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## **Reviewing Studies on Villager Self-government in China: The *XiangTu* School as an Example**

*Abstract:* The article draws the outline of the studies of villager self-government system in China, then emphatically analyses a typical example, the *XiangTu* school, most scholars of which are teaching in the Center of China. The article analyses the change of study direction of the *XiangTu* school. The author points that the theoretical feature of the school is connecting villagers' autonomy with governance of villages. However, the author criticizes the school for its flaws on the methodology.

*Keywords:* Villager self-government system; the *XiangTu* school; governance; sociological imagination.

### **Chinese Villager Self-government: from a Frozen Field to a Hot Topic**

Chinese villager self-government system set up by the new constitution which was adopted at the Fifth Session of the Fifth National People's Congress on December 4, 1982. According to Article 111,

The residents committees and villagers committees established among urban and rural residents on the basis of their place of residence are mass organizations of self-management at the grass-roots level. The chairman, vice-chairmen and members of each residents or villagers committee are elected by the residents. The relationship between the residents and villagers committees and the grass-roots organs of state power is prescribed by law.

Then, the Organic Law of the Villagers Committees of the People's Republic of China (For Trial Implementation) which was adopted at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Sixth National People's Congress on November 24, 1987, clearly defined that the chairman, vice-chairmen and members of villagers committee shall be elected directly by the villagers and the term of office for a villagers committee shall be three years. With the progress of legislation, the Ministry of Civil Affairs carried out this system in some areas as experiment units. The system wasn't extensively accepted and made any progress until 1992, owing to a serious pilot projects and promotion. After that, academic study on this system is no longer a frozen field but got more and more attention.

There are two reasons for why the research theme of villager self-government attracted scholars' attention. On the one hand, the Chinese government needed to build up an international image that it headed to democracy after the riot on June 4 1989, while it was unwilling to deepen the essential reform in political system. As

a result, villager self-government became the sample of political reform for its low risk. The state intentionally guided the research through various subjects in order to provide academic and policy support for villager self-government. On the other hand, many scholars thought it shouldn't be an "image project." They expected that it would become the breakthrough of the political reform and the micro social basic of the democratic construction, at least become "the training base of democracy." The foundations in western countries are also interested in this expectancy. And the focus further encourages the research of domestic scholars. Therefore, research on villager self-government has been a hot topic in contemporary China studies. It is rare that other topics attract as much attention as this from both academic and government circles, Chinese and foreign alike. Soon, Academic Works on villager self-government emerge in an endless stream and make us dazzled.

### **From Democracy to Governance: the Rise of the *XiangTu* School**

Villager self-government originated in the problem how to restructure the framework of village. At that time, household responsibility system ran well in rural China, while the rural grassroots organizations were unorganized and the security situation deteriorated sharply. In this case, some villages in Guangxi Zhuang National Autonomous Region<sup>1</sup> spontaneously created the new governing measure—villager self-government in 1980s. Then, it was quickly embraced by the state system and became imposed by the state on most villages in a top-down manner, so it can basically be called an exogenous variable.<sup>2</sup> We can't understand how it operates in rural China before we found out the internal mechanisms of villager interaction and solved the problems in practice.

Despite all this attention, it is also rare that this field produces any profound new insights into rural Chinese society during the present period of transition, especially its complex social contradictions and subtle webs of relationships. Most analysts—from idealistic democrats to utilitarian pragmatists—fail to deal with the relationship between villager committee elections, issues of village governance, and the internal mechanisms of villager interaction. They put their enthusiasm into the form of democracy, but forget that villager self-government was just created as a governing measure and also as the relationship between the form of democracy and village governance. To a certain extent, what they virtually care about is the macro issue of how to realize political democratization in China through grassroots democratic election, other than the micro issue of how to govern villages.

A group of scholars based in central China who could be called the *XiangTu* school have refocused villager self-government studies from questions of democracy to questions of governance, and from the external value of villager self-government

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<sup>1</sup> Located in southern China, along its border with Vietnam, created in 1949 as one of China's five minority autonomous regions. 32% of the 49 million population are Zhuang.

<sup>2</sup> On the origins of villager self-government, see Wang, et al. (1994, 1995, 1996).

to its internal mechanisms.<sup>3</sup> This group holds deep concern and affection for China's agrarian (*XiangTu*) society and high hopes to villager self-government, but they emphasize self-government's ability to solve practical problems facing rural society under today's particular conditions, rather than its meaning in the course of China's democratization. They stress a broad field research on the practice of villager self-government rather than using Western theories to dissect the particular conditions of rural China. They advocate making bold hypotheses based on the inspiration of direct experiences in the field rather than being restricted by the various norms dictated by Western academic discourse. Against the pressures of Western social science, they aim to create a unique school of villager self-government studies with a system of concepts deriving from field experience that is not only different from the tinted glasses of Western theory, but which can become a more useful, appropriate, and profound pair of glasses.<sup>4</sup>

Without a doubt, the *XiangTu* school's proposals are attractive and compelling to people concerned with China's contemporary rural problem (*sannong wenti*). Although Tong Zhihui is not based in central China, he happens to share the views of this school, has worked with them, and has become an important member of their academic community. His recent book, *Electoral Event and Village Politics* (Tong 2004, henceforth *Event*), may well be considered a representative work of this group. Below I review this book as a springboard for making some brief critical comments about the *XiangTu* school in general.

### **The Main Issue of Village Politics: From Villager Self-government to Village Governance**

In the title of his book, the author calls elections "events" not so much to express their importance to rural society as to emphasize their confrontational (*zaoyu*) character. In his account, elections are not products of social relations within villages, but they are capable of shaking up, exposing, and changing those relations, and those relations also shape the actual course of elections. In his own words, "when an electoral event confronts a village, the event also creates an electoral situation (*changyu*) different from the village's previous political situation" (Tong 2004: 213). The novelty of Tong's book, therefore, is that it does not simply look at elections, but also locates them within the conditions (*mianmao*) of village social life as a whole. Through four vivid narratives of village electoral events, the author attempts to show how villagers participating in elections do not mechanically comply with pressures from above, but rather calculate their interests according to existing village social networks and mobilize resources

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<sup>3</sup> For a brief review of this turn, see He (2002). This group of scholars based at Central China Normal University and Huazhong University of Science and Technology call themselves "the *cunzhi* [villager self-government/rural governance] studies school." In order to distinguish them from other scholars of villager self-government, we take the liberty of naming them "the *XiangTu* (native land) school" because one of the school's representative works—*New XiangTu China (Xin XiangTu zhongguo)* by He Xuefeng (2003)—indicates that they aspire to carry on the legacy of Fei Xiaotong's *XiangTu* research.

<sup>4</sup> These sentiments are expressed in Xu, et al. (2002), which may be regarded as the school's manifesto.

through particular relations of social domination, which Tong calls “village social bonds” (*guanlian*), in order to strengthen their position within these relations and expand their shared interests and external influence. The author calls this “bonded (*guanlianxing*) participation,” and it is behind this kind of participatory action that we perceive the various relational patterns (*geju*) of different types of villages and their particular effects on village politics. Tong regards bonded participation as the basic mechanism of peasant political participation in China today.

*Event* fully manifests the *XiangTu* school’s orientation of interpreting elections within their village contexts. The book shows us how, instead of passively responding to state demands, villages mobilize their own aims to achieve a kind of “complicity” (*hemou*) with the state. Although villager self-government paradoxically derives from the force of state policy, villages actually respond to this force with some relatively autonomous mechanisms.

More dubious, however, is the author’s opening assertion that “villager committee elections are the most fundamental and important link in village politics today” (Tong 2004: 8). Let us first summarize the book’s four electoral narratives.

Mao village begins its election at a time when the contradiction between the village’s religious elite and its official (*tizhi*) elite has reached a boiling point. The election “shifts the stage of conflict between the ‘incumbent party’ (*baofang*) and the ‘contending party’ (*daofang*) from the path of appealing to higher authorities (*shangfanglu*) to the polling booth” (Tong 2004: 64). The result, however, does not satisfy the contenders, and so becomes fuel to the flames of their hostile activities. In other words, the election in Mao village not only fails to mitigate the contradiction between the two village elites, but actually intensifies it.

In You village the election is long and complicated, on the one hand, no doubt due to the efforts to maintain the balance of lineage power, but on the other hand due to the factors left out of the author’s analysis. At first the two candidates are unwilling to run. The incumbent village chief You Qingfa finally decides to run only because “this time the election is democratic, so I’d lose face if I were voted out of office.” The incumbent party branch secretary You Caishan decides to run only because the township authorities, disliking his willful (*qianghan*) character, first strip him of his position, and then attempt to coerce the villagers into nominating someone else, so he finally enters the race because he “doesn’t want to succumb to that kind of strong-arming” (Tong 2004: 102, 80). In other words, the You village election was, to a significant degree, a struggle between elites to protect their “face.”

The election in Long village is uneventful. “It happened to occur during a drought, and the villagers were much more concerned about the drought than the election” (Tong 2004: 114). The polling booths lie cold and deserted, and the incumbent elite easily control the outcome.

In Ping village, factionalism makes the election unusually boisterous. However, “the full expression of the villagers’ will in the election did not make governance easier in Ping village; on the contrary, while increasing the legitimacy of power, the election also increased the complications of village-level governance” (Tong 2004: 173).

Upon reading these carefully constructed narratives, two questions emerge:

First, do elections mitigate or exacerbate the contradictions among village elites? What we gather from the narratives is that, in some villages, the reason elections become heated events is that contradictions already exist among elites, and elections not only fail to resolve these contradictions, but actually worsen them and aggravate the complications of village politics.

Second, and more importantly, where are the majority of ordinary villagers? In the narrative sections of the book, the ordinary villagers are described only vaguely, in contrast to the vivid depictions of a few elite characters, and in the analytical section, the former are categorized into types, namely, peasants with different degrees of autonomy in electoral participation depending on two types of village social cohesion (*guanliandu*).

In this categorization, ordinary villagers are the objects of the elite's efforts to solicit votes, so the former possess no real autonomy of action. The only villagers who exercise any autonomy are those who vote independently, abstain from voting, or undertake counter-mobilization by proposing conditions for candidates to run,<sup>5</sup> and these actions are precisely the weak points and blind spots of Tong's analysis. The ordinary villagers thus become "the silent majority."

If, however, we do not simply equate politics with power, of course ordinary people have their own political aims and strategies of struggle; it is just that their political life lies in a different world from that of the elite. Indeed, Tong already noticed through empirical intuition that "although the designers of democratization can complete the political training of peasants for further democratization through several elections, what concerns peasants who have to live the rest of their lives in the village is how to acquire face and authority, and how to expand their livelihood opportunities" (Tong 2004: 67). Actually, each of these concerns is located at a different level: it is the village elite who are primarily concerned with face and authority, whereas it is the ordinary peasants who are primarily concerned with how to expand their livelihood opportunities. As with most other writings on villager self-government, however, Tong's narrative is so centered on the elections themselves that those dissonant voices complaining that "nowadays the crops are always failing, what do I care about that crap (i.e. elections)" (Tong 2004: 136) are lightly brushed aside. It is precisely such weeding out of dissonant voices that has allowed electoral politics to completely overshadow the true political issues of contemporary rural society. By the latter I mean the social decay throughout rural China—especially the central and western impoverished areas dealt with in *Event*: the decline of peasant incomes, the increase of tax burdens, the standstill of village finances, the deterioration of social order, the corruption of township and village authorities—sometimes to the point of joining ranks with the mafia (*heishehuihua*), the dilapidation of public works, the emptying out of villages, the rise of collective acts of resistance, and so on.

Tong elsewhere proposed that "rural democracy should be geared towards governance," meaning that the procedures for village-level elections should be determined

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<sup>5</sup> Counter-mobilization (*fanxiang dongyuan*) refers to preliminary conditions for candidates to run for office, whereas acceptance of elite vote-solicitation refers to villagers' acceptance of the conditions promised by a certain candidate and support for his or her campaign.

according to whether the elections benefit the goals of village governance, rather than according to whether they manifest the will of the villagers according to democratic principles (Tong 2001). This concept directly reflects the academic turn the *XiangTu* school aims to achieve in the study of villager self-government. The key question for them is not who governs or what are the electoral procedures, but how can the practical problems of governance be effectively solved? In *Event*, however, the connection between village-level elections and village governance recedes from view. The author claims he wants a turn in the study of elections, but then he stops halfway. He merely tells us that elections are influenced by personal networks of reciprocity (*guanxi wangluo*), failing to explain the elections' inherent meaning to village politics. He tells us only *who* governs, and not *what* is governed or *how*. He tells us about the social relations that affect the electoral process, but not about village politics after the elections—especially the everyday politics between elections. If the elite is concerned with the elections themselves, wrangling over power, and the reproduction or loss of their positions, then ordinary villagers are concerned with the fulfillment of electoral promises, the improvement of their everyday lives, and the solution of practical problems such as taxes, land, and fairness. *Event's* elision of this silent majority thus reveals a dissociation from the practical problems of village governance.

It should be noted, however, that when I criticize *Event* for failing to link electoral events with issues of village governance, this is only to say that it fails to follow through with the inward turn proclaimed by the *XiangTu* school. This is not to say that I agree with the *XiangTu* school's insistence on discussing village governance within the framework of villager self-government. When they deal with the relationship between villager self-government and village governance, the *XiangTu* school emphasize villager self-government's positive function in village governance,<sup>6</sup> whereas other scholars emphasize its negative function.<sup>7</sup> As I see it, to approach the relationship between villager self-government and village governance from such a traditional functionalist perspective is too simplistic.<sup>8</sup> We must penetrate the actual operational mechanisms of village governance to see the more complex, paradoxical relationship between the two,<sup>9</sup> the ambiguity of the institutional design, and the unpredictability of the results. The most important issues that need to be researched about village politics are the mechanisms of village governance themselves, not villager self-government. Under which circumstances do villager committee elections become a key link in village politics, and under which circumstances are they unimportant? Under which

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<sup>6</sup> Xiang Jiquan (2002), for example, regards rural democracy as a practical way to solve the governance problems caused by shortages of public finances.

<sup>7</sup> Yu Jianrong (2003), for example, also trained in central China but differing significantly from the *XiangTu* school, points out that sometimes "democratization" actually helps to legitimize or "governmentalize" criminal elements in rural communities. He also points out that strong lineage forces can lead "the will of the majority" in directions detrimental to the development of the community, that is, they may use the idea of "the will of the majority" to legitimize infringement on the rights of the minority.

<sup>8</sup> See Ye (1991) for a Chinese analysis of the limitations of traditional functionalism.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang (2002), for examples, points out that what villagers ask of self-government is contradictory: on the one hand, they advocate autonomy, but on the other, they want the government to take the lead, for they regard the village elite as the true authority of self-government.

circumstances do they function positively, negatively, manifestly or latently?<sup>10</sup> These questions can be determined only through concrete research on the mechanisms of village governance. Even if we are willing to make villager self-government the topic of our research, we should not discuss problems of village governance under the supposition that villager self-government is rational or important.<sup>11</sup> Instead we should confront the complexity of the problems of villager self-government within the framework of village governance.

In an academic conference of 2001, the *XiangTu* school formally brought up the view that they should lay our emphasis on the understanding of the non-ritualized peaceful rural everyday life rather than focusing on the political incidents in the rural areas, and they should replace their research contents of discussion on villagers' autonomy with discussion on the village governance by probing into the reform of firms, culture of clansman and history of village governance which are the new topic for the *XiangTu* school in the later period. Nearly at the same time, they began to impart the meaning of "village governance" into the notion of "*cun zhi*" which is formerly the short form for 'villagers' autonomy,' and call the 'research on the village governance' as 'the research on the nature of rural society in the transferring period', tried to understand the current condition of rural society and its district differences in China through comprehensive investigation on villages in different areas, so as to understand the process, mechanism and result of the system of villagers' autonomy changing into different rural societies. Then, topics concerning burden of villagers, organization of villages, finance of village, reform on tax and fee, history of villages, types of villages and others ,were included into the research area of the period. This serial changes marked the transfer of research emphasis and reconstruction of research frame for the *XiangTu* school, and also represented that the *XiangTu* school have surpassed the frame of villagers' autonomy in the research on the village governance. We should say that the serial research results contributing by the *XiangTu* school in later period play an significant role in understanding the Chinese rural society in the transferring period.

### Question to the *XiangTu* School: "Wild Thinking" or "Sociological Imagination"?

The *XiangTu* school proposed "wild thinking" (*yexing de siwei*) among the aims of their programmatic statement in 2002, explaining this as aiming to discard outmoded conventions and, under the direct inspiration of field research, boldly make hypotheses and earnestly seek supporting evidence in order to provide new conceptual tools and methodological perspectives for villager self-government studies (Xu, et al. 2002). As they see it, scholarship on politics in rural China is underdeveloped and dominated by Western academic discourse, so they want to break through the limits that Western social science has imposed on Chinese villager self-government studies, fully mobilize

<sup>10</sup> See Merton (1968) for a classic analysis of positive, negative, manifest and latent functions.

<sup>11</sup> He Xuefeng (1999) asserted that "under the present conditions of state policy, the theme of discussions about rural politics should not be *whether*, but *how* to implement villager self-government."

the knowledge that researchers have already accumulated, and creatively make their own hypotheses. One of their particularly resounding slogans is “less civilized norms, more wild creativity.”<sup>12</sup> The analysis in the second half of *Event* clearly manifests this approach, so let us first consider the main concepts used there and then comment more generally on this “wild” way of thinking.

Tong’s central concept is “village social bonds,” which he defines as “the relations of domination (*zhipai*) among members of village social networks that make possible unified action among villagers” (Tong 2004: 184).<sup>13</sup> The concept thus includes asymmetry and identity in relations of domination. It is extremely problematic, however, to consider domination only in its aspects of unity, asymmetry, and identity. The author is obviously unfamiliar with Michel Foucault’s decades-old insight into the study of domination: where there is power (*quanti*), there must be resistance. As Foucault wrote in *Discipline and Punish*,

[T]he study of [the micro-physics of power] presupposes that the power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy;... that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory. In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the “privilege,” acquired or preserved, of the dominant class but the overall effect of its strategic positions—an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the positions of those who are dominated. [Foucault 1995: 26–27]

Relations of power are thus relations of perpetual struggle from both directions. However, while consciously rejecting Western theorists such as Foucault, Tong unconsciously adopts the very tradition of Western theory against which Foucault was writing, namely the traditional notions of power as either a “conflict of interests” or “legitimized authority.” Both notions regard power as external control that is homogeneous, unidirectional, and repressive.<sup>14</sup> The preference in Tong’s narrative for the political life of the elite against that of ordinary villagers derives from his narrow understanding of power. Although the author insightfully perceives that major events such as elections mobilize village social relations, he unfortunately reduces all those complex relations to unidirectional relations of domination, thus wasting an opportunity to dig deeper into everyday village politics.

Tong and the *XiangTu* school in general reject normalization by the academic tradition because, in their eyes, social science today is a tradition of Western academic hegemony that is irrelevant to *XiangTu* China. They thus instinctively reject Western theory, hoping to create their own theoretical system by facing the field directly. On closer inspection, the “wild thinking” they advocate exhibits the two related but distinct tendencies of anti-Westernism and anti-theoreticism. Let us look at each of these separately.

<sup>12</sup> The Chinese word for “wild” (*yexing*) here invokes the word for “field” (*tianye*) as in “field research,” and is contrasted with “civilized” (*wenming*).

<sup>13</sup> The concept of “village social bonds” was first proposed in He and Tong (2002) and then revised in *Event*, as discussed in a footnote on page 188. My critique of the concept refers to its usage in *Event*. [In some contexts the term may be better translated as “village social cohesion.”]

<sup>14</sup> On Foucault’s critique of these traditional notions of power, see Li (1999).

Regarding anti-Westernism, the *XiangTu* school believes that, in such a practice-oriented field as villager self-government studies, they should form a native system of scholarship through field research rather than putting on tinted glasses from the West (Xu, et al. 2002). It is beyond doubt that we must establish a foothold in China in order to understand Chinese society, and that we must strive for a China-centered perspective. The question is whether it is possible to rid ourselves completely of Western tinted glasses while forging our own pair. For example, the *XiangTu* school holds in the highest esteem the sociologist Fei Xiaotong, who emerged from China's native soil. However, they often notice only Fei's straightforward writing style and his apparently direct inspiration by field research, without fully appreciating the academic tradition he had studied before beginning his field investigations, namely, the functionalist anthropology of Polish-British anthropologist Malinowski (Fei 1996). Fei's later establishment of Chinese anthropology emerged from the womb of Western theory. Even the method of fieldwork itself that the *XiangTu* school so highly values was invented by a Westerner—Malinowski. The question, then, is whether it is possible to understand today's China in isolation from the West. In my opinion, the answer is no. This is because, through the past century of modernization, and especially the past three decades of opening up and getting on track with the world, Chinese society has already become westernized on many levels. Western influence has already penetrated deep into the everyday life and spirit of Chinese people. If we want to talk about how today's new agrarian (*XiangTu*) China differs from that of Fei Xiaotong, the most obvious way is the extent to which the everyday living worlds of even rural society have been westernized. If we do not profoundly understand the Western world and Western social science, therefore, it will be hard to truly understand the rural society of China today. Of course, this does not mean that we should blindly follow West-centered logic and the hegemony of Western academia. Orientalism does not exclude the good aspects of Occidentalism,<sup>15</sup> and Fei's work actually demonstrates a path back to China via the West.

As for their anti-theoretical stance, it is not that the *XiangTu* school completely rejects theory, but that they basically limit themselves to their own theories, which they aim to create directly from field research. Of course it is commendable that they advocate practical, native (*bentu*), empirical scholarship, against the tendency of certain scholars to carelessly apply Western theory to China studies, but the key question is, where does incisive empirical perceptiveness originate? Or, in other words, where does "sociological imagination" originate? When the American sociologist Mills (1967) proposed this concept, he was writing against two sociological currents popular at the time—"grand theory" represented by Parsonian functionalism, and "abstract empiricism" represented by Lazarsfeld's quantitative research—but I think it is also relevant to Chinese social science today. What impedes the sociological imagination is, on the one hand, grand theory divorced from the living world, and on the other, abstract empiricism derived from blind worship of the scientific method. In

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<sup>15</sup> On "Orientalism" and "Occidentalism," see Said (1978).

the Chinese context, however, an even bigger obstacle may be another factor: vulgar empiricism.

By vulgar empiricism I mean the belief that, upon entering the field, one's experience and intuition can ascend directly to the level of a new theory without edification by any theoretical tradition, and with neither refuting nor drawing upon any theoretical predecessors. As mentioned above, although Fei Xiaotong's outstanding scholarship may appear to be free of theoretical traces, both his fieldwork and his writing was in fact well grounded in theory. Social phenomena are not self-evident; they are represented, constructed. Without a singular perceptiveness, without a keen awareness of problems, even if a social entity towered overhead like a god on a mountaintop, one may look right at it but still not see. To create one's own theory without reading theory is just as bad as rigidly imposing Western theories onto Chinese scholarship—both evince a lack of true “sociological imagination.”

After my critical article, the *XiangTu* school argued that they didn't anti-theoreticism, they only based on China question and take pragmatism and opportunism attitude to Western theory, i.e. what they reject is the whole of Western theory not the elements of Western theory.<sup>16</sup> Because in the view of them, the acceptance of Western theory as a whole meaning the establishment of Western academic hegemony in China and China's social science will be lost it's autonomy. However, if they just take pragmatism and opportunism attitude to Western theory, what essential distinguish between their methodology and the method which they against of directly apply Western theory to China studies?

### **Field Research: More Extensive or More Intensive?**

Methodologically, *Event* also adopts the strategies of “event—process analysis” and comparative analysis of multiples cases. The author explains that he adopts both strategies because, on the one hand, event-process analysis is useful for the village relations he wants to explore, but on the other hand, he worries that a study of one village alone could not show the richness of electoral participation, so he deliberately chooses four comparable villages (Tong 2004: 10). Considering the immense number of villages in China and the variation among them, however, even 400 villages, to say nothing of four, offer nothing in the way of a representative sample. Of course comparison of multiple cases is a valid research method, but the researcher should recognize that the strength of qualitative research lies not in its quantity but in its depth. If one aims to show the richness of village politics, therefore, one should focus not on the plurality of village types, but on the incisiveness of questions asked, the depth of field investigation, the thickness of one's narrative, and the complexity of one's analysis. *Event* would have been much better if the author had told us more about the connections in one village between electoral and everyday politics, and between elite and villager politics, than to merely touch on the surface of four villages, like

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<sup>16</sup> See Ying (2005), Wu (2005).

a dragonfly skimming the water. I too have worried about methodology in my own studies of rural politics, but my worry was not whether they would be representative, but how to simplify complex relationships and rich materials into a “case” or “sample” that could be used analytically to make a falsifiable argument—thus committing the fatal error Bourdieu criticized of forcing theoretical logic onto the ambiguous and makeshift logic of practice (Ying 2001: 341). Is this what Tong (2004: 191) has in mind when he writes that his aim is not that his cases be representative but that they be “typical” (*dianxing*)?

The *XiangTu* school regards the shortcoming of villager self-government studies to be the field’s lack of attention to the social foundations of villager self-government, and they aim to supplement this through field investigations into the practical situation of contemporary villager self-government (He 2000). This proposal is significant inasmuch as it opposes armchair theorizing and aims to put academic and policy discussions onto a more practical empirical basis. However, we should also be aware that more thorough investigation does not necessarily lead to a deeper understanding of village politics. Over the past two decades we have spent immeasurable effort and resources on surveys of thousands of villages and households, but how much have we really learned from them? As for qualitative research, its intensiveness and the length of time in the field are much more important than its breadth. William Hinton’s *Fanshen* dealt with the course of land reform in only one village in southeastern Shanxi, yet it remains a classic among scholarship on village revolution in China.

In sum, Tong Zhihui and this group of scholars based in central China are shaking up the world of rural China studies with a sincere concern for rural society, and villager self-government in particular. Their aims are noble, their will is strong, and their results so far are impressive. However, there is much room for improvement in both their choice of research topics and their methods. Perhaps it is only through a combination of carefully reading Western social theory and closely observing the practical logic of Chinese rural society—that is, through the combination of theoretical nourishment of empirical intuition—that we may grasp the major problems and subtle characteristics of rural Chinese society in the present period of transition, and thus forge a truly new path of theoretical innovation.

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