, it is clearly in the cadre's own interest to find ways to reduce tensions between the local government and the masses. Hence, using limited and carefully managed democratic elections to restore the people's trust in the local government following a corruption scandal appears both rational and necessary (provided, of course, that the elections do not spin out of control). A cadre that fails to ensure social stability not only finds it nearly impossible to get promoted, but could also face demotion.

Finally, using democratic elections as a way of sharing the responsibility for personnel appointments (a motivation that was present in the first Buyun case) is consistent with the assumptions of RCI. When a county party secretary single-handedly appointed a leading township cadre, s/he would also be held responsible

[11] Figure was produced by the author.

if the appointee got caught in a corruption scandal. Allowing more people to partake in the appointment of township officials thus provided some protection for the county party secretary.

3.3 Conclusions

This chapter has shown that the main motivation behind the CCP's decision to support and encourage experimentation with township elections was to resolve a principal-agent problem, while at the same time discovering talented cadres who enjoyed popular support. The local cadres who initiated elections were driven primarily by a desire to gain credit for future promotions, although in some cases they also used elections to restore the people's trust in the local government following a corruption scandal. Indeed, considering that neither the central government nor the local initiator seems to have been driven by a genuine desire for democratic progress, it is not surprising that the township elections eventually died out. Had initiators been motivated primarily by idealism the sustainability of the experiments would have been less sensitive to the withdrawal of certain incentives. The role of incentives and encouragements in the initiation of the township elections is something we shall now turn to in the following chapter.

4. Initiating China's township elections

4.1 The role of the central leadership

The central government in Beijing was not directly involved in the initiation of any of the township elections explored in this thesis. The role of the central leadership in the initiation of these experimental elections was largely a passive one of providing incentives or encouragements, followed by careful observation, and occasionally stepping in to clarify the boundaries of acceptability. There appears to have been two types of incentives serving to encourage political experimentation – 1) statements made by senior leaders; and 2) prestigious government prizes awarded for political innovation.

The first major encouragement for political experimentation came during the 15th Party Congress in 1997, when the then party secretary, Jiang Zemin, in very vague terms, pledged to 'extend the scope of democracy at the grassroots level' and establish a 'sound system of democratic elections' for grassroots organs of power (Jiang 1997). Since elections were already being implemented at the village level, an 'expansion' was taken by some to imply that democratic elections were ready to move up to the township level.

These words from the country's top leader are likely to have had an emboldening effect on ambitious local cadres seeking to resolve local governance issues and advance in their careers. Saich and Yang (2003, 185) point out that a few localities took Jiang Zemin's promise to 'expand grassroots democracy' as a 'green light' to experiment with township elections; Chen and Huang (2012, 101) have argued that Jiang's words became 'an important source of legitimacy' for reforms; and Li (2002, 720) has argued that 'all experiments with direct election of township heads occurred in response to Jiang Zemin's pledge to expand grassroots democracy'.

However, the sincerity of Jiang's words was called into question following the central government's denouncement of the Buyun election in 1999. An article in the state-owned newspaper Legal Daily accused the Buyun election of violating China's constitution by allowing citizens to elect their township head directly, thus circumventing the role of the local people's congress in electing and appointing township heads (Zha 1999, 1).

The criticism aside, some senior CCP leaders continued to make statements in support of direct elections of township heads. Premier Zhu Rongji – at the time the country's third most powerful official – said during the concluding press conference of the NPC sessions in March 2000 that he would like to see an extension of direct elections to the township level 'as soon as possible', though at the same time stressing that cultural, social and economic conditions had to be ripe before such elections could take place (Li 2000). His words, which were subsequently published on the front page of People's Daily, could possibly have served as an incentive for ambitious and reform-minded cadres to continue

experimenting. However, at the same NPC sessions Jiang had allegedly told the Anhui provincial delegation that 'villagers' self-government' must not be extended to higher levels, suggesting that Beijing's leaders were not in agreement on the issue (Li 2002, 704). A final blow came in July 2001, when the CCP Central Committee issued a document which declared that the direct election of township heads was 'unconstitutional' and in conflict with the organic law on local people's congresses and people's governments (2001).

The document did not completely deter local cadres from experimenting with direct elections of township heads[12], but forced reformers to carefully design their elections to ensure that they respected the role of the local people's congress, usually by having the congress hold a formal vote to confirm the result of the election. However, in the end, the document and the aforementioned criticism are likely to have had a discouraging effect on many reform-minded cadres. After the Buyun election the reform focus shifted from township head elections (government side of the leadership) to the 'safer' intra-party elections and party congress reform[13]. In 2003 Jiang Zemin elevated intra-party democracy to new heights by proclaiming it the 'lifeblood of the party' (党的生命), a phrase that was repeated during the 4th Plenum of the 17th Party Congress in 2009, and again by former party general secretary Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) in his report to the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

Prestigious government prizes awarded for political innovation was a second incentive for local cadres to experiment with electoral reforms. In 2000, the China Centre for Comparative Politics and Economics (CCCPE) at the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (an organ under the CCP Central Committee), in conjunction with the Comparative Research Centre for the Party at the Central Party School, and the Centre for Chinese Government Innovations at Peking University, launched an award programme for local governance innovations with several prizes in different categories awarded every two years (Florini, Lai and Tan 2012, preface). The prizes are awarded based on six criteria: degree of innovation, participation, social effects, significance, economy and transferability. The stated goals include 'to find, exchange and spread excellent innovations in local governance', and 'to encourage local governments to undertake creative activities and innovative reforms in accordance with the market economy in the global age'. The winning localities all receive a prize of 50,000 yuan (Xinhua 2007).

As shown in Table 2, several of the localities in our cases were awarded this prize: Buyun received a prize for its direct election of a township head in 2002;

[12] For example, there were elections for township heads in Pei county in 2003 and in Honghe county in 2004 (see Table 2).

[13] In 2006, the then vice chairman of the NPC, Sheng Huaren (盛华仁), published an article in the party's journal Seeking Truth, in which he urged townships to avoid direct elections of township government leaders (Sheng 2006). Although experimentation with such elections had been dormant for a few years, the article became a final nail in the coffin.

Xindu district of Chengdu was shortlisted for a prize for its intra-party elections that same year; and Pingchang was awarded a prize for its experiments with open recommendation, direct election of township party committees in 2004.

Discussion and analysis

Statements made by individual leaders – however senior – should perhaps not be regarded as incentives per se, as they were not necessarily intended to actively encourage a certain type of behaviour (in this case experimentation with electoral reform). Moreover, single statements do not necessarily reflect the will of China's collective leadership, if there even is such a 'collective will'. This can be seen from the contradictory signals and behaviour of senior leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji (朱镕基). What an authoritative statement in support of democratic reforms can do, however, is to encourage experimentation by reducing the perceived risk of engaging in such activities. Sometimes this can be enough to spur ambitious and reform-minded actors, who rationally weigh the potential risk of carrying out an experiment against the possibility of gaining something of value.

The award programme clearly exists to provide an incentive for local agents to experiment with innovative political reforms. The prize money awarded to the winners is only 50,000 yuan, however the benefits and recognition that accompanies a win is valued much higher, as it is likely to bring a career boost for the involved actors. Indeed, winning an award often brought prestige to an entire locality, and especially to the initiator. It is important to note that the award programme is designed primarily to encourage innovations – 'degree of innovation' is listed as the first award criteria. This helps further explain the competitive behaviour among reformers, especially the reluctance against copying or reusing models from other localities (see Chapter 3). It also seems to indicate that what the CCP wanted was to encourage local agents to come up with innovative solutions to temporary problems in local governance, but not necessarily to institutionalize the reforms. This is supported also by the fact that the CCP did not provide the legislation necessary to institutionalize the reforms (see Chapter 6).

A secondary purpose of the award programme could have been to create an incentive for local governments to voluntarily report their political experiments to the central government. From a principal-agent perspective, this would help the central government overcome asymmetric information concerning the political experimentation of its agents.

4.2 Initiation at the local level

An overview of the cases reveals that, apart from one notable exception (the Pingba case), all of the township elections were initiated at a higher level of

government (see Table 2). Indeed, several researchers have highlighted that experimental township elections were generally initiated by county party committees (the level directly above townships), although sometimes also by prefecture party committees (Lai 2004, 8; Yuan 2011, 19).

Once a county or prefecture had decided to carry out an election it started looking for a suitable location to hold the experiment. The ideal trial site was an isolated township with a scarce population. This was a way of reducing the risks with the experiment – should an election spin out of control there was little chance of turmoil spreading to nearby areas.

The initiating locality also had to decide whether or not to seek formal approval from higher levels. In 1997, following Jiang Zemin's call to 'extend grassroots democracy', a number of provinces sought formal approval from the NPC in Beijing to experiment with township elections, but their applications were all rejected by the central leadership. Among those that applied was Shenzhen, which was especially keen to take the lead in political reform, just as it had done in economic reform a decade earlier (Saich and Yang 2003, 188). The fear of rejection spurred some localities to go ahead with elections without seeking formal approval. China's first two township elections – the Nancheng and Buyun elections in late 1998 – were in fact carried out without formal permission from the central leadership in Beijing. Sichuan's provincial leadership (itself lacking formal approval from Beijing) had started to encourage its prefectures to experiment with township elections, which would help explain why local party committees felt confident and secure enough to initiate the elections (Li 2002).

Moreover, in order to successfully initiate an election, it was essential to secure support from the next higher level. As shown in Table 2, all initiators of township elections had received either implicit or explicit support from higher levels. The only exception is the initiator of the aborted election for township head in Pingba township in Chongqing. This experiment is noteworthy for two reasons; firstly, it was not initiated at a higher level; and secondly, the initiator did not secure critical support from his superior prior to the election. For initiator Wei Shengduo, the result was tragic – he was demoted from his position as party secretary and deprived of his people's congress membership (Ma 2004; Chou 2005).

Discussion and analysis

Experimenting with political reform was not a risk-free activity for local cadres. However, an overview of the cases indicates that they were carefully calculated risks taken by rational actors. Firstly, cadres launched their experiments in response to encouraging statements made by central leaders, statements that are likely to have reduced the perceived risks of engaging in such activities. Secondly, as a risk-reducing measure, initiators made sure to secure support from the next higher level before they launched any experiment (with the exception of the

Pingba case). Thirdly, as trial sites for their experiments, they tended to choose isolated townships with scarce populations. This too was a way of managing and reducing risk – should an experiment run out of control there was little risk of turmoil spreading to nearby townships. In sum, the local initiators took concrete measures to protect themselves. However, although the risk could be minimized, it could never be eliminated. The potential risks of carrying out an election had to be carefully and rationally weighed against the possibility of gaining something of value, e.g. credit and acclaim that could generate promotions for the involved cadres, restored legitimacy for the local government and improved social stability in the locality.

4.3 Conclusions

The central leadership in Beijing took a passive role in the initiation of semi-competitive township elections, providing some encouragements and incentives for local experimentation, followed by careful observation. Occasionally it stepped in to draw the line of acceptability, as was the case in 2001 when a central committee document declared the Buyun election unconstitutional, and again in 2006 when Sheng Huaren – then vice chairman of the NPC – urged townships to avoid direct elections of government leaders. It was local cadres, usually at the county or prefecture level, that took the active role in initiating township elections. Statements by central leaders spurred these actors into launching experiments by reducing the perceived risk of engaging in such activities. The chance of winning prestigious awards was another incentive, as a win would often bring prestige and faster promotions to involved actors. Moreover, the design of these incentives seems to indicate that the CCP wanted to encourage innovation in local governance, but not necessarily the institutionalization of those innovations. At any rate, the strong focus on innovation caused competitive behaviour and rivalry among reformers, which may not have been positive for the institutionalization of the reforms.

5. Organizing and implementing China's township elections

This chapter begins by briefly introducing the key actors and institutions involved in the organization and implementation of the township elections. It then briefly summarizes the main organizational steps and procedures of some notable cases, draws some comparisons between them, and assesses their degree of democracy, participation and transparency.

5.1 Key actors and institutions

It was usually the higher-level party committee that organized, implemented and oversaw township elections – both the elections for township heads (government side of the leadership) and the intra-party elections of township party committees. For example, the Buyun election for township head was organized and implemented by the Shizhong district's party committee (Lai 2003, 60), the intra-party elections in Pingchang and Xiangshui for township party committees were organized and carried out by the party committees of Nanzheng county (Wang 2010) and Pingchang county (Wang 2013b, 160) respectively, and the Honghe elections for township heads were organized and implemented by the Honghe prefectural party committee (Zhou 2005, 65). The party committees were often led by a strong and reform-minded cadre, who personally played a pivotal role in the organization and execution of the elections.

Sometimes the party organization two levels above participated in the coordination of township elections. In the Xiangshui case, for example, the county party committee was the organizer, but the Hanzhong city party organization paid close attention to the election, making several trips to Xiangshui to 'provide guidance' on the spot (Wang 2010). Moreover, it was Shenzhen city's party committee that planned, designed and initiated the consultative election in Dapeng township, although it entrusted the Dapeng party committee with the responsibility of organizing and implementing the election (Cheng 2001, 114).

The elections were usually carried out in close collaboration with the local organization bureau (an agency directly under the party committee). In some of the cases (e.g. the Pingchang, Xuzhou and the Xindu cases), the head of the local organization bureau was one of the three members of a small 'electoral leading group' that was established by the party committee to oversee the election (the other members were usually the county party secretary and the deputy party secretary). The local organization bureau often acted as the formal organizer of the elections – in some cases an office of the leading group was established inside the organization bureau, and official documents and propaganda materials related to the election were issued by the local organization bureau (Wang 2013b, 160).

Finally, the local people's congress played an important role in the elections of government leaders (township heads), mainly as a 'victim' of the reforms. According to China's constitution, township heads should be appointed by the local people's congress. In many of the cases, however, the role of the people's congress consisted merely of ratifying the voting result, thus lending legitimacy to the election. In the Buyun case, the role of the people's congress in appointing the township head was circumvented entirely, which is why this election was accused of violating China's constitution (see Chapter 6).[14]

5.2 Organizational steps and procedures

The organizational steps and procedures varied from case to case, and especially between different models. Below we shall briefly summarize the main steps and procedures of a few of the most well-known and researched cases.

Buyun

Candidates standing for election were nominated through two different processes – two were selected through a public process and one was nominated directly by the party committee. Any citizen over 25 years of age with a high school education could register to stand for election, provided that he/she could collect a minimum of 30 signatures on a nomination petition. In total 15 people registered for the election. An 'electoral committee' consisting of 161 township and village cadres was tasked with picking two formal candidates from the 15 who had registered. Each candidate gave a 20-minute speech in front of the committee and answered its questions, after which the committee voted and elected two formal candidates – one was a village head and the other was a high school teacher. The third candidate (the one that was nominated by the party committee) skipped this step and went directly to the next round. The final three candidates then spent one week campaigning in the villages, where they gave speeches in front of the villagers and answered their questions. Finally, on 31 December 1998 the voters went to the ballots, electing their township head. The candidate nominated by the party won the election and was appointed township head, without a formal vote in the local people's congress (Lai 2003, 60; Fewsmith 2013, 79–81).

Xindu

The party committee began by forming an electoral leading group in charge of organizing and implementing the elections. Candidates standing for election had to have been party members for at least three years, have five years of working experience, and be under 45 years of age (especially talented cadres could be

[14] Other actors, such as incumbent township leaders and candidates standing for election were all significant for the sustainability of the elections, but they were not involved in the organization, and therefore will not be discussed in this chapter.

exempt from this rule, provided that their candidacy was approved by the district organization bureau). A recommendation meeting was held, during which two preliminary candidates were elected from those who had passed the initial screening. Participants to the meeting included a wide range of township and county cadres, village leaders, and representatives from local enterprises and from 'the masses'. Each candidate gave a 10-minute speech, after which the meeting participants cast 'votes of recommendation'. The result was announced immediately, and the two candidates with the most votes became the two preliminary candidates. The district party organization further investigated the two preliminary candidates, finally confirming them as formal candidates. The next step was to call a meeting with all party members. Both candidates gave a 15-minute speech, after which the party members voted and elected a party secretary. In the final stage the newly elected party secretary single-handedly appointed the other members of the party committee – his 'cabinet' (Ren and Li 2010, 58–62).

As Fewsmith (2013, 90) has noted, the final step of the Xindu election would appear to exacerbate principal-agent problems. A party secretary who was able to appoint the other members of his party committee could perhaps more easily and effectively exercise his power. However, it also removed important checks and balances from within the party committee. Indeed, this would seem to run contrary to the original intention behind these reforms, which was to restrict the power of the local party secretary (see Chapter 3). This is probably why subsequent cases (e.g. the Xiangshui case) adopted the Pingchang model instead (see below).

Pingchang

As in the Xindu case, the first step was to form an electoral leading group, headed by the county party secretary. The criteria for registering as a candidate were very steep: candidates had to be members of the current township or county leadership, have a college degree and a minimum of three years' working experience, and they had to have been party members for at least two years. They also had to be under 45 years of age, and 'of good health' (Wang 2013b, 160–166). The next step was to hold a 'recommendation meeting' (推荐大会). Non-party members were allowed to take part in the meeting, but their numbers could not exceed 30%. During the meeting, each candidate gave a speech and answered questions from the audience. Due to the demanding registration criteria, only two people had registered for the election of committee secretary. Hence after they had answered questions they automatically became the two nominees (there was no additional vote). A meeting was convened with all party members in which they cast their votes in three rounds, first electing a party committee secretary, then a deputy party secretary, and finally the other party committee members. The candidate who failed to be elected party secretary could choose to stand for

election as deputy party secretary in the second round, and the candidates who were unsuccessful in the second round could compete for a seat on the party committee in the final round (Zhou 2007). It is noteworthy that many of the steps and procedures of the Pingchang case were used also in the Xiangshui case, e.g. the final step with the three-round voting system (Wang 2010).

Ya'an

Ya'an is best known for its experiments with party congress reform, initiated by Zhang Jinming in 2002 when she served as head of the Ya'an organization bureau. However, having been promoted to deputy party secretary of Ya'an, Zhang launched a series of 'consultative' elections for township leaders. Similar to the case in Pingchang, the criteria for standing for elections were very restrictive – only 90 people out of a population of 23,000 in the townships met the standards (this can be compared with Zhang's election in Buyun, when the criteria were much less restrictive). Sixty-seven people registered as candidates, of whom most were incumbent officials, and 87% were party members. An important element of the election was that voters had a chance to meet with candidates face to face, including home visits being made by candidates. A series of meetings were also held where candidates gave speeches and answered questions. Votes were counted in public and the counting was done in an open and systematic manner. Voter turnout was 87%. Only a few days later was the purely consultative nature of the elections revealed. In the end, the voting results only served as one factor among many when the final appointment decisions were made (Thøgersen, Elklit and Lisheng 2008).

Discussion and analysis

The actors in charge of organizing the township elections all acted under the constraint of the existing institutional environment, which influenced how they chose to design and carry out the elections. Most importantly, organizers had to make the case that their experiments did not violate the core principle of 'the party manages the cadres', which places power over personnel appointments in the hands of higher-level party committees. Hence all elections were closely overseen by the higher-level party committee, and included steps and procedures that allowed it to control the entire process, including the final result. For example, by setting restrictive criteria for who could register as a candidate, the party committee could easily exclude a large number of people from standing for election, and it is easy to imagine how the party committee could design the criteria to fit a particular individual of their preference. Moreover, many of the cases included a step near the end were the party committee could disqualify a nominated candidate (e.g. the Xindu, Pingchang and Xiangshui cases). In some cases, such as the Ya'an elections of 2006, the higher-level party committees maintained even tighter control over the appointment process by treating the

election result as a mere recommendation. Nevertheless, by allowing party members and ordinary citizens to vote for their preferred candidates, the reformers did, to some extent, push the boundaries of 'the party manages the cadres'. Most importantly, the elections restricted – however modestly – the power of the county party secretary (*yibashou*) in appointing township leaders.

Organizers of government elections faced additional institutional constraints. The Buyun election clearly broke the 'rules of the game' by circumventing the role of the local people's congress in appointing the township head. This would normally have resulted in sanctions for the initiator, but Zhang Jinming managed to avoid punishment due to critical support from the Sichuan provincial leadership, and disagreement among top leaders in Beijing on how to deal with township elections (Fewsmith 2013, 82). However, the strong criticism against the Buyun election forced future organizers to carefully design their elections to ensure that they stayed within the provisions of the constitution. Zhang herself has claimed that after the Buyun election her future reform experiments would be confined to the boundaries of the current system, rather than trying to break through it (Li 2009, 24).

The Pingba case serves as an example of what can happen when a cadre breaks both the formal and informal rules. Apart from bypassing the role of the local people's congress, initiator Wei Shengduo broke informal rules when he failed to secure critical support from the higher-level party committee. As a result, he was demoted from his position as party secretary and deprived of his membership to the local people's congress.

5.3 Conclusions

This chapter has shown that all township elections were organized by higher-level party committees, and that they maintained tight control throughout the entire process. Yet by allowing party members and sometimes also ordinary citizens to recommend or vote for their preferred candidates, the reformers did manage to stretch the boundaries of the CCP's key governing principle 'the party manages the cadres', a principle that places power over cadre appointments firmly in the hands of the higher-level party committee (especially the party secretary). This raises the question of how the 'victims' of the reforms would respond to these institutional challenges. These and other questions will be addressed in the following, concluding chapter.

6. Critical junctures in the development of China's township elections

For a few years China's township elections were the focus of extensive scholarship in both China and abroad, and some scholars were carefully optimistic about the future development of these elections. However, all cases of township elections explored in this thesis were eventually discontinued, and as of 2016 there are no signs of any new breakthroughs. In this final chapter the points that emerged from individual-level analysis in previous sections are contextualized and analysed from a macro-perspective. It identifies a number of key turning points, or 'critical junctures', in the rise and decline of China's township elections. Each of these critical junctures appears to have pushed the development of China's township elections onto a new path, before reaching a seeming end in 2014.

Jiang Zemin's pledge at the 15th Party Congress in 1997 to 'expand grassroots democracy' and establish a 'sound system of democratic elections' for grassroots organs of power (Jiang 1997) became the starting point for six years of local experimentation with township elections. Several scholars have highlighted that China's first township head elections – those in Buyun and Dapeng – were initiated in direct response to Jiang's words (see Chapter 4).

6.1 First critical juncture: criticism of township head elections

According to Article 101 of China's constitution, 'local people's congresses at their respective levels elect and have the power to recall governors and deputy governors, or mayors and deputy mayors, or heads and deputy heads of counties, districts, townships and towns'. As expected, shortly after the Buyun and Dapeng elections the legal obstacles against holding direct elections for township heads became apparent. In 1999, an article in the state-owned newspaper Legal Daily titled 'Democracy Must Not Transcend the Law' criticized the Buyun election for violating the constitution (Zha 1999).

The Legal Daily article was followed by a year of seemingly contradictory signals from senior CCP leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji, suggesting some ambivalence in Beijing on how to deal with township elections (see Chapter 4). A verdict appears to have been reached in mid-2001, however, with the publication of Central Committee Document No. 12, which stated explicitly that direct elections of township governments do not conform with the PRC Constitution and the Organic Law on Local People's Congresses and Local Governments (2001). The issuance of the document would suggest that the leaders in favour of halting township elections had managed to get their will. The document did not bring direct township elections to a halt, but narrowed the boundaries for future experimentation. Apart from securing critical support from

the local people's congress, reformers had to carefully design their elections to ensure that they stayed within the parameters of the constitution.

Direct elections of township heads met with strong opposition right from the start. A comparison can be drawn with the institutionalization of village elections in the 1990s. As Saich and Yang (2003, 186) point out, whereas village elections filled a structural vacuum left behind since the dismantling of the agricultural communes, the same logic does not apply to townships, where opposition from vested interests is stronger. Without the necessary revisions of the constitution, support from the NPC will be crucial. However, this is not what we have seen so far – on the contrary, the people's congress system has been one of the strongest opponents to direct elections of township heads (Gilley 2013, 1065).

Moreover, direct elections for township heads threatened the dominant role of the party secretary in townships. The party feared that if government leaders were elected by voters through a bottom-up process, whereas party leaders were appointed by their superiors in a traditional top-down fashion, it would strengthen the legitimacy of government leaders while weakening the authority of the party secretary. This would challenge the role of the township party secretary as the 'leadership core' in townships (Chen and Huang 2012, 101). Indeed, this had already happened in some villages, where elected village heads had used their popular mandate to challenge the authority of the village party secretary (Li 2007, 108). The party did not want this problem raised to the township level.

Thus in 2001, Sichuan's provincial leadership – the province that had pioneered township elections in 1998 – called on its county party committees to stop implementing direct elections for township heads, instead encouraging them to focus on open recommendation, direct election of township party secretaries (Yin 2010, 24). Experimentation would continue in other provinces, however, with township head elections in Jiangsu in 2003 and in Yunnan in 2004.

6.2 Second critical juncture: a shift to intra-party democracy

By 2004 direct elections for township heads finally came to a halt in China. The central government had decided to shift the reform focus from township head elections (government side of the leadership) to the 'safer' intra-party elections of party committees.

Following the halt of township head elections, the promotion of intra-party democracy intensified. The idea was to first expand and improve the democratic rights of party members, which would later be extended to the rest of the population – 'using intra-party democracy to drive people's democracy' (以党内民主带动人民民主) and 'intra-party democracy is the lifeblood of the party' (党内民主是党的生命) became new party slogans (Hu 2009). This shift was reflected also in the choice of winners of awards for political innovations, which clearly came to favour intra-party elections over government elections – the 2004

election for party committees in Pingchang received an award, and the 2003 intra-party election in Xindu was shortlisted for an award.

The hope was that intra-party elections could avoid some of the problems that had been present in elections for township heads, such as opposition from the people's congress system and increased tensions between the party and the state (Chen and Huang 2012, 102). However, it soon became apparent that those problems were present also in intra-party elections. When party members elected a party committee in intra-party elections, in effect they also elected the township head, the deputy township head and other top government leaders. This is due to China's Leninist leadership structure, in which top party leaders concurrently hold important government posts. This left the subsequent people's congress election with little meaning, and became a reason for actors within the people's congress system to oppose also intra-party elections (ibid).

The most critical institutional conflict, however, was between limited bottom-up accountability and the CCP's core governing principle of 'the party manages the cadres', which places power over personnel appointments firmly in the hands of the party secretary at the next higher level (the *yibashou*). Traditionally, the county party secretary had more or less single-handedly appointed township heads (Fewsmith 2013, 72). This ensured the loyalty of township heads to the county party secretary who appointed them. Popularly elected party leaders, on the other hand, would be slightly more independent from the party secretary at the next higher level, and would sometimes balance their loyalty between the higher-level party committee and the local population. This was clearly not in the interest of the *yibashou*, who often got rid of elected township leaders by transferring them to other areas, sometimes in the middle of their tenures (Wang 2013a). However, moving a popularly elected cadre mid-tenure defeated the purpose of the election and ran counter to democratic principles (Zhong 2016). This left the *yibashou* in an awkward position – he had to deal with subordinates who were not only less loyal to him personally, but also more difficult to move.

These institutional conflicts caused the emergence of a number of phenomena. Firstly, while the central government repeatedly encouraged experimentation with intra-party elections, it did not provide the legislation needed to institutionalize the reforms. Hence reform initiators always ran a certain risk of violating election laws (Chen and Huang 2012, 104). To be willing to take such a risk there had to be the potential for considerable gain. For most of China's county party committees, however, experimenting with township elections was essentially a high-risk project with few benefits. Most counties instead preferred to focus on developing the economy, as this would more easily help them attain their own interests (Ma 2014, 73). As was explained in Chapter 3, political experimentation was attractive mainly in China's poorer regions,

where it served as an alternative pathway to promotions for officials who were unable to develop the local economy to a significant degree.

Secondly, intra-party elections lacked sustainability. Many provinces have implemented intra-party elections, but apart from Sichuan and Jiangsu elections have been sporadic and fragmentary. Moreover, party committees preferred to change trial sites for each election cycle, rarely holding two consecutive elections at a trial site (Chen and Huang 2012, 104).

Finally, several scholars have noted how democratic elections were tightly connected with the individual leader who launched them. Once that reform-minded cadre was promoted and transferred to another area the reforms s/he had launched tended to wither away (Fewsmith 2013, 101–102; Ren 2012, 52; Xiao 2008, 63).

6.3 Third critical juncture: the end of China's township elections

A third critical juncture, which marked the end of the era of township elections in China, took place after current CCP general secretary Xi Jinping ascended to power in 2012. This leadership transition has been characterized by a centralization of power. Examples of this are the formation of the 'leading small groups' (领导小组) under the CCP Central Committee, many of which are chaired by Xi Jinping personally[15]. Most significant, however, was the revisions to the 'Regulations on the Work of Selecting and Appointing Leading Party and Government Cadres' in 2014 – an event that appears to have gone largely unnoticed by scholars. A careful comparison with the previous version from 2002 reveals that the CCP is reducing the importance of democratic practices such as voting in the appointment of cadres, and that cadre management is becoming increasingly centralized. For example, in the 2014 version 'democratic recommendation' has gone from an 'important basis' (重要依据) to an 'important reference' (重要参考) in the appointment process (Zhu 2014). The document clearly seeks to reinforce top-down cadre management and strengthen the authority of higher-level party committees.

Discussion and analysis

What we can see from the rise and decline of township elections in China is that they were essentially a failed attempt by the central government to deal with a principal-agent problem. As was discussed in Chapter 3, the central government's main intention with township elections – be they for government or party leaders – was to restrict the power of the *yibashou* (county party secretary) in appointing township leaders. However, the *yibashou* struggled with his own agency problem

[15] For a discussion of the new Leading Small Groups, see Miller (2014).

– he, too, wanted to ensure compliance by his subordinates. Township elections hurt the interests of the *yibashou* by restricting his ability to appoint his own agents into positions of power, instead producing cadres who were slightly more independent and less loyal to him personally. Hence, we may speak of two conflicting principal-agent dilemmas – one between the central government and the *yibashou*, and one between the *yibashou* and his subordinates at the township level.

Despite all the problems it created there was a logic to the old system – the *yibashou* promotes his trusted clients into positions of power, who will then owe him a 'debt of gratitude', which ensures that they stay loyal and accountable to him personally. The client can also benefit from this relationship – as long as he pleases the cadre who appointed him he can expect steady promotions in the future. Hence, this relationship allows gains from exchanges between the client and the patron – loyalty in exchange for promotions – that help to sustain this institutional arrangement.

For these reasons, county and township leaders have in general been reluctant to experiment with township elections (as explained above, cadres in China's poorer regions were the exception). And the central government, concerned about these institutional conflicts, have acted indecisively, providing some encouragement for experimentation but not the legislation needed for institutionalization.

6.4 Conclusions

In this concluding chapter the findings from earlier sections were conceptualized and analysed from a macro-perspective. It found that there have been three critical junctures in the rise and decline of China's township elections. China's township elections failed because they created institutional conflicts that the central government found itself incapable of solving. The most significant conflict was that between limited downward accountability and top-down cadre management. Most importantly, township elections hurt the interests of the county party secretary (*yibashou*) by restricting his ability to establish patron-client relations with township leaders.

7. Conclusion: why the township elections were not institutionalized

The aim of this thesis is to answer the question: 'Why were China's experimental township elections not institutionalized?' Apart from bringing this body of research up to date, the main contribution of this thesis lies in its application of theory, which allowed for a more systematic analysis of the cases.

Each chapter of the main thesis (chapters 3–6) has focused on one aspect of the elections, with the aim of providing a more conclusive and comprehensive answer to the research question. Chapter 3 focused on the underlying motivations of the central government and the local initiator, finding that neither of them was driven by a 'democratic awareness' or a genuine desire for democratic progress – however defined. For the central government, the main intention of the elections was to resolve a principal-agent dilemma that threatened to undermine its legitimacy at the local level, while at the same time discovering talented cadres who enjoyed popular support. The local initiator was motivated primarily by a desire to gain credit for future promotions, although some of the elections also served the purpose of restoring the people's trust in the local leadership following a legitimacy crisis.

Chapter 4 discussed and analysed the respective roles of the central government and local cadres in the initiation of township elections. The central government took on a passive role in the initiation process, providing some encouragements and incentives for launching experimental elections, but not the legislation needed to institutionalize them. Encouraging statements from senior CCP leaders spurred ambitious and reform-minded cadres into launching experimental elections by reducing the perceived risk of engaging in such activities. However, the design of the incentives and the lack of concrete legislation seem to indicate that the CCP wanted to encourage its local agents to discover innovative solutions to problems in local governance, but not necessarily to institutionalize the reforms.

Chapter 5 looked at the organization and implementation of the township elections, paying special attention to the institutional clashes embedded in them. It found that all elections were carried out by the higher-level party committee, which maintained tight control throughout the entire process. Nevertheless, by allowing party members and sometimes also ordinary citizens to have a say in the appointment of cadres, the reformers pushed the boundaries of the CCP's core governing principle – 'the party manages the cadres' – which places power over personnel appointments firmly in the hands of the higher-level party committee.

The institutional clash between top-down cadre management and limited bottom-up accountability was further analysed in Chapter 6, which explored important critical junctures in the rise and decline of China's township elections. This chapter also brought the research up to date by discussing some recent

developments. It found that the township elections failed because they threatened traditional patron-client relations between *yibashous* and their subordinates at the township level – a theoretical observation that appears to have been overlooked in previous research. The elections produced cadres that were slightly more independent and less loyal to the *yibashou*, and in response the *yibashou* would sometimes try to remove elected officials by transferring them to other areas. However, transferring elected cadres mid-tenure defeated the purpose of the elections and was contrary to democratic principles. The fact that the CCP continued to encourage political innovation and experimentation without providing the legislation needed to institutionalize the reforms suggests that it had yet to find a solution to this problem. Indeed, this serves to further reinforce Fewsmith's argument that the CCP has encouraged institutional innovation while purposely avoiding institutionalization.

The lesson learned is that the central government may need to find a way to restrict the power of its local agents (the *yibashous*) without affecting their cliental relations. This raises some important questions – are patron-client ties a threat to China's current political system, or are they in fact what guarantees the sustainability of the system? Are the actors within the system loyal to the party, or is loyalty based primarily on patron-client relations? These are all intriguing questions that warrant further research.

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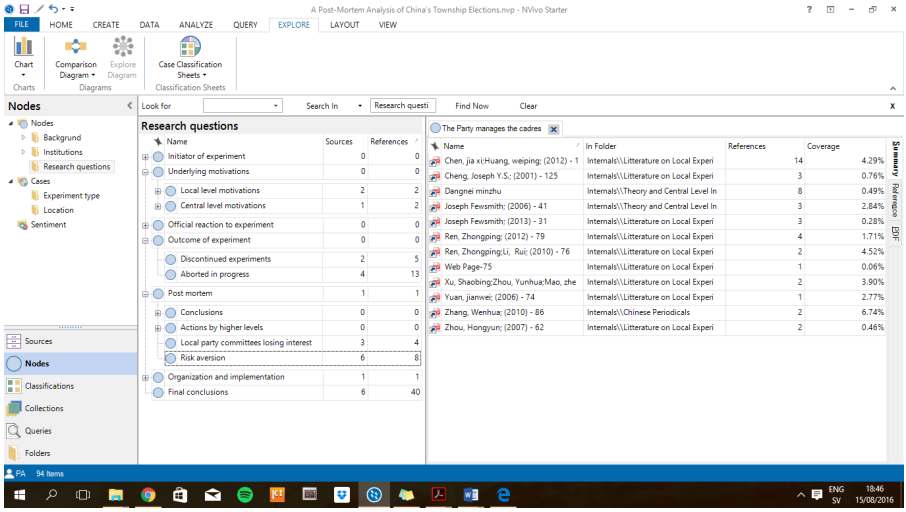
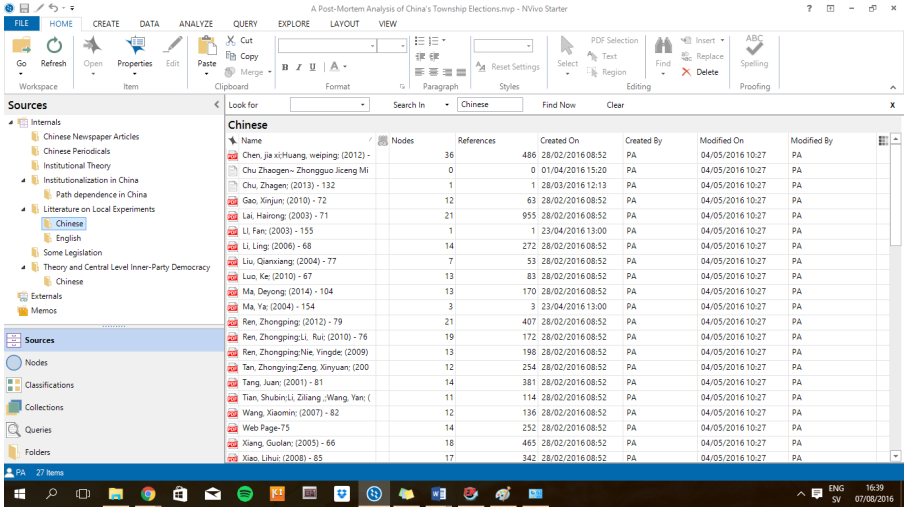
Appendices: output from QDA with NVivo

Appendix 1: nodes and cases



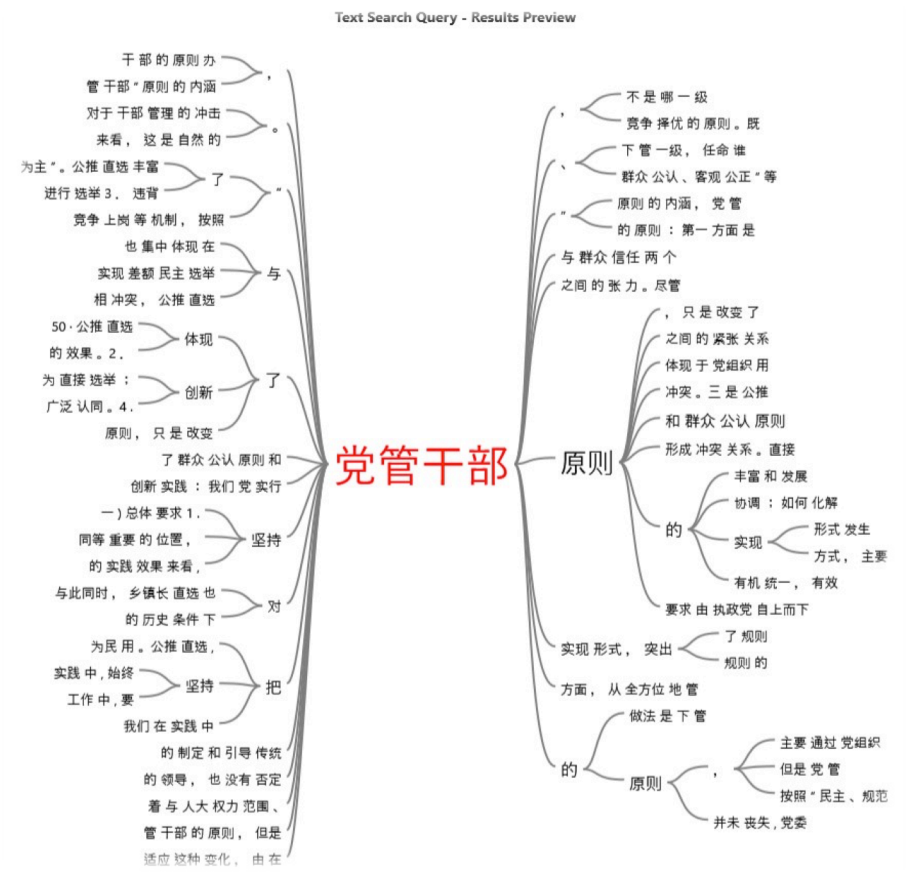
Appendix 2: categories of sources



Appendix 3: word cloud showing the most frequently used words in English-language sources on China's township elections (used for literature review)

Appendix 4: word cloud showing the most frequently used words in Chinese-language sources on China's township elections (used for literature review)

Appendix 5: word tree for the Chinese search term 党管干部 (the party manages the cadres) in Chinese-language sources on China's township elections



Appendix 6: explore diagram for the project node 'Promotion and recognition' (as a motivation for launching local political reforms)