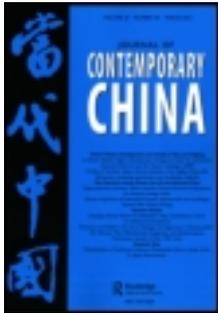


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Patterns of Authority and Governance in Rural China: who's in charge? Why?

XIN SUN, TRAVIS J. WARNER, DALI L. YANG and MINGXING LIU*

A 'dual-power structure' governs the Chinese countryside. Branch committees of the Chinese Communist Party, traditionally the centers of power in the villages, increasingly share their authority with elected villagers' committees. Seeking to illuminate the factors contributing to the division of authority between these 'two committees', we view Party branch secretaries and the chairs of villagers' committees as the agents of two distinct principals. Party branch secretaries tend to derive their authority from township authorities, while villagers' committee chairs derive theirs from their village electorates. We predict that the division of authority between the two committees varies with (a) the relative levels of activism exhibited by the principals; and (b) the perceived legitimacy of the agents, as determined by their method of s/election. Through analysis of a unique dataset, we test four hypotheses derived from this framework. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the 'exercise of power' in rural China and shed light on the dynamics of China's political evolution.

In one of his most provocative works, Robert A. Dahl famously asked: 'In a political system where nearly every adult may vote but where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, *who actually governs?*'¹ Dahl's question of 'Who Governs?' is particularly worth asking in rural China, where concerns about village governance have long troubled national leaders and villagers alike and have persisted throughout the post-Mao period.²

The configuration of power and authority in rural China has undergone significant transformation in recent decades. In the Mao era, secretaries of local Communist Party branches held sway in rural communities.³ Since the 1980s, decollectivization

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1. Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 1, emphasis added.

2. Dali L. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Famine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

3. For a nuanced interpretation of village politics, however, see Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); William L. Parish and Martin King Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

and the introduction of village elections have attenuated the Party's monopoly at the village level such that Party branches increasingly share their authority with elected villagers' committees.⁴ Results from our survey indicate that, while Party branches still wield ultimate authority in a plurality of sample villages (50%), elected villagers' committees (VCs) either share this authority or serve as the centers of power themselves in 32% of villages surveyed. A 'dual-power structure' (*eryuan quanli jiegou*) thus exists in today's Chinese countryside, making the Dahlist question all the more pertinent.⁵

There has been little systematic research on the authority relationship between the 'two committees' (*liangwei*).⁶ Nonetheless scholars have recognized this lacuna in the literature on rural Chinese politics, which has tended to focus on the causes and effects of village elections. O'Brien and Han, for example, applaud the spread of grassroots political reform, but advise against overstating its effects. They contend that while village elections have increased villagers' 'access to power', they have done little to alter the actual 'exercise of power' in villages where Party branches, township authorities or social forces (such as clans and even local mafias) continue to dominate. They and others argue persuasively that further research into the dynamics and effects of grassroots political reform in China requires a full accounting of authority relations at the village level.⁷

In this article, we expand upon Dahl's question and ask: who governs in rural China, and why? We seek to offer a comprehensive account of authority relations at the village level and illuminate the role of the Party branch, which has been understudied by Western scholars. We begin with an overview of the dual-power structure in rural China. We then present a theoretical framework for exploring factors behind the division of authority between Party branch and villagers' committee leaders. Drawing on a unique dataset from a nationwide survey, we describe the current state of Party branch secretary selections by providing a snapshot of the configuration of authority between Party branches and villagers' committees. Finally, we empirically test the hypotheses derived from our theoretical framework and discuss the implications of our findings.

Our findings point to the importance of political and institutional variables in defining the contours of the dual-power structure. For the purposes of theory building, we view Party branches and villagers' committees as the agents of two distinct principals; Party branches generally derive their authority from township governments, while villagers' committees tend to derive theirs from the village

4. For example, Thomas Bernstein, 'Village democracy and its limits', *ASIEN* 99, (2006), pp. 29–41; Zhenglin Guo and Thomas P. Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power: the relations between the village committees and the Party branches', *Journal of Contemporary China* 13(39), (2004), pp. 257–275; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, 'The struggle over village elections', in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds, *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 129–144; Jean C. Oi and Scott Rozelle, 'Elections and power: the locus of decision-making in Chinese villages', *China Quarterly* 162, (2000), pp. 513–539.

5. Zhenglin Guo, 'Zhongguo Nongcun Eryuan Quanli Jiegou Lun' ['On the binary structure of rural power of China'], *Guangxi Minzu Xueyuan Xuebao* (2001).

6. As we discuss below, a major exception is Oi and Rozelle, 'Elections and power'.

7. Bjorn Alpermann, 'The post-election administration of Chinese villages', *China Journal* 46, (2001), pp. 45–67; Bernstein, 'Village democracy and its limits'; Kevin J. O'Brien and Rongbin Han, 'Path to democracy? Assessing village elections in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 18(60), (2009), pp. 359–378.

residents who elect them.⁸ In general, we predict that the division of authority between the two committees varies with (a) the relative levels of activism exhibited by the principals; and (b) the perceived legitimacy of the agents, as determined by their method of selection. We hypothesize that Party branch secretaries are more likely to maintain their leading positions in village governance where: (1) township leaders depend more heavily on village authorities for fulfillment of mandatory policy goals; and (2) selection procedures for Party branch secretaries are more representative. The villagers' committee chair, on the other hand, is more likely to share power with the Party branch secretary, or even to exercise ultimate authority, in places where: (1) villagers display a high degree of activism, as measured by their use of collective petitions; and (2) election procedures for villagers' committee chairs are more representative.

From a broader comparative perspective, we believe our project may help advance the larger comparative literature on elections in authoritarian contexts. Existing works in this area have mainly focused on the impact of elections on the durability of authoritarian rule on the one hand, and on government accountability on the other.⁹ Taking a step back, our project asks: when is an elected body likely to gain genuine power in a non-democratic environment? And how do electoral institutions shape the resulting distribution of authority? We hope this endeavor may contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of authoritarian elections.

The dual-power structure in the Chinese countryside

In this section, we trace the development of the dual-power structure in rural China. We make the case for viewing Party branch secretaries and villagers' committee chairs as the agents of two distinct principals and outline the implications of this analytical framework for further research.

During the late Mao era, a 'unitary power structure' (*yi yuan quan li jie gou*) under the leadership of the Party was the norm in rural China. The Party branch secretary served as 'the undisputed boss of the village', with his power being reinforced by the 'winds of communism'.¹⁰ To be sure, Party branch secretaries were Janus-faced.¹¹ As village residents they were sympathetic to the concerns of their communities, but they 'were accountable primarily to leaders higher up in the chain. With their salaries paid by the local government, they were under pressure to heed orders from above rather than display loyalty to those below them'.¹² Village cadres oversaw the fulfillment of state grain quotas, the submission of taxes and levies, and the implementation of a wide variety of state policies. The Party's economic and political control at the village level may not have been monolithic—various forms of political

8. Guo and Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power'.

9. For a review of authoritarian elections, see Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, 'Elections under authoritarianism', *Annual Review of Political Science* 12(1), (2009), pp. 403–422.

10. Guo and Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power', p. 258. We recognize this is a stark statement. For more contextualized discussion of status and power issues, see Parish and Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China*, pp. 96–114.

11. Helen F. Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

12. Jude Howell, 'Prospects for village self-governance in China', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 25(3), (1998), p. 88.

participation remained possible—but it did go largely unchallenged throughout the Maoist period.¹³

The post-Mao decollectivization struck a major blow against the unitary authority structure in the villages. As household farming spread, village cadres lost much of their control over the distribution of goods and services in their communities.¹⁴ No rival organization yet existed to challenge the Party branch leadership, but their authority suffered as villagers began to view them as ‘unnecessary, even parasitic’.¹⁵ Some parts of the country were caught in a crisis of rural governance, with spates of violence between villagers and rural officials.¹⁶ Concerns about improving rural governance led Chinese policymakers, notably Peng Zhen, then the vice-chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, to draw on local experiments and make a provision for village self-governance in the 1982 Chinese Constitution (Article 111).¹⁷ In 1987, the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees was enacted, providing the legal basis for villagers’ committee members to be elected by village residents.

Most observers agree that China’s leaders viewed village self-governance in instrumental terms, as a mechanism to solidify political authority in the countryside rather than as a means to advance the inherent virtue of grassroots democracy.¹⁸ Yet, introducing village elections while maintaining the Party structure has produced a dual-power structure riven by conflicts. Indeed, arguments by village election advocates foreshadowed the divergence of authority between village Party branches and villagers’ committees. They claimed, for example, that elections would facilitate revenue collection ‘because elected cadres are more powerful than appointed ones’.¹⁹ In fact, village self-governance has empowered the villagers’ committee to become ‘a rival authority’ to Party branch leadership.²⁰

Leadership conflicts between the villagers’ committees and Party branches should not be perceived as a foregone conclusion. With congruent policy goals and clearly demarcated responsibilities, it is conceivable that the relationship between the two entities would settle into a cooperative equilibrium.²¹ Such has not been the case,

13. John P. Burns, *Political Participation in Rural China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Jean C. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989); Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

14. Howell, ‘Prospects for village self-governance in China’; David Zweig, *Freeing China’s Farmers* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997); Oi and Rozelle, ‘Elections and power’.

15. Kevin J. O’Brien, ‘Implementing political reform in China’s villages’, *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32, (1994), p. 35. See also, Tyrene White, ‘Reforming the countryside’, *Current History* 91(566), (1992), pp. 273–277.

16. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China*.

17. Daniel Kelliher, ‘The Chinese debate over village self-government’, *China Journal* 37, (1997), pp. 63–86; Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, ‘Accommodating “democracy” in a one-party state: introducing village elections in China’, *China Quarterly* 162, (2000), pp. 465–489.

18. See, for example, Howell, ‘Prospects for village self-governance in China’; Li and O’Brien, ‘The struggle over village elections’; O’Brien, ‘Implementing political reform in China’s villages’; O’Brien and Li, ‘Accommodating “democracy” in a one-party state’; Minxin Pei, ‘“Creeping democratization” in China’, *Journal of Democracy* 6(4), (1995), pp. 65–79.

19. Kelliher, ‘The Chinese debate over village self-government’, p. 73.

20. Guo and Bernstein, ‘The impact of elections on the village structure of power’, p. 261; Bernstein, ‘Village democracy and its limits’.

21. Our data indicate that party branch secretaries and villagers’ committee chairs share authority in 26% of sample villages. These data say nothing, however, about the ‘cooperative’ nature of these relationships, and in our fieldwork we have found that conflicts between the two committees are frequent.

however. First, the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees (1998; trial version 1987) does not clearly demarcate the roles of villagers' committee chairs and Party branch secretaries. It describes villagers' committees as mass organizations for self-government and refers to the Party branch as the 'leadership core' (*lingdao hexin*). Article 3 stipulates that the Party branches, 'in accordance with the Constitution and laws, support the villagers' committees and ensure that they carry out self-government activities and exercise their democratic rights directly'.²² As a result of these vague stipulations, each side has invoked the Organic Law to assert its authority, pitting the two committees against each other in many communities. A survey of 500 villages in Hunan Province found that 65% of Party branch secretaries viewed the branch's 'leadership core' role as granting it ultimate authority over village affairs; on the other hand, 95% of villagers' committee chairs claimed that Party branches lack the authority to intervene in the management of collective property.²³

Second, different selection procedures for the two committees have imbued them with distinct behavioral logics 'based on two different sources of authority'.²⁴ Regardless of how they are selected, Party branch secretaries belong to a Party hierarchy organized on the Leninist principle of democratic centralism. They may be voted on by Party members in the village (as we detail below) but organizationally they are directly subordinate to their superiors at the township level and tend to take their marching orders from above.²⁵ Elected villagers' committee chairs, in contrast, derive their authority from the consent of voting villagers and are therefore more likely than Party branch secretaries to heed villager demands. Moreover, the Organic Law (Article 4) specifies that the relationship between townships and villagers' committees is one of 'guidance' (*zhidao*) rather than 'leadership' (*lingdao*). Though the Organic Law requests the villagers' committee to help the town/township government with their work, it specifically prohibits the town/township governments from interfering in matters that 'lawfully fall within the scope of the villagers' self-government'.

The preceding discussion leads us further to our analytical framework for explaining the division of authority in village governance: we see the villagers' committee chair and the Party branch secretary as agents of two distinct principals—village residents and township officials, respectively.

Case studies by other scholars and our own fieldwork lend support to the observation that their two distinct sources of authority have contributed to tensions and conflicts between branch secretaries and VC chairs. Li and O'Brien report that elected villagers' committee chairs in some places, empowered by popular 'legitimacy', openly attempt to undermine Party branch secretaries. They quote a high-level official as saying: 'Challenging the Party secretary is one of the first things

22. See 'Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees of PRC' (1998). For a detailed examination of the rules adopted in provinces, see Bjorn Alpermann, 'Institutionalizing village governance in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 18(60), (2009), pp. 397–409.

23. Junji Mao and Yuanzhang Chen, 'Nongcun Liangwei Guanxi Zianzhuang ji Duice: dui Hunan 500 ge Cun de Diaocha' ['Exploring the two-committee relations in the countryside: a survey study of 500 villages in Hunan'], *Zhongguo Dangzheng Ganbu Luntan* [*Chinese Cadres Tribune*], (2001).

24. For more detailed discussion of the two committees' distinct source of authority, see Guo and Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power', p. 258.

25. Interview 1, Jilin Province, August 2007.

many village committee chairs do'.²⁶ Elsewhere Li notes that elections can bring villagers and villagers' committees together in resisting unlawful township policies.²⁷ Township officials confronted with such activism are likely to lean on the Party branch secretary for support.

Admittedly, this principal–agent framework represents an ideal type. Although the Party branches are responsible first and foremost to higher levels of the Party hierarchy, they are not deaf to villager demands. Conversely, villagers' committees are legally obligated to assist the township/town governments, even though their political survival hinges on maintaining the support of village constituents. Nonetheless, we suggest this principal–agent framework provides a useful starting point for explaining the patterns of authority in the Chinese countryside.

This principal–agent framework also helps elucidate a recent attempt to reunify the dual-power structure in China's villages. In 2002, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council jointly endorsed *yijiantiao* ('one shoulder carries'), or the practice of selecting a single individual to head both the villagers' committee and the village Party branch. Also known as 'concurrent office-holding', the practice has been promoted as a method for streamlining grassroots governance and reducing tensions between the Party branch secretary and the VC chair.²⁸ [We refer to this leadership form as *yijiantiao* to avoid any confusion between the terms 'concurrent office-holding' (one individual serving in both leadership positions) and 'joint leadership' (two individuals sharing leadership duties).] In places where *yijiantiao* holds sway, there is little question as to who serves as the village's top leader, or *yibashou*. Viewing the Party branch secretary and the VC chair as the agents of distinct principals adumbrates why *yijiantiao*—which may seem a step backwards to some Western observers, given the Party's increased role in village elections—would appear attractive to Chinese officials. *Yijiantiao* makes the village leader accountable to both township officials and village residents, as he must be approved by township leaders/Party branch members (for the position of Party branch secretary) and elected by villagers (for the position of VC chair). Our framework says little about why particular communities would adopt *yijiantiao*; the institution is often encouraged by higher-level officials.²⁹ Nonetheless, in the following empirical analysis, we attempt to identify some of the factors behind its occurrence.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

While the introduction of village elections has engendered a large and dynamic scholarly literature,³⁰ observers of grassroots politics in China have generally not

26. Li and O'Brien, 'The struggle over village elections', p. 142.

27. Lianjiang Li, 'Elections and popular resistance in rural China', *China Information* 15(2), (2001), pp. 1–19.

28. Guo and Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power'; O'Brien and Han, 'Path to democracy?'

29. Guo and Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power'; O'Brien and Han, 'Path to democracy?'. Our interviews also confirm that, in many villages, *yijiantiao* is in fact prescribed by upper-level governments rather than chosen by villagers themselves (interview 2, Jilin Province, August 2007; interview 32, Jiangsu Province, May 2008).

30. For example, Loren Brandt and Matthew Turner, 'The usefulness of imperfect elections: the case of village elections in rural China', *Economics & Politics* 19(3), (2007), pp. 453–480; John J. Kennedy, 'The face of "grassroots democracy" in rural China—real versus cosmetic elections', *Asian Survey* 42(3), (2002), pp. 456–482;

delved into local power relations in village politics.³¹ The major exception is Oi and Rozelle's article 'Elections and power', which concentrates on the causal effect of economic—not political and institutional—variables on the locus of village decision-making.³² They argue that villagers' committees tend to gain authority vis-à-vis Party branches when: (1) villagers have relatively few economic ties to the outside world; and (2) the local economy is primarily based on agriculture. Where these conditions exist and an 'exit' option is not viable, villagers are more likely to 'voice' their interest in village elections and help empower the leaders they elect.³³

In this section, we lay the theoretical groundwork for, and then articulate, the hypotheses guiding our empirical analysis. Our analytical framework acknowledges the importance of villager activism as noted by Oi and Rozelle but also recognizes that the activism of both villagers and township governments may not be independent of local economic conditions. Many petitions in fact arise from economic disputes. We thus explicitly theorize and measure the two kinds of activism.

Township and villager activism

Chinese analysts have emphasized how, in China's unitary and hierarchical political system, political pressures emanating from above have shaped the behavior of county and township officials and have induced them to escalate demands on their subordinates.³⁴ Because many of the policy-related tasks shouldered by township leaders (e.g., birth control and land acquisition) cannot be implemented or fulfilled without the cooperation of village leaders, this 'pressurized system' has caused township authorities to seek greater control over village affairs in spite of the Organic Law's provisions for village self-governance. Township officials generally prefer to

Footnote 30 continued

John J. Kennedy, Scott Rozelle and Yaojiang Shi, 'Elected leaders and collective land: farmers' evaluation of village leaders' performance in rural China', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 9(1), (2004), pp. 1–22; Pierre F. Landry, Deborah Davis and Shiru Wang, 'Elections in rural China: competition without parties', *Comparative Political Studies* 43(6), (2010), pp. 763–790; Lianjiang Li, 'The empowering effect of village elections in China', *Asian Survey* 43(4), (2003), pp. 648–662; Melanie Manion, 'The electoral connection in the Chinese countryside', *American Political Science Review* 90(4), (1996), pp. 736–748; Melanie Manion, 'Democracy, community, trust: the impact of elections in rural China', *Comparative Political Studies* 39(3), (2006), pp. 301–324; O'Brien, 'Implementing political reform in China's villages'; Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Villagers, elections, and citizenship in contemporary China', *Modern China* 27(4), (2001), pp. 407–435; O'Brien and Li, 'Accommodating "democracy" in a one-party state'; Jean C. Oi, 'Economic development, stability, and democratic village self-governance', in Maurice Brosseau, Suzanne Pepper and Shu-ki Tsang, eds, *China Review 1996* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1996); Robert Pastor and Qingshan Tan, 'The meaning of China's village elections', *China Quarterly* 162, (2000), pp. 490–512; Tianjian Shi, 'Economic development and village elections in rural China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 8 (22), (1999), pp. 425–442; Tianjian Shi, 'Village committee elections in China: institutionalist tactics for democracy', *World Politics* 51(3), (1999), pp. 385–412; Lily L. Tsai, 'Solidary groups, informal accountability, and local public goods provision in rural China', *American Political Science Review* 101(2), (2007), pp. 355–372.

31. Alpermann, 'The post-election administration of Chinese villages'; O'Brien and Han, 'Path to democracy?.'

32. Oi and Rozelle, 'Elections and power'.

33. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

34. Jingben Rong, *Cong Yalixing Tizhi xiang Minzhu Hezuo Tizhi de Zhuanbian: Xianxiang Liangji Zhengzhi Tizhi Gaige [The Transformation from the Pressure System to the Democratic Cooperative System: The Political Reform of County and Township Governments]* (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1998); Jingben Rong et al., *Zailun cong Yalixing Tizhi xiang Minzhu Hezuo Tizhi de Zhuanbian [The Transformation from the Pressure System to the Democratic Cooperative System: A Reexamination]* (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2001).

seek the assistance of the village Party branch secretary rather than the popularly elected VC chair, particularly when the tasks have the potential to conflict with the perceived interests of village residents.³⁵ Institutionally, the township Party committees enjoy a direct leadership relationship with the village Party branches and have the authority to dismiss and remove village Party branch secretaries. They can also more readily intervene in the village Party branch selection process. In contrast, the appointment and removal of VC chairs are subject to the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees, making it more difficult for township authorities to intervene. Not surprisingly, township officials adjudicating conflicts between the Party branch secretary and the VC chair tend to favor the Party branch secretary.³⁶ Based on the above analysis, we predict that the more township authorities depend on village leaders to fulfill policy tasks, the more likely they are to intervene in support of the village Party branch secretaries.

Hypothesis 1: The more township authorities depend on village cadre cooperation for the completion of policy tasks, the more pressure they will apply to village leaders (especially the Party branch secretaries), and the more village Party branch secretaries will tend to consolidate power vis-à-vis VC chairs.

Village residents are not opposed to all policies emanating from higher levels of government, but a variety of conflicts, especially those over arbitrary fees and low-ball compensation for land requisition, have received considerable attention in the media and in the scholarly literature.³⁷ Villagers engage in a broad spectrum of activities to resist the enormous pressure authorities can bring to bear. Some studies suggest that, empowered by their participation in elections, villagers now may pursue more active forms of political resistance that have reshaped grassroots politics in China.³⁸ Research indicates that semi-institutionalized channels, particularly collective petitions, can provide villagers with a powerful, if sometimes costly, means for resisting perceived cadre predation.³⁹

Collective petitions can shape the configuration of authority at the village level in two ways. First, given their closer relationship with township authorities, village Party branch secretaries lacking popular mandates are more likely to bear the brunt of mass dissatisfaction with unpopular government policies. Among the most common complaints are lack of transparency in village finances, misappropriation of collective property, and manipulation of village elections. Pressure created by collective petitions can put the village Party branch secretaries on the defensive and

35. Bernstein, 'Village democracy and its limits'; Guo and Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power'; Li and O'Brien, 'The struggle over village elections'. In some villages, township authorities have solidified the superior status of the Party branch secretaries by paying party branch officials full-time salaries, while villagers' committee members are compensated as if they were temporary employees.

36. Guo and Bernstein, 'The impact of elections on the village structure of power'; Guidi Chen and Chuntao Wu, *Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

37. Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, *Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China*; Chen and Wu, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?*

38. Li, 'The empowering effect of village elections in China'.

39. O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*.

cause them to give more room to elected villagers' committees.⁴⁰ Second, even when a Party branch secretary is not the object of a collective petition, his status as village leader nonetheless suffers, especially in the eyes of township leaders, and politically savvy VC chairs are known to take advantage of such dynamics. Our fieldwork in Jilin Province indicates that VC chairs are loath to deal with land disputes and other contentious situations in villages where Party branch secretaries have concentrated power; instead, they leave the trouble to the branch secretaries.⁴¹ When the disputes lead to collective petitions, the branch secretaries often find it expedient to cede some power to villagers' committee chairs to help mitigate tensions.

Therefore, where villagers are more active in defending their interests, particularly where they are inclined to make collective petitions, we expect authority to flow in the direction of VC chairs. This prediction is in line with Oi and Rozelle's argument that more active political participation on the part of villagers tends to empower elected officials. However, unlike these authors, we expect to find that such participation has an effect on village authority relations independent of a village's socioeconomic conditions.

Hypothesis 2: The greater the level of village activism, as measured by collective petitions, the more power in the village will tend to be dispersed, or will flow toward villagers' committee chairs.

Perceived legitimacy of villagers' committees and Party branches

As noted earlier, the introduction of competitive elections has resulted in a bifurcation of village authority. Some elected village leaders have claimed themselves more legitimate leaders than Party branch secretaries and have consequently demanded more decision-making power.⁴² Clearly, elections have empowered VC chairs to compete for village leadership.

Elections have not only empowered elected leaders, but have also increased ordinary villagers' civic consciousness and their willingness to participate in politics.⁴³ As a result, villagers may become more active in pursuing self-governance, and more willing to fight for genuine power. Yet all these impacts presuppose that elections themselves are sufficiently meaningful, at least from a procedural perspective. It is worth noting that the quality of elections varies greatly across both villages and election years. There exist wide differences in registration rules, voter turnout, candidate nomination, number of candidates, ballot secrecy, and the use of

40. Zhenglin Guo, 'Cunmin Xuanjuhou de Dangzhibu: Kunhuo, Douzheng yu Quanli Geju' ['Party branches after village elections: confusion, conflict and power structure'], in Lianjiang Li, ed., *Cunweihui Xuanju Guancha [Observation on Village Elections]* (Tianjin: Tianjin People Press, 2002).

41. Interview 14, Jilin Province, September 2007.

42. Guo, 'Zhongguo Nongcun Eryuan Quanli Jiegou Lun' ['On the binary structure of rural power of China']; Zhenglin Guo, 'Guowai xuezheshiye zhong de cunmin xuanju yu zhongguo minzhu fazhan' ['Village elections and democratic development in the perspective of foreign scholars'], *Zhongguo Nongcun Guancha [Observation on China's Villages]*, 5 (2003).

43. O'Brien, 'Villagers, elections, and citizenship in contemporary China'; Li, 'The empowering effect of village elections in China'; Fubing Su, Ran Tao, Xin Sun and Mingxing Liu, 'Clans, electoral procedures and voter turnout: evidence from villagers' committee elections in transitional China', *Political Studies* 59(2), (2011), pp. 432–457; Qingshan Tan and Xin Qiushui, 'Village election and governance: do villagers care?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 16(53), (2007), pp. 581–599.

proxies and ‘roving ballot boxes’. We also find wide variation in the electoral practices of our sample villages. Poorly organized, fraudulent elections are unlikely to help elected villagers’ committees consolidate power.

While it is well documented that elections have opened up opportunities for villagers to challenge the Party secretaries’ domination in village affairs, it is an empirical question whether more representative electoral procedures enhance the authority of villagers’ committees and, as a result, improve their ‘exercise of power’.⁴⁴ Hence we posit:

Hypothesis 3: The more representative election methods for villagers’ committees are, the more power will tend to flow toward villagers’ committees (and chairs).

Making the selection methods for Party branches more democratic could likewise help to remedy the democratic deficit of the Party branch secretaries. Chinese observers of village politics suggest that intra-Party democratic reform may help solve village conflicts by empowering Party branch secretaries.⁴⁵ It is not clear whether tensions between Party branch secretaries and VC chairs would ease if both were chosen more democratically. However, it is likely that in villages where Party members directly elect the Party branch secretary, or where the villagers approve a list of potential candidates for the village Party branch committee (the so-called ‘two-ballot system’), the Party branch secretary would gain popular legitimacy; he might thus be able to more easily consolidate his authority over the VC chair. In his detailed treatment of the ‘two-ballot system’, Li contends that ‘a strong showing in a vote of confidence can help legitimize [Party branch secretaries’] authority and pre-empt challenges from the VC chair, who is often their main political rival’.⁴⁶ Our fieldwork also reveals that Party branch secretaries benefit from more representative selection methods. Officials in two villages reported that appointed Party branch secretaries don’t have as much ‘prestige’ (*weixin*) as those directly selected by village Party members.⁴⁷ Our final hypothesis thus relates to how intra-Party democratic reforms may empower Party branch secretaries in the struggle for power in the villages.

Hypothesis 4: The more representative selection methods are for Party branch secretaries, the more power will tend to flow toward Party branch secretaries.

44. Melanie Manion, ‘How to assess village elections in China’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 18(60), (2009), pp. 379–383; Gunter Schubert, ‘Studying “democratic” governance in contemporary China: looking at the village is not enough’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 18(60), (2009), pp. 385–390.

45. See Guo, ‘Zhongguo Nongcun Eryuan Quanli Jiegou Lun’ [‘On the binary structure of rural power of China’]; Lianjiang Li, ‘The two-ballot system in Shanxi Province: subjecting village party secretaries to a popular vote’, *China Journal* 42, (1999), pp. 103–118.

46. Li and O’Brien, ‘The struggle over village elections’, p. 118.

47. Interviews 8 and 14, Jilin Province, September 2007.

Data and method of analysis

In the rest of this article we utilize data from a nationwide survey conducted in 2005 to test the above hypotheses.⁴⁸ Excluding non-responding townships and villages, the final sample consisted of 58 townships and 116 villages in six provinces (Fujian, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shaanxi and Sichuan). Due to the incidence of non-responding villages and missing responses on particular survey items, the number of observations in our data analysis ranges from 108 to 116 villages. Top leaders of the townships where these sample villages are located were also interviewed.

Besides the survey data and analysis, we also draw on our own fieldwork in formulating our hypotheses and addressing various issues related to causation. From January 2007 to May 2008, follow-up interviews were conducted with leaders and residents of 46 sample villages. We visited each sample province (except for Sichuan) and averaged three interviewees per village. We sought not only to clarify ambiguities that had arisen in the earlier survey process, but also to add substantive qualitative detail to our quantitative data through structured but open-ended interviews. In all, we interviewed 18 VC chairs, 15 Party branch secretaries, three concurrent office-holders (*yijiantiao*), 33 other village leaders, 12 former cadres, two religious figures and 43 ordinary villagers.

The configuration of village power: branch secretaries vs. committee chairs

Table 1 provides a tally of the division of authority in the sample villages. This snapshot of the ‘exercise of power’ will be the dependent variable in our regression analysis. In determining the configuration of power in sample villages, we consider two factors: the authority to allocate collective financial resources, and the responsibility for day-to-day administrative work.⁴⁹ In nearly half (50%) of the 115 responding villages, the Party branch secretary played the primary leadership role. In contrast, VC chairs led in only 6% of the sample villages. Authority was shared between the two in 26% of the sample while *yijiantiao* prevailed in the remaining 18%.

These results show that few VC chairs have displaced the Party branch secretaries as top village leaders. Yet they do suggest a more variegated landscape of authority: the Party branches no longer hold a monopoly and power-sharing is fairly common in each of the sample provinces. Importantly, Party branch leadership occurs in a majority of villages in all three interior provinces in the sample (Jilin, Shaanxi and

48. More detailed information about our sampling method can be found in the online supplement to this article.

49. We code the dependent variable based on responses to the following question: ‘In your village, how are public affairs tasks divided between the two committees?’. The possible responses were:

- (1) All tasks are completed together.
- (2) The Party branch secretary controls the purse while the VC chair is responsible for administrative work.
- (3) The villagers’ committee makes key decisions and the Party branch plays a supporting role.
- (4) The Party branch makes key decisions and the villagers’ committee is responsible for implementation.
- (5) One individual is both VC chair and Party branch secretary (*yijiantiao*).
- (6) The villagers’ committee controls the purse while the Party branch is responsible for administrative work.

We code responses 2 and 4 as Party branch leadership. Responses 3 and 6 are coded as villagers’ committee leadership, which we combine with response 1, or joint leadership in our analysis below. Response 5 represents *yijiantiao*. For a more detailed justification of why we code responses 2 and 6 as Party branch and villagers’ committee leadership, respectively, please see the online supplement to this article.

Table 1. Village division of authority

Division of authority	Number and proportion of sample villages						
	Country	Jiangsu	Sichuan	Shaanxi	Jilin	Hebei	Fujian
Party branch leadership	57 (50%)	9 (42%)	11 (55%)	9 (56%)	14 (66%)	7 (37%)	7 (35%)
Villagers' committee leadership	7 (6%)	0 (0%)	2 (10%)	0 (0%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	2 (10%)
Joint leadership	30 (26%)	2 (11%)	5 (25%)	7 (44%)	2 (10%)	5 (26%)	9 (45%)
<i>Yijiantiao</i>	21 (18%)	8 (47%)	2 (10%)	0 (0%)	3 (14%)	6 (32%)	2 (10%)
Total number in sample	115	19	20	16	21	19	20

Sichuan) but none of the three coastal provinces (Fujian, Hebei and Jiangsu). Jiangsu Province stands out for the high percentage (47%) of villages with *yijiantiao*.

Current state of Party branch secretary s/elections

In our theoretical framework, the selection method for Party branch secretaries is an important independent variable for analyzing the configuration of village power. In the current literature on grassroots politics, information on the selection of Party branch secretaries has largely been anecdotal. Here our survey data offer a systematic portrayal of the current state of Party branch selection methods, which, in the absence of strict stipulations, are more diverse in form than those used for electing VC members and chairs. They can roughly be sorted into two categories: *competitive elections* and *non-direct-election methods*.

Competitive elections (cha'e zhixuan) for village Party branch secretaries take two primary forms, neither of which is as 'competitive' as the elections for VC chairs. The electorate in question is limited to Party members in the village. In the first form, village Party members directly vote on candidates they have nominated. In the second, village Party members vote on the Party branch committee members first and then elect the Party branch secretary from the slate of elected branch members.

Non-direct-election methods include the direct appointment of Party branch secretaries by the township Party committee; the selection and appointment of Party branch secretaries by the township leadership from among elected Party branch committee members; the nomination (by the township) of a sole candidate for the approval of village Party members; and the election of secretaries by Party branch committee members, who are directly elected by Party members at first. These methods, except for the last type, have traditionally allowed township leaders to get directly or indirectly involved in choosing Party branch secretaries. In the case of the last type, the township is not necessarily involved in choosing the Party branch committee membership, and in many cases the election of the branch committee membership is competitive. Our fieldwork revealed that in villages where the first-

stage election of Party branch committee members was competitive, interviewees often perceived this process to be fair and transparent.⁵⁰ Therefore, even some of the indirect methods for choosing the village Party branch secretary can be fairly democratic.

Table 2 shows the diversity of nomination and selection processes for village Party branch committee members and secretaries. Note especially the variety of nomination processes for candidates in direct and competitive elections for village Party branch secretaries. It is evident that the selection of the village Party branch secretaries in China has largely moved away from direct appointment by the township. In 2004, the last round of Party branch secretary selection at the time of our survey, higher-level township Party committees directly appointed branch secretaries in 12% of the sample villages.⁵¹ In contrast, in more than half of the sample villages (54%), village Party members voted in competitive elections for the Party branch secretary. In another 26% of the villages, competitively s/elected Party branch committee members were empowered to choose one of their own as the branch secretary. In an indication of continuing democratization in the countryside, the percentage of villages in which Party members directly voted in competitive elections for the Party branch secretary rose from 14 to 21% between 2001 and 2004.⁵²

To facilitate our data analysis, we categorize the s/election of Party branch secretaries into two groups based on whether township Party committees explicitly interfered in the nomination and election of village Party branch secretaries.⁵³ Our field interviews indicate that villagers tend to view township-appointed Party branch secretaries as less 'legitimate' than those selected by village Party members.⁵⁴ As shown in Table 3, there is substantial variation in township interference across the provinces. In Fujian and Jilin, only 5% of the sample villages reported 'interference', but the percentages in the two western provinces (Shaanxi and Sichuan) as well as collectivist Jiangsu were much higher. Altogether 25% of the villages experienced such interference.

Econometric model specification

Our dependent variable is the division of authority in the village. We code as 0 those villages in which the Party branch assumes the primary leadership role ('Party branch leadership' hereafter). We code as 1 those villages in which villagers' committees either assume this role or share leadership responsibilities with Party branches ('villagers' committee leadership' hereafter). We combine these categories because both represent a shift away from the traditional status quo of Party branch dominance.

50. Interviews 113 and 114, Fujian Province, April 2008; interview 16, Jilin Province, September 2007.

51. The results from an earlier round of the survey, conducted in 2001, were similar. Because the changes between the two surveys were minor (except as noted below about direct nominations), we have chosen not to include the earlier results.

52. The figure for 2001 comes from a previous survey round.

53. We admit township Party committees may have more subtle ways of influencing the s/election process for village Party secretaries but believe our emphasis on explicit interference is adequate for the purposes of this study.

54. Interview 6, Jilin Province, August 2007; interview 14, Jilin Province, September 2007; interview 25, Jiangsu Province, May 2008.

Table 2. Method of selecting village party branch secretary (2004; $N = 116$)

Party secretary selection method	Proportion of sample villages (%)	
	2004	
Competitive direct elections (with more candidates than posts)	54	
<i>in which:</i>		
Party members elect from nominated candidates for secretary	21	
Higher-level committee nominates		5
Party members nominate		12
Party members and villager representatives nominate		4
Nomination of branch members first, Party members then elect branch committee members, and then elect secretary from among committee members	33	
Higher-level Party committee nominates		1
Party members nominate		23
Party members and village representatives nominate		9
Non-direct election methods	46	
<i>in which:</i>		
Higher-level Party committee directly appoints	12	
Higher-level Party committee appoints secretary from among branch committee members	4	
Higher-level Party committee nominates sole candidate; Party members approve	1	
Selection of branch committee membership first; then branch committee members choose one of its members as secretary	29	
Uncompetitive election for branch committee membership		3
Competitive election for branch committee membership		26

Villages exhibiting *yijiantiao*, where a single individual occupies the offices of villagers' committee chairman and Party branch secretary, are coded as 2.

We estimate the factors contributing to the division of authority using a multinomial logit regression model. The model takes a particular value of the dependent variable as the baseline category—in this case, 0, representing Party branch leadership. For each of the other two values, 1 (villagers' committee leadership) and 2 (*yijiantiao*), the beta coefficient β represents the change in the odds of being in the category in question as opposed to the baseline category led by a one-unit increase in the independent variable. In regards to category 1, for example, a positive coefficient on our measure of villager activism would indicate that increasing villager activism increases the likelihood of observing villagers' committee leadership, as opposed to Party branch leadership.

We identify four key independent variables to test our four main hypotheses. Our measure of the variable *township dependence on villages* is a composite indicator of

Table 3. The presence or absence of higher-level interference in Party branch secretary selection

Method of selecting branch secretary	Number and proportion of sample villages						
	Total	Jiangsu	Sichuan	Shaanxi	Jilin	Hebei	Fujian
Interference present	29 (25%)	6 (32%)	8 (40%)	6 (38%)	1 (5%)	7 (35%)	1 (5%)
Interference absent	87 (75%)	13 (68%)	12 (60%)	10 (62%)	20 (95%)	13 (65%)	19 (95%)
Number of villages	116	19	20	16	21	20	20

the degree to which township authorities depend on village leaders for the completion of five key government tasks (related to economic growth, revenue, family planning, social order and welfare).⁵⁵ Township leaders were asked how much they needed the cooperation of village leaders in the completion of these tasks (they could report needing, sometimes needing or not needing). Our indicator, which we refer to as *township dependence on villages*, is a composite score of these responses.⁵⁶

Our second hypothesis deals with collective petitions. We use the number of participants in the village's largest collective petition over a three-year period as a proxy for the strength of villager activism. Our fieldwork indicates that collective petitions involving only a few people are relatively common in our sample villages. Since such petitions often meet resistance from local officials, we view villages with large-scale collective petitions as exhibiting stronger collective activism. Our second explanatory variable is thus *maximum number of village collective petition participants*.

Our third hypothesis posits a relationship between the perceived 'legitimacy' of villagers' committee members and their likelihood of acquiring a primary leadership role in the village. We measure this 'legitimacy' using the democratic quality of village elections. We would ideally like to measure the extent to which township governments interfere in local elections, but our current data include no such indicators. Instead, we use the presence or absence of 'open sea nominations' (*haixuan timing*) as a proxy measure for the democratic quality of villagers' committee elections. Villages with this type of nomination process allow any person or group in the village to nominate a candidate for VC chair. Kennedy has found that *open sea nominations*, which increase the uncertainty of the electoral process, tend to increase villager satisfaction with village elections.⁵⁷ We use a binary variable to indicate whether the sample village adopted open sea nomination in the latest villagers' committee election.

55. This list is a summary of the choices selected by township officials in our survey.

56. We assign weights of 1, 0.5 and 0, respectively, to the three choices for each task and then create a weighted average of the responses for the five tasks. We then multiplied the resulting proportion to obtain a percentage—our measure of the pressure applied by townships to village leaders.

57. Kennedy, 'The face of "grassroots democracy" in rural China'.

Our fourth hypothesis predicts that Party branch secretaries selected in a more representative manner will be able to more easily consolidate authority over villagers' committee chairs. Despite the various forms Party branch secretary elections can take, we believe that the foremost determinant of the procedural integrity of such elections is the existence or absence of interference by upper level authorities. As described earlier, township leaders can play a major role in selecting the village Party branch secretary by nominating candidates, appointing the secretary from village Party committee members, or even dispatching township cadres to take up the Party branch secretary post. Blatant interference tends to generate villager discontent with the village Party branch elections and with the appointee.⁵⁸ In contrast, villagers tend to view Party branch secretaries as more 'legitimate' when township officials refrain from interfering in the process of their selection.⁵⁹ We construct a dummy variable, *Party branch selection method*, which takes on the value of 0 in the absence of township interference and the value 1 in the presence of such interference, to capture the dynamic described here.

It is reasonable to expect that the personal characteristics of village leaders are also important determinants of the division of authority between Party branch secretaries and VC chairs. Case studies indicate that if an elected VC chair has a relatively strong personality, rich life experience or a long history of public service, and is thus recognized as a 'capable individual' (*nengren*), he has a good chance of displacing the Party branch secretary as the top village leader. Conversely, if the Party branch secretary possesses more of these qualities than the VC chair, he stands a greater chance of being in charge of village affairs than would otherwise be the case. In our analysis, we control for differences in age, levels of education and migrant work experience of the VC chairs and Party branch secretaries. We also control for township government experience; those who have served at the township level may enjoy closer personal ties with higher-level cadres and be more resourceful. Specifically, for age and education, we code the observation as 1 if the VC chair is more senior in age/more educated than the Party branch secretary, as -1 if the Party branch secretary is more senior in age/more educated, and as 0 if the two have exactly the same age/education attainment. For migrant work and township government experience, we code the observation as 1 if the village's VC chair had migrant/township experience while the Party branch secretary did not, as -1 if the secretary has such experience while the VC chair didn't. We code the observations as 0 if the two had equal experience. We expect that between the two, the one who is senior in age, better educated and has more experience as a migrant worker or township functionary is more likely to be the top leader.

We also control for a number of factors representing the socioeconomic characteristics of sample villages. As mentioned earlier, Oi and Rozelle found that, in relatively developed villages, authority tends to flow to Party branch secretaries; village heads, on the other hand, are more likely to consolidate authority in less-developed villages.⁶⁰ We control for the level of economic development by including

58. Interview 14, Jilin Province, September 2007; interview 25, Jiangsu Province, May 2008.

59. Interview 6, Jilin Province, August 2007.

60. Oi and Rozelle, 'Elections and power'.

the estimated per capita income level of village residents. We also control for village population size.

The preceding descriptive analysis reveals significant province-level variation in the division of authority between the Party branch secretary and VC chair and in the selection methods for village Party branch secretaries. Provincial governments and Party committees are likely to influence the configuration of authority in the villages under their jurisdiction through provincial policies. Our model includes provincial dummy variables to control for unobserved province-related factors. Descriptive statistics for the main variables used in our analyses appear in Table 4.⁶¹

Results and discussion

Table 5 presents the regression results, using Party branch leadership as the baseline category of the dependent variable. We report our results in Table 5 both without (columns 1 and 2) and with (columns 3 and 4) dummy variables controlling for fixed effects at the provincial level. In this section, we consider only the effects of our independent variables on the likelihood that villagers' committees will gain authority vis-à-vis Party branches (columns 1 and 3). Our discussion of *yijiantiao* (columns 2 and 4), which largely falls outside of our theoretical framework, is presented further below.

The main results, presented in columns 1 and 3, support three of our four hypotheses. First, 'township dependence' has a negative effect on the chances of VC chairs assuming primary leadership. This indicates that Party branch secretaries are more likely to maintain their predominant positions in villages where township authorities are more dependent on village leaders for the implementation of policy measures. This finding is significant at the 5% level regardless of whether we include province dummy variables. Villager activism also appears to influence the division of authority in the villages. Our results show that VC chairs are more likely to assume leadership roles in villages with larger-scale collective petitions.⁶² The impact is statistically significant at the 5% level (10% in the presence of provincial dummy variables). Thus, collective petitions by rural residents significantly shape the 'exercise of power' in Chinese villages.

As we mentioned earlier, some scholars have posited that elections confer legitimacy on, and thus empower, elected officials. Our data reveal that township interference in Party branch secretary selection significantly undermines the authority of Party branch secretaries, allowing VC chairs to gain more power. From another perspective, it appears that freer elections for village Party branch secretaries would tend to help them consolidate power. Yet we do not find that 'open sea nominations' for VC chairs are statistically significant in our analyses. On the surface, this finding is somewhat surprising and seems to contravene the generally held view that village

61. Astute readers will no doubt wonder whether we have adequately controlled for the possibility of an endogenous relationship between our variables of interest. We address these concerns in the online supplement to this article. While we cannot rule out the possibility of endogeneity or reverse causation, we are confident that we offer a plausible explanation for the village-level division of authority.

62. Because there were large differences in the size of collected petitions, we also ran a regression excluding possible outliers to ensure the robustness of our conclusions. The results indicate that our findings are very robust.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for primary variables

Variable	Number of observations	Unit	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Division of authority	115	–	0.70	0.77	0	2
Township dependence on village cadres	115	%	83.2	16.8	40	100
Party branch selection method	116	–	0.25	0.43	0	1
Open sea nomination	115		0.38	0.49	0	1
Max number of collective petition participants	111	People	39	191	0	2,000
Average income	115	<i>Yuan</i>	2,881	1,550	300	6,596
Total population	115	People	1,592	979	161	4,975
Personal characteristic: age	108	–	0.046	0.89	–1	1
Personal characteristic: education level	108	–	–0.083	0.70	–1	1
Personal characteristic: official experience	108	–	0	0.58	–1	1
Personal characteristic: migrant worker experience	108	–	0.01	0.42	–1	1

elections empower villagers' committees (and their chairs). However, we are hesitant to make such an inference here and believe instead that our result is inconclusive because the variable 'open sea nomination' represents at best an imperfect indicator of the quality of village elections.⁶³ Judging from our finding regarding township interference in Party branch selections, what legitimates village leaders in the eyes of village residents is the perception that they are relatively independent from township authorities—that their selection is not determined by what has been called 'the most hated level of government'.⁶⁴ As Bernstein has noted, 'villagers want leaders who can defend their interests against the demands of higher authorities, especially those of townships'.⁶⁵ Seen from this perspective, it seems plausible that, as was the case with the selection of Party branch secretaries, VC chairs also gain authority in places where their elections are free of township government interference. The presence or absence of 'open sea nomination' does not measure this type of independence; elections can still be subject to substantial influence from township governments even when nomination procedures are relatively open. Thus, further research into the configuration of village power calls for greater attention to the role played by township authorities in village elections.

Among the variables measuring the personal characteristics of village leaders, real world experiences, such as previous stints in public service or as a migrant laborer, have a significant impact on the division of authority. VC chairs are more likely to

63. Given our suspicion, we ran the regression without the sea election variable to ensure that it was not biasing our results. Our findings for the other key variables remained virtually the same.

64. Lianjiang Li, 'The politics of introducing direct township elections in China', *China Quarterly* 171, (2002), p. 706.

65. Bernstein, 'Village democracy and its limits'.

Table 5. Factors influencing the division of village authority (Party branch leadership as base outcome)

	VC or joint leadership (1)	<i>Yijiantiao</i> (2)	VC or joint leadership (3)	<i>Yijiantiao</i> (4)
Township dependence on villages (0–100)	– 0.04 (2.18)**	– 0.04 (2.02)**	– 0.05 (2.54)**	– 0.03 (1.26)
Party branch selection method (interference = 1, no interference = 0)	1.28 (2.02)**	– 0.51 (0.63)	1.60 (2.22)**	– 1.30 (1.45)
Max number of collective petition participants (number of people)	0.02 (2.05)**	0.01 (1.24)	0.02 (1.74)*	0.01 (1.46)
Open sea nomination (present = 1, not present = 0)	– 0.42 (0.74)	1.32 (2.19)**	– 0.15 (0.19)	1.64 (1.85)*
Average income (<i>thousand yuan</i>)	– 0.42 (1.92)*	0.13 (0.58)	– 0.19 (0.69)	0.10 (0.37)
Total population (<i>thousand people</i>)	0.14 (0.41)	0.10 (0.29)	0.18 (0.49)	0.13 (0.35)
Personal characteristic: age	0.57 (1.86)*	0.06 (0.15)	0.54 (1.60)	0.15 (0.35)
Personal characteristic: education level	– 0.82 (2.03)**	0.34 (0.67)	– 0.78 (1.96)**	0.39 (0.68)
Personal characteristic: official experience	0.82 (1.85)*	0.45 (0.8)	0.67 (1.44)	0.41 (0.65)
Personal characteristic: migrant worker experience	1.53 (2.09)**	0.29 (0.35)	1.55 (2.09)**	0.03 (0.04)
Constant	2.78 (1.58)	0.59 (0.33)	1.18 (0.56)	– 0.01 (0.00)
Provincial dummy variables	No		Yes	
Obs.	108		108	
Pseudo R^2	0.218		0.286	

Notes: *, ** and *** represent significance levels of 10%, 5% and 1%, respectively. Z statistics are reported in parentheses.

become the top village leaders if they possess more of these types of experience than the Party branch secretaries. Age also matters. Older VC chairs appear to be able to better gain authority vis-à-vis younger Party branch secretaries. Education also affects authority, but the direction of such effects seems to be non-intuitive. One possible explanation might be related to seniority. Older but more experienced officials tend to have less education in general, thus it leads to a negative correlation between education and division of authority. In line with Oi and Rozelle's claim that village Party branches are more likely to consolidate authority in more highly developed villages, we find that village per capita income is negatively related to the incidence of VC chair leadership. This association may be explained by province-level factors, however, as it becomes statistically insignificant when province dummies are included.⁶⁶

What can we make of yijiantiao (concurrent office-holding)?

Our theoretical framework may help explain why local authorities would promote *yijiantiao*—i.e., to make village cadres accountable to both township governments and village residents, thereby internalizing the conflicts between the Party branch secretary and the VC chair. However, it does little to explain the adoption of this institution in any particular village. In practice, higher-level authorities, notably in Jiangsu Province, have actively encouraged the adoption of *yijiantiao* in villages; their commitment to the institution has subsequently been embraced by county and township officials. Consequently, the village-level variables included in our analysis may not be able to capture the promotion of *yijiantiao* by township/county/provincial authorities, though this concern is somewhat mitigated by the inclusion of provincial dummy variables in our regression.

As we report above, the practice of *yijiantiao* is found in 18% of our sample villages; we would thus be remiss if we failed to identify some of the factors behind the incidence of this phenomenon.⁶⁷ The second and fourth columns of Table 5 present the influence of our independent variables on the relative odds of *yijiantiao* versus party leadership, without and with provincial dummy variables, respectively. Township dependence on villages constitutes one important factor that reduces the incidence of *yijiantiao* (in the absence of province dummies). This finding may suggest that when township authorities need village cadres to help them accomplish policy tasks from above, they prefer working with powerful village Party secretaries rather than those who serve as VC and Party heads simultaneously. This result can be well explained using the theoretical framework we proposed above. Compared with Party branch secretaries, concurrent office-holders boast more electoral legitimacy but are also more accountable to villagers' demands, making them less pliable to township demands. Township governments that are highly dependent on assistance from village leaders may thus be less willing to promote *yijiantiao*.

66. The analysis here is based on the statistical significance of our regression coefficients. For a substantive interpretation of our regression results, please refer to the online version of this paper at www.daliyang.org.

67. *Yijiantiao* has become more widespread in the years since our survey. According to some estimates, as many as 60–70% of villages are currently characterized by this leadership form. Zhao Shukai, *Nongmin de zhengzhi* [*Peasant Politics*] (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2011). The causes and effects of concurrent office-holding should provide a fruitful vein for future research.

Another independent variable that achieves statistical significance is ‘open sea’ nomination. Whereas we are skeptical about using this variable as the indicator of election quality, the result here suggests that more competitive VC elections are associated with a higher likelihood of *yijiantiao*. One interpretation of this result is that winners of VC elections who are Party members, and have gone through the more competitive ‘open sea’ nomination process, enjoy greater electoral legitimacy and are more likely to succeed in also becoming Party branch secretary.

Conclusion

A quiet but profound transformation of ‘the exercise of power’ is occurring in China’s villages. Township authorities no longer appoint the top leaders in most Chinese villages. Elected leaders increasingly exercise real authority, whether as powerful village committee chairmen or as concurrent office-holders. Furthermore, increasing numbers of Party branch secretaries are subject to more representative Party-member elections. Whereas the picture of national politics in China has been one of resilient authoritarianism, the findings and our ongoing fieldwork on local political experimentation reinforce the pictures of dynamic grassroots political reform that other studies have offered.⁶⁸

Our analyses shed new light on the question: who governs, and why? Descriptively, the survey data reveal a variegated landscape in the configuration of village power in China. As of the survey time, Party branch secretaries occupy the pinnacle of village authority in 50% of sample villages. VC chairs dominate or share power with the Party branch secretaries in 32% of sample villages. We also provide what is to our knowledge the first systematic description of the forms of village Party branch secretary selection. It is worth noting that the methods used for the selection of the Party branch secretaries have become more representative (for Party members). Generally, villagers as a whole still do not have the opportunity to vote on Party branch secretaries (except when the secretaries also run for the position of VC chair), but there has been substantial movement away from the old method of direct appointment by township Party committees.

We also provide an analysis of the division of authority between the village Party branch secretary and the VC chair by viewing the two actors as the agents of higher-level Party committees and villagers, respectively. Two major findings emerge from our empirical analysis. First, the Party branch secretary or the VC chair gains authority vis-à-vis the other when its principal exhibits a higher level of activism. We find that village collective petitions—an indicator of villager activism—are positively associated with the empowerment of VC chairs. Meanwhile, township dependence on village leaders appears to lead to the consolidation of authority by the village Party branch secretaries. Second, we find that reduced township interference in the selection of the village Party branch secretary and thus greater village freedom

68. On resilience, see Andrew J. Nathan, ‘Authoritarian resilience’, *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), (2003), pp. 6–17; Dali L. Yang, ‘State capacity on the rebound’, *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), (2003), pp. 43–50; and Dali L. Yang, *Remaking the Chinese Leviathan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). For an overview of grassroots reforms, see Elizabeth J. Perry and Merle Goldman, *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

in conducting the s/election appear to help Party branches to consolidate their authority. However, while it is widely believed that village elections have empowered villagers' committees, we do not find evidence that open sea nominations are positively associated with villagers' committee or joint leadership. On reflection, 'open sea elections' may represent an inadequate proxy measure for village-level democracy; future measures of village election quality should perhaps focus on the presence or absence of township interference in the electoral process for villagers' committee chairs.

Finally, we note that recent tax and fee reforms, especially the abolition of the state agricultural tax, and the introduction of social policy measures to improve the welfare of rural residents have substantially altered the relationship between township authorities and village leaders. Since the central government abolished the agricultural tax in 2006, township governments have become less dependent on village cadres and now instead provide various subsidies and benefits to rural residents. Recent studies indicate that, as a result, local authorities have received a substantial boost to their popularity among rural residents.⁶⁹ It is a fascinating question how this national turn away from urban bias may affect the configuration of power in China's villages.

69. Ethan Michelson, 'Public goods and state-society relations: an impact study of China's rural stimulus', in Dali L. Yang, ed., *The Global Recession and China's Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).