

RURAL DEMOCRACY AND VOTE BUYING

The story translated/paraphrased below appeared in the Ming Pao, a non-communist Hong Kong newspaper. The story appeared first in Xiaokang, a publication of the Central Propaganda Department. The slant of the Xiaokang version was amazement that an oath to Guangong (or Guan Di), the god of war and commerce, was more effective in curbing corruption than the laws or the state and the discipline of the Party. The account does testify to the resilience of local culture and customs, for good or bad, particularly as control from the Center becomes looser. It also shows the continuing (or revived) influence of clans and the authority of the clan head. Indeed, one wonders whether the action of the clan head in forcing the candidates to forego vote-buying had something to do with the fact that both candidates were clan members—that is, the clan as an organization was going to come out all right no matter who won the election, and had a general interest in holding down campaign spending and minimizing the chance of scandal.

The story is also evidence that the elected position of village head is in fact one worth fighting for, that its authority is not purely nominal or derivative—comfort, however cold, for those who favor China's democratic development. The authority of the village head, however, is probably more a matter of the ability to dole out favors (in return for consideration) rather than in determining the course of policy.

The money units in the story are in Chinese dollars, yuan—in 2007, worth roughly eight to one American dollar.

Ming Pao Reporter

VILLAGERS COMPLAIN OF LACK OF VOTE-BUYING IN ELECTON

The People Point Out that Those Who Reap the Rewards of Office Owe Something for It;

Scholars Discuss Broadening Participation in Public Affairs

19 March 2007

In an election for village head in a village in Xiamen, Fujian province, in order to counter an atmosphere of bribery a clan head organized a visit to the Guangong temple, where the candidates swore that they would not buy votes. This, however, led to dissatisfaction among the villagers who received money for their votes. They said that a village head “could make a lot of money,” and should therefore be willing to “pay out a little bit of money for the position.” Scholars in the interior point out that lack of full development of the law is one of the reasons for electoral bribery. The villagers yearn for true democracy. Bribery can be fully prevented only if the villagers are able effectively to participate in public affairs.

According to the third issue this year of *Xiaokang*, a news monthly that is part of the *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth), group, a set of publications under direct Central control, in previous elections in Dingmei village in the Dongfu district of Xiamen municipality candidates always bought their votes. At the village council election in August of last year the villagers Hu Huihuang and Hu Jianbiao were competing for the office of village head. In order to prevent bribery, the head of the Hu clan arranged for both men to visit the Guangong temple where they swore that they would not engage in bribery. As a result, there were no instances of bribery in that election.

Swearing Before Guan Di Not to Bribe

However, the refusal to engage in bribery left certain of the villagers dissatisfied. An old villager named Chen said: In the election for village head last year, a vote went for three

or four dollars, and some votes paid more than a thousand dollars. “A village head can make a lot of money. What’s wrong with paying out a little bit of money to get the office?” Chen’s wife went on to explain further: “If one person can get a few hundred dollars, that’s more than a thousand for the whole family. If a ballot goes for a thousand dollars or more, it’s that much more income for the family.” The reporter for that publication interviewed about a dozen families, and about half of those he talked to approved of vote selling. At the recently concluded sessions of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Liu Xiguang, an NPC representative from Hebei province, said: In some wealthy or resource-rich villages in the interior the competition for the post of village head is fierce; not a few people spend several tens of thousands of dollars, or even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Village Elections Can Cost Tens of Thousands of Dollars

According to an analysis by Wang Cailiang, head lawyer in Beijing’s Cailiang Law Firm, currently there is a lack of precise legislation regulating the basic-level elections in the interior. There is no clear definition of just what constitutes “electoral bribery.”

Lack of a Precise Legal Definition

According to Wu Licai, associate professor in the Political Studies Institute at Central China Normal University, in the past in order to get the position of village head would “present gifts” to the township head or the [Communist party] secretary. It is a small “step forward” from giving gifts to those higher up to bribing the villages. He believes the villagers’ logic in accepting bribes is very simple: The candidates are in the position of “investors” and expect in the end to get their money back. This sort of logic reflects a universal problem in the development of rural basic level democracy: the only time the

villagers have even a limited “right to speak” is when they cast their votes. In ordinary times they have no influence whatsoever on the public affairs of the village.

Ming Bao, 19 March 2007