Country Lessons

A Rural Incubator for China’s Political Reform?

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In the spring of 1989, students from Beijing's elite universities protested in Tiananmen Square to demand democratic reform. The military crackdown and repression that followed were not limited to Beijing, and its victims were not only students. But the Tiananmen movement of 1989 has nevertheless gone down in history as one of the world's great student movements for democracy.

In China and elsewhere, democratic student movements often disappoint. From revolutionary France and postcolonial Africa to Weimar Germany and today’s Iraq, history has shown that stable democracies can be built only on a broad base of politically educated citizens—ordinary people who believe that democratic decision-making and the rotation of leaders into and out of power are both normal and fair.

Democratic norms, of course, must be learned. And although they are often learned first by urban elites, it's no good having democratic leaders without a democratic society. If democracy flowers in urban squares such as Tiananmen, then it must also be rooted in the countryside. Even in rapidly urbanizing China, most people are still no more than one generation removed from the land—and so it is in China’s villages, through local elections and popular protests, that potentially transformative democratic habits might be forming.

RURAL ROOTS

Western political philosophers have romanticized the virtues of the countryside for millennia. In the Politics, Aristotle claimed that farmers make the best raw material for participation in representative democracies because they are too busy working to meddle in government. Romans of the early Republic revered the citizen-farmer Cincinnatus. And Thomas Jefferson believed so strongly in the political class of the small farmer that the very term "Jeffersonian democracy" has come to mean a republican government founded on the universal (white, male) suffrage of a largely agricultural population.

In India, Mahatma Gandhi looked to traditional village councils as the training grounds for democratic life. India's post-independence rulers discarded Gandhi's vision in favor of the centralization of power at the national level. After three major wars, two separatist insurgencies, and a 21-month suspension of the rule of law, in 1992 India returned to Gandhi's vision and reinstated village councils.

China, too, has elected village councils. Democratic experiments begun in the 1980s were suspended after 1989, but they resumed in the mid-1990s. After 1998, the direct election of village-level representatives was in principle rolled out nationwide. By law, these posts are contested on secret ballots.

These elections are generally free and fair, if lackluster. Indeed, most village elections are sleepy occasions firmly under the control of local Communist Party bosses: the party recruits and vets the candidates, and in the years since agricultural taxes were abolished in 2006, there has been little to
fight over. Only rarely does a village election flare into national prominence because of a dispute over environmental pollution or land grabbing.

Still, since the late 1990s, hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens have participated in a quiet triennial ritual in which they choose their local leaders. Of course, corrupt incumbents representing entrenched interests often stay in office without real opposition. But even officials such as these are learning to become more responsive to popular opinion, and on occasion, local authorities have even been thrown out of office by angry voters.

In some ways, village elections are merely a tool used by the undemocratic Chinese Communist Party to keep watch over local functionaries. But even if the specific outcomes of China’s village elections are not very important for the future of democracy at the national level, the democratic norms being developed in the villages are. Chinese villagers are learning that elections are the way leaders are chosen and that if they make enough fuss, they can even fire their leaders. The significance of these lessons should not be minimized—and they are perhaps best learned in circumstances like China’s village elections, where the choices on offer are limited and the stakes are relatively low.

EDUCATION IN DEMOCRACY

China’s limited education in electoral democracy is restricted to rural areas, but that doesn’t mean that only rural residents have a stake in village elections. Although nearly 55 percent of China’s population lives in cities, some 65 percent of Chinese nevertheless have rural hukou, or household registrations, which determine the allocation of many state services. In other words, nearly two-thirds of China’s population is formally tied to rural villages. And many rural-urban migrants—who constitute around 36 percent of China’s urban population—have one child living with relatives in the countryside. China’s new urbanites thus have enduring ties to the land.

Another large segment of China’s population lives in formerly rural villages that have suddenly found themselves on the edges of China’s growing cities. Such settlements can be breeding grounds for grievances encouraged by rapid urbanization. In a highly publicized incident in 2011, residents of the eastern village of Wukan publicly protested the corrupt transfer of land rights to developers from nearby Lufeng, a rapidly growing city infamous as the illegal drug capital of China. In the village elections that followed, the sitting administration was decisively defeated.

According to Chinese government reports, tens of thousands of such "mass incidents"—official jargon for unauthorized gatherings of 100 or more people—have occurred since the early 1990s. Most are sparked by wage disputes, land seizures, or environmental pollution. Nearly half of them have involved protests against specific political officials.

Wage disputes overwhelmingly concern rural-urban migrants, and land seizures are highly concentrated in the villages of China’s urban fringes. No one knows for sure the extent to which the experience of village elections prompted the participants in these protests to stand up for their rights—if at all. But rural-urban migrants are a massive and growing segment of the Chinese population, and many of their children are still forced by their hukou to experience village life firsthand. Might not the democratic norms developed in villages carry over to cities, where so many democratic movements have taken shape?

Rural-urban migrants have served as a democratizing force in the past, most notably in nineteenth-century England. On August 16, 1819, tens of thousands of pro-democracy activists gathered in Manchester and throughout Lancashire, in England’s northwest, to demand greater representation
for the county’s townspeople. Most of these demonstrators were recent transplants from farm to
city; the keynote speaker in Manchester, the radical politician Henry Hunt, was the son of a country
squire. As the assembly in Manchester grew, the authorities panicked, ordering the cavalry to charge
on the crowd. Around a dozen people were killed in what came to be known as the Peterloo Massacre. As with the aftermath of the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, the immediate outcome of
the Peterloo Massacre, which is widely regarded as the seminal event of the British parliamentary
reform movement, was repression rather than reform. Change didn't come until 1832, when the city
of Manchester finally achieved representation in Parliament. And universal suffrage came much
later, in 1918 for adult men and some women and in 1928 for all adults. It took 99 years for the
United Kingdom to progress from the first major confrontation of the parliamentary reform
movement to universal male suffrage.

THE PACE OF CHANGE

It took China just 35 years to make up for the economic costs of a century and a half of colonialism,
occupation, civil war, and centralized maladministration. This raises the question of whether political
reform in China could proceed at a similar pace. Of course, if real democracy ever comes to China, it
won't come from a Tiananmen-style revolution, and it won't come from top-down reform. It will
come the same way it did in South Korea and Taiwan: through a growing sense of entitlement
among ordinary people to select their own leaders, coupled with a growing realization among
authoritarian rulers that repression is ultimately unsustainable. Democracy, in short, will arrive
through the slow evolution of norms.

Given that most of China’s population is still close to the land, village democracy is an important
force for normative change. Rural children born in 1980 are now the veterans of half a dozen regular
election cycles. Equally at home in country and city, they have also become accustomed to the
mundane freedoms of consumer choice and online criticism. Networked by social media, they are
increasingly aware of and demanding their rights under Chinese law. The Chinese government has so
far been reluctant to violently suppress their protests.

Today, these urban dwellers are still outnumbered by their more cautious elders. But by 2017 or
2018, the post-1980 generations will make up a majority of the Chinese population, and a decade
later, they will make up a majority of the adult population. By 2040, they will be running the country.
If this generation chooses to pursue democratic reform, the seemingly empty gesture of village
elections will in retrospect seem highly consequential. China’s market reforms grew out of its
villages. Perhaps its political reforms will, too.