Final Report

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Project title DirectElectionsChina

The researcher obtained funding for fieldwork in Southwest China. He took an empirical case study approach to understanding the governance effects of direct elections, comparing five townships that have introduced elections with five townships that have not. He and his graduate students conducted intensive interviews with 80 officials in central and local party-state institutions on direct local elections. They administered a questionnaire survey among local residents in five counties, creating a dataset of about 1500 responses, which has been made available to some other scholars. The questionnaire comprises 104 questions on respondents’ background (education, occupation, income and religious beliefs), political attitudes, political participation and assessment of five levels of government. Two articles analysing the dataset have been published in a major Chinese journal and one English article will be published soon. In addition, the researcher has also published eight articles on other topics and two book reviews. An outline for a monograph has been prepared. The researcher cooperated with the Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, Switzerland and convened the International Conference on Citizen Participation in Local Governance in China and Beyond in Zurich on September 8-9, 2016. The *Journal of Contemporary China* will run a special issue of the selected papers from the conference. It will be published online in September 2017. Although current political situation in China differs from the eight years ending 2006 when the direct township elections were experimented, the project has managed to deliver the results exceeding that specified in the proposal, with initial favourable feedback from China, Europe and beyond.

A summary of findings and conclusions of this project follows:

From the early 1990s to 2007, there was a tug of war between reformers and political ‘conservatives’ over village and township direct elections. While the reformers tried their best to promote democratization in China, the conservatives’ tolerance, lukewarm support, questioning and outright opposition evolved in tandem with their judgement as to whether the local direct elections would strengthen or weaken the party-state leadership. The so-called ‘colour revolutions’ in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and the change of power from Kuomintang to the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan in 2000 convinced the conservatives that direct local elections would have questionable consequences. Extensive international support (including the European Union’s proposal to establish another bilateral programme with the Chinese government on township governance following the conclusion of the programme on village governance) for the efforts made by the reformers aroused the suspicion of the conservatives. At the same time, the poor performance of some senior officials in new, somewhat more competitive inner-Party elections made them adamant opponents of the direct local elections.

The project’s initial findings regarding the effects of direct elections on local governance are two-fold. First, direct elections do make local officials more responsive to the electorate, while participation in open and competitive elections does make villagers more critical citizens. Second, the various elements of the existing cadre selection and management mechanism complicated the implementation of the democratic procedures designed by the reformers. This in turn tarnished the image of the reformers. Finally, the existence of so many categories of perfunctory elections confused villagers and reduced the significance of direct local elections.

The questionnaire survey of the residents in Southwest China shows that political trust in local governments is associated with both cultural factors and perceptions of the quality of local government. Particularly, political trust in local governments is strongly influenced by the perception that these governments perform well, are responsive to citizens' needs, and free from corruption.

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Prof. Dr. Lisheng Dong