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Some Empirical Evidence”**

Author: Yang Zhong

Issue: Jul. 2004

Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics*



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Political Culture and Participation in the Chinese Countryside: Some Empirical Evidence

Yang Zhong, *The University of Tennessee*

Introduction

Democracy in rural China has attracted much attention in recent years. During President Bill Clinton's visit to China in 1998, he made a public stop at a village outside Xian to chat with a few Chinese villagers about village elections in China. In fact, village democracy has become one of the rare subject matters that the Chinese government is eager to publicize and the Western academia and media are interested to investigate. The Chinese government, often through the Ministry of Civil Affairs, has organized and allowed foreign journalists, social scientists, dignitaries, diplomats, and political, academic, and social organizations (such as the U.S. International Republican Institute, the Ford Foundation, the Carter Center, and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations) to go to Chinese rural areas to observe village self-government and elections. There is no doubt that the Chinese government intends to showcase its village self-government to the outside world, hoping to improve its tarnished image from the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. Western media and governments are interested in this new development in China in the hope that this will be the beginning of the long-delayed democratic transition in the most populous country in the world.

It is ironic that the Chinese government first introduced democratic elections into the Chinese countryside since the Chinese government often argues that the main obstacles to further democratization are low educational levels among the vast Chinese peasant population and the lack of economic development in rural China. In fact, the Chinese government is not alone in holding a negative perception of Chinese peasantry. Historically, Chinese peasantry has

been viewed as a conservative social and political force. A popular view among Chinese intellectuals and the general population in China is still that Chinese peasantry is one of the main obstacles to Chinese democracy due to their conservative political culture, despite the fact that meaningful villager committee elections are taking place in many Chinese villages and the recent scholarship suggesting that Chinese peasants are very conscious about their rights and are willing to protect their rights through "rightful resistance" (O'Brien and Li 1995, 756-783). In fact, some scholars even suggest that the Chinese countryside may end up leading democratization to the rest of China (White 1992, 277).

Is this popular negative view about Chinese peasantry valid? What is the current status of political culture and participation among Chinese peasants? How do Chinese peasants compare to Chinese urban residents with regard to their political views on democracy and economic reforms? Answers to these questions are crucial to understanding political developments and in predicting the path of democratization in the most populous country in the world. Unfortunately, there have been few empirical studies on this subject in contemporary Chinese scholarship. This paper attempts to provide some answers to these questions by drawing findings from a unique survey conducted in Jiangsu province. It is not the author's intention to generalize these findings from southern Jiangsu province, which is one of the most developed rural areas in China, to the rest of China's rural population. Findings from this study demonstrate that the Chinese countryside is more stratified than many people think and that the political culture of peasants in China's developed rural areas is quite advanced and does not lag far behind that of China's urban residents. As rural areas in the Chinese hinterland become more economically developed, Chinese peasants in those regions will take on the political culture characteristics of today's Jiangsu peasants, which will provide a brighter

future for further democratization in rural China.

Data

This research is based on a random public opinion survey conducted in the summer of 2000 in 12 Jiangsu counties. Jiangsu is a major populous province and one of the most economically and culturally developed areas in China. Southern Jiangsu is historically known as *yu mi zhi xiang* or land of fish and rice. Jiangsu's economic development has accelerated since the economic reforms of the late 1970s due to its successful rural industrialization drive led by the collective economy of township and village enterprises (TVEs).¹ Due to the province's long-held respect for knowledge and education and its recent economic development, the educational level and literacy rate of the rural population in southern Jiangsu are much higher than those in most other rural areas in China.² If we accept the positive linkage between economic development on the one hand and democratization and development of democratic political culture on the other in Western literature, it seems that Jiangsu offers one of the best sites to study how far democracy can develop in rural China.

The survey, conducted in cooperation with a Chinese research institute,³ draws from the literate rural adult population (with rural residency status or *hukou*) over 18 years of age residing in 21 towns and townships in southern Jiangsu.⁴ Our sample obtained 1,162 valid responses of 1,270, using multi-stage random sampling procedures.⁵ The gender distribution among our respondents was 60% male to 40% female due to the fact that we excluded illiterates in our survey and the illiteracy rate in China is higher among women than among men. About half (52%) of the people in the survey were below 40 years of age. We employed advanced and trained undergraduate and graduate students as field workers to conduct the survey. A field worker brought the questionnaire to the randomly-chosen

Yang Zhong is professor of political science at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is currently working on a book manuscript on political culture and participation in rural China.

individual respondent who filled out the questionnaire; the field worker then brought the questionnaire back to the survey center. As a result of this survey method, the response rate is close to 92%.⁶ Care was taken to minimize respondent effects and linguistic misinterpretations. The original wording of our questionnaire, first designed in the U.S., was reviewed by our cooperating research institute in China to fit the Chinese social and cultural context. Respondents were assured of absolute confidentiality and encouraged to provide answers that best captured their true feelings.⁷

Findings from the Survey

Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, in their classical work *The Civic Culture*, define political culture as “the political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population” (Almond and Verba 1989, 13). Democratic political culture involves cognitions and feelings toward democratic values or principles such as political tolerance, appreciation of liberty, consciousness of civic/political rights, support for an independent media, and support for competitive elections (Gibson, Dutch, and Tedin 1992). A democratic citizen is one who believes in political tolerance and dissent, individual liberty, who is conscious about his or her civic and political rights, who favors more independent media, and who supports and participates in competitive elections. Level of political interest or apathy is also an important ingredient of political culture.

Political interest as psychological involvement in politics and public affairs often leads to more active political participation (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978, 71). Any study of political culture in China should also touch upon the significant economic reforms that have

Findings from this study demonstrate that the Chinese countryside is more stratified than many people think and that the political culture of peasants in China’s developed rural areas is quite advanced and does not lag far behind that of China’s urban residents.

been intricately related to political changes in that country. Many scholars have long argued that there is a strong correlation between free-market economics and democracy (Schumpeter 1942; Moore 1966; Lindblom 1977; Dahl 1989; Almond 1991). Moreover, as indicated earlier, political culture should concern citizens’ subjective evaluation of their government and policies.

Levels of Political Interest and Participation

Literature on Chinese political culture and participation often describes three relatively distinct stages with regard to

mass political interest in contemporary China. The first stage was before the 1949 Chinese Communist revolution when most Chinese seemed to be politically apathetic and ignorant (Zhu, Zhao, and Li 1990). This stage was also characterized by what one China scholar typified as a “popular isolation from politics” (Townsend 1967, 10–20). The second stage between the 1950s and 1970s was marked by a “participation explosion” (Townsend 1967, 10–20) due to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) sustained mobilization efforts that led to unprecedented enthusiasm on the part of the population about public and political affairs, especially during the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution. In fact, political participation (in terms of private citizens’ efforts to influence public affairs) in the Chinese countryside was much more active than many people think during this period. Peasants used various means to protect and voice their interest, including state institutions (such as local assemblies, mass organizations, elections, and media) and non-conventional activities (such as passive resistance and collective violence) (Burns 1988, 1–2). During the third stage, which covers most of the post-Mao reform period and continues to the present, a popular perception among China observers is that the Chinese people are consumed with material goods and making money and have become increasingly apolitical and pragmatic.⁸ Deng Xiaoping’s slogan “Getting rich is glorious” carries the day in modern China.

However, our Jiangsu rural survey shows that this perception of a low level of political interest may not be the case. As Table 1 shows, about two thirds of our respondents were still interested or very interested in national affairs. This figure is surprisingly close

Table 1
Level of Political Interest among Jiangsu Peasants (%)

	Very Interested	Interested	Not Very Interested	Not Interested	Hard to Say	N
Interested in National Affairs	12.6 (14.1)*	55.8 (65.0)	22.3 (19.5)	5.4 (1.4)	3.8	1160
Interested in Local Affairs	6.0 (22.1)	56.6 (64.9)	27.1 (14.9)	4.3 (1.1)	5.8	1160
	Whenever We See Each Other	Very Often	Occasionally	Never	Hard to Say	N
Discussion of politics with others	2.5 (2.4)	41.8 (42.9)	47.8 (51.1)	5.7 (2.9)	2.8 (0.7)	1160

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

*Figures in parentheses are combined findings from surveys conducted in Beijing in 1995 and 1997.

to that found in two mass surveys among Beijing residents conducted in the 1990s.⁹ A slightly lower percentage of our respondents (about 62%) cared for local public affairs. This figure is more than 25% lower than what we found among urban residents in Beijing. However, the bottom line is that the majority of the peasants in our survey showed some or strong interest in national as well as local public affairs. These findings seem to contradict the popular perception that most Chinese people, especially most Chinese peasants, are apolitical and not interested in public affairs and politics. In fact, there are many national and local issues that Chinese peasants are truly concerned about, such as corruption at various governmental levels, abuse of power by local and village government officials, and government rural policies.

Even though most of our respondents were still interested in public affairs, the number of people who talked about politics with others was lower. Less than half of the respondents in our survey said they talked about politics often with their family members, relatives, colleagues, and friends (see Table 1). Yet, this number is still very impressive given the stereotype about political inactivity among Chinese peasants. Also, this figure is very close to that in the Beijing surveys, indicating that rural residents in Jiangsu are almost as active as urban residents in Beijing in talking about politics and public affairs.

Next, we wanted to find out how often the rural residents in our survey engage in participatory political acts.¹⁰ Political participation is a complicated and ambiguous term in China. In general, political participation in China can be divided between officially sponsored and mobilized participation and unofficial and spontaneous participation. We dealt with both in our surveys. In the former, we included voting in government-sponsored elections to local people's congresses and villagers' committees. As Table 2 shows, only about a third of our respondents participated in the most recently held election to the county people's congress and about half participated in the most recently held township people's congress elections. Unlike people's congress elections at higher levels (city, provincial, and national), elections to both county and township people's congress are direct elections, meaning regular voters cast votes directly for their representatives. Since people's congresses at both county and township levels are primarily rubber-stamp organizations, people in China generally show low

levels of interest in these organizations. As a result, the government has to make great efforts to mobilize people to vote in these elections to legitimize the existence and functions of these "representative" organs. Even though the voting in these elections is government mobilized, the percentage of voting in these elections in Jiangsu's rural areas is still lower than many would expect. This is primarily due to the fact that failure to show up for these elections is no longer treated as a punishable act by the authorities.

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, villagers' committee elections have attracted much attention both at home and abroad. Just how many Chinese peasants vote in village elections? The figures vary significantly from one report to the next. The Chinese press routinely reports voter turnout in these elections at above 90%. In a document prepared by the Taicang (a county-status city in southern Jiangsu) government, it reported a 99.4% voter turnout in village elections held in Taicang in 1997 (Taicang Municipal Government 1999). Tianjian Shi reports around 76% of the people in his 1990–1991 survey participated in the semi-competitive elections of local work unit leaders (village elections included), even though the figure does not differentiate unit leaders' elections between urban and rural areas (Shi 1999, 1123).

Our survey finds much lower peasant voter turnout in village elections in the areas covered by our study. Approximately half (48%) of the eligible voters in our survey reported they actually went to the central polling station to cast their vote while 42% did not (see Table 2). Interestingly enough, the voter turnout in village elections in our surveyed areas is very close to that in township/town people's congress elections, while peasants' participation in county people's congress elections is the lowest among the three.

The low voter turnout in villagers' committee elections has much to do with institutional constraints and limited choices in these elections in Jiangsu.¹¹ For the most part, nomination of villagers' committee candidates is still very much controlled by the township/town government and the village communist party branch. Open nomination (or "sea election") was not widely practiced in Jiangsu when the survey was conducted. In addition, open campaigning by candidates was discouraged. What is even more detrimental to the effectiveness of villagers' committee elections in China is the limited power of villagers' committees, which are subject to the authority of the village communist branch. The village party branch secretary is the so-called first hand, or the most important cadre in the village, while the villagers' committee chair is usually the deputy party secretary. All major decisions have to be approved first by the village party branch before adoption and implementation by the villagers' committee. In addition, the power and authority of the villagers' committee is also circumscribed by higher authorities, especially township/town governments. Given these institutional constraints, it is not surprising that peasants in China lose interest in villagers' committee elections.

Apart from officially organized and sanctioned political participation, there are also spontaneous yet conventional political acts initiated by private citizens in China. In our survey, we included voicing opinions or writing letters to village and township/town government leaders and deputies to the county and township/town people's congresses. As shown in Table 3, close to a quarter of our respondents voiced opinions to their village officials and township/town officials. Much fewer people ever contacted their deputies to the township/town and county people's congresses. Apparently, many people were not shy in contacting

Table 2
Participation in Elections (%)

	Participated	Can't Remember	Didn't Participate	N
Participated in the most recent village election	48.2	9.1	42.4	1156
Participated in the most recent township/town people's congress election	49.4	6.1	40.9	1160
Participated in the most recent county people's congress election	34.3	6.6	55.4	1160

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

Table 3
Spontaneous Political Participatory Acts (%)

	Contacted and Voiced Opinions	No Contact	Don't Remember	N
Contacting village officials in the past year	23.6	69.8	6.4	1156
Contacting township/town officials in the past year	23.0	76.7		1156
Contacting deputies to local people's congresses in the past year	5.7	88.1	5.8	1156

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Hard to Say	N
Suggestions and complaints made by the public to the government are often ignored	26.7	45.5	15.9	2.9	8.7	1157

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

local government officials, even though it remains doubtful whether contacting officials could effectively affect officials' behavior. In our survey, more than 70% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that opinions and concerns voiced by the people to government officials are most often ignored (see Table 3). Very few people in our survey ever contacted deputies to the local people's congresses, even though they are supposed to be official representatives for the people. Obviously, the local people's congresses have yet to become effective representative, legislative, and supervising bodies in China.

Selected Democratic Values among Peasants

There has always been serious debate about whether traditional Chinese political culture is inherently authoritarian

and incompatible with modern democratic values (Goldman 1994, 1). Chinese peasants in particular are suspected as carriers of authoritarian culture. In fact, the absence of democratization in China is often blamed on the Chinese peasants who are believed to have a low level of democratic political culture and lack democratic traditions. Moreover, the Chinese people have lived under communism for over half a century, which is likely to leave an indelible imprint on their political orientation and behavior. On the other hand, some China scholars have predicted that marketization of the Chinese economy will inevitably lead to a gradual process of political democratization, if one believes in the linkage between economic development and democratization (White 1993; White 1994; Overholt 1993). What, then, is the picture of mass political culture among Chinese peasants toward democratic elections, pluralism, tolerance, and

authorities? Our survey attempts to shed some light in this regard.

Findings presented in Table 4 show that peasants in our survey strongly endorsed democratic elections. An overwhelming majority of our respondents supported the concept that township and county officials, who are currently not directly elected by voters, should be popularly elected to their positions. Close to 60% seemed to support the idea that state leaders should also be promoted through elections. In another survey question, we asked whether all village Party secretaries should be popularly elected. An overwhelming majority of our respondents (82%) favored popular election of vil-

lage Party secretaries. A major constraint and drawback in current village self-government in China, as mentioned earlier, is the fact that the village Party secretary is the most powerful cadre (or the "first-hand") and the elected village committee chairman is usually a deputy to the Party secretary. Yet, the Party secretary is not popularly elected. The lack of power by the villagers' committee chairman significantly reduced the meaningfulness and effectiveness of village elections in China.

It is even more surprising to find that a majority of our respondents were not willing to give up on democratic elections even if elected officials did not solve their problems and if elections created chaos, indicating a strong belief in democracy. It should be noted that the Chinese people have a special fear of chaos or *luan* after experiencing centuries of upheavals, revolutions, and instabilities. The chaotic Cultural

Table 4
Selected Democratic Values I (%)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Hard to Say	N
All county and township/town officials should be elected to their positions	59.8	33.6	2.6	0.3	3.4	1156
It is better to appoint state officials	9.6	23.6	39.1	18.3	9.0	1156
If village elections do not solve village problems, it is then unnecessary to hold village elections	12.9	23.4	34.8	18.5	10.0	1156
Elections should be abandoned if they create chaos and instabilities	9.9	22.3	36.9	20.1	10.4	1156
It would not be necessary for ordinary people to be involved in the decision-making process if the officials are capable and trusted by the masses	8.8	24.3	37.8	23.0	5.7	1156
It would be best that ordinary people are involved in the decision-making process regardless of their knowledge of the issues	18.3	34.3	29.5	8.9	8.7	1156

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

Table 5
Selected Democratic Values II (%)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Hard to Say	N
The press should be given more freedom to expose wrong doings such as official corruption	62.5 (66.7)*	28.4 (26.5)	3.5 (6.0)	0.3 (0.7)	5.1	1157
Non-official media should be allowed to co-exist with official state media	32.3	42.9	7.3	2.0	15.0	1157
Regardless of one's political beliefs, he or she is entitled to freely express his or her views	57.6 (40.8)	32.0 (45.5)	5.1 (11.9)	0.4 (1.8)	4.4	1157
Assemblies and demonstrations can cause social chaos, therefore they should be banned	14.0	24.5	36.1	14.8	10.3	1156
The well-being of the country is mainly dependent upon the state leaders, not the masses	12.4 (31.8)	23.9 (39.4)	30.8 (23.9)	27.5 (4.9)	5.1	1157
Currently what China needs most is political reform	23.1 (30.4)	33.4 (49.3)	16.7 (17.0)	3.5 (2.5)	22.9	1157

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

*Figures in parentheses are combined findings from surveys conducted in Beijing in 1995 and 1997.

Revolution is still fresh in peoples' minds. Capitalizing on this fear, the Chinese government, since the Tiananmen Democracy Movement in 1989, has relentlessly emphasized the need for stability for greater economic development. Chinese leaders have used the stability argument to suppress dissent and garner regime legitimacy by equating democratization with chaos and constantly reminding Chinese people that the unstable situation in some Eastern European countries and Russia in their transition to democracy could happen to China (Zhong 1996, 214–215). Therefore, the survey findings are especially interesting given the Chinese peoples' traditional concern for stability over chaos. Moreover, we also found a strong sense of popular participation. Over 60% of people in our survey did not believe in elite politics and over 50% supported a citizen's right to participate regardless of one's knowledge and educational levels. These findings contradict the negative perception of low political democratic culture among Chinese peasantry.

Table 5 presents findings on attitudes toward press freedom, tolerance, political efficacy, and the necessity for political reforms. Press freedom seems to be strongly favored by our respondents. An overwhelming majority of the peasants in our survey believed that the press should be given more freedom to expose wrong doings such as official corruption, and a significant majority favored the existence of a non-official media alongside the official state media. Close to 90% of our respondents agreed that one is entitled to the same right of free speech as everyone else regardless of his or her political

beliefs. When asserted that assemblies and demonstrations should be banned if they cause social instability, more than half of our respondents disagreed. In addition, peasants in our survey seemed to have strong internal political efficacy. Close to 60% of our respondents believed that the well-being of the country is mainly dependent upon the masses,

These findings seem to defy the conventional wisdom that Chinese peasants are socially and politically conservative forces and hold values incompatible with democracy.

not state leaders. This indicates a strong sense of confidence in themselves among our peasant respondents. Moreover, over 50% of the people in our survey believed that political reforms are sorely needed in China. These findings seem to defy the conventional wisdom that Chinese peasants are socially and politically conservative forces and hold values incompatible with democracy.

In fact, on most of these questions, our peasant respondents in Jiangsu fared equally well or even better than the urban residents in our Beijing surveys. For example, on the question upon whom the well-being of the country relies, most people in our Jiangsu rural survey chose the masses, while most Beijing residents selected state

leaders. Findings like these are indeed thought-provoking and need more research and exploration.

Attitudes toward Economic Reforms

As mentioned earlier, many scholars have long argued that there is a strong correlation between the free market economic system and democracy. Given that connection, it is interesting to discover how Chinese peasants feel about the on-going market-driven reforms started in the late 1970s. It is apparent that the economic reforms have dramatically changed the face of China, making it one of the fastest growing economies in the world. These reforms have markedly improved the standard of living for ordinary Chinese. Yet, these reforms have also brought negative consequences such as inflation, declining social welfare programs, corruption, a widening gap between the rich and the poor, and job insecurity. In our surveys conducted in Beijing in the 1990s, we found lukewarm support for the adoption of a complete or predominantly market economy (Zhong, Chen, and Scheb 1998, 773). These economic reforms started in the rural countryside, where they received strong initial support from the peasantry who benefited from the rural reforms in the 1980s. However, since the late 1980s the economic situation in rural China has deteriorated and the income gap between urban residents and peasants has widened to the disadvantage of the peasants due to declining prices for agricultural products, the rising cost of farming, and excessive fee collection by local governments. Given the new peasants' circumstances, we were

Table 6
Feelings toward Economic Reforms (%)

	Total Planning Economy	Predominantly Planning Economy	Half Planning Half Market	Predominantly Market Economy	Total Market Economy	Hard to Say	N
What kind of economic system do you prefer?	0.4 (2.9)*	6.9 (14.3)	9.8 (26.9)	54.1 (38.0)	2.4 (2.7)	26.0 (18.3)	1152
	Total Public ownership	Predominantly Public ownership	Half Public Half Private	Predominantly Private Ownership	Total Private Ownership	Hard to Say	N
What kind of ownership system do you prefer?	0.5 (3.2)	41.8 (52.7)	14.5 (20.0)	14.3 (7.1)	0.4 (1.9)	28.1 (15.6)	1152
	Too Fast	Fast	Appropriate	Slow	Too Slow	Hard to say	N
What do you think of the pace of economic reform?	2.2 (6.3)	17.6 (20.6)	39.0 (42.6)	14.7 (9.7)	5.6 (1.7)	20.6 (19.1)	1152

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

*Figures in parentheses are combined findings from surveys conducted in Beijing in 1995 and 1997.

interested in what peasants thought about the market-driven reforms. We particularly wanted to tap into the opinions and attitudes of the rural residents toward economic and ownership systems, the speed of economic reforms, and widening income inequality.

The responses to our questions on preferences for economic systems and ownership structures showed an interesting pattern. With regard to economic systems, very few preferred a total central planning economy or CPE or a predominantly CPE genuinely mixed economy (see Table 6). Also not many people (only 9.8%) preferred a genuinely mixed economy. Compared to data from our Beijing surveys, these figures are much lower. Around 56% of our respondents preferred either mostly market economy or a total market economy. This figure is much higher than that in our Beijing surveys. A quarter of the people in our Jiangsu rural survey had hard time in deciding what system would be best for them. It seems that a market economy, which has been favored and promoted by the government since the early 1980s, is more acceptable and more supported by rural peasants in Jiangsu than among urban residents in Beijing. This is probably due to the fact that Beijing urban residents have been more affected negatively than Chinese peasants by the market-driven reforms which have led to layoffs of state-owned enterprises. Also, Chinese peasants are more economically independent and do not receive much in the way of state welfare and subsidies.

When it comes to forms of ownership of the means of production, most

of the peasants in our survey still preferred predominantly public ownership, even though the figure is lower than that in our Beijing surveys. Close to 15% supported an evenly mixed ownership system, with very few favoring totally private ownership. The support for a predominantly public ownership system among our respondents can be contributed to two factors. The first is the official policy of maintaining a predominantly public ownership system in the economy even though private business (including foreign investment) has made tremendous strides and has been playing an increasingly important role in the Chinese economy in the past two decades. The second factor is the predominant position of collective township and village enterprises (TVEs) that existed in Jiangsu. In fact, southern Jiangsu is well known for its successful collective TVEs, which have been referred to as the "Sunan model" of rural economic development in China.

When asked about the speed of economic reforms, close to 40% of our respondents seemed satisfied with the current pace. However, around 20% thought the reforms have been moving fast (17.6%) or too fast (2.2%). Interestingly, about an equal number of the respondents believed the economic reforms have been moving either slow (14.7%) or too slow (5.6%). Again, these last two figures are higher than those in our Beijing surveys, suggesting peasants in our Jiangsu survey are more reform-minded than the urban residents in Beijing. Once again, around 20% of the respondents had difficulty in answer-

ing the question. These findings show that there is no consensus among our peasant respondents on the pace of economic reform, even though most people seemed content with the current pace of economic reforms.

Economic equality is a major socialist value and used to be touted as a proud achievement by the Chinese Communist Party. During the reform era, however, the income gap has widened significantly. In fact, the income gap in China is on par with some developed capitalist countries and worse than others. For example, the Gini coefficient for China in 2001 is 0.458, higher than those in Japan (0.219), South Korea (0.28) and the United States (0.457), and close to those in Hong Kong (0.487) and Singapore (0.481) (*Lianhe Zhaobao* May 11, 2000, 17; February 10, 2001, 1). The widening income gap often makes many of the less fortunate resentful of the market-driven economic reforms. When asked whether the income gap has become too wide, over 70% of our respondents either agreed or strongly agreed (see Table 7). Obviously, it is a concern for the rural population in our Jiangsu survey. However, when asked whether the government should set an income limit to reduce the widening income gap, more people (46.8%) disapproved of than supported (43.4%) such a move (see Table 7). It might very well be that one's economic standing determines one's position on that issue. Specifically, the less affluent peasants supported a limit on people's income while the well-to-do peasants opposed such a move. Nonetheless, it

Table 7
Feelings about Income Gap (%)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Hard to Say	N
Presently, the income gap between the rich and the poor is getting too big	43.9	38.8	13.2	1.0	2.8	1156
Government should set an income limit to reduce the widening income gap	18.2	25.4	26.0	20.9	9.2	1156

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

is sufficient to say that the notion of an income cap is not popular with a substantial number of the peasants in our survey and the socialist value of income equality is probably disappearing in the Chinese countryside.

Evaluation of Government Performance

How do peasants evaluate the performance of the Chinese government? Perceived government performance can be directly linked to regime legitimacy and political stability. Rural instability has become a major concern for the Chinese government in recent years. We believe that peasants' evaluations of government performance reflect their level of satisfaction and can be used as a predictor of stability in the Chinese countryside. The respondents in our survey were asked to rate the performance of government in a number of issue areas using a scale of 1 to 5 points (1-very poor, 2-poor, 3-fair, 4-good, and 5-very good).

The grades they gave are presented in Table 8. Satisfaction with Chinese government performance varies with different issue areas. On the one hand, a substantial number of the peasants in our survey were not happy with the government's efforts in providing job security or employment, minimizing the gap between the rich and the poor, providing adequate medical care, protecting

the environment, and combating official corruption. In these issue areas, many people simply gave a passing grade (fair) and few rated government performance as good or very good. It seems that the least satisfied areas among our respondents were the widening income gap and official corruption. Over 50% of our respondents gave either poor or very poor grades to government efforts in minimizing the rich-poor gap and over 40% gave similar grades to government performance in reducing official corruption. These two issues are often the sources of instability in China's rural areas. On the other hand, peasants in our survey were more content with the government's efforts in controlling inflation, maintaining social order, family planning, and strengthening national defense. These ratings are understandable. The Chinese government has done a relatively good job in controlling inflation since the late 1990s and the authoritarian nature of the communist regime in China makes it easier to implement policies in the areas of maintaining social stability, family planning, and national defense.

Overall, the evaluation of Chinese government performance is mixed, though there is a considerable level of discontent with government performance in many policy issue areas. It should be noted again that Jiangsu's rural areas are more economically developed than most other rural areas in China. It is

safe to predict that the dissatisfaction level among the peasant population in less developed rural areas should be higher than that in Jiangsu.

Concluding Remarks

Through the survey conducted in Jiangsu, we get a glimpse of the popular political culture and mood among Chinese peasants. Since this survey was done only in the Jiangsu countryside, an economically developed area of China, we do not intend to generalize the findings to the rest of China's rural areas. In addition, it should be noted that one inherent problem with survey research is that responses are often poor guides to predicting the actual behavior of human beings, and our survey is no exception. With these two cautions in mind, we derive the following tentative implications based upon the findings.

First, we found that materialism has not reduced peoples' attention to and interest in politics and public affairs among Jiangsu peasants. Not only were they interested in state and local public affairs, but a large number also talked about politics on a regular basis. Yet, their political interest has not found legitimate and effective venues for political participation. Voting by peasants in local elections was low. If these elections were meaningful, the participation level would have been much higher. The findings in our survey seem to confirm

Table 8
Evaluation of Government Performance (%)

	1 Very Poor	2 Poor	3 Fair	4 Good	5 Very Good	Hard to Say	N
Controlling inflation	1.4	8.8	45.2	25.8	7.5	11.0	1153
Providing job security	6.2	31.7	41.4	13.0	1.9	5.4	1153
Minimizing rich-poor gap	12.7	39.0	32.9	8.1	2.2	4.8	1153
Maintaining societal order	1.6	12.1	53.9	25.8	5.0	1.1	1153
Providing adequate medical care	5.8	23.3	45.5	16.6	3.5	4.9	1153
Implementing family planning	0.3	3.4	28.4	41.1	26.0	0.3	1153
Protecting the environment	9.0	33.6	38.4	12.3	3.3	2.9	1153
Strengthening national defense	0.4	3.5	30.1	36.9	20.3	8.4	1153
Combating official corruption	14.9	28.4	33.4	12.7	5.3	4.9	1153

Source: Jiangsu Rural Survey 2000

that. Only one third of our respondents participated in much less meaningful county people's congress elections while close to half voted in the more meaningful villagers' committee elections. One important finding is that the peasants in our survey showed relatively high levels of political culture. They overwhelmingly endorsed elections as the means of official promotions and appointments; they were extremely supportive of press freedom; and they showed relatively high levels of political tolerance. Our findings in Jiangsu in this regard are not that different from those in our Beijing surveys in the 1990s. Moreover, peasants in our survey did demand more political reforms. These findings indicate that it may be premature and incorrect to say that all Chinese peasants are not ready for democracy. It seems that peasants in our survey area are quite ready for democratic change.

Second, on the economic front, it seems that the government's efforts to

develop a market economy while maintaining a primarily public ownership system enjoy a high degree of support among the peasants in our survey. In fact, more people in our Jiangsu rural survey supported a market economy than the respondents in our surveys in Beijing. Also, income disparity is a major concern for peasants in our survey. Yet, more people are reluctant to adopt extreme measure such as capping one's income by administrative means to bring about economic equality. It seems that the socialist value of absolute income equality may be declining in the more economically developed rural areas of China.

Third, we found that many people were fairly dissatisfied with government performance in a number of issue areas, such as the government redistribution policy to narrow the income gap between the rich and the poor, combating official corruption, and providing employment opportunities. If not

handled properly and adequately, these problems could lead to serious instability in China's rural areas.

In fact, over the past decade there has been a general and steady deterioration of stability in the Chinese rural areas due to a combination of factors such as misbehavior and corruption by the local government officials, misguided government policies, and lack of improvement in peasants' living conditions. Peasants' riots and disturbances are not uncommon these days in the PRC. Fortunately for the Chinese government, these riots and disturbances are seldom well organized and tend to be spontaneous and incident driven. The stability and economic development of China depend much on the situation in the vast rural areas. How to accommodate the political demands of the peasants while maintaining a steady economic growth is still a huge challenge for the Chinese government.

Notes

*This research project was generously supported by the Graduate School and the Department of Political Science at the University of Tennessee. The author would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *PS* for their helpful comments and suggestions to revise an earlier version of the manuscript.

1. The southern Jiangsu economic development model is often differentiated from the Wenzhou development model that emphasizes private enterprises and the Pearl River delta development model that is based on massive foreign investment.

2. The illiteracy rate in Jiangsu is 9% while the national average is around 19%, see *Suzhou Statistical Yearbook*, *Wuxi Statistical Yearbook*, *Changzhou Statistical Yearbook* and Suzanne Ogden 1999, 4.

3. By mutual agreement we must maintain the anonymity of this organization.

4. The reason we decided not to include illiterate peasants in our survey is based upon the results of a pre-test conducted prior to the sur-

vey. Our experience with the pre-test is that most of the illiterate peasants had so many cognitive problems in comprehending the questions that we had to explain the entire questions. In fact, we observed that when the interviewers tried to explain the questions to the respondents they tended to inject their own opinions or biased examples. To avoid such biases and induced answers, we decided to eliminate the illiterate population from our survey. Fortunately, only 9% of the rural population in the areas we surveyed is illiterate. We do not think this elimination should have major impact on our findings in this study.

5. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to conduct the survey. Twenty-one towns and townships were randomly chosen after the first stage of sampling. Four villages were randomly chosen from each town or township after the second stage of sampling. The third stage of sampling produced approximately 16 households from each randomly chosen village. One individual adult was randomly chosen from each randomly chosen household as the respon-

dent at the final stage of sampling in our Jiangsu rural survey. A total number of 1,270 respondents were randomly chosen; 1,162 responded to our surveys.

6. On the high response rate in China, see Tianjian Shi 1997.

7. On conducting public opinion surveys in China, see Melanie Manion 1994.

8. For this perception, see Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, 1994, and Arthur Lewis Rosenbaum 1992, 19.

9. On the two Beijing surveys conducted among Beijing residents in the 1990s, see Yang Zhong, Jie Chen, and John Scheb 1998.

10. Another venue of participation that this survey did not cover is the court system in China. There is evidence that Chinese peasants increasingly use the law and the courts to protect their rights and interests. See Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li 1995, 766.

11. For a more detailed discussion and history of villagers' committee elections in Jiangsu, see Yang Zhong 2000.

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