

The Price of Democracy: Vote Buying and Village Elections in China

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Local elections have been occurring in most villages for over a decade in rural China, and competitive elections are one of the key indicators of the democratic process. Indeed, competition is an important aspect of any democracy, and it increases the value of a villager's vote—so much so that in some villages, a farmer's vote can be worth a small fortune. As village elections become more competitive, reports of vote buying are on the rise, and a number of journalists and academic researchers have condemned this growing practice in rural China. Accordingly, vote buying subverts democratic development and hinders democratization efforts. However, vote buying has a long history in well-established democracies, such as the United States and Great Britain. Rather than subverting democratization, vote buying can be viewed as part of the process or the price of democracy. While policies and laws are needed to control vote buying in the long run, initially it is a positive indicator that voting is an important and valuable process in rural China.

Key words: China, democracy, village elections, vote buying

Introduction

On Election Day, July 24, it is a warm summer morning, and rural voters come to the polling site ready to vote. Before eligible voters cast their ballots, however, they are treated to an endless flow of beer and wine compliments of a wealthy candidate. Indeed, this candidate is a newcomer to the political stage, and he is spending a large sum of money to challenge the incumbent (i.e., the gift of beer and wine to influence voters). Of course, the affluent candidate is not pouring the wine himself. His representative pours the beverages and reminds voters who is providing the drink. The new candidate beats the incumbent and receives the most votes in a competitive, “free and fair” election.

The actual date of this election is July 24, 1758, for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses, and the rich candidate is America's first president, George Washington (Abbott, 1983). Washington spent £39 on beer, wine, rum, and brandy. This was quite a large sum of money at the time. According to one historian, £39 was “several times more than enough to buy the house and land of the voter who

barely met the minimum franchise requirements" (Mutch, 2001, p. 3). While Washington provided the cash, it was his friend and manager Colonel James Wood who brokered the deal with voters and monitored the polls at the election site. Yet, spending this kind of money to influence voters was not limited to only one of America's Founding Fathers. In fact, Thomas Jefferson was also known to dispense liquor on Election Day. Jefferson stated that such practices were not directly associated with "vote buying," but rather beverages were small rewards given to constituents for taking the time and expense to exercise their voting rights (Campbell, 2005). Indeed, one justification—then and now—was that these rewards helped to bring out the vote and candidate supporters to the polls. Still, soon after Washington's election victory, members of the House of Burgesses discussed the undemocratic nature of vote-buying practices and eventually passed a law that disqualified members who provided "any money, meat, drink, entertainment or provisions in order to get elected" (Campbell, 2005, p. 5). This story demonstrates how vote buying emerged in colonial America *after* the introduction of local election reforms, but *before* the establishment of a developed legal system with the capacity to fully enforce laws down to the village level.

From early America in the 1700s to Taiwan in the 1990s, new democracies have had to deal with vote buying in one form or another. However, the issue is particularly salient for countries or communities that introduce local elections for the first time. Do vote-buying practices that develop soon after the introduction of local elections reflect a breakdown of these new democratic institutions? This is the question that Chinese officials and scholars are currently confronting with regard to village elections for local leaders. Over the last decade, reports of vote buying have steadily increased, especially after the year 2000. This has drawn the attention of top officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs who are in charge of establishing and monitoring village elections in rural China. According to Wang Jinhua, the director of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Department of Basic Governance and Community, vote buying is a serious and complex problem (Li, Yue, & Lai, 2008). Indeed, a number of Chinese scholars and local Civil Affairs Bureau chiefs argue that vote-buying practices undermine local democratic institutions by providing disproportional influence of wealthy candidates and stripping villagers of their equal right to participate and choose without interference (Chen 2009; Chen & Zhou, 2007; Ye, 2007). Of course, these scholars also point out that the voters (i.e., vote sellers) are as much to blame for this type of electoral manipulation as the vote buyers. The implication is that rural democracy, in some respects, is still underdeveloped.

While the general consensus is that vote-buying practices have a negative influence on the democratic process, some scholars and officials in Civil Affairs Bureaus view vote buying as a positive outcome (Z. Li, 2007; Si, 2007). For instance, vote buying spreads the wealth from bribing a specific official to become a village leader (office buying) to paying off a larger number of village constituents. Another example is that vote buying provides an opportunity for new candidates with no prior government connections to challenge incumbents.

The way Chinese scholars and officials view vote buying in village elections—either negative or positive outcomes—may have serious consequences for the future development of election reforms in China. When asked about the development of elections in China during a 2006 interview with the

foreign press, Premier Wen Jiabao said, "We are confident that when the people are capable of running a village through direct election, they will later be able to run a township, then a county and a province, true to the principle that our country is run by the people" ("Premier Wen," 2006). Thus, if vote buying is perceived as a negative development in the village election process, then it is possible to adopt the position that villagers are currently incapable of running a village and by extension running a town or county. Vote buying may be a legitimate reason to stall political reforms, at least until this form of voter manipulation can be curbed or controlled. Even in early America, vote buying was used as an excuse to limit voting rights to white male property owners. During the Constitutional Convention (1787), Governor Morris argued, "Give the votes to people who have no property and they will sell them to the rich, who will be able to buy them" (Farrand, 1937, p. 206). Of course, as Washington discovered, even property owners can be bought. Nevertheless, the implication is that central leaders may perceive vote buying as a democratic setback and forestall further election reforms.

Yet, if vote buying is accepted as part of the village election process that can lead to both bad and good outcomes, then it may *not* be a hindrance to further democratic development, especially at the town and county levels. While vote-buying practices are perceived as inherently undemocratic, it could not occur without relatively free and fair elections. Vote buying takes place *only* when the election process is truly competitive and candidates can no longer buy the government position from higher authorities (Schaffer, 2008). Once potential candidates as well as local authorities can no longer resort to intimidating voters, manipulating election registries, or doctoring final tallies, then vote buying is the only method left to influence the election outcome (Hicken, 2007). Thus, vote buying may be a desirable outcome that reflects a positive development in establishing local democratic elections, especially within an authoritarian regime.

Vote buying emerges when the national leadership in a developing country attempts election and legal reforms at the same time and political gaps or spaces between these reforms take shape. The first gap arises *after* the reduction of direct appointments for local government officials (i.e., local elections) but *before* the introduction of popular elections at the national level. The second gap is the interim *after* the promotion of direct elections but *before* an independent judiciary and legal system is fully functioning. Thus, within an authoritarian regime without popular elections for the national leadership, vote buying at the subnational level may reflect significant democratic procedural development.

A theory of vote buying as a positive indicator of institutional democratic progress rests on the distinction between vote-buying outcomes (good and bad) and vote buying as a desired outcome in and of itself. This article will examine the vote-buying debates in the Chinese and English literature. Much of these debates in China reflect similar themes in the English literature about the negative (and positive) outcomes of vote buying. There are three general issue areas: (1) the definition of vote buying, (2) the emergence of vote-buying practices, and (3) the outcome of vote-buying practices. Few articles in English closely examine vote buying in China. Most of the North American and Western European scholars focus on the persistent problem of vote buying at the national and district levels in established democracies as well as democratizing countries in Latin

America and Asia (Bowie, 2008; Snyder & Samuels, 2001; Stokes, 2005; Wu & Huang, 2004). However, for Chinese scholars and Civil Affairs officials, vote buying is a new phenomenon that is associated with recent democratic experiments at the village level. In China, national, provincial, and municipal leaders are not popularly elected and, as a consequence, vote buying between candidates and citizens is not an issue.¹ Despite the difference in political systems under study, there is a convergence in the English and Chinese literature along the three general issues areas.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section will address the various types and definitions of vote buying in village elections. The second section examines the emergence of vote buying in rural China. The third section focuses on negative and positive vote-buying outcomes and draws attention to the distinction between vote-buying practices and the existence of vote buying as an important outcome. The final section examines how this distinction fits into the larger democratization theory. I argue that, at least in the beginning of the democratization process, vote buying is actually an essential indicator of democratic progress.

Definitions and Types of Vote Buying

The definitions of vote buying vary from broad concepts that encompass a wide range of activities to a more narrow definition that identifies specific practices. Language is the first factor that distinguishes broad definitions from the English and Chinese accounts. In the English literature, Neeman and Orosel (2006), Stokes (2005), and Schaffer (2008) provide a market interpretation of vote buying. Thus, "vote buying, in the literal sense, is a simple economic exchange. Candidates can 'buy' and citizens 'sell' votes, as they buy and sell apples, shoes, or television sets" (Schaffer & Schedler, 2007, p. 17). Starting from this general definition, some scholars point out the potential principle-agent problems with this economic contract, such as the difficulty vote buyers have when monitoring sellers who use secret ballots. Stokes (2007) finds that the market definition reflects the inherent inequality in vote buying. Wealthier candidates can afford to buy more "apples and shoes" than poorer candidates. Moreover, vote sellers do not articulate their personal interest at the polls, but vote for the highest bidder. Yet, it is the poor who typically sell their vote, and it is their interests that are lost in the transaction.

The literal Chinese definition of vote buying is the two characters "bribery" and "elect" (*huixuan*), or "using bribery to get elected." Many Chinese scholars and the official statements from the Ministry of Civil Affairs refer to vote buying as a practice whereby the candidate uses money or other benefits as a means to influence constituent preferences or desires (Wang & Fu, 2007; Xu, 2006). The broad definition typically includes references on how vote buying allows individual candidates to subvert the will of the people for private gains. Thus, in principle, most Chinese and Western scholars have the same opinion that vote buying is a criminal action and subverts the development of fair and equal access to the democratic election process.

For many scholars in China, one of the main problems associated with vote buying is that the practice is not clearly defined in the village election law known

as the Organic Law of Villager Committees. The Organic Law allows villagers to elect three to seven members of the villagers committee as well as the village head (chair of the village committee). It was first written in 1988 and implemented as "trial law" throughout rural China. The trial law was amended in 1998 and enacted as a full law that allowed for secret ballots, an open (villager) nomination process, and noninterference from higher authorities, such as the township or county party governments. However, the Organic Law (1998) does not explicitly address vote buying. Article 15 of the Organic Law refers to bribery (*huilu*) but does not mention vote buying (*huixuan*). A number of China scholars suggest that this ambiguity in the law contributes to the rise in vote-buying practices at the village level (Lin, 2007; Qian, 2005).

Still, there is disagreement among China scholars over which forms of vote buying constitute "bribing elections." The types of vote buying range from small gifts and banquets to cash. Moreover, vote buying varies by degree as well as kind. In the Chinese literature, the three general and most common forms of bribery for votes are (1) promises of future state benefits, (2) immediate material rewards, and (3) cash. Vote-buying promises are different from general campaign rhetoric because these rewards are focused more on individuals than the community. The individual promises are associated with postelection favors, such as a job in the collective enterprise or providing a construction permit. They can even include getting around the family-planning policy and obtaining "legal" household registration certificates. This type of reward to influence voters is not unlike methods used by urban political machines in America around the late 1800s. Political bosses used the promise of city jobs in exchange for electoral support, especially from new immigrant communities (Riordon, 1963). Most Chinese scholars (and turn-of-the-century American reforms) view this type of vote buying as undue influence on the voters' choice as well as misuse of public works and funds (Lin, 2007; Wang & Fu, 2007; Xu, 2006).

The second type of vote buying is in the form of gifts and banquets. The small gifts range from a pack of cigarettes and a few bottles of liquor to large banquets and cases of beer and wine. This form of vote bribery is the most ambiguous. While some scholars include gifts in the broader definition of vote buying, others see this practice as less threatening. For example, in a Carter Center Report on village elections in 2000, the head of the Department of Basic Governance and Community in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Zhan Chengfu, was asked about vote buying and gift giving during an election visit. He replied, "Can we categorize offering cigarettes or a simple meal as vote buying?" He answered his own question with "probably not" (Carter Center, 2000). One of America's founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, held the same impression that small gifts of food and drink did not constitute vote buying.

The third and most explicit form of vote buying is handing out cash for votes. Both Western and most Chinese scholars view this form as a corrupt practice. The amount can vary from 5 yuan (\$0.75) to 1,500 yuan (\$220) for a single ballot. Local and national newspapers tend to report the most excessive cases. For example, during a spring 2006 village election, one village candidate in Huhehaota municipality, Inner Mongolia, paid 662 villagers 1,000 yuan apiece (Liu, 2006). A 2008 press report details how one village candidate in Guangdong province spent a total of 1.6 million yuan (\$235,000) for a single election ("Guangdong Dongyuan

Villager," 2008). Of course, the extreme examples receive the most attention from the Chinese and English press, and this paints a bleak picture of the election process. However, most cases of vote buying or bribery to influence elections are much less sensational and never make the headlines. For instance, most rural candidates do not have over 100,000 yuan readily available to spend on an election.

All three types of vote-buying outcomes present a challenge for the local and national leadership. Yet, some higher officials recognize that vote buying exists within the political spaces that open up after the introduction of direct elections for village leaders, but before legal reforms are enacted and fully implemented. For example, in a 2008 report, a leading official from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Wang Jinhua, the deputy director of the Department of Basic Governance and Community, points out three difficulties in dealing with election bribery at the village level (Li et al., 2008). First, the current laws (up to 2008) do not clearly identify specific election bribery practices. Second, vote sellers are reluctant to testify against vote buyers. Third, there are no specific sanctions against election bribery. Therefore, the worst punishment for the offending candidate is disqualification from the election. Wang acknowledged that over the last few years, vote-buying practices have become more prevalent in village elections (Li et al., 2008).

Emergence of Vote-Buying Practices

Much of the research on vote buying suggests that the practice emerges due to a number of social, political, economic, and institutional factors (Hicken, 2007). The Chinese and Western literature on vote buying overlap and vary among these four factors.

Social and political factors involve the use of material gifts and cash to increase turnout. Rather than using cash and material incentives to change the minds of voters, candidates use these incentives to get their supporters to the polls (Nichter, 2008; Schedler, 2002). This suggests that the emergence of vote buying is a party (or individual candidate) strategy to target strong support. Nichter (2008) examines elections in Argentina and suggests that the candidate (party) use of material incentives to influence votes reflects turnout buying rather than vote buying. Several Chinese scholars have made a similar argument regarding village elections (Lin, 2007; Wang & Fu, 2007). For example, candidates who are from a specific family clan will use an election banquet or even cash gifts in little red envelopes (*hongbao*) to get extended family members to the polls on Election Day (Lin, 2007). There are also natural groupings within the village, such as small groups (*xiaozu*), where villagers have common interests and tend to back a specific candidate. These represent small voting blocs within the village committee elections, and vote buying is used to solidify these internal groups.

However, since the mid- to late-1990s, local leaders in some townships and villages have had to use material incentives just to get *any* villagers to attend mass assemblies, including elections. This is an interesting twist to the vote- and turnout-buying argument. In many villages, especially in the poorer, more remote mountainous regions, attendance in village assemblies has been dramatically decreasing due to temporary labor migration to local cities and reduced

authority of village leadership over the local economy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the village (brigade) leadership had wide authority over land use, agricultural inputs, crop choice, grain rations, and jobs in rural factories. During this period, when village leaders called a mass assembly all villagers attended without delay. However, the introduction of market reforms in the 1980s changed village dynamics and ended village cadre control over agricultural inputs and local factory jobs. This also eliminated the incentive for villagers to attend village assemblies, as villagers' livelihood became more detached from the village leader's decisions (except for land that is still collectively owned and managed by the villager leadership). As a result of lower turnout, local cadres have resorted to offering small gifts, such as shirts, pens, or food and drink, to increase attendance in village assemblies (Oi & Rozelle. 2000). In a rural Shaanxi village, during a 2004 interview with the village leader and party secretary, cadres admitted that they announce a village-wide assembly only once every three years for elections, and even then they need to provide small material incentives just to get villagers to attend the election.²

The appearance of vote brokers is also related to turnout buying and reflects a more sophisticated and localized vote-buying practice. For example, in Taiwan, political parties and candidates use vote brokers to approach individual voters. Taiwan has a long history of vote buying, from the introduction of local elections in the 1950s and 1960s when opposition parties were illegal to post-1987 when multiparty national elections were first allowed (Rigger, 1999). Vote buying became a more pervasive practice after the 1987 political reforms and the end of martial law on the island. A 1992 survey of Kaohsiung City, the second largest city in Taiwan, revealed that 45% of respondents admitted to selling their votes to vote brokers in the last election (Wang & Kurzman, 2007a). In order to increase turnout and influence voters, vote brokers have to be more than candidate or party representatives dispensing cash and gifts. They need to understand the local district and be close to the constituency. According to Wang and Kurzman (2007b), vote brokers in Taiwan need to be "walking encyclopedias of local knowledge" (p. 64). Vote brokers are friends and neighbors, and they are an important component of the vote-buying process and reaffirm voter commitment to the party or candidates through words (local relations) and actions (gifts). Thus, vote buying, even for national parties and candidates, is very localized and personal.

In recent years, vote brokers have also appeared in mainland China village elections. The terms used are *agents (dailiren)* or *middle people (zhongjianren)* who personally dispense the gifts or cash to voters (Lin, 2007). These rural vote brokers are villagers. They can also be friends, family members, and neighbors who know their fellow villagers very well. The vote brokers as well as the candidates they represent attend the election, and they are able to closely monitor who shows up to the election. In some villages, the vote brokers make sure vote sellers have a stake in the election outcome by withholding partial or full payment until after the election and the "right" candidate wins (Lin, 2007). This is a way to create a situation whereby villagers have a monetary stake in the election outcome. The use of vote brokers in village elections reflects the growing sophistication of vote buyers.

Another political factor is the relaxed judicial system and local police who allow vote-buying practices to develop. In Thailand, Taiwan, and the Philippines, vote

buyers relied on the willingness of local judges and police to look the other way (Wang & Kurzman, 2007b). In Taiwan, weak judicial oversight was a contributing factor in the emergence of vote buying (Rigger, 1999; Wu & Huang, 2004). In China, vote buying in village elections also occurs under the supervision of the local party branch and the township Public Security Bureau (PSB). The township government is in charge of setting up but not interfering with village elections. According to Article 4 of the Organic Law (1998), the township government provides “guidance, support and assistance” to the village committee and election process. Township election duties include candidate and voter registration, scheduling the election, and overseeing final vote count to ensure a competitive nomination and election process. In addition, the nonpopularly elected village party branch and the party secretary are key political figures in the village. According to Article 3 of the Organic Law (1998), the local party branch “play[s] the role of leadership core” in the village and provides guidance and support to ensure villagers practice their “democratic rights.” Thus, how do the local party cadres and township officials view the new vote-buying activities? How can extreme incidents of vote buying where the candidates spend over 100,000 yuan in a single village go unnoticed by the township government or village party branch? Township officials are close to villager activities and the village party secretaries are rural residents. During an interview in 2007, a town official admitted that he knew of the vote-buying activities, but he considered it a village matter and it did not require the attention of the township government or PSB.³ There is no indication that local authorities attempt to protect vote-buying activities, nor are they paid off by wealthy candidates; rather, it seems there is general acquiescence among local officials due to vague laws and unclear sanctions for vote buying.

Economic factors that make office holding attractive, such as management of a profitable collective industry or high land values, are powerful incentives for some candidates who resort to vote buying as a means to gain office. This explanation dominates much of the Chinese literature on vote buying. The most common theme is land. No one owns land in China, and the village land is collectively owned and managed by the village committee. As a result, elected village leaders have control over village land-use contracts. In villages near urban areas, the land values (i.e., value of the land-use contracts) over the last 10 years have rapidly increased. Urbanization and the creation of new suburban industrial parks provide unique opportunities for some village cadres. For instance, if an urban developer approaches a village leader for a portion of land, then the elected leader must first renegotiate villager land-use contracts and pay compensation to villager households. Once villager compensation is agreed upon, the village leader can negotiate a price for the developer’s land-use contract. The leader may then be inclined to keep the cash difference between village compensation and the new contract price. This is how a village party secretary in Shaanxi province explained the process in a 2007 interview. He complained that in the neighboring village, the current village leader spent over 20,000 yuan to buy votes in the last election. When asked how the elected leader could ever make back that kind of money on a village leader salary, the party secretary replied, “It is easy. He will get the 20,000 yuan back and then some within six months after he completes a land deal with the local developers.”⁴ In this case, vote buying is associated with land values.

While there is currently no comprehensive study on vote buying in rural China, reports suggest that vote buying is most prevalent in wealthier villages close to urban centers, such as large metropolitan areas (Beijing, Shanghai, or Shenzhen), provincial capitals (Chengdu, Xian, or Shenyang), district cities, and even smaller county seats. This suggests a spatial dimension to vote buying. However, the distance to urban centers may reflect a variation in the *degree* and type of vote buying rather than whether vote buying exists. The Chinese popular press sensationalizes the extreme cases that are typically in wealthy villages with high land values near urban centers. Yet, academic and government reports from the local Civil Affairs Bureaus suggest that vote buying is also prevalent in some of the more remote villages. The type of vote buying in these villages is less extravagant, such as candidates dispensing cigarettes, wine, or even a few yuan for votes. Therefore, although the price of votes varies with the level of village wealth and geography, the *existence* of vote-buying practices does not vary by economic or geographic factors. This suggests intuitional factors may play a significant role in the emergence of vote buying.

Beyond economic explanations, the two most influential institutional factors in the literature are party systems and the introduction of political reforms. A number of Western scholars suggest that candidate-centered politics are more susceptible to vote buying than party-driven elections (Cary & Shugart, 1995). One of the key factors is intraparty competition, that is, candidates within the same party competing in a single election district (Lijphart, 1994). In this situation, the party platform is no longer an ideological or practical policy tool candidates can use to distinguish themselves from other candidates. Within a single-party system where opposition parties are illegal, the key distinction between candidates in local competitive elections is party vs. nonparty candidates. This occurred in Taiwanese local elections before 1987. In mainland China, village elections have also generated local competition between Chinese Communist Party (CCP) candidates and nonparty candidates. Indeed, in a 2000 survey of 36 villages in Shaanxi province, villagers were more likely to elect nonparty candidates in competitive elections that had an open nomination process and were free from township government or local party branch interference (Kennedy, 2002). While party and nonparty candidates can distinguish themselves in a political race, this may become more difficult when all the candidates are nonparty members. Under this condition, vote buying may be one way to set the candidates apart. In fact, the rise in nonparty candidates may be a contributing factor to the increase in vote-buying reports between 1998 and 2008.

In the Chinese press and academic journals, few articles discuss the presence or absence of CCP candidates in vote-buying scandals. In a number of villages, the party secretary will also run for village leader (L. Li, 1999). Thus, does the opposition candidate need to resort to vote buying to compete? Does the local party secretary also need to resort to vote buying to stay competitive? Indeed, over the last few years there have been a number of local experiments with electing village party secretaries. The most common is a competitive election process among the village party members rather than a village-wide popular election (L. Li, 1999). Still, studies on village party secretary elections to date have focused little attention on vote buying in these contests. Although there are no comprehensive studies on the characteristics of vote buyers, especially CCP

affiliation at the village level, future research might examine the role and behavior of the local party branch and party membership in elections that experience widespread vote buying.

One of the most important institutional factors that influence the emergence of vote buying is election reform (Schaffer, 2008). When the central and local governments fully enforce election reforms that protect citizens from voter intimidation and dramatically reduce the manipulation of the election process, elections become truly competitive. Vote buying emerges when candidates can no longer resort to threats and procedural manipulation (Lehoucq, 2007).

Vote buying is a reflection of competitive elections and successful democratic (procedural) reforms. It is hard to imagine any political system with competitive elections that has not gone through a period of vote buying. Almost all the industrialized democracies have a history of vote buying. Vote buying dramatically increased after the 1832 reforms in Great Britain that expanded the electorate and improved the quality of elections (Lehoucq, 2007). In America, vote buying was pervasive during the 1800s, especially after the influx of European immigrants in the 1880s. New democracies in Eastern Europe and Asia, such as Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines, have experienced (and continue to experience) vote buying (Lehoucq, 2003; Pye, 1997; Schedler, 2002). It is part of the electoral reform process and reflects a successful implementation of procedural democracy.

Throughout the 1990s, village election research focused on the competitiveness of the village elections, township interference in the village election process, and the dual relationship between the popularly elected village leaders and the non-popularly elected party secretary.⁵ There were very few reports of vote buying at the village level. In fact, the flood of vote-buying reports did not occur until *after* the 1998 Organic Law that ensured an open nomination process. In addition, greater top-down pressure to fully implement the 1998 Organic Law from the national and provincial levels was a key factor in improving the quality of village elections. Positive reports from the Ministry of Civil Affairs as well as the Carter Center indicated that village elections were becoming more competitive. Indeed, several Chinese scholars and key Ministry of Civil Affairs officials made the connection between election reform and vote buying. In a 2000 Carter Center report, the head of the Department of Basic Governance and Community in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Zhan Chengfu, believed that "having a vote buying problem was a good sign because it meant elections did take place and there was competition." Z. Li (2007) finds that vote buying emerges when election reforms create a shift from office buying to vote buying. This shift is a positive institutional development and reflects an advance in the village election process. The argument is similar to that of several American scholars, who suggest that the shift from office to vote buying means the voter's choice is important and the candidate must distribute his or her bid among voters (Neeman & Orosel, 2006).

Distinction Between Outcomes of Vote-Buying Practices and Vote Buying as an Outcome

The Chinese and Western literature draw attention to several outcomes of vote-buying practices that are both negative and positive. The harmful outcomes

include unequal access to local political offices and misuse of public resources. Immediate solutions for these negative outcomes require stricter laws and a stronger legal system. Possible positive outcomes are greater accountability and representation of underrepresented groups. The third positive outcome is the actual existence of vote buying. Vote buying is the result of competitive elections and a desired outcome at the early stages of democratization. In this case, there is no need for an immediate solution to the vote-buying phenomenon. Instead, vote-buying practices can *eventually* be reduced through a more efficient legal system and a change in voter attitudes toward vote buying (i.e., voter education).

One negative outcome that dominates the Western and Chinese literature is how vote buying subverts democratic practices and equal access to political power (Chen & Zhou, 2007; Lehoucq, 2003; Lin, 2007; Stokes, 2007). Only wealthy individuals and groups can afford to buy enough votes to win office, and voters are literally selling their interests to the highest bidder. The best way to resolve this problem is to enact and enforce strict laws against vote buying with penalties ranging from fines to jail time (Lin, 2007; Schaffer, 2008). Another way to bring vote buying under control is voter education (Wang & Fu, 2007).

Still, in rural China, full implement of the election law down to the village level is difficult to achieve. It took over a decade and two national laws (Organic Law 1988 and 1998) before most villages experienced relatively competitive elections. The key mechanism that brought about the widespread implementation of village elections was the commitment of local government officials at the township and county levels to not interfere with the election process. This came about through a combination of continued pressure from higher authorities on county and township officials as well as villagers' demands and push from below that provided the opportunity to improve the quality of village elections across rural China. However, it takes a well-developed legal system, such as an independent judicial authority and local PSB, to successfully stem vote buying. Local judges and PSB officers have to be willing and able to identify and prosecute offenders at the village level. This is the exact problem that many Chinese scholars and Ministry of Civil Affairs officials point out. It may be easier to fully implement competitive elections than it is to eliminate vote buying. The lingering question for the national leadership is does vote buying have to be resolved before the expansion of direct elections for township and county leaders.

Another negative outcome of vote buying that tends to stand out in the Chinese literature is the elected leader's misuse of village (public) resources. Some candidates will spend huge sums of money and extend favors once in office in an attempt to control village resources, such as land-use contracts and collective enterprises. The danger for village constituents occurs when this type of elected leader does not plan to run for reelection. In this case, the elected leader may use his or her position to loot local resources as much as he or she can before the next election. This can undermine the function of elections to make elected leaders more accountable to their constituents through periodic election (or reelection). Several Chinese scholars suggest that the best way to resolve the problem of vote buying and misuse of public resources is to eliminate village committee authority over local resources, such as land and collective enterprises (Dang, 2008). The logic is that if you abolish the authority over village economic or profitable resources, then there will be no incentive for unscrupulous candi-

dates to buy votes. However, this may also reduce the role of the village leader to a powerless cadre whose only function is to carry out unpopular policy demands from the township authorities, such as family planning. This also removes the incentive for qualified candidates to run for office. While these village elections may be free from vote buying, the election process may become a meaningless exercise to elect someone to a politically hollow position. In addition, reducing the profit incentive of the elected office may not be a viable solution if election reform is extended to the township and county levels.

Within the literature, there are two narrow positive outcomes from vote-buying practices and one broad positive institutional development. The first outcome is associated with the shift from office buying to vote buying. This reflects the institutional development from appointments to local direct elections. Several Chinese scholars suggest that this shift spreads the bribe wealth more evenly among village voters, that is, from single authority figure to the village constituency (Z. Li, 2007). As opposed to scholars who argue that vote buying reduces accountability, these scholars contend that vote buying actually increases accountability of the candidates and elected leaders. Villagers still have the electoral authority to recall the elected leader or kick him or her out of office in the following election. In fact, vote buying does not ensure victory. Even candidates who spend huge sums of money can lose the election. For example, in 2008, one losing candidate in Guangdong province paid up to 1,500 yuan for individual ballots and spent over 200,000 yuan by the end of the election ("Individual Spends," 2008). In 2007, a candidate for a village election in a Beijing district paid 1.5 million yuan for the election and was still defeated ("Candidate for Village Leader," 2007). Of course, voters have to be aware of the looting problem and whether the candidates or elected leaders intend to run for reelection. Nevertheless, China is still in the early stages of election reform, and the shift from office to vote buying is a positive outcome.

The second positive outcome is greater representation for underrepresented groups. One of the ways candidates buy votes is through promises made to villagers to help with individual or family problems, such as legal permits or registration problems. Stokes (2007) argues that it is the poor whose interests are lost after a vote-buying transaction is complete. However, if candidates keep their campaign promises (promised favors), then this may provide poorer residents with access to elected leaders that they otherwise could not obtain. Typically, poorer villagers do not have long-standing relations with village cadres and the party branch. Thus, one of the few ways these rural residents can get some social or political benefits from the village committee is through the sale of their votes. This is similar to the argument that vote buying played a positive role for immigrant communities in late 1800s America and the political machines.

However, beyond vote-buying outcomes is the view that vote buying in and of itself is a positive and desired outcome. If vote buying emerges as a result of competitive elections with an open nomination process, then vote buying may be a desired outcome. This is a crucial development in a country that is in the early stages of election reforms. In China, indirect elections occur at every level of government, from the National People's Congress to the municipal leadership. There are also direct elections for local People's Congress representatives, but these elections typically have a closed nomination process. That is, the candidates

are preselected. There are also party member elections for party officials and local party secretaries. This is part of the new election reforms that aim to develop intraparty democracy. However, popular elections with an open nomination process and noninterference from higher authorities only occur at the village level. This explains why the largest proportion of vote-buying reports is associated with village elections.

Indeed, most of the bribery cases above the village level are considered office buying rather than vote buying. At annual meetings for the National People's Congress, there is a flurry of expensive gift giving among top official and delegates who wish to be "elected" into higher positions (Barboza, 2009). There are also numerous cases of party secretaries at the county, municipal, and provincial levels arrested for accepting bribes for various promotions and favors ("China Punishes," 2007). At higher administrative levels, there is a narrow constituency of a few individuals, and office seekers may attempt to provide gifts to a single official as opposed to vote buying at the village level, where the individual candidate provides gifts to a large constituency. Thus, one expected and desired outcome of election reforms is the shift from office to vote buying.

Concluding Thoughts

China is currently experiencing political growing pains that occur when the national leadership is attempting election and legal reforms at the same time. This creates political gaps or spaces between election and legal reforms. First is the gap that arises *after* the reduction of direct appointments for leading government officials but *before* the introduction of popular elections for most high authorities. Second is the interim *after* the promotion of direct elections, but *before* an independent judiciary and legal system is fully functioning.

Vote buying exists in these political spaces. While vote buying may be generally regarded as a corrupt practice, it also reflects positive procedural democratic development. In the early stages of democratization it may very well be the price of democracy. Viewed in this light, vote buying is an important indicator of democratic progress. Thus, for China, vote buying should not be perceived as a hindrance to further election reforms. In fact, in the near future, successful competitive elections for township government heads *should* exhibit signs of vote buying.

Notes

¹As stated below, it is office buying that is a serious issue at these higher levels of party government.

²Interview, June 11, 2004.

³Interview, January 5, 2007.

⁴Interview, July 12, 2007.

⁵For the most comprehensive collection of articles in Chinese and English on village elections in China, see *China Elections and Governance* at <http://www.chinaelections.org/>.

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