



Carter Center Delegation Report: Village Elections in China and Agreement on Cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, People's Republic of China

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Executive Summary

At the invitation of the government of the People's Republic of China, The Carter Center sent a delegation to observe village elections in China from March 2-15, 1998. In addition to evaluating nine village elections in Jilin and Liaoning provinces, the nine-person team, led by Carter Center Fellow Dr. Robert Pastor, reached a long-term agreement with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) on election-related projects.

The delegation found that the elections provided the voters a reasonably free choice, but there were some procedural problems in several of the villages. The Ministry, provincial, and county civil affairs officials understand clearly the significance of a secret, individual ballot, but some villagers did not. There were several other electoral problems related to proxy voting and "roving ballot boxes" described in this report, together with recommendations on ways to improve the process. With a fourth round of village elections underway in China, it appears that there has been progress, but still there is a distance to travel before the elections could be considered technically competent and in conformity with the Organic Law on Village Elections. Most impressive for the delegation was the openness and candor of Ministry, provincial, and county officials in acknowledging problems and seeking advice on ways to resolve them.

The long-term agreement on cooperation between the Ministry of Civil Affairs and The Carter Center, dated March 14, 1998, is centered around a plan to establish a national election data collection system, which will permit the Ministry to learn election results and assess the electoral process in villages throughout the country in a rapid and transparent manner. The Carter Center will seek funds to help install the software in three pilot provinces and the Ministry and eventually to connect all the provinces. In addition, the project includes exchanges and visits for training on election management and data collection. Carter Center teams will also help formulate uniform election procedures and work with MCA to develop civic education programs in China. The Carter Center will send observation and advisory missions to China and organize groups of Chinese officials to observe local, state, and national elections in the United States.

Background and Terms of Reference

The significance of the current economic and political transition in China is self-evident. Since it embarked on an ambitious modernization process in 1979, China has sustained high levels of growth, causing dramatic changes in the economic and political lives of the country. With this rapid economic development has come the challenge of evolving a popular, stable, and flexible political framework that would allow the country to channel both the new social forces that have emerged as a result of the growth and the frustrations that could occur in the event of an economic downturn. China's success in meeting these challenges will have the greatest significance not only for the people of China, but also for others far beyond her borders.

One important aspect of China's complex transition is the introduction of direct elections at the village level, beginning with the passage of the Organic Law of the Village Committees in 1987. This law, in part a response to the need to find more responsive structures for governance at the village level, introduced a secret ballot and multiple candidates for village committee elections. For the first time in China's recent history, the key democratic elements of secrecy, choice, and competition were introduced into the selection of village leadership. (It needs to be noted, however, that the village party secretary continues to have considerable responsibilities and power in the villages, though he is not elected by the villagers.) Since 1987, four rounds of village elections have been held. A number of international groups have observed some of these elections in China's approximately 930,000 villages and agree that they are an important and sincere initiative and, as such, deserve to be taken seriously and supported.

Currently, village elections are being implemented in an uneven manner. Some villages are conducting technically sound elections while others are having less success. Observers agree, however, that with each round, the process is improving. However, the challenges facing the Ministry of Civil Affairs, charged with implementing the Organic Law, remain formidable. The Ministry needs to train properly village election officials and educate villagers on electoral procedures, even as they experiment with the best procedures. Neither the training nor the standardization of procedures can be achieved, however, without accurate information on all village elections. But collecting the data on election results and methods is a daunting task.

This is the Carter Center's fourth mission to observe village elections in China and to advise the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) on means to improve the process of democracy at the village level. In March 1997, at the invitation of the MCA, Dr. Robert Pastor, Carter Center Fellow and director of the Center's China Project, led a seven-person delegation to observe village elections in Fujian and Hebei provinces. This followed a trip in July 1996 by Dr. Pastor that included interviews with election officials in Shandong province. One year later July, 1997 former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, former Senator Sam Nunn, Stanford University Professor Dr. Michel Oksenberg, and Dr. Pastor visited Beijing for talks with President Jiang Zemin and other high-level officials.

At a luncheon hosted by U.S. Ambassador James Sasser, President Carter and Mr. Duoji Cairang, the Minister of Civil Affairs, discussed means to improve village elections and further develop cooperation between the Ministry and The Carter Center. In a subsequent meeting, Vice Minister Xu Ruixin and Dr. Pastor negotiated areas of mutual cooperation that became the basis for an exchange of letters between President Carter and Minister Cairang, agreeing to a seven-point understanding (see Appendix 2). These areas of agreement can be grouped under three headings:

- Development of a national computer system for collecting data and results on village elections;
- Training of Chinese election officials in the U.S. and China by the Carter Center and high-level visits by Ministry officials to the United States;
- Advice from the Carter Center on developing uniform election procedures; producing civic education programs; and publicizing election information on village elections in China.

The Carter Center's March, 1998 mission sought, therefore, not only to assess additional village elections but also to develop long-term cooperation with MCA on these three key areas. The delegation came to Beijing with a series of concrete proposals that had been developed following intensive consultations with experts on China, elections, democratization, and electoral information systems. The expertise of the team members mirrored the range of discussions that were held. In addition to Dr. Pastor, an international authority on elections, the delegation included Dr. Larry Diamond, Senior Research Fellow at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University, a leading scholar of democratic development; Dr. Jean Oi, an Associate Professor, also at Stanford University, and an authority on Chinese Villages; Dr. Qingshan Tan, Associate Professor at Cleveland State University, a China scholar and member of three previous Carter Center delegations to observe village elections; Dr. Yawei Liu, Assistant Professor at Dekalb College, a China scholar and leader of the information systems design team; and Mr. Tom Crick, an elections expert from the Carter Center.

Discussions were also held with the Intercontinental Communications Center with a view to helping publicize village elections both for training purposes within China and to make them better known to a wider outside audience. To this end, the delegation also included Mr. Jeffrey Aaronson, a world-renowned photographer, and Ms. Sharon Baker and Mr. Pascal Dieckmann, an Emmy award-winning producer and cinematographer with Teleduction. In contrast to previous experience, Tom Friedman of the New York Times, Jimmy Florcruz of Time Magazine, Natalie Liu of CBS News, and members of the Chinese press were all permitted to accompany the delegation and observe the elections.

Observations—Jilin and Liaoning Provinces

After meetings in Beijing on March 4 and 5 (see schedule, Appendix 3), the Carter Center delegation traveled to Jilin Province, where it directly observed elections in three villages and interviewed officials in two other villages where elections had just concluded. In these five villages, the residents gathered together at a schoolyard before the voting began. In the three villages we observed, the assembly was seated and waiting when we arrived at 9 a.m. After the national anthem was played, Chairman of the Village Election Committee, who was also Communist Party secretary, introduced the two candidates for chairman of the village committee, who gave brief speeches describing who they were, what they had done, and what they would do for the village if they were elected chairman. Each of the candidates in the Jilin villages also pledged to accept the election results and continue working for the good of the village if defeated. The voting rules and procedures were then described. Next, the ballot boxes were opened and viewed by the villagers to demonstrate that they were empty. They were then locked or sealed.

The villagers were organized in groups to vote in different school rooms, lining up in groups of twenty or more while others patiently remained seated. Outside each voting room was a team of three election workers who took the white voter certificate from each voter and handed the voter a red ballot in return. They also checked that the marked ballots were properly deposited in the ballot box. Although each village had a list of all registered voters, this list was not systematically consulted (if at all) in the elections we observed in Jilin and Liaoning. Upon receiving the ballot, the voter entered the room, marked the ballot on a school desk, and then came back out to deposit the ballot in a red ballot box, in full view of the community, whereupon another voter entered the room.

The first village election we observed – Gujialingzi (in Nong An County, Jilin Province), on Saturday, March 7 -- was distinct in that each school room accommodated five voters simultaneously voting at separate desks dispersed throughout the room. Although voters did not appear anxious or uncomfortable with this process of having five voters to a room, the lack of any barriers around the different desks fell short of standard procedures for ensuring the secrecy of the ballot. Indeed, often five voters would go into the room and all mark their ballots at the same desk in clear view of each other. In the two other villages we observed in Jilin, Heng Dao and Houshi, both in Dong Feng County, villagers voted individually in a room and curtains precluded people from watching them vote.

The counting of votes proceeded similarly in each of the three Jilin villages. When voting was completed, the ballot boxes were emptied, and a team of election workers sorted the ballots and identified invalid ballots. When there was a question about the validity of a ballot, the chairman of the village election committee was asked to render a judgment. The ballots were then counted and the total number was recorded. Then the votes on each individual ballot were read out, one by one, and the results were tallied (both for village chairman and committee member) on a blackboard. This counting was done in several locations – in the open air in Dong Feng County, and in two classrooms in Gujialingzi, until all the votes had been recorded. The results from the several counting groups were then added, and the winners were publicly announced and gave a brief acceptance speech, after which the public dispersed and the voters returned to their homes.

Each of the Jilin villages we observed had distinctive features. Gujialingzi had a very competitive election between an incumbent, who was a member of the Communist Party, and a challenger who was not. Each gave a spirited, effective speech that was well received by the audience. The incumbent had a huge advantage over the challenger in the number of nominations he had received during the “haixuan”? process (1,104 to 184), but this margin was narrowed considerably in the election result (864 to 655). On balance, the people seemed satisfied with the economic progress the village had made in the last three years, though they also appeared moved by the speech of the challenger. The election in Gujialingzi was well organized, and the voting procedures were explained at the outset. Aside from the multiple voters per room, our other principal concern was the high number of proxy votes (374 out of 1572 total votes – more than 20 percent). The count was slow (as it was divided into only two groups) but was notable for its transparency and methodical character. Each schoolroom where ballots were counted was fully occupied with monitors from the village representative assembly. The delegation was particularly moved by the sight of villagers pressing up against the windows and doorways of the counting rooms trying to catch a glimpse of how the candidates were doing. We were

and doorways of the counting rooms trying to catch a glimpse of how the candidates were doing. We were also impressed with the disciplined, patient, and serious manner in which the voters conducted themselves, from the opening proceedings through the process of voting, counting, and tabulating, which took several hours in total. In this village and the other two we observed in Jilin, voters seemed to take great pride in exercising their civic right to choose their village officials.

The delegation made an unscheduled stop in Kai An village of Nong An county. The election was over. The incumbent was a party member as was his challenger, who withdrew only three days before the election in order to contest for the village committee. The challenger said that he preferred to run for a seat on the committee. Significantly, competition for village chairman did not end with the challenger's late withdrawal. More than 300 voters (out of some 2000 registered in the village) cast votes for a write-in candidate, and even though he was the only candidate on the ballot still contesting for chairman, the incumbent chairman received 250 fewer votes than each of two highest vote-getters for the village committee. We were unable to determine if the write-in candidate had organized a campaign, but we took this substantial write-in vote as a sign of democratic vigor even in a situation where electoral choice had seemed to narrow. The voters used the "write-in", as it is intended, to expand their domain of choice.

In Kai An, as in the other villages in Jilin on which we gathered data, there were five candidates for four positions on the village committee, and there was no position of vice-chairman. The 2000 voters in Kai An took four hours to vote in five voting rooms (from 6 to 10 a.m.) and the vote count took another five hours. As in other villages, this village reported 100 percent voter turnout. Although we were not able to determine the number of proxy votes, we suspected they may (as in Gujialingzi) have contributed in no small measure to the "perfect" voter turnout. In a home visited by a member of the delegation a woman said only one member of the family voted, but he cast proxy votes for other members.

The election we observed in Heng Dao (Dong Feng County) on Sunday, March 8 featured outstanding speeches by both the incumbent and the challenger. Although the incumbent won by a margin of approximately two to one, the election again seemed quite competitive. Immediately after the Haixuan nomination process, the challenger, who, like the incumbent, was a member of the party, was given an opportunity to address the villagers. The elections in Dong Feng County differed from Gujialingzi in that only one person at a time was allowed to enter the voting room, reasonably ensuring secrecy. Again the voting proceeded in an orderly fashion and the count was also well organized. Shuang Quan village in Dong Feng, where we also observed, was notable in that the challenger ran a respectable race (winning about a quarter of the vote) even though the incumbent chairman had received almost all the nominations in the "haixuan". The runner-up in that nomination process (who received 35 nominations to 444 for the incumbent) chose to run for the village committee instead, leaving the third-place nominee (with only ten votes) to contest for village chair. A young man in his early 30s, he stressed to us the value of the experience of having contested for village chair for the first time, which he felt would make him a stronger candidate in the future.

In Hou Shi (Dong Feng county) the "haixuan" again produced a very lopsided distribution of nominations, but in the end the challenger got a quarter of the vote. This was a smaller village (710 registered voters), and with six voting rooms the entire election took only three hours: 90 minutes for voting and 90 minutes for counting.

Overall, the vote and counting in Jilin seemed reasonably secret and transparent. The ideal procedure to assure ballot secrecy would be to have a screen to shield the voter from view, but the procedure of one voter per schoolroom seemed adequate. The process of counting votes in public, as in Heng Dao, seemed to elicit considerable interest, attention, and confidence on the part of the entire village. However, the high winds in Heng Dao did present the danger that, in the process of counting outdoors, a stack of ballots might have blown away at some point. Vote counting went faster where the ballots were divided up among several counting teams, rather than just two. The two principal problems we observed in Jilin were the apparent high number of proxy votes and the lack of a thorough mechanism to prevent multiple voting.

On March 11 and 12 the delegation observed village elections in the Jin Zhou District of Dalian City, Liaoning Province. These elections differed considerably from those we had observed in Jilin. The villages were much more prosperous and developed, and the homes were in much closer proximity to one another. Indeed, they no longer seemed "villages" in the conventional sense but appeared to be communities in transition to a quasi-urban or suburban character.

Most significant were two features that appeared to make the elections less competitive and transparent. The Party branch was more prominent in guiding the elections. In Cheng Zi village, which we observed on March 12, eight of the nine members of the village election committee were also candidates (for chairman, vice-chairman, or committee member), despite the fact that the Village Election Chairman announced at the beginning of election day that it was illegal for a candidate to serve on the Village Election Committee. The

only non-candidate was the chairman of the village election committee, who was vice-secretary of the party branch. The incumbent chairman, who was running for re-election after completing one term, was also the party secretary in the village (an overlap of functions not seen in any of the other villages we studied).

The method of nomination in the four villages where we observed or interviewed in Dalian was not Haixuan, but a two-stage process in which the final determination was made by the village representative assembly. And the candidates for village chairman did not address the entire community but rather the representative assembly, which consisted of 69 members in Cheng Zi and 40 in Hai Tou, where we observed elections on March 11. In both these villages, candidates for chairman and most members of the village election committee were party members, and the nomination process raised a number of questions as to whether it was a free one or "guided" by the party branch.

In Hai Tou, the incumbent chairman was reelected in a landslide, and his opponent was elected to the village committee. This represented a second respect in which the Jin Zhou elections differed from those in Jilin. Candidates for chairman were also allowed to contest for a committee spot.

Another matter of concern for the delegation in Jin Zhou was the huge proportion of ballots cast not at polling stations but in "roving" ballot boxes (seven in Hai Tou; 15 in Cheng Zi). The village of Ma Ti, also observed on March 11, conformed to the pattern of these other two. In these two villages, it appeared that over 90 percent of the votes were cast at roving ballot boxes which visited the homes of voters. Although these boxes were sealed with a lock that was opened in public view after the box was brought to the main voting station, there was no way to determine the integrity of the voting process with these roving boxes. Officials of Liaoning province and from the Ministry shared our concern about the predominance of voting at roving boxes. They indicated that the procedure was intended only to accommodate elderly and infirm voters. But it seemed also used for the convenience of most of the electorate. These were villages with considerable activity in industry and fishing, and many villagers wanted to be able to vote very early in the morning before going to work.

The four villages we observed in Jin Zhou district of Dalian were similar in other respects. Each had very good screens to protect the secrecy of the vote. In each case, the voting and counting proceeded very rapidly. In contrast to what we saw in some instances in Jilin, the ballot boxes were mainly of very high quality: wooden, with locks. In some cases, a wide band of tape was added to seal the box. In each case, however, an additional problem arose with the counting procedure. Although the ballots were counted in view of the assembled voters at the main station, it was impossible to determine what was happening. Ballots were separated into piles by election workers operating in a number of different counting groups, and were then counted amongst the members. In contrast to Jilin, in the first two villages in Liaoning, which we observed, ballots were not read out loud; nor were they tallied on a chalkboard. As a result, ordinary voters and observers could not monitor and evaluate the count. Although the process was considerably faster, it lacked transparency, and the presence of so many counters on a small, crowded stage made the process confusing, if not chaotic.

It is only fair to note that the strain on election officials in these confined quarters may have been aggravated by the large presence of observers from our own team, the civil affairs bureaus, and the media. Nevertheless, the quest for speed and the lack of adequate space for counting generated conditions that were incompatible with a secure vote count.

A minor and clearly unintended problem in Cheng Zi was the way the screens were positioned: unless the voter blocked the view with his or her body, an election official – of which there were several on the stage with the screens – could potentially see how the voter was voting. Indeed, in Cheng Zi, a number of elderly voters who were apparently illiterate or had poor eyesight sought assistance in marking the ballot. In addition, the lighting was rather poor in the booths – in part because the only window nearby had been covered to reinforce the privacy of the booth. Ironically, this had the effect of inducing voters – again the elderly in particular – to repeatedly tilt their partially marked ballots outward toward the center of the stage (and the officials) in order to read the ballot. The problem was accentuated by the fact that the ballots for village chairman and committee in all the elections we observed were on a dark red paper that was hard to read in dim light.

A final problem observed in Hai Tou (and possibly evident elsewhere in the district) was an unusually large number of invalid ballots (at least ten to fifteen percent of the roughly 120 votes cast in the central voting station). Inspection of some of these invalid ballots by members of the observer team suggested that the process of educating the voters was not completely effective. An "O" is to be placed in the box beneath the name of a candidate the voter is voting for, and an "X" beneath the name of a candidate the voter is rejecting. But some ballots had O's in every box, or an O for too many committee candidates, or other significant

departures from the rules.

Although the elections in Jin Zhou district clearly displayed more problems than those we observed in Jilin Province, there are also some noteworthy positive features. There appeared to be some progress from one election to the next toward more competitive elections. Campaign speeches were given three or four days before the election, allowing some time for the promises to be considered and questioned. The voters who assembled at the main polling and counting centers were patient and disciplined.

HOW SIGNIFICANT? HOW REPRESENTATIVE?

In our report last year, we focused on the question of the significance of the village elections, and we concluded that, "despite problems, the village elections are important" for three reasons: (1) the election law mandates the basic norms of a democratic process – secret ballot, direct election, multiple candidates; (2) each round of the electoral process widens and deepens China's technical capacity to hold elections; and (3) the openness of the government to exchange views in the most candid manner was a sign of a commitment to work with The Carter Center to find the best ways to implement the electoral process. Our observations this year confirm our conclusions from last year.

Indeed, we encountered more determination on the part of the central government and provincial officials to improve the electoral process. Perhaps because we have developed closer relationships based on candor and mutual respect, the government demonstrated repeatedly its readiness not only to exchange views on sensitive issues but to revise electoral procedures and also expand cooperation. In response to the fourteen recommendations in last year's report, the government has informed us of efforts to:

- improve the secrecy of the ballot by instructing local election committees to have citizens vote in separate rooms;
- synchronize election days at the county level to improve opportunities for civic education and reduce the cost;
- increase the number of training programs for local officials; and
- pay more attention to the electoral process and less to whether villagers are electing competent individuals.

We spent a considerable amount of time with government officials in Beijing and in the provinces of Jilin and Liaoning provinces discussing specific electoral problems. We will describe the issues and our suggestions below, but our continuing concern extends beyond nine villages that we visited in two provinces during this trip, the six that we visited in Fujian and Hebei last year, and the dozens that we and others have seen during the last few years. Add all these village observations together and the total number remains statistically insignificant. The question that haunts us and the Ministry of Civil Affairs is just how representative are the villages that we have seen.

Last July, when asked just how many of the village elections in the country were conducted according to the rules and the law, the Minister said about 50 or 60 percent, but he acknowledged that he did not know for certain. (Some other experts estimate the proportion at no more than one third.) He said that he would welcome the Carter Center's cooperation in developing a national computer system that could gather the data necessary to draw more robust conclusions about the state of the electoral process and, more importantly, indicate where targeted civic education projects could most improve the electoral process.

Since that meeting, The Carter Center has worked with several other organizations to devise comprehensive proposals for a national data collection system and educational and training exchanges to facilitate effective implementation of the program. The Carter Center team presented these proposals to the Ministry of Civil Affairs on March 4th and 5th and to the Intercontinental Communication Center, and we are pleased that our talks yielded a productive agreement, which is attached (See Appendix 1).

The national system for collecting data on village elections is the core of the new cooperative program. It will permit Ministry and provincial officials to answer the question, in a preliminary way, as to where elections are being implemented properly and where they are not. It will enable the Ministry to measure and explain the rate of re-election of village chairmen, the narrowness or openness of the nomination process, and which areas do not have competitive elections. With this knowledge, the Ministry will be able to know where to target its civic education programs. The data system, in brief, will permit the government, for the first time, to judge

how many and which villages are genuine models and which ones are failing.

During this visit, we reviewed with the MCA officials the forms that will be needed to obtain the information from the villages both on the election results and on the state of the electoral process. We will return to the United States and develop the software for inputting the data on disks or directly on to the Internet at the county and provincial levels. This data will be sent rapidly and transparently so that the Ministry would receive the information and begin acting on it to strengthen civic education programs.

Our proposed programs for exchanges and training aim to contribute to the further development of the Ministry's capacity to implement this proposal for computerizing the entire collection of data on village elections. Dependent on raising the necessary resources, The Carter Center will sponsor two visits to the United States by senior Ministry officials in July and November and a Carter Center team visit to China in June to help prepare for the installation of the system. We will also work closely with the Ministry to develop uniform standards of election procedures.

ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS

After each full day of election observing, we sat down with MCA, provincial and local officials and exchanged views for hours on the strengths and weaknesses of the procedures we observed. Much remains to be done for village elections to become a firm foundation for grassroots democracy. As we noted in the "observations," there were a host of problems. We were very frank in explaining the problems, and we were pleased that MCA officials invited and welcomed the most direct criticisms. Even more impressive was their acknowledgment that they agreed with much of our critique, had already identified many of the same problems, and were trying to find solutions. Together, we worked on them and in that same spirit of transparency, we believe that the specific concerns that we discussed should be made known to the wider public. We divide the issues between those that are immediate and critical to free and competitive village elections, and those technical problems that are not of immediate concern to the villages but could lead to serious problems in the future as direct elections move up the ladder to the county and provincial levels. For each set of issues, we will also offer some specific recommendations.

II. Immediate Electoral Issues for the Villages

1. Privacy of the Ballot. There is probably no issue which is more important to the success of an election than the certainty that a voter can cast a ballot privately and in secret. The MCA officials with whom we have worked are committed to this goal, but it is not always easy to implement in practice. Here is one instance where a simple technical device can make the difference between failure and success. In the first village we visited in Jilin Province, five voters filed into a room that contained five desks. Often, the voters would congregate around the middle desk and look at each other's ballots even as they tried to fill them out. We saw nothing malicious or manipulative in the way that people looked at each other's ballot, and that in itself, convinced us that much more work needs to be done both to preserve the privacy of the ballot and to teach voters just how central that secrecy is to their own individual rights.

Recommendation # 1: The Ministry needs to take additional steps to ensure the privacy of the ballot. The most desirable technique is for citizens to vote behind a screen, like those we saw in Liaoning Province, in which no one can see the act of voting. However, not all villages can afford such a screen, and so less expensive alternatives are needed. Voting individually in separate rooms, as we saw in the other villages in Nong An and Dong Feng counties in Jilin province, is a useful technique. Fashioning a screen out of cardboard or even newspapers might work. Covering windows with cloth or newspaper is also useful so that people can't see the act of voting.

Recommendation # 2: MCA needs to undertake a more intensive voter education plan to help people understand why their vote counts and why they need to vote in private. One simple way to communicate this message – as is done in Fujian Province and many other countries – is to put a poster on the polling booth that reminds people: "Your vote is secret."

2. The individuality of the ballot. In addition to protecting the secrecy of the ballot, the government needs to encourage people to see the secret ballot as a way to enfranchise individuals. This is not possible when a large percentage of voters mark their ballots for others – proxy votes – or when they vote in roving boxes. Roving boxes, as a senior official in Liaoning Province reminded us, were designed to help the very few people who were sick or elderly and unable to go to the polls. This is clearly not the case when more than 90 percent of all the ballots are done by roving boxes or by proxies, which was the case with several villages that we observed. There are several problems with roving boxes: they diminish the sense of civic obligation that

observed. There are several problems with roving boxes: they diminish the sense of civic obligation that comes with going to the polling station; the secrecy of the vote can be easily violated; and individuals voting as a family lose their individuality. The good news is that ministry, county, and provincial officials agreed with this analysis. Many of the arguments against roving boxes also apply to proxy voting, by which individual voters can vote for as many as three other people.

Recommendation # 3: Roving boxes should be banned or minimized, to be used only by the very few people who are physically unable to come to the polling stations. In wealthier communities, however, like those we saw in Liaoning, the community should consider arranging to send transportation to escort elderly or sick people to the polling stations.

Recommendation # 4: Proxy voting should be banned. Citizens should be encouraged to vote for themselves. The government at various levels should spend more time and resources educating the populace to the importance of elections and the character of democratic elections with a secret ballot.

3. Ensuring Choice. The second critical pillar on which free elections needs to be built is the citizens' right to choose. This means, first of all, that there should be more candidates than positions; and secondly, that the process for nominating and selecting candidates should be as open as possible. The law requires that there be more candidates than positions, and it provides for write-in votes. Both stipulations have widened the domain of choice for villagers, but we also witnessed the withdrawal of a candidate for village chair three days before the election, allegedly because he did not want to be a Chair, but possibly because he and the other candidate were both party members. One of the problems with the current rules for competitive elections is that the threshold for victory may be too high; a candidate must win an absolute majority of registered voters. This leads to many run-offs in close elections when a write-in candidate wins enough to prevent a first-round victory.

The nomination process has often been notorious in reducing the range of new candidates. To its credit, MCA and the province of Jilin have instituted the "haixuan" nomination process whereby individual citizens can anonymously nominate an individual. Officials acknowledge that the purpose of "haixuan" is to prevent the party branch from monopolizing the process as they had done in the past.

Recommendation # 5: The Village Election Committee should always ensure competition for Village Chairs. If a candidate does not want to run, then the VEC should choose the nominee, who placed third, and if he or she does not want to run, the fourth-place finisher, and so on until someone agrees to run.

Recommendation # 6: We suggest two candidates for every position, including that of Committee member. Thus, if four committee members are to be elected it would be more consistent with democratic procedures to have eight candidates. An important principle of competitive elections is that the voters should have the means to replace any and all incumbents. We also recommend that the confusing voting procedures that allow candidates for Village Chair to be considered for Committee members should be discarded for a simpler approach.

Recommendation # 7: Some of us were skeptical about the effectiveness of "haixuan", particularly if it is not conducted secretly, and we all believe that it would benefit from a more detailed study. But we also think that it has begun to open the nomination process to new candidates, and that is good.

4. Campaign. We were most impressed by the campaign speeches given by the candidates in Jilin Province for Village Chair. The speeches were concise and offered practical programs, allowing the voters a chance to assess the wisdom of the promises alongside the competence of the individual. We also thought that the idea to allow the challenger after a Haixuan vote to introduce himself or herself to the community was a very good idea that is likely to increase the competitive desire of the incumbent to improve his program. Conversely, we felt that many voters were deprived in Liaoning Province because the candidates were not able to give a speech before the vote, although they had done so before the selection of candidates but only to the Village Representative Assembly.

Recommendation # 8: We would encourage that all the villagers be given an opportunity to hear the candidates present their program, ideally at least twice—once immediately after the election and again to an assembly of villagers just before the votes. We would also suggest that the voters

have a chance to participate by asking questions of the candidates.

Recommendation # 9: Those of us with experience in elections in transitional countries in the Third World know the difficulty of persuading candidates to acknowledge before an election that they could lose and to say that they will respect and accept the results. The candidates, who made this point in Jilin should be commended and should become a model for others.

5. The Count. We saw a number of ways in which villages counted the ballots. Some of the approaches – like those in villages in Liaoning – were chaotic and not secure. Those in Jilin were far more organized and transparent – critical ingredients of a free election – but there was an important difference. One was held inside a small room, and the people pressed their faces against the window, finding it difficult to see the count. An alternative, which we had earlier suggested, was done in the public where everyone could see. It was done quickly and efficiently, by dividing up the votes according to different polling stations.

Recommendation #10: A methodical and transparent count, visible for all to see, is a desirable way for allowing voters to follow the process from start to finish.

6. Civic Education and Countywide elections. To instill in citizens the importance of elections and to teach correct electoral procedures, the government will have to undertake a significant civic education program over a long period of time. The decision by Dong Feng County in Jilin to synchronize village elections so that they were held at about the same day struck us as an excellent way to conduct a countywide civic education campaign using television and radio advertising during a concentrated period. There are other good reasons to consider holding county-wide elections at about the same time, not least that it permits county officials to practice for holding county-wide elections for magistrates.

Recommendation # 11: We suggest that counties set a date (1-3 days) for conducting all village elections in their area.

7. The Role of International Observers. We deeply appreciate the warm welcome that Chinese government officials and villagers in the two counties extended to us. It is also evident that the presence of international observers may alter elections in some ways. Some of the changes are obvious, such as when we arrive in a village, and the village applauds and then begins the election process. In many cases, the presence of international observers helped evoke the best in a country, for example, diminishing electoral-related violence, as recently happened in Jamaica. A more disturbing case occurred at the first village we observed in Jilin province. We were told that night by government officials that they had asked local officials to place five desks in the polling booths to expedite the voting. While the officials meant well, we made it clear to them that such a change was wrong.

Recommendation # 12. Election procedures should not be altered for the purpose of either accommodating or influencing the observers.

II. Medium to Long-Term Issues

We believe the Chinese government was wise to begin the process of democratization at the grassroots level. It will take time for villagers around the country to understand fully the electoral procedures and conduct their elections in a manner that permits them to choose their leaders in a free and fair manner. But the election issues that preoccupy administrators at a local level are often quite different than those at a higher level. For example, we have monitored many national elections, and every one has had a problem with registration lists, multiple counting, and security of the ballots. These national problems rarely exist at a local level where people know each other. Unless these procedures are mastered at the local level, however, the opportunities for fraud at higher levels of political authority will be significant. We have seen cases where bad registration lists led to rioting.

1. Voter identification cards. There was no consistency about how to handle voter identification cards. Technically, no one should vote unless the person has given his or her voter identification card to the election official. In some cases, villagers gave their I.D. cards to the authorities and retrieved them after voting; in other cases, election officials checked the I.D. cards against a registration list, but more likely, they just wrote their names down on a separate list. A second problem is that the voter I.D.'s would be very easy to

duplicate.

2. Preventing multiple voting. A good technique to prevent some from voting more than once is to dip each voter's thumb in indelible ink after they have voted.

3. Security of Ballots. In most countries that we have monitored, there is great concern that the incumbent candidate and his supporters will take ballots before the election and use them to "stuff" the ballot box on election day. The villages and the townships handle the ballots and the registration list in a very haphazard affair. This needs to be corrected at the local level or it could cause grave problems if it occurs at higher levels in the future.

4. Election Commission. Since World War II, many countries have chosen to consolidate the various agencies that deal with electoral matters into a national and independent election commission. It is particularly important that the Commission is independent of the government and therefore viewed as impartial with respect to the electoral process. In China, there are a number of government groups that are responsible for the conduct of elections. In an interview, the Deputy Party Secretary in Liaoning explained that he sat on two separate committees that are engaged in elections – the MCA committee on village elections and the Standing Committee of the County People's Congress. These two organizations prepare separate registration lists, organize the nomination and selection of candidates, conduct the election, count the votes, and announce the results. One question is whether such a duplication of functions is necessary, or whether the two committees could be combined in a way that increased their competence and credibility.

Recommendation # 13: The Ministry of Civil Affairs might consider establishing an expert working group to review and offer some recommendations on the four medium-term issues described above.