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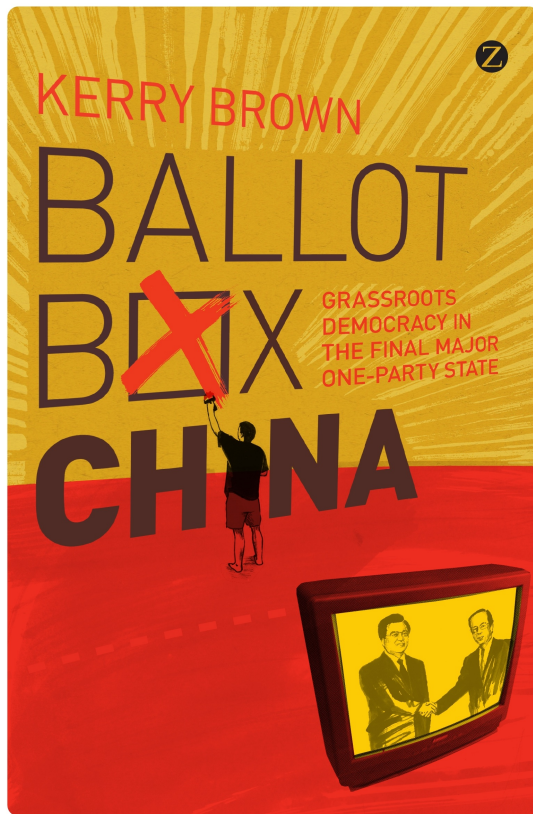
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When Things Go Wrong: Village Elections as a Process Creating Contention

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By Kerry Brown



ASIAN ARGUMENTS

At the heart of the big story of Chinese rural democracy is the many millions of smaller stories of those who have been touched by this immense process. Before looking at village elections, therefore, here is one single story, of one man, who tried to stand in a village election, and of what happened to him. It is concrete experiences of engaging in the whole process of rural democracy like this that give village democracy its tremendous significance and interest. This section is based on papers obtained in Beijing in August 2009.

Mr Wang Jinsheng is 55, a native of a rural area of the impoverished western province of Shanxi. Shanxi may well be the home of the Terracotta Warriors, near to the main city of Xian, and boasts a splendid history dating back thousands of years, culminating in its time as the capital of what was then China during the mighty Tang dynasty from the seventh to the tenth centuries. But it now lives as a place with its best days behind it. While the rest of China hurtles ahead, towards some kind of über-modernity, Shanxi suffers from a degraded environment, lack of infrastructure, a state owned enterprise sector dominated by heavy industry, and, in some of the more isolated areas, deep and entrenched poverty. Even so, those in its mining sector, because of China's burgeoning energy needs and reliance on coal, which the region is well endowed with, have in the last few years made a killing. A poor province therefore has some of the wealthiest individuals in the country.

Mr Wang is one of these, albeit on a small scale. According to a local newspaper report, Mr Wang had been a 'common mechanic' before taking the opportunity to set up his own business

in the 1980s, at the start of the great economic liberalisation process. He is now an energy and mining company president, but someone who has not forgotten his poor background, and who decided, fatefully, to put himself forward in his local village election. It was a decision that was to change his life. His case is typical of many of those new elites, especially business people, who are starting to want something more than the right just to make a lot of money.

Mr Wang had been highly supportive of charities and educational projects in the village in which he chose to stand. According to a reporter from the Xinhua news agency, the official news outlet of the Chinese government, he 'had never forgotten his fellow villagers.' At the end of every year, he had donated foodstuffs, and given everyone over 60 years old, the disabled, and the poor, 100 Chinese yuan (US\$16.4). 'Mr Wang, a rich man who does not consider himself rich, wants to let everyone grow rich with him.'

He had, however, started to harbour ambitions in a more political direction. A great part of this had been due to the current Village Committee leader, Mr Zhao. Mr Zhao had, according to testimony put together by Mr Wang after the events that subsequently unfolded, used his position to abuse the one significant power that now still remains in elected village committee heads – that of being able to disburse land and to approve building and commercial projects.

From 2000 to 2008, Mr Zhao had allowed, and been personally involved in, a number of construction projects. This was expressly against the national and local regulations which have forbade the conversion of agricultural land for residential or commercial use. With only 7% of its land arable, and with a massive population to support, it had become a national priority to preserve what agriculturally usable land is left. But rapid, and massive, urbanisation, and the huge boom in the price of housing, has been too great a temptation and in many places, building sites continue to encroach relentlessly onto rice fields and growing plots. 'The land' as Mr Wang's main deposition to the authorities states at its start, 'is a farmer's destiny. If they lose their land, they lose the basic means of materially making a living.'

In 2006, Mr Zhao with a local construction company, had signed a contract with a 50 year lease, worth 1 million yuan (approximately US\$100,000). Five years earlier, he had been the middleman in a development through the construction of a driving school centre, again on a 50 year lease, selling parts of the site for commercial property. The same year, on what had been till then agricultural land, he had allowed a hospital a 50 years lease to build shops, a factory, and other commercial property. In 2004, 12.4 mu (a mu is equivalent to about 0.66 hectares) had been transferred to some associates to be used for, among other things, an entertainment centre. An hotel had been built on other land at a cost of over 1 million yuan. In all, over the seven year period, 120 mu (about 85 hectares) had been used illegally. The net result had been to make many people in the village poor, with only 200 yuan (US\$29.3) a year compensation. '80% of the villages' Wang's deposition states, 'have no growing land.' While Zhao's relatives, and associates, had grown rich, natives of the area where he had been elected to represent had become increasingly more impoverished.

For this reason, Wang, as a businessman, had decided to stand against Zhao in the elections for village committee head scheduled for December 2008 as a non party candidate. As part of Wang's election campaign, he had prepared a 'notice' issued to all residents eligible to vote in the village. 'I am Wang Jinsheng,' it states, 'the President of Jinxing Company, originally a factory head... I have come to take part in the competition for the head of the Village Committee.' His appeal continues: 'If this village needs me, I will work for the villagers. If the villagers want me, I will sort things out realistically for them. If everyone wants me, I will openly speak to people. I have promised myself, I will be honest to people, I will work hard, and I will be self-disciplined.' Part of Wang's appeal was that he was not just another cadre, but a businessman who had made his own way for 20 years. It was on the basis of this that he had felt it legitimate to stand.

The chronology of what followed in December 2008 is a classic example of how elections have become the arena for play offs of power between new and old forces at the most basic level of governance in modern China. Wang had made his intentions clear about standing for

the Village Committee position in November. On the 26th November, however, a notice had been posted by the local election committee, stating that there were two 'strict rules' which had to be adhered to by all those who intended to be candidates. One was that they had to be Communist Party members. The other was that they could not be more than 48 years old. In fact, national and local laws allow all those between the ages of 18 and 60, regardless of gender, ethnicity, party membership, or status, to stand in village elections. Such a regulation put out by a local government was purely because 'the locals do not understand the real regulations, and were cheated.' Part of Wang's motives in his campaign therefore were to ensure that people knew that the regulations issued by the local committee were simply not true.

So angry had Wang been, in fact, that on the 30th November he had set up a meeting with 17 other villagers to discuss how to respond to this issuing of new, irregular rules. On the 1st December, Wang had gone to the local village committee offices to discuss things with Zhao. 'When Zhao left the room,' Wang writes, 'I flipped over a note he had left on the office table. On this he had written "If Wang Jinsheng really wants to stand and be a leader, then let the police, the law, and the local public security bureau collect information and evidence about him, and think of a way of detaining him."' After seeing this, Wang had said, 'I do nothing illegal, I am disciplined, and abide by the law, so what can I be got for?'

The next day, with these 17, Wang had set off to report the matter to the next level of government, at the township close by. But the encounter proved to be unpleasant. 'Are you Wang Jinsheng?', a township official called Hou had started, 'I wanted to find you anyway. That notice you put around yesterday was illegal.' Wang had replied, 'Mr Hou, I didn't put up anything illegal, it was a notice about my election promises.' This had angered Hou, who slammed his hand on the table. 'I say it was illegal, so it's illegal. I am warning you, you need to have responsibility for the illegal things you are doing.' When Wang tried to intercede, Hou continued, 'I'm telling you. You are not to take part in the election. You have to withdraw. Even if you get a thousand votes, you're not going to be the candidate. And even if Zhao gets one vote, he is still going to succeed.' 'I want to take part in the election because the local people support me,' Wang said. 'You're not qualified,' snapped Hou, 'you're not a party member and you're over 48.' When Wang demanded to see where these two laws were written down, another man with Hou had produced a local book of regulations stating adamantly they were in that. But when Wang asked to see them on the page with his own eyes, Hou had barked at him 'I can't waste more of my time talking to you.' The next day local officials had come to place pressure on Wang's younger brother, telling him to ask Wang to see reason and withdraw. They even offered inducements in the form of unspecified compensation.

Because Wang had shown no signs of withdrawing from the election, things escalated on the 12th December with a summons to the local procurator, Mr Zhang. 'Old Wang', Zhang had said, 'you've been a business person for years. I've heard about all the good things you've done for villagers. They really support you. But you can't be the village committee head. You can carry on doing really important, useful things. But not as an elected official. You're not a Communist Party member, and you're too old. Withdraw now. It is the best thing to do.' As they talked, the head of the local Public Security Bureau (PSB) 'happened to come by and invited me to talk with him at his offices.' Growing ominously closer to the security agents and their world, Wang maintained his line: 'I can't withdraw from the competition. Villagers have great expectations towards me. If I withdraw now, what will they think? How will they look at me?' The PSB boss put it crisply: 'Don't you get it? Mr Zhao is the right man for this job. You're not competing with Mr Zhao. You're competing with the local government. The local district government belongs to the Party. We have to listen to them.'

Taken to another security officer's room, Wang was presented with a piece of paper, on which was written the accusation that he had 'destroyed the process of the elections and committed fraud.' Stunned, Wang asked on what grounds this had been made, and why he should sign something that he did not believe was true. 'It is because you improperly took 17 villagers to a dinner to gain their votes', he was told. This was construed as election rigging. Magically, at

this point his nemesis Zhao appeared, and told him that 'this matter is out of both of our hands.'

Already late at night, Wang simply left, tired with the business. On the 13th December, Wang took all the materials he had gathered about the irregular rules, and the property dealings of Zhao, to the provincial government. They simply told him that they would instruct the local township to investigate matters, and get back to him. A meeting held as follow up by the township in the 15th December issued a notice saying that 'Wang Jinsheng is not an eligible candidate, not because of his qualifications, but because he tried to buy votes by entertaining voters.'

On the 16th December, Wang was detained. The second day he was in the local prison, the first leg of the election was held. Of 1,359 who cast their votes, he received 623, Zhao 531. Because no one received more than a half of the total votes cast, a second leg was held on the 18th December. This time, of 1,367 people, Wang received 724 votes, and Zhao 517. This was despite Wang's claim that Zhao had invited more than 30 friends and relatives, who he had generously entertained while in the village, to take part in this. Despite the clear mandate, on the 23rd December, Zhao was reappointed as the Village Committee leader. The next day, a group of villages went to protest the vote at the provincial government offices. More than ten of these returned to the local town government the next day, but were promptly detained along with Wang.

After ten days in prison, Wang was let out on the 26th. 'In all, it had been 30 days since I had been involved in this election. It had been 30 days of a nightmare.' 'I realised' he went on, 'that whatever the situation, if you wanted to be the village committee head, it had nothing to do with elections. It was all stitched up beforehand.' The words of a town official came back to him: 'Our township government is on the first level of government. It isn't something that elections in a village can sort out. If we let people take part, then that's our business. We are the ones who words matter.'

Wang had gathered 700 signatures to support his original candidacy. But even on his own admission, he had been up against a powerful coalition of vested interests, from township officials, to security officers, to other businesses. Six months later, in the middle of 2009, he was pursuing his case at the central government level. But his lawyer admitted that 'this kind of case is too common. If you don't push it immediately, then it gets lost in thousands of others like it.'

Wang's case illustrates well where village elections put the old Party against emerging new figures. Wang had given generously, and contributed a large amount to the earthquake victims in the Yunnan earthquake in early 2008. He had used the local, and national, press in his campaign. In many areas, people like Wang achieve a breakthrough. In others, it ends up with much worse violence. Some parts of Shanxi have not been able to hold elections for over a decade because they end in chaos and out and out fights. For each of China's more than 600,000 villages, the case is different. What Wang's story does show is a society where new sources of wealth, and a new classes, are sometimes coming up against the Party, and pushing their demands more assertively. Someone as persistent as Mr Wang won't be easy to keep down for long. And he is just one of many thousands. Their contribution to China's future could be more significant than people currently believe.

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